

Croft, Brian, and Ronnie Martin. *The Unhurried Pastor: Redefining Productivity for a More Sustainable Ministry*. N.p.: Good Book, 2024. 169pp. + 4pp. (back matter).

While pulpit committees breathlessly search for the next Charles Spurgeon, pastors are busy scrambling for the exits. The confirming surveys are relentless in their annual tracking of the sobering trend that transcends educational and denominational boundaries.¹ Pastors want out, and while many are only eyeing the doors, increasing percentages of a diminishing number of pastors are passing through them. All of this points to an alarming ministry exodus, one more notable than nearly any since, well, *the* exodus.

Desiring to encourage pastors in their ministries, Brian Croft and Ronnie Martin have collaborated on *The Unhurried Pastor*, a most helpful appeal for pastors to assess themselves spiritually and their philosophy of ministry scripturally. More than a decade ago, Paul Tripp described the ministry as a “dangerous calling.”² He captured how much temptation lurks in a sacred calling when pastors so readily neglect to nurture their own spiritual lives, instead giving into the age-old lure of proving themselves by shaping their lives and schedule around the fool’s gold of men’s approval. The danger is certainly not a new one. We have often been warned. Philip Spener (1635–1705) wrote to a German Lutheran pastoral community in 1765, “How many a Christian minister, when by God’s grace he first enters upon his office, has the experience that many of the things to which he devotes hard work and great pains prove to be useless, that he must begin all over again to reflect on what is more necessary, and that he wishes he had known this before and had been wisely and carefully directed to it.”³

Several decades before Spener, in 1689 after Puritan pastors had been newly restored to their congregations following the Glorious Revolution, John Flavel (1627–1691) wrote “A humble supplication to the *more aged*, and as an Exhortation to *younger* Ministers and Candidates,”⁴ in which he urged his fellow ministers in England concerning their renewed opportunity to exemplify scriptural ministerial priorities: “He will make the best divine that studies on his knees,” “Take care you put not that last, which should be first; and that, again, first, which should be last,” “A head well instructed is much to be desired; but a sanctified heart is absolutely necessary,” and “It is one thing to be learned in the truths of Christ, another to be taught by Him, as the truth is in Jesus.”

¹ See “38% of U.S. Pastors Have Thought About Quitting Full-Time Ministry in the Past Year,” Barna Group (2021), accessed August 17, 2024, <https://www.barna.com/research/pastors-well-being/>; “Pastors Share Top Reasons They’ve Considered Quitting Ministry in the Past Year,” Barna Group (2022), accessed August 17, 2024, <https://www.barna.com/research/pastors-quitting-ministry/>; Peter Smith, “US pastors struggle with post-pandemic burnout. Survey shows half considered quitting since 2020,” AP News, January 11, 2024, accessed August 17, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/christian-clergy-burnout-pandemic-survey-24ee46327438ff46b074d234ffe2f58c>; and Darryl Dash, “The Coming Pastoral Shortage,” The Gospel Coalition Canadian Edition, February 15, 2023, <https://ca.thegospelcoalition.org/columns/straight-paths/the-coming-pastoral-shortage/>.

² *Dangerous Calling: Confronting the Unique Challenges of Pastoral Ministry* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012).

³ Philip Jacob Spener, *Pia Desideria*, trans. and ed. Theodore J. Tappert (1964; reprint, Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2002), 54.

⁴ *The Whole Works of the Rev. Mr. John Flavel, Late Minister of the Gospel at Dartmouth, Devon* (London: W. Baynes and Son, 1820), 4:15.

It is fitting that most of the final words Jesus uttered before his ascension were uttered to those who would be church leaders. His words are clear and simple—shepherd my sheep, teach, baptize, preach the gospel. Those who become so busy redefining ministry forget or at least overlook the heart of his counsel every bit as much as the religious leaders of Jesus’ day did. Jesus’ words not only command; they anticipate our propensity to distraction. Martin cautions us that today pastoral life is “hijacked by success driven strategies, edgy entrepreneurs, and leadership seminar gurus who tempt pastors to reinvent the pastoral life into something that can be measured on an Excel spreadsheet” (35).

The blessing of *The Unhurried Pastor* is that a tandem of contemporary ministerial brothers are willing to call attention yet again to the sin that so easily besets pastors and urge them to “keep a close watch” on themselves (1 Tim 4:16). Their call is not to a more lax and leisurely ministry but to a scripturally prioritized and purposeful one. Seminary students, pastors (young and old) and their wives, church leaders, and pastoral search committees all would profit wonderfully from a careful read. Martin and Croft provide a “push against the accepted busy and frantic practice of pastors today, as well as a push against our broader Western mindset, which assumes that to be productive we must always be busy, moving, and hurried” (13). Martin, in the “Preparation” and “Power” sections of the book (chapters 1–3 and 4–6 respectively), diagnoses and opens soul wounds into which he then pours the ointment of the gospel. Croft completes the book with the “Pursuit” section, with briefer chapters (7–11) of iron-sharpening counsel to structure pastoral practice that prioritizes practical biblical prescriptions. “Genuine pastoral productivity—of a kind that brings joy and longevity—is unlocked through the practices reflected in some of the titles of chapters that follow: humanity, humility, self-awareness, prayer, contemplation, silence, rest, friendship” (13). The writers blend candor with sympathy, personal transparency with brotherly love, and truth with grace to goad our remembrance that our privileged calling “lies in *being* more than *doing*” (14, emphasis original). Martin’s concluding “Daily Spiritual Health Plan” (appendix) endeavors to weave the essence of the book into a model worth perusing with care.

My own notes from this little volume fill several typed pages. I have profited from repeated readings, particularly of chapters 1–6, and as I review my notes even now, even after more than thirty years of ministry, I find myself sliding from my chair to my knees to be instructed. Below is a sampling of some of the best contributions of the authors.

1. Humanity (19–32): We must admit and submit to our God-designed limitations. We are inadequate. We are not the Messiah. “Remembering that God is the one who takes you, places you, and keeps you prevents ministry from becoming the pinnacle of your identity. It also helps remove that rather large anvil of performance-driven spirituality that rides so heavily on your back—the kind of spirituality that seeks applause from an audience other than God in order to be affirmed. God has put us where we are. *We work for him*” (24).
2. Humility (33–45): “Your care for your body and soul helps you *become* the person you’re called to *be*, before you spend even an hour doing the work of the *pastor* that people expect you to be” (37, emphasis original).

3. Hopefulness (47–59): “Waiting [on God] is putting a pause on our stirring without pausing our belief that God will not fail to deliver his goodness to us” (51).
4. Self-awareness (63–76): “Theorizing about our limitations does little good if we aren’t daily grasping the reality that God didn’t create us with hands big enough to hold *all things together*” (66, emphasis original).
5. Contemplation (77–87): “Contemplation provides the space for us to differentiate between what is true and what is not so that we develop healthier patterns of working and thinking” (79). “Prayer is the first recourse of wise people” (82).
6. Prayer (89–103): Prayer is “like water in the garden of our soul. It’s doing something beneath the surface of our being that we can’t always see but that we trust is going to produce something lovely—as long as we don’t break our habit of consistent watering” (91). “Prayer is how I experience the peace of God, protect my heart from anxiety, and reposition it to rejoice” (92).
7. Self- (soul-) care (107–21): “I have spent most of my life pretending that strength and weakness do not and cannot coexist. By God’s grace, however, I am continuing to learn that this combination is a key for living courageously and in the freedom of the gospel” (112).
8. Rest (123–28): “In fact, what I now understand to be rest and recreation I saw back then as laziness and lack of productivity” (123).
9. Silence (129–36): “Silence exposes the soul” (129).
10. Emotions (137–43): “A courageous pastor loves deeply and risks feeling deeply for others. Ultimately, it is the deeply feeling pastor who is able to stop, be still, feel with others, be present, connect on that human level, and minister God’s grace” (140).
11. Friendship (145–55): “The unhurried pastor stops and takes the time to consider their need for care and invests in the types of meaningful pastoral friendships where that care is found. Friendship is precious, but every pastor must carve out time from the demands of his schedule to cultivate it” (154–55).

Hurry to read this book . . . but read it unhurriedly. You will appreciate the understanding, empathy, and pastoral sensitivity of Martin and Croft’s timely counsel.

Robert Vincent

Senior Pastor | Grace Bible Church, Milford, OH