

FIGHT



FOR YOUR



PASTOR



PETER ORR

FOREWORD BY DANE C. ORTLUND

“As a pastor’s wife, I see how prayerfully and methodically my husband fights for the spiritual vitality of those we love and serve. I praise God when a man or woman in our church encourages him, prays for him, gently questions him, and thanks him, because each time it is a cup of cold water to a thirsty soul. My husband always says, ‘No one is suffering from too much encouragement.’ Least of all our pastors. This book, if read and practiced, will not only be a blessing to your pastor (and his wife!), but will strengthen your entire church and community.”

Christine Hoover, author, *How to Thrive as a Pastor’s Wife*; host, *The Ministry Wives Podcast*

“A single preposition can make a world of difference! This book is entitled *Fight for Your Pastor* not *Fight Your Pastor*. Peter Orr wisely and winsomely helps us to see the *for* and then provides practical ways to make it a reality—and all with a touch of humor thrown in. Given everything that has unfolded for churches and their pastors in the last few years, this timely book will encourage church members to be faithful sheep as they seek to encourage faithful shepherds. The content carried even more weight for me since I personally know Peter as a Christian brother who has modeled a genuine love for Christ’s church—for both its pastors and its people.”

Jonny Gibson, Associate Professor of Old Testament, Westminster Theological Seminary; Teaching Elder in the International Presbyterian Church, United Kingdom

“It is to our advantage—to our own benefit and joy, says Hebrews 13:17—to have happy pastors, not groaning clergy. Of course, at the end of the day, the pastors’ gladness and resilience is not the church’s final responsibility. But we can pray for them. We can fight for them instead of against them. Joyless pastors plague the church! Dear God, make them truly, deeply happy and be pleased to use their congregants to be some small but real ingredient in their joy. Peter Orr’s wise and timely book is a great place to start for how we can do our part.”

David Mathis, Senior Teacher and Executive Editor, desiringGod.org; Pastor, Cities Church, Saint Paul, Minnesota; author, *Workers for Your Joy: The Call of Christ on Christian Leaders*

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Peter Orr

Foreword by Dane C. Orlund

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Fight for Your Pastor

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For Ben, Russ, Paul, Andrew, and Leo

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Foreword

“FIGHT FOR YOUR PASTOR,” this book is titled—not “Fight *with* Your Pastor.” Pastors are just as fallible and fallen as any of us, yet the pressures they are under are unique and unremitting. Peter Orr sees what is at stake in the war zone of a pastor’s heart and calls all of us to obey the New Testament and not just to tepidly receive our pastor’s ministry, but also to proactively fight for his ministry, heart, and joy. He needs it.

A pastor is called to love, encourage, and build up his people. He must lead the way in this. But this will be a joy to him, and sustainable, only if the people self-consciously reciprocate that love and encouragement. Orr offers this important book out of a heart for the members of a church to hold up the hands of their spiritual leader, like Aaron and Hur holding up the hands of Moses (Ex. 17:12).

What kind of revival might break out if thousands of churches threw their arms around their pastors in the way this book prescribes? What we have here is the formula for apostolic Christianity itself—pastor and people loving and blessing one another, shepherd to sheep and sheep to shepherd, igniting a beauty of fellowship for which the world has no category.

Encouragement given is the glorious alternative to the common tragedy of withheld love and encouragement. Orr shows us how vital it is for a pastor's longevity in ministry for his people to receive his ministry *and to tell him they are receiving it*. Perhaps as churchgoers we think that it is enough not to criticize our pastor. It isn't. We must positively uphold him with life-giving words of specific and sincere encouragement. Our joy as members and his joy as a pastor are bound up with one another.

If he is such a poor pastor that you can't find anything to say to encourage him, then you need to find a new church. If you can find something to say, then you must. What you must *not* do is stay, saying nothing. Withheld love is a grievous failure; the devil smiles. For while overt or public criticism will end a man's ministry in the short term, the simple tragedy of withheld love will end a man's ministry in the long term. A ministry to silent parishioners is not sustainable.

FOREWORD

I am deeply thankful for Peter Orr's exhortation for every church member to fight for their pastor. This is a wise book, and a needed one.

Dane C. Ortlund
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Introduction

*“Apart from other things, there is the daily pressure
on me of my anxiety for all the churches.”*

2 CORINTHIANS 11:28

*“Is there a day that goes by when I don’t
wonder how to get out of ministry?”*

AN ANONYMOUS PASTOR¹

AS A SEMINARY professor in Australia, I have been involved in training hundreds of men and women for ministry over the last decade. A significant number of those who have completed training and are in ministry—whether as senior pastors, women’s workers, or assistants—are facing personal, psychological, or relational challenges. These difficulties

¹ The quotes at the beginning of each chapter are from pastors whose names I have withheld. I have edited their comments slightly for grammar and clarity.

are so intense that many are leaving their posts—some to parachurch ministries, some to secular jobs, and some—tragically—leaving the faith altogether.

Two friends immediately come to mind. One recently wrote to me, “I always thought energy and optimism were my secret power—the thing that kept me from burnout. But here I am, struggling to function and on four weeks of medical leave to recover from it all. I’m not fully aware of what caused it. I think just the collective toll of a thousand difficulties and disappointments.” Another pastor friend had to take medical leave because of some serious accusations made against him. He developed mouth ulcers, struggled to sleep, and was consumed with anxiety. After a year of intense stress, he was exonerated, but the effects remain with him and his family.

Of course, every Christian faces difficulty—Jesus called us to a life of carrying our crosses as we follow him. However, the challenges of those in pastoral ministry are often more acute. They have the same struggles as every Christian—following and living for Jesus in a world that hates him. However, they have the added role of leading other Christians who don’t always want to be led and proclaiming the gospel to a world that does not want to hear. Being in Christian leadership has always been challenging, but recently it seems that the pressures have multiplied. Think of the difference between

climate and weather. The “climate” for pastoral ministry is constant. The world, the flesh, and the devil are long-term climate factors that remain between Christ’s first and second coming. But it feels as if—in the West, at least—there’s been a change in the “weather.” There is now a general weather front of apostasy, secularism, unbelief, and so on that is making the life of a pastor—particularly a conservative, complementarian, and evangelical one—more difficult.² Whether on matters of sexual ethics, gender, or the uniqueness of Christ, a faithful pastor who proclaims and stands for the word of God faces rising hostility from the world.

Pressure doesn’t come only from outside. High-profile scandals have rocked the evangelical world, and these have raised questions about pastoral “power.” Congregation members are wary—rightly so—of overbearing pastors. However, for every bullying or abusive pastor, there are many more who are seeking, however imperfectly, to faithfully lead our churches. But because of the failings of a few, even these godly men are now regarded with suspicion. It is hard to rebuke a congregation member (something Paul expects a pastor to do: Titus 2:15) when so many voices are proclaiming that pastors are drunk on power.

2 I am grateful to my friend Rory Shiner for this illustration.

INTRODUCTION

The pressures caused by the recent pandemic further increased the pastor's burden. Many had to pivot quickly to online ministries. They were hit with criticism for not closing down quickly enough or for not opening up soon enough—or, conversely, for closing down in the first place. They faced the discouragement of congregation members continuing to stay away from church “because of COVID”—while happily attending restaurants, sporting events, and so on. A pastor friend of mine was complimented for his online resources since they enabled a family to “do church” at a more convenient time. Even better—by playing the service at 1.5 speed, “church took less time” out of the family schedule. With compliments like that, who needs criticism!

The Christian life was never meant to be easy. We follow a crucified Savior. Christian ministers have no monopoly on suffering. But in my experience and based on what the Scriptures say, pastors are the group under the most pressure. As Paul notes, “Apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches” (2 Cor. 11:28). Pastors' role in teaching the gospel and guarding congregations means they are under more extreme spiritual attack than the rest of us. Discouragement and opposition weigh heavily on them. Such spiritual opposition is part of the job, but it can be incredibly draining

when it takes the form of unfair criticism or unrealistic expectation from believers.³

There is a crisis among pastors. As Christians, we can do little to change the prevailing “weather,” but we can support our pastors as they lead us through stormy times. This short book is written as a call to more actively love and support our pastors. If you are reading this book, I am sure you love your pastor, but I want to nudge you to love him⁴ more intentionally. I invite you to pause and think about how you can support him more. In short, I am calling you to fight for your pastor.

3 Portions of this paragraph and others throughout the book are adapted from my article “Fight for Your Pastor,” the Gospel Coalition, Australia edition, May 14, 2021, <https://au.thegospelcoalition.org/>. Used with permission.

4 I am deliberately writing this book with respect to senior pastors, although I think the principles apply to others in full-time ministry. I want to concentrate on senior pastors because in my observation they are the ones who are under the most pressure—certainly in the contexts in which I live and work. For that reason, I have used the language of “he” throughout. I am convinced that the New Testament teaches that the role of the senior minister is reserved for men (e.g., 1 Tim. 2:12) even as it also affirms the vital ministry of women (e.g., Rom. 16:12; Phil. 4:3). If you disagree, I hope that you can still benefit from what I have written and apply it in your own context.

Fight!

“You also must help us by prayer.”

2 CORINTHIANS 1:11

“I wish my congregation would understand that God would grow us to be more like Jesus if we turned our criticism and cynicism into prayer for others and church leaders.”

AN ANONYMOUS PASTOR

I COULD HAVE ENTITLED this chapter “Pray,” but the idea of “fighting in prayer” (see 2 Cor. 10:4; Eph. 6:10–20) underlines the seriousness of the battle we need to undertake. The person who is under more satanic attack than anyone else you know is your pastor. The person whose faith Satan

wants to derail the most is your pastor. The person whose marriage Satan would most like to wreck, whose kids he most wants to cause to rebel, whom he most wants to discourage is your pastor. You need to fight in prayer for your pastor.

It is striking how often the apostle Paul asks his churches to pray for him and his colleagues. In fact, it is striking that someone with such a clear grasp of God's sovereignty is so insistent that he *needs* the prayers of God's people. It is also instructive to consider the range of things that the apostle asks prayer for.

Paul outlines pressures he faced, describing how he "despaired of life itself" (2 Cor. 1:8). Thankfully, the Lord delivered him from these trials, but he is not naive enough to think that he will not face similar pressures in the future. He knows that the Lord will continue to deliver him, but he adds, "You also must help us by prayer" (1:11). Paul has seen the sovereign, miraculous deliverance of God in his life; nevertheless, he requests, commands even, the Corinthians to pray for him. He needs their help. Your pastor is not an apostle, but he needs you to help him by your prayers. He needs you to pray that he will endure even in the face of the kinds of pressure that might make him "despair of life itself."

FIGHT!

Paul asks the Philippians to pray for his deliverance. Locked in a Roman prison, he tells the Philippians that he rejoices because he knows “that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance” (Phil. 1:19). Paul is putting the prayers of Christians on the same level as the work of God! Of course, our prayers are so significant precisely because they ask *God* to work. Your pastor may not be in prison, but Paul expects that he will have to “endure suffering” (2 Tim. 4:5) if he is faithful to the gospel. The opposition that he faces can often feel too much to bear. He needs your prayers for deliverance and joy in the midst of trials.

Praying for your pastor has a double benefit. Primarily, when you pray for your pastor, you are asking our heavenly Father to work in his life. You are asking him to pour out his grace. You are asking for the supernatural help your pastor needs. However, there is a secondary benefit: praying for your pastor means that you are remembering him before the Lord (see Eph. 1:16 and 1 Thess. 1:3). To remember your pastor before the Lord means you are thinking about him in the presence of God, so you are less likely to be negative toward him. Spending more time remembering your pastor before the Lord means spending less time complaining about him to other people.

A Pastor Writes:

We have people who feel that they need to take a “time-out” from ministry serving because they are “struggling.” We try to put on events that will help people to connect with others and remind them of the joys of the church family, but people feel too tired to commit. With all of that, we have a leadership team that is shouldering more and more responsibility and ministry tasks to help a Sunday gathering to happen. *They* are tired. I have walks with people from the church who are trying to keep work going, family going, who are not handling “life” as they might normally do, and it is never-ending. And then there is me. My mind is full of other people’s problems, and I can’t switch off. I have started to wake up and dread the day’s to-do list. I am tired too, and it is a lonely place. I feel guilty asking others to do things when they have to take time to pray about it and then tell me that they can’t, or that they will when things are more “normal.”

A pastor recently shared with me what happened during a service he was hosting (because of local COVID restrictions) online. As the service began, the camera stopped talking to

the computer and everything went off-line. It took nearly ten minutes to get back online. In that time, the pastor received two text messages. One came from a family that acknowledged how stressful this must be for him and said that the family members were praying for him. The other came from a frustrated church member wondering what was happening and pointing out how uncaring it was not to start on time. Pressure does funny things to people, but it would be great if our default instinct was to pray for our pastors rather than to criticize.

Often, Paul asks for prayer regarding his proclamation of the gospel—namely, that he would proclaim the gospel boldly (Eph. 6:18–20), clearly (Col. 4:4), and effectively (2 Thess. 3:1). A pastor is charged with doing the work of an evangelist (2 Tim. 4:5). This is a reminder that we can pray *positively* for our pastors, not just that they might endure the pressures and stresses they face, but also that they might diligently, boldly, and faithfully execute their ministries. Why not pray through the qualifications that Paul lays down for pastors in 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus? Why not pray that your pastor would be able to perform the duties and display the character that God expects of him?

Paul often starts his letters with short prayers for the churches he addresses. Why not pray through these prayers for your pastor? One of the most spiritually helpful things we can do is to pray through Scripture. As we read God's word and pray his

words back to him, we can be confident that we pray according to his will. Paul's prayers are spiritually rich, varied, and detailed, so they will help us avoid bland "bless him" prayers.

A Pastor Writes:

I've recently had to discipline a couple over sexual sin and infidelity, and it's been the biggest ongoing source of stress; and yet, it would be totally inappropriate for me to share those details with someone who offers to pray for me. So I have to bear that burden quietly, and even though I want to share it for prayerful support, I can only speak in vague generalities to protect the privacy of others. In the end, it feels like no one is praying for me as I really want or need. I would love my congregation to understand that the very things I want and need prayer for are the very things I cannot share. When you genuinely ask how you can pray for me, please know that what I share is only a snapshot of the deeper things for which I truly want and need prayer. In fact, what I say might be so general and nonspecific that it appears totally meaningless! But that's because I can't get specific, because if I did, I would be inappropriately sharing the deep sins and struggles of other brothers and sisters in our congregation.

However, Paul can also issue a general request for the Thessalonian church to “pray for us” (1 Thess. 5:25). This prompts us to pray for our pastors in expansive terms. It doesn’t take much to imagine what we could pray for them. In many ways, the prayers we pray for them are the same as those we pray for ourselves.

Here are some suggestions for prayers for your pastor:

- Pray for his marriage (if he is married)—that he would be a faithful husband.
- Pray for his kids—that they would grow up in the fear and knowledge of the Lord.
- Pray for his health—physical, mental, and spiritual.
- Pray that he would be wise in his use of technology—not giving in to impurity (pornography), time wasting (too much social media), or anger (again, too much social media).
- Pray that he would devote himself to the Scriptures.
- Pray that he would grow in his love for the Lord Jesus.
- Pray that he would grow in his love for the saints.
- Pray that he would grow in his ability to teach God’s word.
- Pray that he would be kept from error.
- Pray that he would be faithful in evangelism.
- Pray that he would not give in to bitterness as he faces criticism.

- Pray for his refreshment when he is on vacation.
- Pray that he would delight in the Lord.

If your pastor is doing his job properly, he is praying for you, fighting for you. Paul describes his colleague Epaphras's praying for the Colossian believers as "struggling on your behalf in his prayers, that you may stand mature and fully assured in all the will of God" (Col. 4:12). What a great picture—pastor and people laboring, struggling, *fighting* in prayer for one another.

Do you pray for your pastor regularly? Daily? Specifically? Many of us, myself included, need to repent of the lip service we give to the idea that we pray for our pastors. Your pastor needs your earnest, prayerful support. Fight for him!