

MINISTRY & MEANING

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www.jhillworks.com

Dr. John Hill, Editor

LAYPEOPLE DO NOT NEED YOUR PERMISSION TO BE FAITHFUL

One of the quiet failures of pastoral leadership is that we have sometimes trained church members to wait for permission before they obey God.

We may not say it that plainly. We dress it up in respectable language. We talk about “making sure everything goes through the proper channels.” Some of that is necessary. **The church should not be chaotic. Not every person with an idea has a calling. Not every burden needs to become a program.**

But somewhere along the way, many churches have taught the laity to think ministry belongs to the ordained, the elected, the platformed, or the officially appointed. Everyone else is expected to attend, give, support, volunteer when asked, and stay in their lane. That is not the New Testament vision of the church.

The church is not a religious theater where pastors perform ministry and members watch from padded seats. The church is a body. Every member matters. Every believer has a calling. Every Christian is sent into the world as a witness of Jesus Christ.

We must recover this truth: **ministry belongs to the whole body, not just the ordained.**

I believe in pastoral leadership. I believe the church needs shepherds, teachers, elders, deacons, and structured leadership. But ordination does not mean the pastor owns the ministry. It means the pastor has been set apart to equip the saints for the work of ministry. That phrase matters: **equip the saints.**

Too often, we act as though the pastor’s job is to do the ministry while the congregation helps maintain the institution. That model may keep the machinery running, but it will not produce a spiritually mature church. It creates spectators, critics, and consumers instead of servants, missionaries, and disciples.

Laypeople do not need the pastor’s permission to pray with a coworker. They do not need permission to visit a lonely neighbor. They do not need permission to share the gospel, encourage a struggling believer, disciple their children, serve the poor, reconcile with an enemy, or open their home for Christian hospitality.

They need teaching. They need wisdom. They need accountability. They need encouragement. But they do not need to be treated as though faithfulness begins only after the pastor signs off on it.

A controlling church culture turns every act of ministry into an administrative request. It makes people nervous about stepping forward. It quietly says, **“Do nothing unless leadership tells you to.” Then we wonder why members are passive. We created the passivity.**

We preach the priesthood of believers while building systems that suggest only clergy are truly qualified. We told people they were gifted by the Spirit, then gave them no place to use those gifts unless they fit inside an existing committee. We told them to reach the lost, then acted suspiciously when they showed initiative outside our programs. That is not leadership. That is bottleneck ministry.

We should not be threatened by faithful laypeople. **A church filled with capable, active, spiritually serious members is not a threat to pastoral authority.** It is evidence that pastoral ministry is working.

My goal should not be to make people dependent on me. My goal should be to help them become mature in Christ. If every decision, question, ministry idea, and act of service must come through me, I have not built a healthy church. I have built a dependency system with a steeple on top.

That does not mean every layperson should preach, teach, lead, or represent the church publicly without discernment. Scripture still calls for order. Teachers must be tested. Leaders must be qualified. Doctrine matters. Character matters. The church must guard against confusion and error. But there is a difference between guarding the flock and caging the flock.

Faithful lay ministry will sometimes be messy. People will need correction. Some ideas will fail. Some efforts will be clumsy. But the answer is not to shut everything down until the pastor can control it. The answer is to disciple people well enough that they can serve wisely.

A pastor who develops lay leaders must be willing to release real responsibility. Not busywork. Not “help me with my agenda” disguised as empowerment. **Real responsibility means allowing others to lead, decide, learn, fail, grow, and receive credit.**

Laypeople do not need permission to be faithful. They need pastors who will teach them the Word, trust the work of the Spirit, and stop acting like ministry is the private property of the clergy.

SERVANT LEADERSHIP IS NOT SOFT LEADERSHIP

Servant leadership is often misunderstood because people confuse humility with weakness.

I have heard the phrase “servant leader” used as though it means a pastor should be endlessly agreeable, constantly available, emotionally soft, and unwilling to confront anyone. That is not servant leadership. That is people-pleasing with religious language wrapped around it.

Biblical humility is not passivity. It is **strength under submission to God.**

Jesus was the perfect servant, but He was not weak. He washed feet, welcomed children, touched lepers, fed the hungry, and showed mercy to broken people. But He also confronted hypocrites, rebuked pride, overturned tables, exposed false religion, and told hard truths that made people walk away. That is servant leadership.

A servant leader does not lead for ego, control, applause, or personal gain. **He leads for the good of others and the glory of God.** But leading for the good of others sometimes requires saying no, drawing boundaries, correcting error, confronting sin, and disappointing people who expect the pastor to keep everyone comfortable.

I need to remember that serving people is not the same thing as satisfying people.

Those are very different things. A pastor can serve a congregation faithfully and still refuse a bad idea. He can love a church member and still correct destructive behavior.

He can care deeply about unity and still confront division. He can be gentle in spirit and still firm in decision.

Some churches do not want servant leadership. They want manageable leadership. They want a pastor humble enough to serve but not strong enough to challenge them. They want kindness without courage, patience without conviction, and leadership without disruption.

That kind of church will eventually train its pastor to become harmless. But a harmless pastor is not necessarily a faithful pastor.

If I avoid every hard conversation because I fear backlash, I am not serving the church. If I let unhealthy people control the atmosphere because I do not want conflict, I am not serving the church. If I preach around difficult truths because I want to be liked, I am not serving the church. I am protecting myself.

Servant leadership requires courage because real service is often costly. It costs time, comfort, reputation, convenience, and sometimes popularity. A servant leader must be willing to absorb criticism without becoming bitter. He must be willing to make decisions that are right, even when they are not immediately appreciated.

Humility does not mean pretending I have no responsibility. It does not mean surrendering leadership to the loudest voice in the room. It does not mean letting every complaint become a command.

Humility means I know I am not the Lord of the church. Christ is. It means I lead under His authority, by His Word, for His people, not for my own importance.

Servant leadership is not soft leadership. **It is leadership with a towel in one hand and a backbone in the other.**

Quotables

“The servant-leader is servant first.” —Robert K. Greenleaf

“The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy.”

—Martin Luther King Jr.

“For you I am the bishop, with you I am a Christian.”

—Augustine

“The Church is the Church only when it exists for others.”

—Dietrich Bonhoeffer

“The true follower of Christ will not ask, ‘If I embrace this truth, what will it cost me?’ Rather he will say, ‘This is truth. God help me to walk in it, let come what may!’” —A. W. Tozer

“Take heed to yourselves, lest your example contradict your doctrine.” —Richard Baxter

“Management is doing things right; leadership is doing the right things.” —Peter Drucker



ISAIAH’S MESSAGE: HOLINESS, HOPE, AND MISSION

Isaiah 5:1-7
Isaiah 44:6-8
Isaiah 45:1-7
Isaiah 51:1-6
Isaiah 55:1-5
Isaiah 55:10-13
Isaiah 56:1, 6-8

These selected passages from Isaiah place several major doctrines: **the holiness of God, the sovereignty of God, the faithfulness of God’s Word, the gracious invitation of salvation, and the widening mission of God to the nations.**

Isaiah 5:1-7 sets the theological backdrop. Israel is pictured as the Lord’s vineyard. God planted, protected, and cultivated His people, but they produced “wild grapes.” The doctrine here is covenant accountability. God’s people are not merely privileged; they are responsible. Election does not excuse rebellion. Grace does not cancel holiness. **Pastors should notice the tragic contrast between what God provided and what His people produced.**

Isaiah 44:6-8 declares the uniqueness of God: “I am the first, and I am the last; and beside me there is no God.”

This is strong monotheism. **God is not one power among many. He alone rules history, reveals truth, and secures His people.** The sermon emphasis should be confidence. God’s people need not fear because their Redeemer is unrivaled.

Isaiah 45:1-7 deepens this theme through Cyrus, a pagan ruler used by God for divine purpose. This passage teaches providence. **God can use unlikely instruments to accomplish His will. He forms light and creates darkness; He governs events beyond Israel’s control.** Pastors should handle this carefully: God’s sovereignty is not sentimental, but it is deeply comforting.

Isaiah 51:1-6 calls God’s people to “look unto the rock.” The doctrine is covenant remembrance. **The God who called Abraham and comforted Zion remains faithful.** Present discouragement must be interpreted through God’s past faithfulness and future salvation.

Isaiah 55:1-5 presents salvation as gracious invitation. **The thirsty are called to come without money and without price. God’s mercy is not earned; it is received.** Yet the invitation also demands response: “hear, and your soul shall live.” Grace is free, but it is not casual.

Isaiah 55:10-13 emphasizes the effectiveness of God’s Word. **Like rain that waters the earth, God’s Word accomplishes what He sends it to do.** This is essential for preaching. The power is not in cleverness, personality, or technique, but in the Word God speaks.

Isaiah 56:1, 6-8 expands the vision. Foreigners who join themselves to the Lord are welcomed. **God’s house is “an house of prayer for all people.” The doctrine is mission.** God’s covenant purpose moves outward, gathering outsiders into worship, obedience, and joy.

These passages give a rich sermon path: God judges unfaithfulness, yet He does not abandon His redemptive purpose. He alone is God, He rules history, He remembers His covenant, He sends His Word with power, and He invites the undeserving to come and live. For preaching, the message is clear: **God’s holiness exposes sin, His sovereignty steadies faith, His grace welcomes the thirsty, and His mission gathers worshipers from beyond the expected boundaries of His people.**

SERMON GEMS FOR PLANNING AUGUST

“Song of the Beloved Vineyard” Isaiah 5:1-7 A. Cherished Planting B. Careful Provision C. Corrupt Produce	“Cyrus and the Sovereign God” Isaiah 45:1-7 A. Chosen Instrument B. Conquered Nations C. Creator’s Authority	“Invitation to Abundant Life” Isaiah 55:1-5 A. Gracious Call B. Generous Covenant C. Glorious Witness	“A House for All Peoples” Isaiah 56:1, 6-8 A. Practiced Justice B. Personal Devotion C. Promised Gathering
“The Lord Without Rival” Isaiah 44:6-8 A. Sovereign Reign B. Singular Redeemer C. Secure Witness	“Look to the Rock” Isaiah 51:1-6 A. Remembered Foundation B. Renewed Comfort C. Righteous Deliverance	“The Word That Will Not Fail” Isaiah 55:10-13 A. Descending Rain B. Directed Purpose C. Delighted Creation	“Come, Listen, Live” Isaiah 55:1-5 A. Come Freely B. Consider Faithfully C. Covenant Forever

DO OUR CHURCH MEMBERS KNOW THEY ARE SENT?

I am not convinced most church members know they are sent.

They know they are expected to attend. They know they should give. They know they should be decent people, support the church, and maybe serve on a committee if asked. But do they know they are missionaries?

Do they know their workplace is a mission field? Their school? Their neighborhood? Their family table? Their daily conversations? Their ordinary routines?

Too often, Sunday worship prepares people to come back next Sunday, but not to live faithfully on Monday. That is a problem.

The church gathers, but the church is also scattered. We come together for worship, instruction, fellowship, encouragement, and prayer. Then we are sent back into the world as witnesses of Jesus Christ. The gathered church should strengthen the scattered church. Sunday should prepare believers for Monday.

If it does not, we may be training attenders instead of forming disciples.

I believe deeply in corporate worship. I am not interested in reducing Sunday to a motivational rally or a ministry strategy session. Worship is first about God. We gather to honor Him, hear His Word, confess our sins, sing His praise, pray together, and remember who we are in Christ. But true worship never leaves people where it found them.

The Word preached on Sunday should shape the way a man speaks to his wife on Monday. It should affect how a business owner treats employees, how a teacher handles students, how a nurse cares for patients, how a retiree encourages neighbors, how a teenager lives at school, and how

and how a church member responds when an unbeliever is hurting. If worship does not move into life, something is broken.

Pastors must stop speaking as though "ministry" only happens inside the church building. That language is killing us. We call the nursery ministry, the choir ministry, the youth ministry, and the outreach ministry. Fine. But we must also teach that Christian ministry happens in offices, shops, farms, classrooms, hospitals, restaurants, homes, and front porches. The church building is not the only holy place where believers serve God.

Every Christian is sent. Not every Christian is sent in the same way. Not everyone is called to preach, pastor, teach publicly, or serve overseas. But every believer is called to bear witness, practice holiness, love neighbors, do good works, speak truth, show mercy, and live under the lordship of Jesus Christ. That is not optional. That is discipleship.

If our people leave Sunday worship thinking, "The pastor did ministry today," we have failed them. They should leave thinking, "We have worshiped God, heard His Word, and now we are being sent to live as Christ's people in the world."

This does not require gimmicks. It requires clarity.

Preaching should connect doctrine to ordinary obedience. Prayers should include the actual places where people live and work. Testimonies should highlight faithfulness beyond church programs. Announcements should not consume the service as though the church calendar is the center of Christian life. Benedictions should sound like sending, not simply dismissal. **There is a difference between "You are free to go" and "You are sent in the name of the Lord." One empties the room. The other commissions the people.**

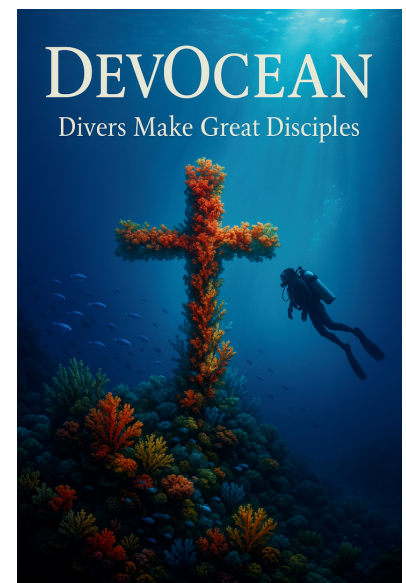
I need to ask myself hard questions. Am I preparing people merely to support the church institution, or am I equipping them to represent Christ? Am I measuring involvement only by what they do at church, or also by how they live as Christians in the world? Am I unintentionally suggesting that a faithful member is one who attends events, fills slots, and causes no problems?

The church does not exist to gather people into a religious holding tank. **We gather to worship. We scatter to witness.**

If Sunday does not prepare believers for Monday mission, then our worship may be sincere but incomplete. We have sung, prayed, preached, and dismissed, but we have not sent.

Our church members do not need another reminder to be busy.

They need to know they are called. They need to know they are trusted. They need to know they are sent.



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TEACHING ISAIAH 5, 44, 45, 51, 55, & 56

ISAIAH: JUDGMENT, GRACE, AND THE GOD WHO GATHERS

When God's Vineyard Bears Wild Grapes

Isaiah 5:1–7

Focus: God's people are accountable to produce righteous fruit in response to His faithful care

- What evidence of God's care should have produced greater faithfulness in your life?
- Where might God be looking for justice and righteousness, but finding selfishness, neglect, or spiritual decay?

No God Beside Him

Isaiah 44:6–8

Focus: The Lord alone is Redeemer, King, and Rock; His people can trust Him without fear

- What fears lose their power when you remember that God is the first and the last?
- How does God's uniqueness challenge the idols, securities, or lesser trusts we depend on?

The Sovereign God of History

Isaiah 45:1–7

Focus: God rules over nations, rulers, and events, even using unexpected instruments to accomplish His purpose

- Where do current events or personal circumstances make it difficult for you to trust God's rule?
- How does God's control over light and darkness, peace and trouble, deepen your understanding of providence?

Look to the Rock

Isaiah 51:1–6

Focus: God's past faithfulness gives His people confidence in His future salvation

- What part of God's past faithfulness do you need to remember in your present discouragement?
- How does looking back to Abraham and Sarah help believers trust God when the future seems uncertain?

Come to the Waters

Isaiah 55:1–5

Focus: God graciously invites the thirsty to receive life, mercy, and covenant blessing without price

- What are people tempted to "buy" that can never truly satisfy the soul?
- How does God's invitation to "come" challenge both pride and spiritual emptiness?

The Word That Accomplishes God's Purpose

Isaiah 55:10–13

Focus: God's Word is effective, purposeful, and certain to accomplish what He sends it to do

- Where do you need renewed confidence in the power of God's Word rather than human effort?
- How should this passage shape the way we preach, teach, witness, and wait?

A House for All Peoples

Isaiah 56:1, 6–8

Focus: God gathers outsiders into worship, covenant faithfulness, and joyful service

- Who might our churches unintentionally treat as outsiders whom God is calling near?
- How does God's promise of a house of prayer for all people expand our view of mission?

Holiness, Hope, and the Nations

Isaiah 44:6–8; 55:1–5; 56:1, 6–8

Focus: The one true God calls His people to trust Him, receive His grace, and join His mission to gather the nations

- How does knowing God as the only Redeemer strengthen our confidence in His invitation of grace?
- What would change if our churches saw worship not as a private possession, but as a witness for all people?

From Failed Fruit to Faithful Promise

Isaiah 5:1–7; 44:6–8; 45:1–7; 51:1–6; 55:1–5; 55:10–13; 56:1, 6–8

Focus: God confronts the unfaithfulness of His people, yet continues to reveal Himself as the only Redeemer, sovereign Lord, gracious Savior, and gathering God

- How does Isaiah's vineyard song expose the danger of receiving God's care without producing faithful fruit?
- How do these passages move us from judgment and accountability toward grace, mission, and hope?



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THE SPIRITUAL GIFT WE KEEP IGNORING: COMPETENCE

Churches love to talk about calling, passion, burden, vision, and gifting. We should. God does call people. The Spirit gives gifts. The church needs people with holy burdens and kingdom vision.

But there is one “gift” we often ignore until its absence creates a mess: competence.

I know competence is not usually listed when we talk about spiritual gifts. It does not sound as spiritual as preaching, teaching, mercy, exhortation, or leadership. It sounds too practical, too ordinary, too close to business language. But churches suffer when practical ability, wisdom, and reliability are missing from leadership. **A person may be sincere and still be incompetent.** That sentence needs to be said out loud. Sincerity matters, but sincerity does not organize a ministry, balance a budget, protect children, handle conflict, prepare a lesson, lead a meeting, or follow through. Good intentions are not enough. A church can be harmed by people who mean well but consistently fail.

We have all seen it. Someone is placed in leadership because he is willing, available, likable, related to the right family, or has “always done it.” But s/he cannot plan, communicate, make decisions, handle pressure, or work with people. Then everyone quietly works around him while pretending everything is fine. **That is not kindness. That is poor stewardship.**

Competence matters because leadership affects other people. When a leader is disorganized, the ministry becomes disorganized. When a leader is unreliable, others carry the weight. When a leader lacks wisdom, small problems grow. When a leader cannot communicate, confusion spreads. When a leader avoids decisions, the church drifts. Eventually, faithful people get tired.

Churches often burn out their best servants by protecting their weakest leaders. We keep incompetent people in place because we do not want to hurt feelings. We call it grace, but sometimes it is cowardice wearing a church name tag.

Grace does not require us to put people in roles they cannot handle. Love does not require us to ignore reality. The body of Christ is not strengthened when we pretend every willing person is suited for every task.

There is a difference between giving someone a chance to grow and placing someone in a role he is not prepared to carry. Developing leaders requires patience, training, encouragement, and room to fail. But leadership development is not leadership denial. At some point, we must tell the truth.

Competence is not the enemy of spirituality.

Practical wisdom is deeply spiritual. Proverbs warns against foolishness, laziness, poor judgment, rash speech, and lack of discipline. The New Testament qualifications for church leadership include character, reputation, self-control, family management, hospitality, and ability to teach. In other words, faithfulness has visible evidence.

A competent church leader does not have to be flashy, charismatic, polished, wealthy, highly educated, or impressive on a stage. But he should be dependable. He should keep his word. He should understand the assignment. He should know when to ask for help. He should communicate clearly. He should prepare. He should be humble enough to be corrected.

Reliability is underrated because it is not dramatic.

Nobody applauds the person who unlocks the building on time, prepares the lesson, counts the offering correctly, schedules workers, and handles the problem before it becomes a crisis. But church health depends on people who quietly do what they said they would do.

Pastors need to stop confusing availability with qualification. Just because someone will take the position does not mean he should have it. Desperation is a terrible strategy. If no one is ready for a role, maybe the answer is not to lower the standard. Maybe the answer is to train people, simplify the ministry, or let a program rest.

The church does not need more titles filled by unprepared people. It needs servants formed into capable leaders.

I want Spirit-filled people who pray, dream, serve, and care. But I also want people who answer messages, show up on time, tell the truth, make sound decisions, and finish what they start.

Competence will never replace holiness. But incompetence is not holiness either.

The church should honor practical ability as a gift of God, because when wisdom and reliability disappear, ministry does not become more spiritual. It becomes harder for everyone else.

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Brothers and Sisters,

I cordially invite you to the second annual Camp Meeting Revival at Cragmont Assembly on **Monday, August 17-19, 2026**. I moved the date to August to get out of Revival and Homecoming Seasons. This was one of the few times Cragmont had available for our group.

Last year worshippers gathered for worship, prayer, and spiritual revival. Our preachers shared God's Word, and many prayers were offered with tears and praise. We would love for you to join us this year at Cragmont.

The included flyer is for you and your purposes. Everyone is welcome—preachers and members alike. Bring your spouse for a spiritual retreat with good friends and Bible preaching.

Mail the bottom portion of this form and a \$30 non-refundable deposit to secure your room. You will pay the remaining balance directly to Cragmont while attending the retreat.

I hope to see you at Cragmont—August 17-19, 2026!

Faithfully Yours,

|

John Hill

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