

PLANTING
A CHURCH
WITHOUT
LOSING
YOUR
SOUL

*Nine
Questions
for the
Spiritually
Formed
Pastor*

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FOREWORD BY
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HOW TO BE BOTH A PASTOR AND A PERSON

*Pastors don't get in trouble because they forget they are pastors.
They get in trouble because they forget they are people.*

ARCHIBALD HART

That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses.

PAUL THE APOSTLE (2 CORINTHIANS 12:10)

“YOU ARE DOING THIS ALL WRONG,” Charlie said gently.

My spiritual director (or as I liked to think of him, my personal monk) sat there quietly, a kind smile on his face. His hands rested lightly on crossed legs. A flickering candle sat on the coffee table between us, and Charlie's pronouncement seemed to hover in the air above the flame.

“You have become a *warehouse*, storing and holding all the church's problems. But God never intended that. He intends you to be a *warehouseman*.”

Another couple had left our young church plant—one of the few families that had children. They loved the church but were concerned that our fledgling children's ministry would not be able to adequately minister to their kids as they grew. I couldn't argue—we were so new



at this, and the church had just a handful of kids. Our plan was solid, and I was confident that as more families with children came to the church that it would be just a few years before we would have a robust ministry for kids. But how could I really know, and how could parents really know? *And how will we ever get there if families with children won't stick?* I was discouraged and worried, and didn't know how we could escape the vicious cycle we found ourselves in.

Charlie sat patiently, a smile barely perceptible on his lips, content to let his words gain weight as we sat in the silence.

"What do you mean?" I finally asked.

"You are holding onto all of the church's problems, Tim—storing them in your mind and heart as if your soul is a giant warehouse. But you aren't *capable* of holding all these concerns. Nor are you meant to be. God alone can hold the church's problems."

Charlie paused again, his easy demeanor matching the counsel he was giving. "You are not to be the warehouse that holds all the problems but a *warehouseman*. Your job is to get on your forklift, pick up the church's problems, set them down in the warehouse, and then drive away. As long as you try to do what only God can do, you're going to be anxious and exhausted."

Charlie paused, and then leaned forward for emphasis. "*You need to let yourself be the pastor, and let God be God.*"

LEARNING HOW TO NOT BE GOD

Zack Eswine, in his important book *The Imperfect Pastor*, writes, "I became a pastor. But I didn't know how to be one. The Serpent saw this. He seized his opportunity. 'You can be like God,' he said. And I, the fool, believed him."¹

Part of me reads that line and resonates with it, while another part protests, "No. I don't do that, do I?" Eswine goes on to detail the ways that we try to be everywhere for everyone (omnipresence), fix everything for everyone (omnipotence), and have all the answers for

everyone (omniscience), and I realize just how much of my vocation as a church planter is my trying to do what I cannot possibly do.

Dr. Chris Adams is director of the Center for Vocational Ministry at Azusa Pacific University and a researcher for two of the largest studies on pastoral health to date. For one of these studies they contracted a consultant whose job it is to determine what competencies are needed for various marketplace jobs, and they asked him to evaluate the role of pastor. Recognizing that pastors wear a lot of hats, he expected the list to be long, yet he came back shocked at his own findings: a staggering list of *sixty-five* core competencies a person needs to lead a church. “No one can be good at all of these things,” he said. “This is a setup to feel inadequate. *Who would ever want to do this job?*”

Adams reports that all this contributes to the danger of chronically elevated stress among pastors, which creates substantial wear and tear on a pastor’s mind and body over time. Pastors have higher rates of anxiety and depression than the general population. They have poorer lifestyle-related health markers, including higher rates of obesity, hypertension, diabetes, and metabolic syndrome. Research would indicate that at any given time, one-third of pastors are experiencing burnout and/or depression. Only one-fourth of pastors, Adams’ research finds, finish well with vitality.²

Given the additional stressors for pastors engaged in the work of establishing a new church, there is good reason for church planters to pay particular attention to their need to intentionally learn to minister in ways that are healthy and life-giving. In addition to the typical list of pastoral duties, consider the complexities in a church plant:

- Planters have the start-up responsibilities of an entrepreneur as well as regular pastoral duties.
- The planter is most often a solo pastor, not part of a staff.

- Church systems are not yet established, which means greater effort in nearly everything.
- Many church planters have less accountability than established pastors—either to an elder board within the church or, for many, to denominational leaders.
- Church planters have few (or zero) established leaders to share the work.
- Planters face the constant pressure of wondering whether the church will make it.
- Planters are not always appreciated by local colleagues, who often feel threatened by the presence of a new church.

THE ELIJAH SYNDROME

Recognizing our need is our first challenge. For most, the next challenge is to learn to receive care from God and those agents he would use in bringing us care. I find a good model for the kind of holistic care we need to receive from God in Elijah in 1 Kings 19.³

The real power in this chapter comes out when you contrast it with the chapter it follows. In 1 Kings 18, Elijah has just finished one of the most spectacular ministry moments in all of Scripture—his miraculous victory over the prophets of Baal. Against overwhelming odds, a defiant Elijah taunts his opponents in an epic showdown to see whose God or gods are the strongest. Fire literally comes down from heaven, and Yahweh's victory is decisive, leaving no doubt as to who the real God is and what his power can accomplish.

Yet as chapter 19 opens, instead of finding Elijah elated and triumphant, we find him exhausted, discouraged, and fearing for his life. *How can this be?* the reader wonders. How can one experience such a display of God's power in one moment, then turn around and doubt his power in the next?

Our church members might scratch their heads, but pastors have no problem relating to this story. Pastors routinely find themselves

physically and emotionally spent come Monday morning, a phenomenon I've actually heard referred to as Elijah Syndrome. The adrenaline dump that follows a significant ministry event can leave one's mind and body feeling heavy and sluggish. Thoughts of discouragement and inadequacy seem to carry more weight. Anticipation of the coming work week can feel daunting.

Intuitively, I would think that only the failures would drain us, while successful ministry ventures would be nothing but life-giving. Yet experience teaches us something different. Even good ministry can leave us depleted. I'm learning to anticipate that after the adrenaline dump that follows a significant ministry event, I may find myself markedly tired—physically, emotionally, and spiritually. On those days, I should be especially cautious in trusting my already fickle emotions.

That's where we find Elijah. Feeling depleted and defeated, he does physically what many of us do emotionally: "He runs for his life" (1 Kings 19:3). Elijah runs, traveling a full day's journey into the wilderness. There, echoing the sentiments of many ministers to follow, he yells at the heavens, "I have had enough! Take my life, I am no better than my ancestors" (v. 4). Then he lies down in the shade of a bush and falls asleep.

Do you hear any of yourself in Elijah's cry? I've expressed to God, in slightly different words, each of his sentiments at one time or another:

Fatigue: "I'm exhausted, burned out! I can't go on doing this."

Discouragement, tipping into despair: "This job is sucking away my life! I'd be too ashamed to quit, and I don't know what else I would do. But I need out. Please God, let me do something else."

Self-doubt: "I'm not any good at this—no better than those who have tried and failed before me. I certainly don't compare to [insert name of superpastor *du jour*]. Am I really accomplishing anything? I should quit ministry and become a banker."

Into this struggle, God provides care for Elijah in four distinct ways—areas of care that we need as well.

Physical. “Get up and eat,” the angel says to Elijah. Elijah wakes to the smell of freshly baked bread next to a jar of water. And then we read what, for any who are acquainted with deep, heart-level fatigue and its accompanying discouragement, are some of the most beautiful words in Scripture: “He ate the meal and went back to sleep” (v. 6, MSG).

Sometimes, the most spiritual thing you and I can do is take a nap.

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Before his death I had the opportunity to take a class with Dr. Dallas Willard. As a class, we stayed together for two weeks in a monastery, studying and practicing the spiritual disciplines. It was a life-changing experience.

“Your first assignment while we are here,” Dallas said on day one, “is to get ten hours of sleep each night.” Ten hours? We all looked around at each other, dumbfounded. This was a doctoral program, which required a ton of work, and also required that students be in full-time ministry. When could we even remember getting that much sleep? It sounded crazy. “If you can’t actually sleep,” he continued, “at least be in bed for ten hours, and spend the awake time reading and praying.”

The next morning at breakfast everyone grouched about how difficult it was trying to sleep that much, how early you had to go to bed even to attempt it, and so on. The second morning we still grouched, but most of us reported a slightly better experience. By day three, people were talking about feeling more rested than they were used to. By the end of the week we couldn’t imagine going back to living on as little sleep as we had before.

The physical is spiritual. Do you notice that when Elijah is at his point of exhaustion, God doesn’t even bother speaking to him?

Before he does anything else, God just attends to Elijah's basic, bodily needs: food, water, and sleep. I don't think it is too far of a reach to say that prior to this, Elijah is not even at a place where he can hear what God has to say to him.

It's a truth so simple that we easily forget it: *you and I have a body*. Everything we will ever do in God's service will take place in the body he has given us. Therefore, it is vitally important that we treat ourselves as human persons—bodily beings who simply cannot get on without proper rhythms of rest, work, hydration, and nutrition.

As noted above, the average pastor has poorer health markers than the general population, including higher rates of obesity, heart disease, and metabolic syndrome. While for some, heredity is a contributing factor, we have to note that for many of us, these are directly related to lifestyle choices.

Yes, our work is high in stress, which causes our bodies to hold onto more fat than we would like, and the random nature of our schedules makes it harder to plan for exercise and healthy eating. Yet overeating and unhealthy eating are the norm for many in ministry. Perhaps it's because some part of us thinks we are invincible—that God will let us slide on our poor physical habits because the work we are doing is important. Or maybe it's because in America, gluttony has become an acceptable vice. Think about it: if our congregation found out we were coping with ministry stress by drinking too much, there would be great concern, and if we didn't turn it around quickly, we might even lose our ministry. But whose church is going to call them out for chronic overeating? It has become too easy for us to get away with being poor stewards of our bodies.

This is why attending to diet, exercise, and sleep should be thought of as spiritual disciplines, not just physical ones. In fact, in recent years when I have spoken on self-care, attending to our bodily health has become one of the top five disciplines I prescribe for every church planter.⁴

So let me ask you, friend, have you considered that part of the care Jesus invites you to is simply to care for your body? To eat well, to exercise, to sleep?

The angel's words reinforce this: "Get up and eat, *for the journey is too much for you*" (1 Kings 19:7). You are human, Elijah, and you have a body. Acknowledge it, care for it, and respect its limits.

Emotional. The second thing that strikes me in this story is how tenderly God deals with Elijah.

Twice God invites Elijah to speak, and twice he listens while Elijah rants: "I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too" (v. 10, 14).

God creates space for Elijah to vent his honest emotions, and then he listens.

If I were God, my response would likely have been full of correction. "Do you think you might be overstating things, Eli? Perhaps your perspective is a little distorted. Let's go statement by statement through what you said and evaluate its accuracy."

But there is no rebuke for Elijah's outburst, no expression of divine disappointment for how quickly Elijah moves from ministry euphoria to evaporating faith, no correction of Elijah's wrong-headed reasoning. Like a loving parent, God simply invites Elijah to tell him what is wrong. God hears Elijah's anger, fear, and sorrow, and he holds it.

Many of us, when shaking our fist at God, are only made angrier by the gentleness of his presence. We want God to react—either to apologize for allowing ministry to beat us up, or to rebuke us for our insolence. But I've come to feel in my spirit that in those moments God is giving me what I truly need but am not sober enough to see: space to be angry, to be hurt, to be afraid, to be sad. And like a loving father, God simply holds my big emotions while I rant.

Isn't this what the Psalms teach us, that God can handle—strike that—that he *actually wants to handle*—our raw emotion? “*How long Lord, how long?*” Nearly half the Psalms are songs of pain or anger—many of them blaming God. If the Psalms are there to teach us to pray, then certainly we must conclude that God is ready to meet and minister to us in the midst of our strong emotions, not just after we have gotten them under control.

God is ready to meet and minister to us in the midst of our strong emotions.

C. S. Lewis, in his own journey back from deep grief, described God's gentle presence as a special sort of silence—not the silence of a God who is absent or who has bolted the door in response to our knocking, but a silence that patiently and lovingly listens to our pain. “It is more,” Lewis says, “like a silent, not uncompassionate gaze,” which seems to say, “Peace, child; you don't understand.”⁵

I struggle here. I come from a family and a church tradition that values being composed, together, and self-controlled, and I want others to see me as a leader who has it together. I prefer to master my emotions first and talk about them only after they have been safely contained.

But the truth is, God can handle my meltdowns. As pastors we need to take a page from the Psalms and learn to come to him with raw, unfiltered emotion. Perhaps more important, we need to come to a place where we know in our bones that our Father *actually wants* that, and that he is happy to sit with us in our overwhelmed state.

And furthermore, many of us need to admit that we are underdeveloped in this area, to the point that if we are going to grow, we are going to need to enlist someone's help. That is why we insist that our planters are either in therapy or spiritual direction all the time. Don't wait until you break—intentionally develop the spiritual muscle to let God care for your emotional needs.

Spiritual. When Elijah is ready to receive it, God speaks: “Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by” (v. 11).

The mountain in question is Mount Horeb. There, centuries earlier, a barefoot shepherd standing before a burning bush received his call to ministry. Years later that same shepherd-turned-deliverer stood on the mountain and received the Ten Commandments amid a full-blown light show. That time the whole mountain shook as it blazed with fire, black clouds, and deep darkness. From the fire the Lord's voice bellowed, displaying with terrifying effectiveness the power of God to accomplish his purposes (Deut 4:10-14; Ex 19:16-19). Did this history, coupled with Elijah's recent experience of God's power, shape his expectations of how God would meet him, of the shape his calling would take?

What, I wonder, has shaped my expectations of how God would meet me, of how he would shape my call? My faith was nurtured in megachurches where success was made visible by a full parking lot, multiple services, and impeccable production quality. Naturally, I expected that as I grew in ministry, God would meet me in similar ways and call me to similar tasks.

As I grew disillusioned with that world (unfairly so, in many ways), I became enamored of the emerging wave of church planters reaching new generations in fresh ways. In that world, success was made visible less by size than by innovation, multiplication, and an ethos that valued rawness and authenticity over production quality. This world, too, subtly shaped my expectations of how God would meet me, and how my calling would develop.

Famously, God does not meet Elijah in the way he expects. Like Moses before him, God has Elijah wait in a cleft in the rock for God to pass by. Like Moses, Elijah sees God move in wind, a shaking earth, and fire. But unlike the case of Moses, God doesn't speak. His voice only comes after the displays of strength have ended, in a gentle whisper.

It is as if God is saying, "You want me to come to you in a familiar display of power so you can be assured I am bigger than the powers you are now running from. I've done that already, Elijah, and you

didn't recognize it. But I am doing something different with you. You are not Moses, and his story is not your story. You are Elijah, and you have to trust me to write your story too."

How many of us enter church planting looking for God to give us the same story he gave someone else, a story we admire and want to see written over our lives as well? The story we want might be that of the leader of a younger, fresher kind of megachurch, or leader of a network of house churches that excels in disciple-making, or of a missional congregation doing rich incarnational ministry among urban hipsters, or of an inner-city powerhouse prophetically breaking down ethnic and cultural barriers as they unmask systemic injustice. All these stories are great, and each one is needed in the kingdom. But the story you are looking to write may or may not be the story God has for you.

When God is ready to speak, are you willing to hear what he has to say? Are you ready to have him minister to you spiritually, even if it entails him saying things or leading you in ways that differ from the story you are wanting?

When we started Life Cov, our intention was to reach unchurched people. And yes, we have reached some, but more than any other group, we have found that our church is deeply attractive to those we have come to call the dechurched: people who may or may not already have a saving relationship with God, but have been wounded or burnt out on religion and long since walked away from the church—and often from God too.

Even though I loved these people deeply, for the first two years of our church's life it frustrated me that God was bringing them instead of the more truly unchurched. "We want to see more people who have absolutely no church background!" I would tell God. "Why do we keep getting all these wounded Christians and ex-Christians? We want to reach hardcore pagans!"

One day while ranting in prayer, I sensed the need to be quiet and listen. In the quiet I clearly sensed the Spirit saying in my spirit, "Tim,

these people aren't coming to you by accident. You have these people because I am sending them, and this is going to be a significant part of the ministry I have for you. Embrace it, rejoice in it, and pastor your people."

As I reflected on this, it began to make sense. My background was such that I understood the dechurched well, and they seemed to sense that. And as a result of their presence, our church was growing in grace and able to receive them well. Rather than greeting them with judgment, we were able to honor their stories, value their gifts, and give them a place to belong and to serve and to heal.

God does not always meet us in the way we are expecting or wanting, but he always meets us in the way that we need.

Relational. "I am all alone," Elijah says, and no doubt he believes this to be true. But God meets him in this, too, giving him two kings as allies and a committed disciple to be his partner and successor. He also alerts Elijah to the presence of *seven thousand* others he was not aware of who are committed to the Lord as well (v. 15-18).

I find it striking that God does not feel it is sufficient to assure Elijah of his presence, as I might expect that the gentle whisper would be the final word in this story. But God goes a step further and assures Elijah of the presence of other allies as well. Centuries later, Jesus would give similar words of assurance to an anxious Paul, as he works to plant a church in the difficult city of Corinth. "Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, *because I have many people in this city*" (Acts 18:9-10).

Jesus promises that he will be with us as we go about his work, and we can be confident he will. But we need to remember that one of the ways he cares for us is by providing us with other people too.

"The number one hazard for pastors is isolation," according to Dr. Chris Adams.⁶ Pastoral leadership, we learn fairly quickly, is isolating. We carry secrets we cannot share, make decisions that will make us

unpopular with those whose affirmation we desire, and endure jabs and bruises that we have to keep hidden lest we throw congregants under the bus.

Church planters, as a subset of pastors, are almost by definition isolated. Most serve on their own, not as part of a larger staff team. Even those who are blessed with a solid core of lay leaders (and this is far from guaranteed) may feel limited in what we can share with them about other church members, or about our own fears and frustrations with the church, lest we undermine their confidence in our ministry too. Other area pastors may or may not extend a hand of friendship, as many see a new church plant as a threat to their own fragile ego or ministry. It is easy as a planter to feel alone.

One of the ways Jesus cares for us is by providing us with other people.

This has huge implications for us as church planters. It means that you and I must actively combat isolation. One way we do that is to make the practice of community a non-optional spiritual discipline in our lives.

Can we cultivate community with those in our church? Yes. By all means, cultivate relationships that are deep and meaningful with people in your church who you find safe and life-giving. I can't imagine that I would still be a church planter if I didn't have some great friends in our congregation. But it's important to cultivate outside relationships, too, as relationships in the church will inherently have limits that stop short of what you need.

As much as I trust my friends in the church, there are certain pains, certain fears, certain discouragements that I cannot share in full, lest it color the way they see a fellow congregant. Even with my wife, who is my favorite person to process my pains with, I'm learning to be wise in what I do and don't share so I don't unfairly burden her or alter how she views someone she will see every Sunday. Consequently, I find that the longer I'm in ministry, the more I value the life-giving relationships I have with my pastor friends.

To this end, one remedy our denomination wisely employs is to organize its church planters into regional clusters. Every other month, we sit together over a two-hour brown bag lunch to tell stories of laughter and of heartache, to learn from each other, and to pray. Similarly, I convene a monthly coffee for our city's pastors, which has become an important time of reprieve for many of us. There is something great about going into a room where you know everyone at the table understands your life before you say a word. The people in my church don't always understand what my life is like, but my pastor buddies do.

Physical, emotional, spiritual, relational. Do you believe that God *wants* to care for you in each of these ways? If we are involved in the rigors of church planting, we need to be sure to receive from him. How do we do this? God is the primary actor here, but as we will see in the next chapter, it requires intentionality on our part as well.

FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. In what ways have you experienced Elijah Syndrome? What have you found helps you navigate this?
2. How would you rate your current physical, emotional, spiritual, and relational health?
3. What is one thing you can do in each of these areas to better let God care for you?

FURTHER RESOURCES

Adrenaline and Stress by Archibald Hart

The Imperfect Pastor by Zack Eswine

The Flourishing in Ministry Project (FlourishingInMinistry.org)

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ivpress.com/planting-a-church-without-losing-your-soul