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Keeping the Fire Alive: Paul and Kay Watson on the Guiding Principles of Ministry

Patrick Messer

I first met Paul Watson in 2009 when, as a Duke seminary student, I went looking for a ministry internship at a local church. Most of the ministers who had helped spark the vocational flame in me had left the ministry by the time I'd reached the halfway mark of graduate school. The fiery passion they'd had to serve God and God's people had either flickered out or devolved into a strange fire that had consumed them. As I searched for the degree-required internship that year, my prayer was that I would find a mentor who could teach me to walk this career path without burning—or flaming—out. That's when God led me to Paul.

It did not take me long to realize I had hit the jackpot of mentors. Here was a man who had earned a PhD in Old Testament from Yale and then gone on to serve in the academy and the local church for decades. His last major vocational stop had been at the Cole Mill Road Church of Christ in Durham, North Carolina, where he was the preaching minister for twenty-four years. Paul continued serving the congregation as an elder after his retirement in 2007. Three years later, as my internship at Cole Mill Road began, Paul had stepped back into the pulpit as interim preacher during the congregation's search for a new minister.

Throughout the year of Paul's tutelage, I was captivated by his deep love for God's people. In our weekly mentoring conversations, he never once spoke of ministry as someone weary and worn from a lifelong struggle, although he had certainly known hardship and struggle. He always talked about local church ministry with delight. Even more striking, Paul's wife, Kay, reflected a complementary pleasure in his work. As I came to know Kay better, I never once sensed in her a shred of bitterness toward a vocation whose demands of time and attention could well strain any marriage. It was evident that Paul and Kay shared a love for each other and the church that had only matured over time like a fine wine.

As things worked out, I was able to put down roots at Cole Mill Road. After my internship, the church hired me to fill the ministry vacancy. I have now served more than four years as the pulpit minister, attempting to take up the torch that Paul carried so well for so many years.

In preparation for this article, I sat down with my mentor to probe him for advice. The subject: How does one remain steadfast and faithful in vocational ministry for the long haul? I also interviewed Kay to get her perspective on Paul's comments, as well as her wisdom about sustaining a strong marriage in the midst of ministry. The following is a distillation of their responses.

Core Principles of Faithful Ministry

I began my interview with Paul by asking this question: What are the core principles that guided you over the many years of your ministry? With Paul's characteristic attention to detail, he prefaced his reflections by reminding me that ministry comes in many forms. But for the sake of this conversation, he said, he would be speaking of the role of the preacher, or senior minister, and would use those terms interchangeably. And with that clarification, he began.

Integrity

The first principle at the core of steadfast and faithful ministry, Paul said, is integrity: “What the preacher professes needs to be reflected in what the preacher lives. The preacher needs not only to preach the gospel but to live the gospel.” He briefly dropped his gaze, and added in a softer voice, “So often, it doesn’t work out that way.” Serving with integrity, he said, is not the same thing as living a perfect life. “Serving with integrity simply means consciously working at integrating one’s outer life with what one says or thinks.” That kind of work is central to the role of a minister, Paul stated. For starters, the congregation looks to the minister as a model of gospel living. “The preacher is a public figure. People are paying attention. It just goes with the territory. And if a preacher behaves without integrity, people will certainly notice.” This has a real impact on a church, he said. For those considering whether or not to become a disciple, seeing a minister behave out of sync with the gospel can have a devastating influence. For members of the congregation who hold the preacher in high esteem, discovering a lack of integrity can be crushing. For members who never liked the preacher in the first place, the hypocrisy can provide fodder for toxic gossip. All of these reactions stem from a very basic and sound expectation, he said. “The minister is a disciple and must live that way.”

I asked Paul if he would share some specific examples of how the minister’s integrity can be tested. He mentioned three: finances, fidelity to one’s spouse, and time management. He started by identifying a number of pitfalls in how a minister manages finances. “Often, ministers think they do not get paid a fair wage for the amount of work they do.” He went on to say that this can easily become a justification for failing to tithe back to the church or give to other charitable organizations. Another financial pitfall is what Paul referred to as “retail therapy”: the use of shopping to cope with the stress of ministry. This can lead to outlandish purchases and taking on too much debt. According to Paul, managing one’s finances with integrity means doing so as any disciple should: through good stewardship and cheerful generosity.

Our attention then turned to marital fidelity. Paul stressed that it is so easy for a minister who is compassionate and caring to cross physical and emotional boundaries. He looked at me across the table with a firm gaze and raised eyebrows and said, “At some point you will be tempted to cross those boundaries.” He illustrated the point by instructing me to imagine myself being contacted by an attractive woman in the congregation in need of pastoral care. “Imagine she comes into your office and pours out her heart to you about how her husband doesn’t pay attention to her, fails to engage in physical intimacy, and is not emotionally available. That is a scenario in which you can easily send the wrong signals,” he cautioned. It could be a comment that the husband is a fool for ignoring such a smart and beautiful woman. Or it could be a comforting hand placed on her shoulder that lingers too long. These are subtle beginnings of serious infidelity to one’s spouse. Then in a tone filled with conviction, Paul added, “We need to be aware of our own susceptibility to temptation. Inappropriate thoughts are not just a reality for the wicked.” Paul went on to explain that this beautifully illustrates the need for every minister to have an accountability partner outside the congregation. Having such a person with whom to talk openly and honestly on a regular basis provides you with a means to confess sin and receive aid in resisting temptation.

With that, Paul’s attention turned to a third battleground for the minister’s integrity: the use of time. In a matter-of-fact voice, he declared, “Some ministers are lazy. They’ve found that they can slide by week to week with minimal effort.” Paul went on to say that this is particularly a challenge for young ministers. Naturally, my ears perked up. “Why is that?” I asked. Paul replied that oftentimes, young ministers have not had experience operating without the structure of deadlines and tests. When they show up at a congregation for that first job, the congregation assumes they know what to do—“You’re the minister; you’re supposed to know,” he remarked sarcastically. I laughed as I recalled my own feeling of being lost at sea my first week as a full-time preacher. Paul continued, “Ministers must have the discipline and integrity to set a course for the week, create a daily schedule, and follow it. Of course, that schedule needs to be flexible as various needs arise. But you need that structure as your rule of thumb.” As we wrapped up our discussion on integrity as the first core principle of faithful ministry, Paul punctuated his reflection with these words: “Ministers must continually tend to the unspoken dimensions of our ministry. Serving with integrity requires the conscious work of embodying the gospel we proclaim in how we behave.”

At my later interview with Kay, I relayed these thoughts for her comment. She agreed, “Yes, integrity is quite important.” She went on to explain that it can be difficult for ministers to be surrounded by people who expect them to be perfect. “But ministers are human, too,” she noted. “They open their mouths and say something when they shouldn’t.” While all sin has ripple effects, people in the church need to be willing to see their ministers as human and respond with grace when their humanity inevitably shows up. But the bottom line, Kay said, is that a minister’s life as a disciple comes down to the very same standard that exists for every disciple: “You have to want to live the Christian life. Do you truly desire follow Christ?” Ministers and church members alike must have their desire and commitment to the Christian faith show up in their everyday activities, she said, not just at church. In this way, ministers, along with all disciples, prove the integrity of their faith as “a way of life.”

Commitment to the Word

Asked to name the second core principle that had helped guide and sustain his ministry, Paul answered, with a deep breath, “Commitment to the word.” This principle of ministry should be the lifeblood of the preacher’s study, reflection, and proclamation; in order to excel in all three of these aspects of ministry, he said, “we must hunger to understand the word better, not just intellectually but viscerally.” That means developing a capacity to “rejoice in what it says, even if it is a hard word, knowing I need to hear this because God wants my life to have a certain form and shape for his glory, not my personal satisfaction.” Paul went on to assert that in order to cultivate this kind of relationship with the word, ministers need to have regular study, not only in anticipation of teaching or preaching on a text but also for personal enrichment.

This prompted me to ask, “When you have to prepare a sermon each and every week, how do you sustain that hunger in your belly to feast on Scripture? How do you keep your study from becoming stale research for yet another presentation?” Paul replied that the preacher’s entire process of studying the word through research, exploration, and attention to how to communicate it must never lose a particular quality. That entire process must always be permeated with an expectation and “openness to allowing Scripture to reframe, modify, or change our thought.” This is what it means to engage with Scripture as a living word, he said. “No preacher should ever reach a point where he says, ‘I’ve preached on the Good Samaritan fifteen times. This text has nothing new to offer.’” We should always return to texts with the expectation of hearing something new and fresh, Paul continued. “The word doesn’t change, but we do.” He quoted the words of Psalm 73:2—“My feet had almost slipped; I had nearly lost my foothold” (NIV)—and then observed, “What you hear in those words as a young man drastically changes when you hear it again as an old man who has developed problems with balance.” Suddenly, that familiar passage of Scripture takes on “a different shade, a new depth of meaning and resonance.” No matter how much we’ve studied and preached on a particular text, it always has more to offer, he said. If we engage Scripture that way, we’ll keep our hunger alive and never be forced to serve the “warmed-up leftovers” of old exegesis.

Before leaving this subject, Paul offered some further suggestions for how preachers can sustain their commitment to the word in sermon preparation. First, they should continue to hone their exegetical skills by listening to good preachers and paying attention to how those preachers engage with a text. Second, they can join a group of other preachers who gather once a week, early in the week, to examine a common text from which to preach the following Sunday. Finally, ministers should always invest in their own continuing education by attending lectureships, preaching workshops, and seminars.

Paul wound down our conversation on the subject by emphasizing how crucial this principle is for a thriving ministry. “We must retain an excitement and wonderment about the word. If you are not fired up about the word, your congregation will not be.” With a subtle smile, he concluded, “There is an old saying that I think is true: ‘The congregation isn’t going to be more interested in Bible study than you are.’ Excitement about the word gets communicated in sermons, and it’s infectious. The opposite is also infectious.”

When I relayed these comments to Kay, she illuminated the fact that excitement about Scripture can be fueled through engaging conversations at home. One of the benefits of being married to a minister is that you can have great conversations about Scripture, she remarked. This is not to say that Paul and Kay have always

agreed in how they interpret or apply certain passages. They've certainly had their disagreements, Kay said, then added with a mischievous smile, "Now, don't tell Paul, but I think he values my opinion." Through Kay's comments, several things became clear. If a minister is to have an excitement and commitment to the word, that should not only show up at church; it should also show up at home. Furthermore, this commitment to the word is not a dogmatic closed-mindedness but a commitment that values other perspectives and truly enjoys the dialogue. Somehow, that respectful engagement of various perspectives, whether at church or at home, is crucial to keeping the relationship with Scripture fresh and vibrant.

Genuine Love of People

Paul and I then turned our attention to his third and final principle for long and fruitful ministry. Before revealing it, Paul paused a moment, as if to ensure that the words would carry a certain degree of gravity: "You have to have a *genuine* love of people." He explained that in order to love people genuinely, you cannot see them as numbers or data. Rather, he commented, "you must have an interest in and concern for people as they really are. If you feign interest in members, you may be in the wrong role." He went on to note that this kind of genuine interest and fascination with people is reflected in Christ's own ministry. With his own wonderment with the word in full effect, Paul sat back and added, "I'm always amazed at how comfortable Christ is with all sorts of folks, and engages them at the places they are." Paul then recalled the stories of Nicodemus and the woman at the well in John chapters 3 and 4. As he marveled at the details of both stories, he commented, "They could not be more different. The time of day, gender, religion, place—it is a deliberate contrast. And yet Jesus is equally comfortable engaging both." Without any pause for thought, Paul proceeded to walk through story after story of Jesus engaging all sorts of people: the Syrophenician woman who sought healing for her daughter, the paralytic whose friends let him down through the roof, the children who flocked to him, the lepers who asked for healing. As he riffed on each new story, the preacher in Paul picked up steam, until he brought the message home with a final proclamation: "Jesus is there for *people*, not for doctrine. He is there to plant seed and to cultivate relationships. The essence of the gospel is God and neighbor, and those are *relational* terms." After the rousing homily reached its climax, Paul and I settled back into our chairs and absorbed the force of what he'd just expounded. After a moment, Paul added the finishing touch: if details of doctrine exist for anything, he said, they are there to nurture and shape those relationships.

As we brought the interview to a close, Paul gave some sage advice about how to love in concrete ways: "Our interest cannot be selective but must be inclusive. Some personalities will put you off. But as a minister, you need to rise above those personal preferences to relate to anyone and everyone who will allow." He paused for a moment and then elaborated, "Perhaps even more so to those who are on the fringe. We can't blow them off, saying, 'There's not much he can do for me and the church.' We must see and affirm the value in *each* person." The capacity to love each person is not simply a personality trait, he said; there is work involved.

When Kay and I later discussed these comments from Paul, she agreed that some people are harder to love than others. Whether ministers or church members, all of us are faced with people who irritate us—or are irritated by us, or even resent us, perhaps because of something that occurred in the past. However, our commitment to love all people means that we have to try to find ways to understand and relate to those with whom our relationship is strained. This can't happen without effort to get to know them. "To love people, you have to know them, know what their interests are, so you can pick up on things down the road," she said. This kind of work at love is what creates the possibility of a healthier relationship as brothers and sisters in Christ in the future.

While the bulk of my interview with Paul focused on the guiding principles of ministry, the majority of my interview with Kay focused on the guiding principles of a flourishing marriage when one of the spouses serves in vocational ministry. She started by telling me that she and Paul had been married for twenty-seven years. Both had been in previous marriages, with spouses who had suffered untimely deaths. When Paul and Kay met and eventually married, joining their two families presented challenges. "How did you stick it out through those tough times?" I asked. "Our commitment to each other," Kay answered. "We took vows." When

two people are fully committed to keeping those marriage vows, she said, then you choose to stick by one another even when you're presented with reasons to walk away.

I then asked Kay about some of the specific challenges for the spouse of a minister and how to face those so the marriage can flourish. She responded by telling the story of a lectureship that she and Paul attended together not long after they were married. A person Kay had just met asked her what it was like to go to church as a preacher's wife. Leaning forward across the table, Kay recalled her response with raised eyebrows: "Like it always does!" She went on to explain that attending church as a preacher's wife is no more important to her worth and life's meaning than attending church as a plumber's wife. "My identity is not rooted in being a minister's wife," she said matter-of-factly. "I am his wife. But he's *my* husband!" Both spouses have their own identities, gifts, and interests. Both spouses have to love and value each other for who they are and allow each other to be their own individual selves. From Kay's perspective, this was a big part of sustaining a strong marriage throughout Paul's life in ministry and her life in her own work and ministry as a disciple.

I concluded my interview with Kay by asking whether she had any further advice she would give to married couples where one of the spouses serves in full-time ministry. She thought for a moment, then she offered this: "You need to be there to support one another." Both partners in a marriage will face difficult situations and trials in life. When they come home, they both need to find someone willing to listen and encourage them. Kay relayed the story of a long meeting that Paul had at church when a group of people had decided to leave Cole Mill Road. "I remember him walking in the door, his coat on and his briefcase in hand. He just sat down in the chair and started talking for forty-five minutes non-stop. And I just listened. He was agonizing over this situation at church. And he needed someone to listen. So I did." Kay paused for a moment and then concluded, "This is a hard, cold world, so you need to give your spouse compassion and support at home. If you can't find it there, you're not going to find it much elsewhere."

The more I reflect back on my conversations with Paul and Kay, the more the richness of their wisdom seems to soak in. Serving with integrity, maintaining a commitment to the word, genuinely loving people—these are the principles that have undergirded Paul for a lifetime of ministry that never burned out. Remaining committed to your wedding vows in difficult times, refusing to allow your spouse's identity to be absorbed in your vocation, providing encouraging support at home—these are the components of a marriage that thrives over a lifetime in ministry. Perhaps the minister who is rooted in these principles can become like the bush that stopped Moses in his tracks: a vessel for God's voice in a fiery presence that is never consumed.

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