

UPDATED & EXPANDED

# Brothers, We *Are Not* Professionals

*A Plea to Pastors for Radical Ministry*



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# Preface to the New Edition

Nothing has happened in the last ten years to make me think this book is less needed. In fact, instead of going away, the pressure to “professionalize” the pastorate has morphed and strengthened. Among younger pastors the talk is less about therapeutic and managerial professionalization and more about communication or contextualization. The language of “professionalization” is seldom used in these regards, but the quiet pressure felt by many pastors is: Be as good as the professional media folks, especially the cool anti-heroes and the most subtle comedians.

This is not the overstated professionalism of the three-piece suit and the stuffy upper floors but the understated professionalism of torn blue jeans and the savvy inner ring. This professionalism is not learned in pursuing an MBA but in being in the know about the ever-changing entertainment and media world. This is the professionalization of ambience, and tone, and idiom, and timing, and banter. It is more intuitive and less taught. More style and less technique. More feel and less force.

If this can be called professionalism, what does it have in common with the older version? Everything that matters. The way I tried to get at the problem in the first edition was to ask some questions. Let me expand that list. Only this time think old *and* new professionalism.

Is there professional praying? Professional trusting in God’s promises? Professional weeping over souls? Professional musing on the depths of revelation? Professional rejoicing in the truth? Professional praising God’s name? Professional treasuring the riches of Christ? Professional walking by the Spirit? Professional exercise of spiritual gifts? Professional dealing with demons? Professional pleading with backsliders? Professional perseverance in a hard marriage? Professional

playing with children? Professional courage in the face of persecution? Professional patience with everyone?

That's for starters.

These are not marginal activities in the pastoral life. They are central. They are the essence. Why do we choke on the word *professional* in those connections? Because professionalization carries the connotation of an education, a set of skills, and a set of guild-defined standards which are possible without faith in Jesus. Professionalism is not supernatural. The heart of ministry is.

Ministry is professional in those areas of competency where the life of faith and the life of unbelief overlap. Which means two things. First, that overlapping area can never be central. Therefore, professionalism should always be marginal, not central; optional, not crucial. And second, the pursuit of professionalism will push the supernatural center more and more into the corner while ministry becomes a set of secular competencies with a religious veneer.

As I write this, I have ten months left as pastor for preaching and vision of Bethlehem Baptist Church. If I live to see this transition complete, I will have served the church for almost thirty-three years. I feel the conviction of this book as strongly today as when I wrote it ten years ago and as when my ministry began on this basis three decades ago. When I look back, my regret is not that I wasn't more professional but that I wasn't more prayerful, more passionate for souls, more consistent in personal witness, more emotionally engaged with my children, more tender with my wife, more spontaneously affirming of the good in others. These are my regrets.

In the first year of my ministry at the church thirty-two years ago, I read E. M. Bounds' *Power through Prayer*. His book struck the match that ignited the fire of this book. I quote it in chapter 1: "God deliver us from the professionalizers! 'Deliver us from the low, managing, contriving, maneuvering temper of mind among us.'" Now, at the end of my pastoral ministry, I return to this same place and say, *Thank You, Lord. Thank You, for showing me this. Thank You for burning this on my*

*soul. Thank You for protecting me for all these years from the deadening effects of professionalization.*

And I conclude this new preface with the same prayer I began with: “Banish professionalism from our midst, O God, and in its place put passionate prayer, poverty of spirit, hunger for God, rigorous study of holy things, white-hot devotion to Jesus Christ, utter indifference to all material gain, and unremitting labor to rescue the perishing, perfect the saints, and glorify our sovereign Lord. In Jesus’ great and powerful name. Amen.”



Besides this preface there are six new chapters in the book: chapters 4, 6, 13, 18, 22, and 27. I added these because in the last ten years they pressed themselves on me. One for personal reasons like health (chap. 27). One for family reasons relating to my own sanctification (chap. 22). Two for theological reasons where I felt I needed greater clarity or correction (chaps. 4 and 6). And two in pursuit of being a better preacher (chaps. 13 and 18).

A very special thank you for David Mathis, for six years my executive pastoral assistant, now executive editor at *Desiring God*. I could not have done this under the constraints of pastoral ministry without his help.

And here at the end of my pastoral ministry, thank you to the church where I did my best to live according to the things written in this book. You have been kind to me. It has been a taste of heaven to worship and serve among you.



The preacher . . . is not a professional man;  
his ministry is not a profession;  
it is a divine institution,  
a divine devotion.

E. M. BOUNDS



We are fools for Christ's sake.  
But professionals are wise.  
We are weak.  
But professionals are strong.  
Professionals are held in honor.  
We are in disrepute.

We do not try to secure a professional lifestyle,  
but we are ready to hunger and thirst and be ill-clad and homeless.

## 1

# Brothers, We Are Not Professionals

We pastors are being killed by the professionalizing of the pastoral ministry. The mentality of the professional is not the mentality of the prophet. It is not the mentality of the slave of Christ. Professionalism has nothing to do with the essence and heart of the Christian ministry. The more professional we long to be, the more spiritual death we will leave in our wake. For there is no professional childlikeness (Matt. 18:3); there is no professional tenderheartedness (Eph. 4:32); there is no professional panting after God (Ps. 42:1).

But our first business is to pant after God in prayer. Our business is to weep over our sins (James 4:9). Is there professional weeping?

Our business is to strain forward to the holiness of Christ and the prize of the upward call of God (Phil. 3:14); to pummel our bodies and subdue them lest we be cast away (1 Cor. 9:27); to deny ourselves and take up the blood-spattered cross daily (Luke 9:23). How do you carry a cross professionally? We have been crucified with Christ, yet now we live by faith in the one who loved us and gave Himself for us (Gal. 2:20). What is professional faith?

We are to be filled not with wine but with the Spirit (Eph. 5:18). We are God-besotted lovers of Christ. How can you be drunk with Jesus professionally? Then, wonder of wonders, we were given the gospel treasure to carry in clay pots to show that the transcendent power belongs to God (2 Cor. 4:7). Is there a way to be a professional clay pot?

We are afflicted in every way but not crushed, perplexed but not driven to despair, persecuted but not destroyed, always carrying in the body the death of Jesus (professionally?) so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested (professionally?) in our bodies (2 Cor. 4:9–11).

I think God has exhibited us preachers as last of all in the world. We are fools for Christ's sake, but professionals are wise. We are weak, but professionals are strong. Professionals are held in honor, we are in disrepute. We do not try to secure a professional lifestyle, but we are ready to hunger and thirst and be ill-clad and homeless. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we try to conciliate; we have become the refuse of the world, the offscouring of all things (1 Cor. 4:9–13). Or have we?

Brothers, we are *not* professionals! We are outcasts. We are aliens and exiles in the world (1 Pet. 2:11). Our citizenship is in heaven, and we wait with eager expectation for the Lord (Phil. 3:20). You cannot professionalize the love for His appearing without killing it. And it *is* being killed.

The aims of our ministry are eternal and spiritual. They are not shared by any of the professions. It is precisely by the failure to see this that we are dying.

The life-giving preacher is a man of God, whose heart is ever athirst for God, whose soul is ever following hard after God, whose eye is single to God, and in whom by the power of God's Spirit the flesh and the world have been crucified and his ministry is like the generous flood of a life-giving river.<sup>1</sup>

We are most emphatically not part of a social team sharing goals with other professionals. Our goals are an offense; they are foolishness (1 Cor. 1:23). The professionalization of the ministry is a constant threat to the offense of the gospel. It is a threat to the profoundly spiritual nature of our work. I have seen it often: the love of professionalism (parity among the world's professionals) kills a man's belief that he is sent by God to save people from hell and to make them Christ-exalting, spiritual aliens in the world.

The world sets the agenda of the professional man; God sets the agenda of the spiritual man. The strong wine of Jesus Christ explodes the wineskins of professionalism. There is an infinite difference between the pastor whose heart is set on being a professional and the pastor whose heart is set on being the aroma of Christ, the fragrance of death to some and eternal life to others (2 Cor. 2:15–16).

God, deliver us from the professionalizers! Deliver us from the "low, managing, contriving, maneuvering temper of mind among us."<sup>2</sup> God, give us tears for our sins. Forgive us for being so shallow in prayer, so thin in our grasp of holy verities, so content amid perishing neighbors, so empty of passion and earnestness in all our conversation. Restore to us the childlike joy of our salvation. Frighten us with the awesome holiness and power of Him who can cast both soul and body into hell (Matt. 10:28). Cause us to hold to the cross with fear and trembling as our hope-filled and offensive tree of life. Grant us nothing, absolutely nothing, the way the world views it. May Christ be all in all (Col. 3:11).

Banish professionalism from our midst, Oh God, and in its place put passionate prayer, poverty of spirit, hunger for God, rigorous study of holy things, white-hot devotion to Jesus Christ, utter indifference to all material gain, and unremitting labor to rescue the perishing, perfect the saints, and glorify our sovereign Lord.

Humble us, O God, under Your mighty hand, and let us rise, not as professionals, but as witnesses and partakers of the sufferings of Christ. In His awesome name. Amen.

### *Notes*

1. John Piper and Wayne Grudem, *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1991), 16.

2. Richard Cecil quoted in E. M. Bounds, *Power through Prayer* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1972), 59.

For my name's sake I defer my anger,  
for the sake of my praise I restrain it for you,  
that I may not cut you off. . . .  
For my own sake, for my own sake, I do it,  
for how should my name be profaned?  
My glory I will not give to another.

ISAIAH 48:9, 11



God's chief end  
is to glorify God  
and enjoy His glory forever.



God loves His glory more than He loves us,  
and this is the foundation of His love for us.

## 2

# Brothers, God Loves His Glory

I grew up in a home where 1 Corinthians 10:31 was almost as basic to our family as John 3:16. “Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (NASB). But not till I was twenty-two years old did I hear anyone say that God’s first commitment is to His own glory and that this is the basis for ours. I had never heard anyone say that God does everything for His glory, too, and that is why we should. I had never heard anyone explain that the role of the Holy Spirit is to burn in me what He has been burning with for all eternity: God’s love for God.

Or more precisely, God the Father's delight in the panorama of His own perfections reflected as a perfect image in His Son.

No one had ever asked me, "Who is the most God-centered Person in the universe?" And then answered, "God is." Or, "Is God an idolater?" And then answered, "No, He has no other gods before Him." Or, "What is the chief end of God?" And then answered, "God's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy His glory forever." So I was never confronted forcefully with the God-centeredness of God until I sat under the teaching of Daniel Fuller and was directed by him to the writings of Jonathan Edwards.

Since those explosive days of discovery in the late sixties, I have labored to understand the implications of God's passion for His glory. That is now the title of a book I wrote as a tribute to Jonathan Edwards, half of which is a reproduction of his book, *The End for Which God Created the World*. Edwards' thesis in that book is this:

[God] had respect to *himself*, as his last and highest end, in this work; because he is *worthy* in himself to be so, being infinitely the greatest and best of beings. All things else, with regard to worthiness, importance, and excellence, are perfectly as nothing in comparison of him. . . . All that is ever spoken of in the Scripture as an ultimate end of God's works is included in that one phrase, *the glory of God*.<sup>1</sup>

Why is it important to be stunned by the God-centeredness of God? Because many people are willing to be God-centered as long as they feel that God is man-centered. It is a subtle danger. We may think we are centering our lives on God when we are really making Him a means to self-esteem. Over against this danger I urge you to ponder the implications, brothers, that God loves His glory more than He loves us and that this is the foundation of His love for us.

"Stop regarding man in whose nostrils is breath, for of what account is he?" (Isa. 2:22). "Put not your trust in princes, in a son of man, in whom there is no salvation" (Ps. 146:3). "Cursed is the man

who trusts in man and makes flesh his strength” (Jer. 17:5). “Behold, the nations are like a drop from a bucket, and are accounted as the dust on the scales. . . . All the nations are as nothing before him, they are accounted by him as less than nothing and emptiness” (Isa. 40:15, 17).

God’s ultimate commitment is to Himself and not to us. And therein lies our security. God loves His glory above all. “For my name’s sake I defer my anger, for the sake of my praise I restrain it for you, that I may not cut you off. . . . For my own sake, for my own sake, I do it, for how should my name be profaned? My glory I will not give to another” (Isa. 48: 9, 11).

God performs salvation for *His own sake*. He justifies the people called by His name in order that He may be glorified.

“Therefore say to the house of Israel [and to all the churches], Thus says the Lord GOD: It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations to which you came. And I will vindicate the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, and which you have profaned among them. And the nations will know that I am the LORD. . . . It is not for your sake that I will act, declares the Lord GOD; let that be known to you. Be ashamed and confounded for your ways, O house of Israel” (Ezek. 36:22–23, 32).

This is no isolated note in the symphony of redemptive history. It is the ever-recurring motif of the all-sufficient Composer. Why did God predestine us in love to be His sons? That the glory of His grace might be praised (Eph. 1:6, 12, 14). Why did God create a people for Himself? “I created [them] for my glory” (Isa. 43:7). Why did He make from one lump vessels of honor and vessels of dishonor? That He might show His wrath and make known His power and reveal the riches of His glory for the vessels of mercy (Rom. 9:22–23). Why did God raise up Pharaoh and harden his heart and deliver Israel with a mighty arm? That His wonders might be multiplied over Pharaoh

(Exod. 14:4) and that His name might be declared in all the earth (Exod. 9:16).

Why did God spare rebellious Israel in the wilderness and finally bring them to the promised land? “I acted for the sake of my name, that it should not be profaned in the sight of the nations” (Ezek. 20:14). Why did He not destroy Israel when they rejected Him from being king over them and demanded to be like all the nations (1 Sam. 8:4–6)? “The LORD will not forsake his people, for his great name’s sake” (1 Sam. 12:22). God’s love for the glory of His own name is the spring of free grace and the rock of our security.

Why did God bring back the Israelites from Babylonian captivity? Because Daniel prayed, “For your own sake, O Lord, make your face to shine upon your sanctuary, which is desolate” (Dan. 9:17). Why did the Father send the incarnate Son to Israel? “To confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy” (Rom. 15:8–9). Why did the Son come to His final hour? “For this purpose I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name” (John 12:27–28). Christ died to glorify the Father and to repair all the defamation we had brought upon His honor. Our only hope is that the death of Christ satisfied God’s righteous claims to receive proper glory from His creatures (Rom. 3:24–26).

Brothers, God loves His glory! He is committed with all His infinite and eternal might to display that glory and to preserve the honor of His name.

When Paul says in 2 Timothy 2:13, “If we are faithless, he remains faithful,” it does not mean that we are saved in spite of faithlessness. For the verse before says, “If we deny him, he also will deny us.” Rather, as the verse explains, “He remains faithful” means “He cannot deny *Himself*.” God’s most fundamental allegiance is to His own glory. He is committed to being God before He is committed to being anything else.

Do your people know these things? Do they stake the answer to their prayers on God’s love for His own glory? Do they make their

case before His throne on the grounds that God does everything for His own name's sake? "Act, O LORD, for your name's sake!" (Jer. 14:7). "Help us, O God of our salvation, for the glory of your name; deliver us, and atone for our sins, for your name's sake!" (Ps. 79:9). "For Your name's sake, O LORD, Pardon my iniquity, for it is great" (Ps. 25:11 NASB). Do our people really know that "hallowed be thy name!" is a petition for God to glorify Himself as God? "Not to us, O LORD, not to us, but to your name give glory" (Ps. 115:1).

We have told our people a hundred times, "Do all to the glory of God" (1 Cor. 10:31). But have we given them the foundation of this command? God loves His glory. He loves it with infinite energy and passion and commitment. And the Spirit of God is ablaze with this love. That is why children of God love the glory of God; they are led by this blazing Spirit (Rom. 8:14).

Let us declare boldly and powerfully what God loves most—the glory of God. Let us guard ourselves from the ocean of man-centeredness around us. "Stop regarding man in whose nostrils is breath, for of what account is he?" (Isa. 2:22). The foundation, the means, and the goal of God's *agape* for sinners is His prior, deeper, and ultimate love for His own glory. Therefore, brothers, tell your people the great ground of the gospel: God loves His glory!

### *Notes*

1. Jonathan Edwards, *The End for Which God Create the World*, in John Piper, *God's Passion for His Glory: Living the Vision of Jonathan Edwards* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1998), 140, 242.