How Transparent? How Vulnerable?

by

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How transparent should a minister of the gospel be with those he or she serves? How vulnerable can we, or should we, allow ourselves to be with them?

I am well aware of the school of thought that says, “People don’t want to know the personal problems of their doctor, their lawyer, their accountant, or their pastor. If you’re open and honest with them about your problems, you will lose your effectiveness in ministry. Talk to a therapist, to a fellow pastor, to your spouse, but don’t tell the people of the congregation.” The problem with that way of thinking is that it doesn’t take into account the richness and complexity of the local church.

I’m going to talk specifically about pastoral ministry because that’s what I know something about. There is something extremely complicated – and very beautiful – about the relationships that exist between the pastor and the people he serves in the name of Jesus. It’s not exactly like any of the caregiving or helping relationships mentioned in the previous paragraph. Especially when he serves faithfully for a period of years, the lives of the pastor and “his people” (Christ’s people whom Christ has entrusted to the pastor’s care) become dynamically interwoven.

Is it possible that lack of transparency and vulnerability leads to shallow and sterile relationships in ministry? In 1 Corinthians 12:26 it says, “If one part [of the body] suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.” Pastors generally seem willing to go along with the second half, the part about being honored. Why do we make ourselves the exception to the first half, the part about suffering? Aren’t we part of the body? Why do we think we have to suffer in silence? Is that perhaps an insidious form of the spiritual arrogance described earlier in verse 21: “I don’t need you!”?

Galatians 6:2 says, “Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.” Is the pastor not part of the “one another”? Is he always to be bearing the burdens of others and never sharing his burdens? Is that perhaps a subtle form of condescension that says, “You’re not strong enough or wise enough to help me bear my burdens”?

Maybe by keeping up appearances, so to speak, we also keep “our people” (Christ’s people whom He has entrusted to our care) in spiritual immaturity and superficiality. They learn to be dependent on the pastor rather than experiencing the dependence on Christ and interdependence with one another that is described in the body metaphor of 1 Corinthians 12. By keeping our problems to ourselves, are we perhaps missing out on some amazing opportunities to set an example and teach an important real-life lesson in burden-bearing? If the pastor is cultivating, consciously or not, a culture of dependence on him, that’s a huge problem.

I’m asking a lot of questions. I really don’t know the answers. I hope the questions are helpful for reflection and conversation.