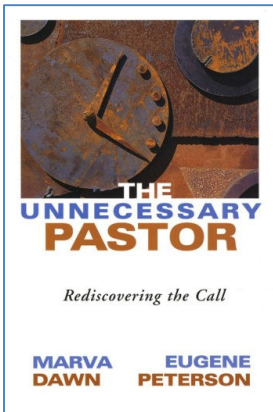


# IF AT FIRST YOU DON'T SUCCEED...

*GCI pastoral intern discussion starter*

By John Halford



Recommended reading:

*The Unnecessary Pastor*  
by Marva Dawn and Eugene Peterson, introduction and chapters 1 and 4.

Life was full of contradictions. In one memorable week, I was informed that the young lady I was engaged to was not converted and I should delay getting married. At about the same time, she was told by others that I was not converted and so she should not rush into marriage. Also, I was told that I did not have ministerial potential. That same week I was hired as an assistant in the Church's ministerial office, a greatly coveted job and a sure sign that I was "headed for the ministry." I looked for some logic in all of this, but now realize it was just that the left didn't know what the right was doing.

## My Early Years

As I reflect on my early years of ministry, two words come to mind: frustration and anxiety. It wasn't "hell on earth," but it would have been much more pleasant and productive if those who trained me understood ministry as we do now.

I attended Ambassador College from 1962 to 1966, first in England, then in California. Although the stated purpose of the college was to train leaders for the growing work, there was a contradiction. Students were not supposed to want to be ministers, and to let it be known that this was your ambition was a kiss of death on your chances.

The official line was that God had to call you into the ministry—it was not something you sought for yourself. So whereas we were constantly reminded that we were the "elite" of the church, and Ambassador was the "West Point" of the church, it was a West Point where the cadets were not supposed to want to be soldiers!

I never could quite figure this out and perhaps that is why those responsible for teaching me could never quite figure me out. That, and being English in what was then a monocultural environment, left me bemused and frustrated. I tried my best, but nothing I did seemed to impress those "over me," who would (so I thought) decide my future.

## An Eye-Opener

Working in the ministerial office with about a dozen ministers was an eye-opener. I began to see that, beneath the benign surface, ministry was intensely competitive. In that office, there was a strict pecking order based on rank. The manager who was highly political, was widely touted to be "the next evangelist."



In those days, at the end of their junior year, it was traditional to send likely ministerial candidates into the field to work with experienced ministers for the summer. I was not selected, even though I was already working as a ministerial assistant. That turned out to be a blessing in disguise.

My boss did not know what to do with me that summer. So he assigned me to the nearby Glendale church, working with Lowell Blackwell. I was warned to be careful—Lowell had a reputation for being a maverick. Also, I was warned to not get too close to another elder, because he was "going nowhere in the work"—his name was Joseph Tkach, Sr.!

That summer with Lowell transformed my view of ministry. Yes, he was a "maverick"—he didn't care about politics or his reputation. He served the people with dedication and humility, while tolerating my immature efforts. He showed me that ministry is about serving those "under" you, not impressing those over you. The Apostle Paul wrote about this issue in given guidelines regarding selecting elders—see Colossians 3:22, Galatians 3:30 and Ephesians 6:5-9.

In those early years of ministry, I found encouraging advice in 1 Samuel 2:3: *Talk no more so exceeding proudly; let not arrogancy come out of your mouth: for the LORD is a God of knowledge, and by him actions are weighed.* I also was helped by Proverbs 29:26: *Many seek the ruler's favor, but justice for man comes from the LORD.* Never forget that the ultimate judge of your ministry is the fruit it produces (Mathew 7:16, 20).

In my early years, the epitome of success as a student (while pretending you didn't want to be a minister), was to get married right after graduation, then drive off with your bride in a new fleet car to an assignment in the field ministry. Doing so meant that you had "arrived." Predictably, I had not. After graduation, I continued working at headquarters and was asked to take further classes. I was considered, and felt like, a failure. But I never forgot the lessons I learned from Lowell Blackwell. I will always be grateful to him.

A year later, my wife Pat and I were assigned to Melbourne, Australia. It was decided that I should be ordained before I left, although some felt I was not ready. When being ordained in front of an audience of over 3000 people, the man ordaining me was obviously reluctant—a reluctance reflected in his prayer. That haunted me for several years. But that is history now, and it has all worked out.

### The Problem and Its Solution

Looking back on those early years, I realize now that I was not the hapless victim of an evil or corrupt system. We were all victims of a dysfunctional system that was based on rank, by which one climbed the ladder of "success." The system attracted ambitious, career oriented candidates. But many of those who achieved "success" dropped away when the ministry entered tough times, no longer carrying the same prestige. However, many of us who were definitely the "second and third team" stayed with it. This isn't a new problem – read Philippians 2:20.



About 15 years ago, some of us suggested that we abandon our ranks system. The idea was approved. We all realized that it had no place in our newfound environment of grace.

Thankfully, our system today is much better. Those holding leadership positions now see themselves as servants and friends of those they lead. Also, our appraisal system is much better at helping identify those who have a genuine call from God to serve in ministry. We're far from perfect, but you can have confidence that you will be trained and evaluated prayerfully and respectfully by those who have learned, sometimes the hard way, what the ministry of Jesus is really all about.

### Discussion Starter Questions

First, read the following scripture, then discuss the questions that follow.

**Acts 12:25** *Barnabas and Saul, once they had delivered the relief offering to the church in Jerusalem, went back to Antioch. This time they took John with them.*

**Acts 13:13-14** *From Paphos, Paul and company put out to sea, sailing on to Perga in Pamphylia. That's where John (Mark) called it quits and went back to Jerusalem.*

**Acts 15:36-41** *After a few days of this, Paul said to Barnabas, "Let's go back and visit all our friends in each of the towns where we preached the Word of God. Let's see how they're doing." Barnabas wanted to take John along, the John nicknamed Mark. But Paul wouldn't have him; he wasn't about to take along a quitter who, as soon as the going got tough, had jumped ship on them in Pamphylia. Tempers flared, and they ended up going their separate ways: Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus; Paul chose Silas and, offered up by their friends to the grace of the Master, went to Syria and Cilicia to build up muscle and sinew in those congregations.*

**2 Timothy 4:9-13** *Get here as fast as you can. Demas, chasing fads, went off to Thessalonica and left me here. Crescens is in Galatia province, Titus in Dalmatia. Luke is the only one here with me. Bring Mark with you; he'll be my right-hand man since I'm sending Tychicus to Ephesus.*

1. What can we learn from these passages?
2. Who was right about Mark—Paul, Barnabas, or both? (Note how God's call on a person's life involves a network of relationships.)
3. In your experience, are there any "gaps" where legitimate needs/ questions have not been addressed? What could be added to the process that might be helpful to you and other interns?