

What is a Senior Pastor?

Rich Nathan

January 17, 2021

Transition Celebration: Commissioning of Eric and Julia Pickerill

1 Corinthians 4:1-2; 1 Peter 5:1-4

We're celebrating this weekend the formal hand-off of the Senior Pastor role of Vineyard Columbus from me to Eric and Julia Pickerill. There are so many wonderful things that I could say about Eric and Julia Pickerill. I love their personal warmth, their noticing of people other than themselves. I love their tender heartedness. I love their love for Jesus. They are wholeheartedly in love with Jesus. But they're not just the kind of people who love Jesus and hate people, they love this church! I love their love for Vineyard Columbus! I love their honor of this church and of our history. I love their love of Marlene and me.

But they're not just people who love the thing they're a part of and think that the church they pastor is the end all and be all of God's plan in the world. I love Eric and Julia's love for the whole church. They have a broad and ecumenical heart. But they're not just caught up in ministry. I love their love for each other. They have a great marriage. They support each other. I love their love for their children. I love their depth of spirituality. These are folks who run deep in the Lord. They know God. They listen to him.

I love the fact that they're not weird people. They have wisdom and balance. I've seen that repeatedly in their decision making over the years. I could go on and on with the qualities that I love about Eric and Julia. I've written about this and spoken at length regarding their personal qualities. You can check out my prior comments at RichNathan.org. (Rich would like these two links dropped in the chat.)

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www.RichNathan.org/articles

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<https://vineyardcolumbus.org/senior-leadership-transition>

I've also spoken and written extensively regarding the process that we used here at Vineyard Columbus in discerning that Eric and Julia were to be our next Senior Pastors. It was a Spirit-led process. Our leadership team waited on the Lord. We fasted and prayed. I took a five-day silent retreat just to be with God and pray over this decision. Our leadership team, made up of our Church Council and our Pastoral Advisory Team unanimously confirmed Eric and Julia after seeking outside counsel from many different

sources. I've had an opportunity to watch Eric and Julia in action and close up over the last couple of years as we went through the transition. Suffice it to say that our leaders did not make a hasty decision in choosing Eric and Julia. We have been very careful in our decision. We believe – and I believe – that Eric and Julia are an incredible gift to us from the Lord. I believe that we here at Vineyard Columbus are the recipients of an unusual amount of grace from our Father in Heaven. There are so many churches that I'm aware of that have gone through wrenching leadership transition processes after a long pastorate. It is so merciful of God to us to allow us to find our future pastors internally – leaders who are children of the church, leaders who are steeped in our values, they are soaked in our DNA while still having fresh vision from the Spirit for our future. This is a grace, brothers and sisters. We get to follow leaders who know us. They know our history and are gifted to lead us into the future.

But I'm not going to spend this service listing all of Eric and Julia's wonderful qualities or the process we used to choose them. Instead, I want to give a word to Eric and Julia about the role they are assuming. I'm going to speak as an older brother to my younger brother and younger sister. You, dear friends, are in a very real sense listening in, you're overhearing a message that I'm aiming at Eric and Julia.

The things I'm sharing with you, Eric and Julia, are nothing new to you. I know that you know these things. You would not have been chosen if you didn't know these things. But I want to share these things with you by way of reminder. As I've often said, leaders are people who repeat themselves. Brothers and sisters, before you listen in on this message to Eric and Julia, let's pray.

Eric and Julia, again, I share all of this with you by way of reminder. There's so much that can be said about the role you're stepping into. But, I wanted to share with you the way I've thought about being the Senior Pastor. And just so that you can remember this, I'm going to use a helpful mnemonic device. I've boiled it down into three points all starting with the letter "S" because I don't have much time today. How should you think about yourselves in your new role? One of the ways that you ought to think about yourselves is that you are stewards.

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A Senior Pastor is a steward

Slide 1 Corinthians 4:1-2 ESV

This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found faithful.

What is a steward? A steward is a trustee and dispenser of someone else's goods. They are accountable to the owner for the care and distribution of those goods. So, Eric and Julia, what exactly are you stewards of as you step into this role as our Senior Pastors?

Well, the Apostle Paul tells us first of all that you are stewards of the mysteries of God.

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Stewards of God's mysteries

Slide 1 Corinthians 4:1 ESV

This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.

The mysteries of God are not some esoteric thing that only enlightened initiates with tremendous prophetic insight can lay hold of. In Scripture, God's mysteries are God's open secrets. God's mysteries are things that we can't know by our natural wisdom or our scientific investigation. God's mysteries are things that God had to choose to disclose. When we're talking about your stewardship, Eric and Julia, first of all, you are stewards of God's self-revelation found in the Scriptures.

In a very real sense, every Christian is a steward. Jesus tells us this in the parable of the talents. Every Christian is a steward of all that God has given us. We're stewards of our gifts. We're stewards of our professional opportunities. We're stewards of our wealth. All that we have, all that we manage is not simply to be managed as we choose or wasted on ourselves. "You know, I always wanted to spend my retirement with a jet ski that I can ride up to my beach house in." Or my dream when Marlene and I retire is for us to drive his and hers Mercedes E Class. A Christian is a steward. Every Christian ought to ask the question: what does the Lord want me to do with what I have? What does God want me to do with the job he's given me? What does he want me to do with the house he's given me? What does God want me to do with the money he's given me? What does God want me to do with the gifts and talents he's given me?

Every Christian is a steward, but Christian pastors are in a unique way called to be stewards. As the Apostle said:

Slide Titus 1:7a

For an overseer, as God's steward, must be above reproach.

A person overseeing a church is uniquely God's steward. Eric and Julia, this title of steward ought to be a great relief to you. When I think about being a steward, I think: What a relief to exchange my heavy yoke for Jesus' light yoke. Because, you see, as stewards you don't have to be brilliantly original. Your calling is not to come up with an innovative, creative approach to people's fundamental questions in life.

We happen to live in a time in history that celebrates innovation. There are over 60,000 titles on Amazon about how to become more innovative or creative, how to become more state-of-the-art, more cutting edge. There are 3,000 titles aimed at Christian

leaders about becoming more innovative and increasing your creativity quotient. Every Christian conference aimed at leaders is all about becoming an innovative leader. That's a lot of pressure! Praise God, that yoke doesn't come from your Lord Jesus Christ, Eric and Julia! Jesus gives you a much lighter yoke. He's simply asking you to be stewards.

What people need to hear from you week in and week out are not your own brilliant ideas or your latest thoughts. What people need to hear is God's voice louder than your voice. I'm old enough to have lived through dozens of psychological and philosophical and political fads over the last 30+ years and I can tell you, Eric and Julia, that our ideas don't last!

The great Old Testament prophet, Isaiah, said 2,700 years ago:

Slide Isaiah 40:6-8

⁶A voice says, "Cry out."
And I said, "What shall I cry?"

"All people are like grass,
and all their faithfulness is like the flowers of the field.

⁷The grass withers and the flowers fall,
because the breath of the LORD blows on them.
Surely the people are grass.

⁸The grass withers and the flowers fall,
but the word of our God endures forever."

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Stewards of God's Word

God's Word is always relevant. We don't have to make it relevant. The hard job of preaching that you're stepping into more and more, is to demonstrate the Scripture's relevance. Your calling as a steward is not to be brilliantly creative or to be spectacularly innovative. Rather, as the Apostle Paul puts it:

Slide 1 Corinthians 4:2 ESV

Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found faithful.

You're called to be faithful to the Word of God. The older Apostle Paul said to the younger pastor Timothy to guard what is being entrusted to you.

Slide 1 Timothy 6:20

²⁰Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to your care. Turn away from godless chatter and the opposing ideas of what is falsely called knowledge,

And in 2 Timothy:

Slide 2 Timothy 1:13-14

¹³ What you heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching, with faith and love in Christ Jesus. ¹⁴ Guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you—guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us.

We live in a time where the church in America is experiencing a tsunami of false teaching and conspiracy theories and millions of people are unsettled regarding what truth is. I want to say to you, Eric and Julia, guard the good deposit! Don't tamper with God's Word. Don't twist it to make it say what it doesn't say. Don't subtract from it, even when it contradicts some modern prejudice or a powerful pressure group in the church. Don't add to it by filling it out with the latest and greatest new theory of human behavior. **Preach** God's Word and **be faithful** to it. Open up the Scriptures week after week and let people hear a different voice than they've been listening to.

All week long, they've been hearing the voice of the world. Let them come to church and hear the voice of God! Let them hear thoughts that are higher than our thoughts. Let them hear wisdom deeper than our wisdom. Let them hear warnings more frightening than lightning bolts and comfort more soothing than the most expensive balm. As faithful stewards, let the church hear words of correction and rebuke served up piping hot in God's kitchen and words of encouragement and hope fresh from God's everlasting stream.

Eric and Julia, as faithful stewards of God's Word, don't just ride your favorite hobby horses or teach your favorite passages of Scripture. Imitate the Apostle Paul who told the Ephesian believers:

Slide Acts 20:27

²⁷ For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God.

Or in the more familiar words of the King James,

Slide Acts 20:27 KJV

²⁷ For I have not shunned to declare unto you all the counsel of God.

You know, it's not possible to offer people God's eternal Word unless that Word is in you. Unless you both immerse yourselves in God's Word, study it, swim in it, drink it in, memorize it. Eleanor Mumford, who along with her husband, John, are the International Directors of the Vineyard Movement. Last week, Eleanor quoted a line from Charles Spurgeon regarding Marlene. I want to fill out that quote from Charles Spurgeon, the great 19th century Baptist pastor. Spurgeon said:

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It is blessed to eat into the very soul of the Bible until, at last, you come to talk in Scriptural language, and your spirit is flavoured with the words of the Lord, so that your blood is Bibline and the very essence of the Bible flows from you.

Not only are you stewards of the Scriptures, Eric and Julia, I say by way of reminder to you. You are as this church's senior pastors:

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Stewards of God's people

The church is not owned by us pastors. But as the Apostle Paul said in Acts:

Slide Acts 20:28

²⁸ Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.

The church is owned by the Lord. I have never called Vineyard Columbus my church. I've never looked out and said, "my people". I've never called pastoral ministry my ministry. The church belongs to God. This ministry belongs to the Lord. He purchased it at the cost of his own blood. What it means that the church belongs to Jesus and that he's the head of the church basically is that you never make a major decision that will affect the future of the church without seeking the Lord first.

The Lord gives us lots of freedom to make the little decisions of life with biblical wisdom. You know, you have the freedom to decorate the church building as you choose – though lots of people will almost certainly tell you what they don't like. You have the freedom to make lots of small decisions with biblical wisdom. But regarding the big things, major directional changes, major staff hiring, major new missions or ministries or opening up a new campus – you need the cloud and the fire. You need to hear from God and know that you know that you've heard from God. Wait on the Lord! Wait for God to speak and lead. Wait for God's timing.

I've said before, Eric and Julia, and I know that you know this. You'll never come up with a better idea than that of the Lord's. My biggest mistakes in ministry all involved in me believing that I had the mind of God before I did. I regret so much the Ishmaels that I conceived because I was impatient. I was like Abraham and Sarah and I didn't trust the fulfillment of God's promises. But I can tell you that every big decision that I made in the history of this church that turned out great was not because I was so smart. It was because I waited on the Lord and he provided. Not only the right wisdom, but he also provided the right timing. David says in the Psalms:

Slide Psalm 27:14

¹⁴ Wait for the LORD;
be strong and take heart

and wait for the LORD.

Eric and Julia, the Lord will take delight every time you seek him with your whole heart for wisdom regarding decisions you need to make for this church. He will give you what you need. He has been faithful to me and to Marlene and he will be faithful to the two of you.

So, you're stewards. That's the first S. I'll move more quickly through the other two. How else should you think about yourselves as senior pastors?

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A Senior Pastor is a sinner saved by the grace of God

I know you know this, Eric and Julia, but I say it by way of reminder, that greatest delusion, the greatest danger that anyone in your position could be in is to believe that because you now have this title of Senior Pastors you are somehow safe when the exact opposite, of course, is true. Eric and Julia, you have put yourselves in mortal danger by accepting this role! You're choosing to make yourselves targets as you've already seen. Targets of disgruntled people; targets of the enemy. The enemy knows that if you strike the shepherds the sheep will be scattered. We've seen it in church after church across America. The shepherd fell and the sheep were scattered! The second identity you need to have, Eric and Julia, at the very top of your awareness is "I am a sinner saved by grace".

In the last century, the famous Protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr famously said that "we need to remember there's only one Christian doctrine that can be proven empirically." There is really only one Christian doctrine that can be proved beyond a reasonable doubt and that is the doctrine of original sin. We are all born with a broken steering wheel. We're all born with the wheels of our car out of alignment. We all pull towards sin.

Put another way, we are like white shirts put in the wash with new red socks. We come out with every fiber of our beings soaked pink. We're like houses with leaky sewer pipes. The smell of sin is everywhere. There's a great danger when we assume a spiritual role of believing people's praise. But we have a greater danger of self-deception. We start thinking, "This original sin business isn't talking about me is it?" The Apostle John wrote nearly 2,000 years ago:

Slide 1 John 1:8

⁸ If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.

The older I get, the more confident I am in my lack of moral virtue apart from the grace of God. I have the fatal disease of sin and so do you, Eric and Julia. Because of that, we who assume the role of senior pastor have to make intentional choices about limiting

ourselves, limiting our power. There's only person in all of human history who can be entrusted with unlimited power and that is Jesus! The rest of us need limits on our power.

So, Eric and Julia, voluntarily **choose** to limit your power. Choose to limit what you receive financially. Limit what you will buy and what you will own and what you will drive. Be model givers in this church. Give more than a tithe. Put limits on your appetites and boundaries on your relationships! Limit how you make decisions. And give away power – real power – to other people, other teams.

And, by way of reminder, not because you don't know this because you do, I want to underline – never become a celebrity. It's not hard to become a celebrity in a megachurch. Reject celebrity status at every turn. We live in a culture that puts way more value on the individual than on the institution.

Eric and Julia, the people of God are way bigger than any single person. The church is always more important than any of its leaders. Avoid the temptation to slap your name or your photo on everything. People will pressure you to do that. You've got to get your name up there. You've got to get your photo out everywhere. The people I've always admired are people who built something bigger than themselves. Because you know, Eric and Julia, none of us are irreplaceable. There will come a time when you'll hold a service for your successors.

You are stewards. You are sinners saved only by the grace of God. The third and final thing is:

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A Senior Pastor is a shepherd

Slide 1 Peter 5:1-4

To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder and a witness of Christ's sufferings who also will share in the glory to be revealed: ² Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, watching over them—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve; ³ not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. ⁴ And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away.

Peter is not just an eyewitness of Christ's sufferings. He's not even just a proclaimer of the message of Jesus' suffering and death for the sins of the world. Peter is someone who said that pastor must be willing to walk in the footsteps of Christ's sufferings. As Jesus put it, a shepherd is not a hireling. A hireling runs away the moment there is trouble. A hireling says: I'm not paying the price of hanging in there for the sake of the sheep. This is just a job to me. I'm looking for the next greener field.

But, Eric and Julia, senior pastors should see themselves as shepherds. You know that part of the price that we're assuming is the price of opposition and suffering.

I don't know any significant Christian leader who hasn't faced incredible criticism in their ministries. Billy Graham's Crusades were picketed for decades by fundamentalists who passed out leaflets as people went to the Crusades. They claimed that Billy Graham was a gospel compromiser.

Rick Warren was subject to the most vicious attacks because his son suffered for years with depression and mental illness. He ultimately committed suicide. Hypercharismatic sect said that if Rick and his wife had just believed in healing, their son would not have taken his own life. People put out blogs after Matt's death saying karma had finally caught up with the Warrens.

There have been all kinds of blogs and Facebook posts against me. There was a neo-Nazi in town who put out a blog saying that I should have died in Auschwitz because I was bringing Jew theology into the church.

One huge comfort, Eric and Julia, when I've been criticized online or received angry emails and when our church was picketed on Cooper Road for over a year while you were experiencing the beauties of Amsterdam. One huge comfort was me celebrating the fact that better people than me suffered way more than I have ever been called to suffer. Now I have the privilege of joining their company. In the tiniest measure I have come to know fellowship with the sufferings of Christ. And you will have the privilege of joining the fellowship of sufferers now as well!

Senior pastors are shepherds. You're called to pay a price. You're called to hold the church near to your heart the way a shepherd would pick up and care for one of its own lambs.

Way back in the 16th century, Ignatius of Loyola founded the Jesuit order in the Roman Catholic Church. Ignatius said:

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Leaders must have great affection toward others, an affection that is coupled with a passion to see the other person run at full speed toward perfection.

Ignatius said leaders have to be characterized by two things. First, great affection for the person they are leading. And second, a passion to see that other person run at full speed toward perfection. That's what I think of, Eric and Julia, when I think about being a shepherd. Someone who has great affection for the church and every person in the church. And second, a passionate desire to see the church and each of the people running at full speed fulfilling God's purposes for them in Christ.

And Eric and Julia, this is the way that the Lord, who has called you into his service thinks about both of you. The Lord has great affection for you. And the Lord will help you to run at full speed in fulfilling this wonderful calling that he has for you.

Closing

Ask Eric and Julia to come up on the stage.

Church, stretch out your hands toward Eric and Julia wherever you are watching. We thank you Lord for the incredible legacy that Eric and Julia are inheriting today – a legacy of kingdom activity modelled to us by Vineyard’s founder, John Wimber.

We ask you, Lord, to connect Eric and Julia not only to our Vineyard legacy but connect them with the legacy of all your people.

- Fill them with faith like Abraham
- Be with them as you were with Joseph
- Make them worshippers like Miriam and Moses
- Fill them with the strength and courage of Joshua and Caleb
- Give them a heart of kindness like David and wisdom like Solomon
- Help them to rise to the hour like Esther and to lament in time of trial like Jeremiah
- Anoint them to heal like the apostle Peter and to preach the gospel like the apostle Paul
- Make them intimate with you like your friend, the apostle John

And above all, in everything, cause them to imitate your Son, Jesus, when he was on earth so they could say with complete integrity: *imitate me as I imitate Christ*.

To this church... will you put your prayers for Eric and Julia in the chat? Specifically...

- Will you commit yourself to pray for them, for their protection, for their marriage and family?
- Will you pray for the Lord to equip them with everything they need to lead the great church we call Vineyard Columbus?
- If you agree to pray for Eric and Julia, put “I will pray” in the chat

Will you join me and Marlene...

- Will you commit yourself to follow the leadership of Eric and Julia, to support them and make their leadership a joy and not a burden?
- If you agree to follow the leadership of Eric and Julia, put in the chat, “I will follow the leadership of Eric and Julia”

Eric and Julia, I turn over to you now the leadership of this church that I love... being confident of this:

I know whom I've believed and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I've committed unto him against that day.

2 Timothy 4:1-2, 5

In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: ² Preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction. ⁵ But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry.

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1. A Senior Pastor is a steward
 - a. Stewards of God's mysteries
 - b. Stewards of God's Word
 - c. Stewards of God's people
2. A Senior Pastor is a sinner saved by the grace of God
3. A Senior Pastor is a shepherd