



# The One Thing Necessary in Pastoral Colleague Relationships

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“I have concluded that there is one thing necessary for a marriage to succeed,” my father used to say. Now that I am 50 years old I am ready to hear him. This wasn’t always the case. My father was a pastor nearing retirement when I was ordained. The two of us were close, but almost too close for me to be able to receive much of his wisdom. I needed to find my own way, not retrace his steps to his conclusions. But now I think he was right about the one thing necessary for a marriage to succeed. Furthermore, I have concluded that the very same thing is necessary for a relationship between pastoral colleagues to succeed.

For the past year I have served on a task force that is studying the dynamics between senior and associate pastors. The reason this task force was assembled is clear enough: the relationships between pastoral colleagues is often strained, unhealthy, even hostile, which takes a toll not only on the pastors but also on the congregations they serve. So what makes for healthy relationships between pastoral colleagues? We have come to some important, if predictable, conclusions. Well thought-out job descriptions help. Clear lines of accountability are important. Ongoing open communication is key. It is always a plus to have complementary gifts, similar philosophies about ministry, theologies that at least make room for one another, and devotion to a common mission. All of that is true and yet we have concluded that all of that is not enough. All of those things put together don’t assure healthy pastoral colleague relationships. Instead, the most telling signs of

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health are more attitudinal—things like respect, consideration, and forgiveness.

Which brings me back to my father's thoughts on marriage. The one thing necessary for a marriage to succeed, he believed, was emotional maturity. Both parties need to be emotionally mature. That's the one thing necessary. It is just as simply stated and just as complex a reality as that. Having compatible values helps. Communication skills are important. We could extend the list, but checking off everything on the completed list will not assure a successful marriage if the two parties lack emotional maturity. It takes adults, or people willing to become adults or at least act like adults, for a marriage to succeed. And the same is true in pastoral colleague relationships. We need more adults in the ministry—or, again, people who are willing to become adults or at least act like adults.

But what, more specifically, does that mean? Emotional maturity begins with the understanding that it is not all about you. It is learning that the center of the universe can be a very crowded place and that you do not belong there. When we are children we do not understand this. We cry if we are hungry and are not immediately fed. We expect to be listened to, even if it means interrupting the person who is speaking. If we don't get what we want, we howl with a kind of indignation. All of those are ways to act out the assumption that our rightful place is at the center of things. That is the way it is when we are younger. But when we "put an end to childish ways" (1 Corinthians 13:11) we are able to take our more rightful place in the universe, someplace at least a little removed from the center. In a similar way, a less than mature pastor will be constantly and keenly aware of his or her own needs, will find it difficult to share the spotlight,

will evaluate ministry on the basis of how it makes him or her feel, will yearn to be recognized and praised. A less than mature pastor will not delight in the recognition that a colleague receives. That is, a less than mature pastor evidences the mistaken notion that love is a zero-sum game, that respect and appreciation of one is somehow taken from another. Such pastors are like children who cannot believe that their parents have room in their hearts for more than one child, that love need not be snatched from one to be given to another.

Emotional maturity is marked by a kind of resiliency of spirit, a spirit that is adaptable, forgiving, willing to listen, to compromise, and to move on together. It involves a willingness to do difficult things without resentment. If this is beginning to sound like a Pauline exhortation, that is entirely fitting. What Paul had to say to the Corinthian church about maturity and love is, in many respects, just what needs to be said to pastors and the congregations they serve.

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Paul's great hymn to love in First Corinthians 13 is so often read at weddings that we can forget that it is addressed to people who are trying to live together as a church. To use a term that is in fashion today, it is a kind of behavioral covenant for those who serve the cause of Christ together. In the preceding chapter, Paul describes the range of spiritual gifts

given by the Holy Spirit to members of the community. He makes it clear that not everyone is expected to have the gift of wisdom, discernment, prophesy, healing, or even faith. There is only one gift of the Spirit that is promised to all and is in some way required of all. And that, of course, is love. It is the only spiritual gift that all of the members of Christ's body are called upon to exhibit.

Love is a gift of the Spirit that is promised to all because the very nature of God is love. Love is not just an attribute of God but God's very essence. We are promised the gift of love because God does not withhold God's own self from us.

If God's gift of love is promised to all, so too are all called to reflect that gift of love. Indeed, the life of a community—whether it is a community of two in marriage, a community of many in a church, or a small community of pastors serving the same church—depends upon love for its very existence. A marriage can survive where only one has wisdom or courage, but a marriage cannot survive where only one has love. A church can get along just fine where only some are particularly gifted with faith or the ability to heal. But a church cannot long survive, and certainly cannot fulfill its calling, if only some exhibit the gift of love. A pastoral team can succeed if only one has the gift of inspired speech or the gift of prophesy. But a pastoral team is headed

for trouble unless all members of that team live out the kind of love that Paul describes.

Of course, when Paul writes to the Corinthians about the spiritual gift of love, he has something in mind that is different from the way in which the word "love" is commonly used in our culture, in popular songs and greeting

cards, and even sometimes in church. In contrast to all the sentimental things we usually hear about love, Paul goes on at length about the gift of love and never once does he speak of it as an emotion. Instead, love is described as a way of being and acting. And that way of acting is not soft, sentimental, or in any way mushy. The love that Paul praises is strong enough and resilient enough that it does not need to assert itself but rather is free to give of itself.

particularly loving but perhaps in spite of how you feel in that moment?

In the end, that kind of love, love with its work clothes on, is the expression of what my father described as “emotional maturity.” When Paul describes the ways of this kind of love, he is describing what emotional maturity looks like. That, of course, is why, after Paul describes the ways of Christian love, he concludes, “When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became

Obviously, it should be kept in mind that no pastor has all of those gifts. Nevertheless, it is appropriate to ask if a pastor’s preaching, teaching, and pastoral care are faithful and effective. Such questions arise quite appropriately out of the 12th chapter of the letter. But if we focus only on those gifts and the ministries that derive from those gifts we will have missed the one gift necessary for strong, healthy, faithful relationships among pastoral colleagues: the gift of love.

To properly evaluate a pastor’s ministry—and particularly to evaluate his or her relationship with a pastoral colleague—we have to move on to the 13th chapter of First Corinthians. If we do that, we will ask an additional set of questions:

**Emotional maturity** is marked by a kind of resiliency of spirit, a spirit that is adaptable, forgiving, willing to listen, to compromise, and to move on together. It involves a willingness to do difficult things without resentment.

Since such love is a way of living and of relating to others, it is most appropriate to ask not, “What does it feel like?” but rather, “What does it look like?” That is, it is characterized by actions rather than emotions. What *does* this love look like? According to Paul, it sure doesn’t look like jealousy, boasting or arrogance, rudeness or resentment. It looks an awful lot like patience, like kindness, like endurance.

Notice that, in the marriage ceremony, we do not ask the couple, “Do you love one another?” Instead we ask, “Will you love one another?” If the love we ask them to affirm were an emotion it would be unfair to expect a response to that question. After all, we simply never know what we are going to feel tomorrow, no less a lifetime from now. But here, as elsewhere, the Gospel seems remarkably uninterested in how we feel and is keenly interested in how we act. So when we ask, “Will you love this man? Will you love this woman?” we are not asking the couple to predict how they will feel. We are asking them to promise to act in a certain way. Will you act in a loving manner, no matter how you feel? Will you put aside boasting and arrogance and rudeness and practice instead acts of patience and kindness—not because you are feeling

an adult, I put an end to childish ways” (1 Corinthians 13:11).

So we can describe what is required for healthy, faithful relationships between pastoral colleagues in various ways: we must “put an end to childish ways,” we must exhibit emotional maturity, we must love one another (which, if I understand Paul correctly, are all different ways of saying much the same thing).

But how does this help pastors and the congregations they serve establish healthy relationships among colleagues? Well, for one, we need to be clear that things like beautifully crafted job descriptions and clarity about expectations and open communication simply are not enough. Nothing short of Paul’s “still more excellent way” is required. Seldom, however, are we pastors evaluated according to this biblical standard. Evaluations of pastors often get stuck in the 12th chapter of First Corinthians. Instead of reading Paul’s list of spiritual gifts as a catalog of the gifts given to members of the community, it begins to look like a job description for the pastor. Pastors are expected to be wise, knowledgeable, faithful, healers, miracle-workers (especially at budget time), prophets, discerning, gifted in speech.

- ◆ Have you been patient with your colleague? (1 Corinthians 13:4)
- ◆ In what ways have you been kind? (13:4)
- ◆ Have you envied your colleague because of what he gets to do (or doesn’t have to do) in his ministry, or because she received some special recognition? (13:4)
- ◆ Have you boastfully sought the spotlight? Arrogantly asserted yourself? Stopped listening? Been otherwise insensitive or rude? (13:4-5)
- ◆ Do you always have to have it your way? Can you let yourself be wrong once in a while? Can someone else ever be right? (13:5)
- ◆ Have you been irritable with your colleague? Resentful of how little he works or how much credit she receives? (13:5)
- ◆ Do you secretly relish the times when your colleague seems less competent than you? Conversely, have you adequately rejoiced in your colleague’s successes? (13:6)
- ◆ Have you been able to speak the truth in love to your colleague rather than complaining to others about him or her? (13:6)
- ◆ Have you put up with him in love (i.e., endured all things)? (13:7)
- ◆ In short, have you put an end to childish ways? (13:11) Or, to put it another way, have you exhibited emotional maturity? (Charles Coppenhaver) ◆



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