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Reflection: [Pastoral Excellence](#)

Images of the more excellent way

Although the language of excellence is limited to two passages in Paul's letters, those two references and the context of their use provide the rationale for our continuing efforts to identify, call forth, and sustain excellence in ministry, writes Kenneth Carder.

by [Kenneth L. Carder](#)

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For many, *excellence* continues to be a troubling term when applied to Christian ministry. Some prefer alternatives such as *faithful*, *fruitful*, or *effective* as more descriptive of the goal of Christian ministry. Admittedly, *excellence* carries some baggage from the prevailing culture. It often connotes competitiveness, elitism, hierarchical rankings, prideful ambition, and prestigious accomplishment.

Excellence can easily become an advertising slogan claiming superiority over competitors and an elitist claim to exclusivity. Further, excellence can be discussed in ways that lead to a form of “works righteousness” that adds to stress, competitiveness, arrogance, and coercion.

Careful attention, however, to the Biblical use of *excellence* can lead to transforming Christian ministry and redeeming the popular connotations. Although the language of excellence is limited to two passages in Paul's letters, those two references and the context of their use provide the rationale for our continuing efforts to identify, call forth, and sustain excellence in ministry.

Paul's promise to “show you a more excellent way” is preceded by consideration of gifts and conflicts over rankings within the Corinthian congregation (1 Corinthians 12:31). What follows the promise is a description of what constitutes genuine excellence—agape love (1 Corinthians 13). Excellence in Christian ministry is being called, formed, guided, empowered, and sustained by LOVE.

In *The Magnificent Defeat*, Frederick Beuchner describes four levels of love. The first is love for equals — of friend for friend, sibling for sibling, spouse for spouse. It is love for that which is loving and lovely. Such love was characterized by Jesus as “loving those who love you.” The world smiles at such love.

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The second level is the love of the less fortunate — the love for those who suffer, those who are poor, those who fail. Beuchner calls this compassion, and it touches the heart of the world.

The third level or form of love is rare. It is love for those who are more fortunate — those who succeed where we fail, those who have what we want. It is to rejoice without envy of those who rejoice. It is the love of the poor for the rich, the “D” and “F” student for those who make “As” and “Bs,” the employee for the employer, the obscure for the prominent. The world is usually bewildered by such love.

Then there is the love for enemy — the love for the one who does not love you but mocks, threatens, and inflicts pain. It is the tortured’s love for the torturer, the oppressed for the oppressor, the victim for the criminal, the condemned for the executioner. This is God’s love, according to Beuchner, and it is the love which conquers and transforms the world.

Excellence in ministry is growing in capacity to love in all four levels as identified by Beuchner. From the reports from SPE projects, several thousand pastors are experiencing through peer groups increased capacity to love colleagues, family, and friends. Some are intentionally moving outside comfortable social and professional boundaries and growing in their capacity to love those who are different from themselves, including people who are marginalized and victimized.

Level three and four in Beuchner’s description of love represent growing edges of many peer groups and Sustaining Pastoral Excellence projects. It is no small challenge to be humble enough to love those who are more competent, more insightful, more influential, and even more loving than we are. It takes more than personal effort and intellectual understanding to be able to love those whose values and behavior inflict suffering and oppression.

The second biblical reference to *excellence* in Paul’s writings is in Philippians 4:8: “Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence ...think about these things.” From Paul’s letters, we know that such virtues as truth, justice, purity, and love are gifts of God’s grace in Jesus Christ rather than marks of human achievement. *Excellence* is Jesus Christ, “who ...emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. ...he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death on a cross” (Philippians 2:6ff).

Excellence in ministry is growing in love through ongoing friendship with Jesus Christ, experienced in Christian community and expressed in mission in the world. Excellence is being continually formed in love and nurturing congregations and communities that embody love for colleagues, equals, and friends; for those who suffer and are marginalized; for those with privilege and power; and for those labeled “the enemy.” Such excellence transforms individuals, communities, neighborhoods, and the world. And, such excellence is a gift incarnate and experienced in Jesus Christ.