

GODLY GROOVES

PSALM 119:32

Forty-one years ago, I answered God's call on my life to start a church. With no funding, no launch team, no facility (other than our living room), we began a church.

Kathy and I had been married a month, but we knew what God wanted us to do. Our first Sunday service was attended by us, five friends, and an 18-month-old toddler.

All I had going for me was the Holy Spirit, the Bible, a good wife, and an unshakeable confidence in the power of God... I had no idea what the next forty years would look like or how ministry would play out for us. But in my heart of hearts, I knew then; what I know today; that it was God's intention for my wife and me to start a church.

I was motivated by a promise Jesus made over 2000 years ago. He told His disciples in Matthew 16, "I will build my church and the gates of hades shall not prevail against it." Jesus first made that promise in 30 AD by the waters of Caesarea Philippi, but the same promise has echoed in my heart every day for the last forty-one years.

And today, four decades later, I stand before you as a testimony to our Lord's ability to keep His promises.

Here's how Christianity works out...

Jesus makes commitments to you, and by faith, you make commitments to Him... and as those commitments run their course, and are lived out in the rough and tumble of your life, you realize the fruits of faithfulness.

That God is more faithful than you imagined. And that your heart grows in the midst of learning to trust in Him.

There's a verse in Psalm 119 I want us to read. It's verse 32. The psalmist pens, "I will run the course of Your commandments, for You shall enlarge my heart."

Notice again the admonition, "I will run the course of Your commandments..." Some things in life need to **run their course** before they can be fully appreciated...

Watch a tree's foliage fall from its limbs in autumn, and throughout the winter its branches are mere twigs. If you didn't know better you'd conclude that the tree is dead...

But let nature run its course, and the miracle of new life will bud in springtime. By summer it's in full bloom.

A young boy meets the girl of his dreams. He'd love to escape with her, and they live happily ever after...

But though she loves him too, he's not yet proven he's marrying material. Besides, she's got school to finish, and parents to please. Just let the relationship run its course, and if it's meant to be, it'll blossom into marriage.

You're achy and running a fever. You're miserable. It's a stomach bug, and you think you might just die...

But you don't need an ambulance or the ER. Just let the illness run its course. In a few days, you'll feel better.

Your favorite baseball team drafts a young pitcher. Everyone's excited. He's hailed as the next superstar. Why not rush him to the big leagues? He's needed...

But no, better to stick with the plan. Speed up his training and it'll short-circuit his development. To reach a player's full potential his progress should run its course.

Sometimes nature, and relationships, and illnesses, and training just need to run their course. There's no reason to interfere. What's needed is time and patience.

And so it is with our commitments to God. **Let God's commandments and your commitments run their course.**

Make a commitment; then give it time and consistent obedience. Don't just attend to your commitment for a day, or month, or year; then get impatient or distracted, and abandon that commitment for other pursuits.

Stick with it. Before you judge the results, create a pattern around God's promise and follow through over time. Log in a few years of following God and attending to your commitments, and then measure the results...

As I've often quoted, God's callings deserve **"a long obedience in the same direction."** Not *a spurt of attentiveness*, but *a long obedience*. We need to pursue God's call with an effort that's not *scattered*, but *targeted*.

We should all allow God time and opportunity to do what He's promised to do... My forty-one years illustrate *that if you do*, God will fulfill His promises, and even more, He'll change, bless, and grow you in the process!

In an interview with Rolling Stone magazine, actor Jeff Bridges was asked, *“What advice do you wish someone had given you when you were twenty years old?”*

Bridges replied, *“I got the advice - I just didn't take it! My dad would say, ‘It's all about habit, Jeff. You gotta get into good habits.’ And I said, ‘No, Dad, you gotta live each moment. Live it as the first one and be fresh.’*

And he'd say, ‘That's a wonderful thought, but that's not what we are. We are habitual creatures. It's about developing these grooves.’ Jeff Bridges concludes, *“As I age, I now can see his point. What you practice, that's what you become.”* ***And this is what I've learned...***

Forty years ago I made a commitment to God to build His church, but what I've discovered over those years is that as God's commandments have run their course in my life, it's those commandments that have built me!

As I've tried to keep my commitments, they've created godly grooves in me that have enlarged me and made me a better man. Forty years of doing ministry with God has enlarged my heart and mind and soul and strength.

This past year Zach's family gave me a turntable - *that's right, a pre-historic record player for Christmas.*

He knew I had an old vinyl record collection, but no way to play them. There's nothing like the scratchiness, and fuzziness of the sounds that come from black vinyl.

You drop the needle down on the record, and it's hard to see them, but the needle falls into little grooves in the vinyl. And it's

those grooves that guide the needle round and round and emits the sound of beautiful music.

Or as we used to say, "It's groovy!"

And we all are like a vinyl record. The grooves that have been laid down over time... the grooves etched into our psyche and perspective - the commandments we've followed and commitments we've live by, are what guides our needle, and produces the music of our life.

Today, I'm going to look back on my forty-one years as a pastor, and discuss four godly grooves that have been etched in me, and have yielded some groovy music...

And please don't misunderstand. I'm not promoting myself as some kind of a pastoral success story. I realize there are other pastors with larger churches, and greater influence, and with more far-reaching ministries...

I'm just saying, I started and pastored a church, and made it forty-one years - *with my marriage intact, and my kids still speaking to me... My confidence in God and in His Word has not wavered... I even have a church of folks that love me, and I'm more excited than ever about what we can do together to help build God's kingdom.*

I don't know if that's how you measure pastoral success or not? I just know I'm a blessed man, and I want to continue being a blessing to God and to His people in the years that I have remaining to serve.

When I think of my life and ministry over the last forty years I feel like it's the outgrowth of four commandments I received from God and have been determined to keep.

I made a commitment to **follow one God, teach one Book, love one woman, and pastor one church.**

These are godly grooves that have been truly groovy.

Well, the initial commitment that led me to Christ, and caused me to embrace His calling to be a pastor, and has guided me every day since... **is my commitment to follow one God...** *And you might think that should be a no-brainer for every Christian, let alone a pastor.*

Christianity is the world's largest monotheistic religion. Unlike pagans, Christians are known to follow one God.

Yet this is not always *practically true* in the church, and among pastors. *Pastors follow lots of different voices.*

Some pastors follow the will and dictates of their denominational leaders. *That never made sense to me.*

Why would any church allow people from outside the congregation, in another town, with different concerns, tell a local church what to do and how to function?

This is why I was so happy to discover Calvary Chapel. I loved and appreciated what I learned from my pastor, Chuck Smith. I embraced the ministry distinctives that were Calvary only because they were also biblical.

With Calvary Chapel, I could listen to and follow God's Spirit without some headquarters looking over my shoulder; yet still be part of a group of pastors who loved and served Jesus.

Without a group, it's easy for a pastor to become an island to himself. That's not very healthy.

As a Calvary Chapel, I've been free to follow Jesus while maintaining some human accountability. It's been a perfect blend, and it's served me well for forty-one years.

I've always followed God, not a human hierarchy.

Neither have I followed the will of the people. Please, understand the opinions of church members should matter to their pastor. It's important what the people of my church think, and *my* door is always open. But when the rubber meets the road I have to obey God, not man.

And people pressure is a huge temptation for some pastors. Popular opinion and political correctness can drive the ship. If we don't follow Brother So-And-So, he'll stop giving, and we need his money. Too many pastors are bullied by folks with strong opinions or deep pockets.

Thankfully, we've never succumbed to these temptations. We've followed one God, and have trusted Him to meet our needs. *And He's done so, in spades.*

Some pastors follow the denomination, others follow certain people in the church, while other pastors follow their own ego. *And I don't want to fall into this trap either.*

I admit it takes a lot of **chutzpah** to be a pastor. Do you know what "chutzpah" means? It's a Jewish word. The dictionary defines it as "shameless audacity." It's a boldness bordering on arrogance. And in my opinion to be a good pastor you have to possess a little chutzpah.

I am a sinful, fallible, very mortal man, yet I get up here every week and claim to speak for God... I pray and provide direction that affects the lives of other people that I believe is in harmony with the still, small voice of the Holy Spirit... I've even exercised church discipline on behalf of God Himself... Those kinds of duties require boldness. Timidity is not a pastor's friend.

You've got to be sure of where you stand with God to be a pastor, *but ego is boldness that's standing alone.*

When I take a stand I need to do so humbly, connected to God, conscious of my dependence on Him.

Whereas, some pastors stand alone behind a godly *facade* - representing their own selfish interests and will.

I really want to follow one God, not my own ego.

Once, Corrie Ten Boom was asked if it were difficult for her to remain humble. She replied, "When Jesus rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday on the back of a donkey, and everyone was waving palm branches and throwing garments on the road, and singing praises, do you think for one moment it ever entered the head of that donkey that any of that was for him? If I can be a donkey on which Jesus Christ rides, I'll happily give Him all the praise and all the honor." I love Corrie's word picture...

Certainly, the donkey who carried Jesus was sure-footed and unafraid of the crowd. He was up to the task. But humility is remembering that Jesus is in the saddle, not me. And that I'm on a journey to bring Him glory.

Over the last forty years, I've stayed committed to *following one God* and *teaching one Book - the Bible.*

Without a doubt, nothing about pastoral ministry has benefitted me more personally than the discipline of *teaching God's Word week after week, forty-plus years.*

There's another verse, Psalm 119:9, where the psalmist asks, "*How can a young man cleanse his way?*" He answers, "*By taking heed according to Your Word.*"

Notice, the psalmist doesn't ask, "*how can a young child, or a grandma cleanse her way?*" Little kids and grandmas are not the most notorious sinners. How dirty could their way be? *But young men...* adolescent males are hotheaded, cocky, reckless, hormonal, stubborn, impulsive... If you can cleanse a young man's way you can have a cleansing effect on anyone.

And what performs this kind of industrial-strength cleansing? "*By taking heed according to Your word.*"

Only the Bible can *tame a lust, and renew a mind, and transform a character, and break old habits, and form a new outlook, and create sensitivity, and spawn self-discipline, and refocus priorities, and develop faith!*

There are literally a thousand shortcuts. You can always find some spiritual fad that promises instant results. But the truth is, we need a steady diet of God's Word; then **we need to let it run its course!**

I'm thankful God called me to be a pastor for many reasons, but chief among them is that it's kept me in God's Word for a lifetime. I was hungry for God's truth before I became a pastor, but the discipline of studying to teach two Bible Studies a week for forty-one years has kept my nose, mind,

and heart in this Book. Today, if there's any *holiness in my life, or purity of heart, or strength of faith* it's because of the impact of the Bible.

On occasion, someone will suggest, "Pastor, we need more worship, extend the music time... Or you need to talk about social concerns, keep us informed... Or let's spend more time in prayer and fellowship..."

And I'm all for worship, proper social involvement, and opportunities to minister to one another, but make no mistake about it... the one overarching, pressing priority I cannot neglect is the study of God's Word.

Romans 10:17 declares, "Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God." Without God's Word, God's people will flounder from a weak faith.

The churches I attended growing up taught *from the Bible*, but they didn't teach the Bible... *And there's a not-so-subtle difference*. In most churches, the pastor sets the agenda and uses select verses to launch into some feel-good thoughts. But that's a far cry from teaching the Bible and letting the Book speak for itself.

I've heard it said, "It takes a whole Bible to make a whole Christian." And for forty years this has been my commitment. We're on our fifth time through the Bible.

Sadly, too many pastors use a Pandora approach to Scripture. *I'm sure you've listened to music on the Pandora app? Type in an artist or song you like* and an algorithm creates a playlist of similar sounding music.

As each song plays, Pandora allows you to *thumbs up* or *thumbs down* the song. This helps the algorithm further tailor your music to your *likes and dislikes...*

And this is how some pastors treat the Bible. They read of God's love - and click **a like**. But the Bible's stance on sexuality - oops, that's **a thumbs down...**

The parable of the prodigal son - **a like**. Slaughter of the Canaanites - ooo, **a thumbs down...** Hope for the hurting - **a like**. Sobriety and holiness - **an unlike...**

And as with a Pandora playlist, this shapes the pastor's teaching. Rather than deal with "the whole counsel of God" he gravitates toward easy passages.

This is tragic, and it's creating an anemic church.

At the judgment seat of Christ, no pastor will hear the Master say, "Well done, good and faithful servant," if he doesn't turn off Pandora, *and teach the Bible "as is"...*

Again, for forty years, I've been committed *to follow one God, to teach one Book, and to love one woman.*

And where do I begin talking about my wife?

For starters, Kathy Adams is this pastor's longest and most faithful church member. She was there at my first CalvaryCSM Bible Study, and I want to love her in a way that makes sure she attends my last Calvary CSM Bible Study...

No offense, but I learned a long time ago that church members will come and go, but at the end of the day, I want my wife to still be my wife.

And if she comes to my church, and sits down front, and still laughs at my corny jokes... that's all the better!

Let me make an observation: a pastor can be sexually faithful to his wife, *yet still be guilty of adultery.*

He's more committed to another man's bride than he is his own. When the other woman calls he'll drop whatever he's doing with his own wife to answer...

The pastor will interrupt his vacation or holiday to entertain his other woman... He pays more attention to her kids than he does his own.... He's more attentive to his mistress than he is to his own wife... *And who is this other woman? It's the Church - the Bride of Christ.*

Every married pastor should remember the church is the Bride of Christ, not his bride. I'm married to Kathy, not the Church. I serve the Lord's church, but my wife deserves the lion's share of my time and affections.

Don't misunderstand pastors here at CalvaryCSM work long and odd hours and do so joyfully. We're on-call and are willing to care for people Jesus died to save.

But before I'm a pastor, I'm a husband and a dad. And our first obligation is to our wife and children.

If you call me and I don't answer, realize it's not because I don't care about your need. I'll call you back at my first opportunity, but just like you, I also have God-given priorities, and it does no one any good for a pastor to sacrifice his family on the altar of ministry.

That's not how any pastor should treat his family.

I once heard some good advice to pastors that I tried to take to heart. *"The best thing a pastor can do for his family is to*

build a good church. And the best thing he can do for his church is to grow a healthy family.”

I agree! And this is why my strategy has always been to give 100% to my family, and 100% to my church.

When our kids were younger James and I often said, “It’s possible to be a good dad and a good pastor, but if you’re both, you won’t have time for anything else.”

I’ll never forget the fellow who approached me after a Bible Study and said he’d decided to join our church. He had been coming several years, so I figured he already felt Calvary was his church home. I asked him why he had reached his decision at this particular time.

He said, “*Pastor Sandy, I’ve been watching your wife.*” Hey, that’s a little creepy! I don’t want another man watching my wife, but then he added, “She seems healthy and happy, and since she thrives under your leadership, I figure my family will do the same.” I still didn’t like him watching Kath but he had some wisdom.

Being married to a pastor can be as stifling and smothering as being incarcerated in a prison cell... or it can be a flourishing and growing experience - and whether it’s one or the other depends on the pastor.

I’ve always used my influence to shape our church’s expectations of the pastor’s wife around what’s best for my wife. I’ve tried to create a ministry life for Kathy she enjoys not regrets. This is what any wise pastor does!

For forty-one years, I've been committed to loving one woman. And I've got to tell you, Kathy and I are in a good groove. Our marriage has never been better.

If your marriage is struggling all I can say is *don't give up*. Create some good grooves. Marriage is like a stiff shoe. It takes a while to break it in, but once you do, *you don't want to take it off*. The trials you endure now, create a trust and peace that will bless you later.

Even after forty-one years, Kathy and I are in love with Jesus, and we're in love with each other. And we're excited about the future... After raising our kids my wife is now into missions, and she loves women's ministry, and she's **all in** as a grandma (**clip**). Lord willing, the best time of our lives is still ahead of us.

For forty-plus years, I've committed myself to *follow one God, teach one Book, love one woman, and pastor one church*. My calling from God, thus my intention, has been to die the pastor of CalvaryCSM.

Of course, *I don't know God's future plans*, and I've always held out the possibility that God could call me elsewhere. I'm the soldier, not the captain. I take the orders. I don't give them. And if the Lord called me to another church I've always hoped I would be obedient.

But I don't go around looking for other opportunities.

I'm proud to pastor our church. I'm pleased with what we've become *and are becoming*... and I would insult the work God's Spirit has done if I viewed this church as a stepping stone to something bigger and better...

Of course, I realize not every pastor *will* or even *should* log forty years at the same church. I do believe God can call a pastor to uproot and move elsewhere.

But a pastor's mobility shouldn't just be exercised *when the going gets tough*, or *when a better offer comes along*, or *when the grass is greener* - it's should only happen when He's called. For there are definite benefits that come with longevity and stick-to-it-ness.

Some folks think because Jesus never sinned He doesn't understand temptation. But just the opposite is true. It's not the person who resists temptation to a point and then caves in - but the person who never gives - in that experiences the strongest temptation.

And the same is true of pastoring. Abandon your post every few years, and jump ship, and you'll never experience the joys and blessings of *the long voyage*.

Did you know that among all churches, the average time spent by a senior pastor with the same congregation is four years? I've been at it forty years, and in lots of ways, I feel as if I'm just getting started.

I'm still earning the people's respect. In a world that shuns commitment and seeks to escape anything difficult or troubling, I've tried to set a different example.

I don't like quitting on people - and if I don't quit on them, they'll be less likely to quit on me. You can't develop meaningful friendships without giving it time.

I know too many pastors that have grown cynical over the years. They get hurt and harbor their bitterness.

The carousel of people coming and going from their church - *it happens in every church* - causes the pastor and his wife to protect themselves from rejection. To shield themselves from hurts, they grow a hard heart.

I've learned a better way to cope. It's called grace.

And I've learned grace largely from CalvaryCSM. This church has always been a *grace place*. It's full of the most loving, forgiving, accepting people I know.

On occasion, we'll have a former church member leave us disgruntled, and they'll post to Facebook.

And guess who's quick to chime in with encouraging words? It's the folks they left behind at CalvaryCSM. I think, *well, if they want to leave let them leave*. But this church loves the one lost sheep, as much, if not more, than the ninety-nine, and they're quick to reach out.

This church challenges me to hold no grudges. Grace loves the unlovable and accepts the unacceptable. I teach grace, but our church lives it out.

Usually, when church members relocate elsewhere, they tell us later they underestimated how difficult it would be to replace their church. *And I know why...*

The relationships forged in a church become some of life's greatest treasures. A church really can become a family - even stronger. Christians share the deepest dimension of life together - its sadnesses *and* its joys.

Over the last few years, I've traveled a lot to speak at conferences and retreats. And I've been asked if I'd ever like to do it full-time. My answer is a definite **"no."**

I appreciate the opportunity to share with other groups, but I'd miss the friendships and connection that come with seeing the same folks week after week. I take great joy in watching the same people grow in their faith toward God and their love for one another.

Of course, I know, if the Lord delays I won't be a pastor forever. And don't worry, if I start drooling in the pulpit and become a liability I won't need to be told to step down... But I'm just 63 years young, with plenty of tread left on my tires. And I still intend to keep rolling...

One of my priorities over the next few years will be to invest in the next generation. Now that I'm closer to the end of my race than its beginning, I'm realizing more than ever the race we run is a relay race. And we won't be a winner unless we pass the baton successfully.

I like what Pastor Joe McKeever writes, "No matter how serious a pastor may be about a long tenure it's not going to happen apart from the intervention of the Lord Himself." And after forty years as a pastor, I agree.

Jesus made a promise to build His Church; then called me and individualized that promise to my heart. It's this promise that's sustained me every day since.

I love what's said of God in Jude 24, "Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to present you faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy..." For forty-one years now, I've sought to keep my commitments - **to follow one God, teach one Book, love one woman, pastor**

one church - but it's only because God made a commitment to me first.

God has intervened in our lives and in this ministry. He's kept us from stumbling, and He'll lead us home.

As the psalmist said, **"I will run the course of Your commandments, for You shall enlarge my heart."**

Make a commitment to God, and as that commitment runs its course in you, God will enlarge *your strength, your vision, your mind - and most of all your heart.*

I grew up around church leaders who soured over time. They didn't respond well to the rigors of ministry **and ended up with *closed minds and small hearts.***

But if we let God's commandments run their course in us, **God promises to create *open minds and big hearts.*** I'm asking God to make room in my heart for *new people to love, and new visions to pursue, and new thoughts to contemplate, and new directions to take, and new technologies to use, and new methods to employ, and new generations to reach...* I want to keep growing in my faith and in my usefulness.

In the Revelation, Jesus writes seven letters to seven churches, and the most encouraging **letter is to Philadelphia - called, "The Church of the Open Door."**

For Jesus says, **"I have set before you an open door, and no one can shut it; for you have a little strength, have kept My word, and have not denied My name."** God opened a door of opportunity no one could shut.

Over the last two years, the coronavirus has caused churches to *lock down* and *close up*. Today, let's pray for ways to *open up* - *our doors, our arms, our hearts*.

And notice, the fact the Church of Philadelphia had just "a little strength" didn't disqualify them from the opportunities God had for them. Jesus opens doors not for churches who have lots of people, or money, or talent, but for churches that keep His Word and honor His name. And this is CC's forte - **we keep His Word!**

This is what so excites me about our future!

Jesus will go before us and open doors. He'll create opportunities. He'll cut paths where there were none.

Let *your commitments* and *God's promises* run their course. Create godly grooves in your life and ministry.

Log in a decade or two of faithfulness. Lay down some obedience. Remember fruitfulness takes time, yet in the end, godly grooves produce large hearts and open doors. ***They'll make your ministry groovy!***