

Piper, John. *Brothers, We Are Not Professionals: A Plea to Pastors for Radical Ministry*.

Nashville: B & H Publishing Group, 2013. 307 pp. \$14.99.

Purpose

John Piper wrote this book to exhort and warn pastors about the dangers of professionalism in the pastorate and to point them in a better direction. The diagnosis is so good, it must be quoted: "Among younger pastors the talk is less about therapeutic and managerial professionalization and more about communication or contextualization. . . . The quiet pressure felt by many pastors is: be as good as the professional media folks, especially the cool anti-heroes and the most subtle comedians. . . . This is not the overstated professionalism of the three-piece suit . . . but the understated professionalism of torn blue jeans and the savvy inner ring. . . . This is the professionalization of ambiance, and tone, and idiom, and timing, and banter. It is more intuitive and less taught. More style and less technique. More feel and less force" (ix).

"Professionalization carries the connotation of an education, a set of skills, and a set of guild-defined standards which are possible without faith in Jesus. Professionalism is not supernatural. The heart of ministry is. . . . Professionalism should always be marginal, not central; optional, not crucial. . . . The pursuit of professionalism will push the supernatural center more and more into the corner while ministry becomes a set of secular competencies with a religious veneer" (x).

This book will find its niche among pastors who are concerned to have a ministry that looks like that of Jesus, Paul, Timothy, and like that of the best pastors of the last two millennia. It will find its niche among those who are sobered by the upcoming stricter judgment of teachers

(James 3:1), and among those sobered by the false shepherd passages such as we find in Ezekiel 34. I found the book to be a necessary, older-brother-to-younger-brother, five-talent-servant-to-two-talent-servant, sermonic exhortation to shepherd beyond the day-to-day, with a view to the high calling and the high stakes for pastor and congregation alike.

Summary

Brothers, We Are Not Professionals is a book of exhortation and warning from a pastor to pastors. The topics covered in the thirty-six chapters include a wide range: the nature of God ("Brothers, God Loves His Glory," chapter 2), satisfaction ("Brothers, Consider Christian Hedonism," chapter 9), exegesis ("Brothers, Pursue the Tone of the Text," chapter 18), physical fitness ("Brothers, Bodily Training Is of Some Value," chapter 27), reacting to 9/11/01-type disasters ("Brothers, Help Your People Hold On and Minister in Calamity," chapter 30), race relations ("Brothers, Sever the Root of Racism," chapter 32), and pro-life ministry ("Brothers, Blow the Trumpet for the Unborn," chapter 33).

The following quotations were important and striking: "At the right time sound the trumpet that all this good news is meant by God to free us for radical, sacrificial service for the salvation of men and the glory of Christ. Help them see that one message of all this misery is to show us that life is short and fragile and followed by eternity, and small, man-centered ambitions are tragic" (217). Also, "(God's) triumph is never in question, only our participation in it—or our incalculable loss. We can be drunk with private concerns and indifferent to the great enterprise of world evangelization, but God will simply pass over us and do His great work while we shrivel up in our little land of comfort" (222).

Several statements in "Brothers, Love Your Wives" (chapter 35) were important for me. Piper writes, "I know that there is no final guarantee in our love that she will always respond

with joy. Tragically some wives forsake Christ and the church and their brokenhearted husbands. Few things are more painful and devastating for family and church" (270). And the author's poem to his son on his wedding day was excellent: "A double rule of love that shocks; a doctrine in a paradox: If you now aim your wife to bless, then love her more and love her less. . . . Yes, love her, love her more than life; O love the woman called your wife. Go love her as your earthly best. Beyond this venture not. But, lest your love become a fool's façade, be sure to love her less than God" (280, 281).

Piper was used by God to help and motivate and encourage me when I was tempted, due to discouragement and fear, to give up our pro-life ministry. He wrote, "The point is this: I believe pastors should put their lives and ministries on the line in this issue" (241).

Critical Assessment

The author's purpose of warning pastors of the dangers of professionalism in the pastorate and pointing pastors in a better direction was a worthy one. It is easy to fall in love with the seductive power of "respectful greetings in the market places" (Matt 23:7), like "Reverend" or "Doctor So-and So," or worse yet, "Reverend Doctor," as some are called. Piper helps pastors fall out of love with the pride of professionalism by showing its deficiencies: "the pursuit of professionalism will push the supernatural center more and more into the corner while ministry becomes a set of secular competencies with a religious veneer" (x). It is not that professionalism is completely wrong all the time. It has a place but, as quoted above, "professionalism should always be marginal, not central; optional, not crucial" (x). It seems Piper accomplished his purposes of warning against professionalism and commending pastoral activities and attitudes that point us in a more fitting, godly direction. We may pursue certain competencies, but beware of competencies that can be attained and practiced even by unbelievers (x).

Does the book make a useful contribution to the discussion of preaching? Yes, it does. But the book is more about being a pastor in general than a preacher in particular, though the first assumes the second. One section (chapter 13, "Brothers, Be Bible-Oriented—Not Entertainment Oriented—Preachers") specifically address preachers and preaching. Piper writes, "Nowhere else in all the Bible is there a preface to a command like this one: 'I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word' (2 Tim 4:1-2). The command is three short words. 'Preach the word"—in the context of 2 Timothy 3:16-17 meaning the 'God-breathed' word of Scripture. But the introduction to the command is spectacular. It is calculated to make us take a deep breath and be sober-minded about the task of preaching. 'I charge you.' 'In the presence of God.' 'And in the presence of Christ Jesus.' 'He will judge.' 'The living.' 'And the dead.' 'By his appearing.' 'And by his kingdom.' In view of these weightiest of realities, preach the word. How could Paul had made preaching any more momentous" (89-90)?

Having thus reminded preachers with such an awesome preface to such a beautiful, glorious, heavy command, Piper helps us choose Bible-oriented over entertainment-oriented preaching. The main difference between the two "is whether there is a manifest connection between the preacher's words and the Bible as what authorizes what he says" (90). Further, entertainment preaching "gives the impression that (it) is not tethered to an authoritative book"—the preaching is not shaped by the Bible. Such preaching impresses for a reason other than that it came from the Scriptures. The entertaining preacher is often at ease talking about many things while in the pulpit that do not have their source in the Bible, but are believed to have worth because they are fascinating or amusing. This kind of preacher does *not* appear to see himself as a representative of God, in front of God's people, to bring God's message. The Bible-oriented

preacher, by contrast, sees himself *exactly* that way. "He knows that the only way a man can dare to assume such a position is with a trembling sense of unworthy servanthood under the authority of the Bible." This latter kind of preacher wants the congregation to know that his words are worthy only if they accord with God's words. He hesitates to go off in his sermon in a direction that is not demonstrable from the biblical text. The result? "People leave the preaching of the *Bible-oriented preacher* (author's emphasis) with a sense that the Bible is supremely authoritative and important and wonderfully good news. They feel less entertained than struck at the greatness of God and the weighty power of His Word." People do not need to be entertained by our preaching (90-91).

Brothers, We Are Not Professionals was extremely helpful. I have not read a book for pastors that has been as striking, urgent, and immediately helpful. Several statements Piper makes (they are quoted above) were game-changers: I am more into the Greek, more committed to pro-life ministry, more excited to share how much God makes of us, more eager to love my wife, less eager to impress the world, less eager for the three piece suit *or* the torn blue jeans.

One of the strengths of *Brothers* is that it is written to a specific target market: pastors. Since I am one, I am happy to be shepherded by a proven, godly shepherd, who wrote it for me and others like me. The book also bring to our attention new, important, and little-discussed matters such as God loving His glory, God making much of us, the debtor's ethic, Christian hedonism, the tone of the text, saving the saints, and racism. The reputation and humility of the author adds to the strength of the book. We have to look somewhere other than the book to find out how many thousands attend Bethlehem Baptist Church, and look elsewhere also to learn that John Piper has a Ph. D. degree from the University of Munich. Further, the way Piper writes makes me want to do something about it, and tell someone about it.

The book doesn't seem to have any substantial weaknesses. A liberal pastor reading the book would see many weaknesses, for the book is based on a high view, among other things, of Scripture and of preaching. There are a few chinks in the armor of this formidable book in terms of some missing pieces. Missing were chapters that might have been titled, "Brothers, Do Not Grieve or Quench the Holy Spirit," "Brothers, Remember the Underground Church," "Brothers, Be Not False Shepherds," "Brothers, Lead God's People," "Brothers, Have a God-Approved Vision for the Church," "Brothers, Remain on at Ephesus," and, "Brothers, Be the Best Dad."

It may have been well to affirm that while pastors are not professionals in the worldly sense, yet there are things that we can learn from the professionalism of those in other fields. When I hear the story of someone's successful cancer surgery, and about the bedside manner, the insight, the humility, the expertise, and the skill of the surgeon, it makes me want to redouble my efforts to excel and be the very best at my "profession."