

“In church contexts that define leadership in terms of image, personality, and technique, Paul’s theology of pastoral ministry in 2 Corinthians is uncomfortably countercultural: humiliating in transparency about weaknesses, resolute in integrity, and—above all—exalting Christ instead of self. Pastor Bredenhof’s exploration of the glorious gospel paradox—Christ’s strength is displayed through weak pastors, God’s priceless treasure conveyed in jars of clay—will both challenge and encourage pastors in our new covenant ministry. Pastor, whether you are discouraged by criticism or tempted to self-congratulation by fruitfulness, *Weak Pastor, Strong Christ* will bring biblical clarity to your view of yourself and of the service to which your gracious Lord has called you.”

—Dennis E. Johnson, professor emeritus of practical theology, Westminster Seminary California

“Reuben Bredenhof gives us a fine, thoughtful, engaging, and readable study of 2 Corinthians that opens up the apostle Paul’s pastoral mind and heart to today’s pastors and church members. Those in pastoral ministry will find this book immensely encouraging, realistic, and practical, as will church members. Reuben both opens up the difficulties and joys Paul experienced in pastoring the Corinthian Christians in the first century and bridges the gap between then and now so that the importance and relevance of Paul’s teaching for today’s churches and pastors is clear. This wise and practical book goes well beyond the superficiality of ‘how to’ books on Christian ministry to dig deep into theology and ministry. Read it—you’ll learn much from it!”

—Steve Walton, professor of New Testament, Trinity College, Bristol

“The premise of this book is straightforward: ministers today can learn much from the ministry of the apostle Paul in first-century Corinth. No clever but soon-outdated pragmatism here. This is a book from a seasoned pastor that is solidly grounded in the God-inspired words of Paul about his pastoral labors in a difficult place. Any minister who longs to serve the Lord in accordance with His word will profit from this volume. Laypeople—especially those

who serve as elders or on a pastor search committee—will find it insightful as well. Generous-hearted laypeople would do well to consider providing a copy for their pastor. Any pastor who receives a copy should be grateful for it, for in these pages is much helpful wisdom.”

—Donald S. Whitney, professor of biblical spirituality and associate dean, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky and author of *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, *Praying the Bible*, and *Family Worship*

“Many books analyze the apostle Paul’s theology and missionary work. Reuben Bredenhof examines the ministry of Paul the pastor in his book *Weak Pastor, Strong Christ*. His careful study of 2 Corinthians unfolds an apostolic model for pastoral work. Here, ministers straining under the burden of unbiblical expectations will find relief; those unsure of how to model their ministry will find godly help. He summons all pastors—in joy or trial—to rely upon Christ’s all-sufficient grace, saying with Paul, ‘When I am weak, then I am strong.’”

—Charles M. Wingard, associate professor of pastoral theology, Reformed Theological Seminary, and author of *Help for the New Pastor*

WEAK PASTOR,  
**STRONG CHRIST**



# WEAK PASTOR, **STRONG CHRIST**

*Developing a Christ-Shaped Gospel Ministry*

Reuben Bredenhof



**Reformation Heritage Books**  
Grand Rapids, Michigan

*Weak Pastor, Strong Christ*

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*Gratefully dedicated to the pastors  
whose faithful preaching, teaching, and care I received  
before becoming a pastor myself:*

Rev. Dr. James Visscher

Rev. Jack Moesker

Rev. Clarence Stam†





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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

An idea for a new book typically has a long period of gestation. The concept of this book has origins that can be traced back almost a dozen years to when I served my first congregation and enrolled part time in some biblical studies courses. While I was pastoring a church in St. Albert, Alberta, Canada, I completed a master of theology degree with a focus on New Testament studies. This was back in 2009. The final component of the degree program was a thesis, which I chose to write on Paul's relationship with the church of Corinth, particularly as he portrays this pastor-congregation bond in 2 Corinthians. It was a project that combined my love for the New Testament with my growing appreciation for the privilege of pastoral ministry, and I relished the several months I was able to devote to researching and writing on Paul as pastor in 2 Corinthians. Thesis accepted and degree granted, I moved on to other projects.

But my dear wife, Rebecca, who often has excellent ideas, suggested already back then that I should do something more with all the work I had completed on 2 Corinthians. "Turn it into a book" was basically what she said. I agreed that the idea had merit, so it went onto the to-do list, where it stayed for about ten years. But at last the opportune time came for me to take my old thesis off the shelf and to give the project another look. Transforming an academic thesis into an accessible book was, of course, far more work than I expected, but I have thoroughly enjoyed the task—and now it is finally done.

I am grateful to have been able to revisit the beautiful truths found on the pages of God's Word in 2 Corinthians, the powerful gospel realities, and the encouraging lessons in gospel ministry. I have certainly not written this book as a minister who has found all the answers and learned all the lessons, but in the deep awareness that I am just one more weak pastor who needs to live in dependence on the strong Christ.

As she has been for many years now, Rebecca was a great support for my work on this book too. With love I thank her for always walking alongside me in my ministry, for reading (twice!) and commenting on all these pages, and, indeed, for giving me that good idea for a book so long ago. Once again, the content of this book needed to pass the careful scrutiny of our daughters—Abigail, Kyra, Sasha, and Tori—who can always be counted on to provide helpful comments, insightful observations, and warm encouragement to their dad. Much appreciation goes to Marlene de Vos of my congregation, who was again ready and willing to spend many hours proofreading an early draft. I would also like to thank the friends and colleagues who happily accepted my invitation to read and comment on the manuscript: Rev. Axel Hagg, Dr. DongWoo Oh, and Rev. Wieste Huizenga. The book is better for their many wise and thoughtful queries and suggestions. Finally, it has been a pleasure to work on this project with Dr. Jay Collier from Reformation Heritage Books and to benefit from the editorial labors of Dr. Drew McGinnis.

May the lessons for ministry drawn from 2 Corinthians be a blessing to all who read these pages!

## SEARCHING FOR A MODEL OF MINISTRY

*Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ.*

—1 CORINTHIANS 11:1

I was twenty-seven years old, fresh out of seminary with a master of divinity in hand, and just beginning the work of pastoral ministry in a church in central Alberta, Canada. Years of preparation had finally led to getting a job and taking up a meaningful task. But even amid my excitement about the new position and responsibility, I felt a whiff of uncertainty. There were lingering doubts and misgivings about what it would take to do this work properly in the coming years. Old hesitations about personal competence and character were suddenly resurrected and became pronounced in my mind. Seminary supplied certain tools—basic skill in exegesis and sermon crafting, some knowledge of church history, and the fundamentals of human psychology—but still I wondered: How can I actually be a *pastor* in the truest sense of the word, shepherding a congregation effectively and with purpose? How can I work faithfully among the church members who have now been placed in my care?

These questions are not new. For as long as the Christian church has been in existence, there have been persons entrusted with the task of caring for the church's members. And these persons—whether called bishops, overseers, elders, presbyters, ministers, or pastors—have always needed to reflect on their work and to be guided and

encouraged in the proper manner of ministry. Already in the first few decades after Christ's time on earth, the apostle Paul gave instruction on pastoral ministry when he wrote two letters to Timothy and one to Titus, men who were involved in the care of Christian congregations. Timothy in particular seems to have struggled with questions of his personal suitability for the task. His struggle is mirrored in Paul's words, "Let no one despise your youth, but be an example to the believers in word, in conduct, in love, in spirit, in faith, in purity" (1 Tim. 4:12). And Paul equipped Timothy and Titus for the challenges and opportunities of their work in the churches by writing the Pastoral Epistles, describing the qualifications, tasks, and conduct of Christian ministers.

But while Christians have long turned to the Pastoral Epistles for instruction in how to do the work of ministry, Paul's other letters have not typically been read with the same expectation. On first consideration this is unsurprising, as the Pastoral Epistles are decidedly oriented to the topic of ministry. Their very name suggests that pastors are going to find helpful direction and encouragement on their pages. Moreover, Paul's other letters might be neglected for instruction in this topic because the apostle is typically seen to fill the role of a missionary and itinerant church planter. He is not usually thought of as a pastor in the sense of the term that is familiar to us, that is, one who ministers to the spiritual needs of a local congregation on a regular basis.

Yet even a passing glance at Paul's ministry reveals that he was more than an evangelist and theologian, he was also a pastor. From the New Testament accounts we can see that he was regularly involved in the ongoing spiritual care of the Christians to whom he had first preached the gospel. In fact, Paul's pastoral work among the various congregations of the early decades of the church cannot be isolated from his other labors of gospel leadership and evangelism. For him the two activities went hand in hand: telling people about Christ, and then helping believers to grow in Christ.

How did Paul carry out his pastoral activities? He did so in a variety of ways, such as through visiting the churches personally and

sending them his authorized representatives. But it seems that Paul's pastoring was conducted particularly through the letters he sent to various churches when he was unable to visit them. His letters provide not only an intimate look into the theological and ethical challenges faced by the early churches, but also into the way Paul sought to guide and exhort the congregations from a distance. It is a reasonable expectation, then, that through studying not just the Pastoral Epistles but the rest of Paul's letters, we can gain insight into the work of ministry as carried out by the apostle.

This brings us to 2 Corinthians. Even a cursory reading reveals its exceptionally personal and emotionally intense character among the letters of Paul. It offers an intriguing window into the apostle's relationship with one of the congregations he founded, the church at Corinth. Paul and the Corinthians apparently had a relationship of mutual affection, but one that also suffered times of strain and stress. In 2 Corinthians he alternates between pleading with them, warning them, teaching, rebuking, and reassuring them. For a variety of reasons that we will consider shortly, the Corinthians doubted Paul's dedication to them as a congregation. Besides this distrust, they favored other church leaders whose appearances were more impressive, whose oratory was more skillful, and who spoke more freely about their dramatic religious experiences.

Because of these criticisms and comparisons, Paul defends the way he has treated the Corinthians and has carried out his ministry among them. In this letter he provides a pointed apology for his character and conduct. At the same time, 2 Corinthians illustrates Paul's abiding devotion to this congregation. Despite the difficulties that are currently affecting their relationship, he instructs, warns, encourages, and commends the Corinthians, consistently expressing his delight in these believers and his great love for them in Christ. It is his Christ-shaped view of the Corinthians as their pastor that Paul wants the members of the congregation to understand and appreciate.

As we look at 2 Corinthians in coming chapters, we will examine how he expresses the character of his pastoral relationship with this congregation. We will give attention to those places where Paul speaks

personally and directly to his readers by describing his holy privileges and weighty obligations as a pastor. Using a number of striking motifs and images, Paul endeavors to reveal the depths of his concern and affection for the Corinthians as their minister. It is Paul's considered view of his relationship with the Corinthians that will provide valuable aspects of a model for contemporary Christian ministry.

Of course, the social, cultural, and ecclesiastical situation has changed substantially from Paul's time to our own. We need to be cautioned against making illegitimate correlations between the practice of ministry in the first century and that in the twenty-first. Relating this to our study of 2 Corinthians and its portrayal of Paul's relationship with the congregation of Corinth, we note that any relationship is inevitably shaped by one's culture. Today there are different expectations and boundaries for personal relationships than were considered acceptable in the time of the apostle Paul. This means that the character of the involvement between a pastor and his congregation today can be expected to have changed to some degree.

Compounding this difficulty is Paul's distinctive position within the history of the Christian church. Paul was an apostle, and as such he possessed a unique ecclesiastical office that no longer functions today. And while some of Paul's peers (such as Timothy and Titus) held leadership positions in the early churches, ministry in Christian congregations at Paul's time was at best organized only at a rudimentary level. When Paul was involved in pastoring the Corinthians, there was not yet a developed structure of church authority to regulate or inform his actions. This meant that Paul was free to exercise the responsibilities and privileges of his position as he saw appropriate in the given circumstances, a freedom that is largely unavailable to pastors today—and probably for good reason!

The character of 2 Corinthians as a letter written at a specific occasion also warns against making simplistic application to the present time. Paul's letter is primarily a personal defense, with the legitimacy of his apostolic ministry being one of its chief concerns. This apologetic purpose casts the entire letter into a certain light. When reading and studying this remarkably personal epistle, we



should be clear that Paul's primary intent was not to impart helpful instruction for those Christian leaders who might read the letter in later years. Consequently, we will see that many of the lessons that can be learned from 2 Corinthians need to be drawn indirectly. All of this means that we should exercise a measure of caution as we seek useful principles and guidelines from this letter.

While not every feature of Paul's relationship with the Corinthians can be applied to contemporary ministry, key elements remain relevant. Importantly, the letter itself suggests a basic continuity between Paul's relationship with the Corinthians and the modern-day pastor's relationship with a congregation. Despite Paul's unique historical role as an apostle, he consistently speaks not only of his own labors, but also about the labors of other servants of God in the church. While Paul is expounding on things that were true for his relationship with the Corinthians, it is clear that he is also writing about what he believes should be true of all those who have the privilege of ministering to Christ's people.

Though his focus is strongly apologetic, in this letter Paul still intends to teach a broader lesson for those who hold positions of Christian leadership. His rivals in Corinth would obviously not measure up to the high ministerial standard that he sets, which Paul eagerly wants this congregation to recognize. But the implication is that all true servants of Christ will conduct ministry in a way that is broadly similar to the apostle. Today, Christian pastors work with the same New Testament gospel of Jesus Christ, doing so in service of the same God and empowered by the same Holy Spirit. We can conclude that it is fitting that Christian ministry is still marked by the same patterns once demonstrated by Paul.

Finally, despite his high stature in the history of the church, in 2 Corinthians Paul reminds us that he struggled like any other human being. It is apparent that he had his own fears and burdens, and that he wrestled with personal weakness and inadequacy in carrying out his work. It is this most realistic picture of ministry that commends the apostle as an example for contemporary pastors, who all surely grapple at times with feelings of insufficiency and a sense of

uncertainty as they work in Christ's church. It remains important that those who are involved in the work of pastoral ministry have good models to imitate and exemplars by which to be taught. And Pastor Paul stands as an excellent candidate for teaching such lessons.

In the coming chapters, we will take a closer look at the pressurized situation in first-century Corinth, the cultural challenges that Paul faced when ministering there, and how the challenges for pastors today are different yet comparable (chapter 1). We will then consider Paul's conception of ministerial identity and what he saw as his task in the church, before beginning to draw lines of comparison to ministerial identity and labors today (chapter 2). From there we will move on to examine one of Paul's principal metaphors for pastoring in 2 Corinthians: the notion of a pastor as father to his congregation (chapter 3). A central area of dispute between Paul and the Corinthians concerned his preaching, so we will explore how Paul portrays the preacher's task and message (chapter 4). This letter makes clear that Paul was facing a barrage of criticism, and his measured response to the Corinthians' reproaches and disparagements is instructive for every Christian pastor today (chapter 5). Paul must also respond to suspicions or complaints about the way in which he handled the matter of the Corinthians' financial support, another interaction that has contemporary relevance (chapter 6). From the first to the final chapter of 2 Corinthians, Paul speaks about his sufferings in ministry; far from downplaying this aspect of his work, he insists that hardship will be integral to the labors of any servant of Christ (chapter 7). In all his ministering among the occasionally recalcitrant and aloof Corinthians, Paul reveals that this letter was driven by a clear sense of pastoral purpose, earnestly desiring to see their faith grow into maturity and toward perfection at Christ's return (chapter 8). We will round off our exploration of 2 Corinthians with a closing reflection on the place of seeking fruits from our pastoral ministry while seeking grace from God even more. For it is only through God's mighty strength and with Christ's gospel that weak pastors will ever be effective.

## SERVING UNDER PRESSURE

*For if I make you sorrowful, then who is he who makes me glad but the one who is made sorrowful by me?*

—2 CORINTHIANS 2:2

It is not easy being a pastor. While the pastors gathered in a local ministerial group will probably find any number of issues to debate passionately—worship styles, infant or adult baptism, reliable Bible translations—with this statement surely all will agree with a solemn nodding of the head: it's not easy being a pastor. Even at the very best of times, when there is a spirit of peace in the congregation and the preaching is being well-received, when the pastoral workload is not too onerous and most of the youth seem to be moving in the right direction, it is not easy. Because even then, there can remain troubling feelings of inadequacy, when a pastor knows that he should do more and do it better. The work of being a pastor is often attended by a multitude of daily challenges, stresses, and niggling concerns. For instance, there are still those church members who rarely return pastoral phone calls or friendly texts, and the people on the far side of the auditorium who generally do not seem interested in your well-crafted and Christ-centered sermons each Sunday. And as in all of life, there are moods in ministry. Within the same span of seven days a pastor can go from having a joyful sense of strength and near invincibility—like that which can come after a particularly good

Sunday on the pulpit—to dark feelings of self-doubt, anxiety, and uselessness—like those which can arise after a couple of particularly difficult pastoral visits. Even when stress levels are low, there can remain the nagging forebodings of a looming burnout.

How much more difficult preaching and pastoral work can be when they are done in a pressurized atmosphere! Sometimes a congregation is bitterly divided in a dispute over a fine theological point, or over some local practice or policy. People are making their cases, taking sides, and are keen to see where the pastor stands. Sometimes there is the swelling influence of an unbiblical worldview or philosophy, one that is having a marked impact on how the members view their faith or the life of the church, and the pastor needs to respond. At other times, a pastor might face direct challenges to his own ministry. He might be unjustly accused of some wrongdoing, or his progressive (or regressive!) views might be perceived as a threat by some faction in the congregation. Or perhaps the pastoral performance standards in a congregation are so fluid that they are unachievable.

In such situations, a pastor can begin to fear that his ability to work in the congregation is being seriously hindered by the unrest, pressures, and criticisms. Even more seriously, the pastor might fear that some congregants have begun to weaken in their commitment to the true gospel. And if the gospel is thrown out, what is left? For a host of reasons, the hard task of pastoring can become even harder, and a minister and his congregation can be left wondering how the church can possibly move forward together in Christ. As we explore 2 Corinthians, we will see that the pressures on a pastor were all too familiar to Paul as he ministered to this congregation.

### **Flashback to First-Century Corinth**

Reading 2 Corinthians is like eavesdropping while a stranger is talking on his phone next to you on the bus or in the grocery store. You are really curious to know what he is talking about, but you hear only one side of the conversation. In this letter we are allowed to hear one side of the conversation between Paul and this church, and it is a conversation about some intensely personal things, such as the