

“A biblically driven, beautifully written book about being a pastor and a human. Dodson’s honesty and vulnerability demonstrate that the key to leading through divisive times is to learn to suffer, grieve, and look to Christ. Every pastor who reads this book will learn principles and lessons to lead through divisive times, but even more, they will be moved by the kind of man and pastor Christ calls us to be in these difficult days. I heartily commend this book.”

BRIAN CROFT, Executive Director, Practical Shepherding; Senior Fellow, Church Revitalization Center, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“This is an excellent book, offering much wisdom and insight to pastors who are facing unprecedented challenges. It is a masterful example of double listening: listening to the pastoral challenges of our time and listening to what the Spirit says to pastors in 2 Timothy. It arrives at just the right time, as I have increasingly engaged with leaders facing the same struggles that Jonathan Dodson skilfully addresses.”

MICHAEL W. GOHEEN, PHD, Director of Theological Education, Missional Training Center, Pheonix

“If there ever was a time when the calling of a pastor could be called difficult, so much so that many are leaving the ministry at unprecedented rates, now is that time. In a world wracked with negativity, outrage, caricature, and us-against-them partisan tactics, Christ’s undershepherds need a resource to help them navigate these realities with grace, truth, and integrity. This is that book!”

SCOTT SAULS, Senior Pastor, Christ Presbyterian Church, Nashville; Author, *Beautiful People Don’t Just Happen*

“If you are wavering, if you are overwhelmed, if you have nothing left, read this book! *The Unwavering Pastor* will lift your head to see that we have an unwavering Father who is committed to you.”

STEVE ROBINSON, Senior Pastor, Cornerstone Church, Liverpool, UK; Director, The Cornerstone Collective

“As a weary pastor myself, who is constantly talking to others in a similar condition, I appreciate how this book comes at the right time. Whatever trial you are leading others through at the moment, this book is sure to provide helpful instruction and life-giving encouragement.”

TONY MERIDA, Pastor for Preaching and Vision, Imago Dei Church, Raleigh, North Carolina; Author, *Love Your Church*

“I sat down to read *The Unwavering Pastor* at the close of a particularly hard week in ministry. Jonathan’s stories and gospel-rich reminders were a salve to my soul. I appreciate the stories and relatability as much as I value the grace and truth on every page. Any pastor or ministry leader who feels weighed down will find fresh encouragement here.”

JEN OSHMAN, Author, *Cultural Counterfeits*

“Every pastor and Christian leader will relate to the poignant struggles so openly shared in this powerful book. Dodson has given all Christian leaders balm for our wounds and a compass through this storm.”

TIMOTHY C. TENNENT, PHD, President and Professor of World Christianity, Asbury Theological Seminary

“Here is an oasis for pressured pastors and weary leaders. This book reads like a conversation with a good friend, who wants to prepare you for inevitable pain as well as save you from unnecessary pain. Jonathan writes from experience, sharing practical wisdom grounded in biblical insight. A timely book for our difficult times!”

ADAM RAMSEY, Lead Pastor, Liberti Church, Gold Coast, Australia; Network Director, Acts 29 Asia Pacific; Author, *Truth on Fire*

“A must-read for any and all who love, serve, and lead the local church. God has led the church through pandemics and divisions before, working through broken men and women just like us. *The Unwavering Pastor* is a reminder of God’s faithfulness, guiding us toward hope.”

JAY Y. KIM, Lead Pastor, WestGate Church, Silicon Valley; Author, *Analog Church*

“Gut-level honest, biblically rooted, beautifully written, and full of wise counsel. Pastor, read it to have your worries and wounds sympathetically understood, your weary soul encouraged, your calling clarified, and your love for Christ deepened. Again and again, I found fresh insights in these pages. For years, Jonathan Dodson has proven himself an important voice in matters of church and culture, and in this book, he shows himself to be a trustworthy pastor to pastors.”

STEPHEN WITMER, Pastor, Pepperell Christian Fellowship, Massachusetts; Author, *A Big Gospel in Small Places*

“This book is timely because we are living in one of the most culturally challenging contexts of pastoral ministry in generations. This book is timeless because it flows from the inspired counsel Paul gives to Timothy as recorded in Scripture. Jonathan Dodson gives us help and hope by reminding us, as the apostle Paul did, the ‘aim of our charge is love’ (1 Timothy 1:5).”

DAVE BRUSKAS, US Director, Acts 29

“In my work as a counselor, I see pastors and ministry leaders facing anxiety, depression, weariness, panic attacks, and temptations to quit like never before. Jonathan honestly and vulnerably shares his own struggles, but he goes much further. He helps leaders endure controversy, division, criticism, and a whole host of cultural challenges alongside presenting a hopeful, practical, and encouraging vision forward. Every pastor would benefit from reading this gospel-rich encouragement.”

JASON KOVACS, Executive Director, The Gospel Care Collective

“*The Unwavering Pastor* does a fantastic job in providing insightful counsel for pastors to depend on both God and others in ministry. The guidance in this must-read book will enrich steadfast and godly leaders to fulfill God’s mission.”

TOMMY LEE, Founder and President, Resource Global

“This is going to be a tremendous help for leaders serving Jesus. I recognize my own story here. Jonathan captured the emotional exhaustion, paralyzing emptiness, and spiritual confusion I felt when I experienced pastoral burnout at 50. Thankfully, Jonathan also gives us gospel balm and grace ballast. This short book is long on wisdom, grace, and timely encouragement.”

SCOTTY SMITH, Pastor Emeritus, Christ Community Church, Franklin, Tennessee; Teacher-in-Residence, West End Community Church, Nashville, Tennessee

“As exhausting, and often spiritually depressing, as normal ministry may be, the last few years press us to go to deeper wells. This book is a deeper well—a very refreshing one.”

MICHAEL HORTON, J. Gresham Machen Professor of Systematic Theology and Apologetics, Westminster Seminary, California

“Lyrical, subversive, tender, raw, grace-filled and profoundly counter-cultural, *The Unwavering Pastor* is a beautifully different book which speaks and embodies the gospel for this moment in a way in which we desperately need. Read it and drink deeply from its grace and truth.”

GARY MILLAR, Principal, Queensland Theological College, Australia; Author, *Read This First*

“Pastors are facing discouragement and burnout at unprecedented rates, and the factors contributing to these challenges are complex. That’s why I’m grateful for Jonathan Dodson’s *The Unwavering Pastor*. This book brings a biblical wisdom and a surprising candor to helping pastors navigate the journey through the thicket of conflict, division, criticism, and even depression, always holding out the healing comfort of grace for the weary pastor’s soul. This is a really good book.”

JARED C. WILSON, Assistant Professor, Pastoral Ministry, Midwestern Seminary; Author, *Gospel-Driven Ministry*

**THE
UNWAVERING
PASTOR**

THE UNWAVERING PASTOR

Leading the Church with
Grace in Divisive Times

JONATHAN K. DODSON

The logo features a stylized, curved line above the text "thegoodbook".
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*To my fellow elders and friends,
Peter, Matt, and John*

CONTENTS

Foreword <i>by Dane Ortlund</i>	13
Introduction	17
1. Divided Times	21
2. Questioning Christianity	41
3. Redeeming Pain	57
4. Divisive Words	73
5. Age of the Self	89
6. Preach the Word	105
7. Continue in the Faith	123
8. Grace to All	137
Acknowledgments	143
Endnotes	145

FOREWORD

By Dane Ortlund

I needed this book. If you're a fellow weary pastor, you do too. And I didn't know how much I needed it until I read it.

Jonathan Dodson has already proven himself to be a wise and steady guide for the church today through his books and his ministry at City Life Church in Austin.

We don't need to be told what bizarre and perplexing times we live in. We know that. We need to be given guidance for how to negotiate these times as pastors. That's what Jonathan Dodson's *The Unwavering Pastor* gives us.

What kind of guide do I need and urgently welcome?

First, someone who is communing with God and commends that communion to us. To quote Francis Schaeffer, someone who knows the all-determining significance of "reality with God" for soul health—an actual moment-by-moment fellowship with the triune God. Sometimes books for ministry leaders have much incisive counsel but miss the nuclear core of communion with God. I was reminded time and again as I read of

the freeing truth that all the obstacles of ministry are navigable if I walk through them with God. Jonathan brings us back repeatedly to this non-negotiable of pastoral health.

Second, someone who is biblical. But by “biblical” I don’t mean someone who feeds Scripture into a family of other equally competing influences—cultural insights, common sense, personal experience, historical lessons, Barna surveys. I mean someone for whom the Bible is the all-determining treasure chest of truth and wisdom in how to lead fruitfully in these days. Jonathan is this.

Third, someone who is honest. Throughout the book Jonathan reflects on his own ministry experience with a refreshing transparency to which I can immediately relate. That candor builds trust as we read and serves us well.

Fourth, someone who is tested. It is obvious in these pages that Jonathan has been tried and found true. “Through many dangers, toils, and snares” he has already come. And we can learn from his experiences.

Fifth and finally, someone who writes well. Jonathan does.

The greatest temptation confronting every pastor right now is not one of resigning, though I know that many are contemplating that route (and if they do, Jesus won’t love them any less). The greatest temptation is more subtle. It is to continue collecting a paycheck from the church while shifting our hearts into neutral. It is to carry forward the ministry at the level of activity, while quitting ministry in terms of our hearts and longings. This is the fork in the road that the criticism and adversities that Jonathan writes so poignantly about, and

which we in the pastorate are facing more persistently than ever, presents us with.

Jonathan understands this greatest of temptations. He helped me understand it more acutely. And *The Unwavering Pastor* helps all of us, through these tumultuous times, fend off that ministry hypocrisy—smiling outside, quitting inside—as it is written by a man who is communing with God, biblical, honest, tested, and articulate.

I've only been a pastor for a few years. So I needed this book more than most. And already in that short time I have been tempted to waver: to withdraw—if not vocationally, in resignation, at least emotionally, in cynicism. God has kept me thus far, and this book is one means that will help me to keep going, dancing my way cheerfully through the Normandy Beach of pastoral ministry. If you read it with an open heart, unhurriedly and reflectively, then you will, like me, conclude your reading of this book deepened, freshly energized, and fortified with sage counsel as we all keep going.

Thank you for blessing us with this seasonable word, Jonathan.

Pastor Dane Ortlund
January, 2022

INTRODUCTION

You may have picked up this book because you want wisdom for leading others through complex cultural issues. There is certainly some of that here. Perhaps you're hoping to find a sympathetic ear from a fellow struggling pastor. I can promise you that. Maybe you want to know how to stay grounded when the world seems to be spinning out of control. If I haven't shown that, then I have failed.

What you will not find here is an unwavering pastor. I waver plenty: from troughs of despair to crests of spiritual joy, habitual sinner to faith-filled saint, ready-to-throw-in-the-towel leader to tenderhearted shepherd, perplexed pastor to confident leader. Christ has held on to me when my emotions would have taken me elsewhere. He has kept me when my sins could have easily swept me away.

Then in what sense can we be unwavering pastors and ministry leaders? In the sense that Paul meant when he said, "I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that he is able to guard until that day what has been entrusted to me" (2 Timothy 1:12). What was Paul's unwavering confidence in? His faith? His spirituality? God's

existence? No, his confidence was not in what he believed but who he believed in. He *knew* the God he trusted.

The more we know a person's character, the more we can discern their trustworthiness. And knowing the utter trustworthiness of God led Paul to tremendous confidence in God's commitment to the good news. Christ died, Christ rose, and Christ will come again to make all things new: even—especially—sinners. Paul's unwavering belief was in a God who forgives wavering people. It was the object of his trust that gave him confidence—the God of the gospel.

Therefore, his knowing, believing, and conviction are expressed as perfect verbs, meaning Paul's past knowledge, belief, and confidence continued on into his present. Why? Because he had encountered a God he could not “un-encounter.” He was redeemed by a gospel that could not “un-redeem.” He knew a messiah who is forever for and with him. Grace had left its mark.

An unwavering pastor's confidence doesn't come from their command of theology, his experience in counseling, or his faithful spiritual disciplines. Our confidence is derived from God's unwavering commitment to his own gospel, so that we can preserve, protect, and promote his grace in Christ through the Spirit for sinners. The triune God is unswervingly committed to that, and therefore, we can count on his steady presence, unrelenting forgiveness, unstoppable grace, and unmatched redemptive power. If you believe this, then you too can be an unwavering pastor.

How then do we lead his church with grace? I have taken two threads and tried to weave them together throughout

this book. The first is an eternal thread—the inspired wisdom of Paul in his second letter to pastor Timothy. The first and fourth chapters contain remarkable candor about the hardships of ministry. Here is mature Paul, broken but full of hope, weak yet strengthened by Christ himself. The second and third chapters are full of penetrating insight for leading a church through division. Here is the sage dispensing wisdom to a growing pastor. It is a personally rich, theologically robust, practical letter.

The second thread is comprises my imperfect yet authentic pastoral reflections on how to lead the church—with grace—through divided times. It is virtually impossible to make it through division without sinning, and Christ is gladly present to remedy that. What is scary is that we can endure divisive times but emerge hardened and closed off. But when we allow God’s grace to flow through us in these times, we soften and become more open-hearted toward fellow sinners. We draw near to God, and consequently, we love his people better and deeper. Though not easy, such a process is entirely worth it.

This book is, in a sense, a long prayer. A flaming arrow shot into the darkness of trial, with the hope that every leader who reads it, and every pastor who engages with it, will feel seen and known, not merely by me but by their Father in heaven and the compassionate Savior at his right hand. I hope you sense divine attentiveness, and even if you don’t, that you will believe in it—and in a God who is always for you and not against you, especially when things are bleak.

