

1-1-2000

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Recommended Citation

McClane, Curtis D. (2000) "The Search for Ministerial Integrity," *Leaven*: Vol. 8: Iss. 2, Article 10.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol8/iss2/10>

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The Search For Ministerial Integrity

BY CURTIS D. McCLANE

“Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him” (Job 13:15 KJV). These words came from the lips of one who felt betrayed by his closest friends. His friends were supposed to comfort him during this most trying of times. But instead of comfort, they brought criticism. The Job narrative provides a helpful paradigm for maintaining ministerial integrity in the midst of unjust and undue criticism. From a devotional perspective, we will look at the integrity of Job’s character during his time of testing for clues that will guide us through the maze of ministerial mayhem.

The words at breakfast that morning hit me like shock waves of an atomic blast. I was not prepared for them. My understanding of our breakfast meeting was that we were going to talk about the positive aspects of my going to the Promise Keepers (PK) conference. Naively eager, I arrived at the restaurant poised to share my latest thoughts and ideas about the way God was using PK. My words froze in midair as the arctic blast of unjust criticism

descended upon me. This person had not come for the purpose of encouraging me. Instead, he was there to tell me how I was not fit for that congregation and I that needed to think about whether or not I should remain. There it was: Job’s tornado, fire from heaven, raiding and murdering bands, his painful boils, his nonsupportive wife, his unsympathetic friends all wrapped up into one demonic package.

Satan had gone before God and asked that the hedge be removed from my ministry. And it was painful. I questioned my ministerial calling. I questioned my person. I questioned my relationship with God. The questions cascaded over my numb brain and fell into the pool of despair I quickly created.

“Have you considered my preaching servant?” God asked.

Satan responded, “You have blessed the fruit of his ministry. But let me stretch my hand out and negate his ministry, and he will surely curse you to your face.”

The Lord said to Satan, “Very well, then, everything he has worked

for is in your hands. Only do not lay a finger on him.”

So from that moment, Satan’s mighty wind took the sails right off my ministry; the fire from heaven scorched my ego; the Sabeans carried off our converts; painful boils surfaced on a sensitive heart; and nonsupportive and unsympathetic leadership basically made it known that the problems in my ministry were because of my own incompetence.

In all this, I did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing, but I certainly did not handle the poison of toxic leadership very well. It was at this time that God gave me the message of Job, and I learned in a personal way that Job’s integrity would become a guiding star in my struggle for ministerial survival.

I want to share with you specific dimensions of Job’s “integrity” (Hebrew *tumah, tom*) that serve as a paradigm for surviving the times of testing when Satan seeks to destroy the effectiveness of our ministries.

What we will see is that often ministry is practiced in its most

authentic forms when our members see us withstand the greatest onslaughts to our character and hold up well with an integrity that flows only from God.

I *Integrity is being able to maintain our equilibrium with God when there seems to be no rhyme or reason to the chaos around us.*

Listen to Job 2:3:

Then the LORD said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him: he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil. And he still maintains his integrity, though you incited me against him to ruin him without any reason." (NIV)

In this initial testing period, Job lost oxen, donkeys, camels, and servants to the marauding parties of the Sabeans and Chaldeans. He lost servants to their swords. Sheep and servants were burnt up in a fire that fell from the sky. And finally, all his sons and daughters were killed in a cyclone.

So Job lost possessions, livelihood, servants, and family. His immediate response was to tear off his robe, shave his head, and fall down on the ground in worship before God. Here is what he said:

Naked I came from my mother's womb,
and naked I will depart.
The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away;
may the name of the Lord be praised. (1:21 NIV)

The narrator then adds: "Job did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing" (1:22 NIV).

This significant remark gives us an important insight into what

integrity is all about. Unimaginable and chaotic tragedies may send us into the vortex of grief. Appropriate grieving is allowed. And it drives us to our knees in humble submission to worship the Sovereign God who knows all. Sin is committed when blame is placed on God.

Janet Yeager and Thomas Dailey have proposed that the chaotic character of the Job narrative is a complementary necessity to the previously untested order of Job's life.¹ It is in the midst of this chaotic experience that Job hangs on to his conviction regarding the trustworthiness and faithfulness of God, even though he cannot foresee the future. He knows that he is living with a clear conscience, and nothing will tempt him to move from his rock of stability with God.

Ministry tends to be one crisis after another. We find ourselves trying to keep our balance when the breaking waves of uncertainty threaten to knock us off our feet. Unimaginable and chaotic responses to our authentic offerings of ministry can toss us into the foaming tide of engulfing grief. A member of the congregation falsely accuses our child of something he or she did not do. We are given cues that we need to be thinking about looking elsewhere for ministry opportunities. Projects that we have spent a lot of time developing are rejected outright, and our competence and motivation are called into question.

Appropriate grieving is allowed. For how long? In my case, it lasted approximately three months. But it was during a time of intense releasing and worshipping God that my soul was freed. This taught me the lesson that often the only response we have left is worship. There is a tendency to blame someone, anyone, even God. But it is the courage and

wisdom of resisting the urge to blame that gives us the freedom and space to worship God. A blaming heart cannot be a worshipping heart.

I *Integrity means persevering even when those closest to us do not share our commitment.*

In chapter 2 we find the following words from Job's wife, which are less than supportive:

Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God and die. (2:9 NRSV)

According to Mrs. Job, there is a limit to what a person can take before bailing out. She expresses surprise that Job is continuing to hold on to a way of relating to God that seems to be producing undesirable results. If the more tenacious you are with your faith, the more troubles come your way, then doesn't it make sense to renounce God and be done with it? After all, how much can one human being stand? The ones who are closest to us have the potential to discourage us the most. Instead of encouraging her husband, Job's wife counsels him to throw in the towel, to call it quits.

In ministry our integrity is often questioned and challenged at its deepest level when leaders of the church with whom we have built relationships over a period of time are less than supportive and question the foundation and direction of our ministries. Probably one of the most hurtful questions to come our way in ministry is the one raised in the midst of controversy: Do you still persist in your integrity?

I find it highly significant that in both its occurrences in chapter 2, the concept of integrity is coupled with the word "still." This indicates

perseverance. It indicates tenacious faith. It indicates a grip on God. Still . . . yet . . . continuing . . . We get the message loud and clear. Are you still there?

One individual asked my wife and me how we could still be ministering in such a difficult setting. The dysfunctional leadership of this church could be characterized as having created a toxic faith that was expressed in sectarian sickness. We replied that God gave us the strength to carry on as long as we stayed on our knees in prayer. And it was during this prayer time that God revealed to us what this “still” really means. It is the “still” that testifies to a feeling of complete dependence on God. It is the “still” that testifies to God’s unfinished work. And it is the “still” that testifies to God’s faithfulness even when those around us have ceased their support.

I *Integrity means never letting go of what we believe to be right.*

This is entirely different from being stubborn or pigheaded about things. Here is the way Job describes it:

Far be it from me to say that you are right; until I die I will not put away my integrity from me. I hold fast my righteousness, and will not let it go; my heart does not reproach me for any of my days. (27:5–6 NRSV)

This is a commitment to an unswerving loyalty to the way of God we believe is being worked out in our lives. Even though others may try very hard to persuade us otherwise, we are unwilling to compromise our core beliefs and values. We do not bow down to the idol of accommodation, nor do we sacrifice

our convictions at the altar of secular humanism.

This is where the prophet role of ministry comes into play. And I hate being cast into it, but when God calls I must respond faithfully. On one occasion God moved me to confront a leadership that was being cruel and harsh with people in the congregation who did not fit their agenda for a strong, growing church. I was being blamed for creating an insurrection against their authority when I encouraged members of the congregation to share openly what was on their hearts.

The church had a marquee outside that had the expression “Where each person is important.” Unwilling to stand by and watch individuals cast aside on the “junk heap” of undesirable members, I told the leaders that afternoon that they needed to take down the sign because they really did not believe that every person was important. I had to spend several hours in prayer before the encounter to make sure that I was speaking out of a heart of conviction and not just being pig-headed. It was a difficult process, because it forced me to sort through the motivations behind my actions and concerns.

It is when we feel our world falling apart that we experience the greatest opportunity for freedom. The old ways of perceiving are now superseded with a new perspective. The old ways of relating are now challenged with a new possibility of relationships. The old ways of decision making are now replaced with a new paradigm of operating. The old has become new. And it is precisely Job’s unwillingness to change his core convictions that provides a new avenue of change in his life’s experience.

Life is more than a series of absurdities and unexplainable pains that simply must be endured. Instead, life for believers is linked with God’s unseen purpose.²

This is so true in our ministries. We have convictions. We will go to the gallows for them. We have a clear conscience and know that God is always true. Even though church leaders, members, and relatives do not understand our thinking, perspective, and direction, we can with tenacity of faith hang on to God when the ministry all around us becomes chaotic. For it is in the mayhem of ministry that we discover the perfect complement of reliance and permanence in our relationship with God.

I *Finally, integrity is being open to God’s critique of our spiritual welfare.*

In Job 31, Job makes himself vulnerable to God’s searching, asking that if he has walked contrary to God’s ways that God make it known to him:

Let me be weighed in a just balance, and let God know my integrity! (31:6 NRSV)

If I have walked in falsehood . . .
If my steps have turned from the path . . .
If my heart has been led by my eyes . . .
If my hands have been defiled . . .
(31:5, 7 NIV)

Job constantly opens his heart to God’s searching eyes. He does not want to hide anything he has done. He knows he is not perfect, but he also knows that his “righteous life” is being lived in such a way that he glorifies God. Later in the story, Job confesses that he probably has

spoken too hastily, and he submits himself to God's sovereign judgment. In chapter 40, Job recognizes that he has spoken too quickly and says, "I lay my hand on my mouth" (40:3-5 NRSV). In chapter 42, he confesses that he has "uttered what I did not understand" (42:1-6 NRSV). Maintaining our integrity does not mean that we know and understand the ways of God. This is a difficult lesson for Job to learn.

It is a difficult lesson for me, too. For example, I went on a three-day wilderness retreat in southern Indiana for the purpose of God's searching my heart and exposing what was impure and self-centered. I wanted God to reveal to me what I was lacking in my spiritual leadership and how I could be a more faithful servant of the gospel. The insights I gained were profound and painful. It was through all this that I had to confess that I too, like Job, had spoken too quickly in defense of my ministry and needed to submit to the sovereign leading of God.

Conclusion

It is clear that the emphasis of Job's narrative is not a treatise on theodicy or an attempt to answer all the questions that are raised. Rather, the theme of this narrative is one of faith and integrity.³ It is Job's struggle to maintain his integrity in the midst of his suffering while at the same time admitting that he is not perfect.

The four specific references to Job's integrity provide significant insights critical to our practice of ministry in difficult times. Contextually, we learn that integrity entails the following elements:

1. Maintaining equilibrium with God when all around is chaos

2. Persevering even when those closest to us do not share our convictions

3. Never letting go of what we believe is right

4. Being open to God's critique of our spiritual welfare

It was extremely helpful for me to take these four elements of integrity from the life of Job and apply them to my ministry. Spiritual direction and theological stability are the blessings I enjoy from God's word. At a time when I felt my calling for ministry was seriously questioned, I was able to reach out for something solid beyond myself. A sense of hope and renewed vigor for ministerial calling surfaced from the experience.

Today I am a different person. My understanding of ministry is much deeper and broader. My search for ministerial integrity began one Friday morning at a breakfast table. It ended with a feast at the feet of a man named Job, who came to understand that suffering opens us up to the presence and working of God.

To learn the lessons of Job and to seek to teach and apply them to one's own [ministry] is a lifelong journey of faith one must "experience as an adventure on the growing edge of the human spirit." Job's example provides practical truths such as persevering in prayer during trials. But these truths must be applied by faith. A person may never fully appropriate them until he suffers.⁴

Almighty, Sovereign God,
Please help me to appropriate
my ministerial suffering
In all its forms to your glory:

The times of disorder and
confusion,

The times of disassociation,
The times of conviction,
The times of critique.

My ministry really means
nothing without your presence.

Thank you for destabilizing my
comfortable little world of ministry
So I could rely on you.

Thank you for suffering.

Thank you for reminding me
what ministry is for.

May I proclaim your greatness in
the midst of the congregation!

Keep me humble and preserve
my integrity.

Lead me not into temptation, but
deliver me from the evil one.

I submit to your kingdom rule

And ask you to continue to use
me in my human frailty.

Your humble servant of the
gospel I am.

In the name of Jesus,
Amen.

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Notes

¹Janet Yeager and Thomas Dailey, "Job's World: A Chaotic Conundrum," *Encounter* 56, no. 2 (1995): 175-87.

²Larry J. Walters, "Reflections on Suffering from the Book of Job," *Bibliotheca sacra* 154 (October-December 1997): 451.

³Andrew E. Steinmann, "The Structure and Message of the Book of Job," *Vetus Testamentum* 46, no. 1 (1996): 100.

⁴Greg W. Parsons, "Guidelines for Understanding and Proclaiming the Book of Job," *Bibliotheca sacra* 151 (October-December 1994): 413.