



LET'S BEGIN HERE

The church building on the corner in our hometown may look like most other churches with its neat trim, inviting entryway, and distinctive steeple. We may pass the building every day, not realizing what the church truly is—an outpost of heaven on earth.

At church, we experience a bit of heaven when we lift our prayers to God and, like the angels, worship Him with voices clear and strong. We hear God speak through His sacred Word. We affirm His unchanging values, and we mobilize as agents of God's kingdom in the world.

To a lost society without a moral compass to guide people, the church is a heavenly beacon, pointing the way to God through Jesus Christ—the “one Mediator who can reconcile God and humanity” (1 Timothy 2:5). Where can people yearning for heaven feel more at home than in Christ's church, the “dwelling where God lives by his Spirit” (Ephesians 2:22)?

And yet, the light of heaven is fading in some churches. Motivational speeches and social events replace the dynamic of God's Word and worship. In these churches, people no longer connect with Christ and no longer hear God's voice in the clear teaching of the Bible. Denominational leader Albert Mohler laments, “Lacking spiritual energy, devoid of biblical knowledge and conviction, many of our churches wear the pallor of death.”¹

To revive these dying churches, we call upon the prophet Ezekiel to administer spiritual CPR. His shocking exposé in Ezekiel 33:30–33 of the spiritual lethargy of God's people challenges today's believers to learn from the past and revive their churches' heavenly calling.

Quotable

*We can be sure
erosion will set
in if we do not
deliberately stay
aware of it and
stand against it.*

— Charles R. Swindoll





YOUR TURN IN THE SCRIPTURES

As we prepare to dig into Ezekiel 33:30–33, let's survey the literary landscape by finding out who was Ezekiel, who were the recipients of his book, and what was the historical setting.

Ezekiel was born into a priestly family in Jerusalem and would have served in the temple had he not been deported to Babylon with other captives in 597 BC—11 years before Nebuchadnezzar's army leveled Jerusalem in 586. Ezekiel was 25 years old at the time he came to Babylon. At age 30, when priests normally began their temple service (Numbers 4:3), Ezekiel "saw visions of God," in which God called him to declare the word of the Lord to Judean exiles (Ezekiel 1:1).

Dark clouds of God's judgment upon His wayward people shroud the first 32 chapters of Ezekiel's book. But beginning in chapter 33, rays of hope burst through Ezekiel's prophetic skies. In chapters 33–48, Ezekiel describes a future in which the Lord will lift His people from the ruins of judgment to new life, return them to their homeland, and restore temple worship. Like the dry bones in Ezekiel's vision that regenerated into living beings, the exiled Jews would be revitalized, cleansed, and gathered into one nation under one messianic King (Ezekiel 37).

Read Ezekiel 36:25–30, and write down the "I will" statements that describe what the Lord will do to restore His people.

***Searching the Scriptures Study Tip***

Set against Ezekiel's backdrop of judgment and hope is his snapshot in Ezekiel 33:30–33 of the spiritual superficiality of the exiles. As we imagine the scene, let's employ Chuck Swindoll's *Searching the Scriptures* tool of reading a text with all our senses. "As we learn to engage the senses," writes Chuck, "the verses come alive in our minds . . . and ultimately in our lives!"²



Read Ezekiel 33:30–33 in the New Living Translation below, and engage your senses as if you are present in the scene. What do you hear? What do you see in the people’s expressions and actions? What emotions might the people be feeling, and what might Ezekiel be feeling?

“Son of man, your people talk about you in their houses and whisper about you at the doors. They say to each other, ‘Come on, let’s go hear the prophet tell us what the Lord is saying!’ So my people come pretending to be sincere and sit before you. They listen to your words, but they have no intention of doing what you say. Their mouths are full of lustful words, and their hearts seek only after money. You are very entertaining to them, like someone who sings love songs with a beautiful voice or plays fine music on an instrument. They hear what you say, but they don’t act on it! But when all these terrible things happen to them—as they certainly will—then they will know a prophet has been among them.” (Ezekiel 33:30–33)

What *discouraging signs of a dying ministry* do you observe from the text above?

The hand of the Lord’s discipline had fallen heavy on these exiles, and yet they were just as wicked as when they lived in Palestine. Rather than turn from sin and obey God’s law, they simply hid their hardened hearts behind masks of showy religiosity.

Hypocrites today wear similar masks, don’t they? We may already see some similarities between the superficial synagogue-attenders in Ezekiel’s day and today’s church-attenders. But let’s not jump the gun and make applications too quickly. Let’s observe this passage a little closer to discover two key roles in any ministry.



The Role of the Leader

Ezekiel was like a “watchman” who keeps a keen eye on the horizon and “sounds the alarm to warn the people” when the enemy approaches (Ezekiel 33:2–3). Read Ezekiel 33:7, and write down the ways that Ezekiel fulfilled the role of a spiritual leader in his community.

What is the same word used to describe the Lord in 33:11, 25, and 27? And what does this title imply about the Lord’s authority and control over the people’s circumstances?

Ezekiel could feel confident because he was acting under the Lord’s sovereign authority. The Lord gave him the message (33:1–2, 10, 12, 23), and Ezekiel’s part was to deliver it to the people. What would have happened to Ezekiel if he failed to do his part (33:7–8)?

Principles

Draw some principles regarding the spiritual leader’s role in God’s community of believers. For example, “Spiritual leaders must always speak under the authority of the sovereign Lord, not their own authority.” What other principles can you find?



The Role of the Listeners

Just as spiritual leaders must respond in obedience to deliver the Lord's message, so also those who hear the message must respond by acting on what they hear. Look again at Ezekiel 33:30–33, and answer the following questions.

What were the people saying about Ezekiel, and what did they understand about his role (Ezekiel 33:30)?

Only God can perceive a person's hidden motives: "For the LORD sees every heart and knows every plan and thought" (1 Chronicles 28:9). What did the Lord know about Ezekiel's congregation that even the prophet may not have realized (Ezekiel 33:31)?

Describe the people's shallow and patronizing response to Ezekiel (33:32). What eventually caused them to take seriously Ezekiel's warnings (33:33)?



Principles

Draw some principles regarding the congregation's role in the community of believers. For example, "For a ministry to thrive, the people must be receptive listeners and willing to obey the Lord's message." What other principles can you find?



Bring It Home

What can we learn from Ezekiel's tragic exposé? Both the leaders *and* the congregation play a vital role in a thriving community of faith. Erosion occurs when either group fails to fulfill its role—*when the leaders entertain their congregation* rather than speak God's Word or *when the people come to be entertained* rather than act upon what they hear.

In application, Chuck Swindoll outlines four critical action points regarding the message, ministry, leader, and congregation:

- Our message must remain riveted to God's Word—biblical and focused.
- Our ministry must keep in touch with our times—relevant and realistic.
- Our leaders must be as committed as Ezekiel—disciplined, devoted, and determined.
- Our congregations must remain authentic, enthusiastic, and engaged—genuine disciples and active participants.

As you think about your role in your church, what are some steps you can take to put into practice any of the principles from this study?



Who's responsible to keep the light of heaven shining bright in your church? Each person must do his or her part in responding to God's Word—the leaders, members of the congregation, and you!



A FINAL PRAYER

Father, I see the superficiality of the exiles under Ezekiel's ministry, and I want more than entertainment from the leaders of my church. I pray for my leaders to faithfully fulfill their role to deliver God's Word. I pray for Your Spirit to transform my heart so that I can grow and my church can thrive. Amen.

ENDNOTES

1. R. Albert Mohler Jr., *He Is Not Silent: Preaching in a Postmodern World* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2008), 153.
2. Charles R. Swindoll, *Searching the Scriptures: Find the Nourishment Your Soul Needs* (Carol Stream, Ill.: Tyndale House, 2016), 94.



CULTIVATING A DYNAMIC MINISTRY

Discouraging Signs of a Dying Ministry

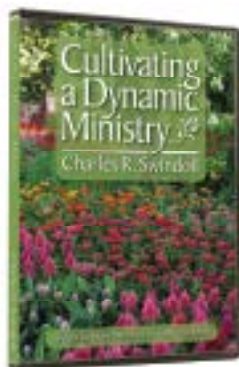
Ezekiel 33:30–33

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For the 2017 broadcast, this *Searching the Scriptures* study was developed by the Pastoral Ministries Department in collaboration with Mark Tobey, based upon the original outlines, charts, and sermon transcripts of Charles R. Swindoll's messages.



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CULTIVATING A DYNAMIC MINISTRY

Encouraging Essentials for a Dynamic Ministry

1 Corinthians 15:58; 16:13–14

SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

STUDY



LET'S BEGIN HERE

Among the last words that the apostle Paul spoke to the leaders of the church at Ephesus was a warning about false teachers who slip into the church and “distort the truth in order to draw a following” (Acts 20:30). “Watch out!” Paul said with deep concern (20:31).

As the years passed, the leaders did well to guard the church against apostolic impostors and their heresies. The Ephesians did not “tolerate evil people” and worked hard to examine “the claims of those who say they are apostles but are not” (Revelation 2:2).

And yet, while watching for the jagged rocks of doctrinal error, the church drifted into treacherous shallows: *religion without love*. “You don’t love me or each other as you did at first!” Jesus told the church at Ephesus through John’s vision (2:4). Somehow, the church lost its spiritual passion from its early days. Without love for Christ and others to give it momentum and dynamic energy, the Ephesian church sank into perfunctory religious duty.

Whether jagged rocks of heresy or treacherous shallows of loveless religion, dangers lurk below the surface for any church. How can we keep our churches on course and guard against that silent, slow, subtle drift into dangerous waters? Thankfully, Paul offers four guiding beacons—*four essentials for sustaining a dynamic ministry*.

Quotable

*If we hope to
sustain the dynamic
ministry that
God has allowed
us to begin, we
must be steadfast,
immovable,
abounding, and
confident.*

— Charles R. Swindoll



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YOUR TURN IN THE SCRIPTURES

Read 1 Corinthians 15:58 in the following versions. Look for the action words in each verse, and in the chart following, record the words that you find.



Helpful Hint

Reading different Bible versions can help you to see the same passage with fresh perspective. If you don't have different versions handy, there are plenty of Web sites that can help you, such as BibleGateway.com.

So, my dear brothers and sisters, be strong and immovable. Always work enthusiastically for the Lord, for you know that nothing you do for the Lord is ever useless. (1 Corinthians 15:58 NLT)

Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord. (15:58 NASB)

With all this going for us, my dear, dear friends, stand your ground. And don't hold back. Throw yourselves into the work of the Master, confident that nothing you do for him is a waste of time or effort. (15:58 MSG)

New Living Translation (NLT)	New American Standard Bible (NASB)	The Message (MSG)



Observation is an important *Searching the Scriptures* technique you will want to use to put together the pieces of a passage of Scripture. As Chuck Swindoll observed the action words in these Bible versions, four key concepts emerged: *steadfast*, *immovable*, *abounding*, and *confident*.

Now, let's do the same exercise with 1 Corinthians 16:13. Read this verse in the same three versions. Observe the commands in each verse, and in the chart below, record the words that you find.

Be on guard. Stand firm in the faith. Be courageous. Be strong. (1 Corinthians 16:13 NLT)

Be on the alert, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong. (16:13 NASB)

Keep your eyes open, hold tight to your convictions, give it all you've got, be resolute. (16:13 MSG)

New Living Translation (NLT)	New American Standard Bible (NASB)	The Message (MSG)

As you compare these versions side-by-side, what observations can you make about the nuances of these commands?



Can you observe an interesting link between these commands and Paul's key words from 1 Corinthians 15:58? Chuck combined the concepts in these verses to form essentials for sustaining a dynamic ministry. In his message, he distilled his conclusions:

Part of being *steadfast* includes *being on the alert*. By remaining *immovable*, we *stand firm* in the faith. As we *abound* in the Lord's work we are *growing toward maturity*. And fourth, being *confident* that our toil is never in vain, we *become strong* in our everyday walk.

Let's uncover the *interpretation* of each set of concepts from 1 Corinthians 15:58 and 16:13. Chuck Swindoll explains:

Interpretation is learning what the Bible means. Each verse of Scripture means something, and when one verse is tied together with other verses, there's an even deeper meaning.¹

Steadfast . . . Be on the Alert

A steadfast church is steady and reliable, solidly committed to the eternal truths of Holy Scripture. Steadfast churches don't just happen; the people from the pulpit to the pew must be on the alert, always vigilant to keep a steady course.

According to Ephesians 4:14, what do steadfast churches avoid?

Earlier, we touched on Paul's address to the Ephesian leaders. Read more of his address in Acts 20:28–32 in which Paul fills out the *meaning* of *steadfast*. What must leaders do specifically so that their church remains steadfast?



Immovable . . . Firm in the Faith

The Greek word translated *immovable* reflects the idea of being tightly secured, anchored to the principles of the faith so that when a storm of controversy washes over the decks, the church remains stable. Churches that are immovable are calm in crisis. “Blessed is a man [and church] who *perseveres* under trial” (James 1:12 NASB, emphasis added).

What might happen to a church that doesn’t persevere through trial? How might the church “move” or shift in its convictions regarding the following issues:

Doctrine: _____

Finances: _____

Moral purity: _____

Ethical integrity: _____

What must leaders do specifically so that their church remains immovable?

Abounding . . . Growing toward Maturity

According to Chuck Swindoll, “always abounding in the work of the Lord” (1 Corinthians 15:58 NASB) means, “Always enthusiastic. Going the extra mile. Keeping a positive attitude. Thinking and often saying yes to opportunities.” It includes a “sense of contagious joy,” Chuck adds. “I don’t think there is a more beautiful sound in a church than laughter.”

An “abounding” church is a maturing church—a church that is growing out of childishness into adulthood. Its members stay positive even when they don’t get their way; they serve enthusiastically and selflessly rather than become irritable and demanding; they don’t quit at the first sign of difficulty; they maintain their sense of humor and remain flexible through seasons of change.



What must leaders do specifically so that their church remains abounding?

Confident . . . Become Strong

Confident that “nothing [we] do for the Lord is ever useless,” we feel stronger and more motivated to serve Him (1 Corinthians 15:58).

What meaning does Hebrews 6:10 add?

Nothing we do for the Lord is in vain! Let that thought permeate your thinking as you serve Him through your church. As we bring this study home to where you live, let’s close with a fifth essential that fastens around the others like a cord—the absolute essential of love.

Do *everything* with love. (1 Corinthians 16:14, emphasis added)



Bring It Home

Read a few lines from 1 Corinthians 13, imagining each member of your church obeying Paul’s admonition to do everything in love—just as these verses describe:

Love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful or proud or rude. It does not demand its own way. It is not irritable, and it keeps no record of being wronged. It does not rejoice about injustice but rejoices whenever the truth wins out. Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance. (1 Corinthians 13:4–7)



As you think about your role in your church, what are some steps you can take to put into practice any of the principles from this study?

Let's close by praying for your church that it will embody these essentials of a dynamic ministry: steadfast, immovable, abounding, and confident . . . with love.



A FINAL PRAYER

Father, I pray for the leaders of my church who have such a significant role, that they will be steadfast, immovable, abounding, and confident—with love—as they guide the people. And may You strengthen and preserve my church's ministry for many years to come. Amen.

ENDNOTE

1. Charles R. Swindoll, *Searching the Scriptures: Find the Nourishment Your Soul Needs* (Carol Stream, Ill.: Tyndale House, 2016), 71.



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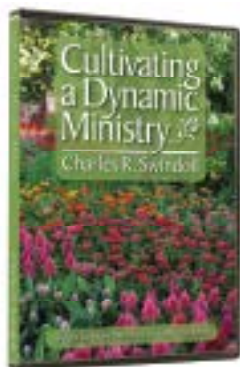
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