



How to Prevent Ministry Burnout

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LEADERS & STAFF



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When Holiness Is Just a Show

When you tend holy fire daily, don't take the flames lightly

by Roberta Hestenes

I don't know a single minister who set out to become a casual, hypocritical, professional Christian doing all the right spiritual things but for all the wrong reasons. Yet Jesus warns us about this.

It happens. One day we wake up and realize we are just going through the motions.

By occupation, we are expected to speak easily and naturally of spiritual realities. We are called to practice our faith in public. Under the never-ending demands of ministry, our holy calling to worship, love, and serve God can gradually become corroded until our ministry becomes a career like any other profession, except that public religious performance is part of the job requirements.

When we deal repeatedly with spiritual things, we risk losing our sense of mystery and awe, of true worship, of inward as well as outward holiness. We can too easily become careless in our words and actions, presuming on the grace of God. We can become cynical in the things of God, including the way we think and behave toward fellow Christians.

It is possible to lead a worship service but neglect to worship, to sing hymns and songs of praise vigorously without directing our thoughts to God, to pray and speak of holy things without engaging our inmost being, to seek human approval rather than the approval of God. I know. I've done it.

Sometimes the sheer busyness and unrelenting schedule of church life require us to perform public acts of devotion more often than our soul can fully engage. Other times conflict and stress in ministry hollow us out until we feel like empty shells, hiding the reality of our own poverty and need. But even more sinister is when I see outward acts of devotion as good for my career.

About a year into my ministry in a new congregation, I realized that I was in real danger of becoming trapped by the desire to impress people rather than depend on God. I began worrying more about success than about glorifying God.

Sometimes our ambitions ambush us and we make choices to advance our success. A pastor friend confessed that for a period of years he did not pray at all except when it was his responsibility to do the pastoral prayer before the congregation on Sunday. Yet he wanted to be known as a man of prayer. Another refused to purge the rolls of absent members because he wanted to be known as the leader of a large successful church. A third shared the way her emotions went up and down depending on attendance and offerings, her real scorecard in ministry.

The underlying tension has to do with not only what we do but with why we do it. It involves the inner springs of motivation and desire, the condition of our heart before God. The psalmist cries out: “Search me, O God, and know my heart.”

God does and God knows. But do we know our own hearts?

His Commands Vs. Their Expectations

Again and again, in straightforward teaching and in parables that prick the conscience, Jesus calls us to be careful about play-acting our public spirituality or showing off acts of visible piety for the wrong reasons. God wants to bless us and to reward us for faithful service. Yet we cheat ourselves out of God’s reward when we seek human applause or personal gratification rather than the approval of God.

Jesus warns us in the Sermon on the Mount against displaying two kinds of religiosity: impressive piety (Matt. 6) and impressive power (Matt. 7). Performance-oriented piety cares more about what things look like than what is true. We use religious words to win success and approval from people rather than from God. The false spirituality of power is exposed in the judgment of Jesus on those who claim many mighty works in the Lord’s name: “Depart from me; I never knew you.” Our motivation, character, and actions need to line up with integrity to our intimate relationship with Christ.

There is inevitable tension between the words of Jesus and the expectations of those we serve in our public leadership. Still, secret prayer is the prayer of the heart toward God without any thought to impressing other audiences. Jesus tells us that when we give, we are to do it in secret so that our Father who sees the secrets of the heart will reward us. Fundraising consultants tell us that it is very important to open a building campaign by announcing the amount of our own pledge. “This is the way to set an example,” the consultant said to me. “This is real leadership; your people need to see you leading the way.”

How do we hold the tensions together with integrity?

The Pedestal Problem

I have struggled in four major areas:

1. Handling the pedestal, or unrealistic expectations
2. Using sacred speech honestly
3. Avoiding cynicism or despair in relationships with difficult people
4. Relying on power or control in order to “succeed”

On the pedestal it is easy to pretend to be what we are not. We are more spiritual on the outside than on the inside. In our speaking, even the holiest of words become empty when used carelessly or too glibly. In our relationships, disappointment or failure can

lead us to lose hope in God's power to change people and situations. Even as we speak of "servanthood," we may be seeking ways to control the actions of others.

The problem of the pedestal occurs when the leader is treated as someone "more spiritual" than others by virtue of office or position. For several years I had a woman who asked me to pray because she said my prayers got closer to the ear of God than hers did. This becomes pernicious if the leader is seduced into believing or pretending this. Pedestals can become a mutual conspiracy between pastor and people. Search committees write "messiah-like" job descriptions and both pastor and people agree this is impossible, while actually expecting perfection of each other.

Experience clearly proves that neither pastor nor people can meet the standards. Then both have a decision to make. Do we walk together in humility, repentance, forgiveness, and holiness, or not? Can leadership be exercised in humility without the need for the pedestal? Can we trust God with our reputation and any results?

Some people are so eager to dethrone their leader that they start searching for someone more worthy to occupy the perch before the leader is even gone (see Num. 14:1-4). Leaders may choose to cover up problems or intensify their public religiosity to hide the reality that both salvation and sanctification really do come only from the grace and power of God.

Like the disciples of old, we have very little to feed the multitudes of hungry people or even our own hungry souls. Only God can take what little we have and multiply it to his glory. True Christian community is not nourished by pretense but is rooted in the reality of acknowledging our human weakness and the reality of the power of God to restore, strengthen, and transform us into his glorious image, one stage at a time. I've seen God prove his grace and power again and again. He can be trusted.

Three Things to Do in Secret

I have found three "habits of the heart" that help strengthen my desire and ability to maintain inner integrity while engaged in public ministry.

The first is to commit myself to a small group that practices prayer and accountability. I have been in one such group with fellow pastors for more than twenty years. It has made an enormous difference in my Christian life. We all need a place to rejoice and weep, to confess and experience God's forgiveness, to share the stories of the hard and joyous journey of discipleship, to pray and be prayed for.

A small group can provide this. To be truly known and loved in one circle can help us to be transparent, holy, and loving in others. Telling the truth with those who love you can help you live the truth with others.

Second is to practice a discipline of secret service and secret giving. So much of what we do in our congregations is visible to someone. I believe God honors quiet service, performed invisibly and unnoticed, such as giving to someone in need, especially to the poor and lost. It is important not to talk about it. If everything we give shows up on our

income tax return, every good deed as a sermon illustration, then perhaps, as Jesus suggests, we already have all the reward we are ever going to get!

A third habit of the heart is to memorize 1 Corinthians 13 and pray it into mind, heart, and life regularly, along with the Lord's Prayer, as part of a regular prayer discipline. I have found it especially helpful to pray this love chapter, verse by verse and phrase by phrase, in my marriage and family, in prayer for my enemies and for those whom I have trouble loving or who may have trouble loving me. It is a long journey to truly learn how to love others as God loves us. God is faithful and sustains us on the journey.

It is no accident, I believe, that the temptation stories of Jesus follow his baptism and entrance into public ministry. Led by the Spirit into the wilderness, Jesus struggled with issues of identity, kingdoms, power, and glory. So do we. He met these temptations through Scripture and reliance on the power of God. So must we.

I find these spiritual disciplines to be helpful antidotes to the poisons that can seep into professional Christian service. Jesus summed it up very simply: "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness." Then everything else will fall into its rightful place.

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When Your Efforts Seem Meaningless

How will I respond when my failures outnumber my successes?

by James L. Wilson

I don't know if it was passing age forty or knowing that my public ministry was half over. Whichever it was, I found myself wading into retrospection. *Am I making a difference? How am I doing at reaching my goals and fulfilling my dreams?*

I pushed the keyboard aside, propped my feet on the desk, and began taking inventory. I made a mental checklist, noting accomplishments on one side and failures on the other side. *Does God really care about this stuff?* Rebuking myself, I sat upright and got back to work.

Try as I might, I couldn't shake the questions, so I decided to turn to my "brain trust" for counsel. Once a month, three retired ministers, who are now members of my congregation, meet with me to discuss ministry in general and our church in particular. I call them "the brain trust" because all three have earned doctorates.

I put two questions on the agenda: What are your greatest accomplishments? What are your biggest regrets in ministry?

When the two older ministers spoke, I could tell they had made peace with both sides of their ledgers long ago. Not so with Fenton, who is freshly retired. Fenton sold insurance until age thirty-seven, then he quit the business and went to seminary. Three years later he launched Tarzana Baptist Chapel with five people.

"I expected it to grow to a church of 300 or 400 in a couple of years," Fenton said. He planned to use his church to build a network of satellite churches throughout the Los Angeles Basin. It didn't turn out that way. Tarzana Baptist Chapel officially organized as a church five years later with 135 members. It never grew any larger; today it has fewer than twenty-five members.

"I once complained that we'd done all the church growth stuff, but the church wasn't as big as it ought to be," Fenton said. "God reminded me that he never promised me a big church." But Fenton had promised himself one. With a doctorate in church growth, Fenton knew the principles, and he applied them. But the church wasn't growing. Why?

Fenton had always thought that if a guy couldn't grow a church he was "either incompetent or carnal." Fenton didn't want to consider himself either.

The work was tough. Tarzana Church seemed unable to close the back door on exiting members. For example, Fenton had poured hours into John, an aspiring movie director from Australia, and brought him to faith in Christ. Just when Fenton was seeing fruit in John's life, the director left Tarzana to go to a church with a drama program and a theater.

The cycle repeated itself in other new members, Fenton said. “I’d do all the hard work of cultivating, witnessing, and baptizing the converts only to lose them to the great choirs, youth groups, and drama programs of larger churches. “It was frustrating.” Fenton had a faraway look as he told the story.

Looking for Success in All the Wrong Places

If Fenton didn’t lose converts to a church down the road, the transient nature of Los Angeles claimed them. One year 51 of the church’s 110 members moved away. That year, Fenton crashed. “It was almost like a death,” Fenton said. “The church was never the same again.”

As hard as that year was, he hadn’t hit bottom yet. Fenton told how Judy, a nurse, was addicted to prescription drugs, cocaine, and heroin. Then she came to Christ, and God delivered Judy from her addictions almost the instant he saved her. Fenton baptized Judy, and she was doing well.

Then Judy simply disappeared. Fenton’s efforts to contact her were futile. “I still don’t know whether she’s dead or alive,” Fenton said. Judy’s memory still haunts him. “I should have spotted this,” he said. “I should have been more cautious and warned her about the danger of a relapse. I should have paid more attention to her.”

Fenton was a gifted evangelist but a struggling shepherd. Because of these apparent failures, he began losing sight of the value of his work. Fenton despaired that his church would ever grow. Eventually, he resigned. “For Tarzana to grow it needs a new vision,” he told the congregation. “I’ve pleaded with God and prayed, and that’s all I’ve heard from him. Someone else will have to lead you to the place you should go.”

Fenton left the church to become a full-time missionary to the Jewish population of the area. He had a heart to win Jews to Christ. His plan was to focus on personal evangelism and to awaken churches to the needs of the Jews. However, he had a hard time motivating pastors to follow up on the Jews he introduced to the Messiah, and his speaking engagements at churches were too few to make a lasting impact.

The night of my meeting with the brain trust, Fenton stopped short of saying he regretted going into the ministry, but he gave the strong impression that he had mixed emotions about whether he had fulfilled his calling. We didn’t talk again for months, and I continued to ponder the questions that drove Fenton from the pastorate. I wondered, *Am I fulfilling my calling? How can I know I’m making a difference when the evidence is scant? If I don’t find answers to these questions, will I surrender to despondency?*

Despondency is that sense of uselessness that says, “I’m not accomplishing what I was called to.” Despondency questions one’s purpose when confirmation is in short supply. Despondency looks at the clock, and wonders if the time allotted for this portion of the test has run out, and deep down hopes that it has because a passing grade seems so unlikely. Despondency grows cynical, sighs, and resigns.

Footsteps Worth Following

We were returning home from a church growth conference. Fenton was driving. Chaplain Scott Sterling, one of Fenton's converts who had gone into the ministry, rode beside him. I relaxed in the back seat, eavesdropping. For thirty minutes or so, they discussed the "good old days" at Tarzana and some of the people who had surrendered their lives to the ministry.

I interrupted their conversation. "Fenton, do you remember our brain trust meeting a couple of months ago where you talked about your regrets in ministry?"

"Sure," Fenton said, "what about it?"

"Let me get this right. You pastored a church for ten years that produced a dozen ministers like Scott, here, and you question your effectiveness as a pastor?"

It got quiet. "In my opinion, you've had a wonderful, world-changing ministry," I said. "As your pastor, I want to bless you for the work you've done and release you from the guilt you carry because you never built a large church."

Despair had blinded Fenton to his ultimate value as a servant in the hands that God used, not to build large churches, but to build a missionary force of purposeful believers.

That night, I decided that I would fight the temptation to worry about my goals, accomplishments, failures and shortcomings. The conversation with other pastors had convinced me that my successes may not look like I expected. The lasting accomplishments may not match the criteria I've been looking at. If God called me, he will use me to do things he planned. Whether I fulfill my dreams or not, I can only pray that I will be faithful. Like Fenton was.

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When Your Personality Is a Problem

How traits that you're not even aware of can undermine your ministry.

by Doug Anderson

“They’re making me crazy,” Peter said. “They” referred to Peter’s board of elders and a few prominent members. He described the elders as lazy and uncommitted, and the chairman as controlling and incompetent.

Peter was very angry. “If they would listen to me, things would be better,” he insisted.

Peter was middle-aged and a skilled minister. Gifted to lead, Peter’s intelligence and creativity opened the door to many ministry opportunities. But soon, even the best ministry setting would turn sour. Peter was baffled by this pattern in his career. His own behavior at those times stumped him. He would suddenly become angry and controlling, and then just as quickly retreat into a subservient position. What brought him to me was the depression that settled in later, and with it occasional thoughts of suicide.

When I first met Peter, I noted that he could talk about his concerns in great detail, but he couldn’t connect his concerns with painful emotions. Mostly I saw and heard anger. Frequently his anger was greater than the situation called for. “Why do people always argue with me?” he asked. “Why can’t they see things the way I see them?”

Peter’s reactions also baffled the board and those who worked closely with him. On some occasions Peter spoke tersely and seemed to distance himself from others. Sometimes he would conspicuously acquiesce to their expectations. This, too, had a distancing effect. Peter was unpredictable. He was sabotaging himself, but he couldn’t see it.

His story is not unusual. The issues may vary, but stories of ministers plagued by church conflicts are as common as Sundays. Over the past fifteen years, I have counseled dozens of ministers. Many lacked self-awareness. As a result, their unconscious needs and motivations expressed themselves in ways that undermined their relationships and ultimately their effectiveness in ministry.

Personality is formed in the earliest years of life. By the time we are three or four years old, our personality is in place for life. I often describe personality as the filter through which we experience life (take it in) and express life (communicate to others through word and behavior). The personality filter is formed in the context of the care giving we receive as a child. Much of one’s personality is tucked away in the unconscious.

Most of us have a colleague or two who seem oblivious to some of the actions or reactions that harm their work. We all have some traits or idiosyncrasies that cause problems for us. For that reason it is vital for ministers to pursue healthy self-awareness. What they don’t know about themselves—or more accurately, what they haven’t exposed to conscious thought—may undermine their ministry.

Ministers come in a smorgasbord of personality types. My experience suggests, however, that certain styles are common to clergy: the grandiose personality, the perfectionistic personality, and the depressive personality.

The Grandiose Personality

The grandiose personality reveals itself in arrogance and entitlement. The person with this style is unable to step into the world of others because of the need to preserve an enlarged sense of self.

The most grievous cost of a narcissistic orientation is the stunted capacity to love. This is dreadful for parishioners. Their phone calls and questions are considered disruptive and critical. The grandiose minister unconsciously reflects a disdain for detractors. Parishioners leave an encounter with a grandiose pastor feeling small, incompetent, and insignificant. Those who do support the minister mirror their leader's values.

The grandiose personality replaces substance with image. The mask the minister shows to the world "becomes more vivid and dependable than one's actual person," says Karen McWilliams. The grandiose person considers image everything. Under this mask, however, is someone who feels fraudulent and unlovable.

Some time ago Sharon came to me for therapy because of interpersonal conflicts. She talked about a time she worked on a community worship service with several other ministers. She joined the group after it had met two times. She said the other members, though willing to engage in dialogue, did not appropriately respond to her ideas. "I can't understand why they didn't want my input," she said. Sharon became angry and alienated herself from the others. This was her pattern. It had been as long as she could remember.

Sharon's parents had perceived her unplanned birth as disruptive. When Sharon needed praise and attention, she got criticism and dismissal. In school, Sharon was a competent student. She won awards for academic accomplishment, and her parents began to see her as a badge of honor. But because she had felt unimportant early in her life, Sharon felt empty. To compensate, she developed a grandiose approach to life. It kept her pain at bay. But Sharon was unaware of the damage such an approach was having on herself and her church.

As Sharon became more aware of how her character had developed, she was able to free herself from the effects. She discovered awareness provides the potential for choice. Her grandiosity still lingers, but she now admits it and frequently chooses to go against her natural tendencies.

The Perfectionistic Personality

Technological societies breed a personality that's organized around thinking and doing. Value is placed upon rationality and logic and "can-do" pragmatism.

Perfectionistic ministers can talk and think about feelings, but they go to extreme lengths to avoid feeling their feelings.

Anger is the exception. Anger in the form of righteous indignation is tolerated—even admired—if it is seen as reasonable. But if indignation is consistently directed toward people in the pews, the ministry is in danger. Perfectionistic ministers moralize. They need everything to be regulated and structured. They lean toward legalism. This is not only the territory of fundamentalist and conservative ministers. The moderate or liberal minister can equally be a list-lover. It's just a different list.

Offshoots of this personality type are the “workaholic” and the “Type-A Personality.” While highly effective, perfectionistic pastors frequently deny themselves adequate release and recreation.

Jerry had been perfectionistic as long as he could remember. Nothing he did as a child was good enough. His family was deeply religious but rather stoic. Emotions were denied or held at bay while precise thinking and appropriate behavior were valued. His mother was moralistic and his father reserved and authoritarian. Jerry never seemed able to think and act as well as his father and mother wanted him to.

This is the key dilemma for the child who may become perfectionistic. The parents expect the child to fulfill their own unfulfilled dreams and expectations. Meanwhile the child has great difficulty developing a healthy sense of himself outside the realm of pleasing his parents.

Jerry's perfectionism also involved his thought life. As a teenager, Jerry fretted that he could not stop intrusive sexual thoughts. As an adult, control of self became the main expression of Jerry's perfectionism. As McWilliams notes, “Paragons of virtue may have a paradoxical island of corruption. ... People who try excessively hard to be upright and responsible may be struggling against more powerful temptations toward self-indulgence than most of us face.” Jerry's way of coping was to try harder.

The impact on Jerry's parishioners was the notion that following Christ is about performance. Drivenness became the standard. Perfectionistic ministers have a tendency to produce perfectionistic churches. In such contexts, grace is delivered with a backhand. Jerry explained it this way: “Someone in my church said, ‘You tell us how much God loves us, but mostly all we hear about is how much we should be doing for God.’”

One minister described the frenzy of such churches: “When you cut off the head of a chicken it suddenly flies higher and appears to be more active than at any time in its entire life, but it is very dead.” Jerry and his church had that quality of frenzied activity and simultaneous deadness.

Theologically and relationally such people are in need of the experience of grace. However, because the personality is organized around thinking and doing, experiencing is a difficult process to enter.

Ministers caught in this personality style should explore their need for control—whether of themselves, others, or the church. When they risk getting beneath the frenzy

of their driven lives, they discover what Lee Eliason said in a sermon I heard years ago: “God is everywhere you are fleeing from.” The good news is that God has met the standard of perfection so we don’t have to.

In getting to know himself, Jerry has learned to relax a bit, and to relax his unrealistic standards for himself and his flock. “I’ve discovered grace isn’t about my doing, but rather, it’s about what God has already done for me,” he says.

The Depressive Personality

Dale came to me because he was feeling dull, unmotivated, and burned out. Our explorations revealed strong evidence of a depressive personality. Dale had what I would describe as a depleted sense of self.

Grief is normal when a person’s external world is diminished in some way. For the depressive personality, what is lost is part of the inner world. We mistakenly assume that grief is a form of depression, when a depressive response is more often the result of not grieving. This person gets trapped experiencing all of life through a depressive filter.

Anger turned against the self is often the culprit. Usually such individuals do not effectively express anger. Instead they feel guilt. One author writes: “Depressive people are agonizingly aware of every sin they have committed, every kindness they have neglected to extend, every selfish inclination that has crossed their mind.” Depressive people, if confronted by the police, would raise their hands and say, “I give up! What did I do?”

Losses in Dale’s life came early. Dale was adopted, then his adoptive parents divorced when he was seven. Dale was introduced to Christ as an adolescent. He attended a camp with a friend, and went forward the last night partly because he feared his friend would reject him if he didn’t. Dale’s faith was infused with a pervasive sense of guilt.

His years as a pastor have been painful. “I always felt like I was failing,” Dale said. Successes he attributed to luck, while even the smallest glitches he credited to himself. “I felt like it was my fault when things went wrong.” Dale believed he was responsible for driving away anyone who left his church or his life. He unconsciously held the conviction that he deserved to be rejected.

To keep distance from church members, Dale said, “I simply stopped returning phone calls.” That was easier than befriending people, only to feel rejected later.

Parishioners who want a meaningful connection with their pastor feel put off by a depressive minister. More problematic may be the minister’s tendency to seek assurances from people who approach him for help. Struggling with his own neediness, the depressive pastor has difficulty with emotional boundaries. Church leaders may find themselves feeling drained in their dealings with the pastor. Depressive attitudes are contagious.

Do the Lion Thing

My favorite line in *The Lion King* is Rafikki saying to Simba, “You don’t even know who you are.” What can be done about failure to recognize personality traits that are harming your work as a pastor? Here are my recommendations:

1. Identify your blind spots. These are aspects of the self that, when left outside the realm of awareness, will sabotage good ministry. Find out what they are and bring them into your consciousness. Be open to feedback from those who know you best. Ask your church leaders how they experience you. Ask several parishioners about their perceptions of you after listening to you preach or teach. Given the right opportunity, they will share what they see in you that you don’t—yet.

2. Get below the surface. The surface problem is usually not the real problem. When you commit to discovering your blind spots, you will begin to see the injuries that have underneath your awareness have guided your adult relationships and behaviors. Start bringing them to the surface. Don’t be so quick to fix the present symptom that you fail to address the cause. Don’t merely hack at the leaves; to deal with the tree you must strike at the root.

When dealing with the root problem is uncomfortable, remember Jesus’ words. He says, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.” He uses language that invites us to feel and express our fears and losses. Such awareness and expression results in comfort. The likelihood of unknowingly damaging ministry dwindles as a result.

3. Remember your message. Paul described ministry in a phrase: “We have this treasure in jars of clay.” Clay jars were the cheap, breakable, easily discarded dishes of the first century. God does not expect you to be without blemish. That’s the role of his Son. He is the treasure of grace. God wants you to be yourself, the vessel. He chooses to use broken people with a variety of personality styles to accomplish his purposes.

The core of ministry is the proclamation of grace by broken people.

The Restored Personality

Peter, the first pastor I mentioned, and I met together for several months. He made excellent use of therapy. He is now able to recognize and even appreciate the components of his personality. He has developed a greater sense of autonomy. His self-esteem is realistic and more stable.

The impact of Peter’s insights on his ministry came slowly. “People still saw my old patterns emerge at times,” said Peter. People also tended to interpret healthier functioning as the exception to the norm. But Peter felt better about life overall.

“A woman challenged me in a recent committee meeting,” Peter said. “I felt intense anger rising up in my throat. But before I lashed out at her, I was able to recognize my internal response and adjust my reply to fit the situation. The funny thing is—she was right.”

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When You Can't Cope Anymore

Lessons from Elijah.

by Skip Heitzig

Depression can sneak up on people as insidiously as November fog, chilling the heart and even sapping the will to get out of bed in the morning. Christians are not immune to depression. However, many Christians feel guilty and ashamed to talk about this issue, thinking that spiritual people should never feel depressed. But spiritual depression is a recurrent theme throughout Scripture. One example is the prophet Elijah who, despite his great faith, fell into depression, going from the mountaintop to the valley.

The Mountaintop

Elijah had experienced one astonishing miracle after another. God had sent ravens to feed him. Elijah, a widow, and her son were miraculously provided for during drought and famine. Elijah even raised the widow's son from the dead! Then Elijah called down fire from heaven while confronting a group of antagonistic idol-worshippers. As a result, there was a sweeping revival in the nation.

The Valley

The last thing we would expect is for Elijah to fall into depression, but he did. He spiraled downward until even suicidal thoughts were part of his dark episode. He prayed that he might die, and said, "It is enough! Now, Lord, take my life, for I am no better than my fathers" (1 Kings 19:4). Elijah's situation reveals several problems that can bring us down.

1. *He presumed the outcome.* Elijah presumed that everyone would repent, but things didn't turn out the way he planned. Can you relate? Have you looked forward to something, believing you had everything mapped out when suddenly things changed? If so, you know how disheartening it can be. The lesson for us is to guard against unrealistic expectations by remembering that God is sovereign, and we must never presume upon his perfect will.

2. *He focused on the problem.* In the wilderness, at the widow's house, and on Mount Carmel, Elijah focused on the power and greatness of his Lord. But Jezebel's murderous threats consumed him and overwhelmed his faith. In a panic, Elijah focused on the enemy's power to destroy him rather than on the power of God to deliver him.

3. *He focused on himself.* Elijah was in the depths of self-pity when he said, "I am no better than my fathers!" (1 Kings 19:4). Elijah's focus had shifted from the Lord to his circumstances, then from his circumstances to himself.

4. *He was physically exhausted.* Another reason we succumb to depression is sheer exhaustion. By the time Elijah got to Sinai, he was weak from fatigue.

The Prescriptions

Our loving heavenly Father provides the prescriptions to alleviate spiritual depression.

1. *Get some rest.* “As he lay and slept under a broom tree, suddenly an angel touched him, and said to him, ‘Arise and eat.’ ... So he ate and drank, and lay down again” (1 Kings 19:5-6). God’s plan to restore his servant Elijah was simple: rest and refreshment.

2. *Get a new focus.* Elijah believed that he was the only one in Israel who was faithful and spiritual. Elijah was in touch with his feelings, but he wasn’t in touch with reality. Things weren’t as bad as he thought, so God came to give Elijah a strong dose of reality.

3. *Have new expectations.* Once God had Elijah’s attention, he set out to readjust Elijah’s expectations. He told Elijah to go outside, then to watch as the Lord passed by. First, a strong wind tore into the mountains and broke the rocks in pieces. God was not in the wind. Next, an earthquake shook the mountain. God was not in the earthquake. A fire followed, but God was not in the fire. Finally Elijah heard “a still small voice” (1 Kings 19:11–12). That was God speaking. The Lord adjusted Elijah’s unrealistic expectations by coming to him as “a still small voice.” Elijah learned that God’s work is sometimes an inner work of the heart.

4. *Take obedient action.* When Elijah was up against the wall, God told him to get up and get moving. He said, “Go, return on your way to the Wilderness ... and when you arrive, anoint Hazael as king over Syria” (1 Kings 19:15). God wanted Elijah to take godly action based on obedience rather than giving way to inaction based on his emotions.

Many people believe that life’s pressures lead to depression. However, it’s how we handle those pressures that leads us either to depression or to victory. I pray that, if depression creeps in, you will follow God’s prescription of rest, refocusing, right expectations, and obedient actions.

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To reply, write Newsletter@LeadershipJournal.net.*

“Journey Through Spiritual Depression,” CHURCH LEADER’S NEWSLETTER, February 14, 2001.

When Power Tempts You

Forget money and sex. The real temptation is “king me.”

by Gary Sinclair

**The names have been changed.*

A neighboring pastor’s ministry collapsed. It was a slow, inward fall over a five-year period, with the blast at the end rather than the beginning. Jim was a gifted communicator, a man of vision brimming with potential. But he was slowly seduced by his power. His giftedness to lead was overtaken by a drive to control. There were warning signs that could have alerted him to his peril, but neither Jim nor his church recognized them.

Jim came to Englewood Community Church* with an impressive resume. He trained under one of the world’s premier pastors. The church that had plateaued began to grow again under Jim’s leadership. Leaders revamped some structures, added a contemporary worship service, and expanded the annual holiday music programs for which the church was known.

Newcomers and church stalwarts appreciated the energetic pastor’s tell-it-like-it-is preaching style. Jim led and completed a building campaign in his first three years. When Jim ran a meeting (which was most of the time), it was thoroughly planned. Each person understood his task before leaving for home. Englewood church, once aging and a little clunky, now operated like a well-oiled machine.

But few people realized what was happening behind that façade. Englewood’s pastor was being seduced.

Warning Signs

Englewood was a trusting church. Most members could remember only two pastors. Both had long tenures. One died in office and the other left for a prominent ministry opportunity at a time when most pastors would have retired. The church respected the office of pastor and generally gave those who held it freedom to innovate. That, combined with their joy at Jim’s early successes, might account for their failure to see the changes that soon occurred between Jim and the leaders. They did not note the following warning signs:

1. Shrinking accountability. The church’s board of deacons, according to the constitution, is the church’s spiritual authority, and the pastor is ultimately responsible to it. On those rare occasions when the board told Jim he should do a particular thing, he had—until the complaints arose from the youth department. Several members reported a discipline problem to the deacons. Youth pastor Scott wasn’t handling the problem to their liking, and dissension was spreading. The deacons wanted to meet with Scott, but Jim didn’t want his protégé brought before the board. “I’ll take care of it,” he told them.

He never did. No one on the board said anything more about it. After that, Jim began to ignore other board suggestions and sometimes vetoed their actions. Because everything was running smoothly, no one seemed to mind—not at first.

2. *Erosion of trust in others.* Another shift took place with the hiring of the new associate pastor. Jim was getting busier. From his perspective, Jim was simply keeping the ministry growing, but he agreed when the deacons said he needed some help. Perhaps they intended to retrieve some of their former responsibilities, but the plan evolved into hiring an associate pastor.

Jim offered to conduct the search himself. “After all, I know the kind of person we need,” Jim told the board. He soon hired a full-time ministerial staff member without the involvement of the personnel committee or a vote of the board.

Jim’s presence in church programs became more noticeable. He restructured the education program, then announced the changes to the leadership team. There was no doubt that he was a gifted leader, but his attitude began to reflect a deadly presupposition: “If I want it done right, I have to do it myself.”

It wasn’t that Jim didn’t trust others. He simply trusted himself more. He wanted to build his people into capable leaders, but he felt the weight of others’ mistakes. Jim thought he was being prudent by ensuring things didn’t fall apart. But most of his leaders began to think, *You don’t trust me.*

3. *Redefining loyalty.* Soon the emphasis was on the church projecting a polished image, a smooth-running operation led by a content, unified leadership team. This spirit caught on, and not many people were willing to fuss over something that might upset the morale. Most leaders determined their concerns were minor and said nothing. Those who spoke up found their objections unwelcome.

A few began to leave the church. Jim suggested that their exit was probably for their good and the good of the church, but as is often the case, their departures were more indicative of the disease than the cure. Loyalty and dissention were redefined. Loyalty came to mean agreement, not with Scripture or with the mission of the church, but with the pastor. Eventually Jim was surrounded by those who told him only what he wanted to hear. Those who questioned Jim’s leadership decisions were chastised for “complaining” and being “unsubmissive.”

Guarded by loyal followers, the pastor is insulated from fair criticisms of his ministry. He is not likely to see its oncoming collapse.

4. *Withdrawing from people.* This may be the most obvious warning sign, but since it usually develops later in the cycle, it’s often noticed too late to make a difference. For Jim it came near the end.

Jim became busier and more isolated. With such important decisions to make and so few people to trust, Jim worked alone. His leadership team did not bother him. The staff remained at a distance, turning to each other for prayer and support. While the associate staff and the deacons worked as a team, their camaraderie had little effect on the church

or on Jim. Jim had few meaningful relationships, and small accountability groups didn't fit into his packed schedule.

Jim's contact with fellow ministers dropped off. When exciting things were happening at Englewood, he readily told his peers about them. Later, Jim became increasingly critical of the church and the leaders. After the ministry collapsed, I wished that someone had talked to Jim. Perhaps we could have averted his resignation.

Jim left the church after all of his key relationships turned sour. He's in business now. I fear his new position is another fix for his power habit.

Smarter Moves

Most members of Englewood still wonder what happened. It's hard to explain how their pastor was seduced by the ugly mistress of power. "The deacons should have stopped that a long time ago," one member said.

Some pastors who are seduced by power have huge television empires. Others pastor churches of less than one hundred. Size isn't the definitive criterion.

Power-mongering is not to be interpreted as bold leadership, either. It has some of the same external characteristics, but the lust for power kills effective leadership. It cultivates mistrust and motivates staff members to rewriting their resumes. Eventually, it chases members away in search of new churches.

Wondering what we could do to avoid succumbing to the temptation, five leaders and I visited with the staff of a well established church with a solid reputation for godly leadership. The church has a dozen full-time pastors and a multi-million dollar budget. They agreed to let us sit in on their staff meeting, after which we met with individual associates to talk about their specific ministry areas.

The pastors, including the senior pastor, answered our questions with candor, sharing successes and failures. Though blessed with resources and influence, they modeled a form of servant leadership very different from what we might have expected in such a powerful ministry. I came away with several conclusions on safeguarding pastors from being seduced by power:

1. *We must humble ourselves through prayer.* We must constantly ask God to help me monitor my pride. It is only as I read God's Word and admit my fallenness before Him that I keep it all in perspective.
2. *We must remember we are servants.* We are called to lead, cast vision, challenge poor assumptions, teach the Word in everyday language, and help others see the big picture of what God could do in our fellowship. Sounds impressive, doesn't it?

While doing all that, we are commanded to serve people. Paul's reminder in Philippians 2 of Jesus' humility is a poignant picture of the attitude we must adopt. And 1 Peter 5:2-3 reminds us that we should be "eager to serve, not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock."

3. *We must be accountable to others.* Seek out a team of people similar in theology and vision but different in abilities, personalities, and life experiences. Let their diverse perspectives be refining influences on you. Ask your team members, or other leaders to let you know when you're getting pushy. You may not feel you're overstepping the boundaries of pastoral power, but others may. Remember, "Intention is one thing, perception is everything."

I try to have a private lunch with all of my key leaders each year. They do most of the talking, and I listen. This past year one of our deacons had a critical, but helpful suggestion. I began to work on it, then asked him later if he saw a change. Today, I'm a better pastor for it, and he knows that I value what he thinks.

4. *We must constantly give leadership away.* Gore Vidal reportedly said, "There is no human problem which could not be solved if people would simply do as I advise." Perhaps what makes power so seductive is its promise that we can minister more effectively without the conflicting visions or methods of others.

We get seduced by power when there are too many people relying on what we say, what we think, what we decide, and what we determine for the future. Like Moses learning to delegate, we must pass the baton of responsibility to capable others who will run races of their own.

The church we visited is developing a plan to replace its senior pastor in the next ten years. They want to do everything possible to assure their people that the church can be just as vibrant with someone else in the pulpit. It takes a confident servant leader to encourage his church to think that radically.

Power itself isn't evil. Power propels airplanes, lights cities, and wins wars. It also packs a charge that will destroy our ministries unless it's properly used.

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"Seduced by Power," LEADERSHIP, Fall 2001, Vol. 23, No. 4, Page 99

When You're Too Transparent

Amid personal crisis, I wanted my church to know the truth. Instead I said too much.

by Al Detter

Our elders' meeting was set for that evening, but after two police detectives visited my office in the morning, my news became our agenda. "My son was charged today," I told the elders. "He was involved in the fire that burned down the children's wing of the church."

The men were stunned as I told them everything. I felt from the expressions on their faces, their tears, and their consoling gestures that they supported me. After an hour, I left. The meeting continued until midnight.

I decided to take a ninety-day leave of absence. Before I did, I leveled with the congregation. On Sunday, my wife, Marie, and I stood in front of church and told people the news. So much had happened to us in recent years that there wasn't a lot of our tribulation the church didn't know. But the trials and the pledge I had made to myself to be open about those trials had taken its toll on my ministry. After twenty-two years as senior pastor of Grace Baptist Church, I wasn't sure that I would return from my unexpected time off.

The Losing Streak

On Valentine's Day five years earlier, I found the first Valentine's card I had ever given Marie. As I embraced her, I told her how grateful I was for our twenty-five years together, our four children, our parents who were all still living, and a ministry that had known many blessings and few problems.

I then said, "But, we won't arrive at the end of the next twenty-five years like we have these. Almost everything will change. Our parents will die, our children will leave home, and we will face hardships like we have never known."

The next day Marie and an associate pastor walked into my office. I saw the look in my wife's eyes. "Is it one of the children?"

"No," Marie said.

"My father?"

She nodded. "He was killed in a car crash—collided with a truck."

Dad's death was the first event in a six-year gauntlet. In May a woman stopped me in the worship center after a Wednesday night service. "A few of us have concerns about the contemporary service. We would like to meet with you." I had begun to see signs that not everyone was happy about the new service, although it was full every Sunday. I arranged a date to meet with the woman and her group.

I walked into a room of sixty people. One of them handed me a ten-page list documenting their people's "concerns." They began to speak, frequently punctuating the comments with "We love you pastor, but—" This was uncharted water for me.

Ninety people showed up for a second meeting in June.

In July, at a special business meeting, I sensed a tear in the fabric of our church. I tried to hold everyone together, but dozens of people in attendance that night never returned to our church. The front eventually grew quiet. By November, the elders, staff, and I felt we had survived the worship war. We had a truce on the issue of worship styles until the day the contemporary worship band resigned and went to another church.

If we were to move ahead, we had to put this crisis behind us. The church had to get healthy again. I felt the same way about myself. I hadn't expected personal grief would last so long. That plus church conflict emotionally drained me. I was hardly prepared for the next episode.

Another Crash

The doorbell rang at 6 A.M. "Two policemen want to see you," my daughter said, meeting me at the doorway of our bedroom. Marie looked out the window. Our oldest son's car was not there.

"We can't find any identification," one officer said, "but we believe your son Jason was in an accident. We need you to identify him in the emergency room."

I felt sick. "Is he alive?"

The officer looked down. "We don't have that information, but he was alive at the scene."

Jason was barely alive. He was also in a coma. After nineteen days, he opened one eye. We glimpsed a ray of hope. But the doctors told us our son had permanent brain damage. His recovery would come in baby steps, and he would never be fully restored. Marie and I prepared ourselves and the rest of the family for a new life centered around Jason. After five months in a rehabilitation hospital, Jason came home.

I was thankful my son was alive, but I couldn't get past our losses. With one tragedy after another, the grief was killing me. With the psalmist David, I could say, "I sink in the miry depths, where there is no foothold; I have come into the deep waters; the floods engulf me. I am worn out calling for help; my throat is parched; my eyes fail, looking for my God" (Ps. 69: 2-3).

I Open Up and They Shut Down

My staff and I attended a Willow Creek seminar during this period. Until this time, I mostly kept my feelings to myself. I didn't want the congregation to tire of endless stories of my family's struggles, so I was guarded in my sermons. But pastor Bill Hybels spoke with remarkable transparency about his personal therapeutic journey.

At a break during the conference, my staff and I talked about Bill's candor. We talked about our relationship as a team, how together we needed to venture into deeper community. I felt we forged an unofficial and mutual covenant to share our personal struggles, believing that would take us to a new level of intimacy and support. Hybels had connected effectively by sharing his struggles.

I began to open up to my staff and elders. They seemed genuinely concerned about my condition. I shared some of the depression I had battled since my son's accident, and my nagging sense of loss. Some of the staff shared their own struggles, but no one ventured as deeply into theirs as I did mine.

One Sunday I revealed my inward struggle with the congregation. During the first service, I had slugged my way through the sermon. I felt numb, emotionally shut down. Between services, I prayed for some infusion of strength. None came. I wanted to flee the platform, but there was no postponing the next service. Should I fake it or tell them the truth?

I decided to be honest. Words spilled from my mouth. "Church, you need to pray for me. My emotions have flat-lined this morning. I struggled through the first service, but I don't feel like doing it again. Will you pray that God will see me through?"

People still talk about that Sunday. Some say I endeared myself to them because they had never known a pastor to be so honest. Public transparency appeared to be my friend.

I began to reveal my struggles more frequently to staff members and elders. They cared, but there wasn't much they could do. I found my revelations had a short shelf life. Seldom did anyone follow up after our meetings and hallway conversations. Maybe people didn't know what to do or what to say. Eventually, I felt that no one cared for my soul. It was not their fault; I had put them in an awkward position.

Some leader closest to me began to question whether I was limping too badly to lead. They wondered about my emotional health because of this long-term stress. I sensed polite erosion of professional respect. Eventually the church seemed paralyzed on every front. Morale was sinking. Then we got another early morning phone call.

We're on Fire

"The church is on fire! You better get over there right away!" It was our church administrator shouting through the receiver. On the coldest day of winter, I sat in my car with the heater on full blast, watching the children's wing burn.

I met with the media all day, answering scores of questions. "Why would anyone set fire to a church?" "Is someone angry at the church?"

Detectives quizzed me. "Do you have any idea who might have started this fire?"

Marie and I wondered who had done this awful thing. Marie even checked our son's shoes after the early morning phone call. It had been snowing, and she wanted to see if he had been out. We were relieved that the shoes were dry. I forgot about our fleeting suspicion until the police appeared at our door seven months later.

What I Learned About Talking Too Much

The following Sunday morning, after telling the congregation about my son's involvement in the fire, we walked off the platform into exile. We felt cut off from everyone. Our dreams seemed like ashes, and my future ministry doubtful.

I couldn't hide the arson or Jason's accident, and everyone knew about the dissention in the church, but had I been too open about my despair? Had I betrayed myself by allowing my church, especially those closest to me, to see how hurt I was, how deep and lasting my grief? I sat with Leith Anderson, pastor of Wooddale Church in Eden Prairie, Minnesota, one afternoon, and discussed transparency.

"People want to know you're human, but not much more," he concluded.

I still aspire to authenticity, but I have learned some lessons from the pain of being too transparent:

1. *Transparency must have boundaries* in terms of depth and frequency. Too much transparency will have adverse effects, regardless of motivation. Candor, even with an inner circle, can erode confidence in a leader.
 2. *Need is no excuse for overexposure.* Some people have a great need to be open and to seek encouragement in troubled times. They should remember Hezekiah, who revealed everything in his house (2 Kings 20:13) and lived to regret it. I am now operating on a "need-to-know basis" rather than a "need-to-tell basis."
 3. *People talk.* A pastor is likely to hear from a third party what has been shared in private. Even those things told in a public setting, such as an elders meeting or a worship service, reveal amazing drift after two or three repeatings. These days I tell myself, "Your revelations may come back to haunt you. Heavy matters should be limited to a small circle of proven confidantes."
 4. *Wounded healers can get hurt twice.* All effective leaders experience pain sooner or later. That experience qualifies them to minister to wounded people. However, the wounded do not need to know the details of their pastor's pain. It is enough for them to know that pastors suffer, too. A therapist need not share the couch.
- Oswald Sanders wrote, "The crowd doesn't recognize a leader until he's gone; then they build a monument for him with the stones they threw at him in life."
- The too-transparent pastor may think he's sharing a monumental personal experience. Instead he may be only handing out stones that disillusioned congregants will turn against him.
5. *Pain can overshadow ministry.* During a prolonged period of pain, a pastor can struggle for balance between revelation and resolution. The congregation has a right to be suspect of their pastor's well-being when they hear many accounts of battles and few reports of victories.

Transparency is effective when the pastor who has survived the conflict can report how God worked to bring him and his family through the difficulty. Painful episodes become more uplifting given time, perspective, and the judicious choice of words.

6. *Recovery cannot be delegated.* It is a mistake to think that the congregation will nurse a hurting pastor back to health. A few will come to the pastor's aid, but not many will see his need. The struggling leader must take responsibility for his own well-being and seek support outside his church relationships.

Can We Trust You Again?

While my family and I were on leave, our elders were meeting without me. The board was split over my fitness to return. One member was adamant, saying, "Our pastor needs therapy, and so does his family. We need to set conditions for his return." When Marie and I were invited to the elders' meeting a month later, we learned the requirements. We were working through our family issues, but the elders' expectations were impossible to achieve.

We turned for help to a mediator, who was impartial. In several sessions, he encouraged people to say "the final 10 percent," the things they had held back, the really hard stuff. The most painful meeting was with the staff. One by one, leaders spoke about my shortcomings and mistakes. I scratched copious notes while dying inside. "If Al were to stay on as pastor, it would take a miracle," one associate said. Most of the staff were making contingency plans.

At the break, I pulled the consultant into another room. "This meeting is going downhill," I told him. "When we go back in there, I have to know whether or not they plan to follow me if I stay. I have to know if we still have a team."

I don't know what the consultant said to the staff, but the tone of the meeting changed in the second half. I left more hopeful.

In mid-December, I returned to the pulpit. One by one I met with the staff over the next couple of weeks. We reviewed the past few years. At the end of each session, I looked each person in the eye and said, "I make you a promise: if the winds of God do not blow through this church in the next ninety days, I will resign."

Miracle on 38th Street

The first Saturday of the new year, I was reading Genesis 32 for my devotions. The text came alive for me. As I read about Jacob's dreaded reunion with Esau, I laid before God own my fears about the future. I even dared, like Jacob, to demand God's blessing.

Late that night, I met with two leaders to pray for the services the next day. We pled with tears for our church. We sensed the presence of the Spirit of God.

On Sunday, people seemed unusually cheerful and upbeat. Attendance was up in both services. I felt better than I had in five years. Though we still had challenges ahead, a miracle had happened.

The miracle continues today, more than two years later. All but one of the staff has stayed, and the one who resigned remains active in the church. We've added a third service, and we're planning to relocate from our cramped three acres on West 38th Street to a spacious thirty-one acres.

Jason lives at home and is making progress. He walks slowly and with difficulty, continues therapy, and works two mornings per week. My younger son also lives at home. He is on probation and is fulfilling the legal obligations of his involvement in the fire.

During my leave of absence, I heard the story of a general who was severely wounded in battle. He told a captain to bring his coat. The captain was bewildered at the request. The general said, "The troops can see some blood, but they cannot see me hemorrhage."

I had shown my troops too much blood. Bandaged and healing, I have since learned that some of my wounds were self-inflicted. I haven't totally surrendered the value of transparency, but I am more careful about when, to whom, and how much I reveal.

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