

Get a Life!

Dear Tim,

Few paragraphs of Scripture have ever impacted me as much as those which describe the attitude of John the Baptist when he learned that the crowds which once came to him were now going to Jesus. In short, he was losing his job.

I've seen men and women lose jobs, and the sight isn't pretty. People usually get defensive, angry, and vindictive. This is the problem: the person and his/her job became indistinguishable.

Not so with John the Baptist. John's thinking goes like this: A person in ministry only possesses what is given him from heaven. From the beginning, he must be quite aware that he is not (and never will be) the anointed one (the Christ). Ultimately, his task is to direct people to Christ so that they forget about the person and remember only the Savior.

Sounds good, right? But watch out! Once you enter the ministry, the entire system will conspire in clever ways to make you forget everything John said. You will be overwhelmingly tempted to step from the *best man's position* to that of *the groom* and accept (if not invite) adulation which simply doesn't belong to you. As your work grows, as your skills and talents enlarge, and as your ability to lead people broadens, you will face the seduction of assuming that people need *you* more than they need Him.

Keep in mind—some day the *job* you've been called to do will come to an end. For your own well being, Tim, you need to begin to cultivate a healthy John-like perspective. If you fail to make this distinction, you may become like those who end life in bitterness and disillusionment. They resent the next generation, which takes their place. They cannot rejoice in the success of others or in the growth of the Kingdom that is happening without them. They don't know what to do with their time, how to live life as a normal, *obscure* person. They discover that their marriages, their friendships, their relationships in the community are all in trouble because they were defined by a ministry, now in the past. Their minds become dull because the only intellectual exercise they knew was preparing sermons. Their leadership skills go flat because they never learned to exercise them in any place but the church. Their own sense of self-esteem plummets because it is predicated on the applause of people, which isn't happening any more.

Now for the good news, Tim. I've known some men and women who didn't fall into this trap, and when I've talked to them about these things, this is what I've learned:

First, they cultivated a marriage that was not ministry-driven. Sadly, a minister can love his/her spouse for the things they do to make the ministry work better. And many a spouse has loved the person in the pulpit, the person the congregation admires, rather than the real person apart from the public ministry. The people I admire, Tim, made sure that their marriages were healthy with or without public activities.

Second, they made sure that there were friends out there whose affection would last beyond the days of ministry. You won't believe this until you've experienced it, but I need to warn you: 90% of those who love you as a pastor will transfer that love to *the next guy* rather quickly. And that's OK. In fact that's how it should be. You don't need a crowd, but do cultivate a few close friends over time.

Third, they maintained a personal center of living that was not defined by institutional ministry. This core included intellectual pursuits, leisure activities, and interests that were not antithetical to their ministries but not driven by them either. For example, some of my favorite people have entered the larger community as coaches, volunteer fire fighters, working in community charities, and helping out in schools. One pastoral couple I have always admired took up ballroom dancing and developed relationships with a host of people they would never have met in a church parking lot.

Let me wrap this up with a story. When I was a teenager, we would occasionally drive up to a ghost town in the Rocky Mountains. Its only inhabitant was an old woman (a veteran of the mining days) who was mentally imbalanced. Among her peculiar behaviors, she would threaten unwanted visitors with a shotgun. Somehow we were romanced by this. One day it became necessary for state authorities to take her away to the state hospital. When they tried to bathe her, they could not remove her hat because she had worn it for so many years, the fibers of her hair had grown up through the fabric. Thus, it became necessary to cut off her hair to remove her hat.

I think you understand where I am going, Tim. Don't let your pastoral role so enmesh itself in your personhood that when your tenure of institutional leadership ends, your personal life ends also. Make sure you know what can be laid aside with grace and what can go on . . . because it is the real you.

If you have any further questions, call John the Baptist. He was an expert on such a matter.

Warmly,

Gordon MacDonald

World Relief Chairman, Belmont, New Hampshire

To this John replied, 'A man can receive only what is given him from heaven.'

*You yourselves can testify that I said, 'I am not the Christ
but am sent ahead of him. The bride belongs to the bridegroom*

. . . He must become greater: I must become less.'

John 3:27-30