

These Are (Not) Your Pastor's Secrets

Edit: This article has garnered both praise and criticism since I wrote it more than 2 years ago. At the time of writing, I was experiencing a wonderful season of ministry. Since that time, I have also experienced some very difficult times of ministry, including nearly burning out in the fall of 2016. I still stand by everything I wrote here, but I want to amend the record in one small way. Number 4, "I never think about quitting" was perhaps a bit naive. The truth is, since my near burnout, I have thought about quitting. And I've thought about it seriously, on more than one occasion. I probably would have followed my own advice and actually quit, but for the grace of God. At the time when I most needed it, God lifted me out of the depths of my frustration and despair, and reinstated me with a sense of passion and purpose for the ministry to which he has called me. My point is this, we all go through seasons in ministry, some of them beautiful, some of them excruciatingly difficult. There is no shame in stepping aside, when the challenges of ministry have become too much for you to bear. But, before you do, I urge you to seek solace and rest in God. He may tell you to stay. He may tell you it is time to go. Either way, he will comfort you, and remind you that you are his beloved.

—

I do a lot of reading – some of it intellectual, some of it not so much. That means I also take in a fair number of articles from blogs and online magazines. I am particularly interested in anything to do with pastoral leadership and the church.

I certainly don't agree with everything I read, but I believe

there is something to be learned from most things I engage with, so I tend to give authors the benefit of the doubt.

But I read an article this morning that rubbed me the wrong way, and I want to respond to it. It is about the supposed secrets that pastors (like myself) hold close to our hearts. The author listed 11 *secrets* that pastors supposedly have. Here is the short list, though you can read the [author's commentary here](#).

1. Our greatest fear is irrelevance.
2. We are mama's boys.
3. She or he sees you when you're sleeping.
4. We think about quitting a lot.
5. We envy people who can be themselves.
6. We are often spiritually starving.
7. We are sinful, no different than you.
8. We are lonely, because it's hard to trust.
9. Ministry is a hard job.
10. We are more sensitive than you probably think.
11. We care about you more than you can imagine.

Three big problems with this list

There are three problems with this list that I want to acknowledge right off the bat.

First, the article was written by someone who left ministry (for good, in his own words). He is an ex-pastor, meaning that there is something that compelled him to quit ministry. There may be any number of reasons for this, and I certainly don't fault him for that. More people need to have the courage to leave ministry if it isn't a good fit, for whatever reason. But what this means is that we are getting the viewpoint of someone who apparently didn't have a great experience with ministry (or he would still be doing it). It should,

therefore, **not** be viewed as normative for pastors. In full disclosure, the author did say that some people who responded to his informal poll said his article didn't match their experience, but he went on to claim that most responded favorably to the list.

Second, there is no mention of pastoral ministry as a calling by God to his work. There should be a deep and profound sense in all pastors that they can do nothing else but answer that call. The author talks about being raised and cultivated to be a pastor, but he never mentions a sense of being personally called to it. I find this troubling as well, because the significant agreement he received from friends in ministry suggests that many pastors view ministry as a career, rather than a calling.

Third, I have a deep conviction that we are living in one of the most fearful societies in history. People walk around constantly worried about what could happen or what might not happen, and we spend untold fortunes in attempts to guard ourselves against our fears (e.g., loss of health, loss of property, loss of work, loss of life).

But the message of the Bible, from cover to cover, is this: **don't be afraid; just believe.** The truth of scripture drives out fear by showing us a God who cares deeply about our well-being and has made himself available to us, through Jesus and the cross. If we are living in fear as Christians, then it means we aren't truly surrendered to God. And if we are harboring *secret* fears, then we are in even worse shape, because it resembles something else that likes to hide in our hearts – sin.

In this article, the secrets that are mentioned all seem to stem from one fear or another; a fear of being irrelevant, weak, boring, incapable, fake, unspiritual, sinful, betrayed, thought lazy, abused, or uncaring.

Again, I don't fault the author for his views, but I also don't accept them as normative for pastors. **In fact, I reject them unilaterally in my own experience.** So, I thought I would offer my very open responses to each of these 11 *secrets*.

These are your pastor's public declarations

1. My only fear is unfaithfulness. I do not fear irrelevance, because the gospel is always relevant. I do not fear persecution, because Jesus said we are blessed when we are persecuted on account of him. I do not fear job loss or becoming overburdened or underpaid or anything else associated with my vocation as a pastor. And I do not fear that the Word I proclaim will be thought superfluous, because I believe that Word has the power to save, in this age and every age to come, and God has promised that his Word will not return void.

2. I am not a mama's boy (but I do love my mama). We are living in a generation of dwindling manhood. We live in a comfortable society where people no longer need to prove themselves as providers and protectors, and the cultural image of manhood seems to be the ability to produce offspring with one or many women. Men are seen as lazy, immature, macho, and stupid. Men who don't see eye-to-eye with that image often swing the other way toward almost effeminate personalities. Neither recognizes the characteristics of a Godly man, which are radical dependence upon God, obedience to his Word, courage in the face of great struggles, and a will to overcome for the sake of the gospel. Incidentally, these are also characteristics of godly women. We need men and women of strong character in our pulpits. If the norm is for pastors to be self-identified mama's boys and girls, then perhaps they need to mature a bit before accepting the charge to shepherd God's people.

3. I see you when you are under conviction. Yes, I see people when they are sleeping. But I don't preach in order to entertain. And I don't derive my energy or enthusiasm from the crowd; I trust the Spirit to give unction to my words. I preach, because the gospel has the power to confront sin and transform lives. So, when I look at the congregation, what I notice more are the faces of those to whom God is clearly speaking. And when I see those looks of conviction or relief, I silently give thanks to God that he is still in the business of transforming hearts and reconciling us to himself.

4. I never think about quitting. If, as a pastor, you are thinking about quitting a lot, then you should quit. God does not want or need half-hearted leaders in the church. I have never experienced more joy in the work I have been given to do, than I experience as a pastor. I am eternally grateful for the opportunity to serve, and I cannot imagine doing anything else. That is true on my best days and on my worst.

5. I strive to always be authentically me. I reject the notion that I must become someone or something I am not, in order to faithfully lead God's people. I am open and honest about both my triumphs and defeats, my joys and my frustrations. I am genuine in both my compassion and my callousness. I am the same person in my home as I am in the church, for better or worse. Because of this, I am not worried about being found out as a fraud, and I have learned to trust in the Spirit's strength, where I am weak.

6. I am spiritually full. Now, that doesn't mean I am spiritually perfect, or that I have it all together. I am growing, just like everyone else who seeks to follow Jesus daily. And I make mistakes. And I go through dry spells where I don't spend enough time with God in the Bible and prayer. But I am spiritually full, nonetheless, because I am learning to depend more fully on God for everything I am and everything I have, each and every day. I have never felt closer to Jesus than I am right now. And that is true, even on days when I am

struggling.

7. I am a sinner, saved by grace. Yes, I am the chief of sinners, and I depend daily on God's mercy and forgiveness. I still struggle with temptation and I even sometimes fall into sin. But by the grace of God, this happens less and less often. I am learning to turn over my temptations to God before I sin, and he has been faithful to give me the strength to overcome. I am proceeding forward in my sanctification, through the power of the Spirit working in my life. I am no longer under the guilt or power of sin, and though I still wage skirmishes on occasion, the war has been won, and Jesus is enthroned in my heart. I can identify with all sinners, because I am one, not because I am regularly engaged in sin.

8. I am not lonely, because God is with me and I maintain close, trusting relationships. I am learning the art of solitude, and have discovered that in those moments alone God whispers to my heart and reminds me who I am to him. And while I spend lots of time alone, I also cultivate close relationships with friends and family. Even when I am alone I am not lonely, because I know that I love and am loved. And I believe in giving my trust, even when it may be abused.

9. I agree that ministry is a tough job. It is the toughest job I have ever had. And if it was just a job, the compensation wouldn't be worth the sacrifice. But ministry isn't just a job; it is a calling. When it gets tough, I have to rely more on Jesus to get me through. Praise God that ministry isn't something I can do under my own power.

10. I am more sensitive to the spiritual than you probably think. I have come to realize that criticism and hate are seldom about something I have said or done, and are more often about a deeper spiritual struggle in the other person's life. I have asked God to give me his kingdom vision, so that I will see people and situations as he does. When he allows me to catch glimpses of what's going on beneath the surface of a

troubling encounter with someone else, it most often breaks my heart with compassion. We all have a deep need for Jesus (myself, most of all). And when I remain mindful of that one truth, I find that I am less sensitive to criticism.

11. I care about you exactly as much as it appears. When I say that I love you, it is because I love you. When I challenge you to deeper obedience, it is because I love you. When I question your absence, it is because I love you. When I disagree with your lifestyle or motivations, it is because I love you. When I encourage you to trust God fully, it is because I love you. When I show up at your events and those of your family, it is because I love you. When I visit you at home or in the hospital, it is because I love you. When I spend time on my knees in prayer, weeping over you with tears of joy and tears of pain, it is because I love you. I am your pastor, because I love you. And I love you, because Jesus first loved me and gave me his heart to love you as he does.

I have never been more privileged to do anything in life, than I have been to serve as a pastor. It is a humble calling, to which I will gladly sacrifice every day from this day forward. And I thank God that he is willing to use a broken vessel like me for his kingdom work.

I have no secrets as a pastor. I am what you see. My prayer is that when you look at me, you will see past my obvious flaws to the one who lives inside of me.

Jesus must become greater; I must become less.