



Thrive in Ministry

"I Got This" and Other Lies I Believe

Three Questions:

When do you find yourself trying to control people and situations?

Is Jethani right? Can the mission of the church become an idol that we worship as pastors?

Ruth Haley Barton asks, "What needs to die in me in order for the will of God to come forth in and among us?"

Douglas John Hall argues that the Age of Disestablishment gives the church an opportunity for the church to engage in a time of self-reflection and "recovery of its life-giving essence." (Hall, 2012, p. x) The prophets told the people of Judah that they had developed idols and that God would cleanse their hearts during the Exile. This time of disestablishment enables the church to take time to do self-examination, confession, repentance, and renewal of life.

The Problem of Functional Atheism

Functional atheism is not the same as philosophical atheism. Philosophical atheist state that they do not believe that God exists. A functional atheist simply functions as if God does not exist.

Who would ever describe a pastor as a "functional atheist." After all, pastors work for the good of their people. They have committed



But LIFE WITH GOD is different because its goal is not to use God, its goal is God. He ceases to be a device we employ or a commodity we consume. Instead God himself becomes the focus of our desire. -Jethani

themselves to the service of God and the gospel. Unfortunately, pastors can develop a form of functional atheism. They subtly develop the dangerous belief that if anything is going to happen in this situation, they are the ones who must make it happen. This is often a pattern that we fall into without examining the thinking behind it. This is not a liberal, fundamentalist, mainline, or evangelical problem. It can and does impact pastors from all perspectives. (Muse, 2007, p. 184) Parker Palmer,

who coined the term functional atheism, describes how this gets played out in life. People subtly find themselves imposing their will on others. (Palmer, 2000, pp. 88–89) Though they believe in the sovereignty of God, pastors often fall into this trap seek to control the timing and events. (Burns, Simmons, & Shoup, 2014, p. 150) They have a need to produce a frenzy of activity. If nothing is visibly happening, how can anything really be happening. (Or how can they justify to others that they are

indeed doing God's work?) We have a fear of chaos, so we structure and plan. Finally, he argues that even an inability to tolerate silence is an indicator of functional atheism.

Skye Jethani writes, "Cutting open the LIFE FOR GOD'S cosmic apple would reveal a mission at the core. Some great goal—understood to be initiated by God and carried forward by us—defines everything and everyone." (Jethani, 2011, p. 84) Mission is not a bad thing. The problem becomes when the mission, especially our participation in that mission, becomes the ultimate thing. Mission then becomes an idol. (Jethani, 2011, p. 87)

The Power of Relinquishment

As Judah entered the Exile, they lost so much that shaped their national identity. Jerusalem was destroyed, and the king was taken in to captivity. The temple was demolished, and the priestly system of worship could no longer be practiced in Jerusalem or Babylon. Judah had to let go of all the systems and structures that they developed during the Exodus and after. Many of these practices and systems had become idols to them in place of worshiping YHWH, had been destroyed or taken away. They had to trust that God was going to do something new or give up.

Jethani argues that for many American churches, the "mission" of the church, be it evangelism or social justice or community, has become an idol that has replaced the communal relationship with God as the primary purpose of the church. If this is the case, pastors today need to relinquish many of the old measures of "successful" or "effective" ministry. Pastors need to stop trying to be like the megachurch pastor or the successful CEO. They need to stop struggling for control of all aspects of their church life. In addition to being a theological problem, this push to control an move often leads to pastors who are stressed out, discouraged, and even burned out.

Practices of Relinquishment

Sabbath: The ancient practice of taking Sabbath reminds us that we are not in control or responsible for

the success of God's mission. Marva Dawn reminds readers that Sabbath calls them to cease not just from work, but from the need to be busy, productive and efficient. (Dawn, 1989, p. 3) Sabbath is also a call to experience that which leads to communion with God. Those things that lead us into an attitude of joy, awe, and gratitude. It is a surrendering of our need to control situations and people. It is a surrendering of our need to worry about others and even God's people.

Practicing Self-Compassion: Practicing self-compassion enables pastors to reject the pressure to maintain the façade of perfectionism. If pastors can accept their own failures and sin and trust in God's compassion, they will be able to push back on the expectations to live up to a perfect life or have a perfect family. (Yarnell & Neff, 2013, p. 147) This requires a transparent humility that is not possible as long as pastors try to maintain their façade.

Prayer of Indifference: As leaders, pastors are rarely without strong opinions. We often have a clear sense of the mission to which we have been called. What happens when that mission becomes an idol? How can we surrender our will to the will of God? Ruth Haley Barton asks the questions, "*What needs to die in me in order for the will of God to come forth in and among us?*" (Barton, 2008, p. 202) It is an act of surrender in order to be obedient to God.

Journaling Assignment:

Your pastor is struggling with controlling a situation in her ministry. How do you help her see that she is trying to control people in her church?