

Theologies of Pastoral Ministry Project  
Pastoral Epistle

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Comrades in the Faith,

I write to you with an ambivalence of both fond affections and looming disconcertments about the present state of pastoral ministry in the United States. To be more direct, I have become grieved in recent days at what I discern to be an absence of courage in our pastoral ministries.

Serving congregations and communities is by no means simple work. The complexities of people's lives and their concerns are as multifaceted as our society is. And when those individual concerns are situated within larger cultural milieus and political systems, the effects can be outright dizzying. I have witnessed firsthand the ill effects of corporate greed and capitalistic gain as it "trickles down," as it were, on those in our congregations already in precarious financial straits. I know from experience the exhausting task of navigating impenetrable healthcare systems and insurance protocols and how it manifests in elderly church women having to choose between buying groceries or paying for their insulin. And I have lived alongside persons who have been abandoned and neglected by our churches for who they love, adding to the already existing desertion they feel from family and society.

In each of these instances, and many more, I query: where is our courage? I do not mean courage in the children's book sense—although that might be a good place for some of us to start. I mean courage in the boldest sense. I mean courage that is daring and audacious. I mean courage that looks at injustice or unfairness or maltreatment or plain ole bad behavior and says "No." On second thought, perhaps it is as simple as the children's books teach: not allowing any bully to pick on anyone else at the playground. I mean courage as standing up for what we believe.

Or, standing up for what we *supposedly* believe. I grieve that maybe that is the disconnect: is the problem that we don't want to stand up for what we believe? Or is the larger inquiry whether or not we actually believe?

Do we truly believe in justice, or is it just what we feel compelled to write on social media, lest we be "cancelled"?

Do we really believe in equity, or do we feel that if we say it enough, people will think more highly of us and our ministry?

Do we faithfully believe in the mandates of the Gospel, or is it all for religious spectacle?

Where is your courage, pastor? Where did you leave it? Did you ever have it? Have you allowed someone or something to take it from you? Who scared you away from it? When do you last recall seeing or feeling it? Have you prayed for it?

I do not wish to be terse. I know that cultivating courage is a lifetime practice, and I would argue a spiritual discipline. I also know that courage is not something one can necessarily be taught in a textbook or graduate classroom. In some ways, we were not evenly trained in courage, and I don't recall "How to be Courageous 101" in my seminary experience. But even if it feels foreign at times, it is still required of us. And so I ask again: where is your courage, pastor?

***Did you ever possess it?*** As I named, courage is not something that can be handed to you or conferred alongside your M.Div. But I think you have experienced and known courage long before you began serving a congregation. Think back to your childhood: when do you remember seeing something that did not sit right with you? What emotions did that evoke? What actions did that inspire? The truth is that those feelings are still deep inside you. And even if they have laid dormant, they can be stirred again. Although courage is not something that can be deposited, it can be developed and trained over time.

For instance, there are subjects that you were educated about in seminary classrooms that some in your congregation still believe are biblically-sound, but you know they are not. Why aren't you telling them what you know? They can handle it! I am not suggesting you dive headfirst into the choppy waters of public attention. Start small and start where you already serve. Cultivate the courage to teach something that feels risky to your congregation. Again, is it that we don't want to stand up for what we believe? Or that we don't believe it? If you believe it, stand up for it. You never know for whom in your congregation you might be standing up.

***Did you have it, and then abdicate its responsibility?*** For some of you, perhaps you know what you believe, and you were standing up for it, but then it became too difficult, too demanding. And I get it. Standing up can be difficult—especially if it feels like you are the only one standing. But I want you to remember that there is great strength in numbers. When more of us in pastoral ministry regularly practice courageous speech and action, then it becomes easier for our colleagues to do the same. In other words, you don't have to stand alone. Find some people, just like Moses did, who will hold up your arms when you get weary.

Even though it might be taxing, I implore you to not abdicate courage. It is theologically and spiritually vital to our shared work. There are plenty of others out here with ill intents and untoward desires, but they have courage to act on their plans and are causing great harm. We need more courage from those who believe in the virtuous things, in the fruit of the Spirit. Remember what our sainted mother Maya Angelou once said: courage is the most important virtue of all, because without it, one cannot faithfully or consistently practice any of the others.

***Have you decided something is more important?*** There are competing commitments in every part of our lives, and pastoral ministry is no exception. The allure of "climbing the ladder," and even the temptation to appease the nation-state, is strong. It can be attractive to be in certain professional or social settings, even if that means sacrificing one's principles. But that is not who we are called to be. The trend of pastors as celebrities must end. What happened to being "servant of all"?

It takes true courage, my siblings, to be last of all. The allures of more important things are not worth trading in your integrity. These are not the "good life," nor are they the "good ministry." True markers of success in ministry are not whether you wear a bishop's ring, or whether you pastor the mega church, or whether you have the most online viewers. But the true markers are how many people were protected and helped by your service? Who found necessary resources? Who avoided

unnecessary judgments or unjust consequences? Where did your courage shine through for those who needed it?

In the end, I write so much of this letter to and for “us,” not just “you.” As someone who is still early in the work of pastoral ministry, I wouldn’t be so presumptive to exclude myself from these admonitions. In fact, I write them out of immediate connection to the temptations that present themselves to me daily. I write this while people and opportunities want me to cave in to the systems and to abdicate my own sense of courage. But let’s resist that urge, together.

I believe in us. I believe in you. We got it.

Courage is our mandate, and courage is our calling. And we can do nothing else that pastoral ministry beckons us toward without being willing to be courageous. That does not mean we will not fear, but courage compels us to act anyhow. Let’s trust the Spirit to give us courage as we begin to earnestly seek after it. Let us pray for it. Let us work toward it. Let us not be satisfied with mediocrity in any of our service, but let us be bold and courageous.

The world is waiting.

Onward, with strength for the journey,  
Corwin