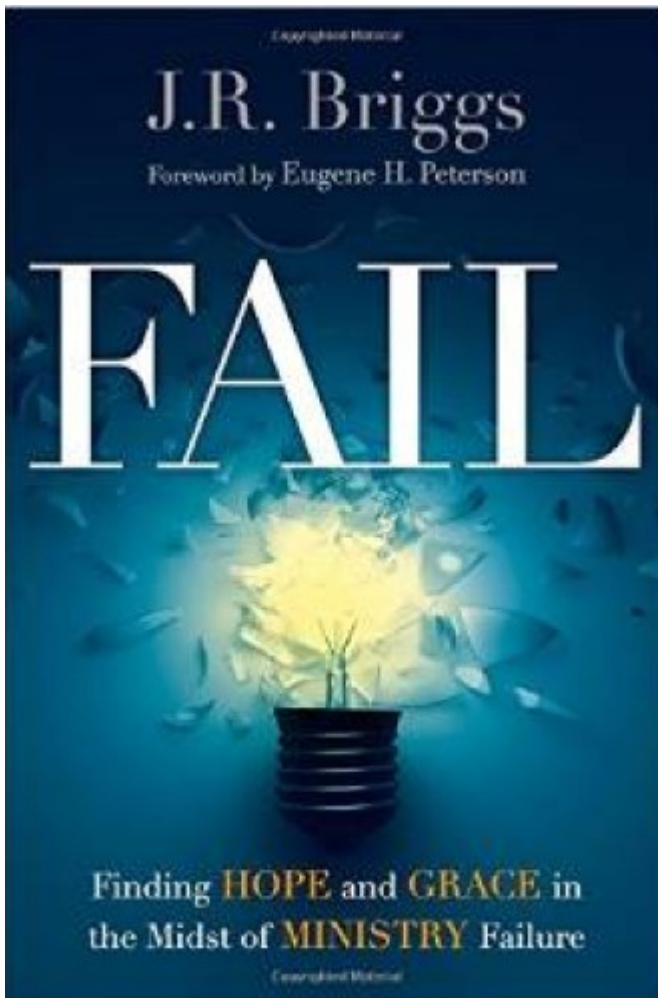


Fail, by J. R. Briggs

reviewed by [Jason Byassee](#) in the [October 15, 2014](#) issue

In Review



Fail

By J. R. Briggs
InterVarsity Press

I've wanted to get my hands on J. R. Briggs's book since the moment I saw it advertised. We pastors are barraged with glossy brochures hustling pricey confabs that promise to increase our ministry, our budget, our reputation, our salary, our

happiness, and our good looks. Just pay through the nose to attend the conference and copy the techniques of the handsome folks on the brochure. I'm exaggerating only a little.

The allure is strong because success is beautiful, in a way. More people and more giving means more impact for the kingdom, more influence for the gospel, more more more. But there has always been something odd about a faith with a man on a cross at its heart hustling for more. This book is no salve for mainline laziness criticizing evangelical creativity as one withers and the other grows. Its subjects are zealous, good-hearted pastors of all kinds who do things right and still meet our culture's most dreaded F-word.

Often in my time as a senior pastor I've found myself thinking, *So this is what failure feels like*. And I've not done anything that wrong. I was complaining about my years in Boone to a pastor from across the country who doesn't know me well. He asked the natural next question, "So how far down is your membership?" I said, well, we're actually up 15 percent. Why then do I feel like things are an inch from collapsing?

Briggs's *Fail* is about what he calls amoral failures, the ones not resulting from sleeping with the wrong person or stealing money or your life otherwise blowing up. Instead he writes about failure that stems from the leadership's betrayal, or folks not showing up or giving, or the church planting grant drying up. In Briggs's case, failure came at a megachurch in Philadelphia that hired him under false pretenses and then tried to forbid him from planting another church in the area. He was out on his own, without security or support or friendship nearby or the basic life accomplishments he expected, and he was wondering what went wrong. Precisely here is where the subtext of the expectation of success is so damning. Surely if we were doing things right, and God were good, our ministry would be succeeding, right?

The book's answer is a resounding no. Briggs sounds like a more conservative Christian than he is. (One failure he confesses is a lie he told: that he has an M.Div., when in fact he has a lesser degree.) His key sources here are Eugene Peterson, Henri Nouwen, and Dallas Willard. There's even a sighting of Barbara Brown Taylor. They help him argue that a pastor ought not be measured solely by the ABCs: attendance, buildings, and cash. We should add a D, for discipleship.

Still, things often go haywire. Briggs cites appalling statistics of pastors whose marriages fail (50 percent), who claim to have no close friends (70 percent), and

who say they were inadequately trained for the job (90 percent—seminaries take notice!). And he tells moving stories of pastors learning to pray like the psalmist when everything has come unglued (one prayed in public, “What the f— do you want with me, God?!”); of a pastor who realizes that the way out of the yo-yoing between thinking she’s a princess and believing that she’s valueless is to think like an heir whose value comes from her adopted Father; of pastors who push through shame and discover belovedness. There is real spiritual wisdom here, of the sort every pastor must find or do something else.

Briggs draws on a friend’s dissertation on pastors’ amoral failures and whether the pastors bounce back. The friend found that the pastors’ chances are much improved if they treat their church failures like a death. Grieving takes months. It comes in Elisabeth Kübler-Ross’s stages: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and eventual acceptance. Those who notice the grief would do best to act like the person is a bereaved spouse standing at the head of a casket. They should never say, “You’re young, you’ll find something better!”

Incredibly—or perhaps not so incredibly—one participant at an Epic Fail conference spoke of the closure of his church as being more painful than the loss of a child. Those who heal spend time in solitude, pray, read scripture, and (most interestingly to me) attend church again. In another denomination. In another zip code. But they return to God’s house not as a leader but as a participant. Folks who heal also spend significant time with non-Christians, whom they find less judgmental and more accepting than God’s own people. In short, they become human once more.

Sounds good, doesn’t it?

I think Briggs is on to something. The life of the Christian is a constant oscillation between cross and resurrection. For pastors, that back-and-forth is more fraught than for others. People cast their stuff on us, whether they hate us or worship us as heroes. We see the stories in the Bible and expect miracles, and when they don’t come we settle. We end up drawing on whatever charisma we may have instead of on what we know to be true about Jesus.

Jesus doesn’t want shopkeepers, as Peterson calls them: folks who sell wares and keep the customers happy. He wants witnesses to a peculiar God’s counterintuitively saving work—especially in America, where we pursue the idol of success. Briggs is right to notice that the moniker *loser* is the most crushing epithet our clever culture

has yet devised. But it's not what God wants. God wants faithfulness.

There is an irony in a book on failure becoming the next "it" book on the Christian publishing scene, just as there is to a conference called Epic Fail being marketed with QR codes. But it smells a lot more like Jesus than most of what's on offer out there.