

When Your Identity Becomes Wrapped Up in Your Ministry

My identity has too often been tied to the successes or failures of the ministries that I lead—and too frequently in unhealthy ways.

It's easy to find yourself counting heads at church on a Sunday or eyeing up the funds that were raised on any given week, wishing that more was accomplished. I remember times when I mistakenly thought, *If I can just get over 200 people this week, then I'll finally be at peace*. Evaluating our leadership capacities can take some ugly turns when done numerically based on factors that are, quite frankly, completely outside of our control.

I'm a highly driven person; quite honestly, it's that drivenness that has in part helped me be a successful church planter and revitalizer for many years. What's unhealthy is not the ambition itself, but the ways I let longings for success overtake my heart and mind. Ambitious people become demoralized not when we dream big, set goals or cast vision, but when the realization of these things we fantasize about becomes essential to our happiness and well-being.

At issue here are some fundamental questions that Christians everywhere—not just in the church—have to answer: What does it look like for followers of Christ to live and work with a *healthy* sense of ambition? Furthermore, how should we approach failure in light of that?

God Wants You

Let me start by saying this: It is possible to be ambitious and driven while also being an enthusiastic Christ-follower at the same time. The two are not mutually exclusive.

God has given each of us gifts. Some of us are gifted with patient spirits, and others of us can't help but forge ahead. Some of us are good at managing large staffs of people, and others of us are content to follow others and take direction.

Regardless of how these inclinations and abilities manifest themselves in everyday life, if you glean nothing else from this article, hear this: Whoever you are, whatever you do, God wants to use *you*. Yes, *you*. He wants to show you how to use your uniqueness the way He always intended and teach you to leverage your skills and abilities for the building of His kingdom.

Don't worry about what you've been given; think instead about the giver Himself and meditate on all the good works He has prepared in advance for you to do.

His Goals, Not Ours

As I've said before, it can be easy for my ambition to get the better of me; I'm wired to want to beat numbers, do better and track improvements over a period of time.

Often, I think it's easy for pastors to start thinking numerically about their congregations. We create measures for success that, quite honestly, are not representative of God's own measures of success for our ministries.

More often than not, the most dangerous part about all this comes when we try to compare our success to that of other pastors and ministry leaders in our communities. When we do this, not only are we trying to "beat" our own numbers, but their numbers as well. This kind of thinking is a slippery slope down the wrong road—it's most definitely an example of ambition gone bad.

God has called us to live in unity as the body of Christ. Focusing on ways to one-up each other's ministries is not how we've been instructed to go about that.

How do we fix this? Well, I think it starts by looking at our ministries the way that Paul did. We see throughout Acts and Paul's letters to various churches that his ambition is centered on not what he wants to accomplish, but what *God* has called him to do. In Acts 16, Paul tries to preach in the province of Asia and the Holy Spirit actually prevents him from doing so.

Reading passages like this, it's clear who is in control of Paul's ministry—hint, it's not Paul. Those of us who preach, teach or lead in the church truly delude ourselves if we think that we are somehow solely responsible for the present, past or future successes of our ministries.

Our posture should be one of surrender to God who holds all the cards—and parishioners we serve—in His hands. Any ambition we have should start and end with the knowledge of His sovereignty over all the things we so tightly cling to.

At the end of the day, it's not about *our* goals—it's about *His*. It's not about what kind of success we imagine, but what *He* has willed for us to accomplish.

It's not about *our* name being made great, but about *Him* being brought glory. Ambition channeled for the glory of God is the only form Christ-followers can ever really strive for and still stand on solid ground.

So What About Failure?

In ministry, there are always ups and downs. In churches particularly, bad Sundays sometimes happen—attendance is low, and sermons don't turn out exactly as we'd originally hoped. This isn't something to stew over for days or blame yourself about; it's something to surrender to God.

Self-reflection and occasional critique are important, don't get me wrong. What's not helpful is when we allow an obsession with perfection and dreams of worldly success to prevent us

from appreciating the ways that God really is at work in our midst.

The truth is that we don't see the big picture. We serve a God who is sovereign over all things. It's only through His strength and provision that we are able to accomplish anything of eternal significance in this life.

As the psalmist reminds us, "Unless the Lord builds the house, the builders labor in vain" (a, NIV).

Pastors and ministry leaders: Trust that He who began a good work in you and in your organizations will bring it to completion in His good timing. {eoa}

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