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WHO YOU ARE IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN WHAT YOU DO

MINISTRY IS AN ADVENTURE. Even the most passive minister deals with risks and unforeseeable danger. At the same time, all ministers have the capacity to experience a remarkable, God-sized ministry. Whichever extreme you may see yourself in, or a combination of the two, you are on an adventure. This adventure is unlike anything else in the world.

Ministry continues to change dramatically. When I entered this adventure, it was easy compared to the challenges we face today. There have always been certain churches that operate like war zones. When you minister in a church in our generation, you are entering dangerous territory, not seasonally, but daily.

This is why it is important to know who you are. As the challenges escalate in number and intensify in debate, you must understand who you are.

CHALLENGES

The common layperson in your church has no idea of these challenges. No one understands these better than your colleagues in ministry. The size or location of your church does not exempt you from any of these contemporary challenges. Let me identify just a few of these unique challenges.

Carnal Christians

You would think the church of Corinth has become the model for the church today. Division, conflict, immorality, confusing theology, and majoring on the minors all serve as indicators of the correlation between the Corinthian church and the church of the 21st century. Taking the good news of Jesus to the world, personal holiness, and love seem to be forgotten commodities in most churches.

Yes, I believe we are experiencing some of the greatest outpourings of God upon some churches. However, at the same time, those churches are rare in our culture. Even those few churches deal with the carnality of Christians just like you do.

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I am amazed at the thousands of churches that dismiss their ministers or have their ministers leave under fire. The size and visibility of the church does not guarantee protection from this injustice. It is happening in churches of all sizes, located in all

places, and is going on with ministers everywhere. This is why you need to know who you are.

Dysfunctional Churches

Over time, carnal Christians create very dysfunctional churches. When ministers stoop into carnality, they may lead their church to become spiritually dysfunctional, creating chaos. If a church does not determine its daily practice and operation by the Bible, believing it to be the only source of authority, the church will become dysfunctional. When the church disconnects from biblical authority in belief and daily practice, chaos will occur.

Minister failure has contributed to creating these dysfunctional, carnal churches. Ministers fail morally when they cease to experience personal devotion before the Lord daily. When a minister goes through moral or ethical failure, usually the church is negatively influenced for decades.

The greatest protection you have from contributing to this unspiritual, carnal dysfunction, and to lead through it if you have inherited a church with it, is to know who you are.

High Expectations

Unreasonable expectations from God's people have placed ministers under a very unfair scrutiny. There have always been those who were not reasonable in their expectations of ministers, but today it is different. This escalating explosion has increased the danger zone for all of us. This is why you must know who you are.

As we navigate through the waters of high expectations, we do not need to contribute to it. We need to promise to do only what we can do and will do. Our motto needs to be: “*Under-promise, over-deliver.*” Do not promise to do things you will not do, but strive to over-deliver what you have promised you would do or you know you should do.

Flavors of Church

Walking into the church today is far different than the “one size fits all” culture of years gone by. When you minister in a church in this contemporary world, it is like walking into Baskin-Robbins trying to determine the kind of ice cream you desire. Men and the way they built their church in their culture have now taken over the nomenclature. This results in shallow questions from shallow Christians.

The common question among ministers today is, “What is your model?” From that point, they move into naming men and their categorical models. The Word of God and Jesus’ model seldom enter into the discussion. Why is this happening?

One of the great places I enjoy going when I am in Texas or Florida is Cold Stone Creamery. This ice cream phenomenon

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involves not only the basic flavor you desire, but also picking and choosing added substances or one of their customized wonders. It is a marvelous place to go.

Most Christians and many churches have theology that looks like the finished product of Cold Stone Creamery. It is composed of a little bit of this and a little bit of that, resulting in their personal theological wonder that would never make it if filtered through the Word of God. This is why you need to know who you are.

Technological Phenomenon

Technology has changed not only the world, but even the church. E-mail convenience, message boards, and websites have become disasters to ministers. Battle formulation and the attack strategy have been mobilized toward ministers, churches, and even denominations.

I believe technology has been given to us by God himself for the purpose of taking the good news of Jesus to the entire world. Technology does not exist to create church division, impair the reputation of ministers, formulate battle strategy, or cripple denominations, any more than technology was created to promote pornography. This is why you really need to know who you are. These are new discoveries for a carnal church. Our goal should always be to use the gift of technology to advance the gospel globally and build up fellow believers regionally and locally.

Human Tradition

In my 30 years of leading local churches, I have seen laypersons fight more for their human traditions than for biblical

truth. This has resulted in needless debate, breeding a culture of what I call “spiritual humanism.” Spiritual humanism occurs when we attempt to spiritualize “our way of doing things,” rather than doing what God says we should do according to the Bible, ensuring that the will of God is done in the church.

As a minister of the gospel, this can create turbulent air in any church, especially one that is led by a minister or a team of ministers who want to do things God’s way. You have to be personal, relational, understanding, wise, and genuine to deal with this detractor to growth.

Use wisdom concerning the issues and the timing of dealing with them or else you may become a victim of the guard. This serves as another reason to know who you are.

One of the great attributes of our church in Northwest Arkansas since the 1970s is that we have been a church committed to doing things God’s way. I am truly the under-shepherd, serving the ultimate Shepherd of our church, Jesus Christ. It is an amazing story and a wonderful testimony that a church can be built upon and by God’s Word anywhere.

WHO YOU ARE IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN WHAT YOU DO

This is a great principle that every minister must know. When you serve in this unique world called church, you will face each challenge listed above and even many more. As you face these challenges, the pressure is unimaginable. You face the pressure internally. Each of us loves to be liked by all people. This is an unrealistic expectation. Your goal should be to never let anyone

outside of your circle of love, regardless of their treatment toward you; but the pressure you face internally demands that you know who you are or else you will make one of the most tragic errors in ministry life. You will become more concerned about what you do than who you are. This creates a spiritual disorder within you that chokes the life of God and ministry out of you.

You also face the pressure externally. Heaped upon your own personal challenge is the pressure of others trying to conform you into their mold or desires. Your network, your association of churches, your conference peers, your human tradition, your church, or your denomination may serve as added pressure you will face from others. Their desires for you (which are many times filled with good intentions) or their unrealistic expectations of you can get you into doing things you do not want to do, do not have a passion to do, are not gifted to do, do not have time to do, or that God just does not want you to do. This will result in you feeling very unfulfilled, frustrated, and filled with anxiety you do not need. This has occurred and will continue to repeat itself when you forget that who you are is more important than what you do.

Regardless of the internal and external pressures upon you, please remember: *Who you are is more important than what you do.* How can you process this, applying it both personally and in ministry? I believe you do so in these ways.

Biblically

I believe every minister and church needs to go deep into the first chapter of the Book of Ephesians. We need to learn for

the first time, or refresh our memories on what God says about each one of us. I discovered this again and taught this to our people recently for five weeks under the theme: “*Who Am I?*” People were freed. The personal heritage, personal insecurities, and the abusive ways, words, and expectations of others place most Christians in the prison cells of bondage. Therefore, people begin to “gain their identity” more from “what they do,” than from “who they are.” This is not God’s will.

You are a minister. Go into the Bible text found in Ephesians 1:3–14, take it apart, maintain balance, and learn who you are in Christ. It will change everything about you. On the last day of the series, I gave out a printed statement the size of a postcard for people to remember what I had taught them for those five weeks. These words have gone all over the world. The statement on the postcard reads:

WHO AM I?

In Jesus Christ,

**I am chosen miraculously, accepted completely,
forgiven freely, planned providentially,
and rich spiritually.**

I read through that statement almost daily. I keep it in my prayer journal to remind me of who I am in Jesus Christ.

Functionally

Once you realize what God says about who you are as a Christian, you are ready to deal functionally with your calling

as a minister. Church and minister dysfunction happen because of biblical and functional misunderstanding.

For every pastor, you are the God-called leader of your church. You are to be the spiritual thermostat and leader of that body. You serve by God's calling, but you are also there to serve God's people. As a pastor, I believe you are called to be a feeder, leader, and interceder. These are your three priorities functionally as you lead your church to fulfill the Great Commission of Jesus Christ.

As the pastor, the ministry of teaching and preaching is vital for you to fulfill the function of your calling. Feeding God's people from the Word of God is the first of your ministry assignments. Leading God's people toward God's will and goal is essential in your function as the pastor. God does not call you to conform to your people, drive your people, lord over your people, or abuse your people; but He calls you to lead them as a shepherd does his sheep. Interceding for God's people is also very important in your function as a pastor. The ministry of prayer is imperative on the agenda of a God-called pastor.

I BELIEVE YOU ARE CALLED TO BE A FEEDER, LEADER, AND INTERCEDER. THESE ARE YOUR THREE PRIORITIES FUNCTIONALLY AS YOU LEAD YOUR CHURCH TO FULFILL THE GREAT COMMISSION OF JESUS CHRIST.

As a minister on the staff of a local church, you serve at the will of your pastor. You are there to lift his arms up so he can fulfill the above three functional aspects of his calling. You are

there to partner with him to see your church fulfill the Great Commission of Jesus Christ. You are there to help him fulfill his calling as pastor-teacher of the church. If you imagine yourself to be anything other than one who fulfills these functions in your church, you are deceived. If you disagree with him, do so in private. If people come to you about him, defend him. If you cannot resolve your differences with him, leave quietly. However, if he commits immorality or heresy, confront and expose him.

As a minister that may be part of a para-church ministry or employed by a denomination, your role is to come alongside the pastor as well as the church for the sole purpose of assisting them in some way to fulfill the Great Commission of Jesus Christ. You serve that church as an extension of that pastor, assisting him with your calling, gifts, and resources. This will result in great fellowship and the kingdom of God being advanced.

Personally

Once we understand what the Bible says about our identity in Jesus Christ and who we are in Him, and once we carry out that identity in our various functional roles in ministry, we need to remember one more key ingredient so we will not get caught in the trap of believing that what we do is more important than who we are. We can escape that trap and live God's way when we remember these things personally.

Ministry is a supernatural calling. You are doing ministry out of calling, not preference. Your calling from God is the only thing that will keep you in it. From time to time, revisit your

ministry calling. Revisit it from the day you were first called by God, and then revisit the time when God called you to where you are presently serving. The minister who forgets his calling will become ensnared in the trap of performance.

God has bestowed upon you spiritual gifts. Ensure those gifts are being exercised where you are serving. If not, the trap will bite you. You will begin to identify your worth with your performance or on what you do, forgetting who you are in Jesus Christ and what He has gifted you to do.

Carnal chaos does not have to take place. When it does, it creates a ministry world that is not reflective of God's Word and does not bring glory to Jesus Christ. Know biblically, functionally, and personally who you are. Ministers have to learn and be reminded daily: *Who you are is more important than what you do.*

When you live this principle, there is nothing like it in the world.

Remember: *“For in Him the entire fullness of God’s nature dwells bodily, and you have been filled by Him, who is the head over every ruler and authority”* (Col. 2:9–10).

