



## **THE PASTOR'S STRUGGLE WITH SELF-ESTEEM**

*Rujon W. Morrison*

During the last 10 years, I have had the privilege of coming alongside men and women who have dedicated their lives to building the kingdom of God. No matter what their age, culture, or experiences in ministry, they all seem to wrestle with similar questions –What is church, and what does it mean to be the church? What does this mean for me as a pastor? If Scripture (Matthew 16:24) tells me I am to deny self, is it biblical to have self-esteem, to spend time and energy on myself when the demands of the church are so great?

A myriad of complex issues lies beneath the surface of each question. While many of the problems pastors face are common to us all, this article focuses specifically on several of the most challenging struggles leaders face in today's church life. The questions they are asking give us powerful clues into the self-esteem struggles they encounter.

### **CHANGING TIMES**

A crisis has been brewing in the Western church since the early 1980's. Significant members of church attendees are leaving the church in Europe and North America every week and they are not coming back.<sup>1</sup> This exodus is not limited to attendees alone –leaders are leaving as well! Whether it is due to dissatisfaction, moral failure, impatience with the demands made upon them, sabbatical, or burnout, leaders of congregations are resigning in large numbers. What is having such a profound effect upon the church and its leaders?

### **A LOSS OF STATUS**

Since the beginning, our culture has looked to the church as part of its foundation; we held it and the profession of ministry in high regard. To be ordained was to be somebody – it offered a certain degree of standing and respect. In our current cultural milieu, the confident announcement of the Christian faith has been perceived as an arrogant attempt by some to impose their values on others. We are waking up to the fact that we no longer live in a Christian culture; it is no longer *our* world.<sup>2</sup> If the church has lost the status it once held, it should be no surprise that clergy would also struggle with a sense of identity and value. Consider this comment by Henri Nouwen: "There was a time, not too long ago, when we felt like captains running our own ships with a great sense of power and self-confidence. Now we seem to be standing in the way. This is our lonely position."<sup>3</sup>

## **A CHANGING INSTITUTION**

Over the past few years doctrinal positions and church policies have altered radically in some denominations. As a result, many clergy have either resigned or tried to find a denomination that upholds the views they feel they can support. One of my friends has decided to hold on and wait. Now with only five years until retirement, he prayerfully watches his leaders wrestle with the issues he feels compromise the gospel. He wonders what the church will look like in the next few years. He wonders if he can remain a part of it. The last time we talked, he shared that he had been depressed for over a year, had been seeing a therapist, and taking an antidepressant. His situation represents a struggle many clergy face today. The loss they experience is similar to a marriage that is failing, and it seems difficult to know how to save it. In other cases, the marriage has already failed. Disillusioned pastors feel that they have failed God and wonder if it is possible to pick up the pieces of their lives.

## **A DYSFUNCTIONAL FAMILY**

Some denominations are not struggling to the extent that I have shared; however, they all experience conflicts associated with “institutional” life. Many men and women in ministry have told me that they were not prepared for the amount of politics and relational conflicts which come with their jobs. Rejection and failure are two unwelcome guests that seem to continuously show up at the pastor’s door. Many pastors tell me that “to experience struggle without a successful solution is to admit failure.” Some believe they can talk about their difficulties, but only when the issues are resolved. It then makes excellent sermon material. Hear this common response: “We are encouraged to talk about our struggles with leadership, but in some cases to do so would mean suicide to our careers. Sometimes it is easier and wiser to keep it to yourself and try to work it out on your own, but that can be devastating.”

## **THE HERO MYTHS**

In many churches, the pastor is expected to take the role of “hero” –the one who makes everything happen, carries all the responsibility, solves all the problems, never says no, is always available for others, etc. More often than not, the hero role is already in place prior to beginning ministry. We must acknowledge the fact that church life helps create or at least reinforce this role for its leaders.

Many “hero” leaders have given so much of themselves that they feel used and abused by both God and the church they serve. Though they may teach of God’s love, many who give so much of themselves unconditionally to others believe that God’s love toward them is conditional. One pastor shared, “I know God loves you, but I just cannot believe that He really loves me!”

Personal and family struggles, marital problems, divorce, burnout, ethical failures, and even suicide are examples of the struggles that sooner or later make their way to the surface and become public knowledge. All too often the leader is judged and sent away from the church. Perhaps we should take a deeper look at these “failures,” see them as symptoms of greater struggle, and dig for the roots that may be causing the difficulty – in both the community and the leader.

## **THE PASTOR-BUSINESSMAN**

At a time when the institution is under great threat, it is easy to see how individual churches are encouraged to be creative to try to grow, perhaps even survive the times they face. Leadership encourages each church to manage its own finances and operate in the black. Other standards are set for salvations, baptisms, and other aspects of what is considered “successful” church life. Some express concerns that this business mindset has gone too far. “Pastors of America have metamorphosed into a

company of shopkeepers, and the shops they keep are the churches,” challenges Eugene Peterson. “They are preoccupied with...how to keep the customer happy, how to lure customers away from competitors down the street, how to package the goods so that the customers will lay out more money.”<sup>4</sup> Peterson challenges the integrity of pastors who operate in this manner. Yet the church often encourages this kind of success.

Facing this dilemma, pastors ask, “How can we survive, even succeed and maintain integrity?” Some state that they have no desire to be business people; others are not sure they measure up to the “successful visionary leaders” so many books talk about. Instead they feel called to shepherd a group of people, to care for them, and help the kingdom grow. Taking this stance causes many to feel that they have failed in some way.

## **SELF-ESTEEM: IS IT BIBLICAL?**

Asking pastors to define self and self-esteem can be quite helpful. When we have conversations, we might discover that some pastors take Matthew 16:24 to mean that they should not have any needs or desires, spend money or time on themselves, or have personal boundaries. If a ministry leader associates self-esteem with pride and selfishness, he or she will find it difficult to seek or receive help. We must be prepared to help the person work out a more balanced theological understanding of important biblical passages.

Every pastor I have worked with desires to “finish the race” and hear, “Well done, my good and faithful servant.” We caregivers are also running this race. The obstacles we face are quite similar to our pastor friends. We can learn quite a bit from each other as together we face our struggles with self-esteem.

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### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Michael Riddle, *Threshold of the Future* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1998)

<sup>2</sup> Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1992)

<sup>3</sup> Henri Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer* (New York: Doubleday, 1972)

<sup>4</sup> Eugene Peterson, *Working the Angles: The Shape of Pastoral Integrity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987)

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