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Contemplative Spiritual Practices-Part 1

Running Toward a False Finish Line

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Twenty years ago, as a soon-to-be high school senior, I walked the aisle of my little church to commit my life to full-time vocational ministry. With the church's approval, I began to serving in any and every area the leaders would allow a passionate 17-year-old to serve. I taught children's Sunday School classes, coached pee-wee sport teams, and helped with VBS. My youth pastor let me follow him around so that I could get a taste of what working for the church might look like. I had a vision of reaching hundreds — no thousands — of teenagers for Christ, if I could only get the chance.

Now twenty years have passed. I am married with five children and doing exactly what I dreamed about as a high school senior growing up in Memphis, Tennessee. I am serving as the lead youth pastor of a great church near Nashville. I have lived, and am continuing to live out, the vision and dream God gave me so many years ago. Even so, I have a confession to make. I have to be honest. I think I am having a youth ministry mid-life crisis.

After working in paid church youth ministry for the past 15 years, attending all of the national youth ministry conferences, reading countless books and magazines, networking with other youth pastors and after all that I have been through and experienced — I can't help shake this nagging feeling that I am a failure in youth ministry.

Even though I have completed seminary, implemented all of the "right" models, and even played David Crowder songs beautifully on my guitar, too many of the youth I have worked with have grown up to either abandon their faith and leave church altogether, or just fill a pew with very little interest in serving in any ministry.

What happened? I worked all of the long hours, spent weeks away from my family, stayed up late playing video games, and prayed not nearly enough. Even with all of the sacrifices I have made, the end result has been a bitter pill to swallow. Of course I do have those students who are on the mission field or in seminary or serving faithfully in their church, but these are largely outnumbered by those who are completely ambivalent to the gospel.

By now, some of you might be sitting back in your chair thinking, "Poor guy — he hasn't really had much success, has he?" That's the thing — according to the standards of the American church, I have. I have grown ministries from a handful of students to hundreds.

I have packed the pew, stuffed the bus, rocked out the youth center, and filled the baptismal pool. Over the past fifteen years, I have served in large and small churches, always enjoying some level of success with both youth and parents.

However, as I have grown older, and as my former students have grown older, all of the "attaboys" and "we're lucky to have you" have begun to sound hollow and empty. Why did I commit my life to all of this as an idealistic teenager? Wasn't it to see teenagers fall in love with Jesus and give their lives away for the sake of Christ? Somehow that initial fire has been slowly replaced by the standard, "Let's hope they stick around to graduation, go forth with some small understanding of the Gospel, stick with God through college, and return to church in their twenties with their children."

I cannot and will not accept this standard for success in the ministry God has given me. I am pouring out my life as an offering to the Lord to see teenagers pour out their lives as an offering to Him as well. I will accept nothing less, not for our youth and not for my own children.

So, if I have seemingly followed the right models, if I have listened to all of the right voices, and I still haven't gotten the results I can sleep with at night, then something else must be wrong. Maybe the race I've been running in youth ministry has been to the wrong finish line.

Is it possible that what I have thought is the finish line with teenagers isn't really the final destination God has designed?

Is it possible that I have been running toward a false finish line?

Is there another finish line that God desires teenagers to reach?

One thing that has greatly helped me in my crisis is to know that I am not the only one going through these feelings. Other youth pastors I have talked with have expressed the same frustrations.

Since this seems to be a common experience among youth workers, let me suggest three reasons I think we run toward false finish lines.

1. Validation

As a young man in ministry, there was a time when I wanted nothing more than to fill our student worship center with excited kids who brought their Bibles, sang loudly, and took notes during the message. I wanted them to participate in our small group Bible studies, attend our retreats and camps, and live a Godly lifestyle. I believed strongly that if I could plug each student into our ministry programs and keep them involved, then each one would logically follow God passionately for the rest of their lives.

But I also wanted them to like me and think that I was the coolest human on the planet. On top of that, I really needed the parents to approve of my ministry so that the church leadership would view me as a valuable asset and keep me on staff. With all of this on my heart and mind, I began running toward the false finish line of validation.

In my mind, a successful ministry existed when the youth were excited, parents were supportive, and church leadership was satisfied with my performance. I knew deep in my subconscious that I wasn't really challenging the teenagers or their parents to grow to maturity in Christ. But, no one was complaining and my approval rating was at an all-time high. I became *the* spiritual voice for the youth at that church and even for the community.

One week, another church even brought their entire youth ministry to experience and observe our weekly youth worship gathering.

I was invited to lead worship and speak at a number of local and regional conferences and rallies. I began to imagine myself as a type of youth ministry "superhero" who had all the answers and could lead the way to the Promised Land. This is a trend that I have seen repeated in church after church over the years.

Most youth ministry contexts are designed around the worship leading and speaking abilities of a few key leaders. Whether intentionally or not, some youth ministry programs serve as a platform for youth leaders to use their specific gifts and talents to feel alive and fulfilled. These key leaders become the primary sources of spiritual "stuff" in the lives of the teenagers and, at times, even the adult volunteers.

One time, before speaking the final message at a weekend retreat, I asked the youth leader if he could prepare his adult leaders to be ready for prayer and counseling at the close of my message. I remember how uncomfortable I was when he told me that he handled all of the counseling and prayer. He stated that his adult leaders were not spiritually mature enough to pray with the students.

But isn't this similar to the Old Testament Temple model, where priests offered prayers and burnt offerings for the people? It is my understanding that Jesus came to eliminate this barrier or obstacle to our relationship with God. When Jesus died on the Cross, Scripture records that the Temple veil for the Holy of Holies was torn in two, from top to bottom. It is as if God was shouting to the whole world, "All obstacles have been removed, enter directly into My presence." Yet, have we re-created this same barrier in an age of "professionalism" in youth ministry? Are we the new "priests" who have begun to believe that we are the ones who have all of the answers because we are paid to intercede in the lives of teenagers?

If we believe this at all, we are delusional. Our ministries must be centered on the person of Jesus Christ, and not driven by the humanity of our own leadership.

2. People-Pleasing

In a culture where almost every group or institution has a purpose statement — ice cream shops, hospitals, newspapers, and, of course, youth ministries — we have become accustomed to imagining the finish line. Did my ice cream sundae satisfy me? Was my waitress proficient at dinner? Did my exterminator kill all the spiders? We live in a consumer-driven culture.

This same culture has crept into the Church. Virtually every church I visit or attend has a purpose statement. Some of the purpose statements are short and sweet, others are long and well-crafted. However, for many ministries, these statements are merely words.

Those who come to "partake" of our ministries come with a consumer mindset. As this change in perspective has taken root, the purpose of our ministry has become to satisfy the consumer; whether we like it or not.

The real purpose of many of our youth ministries is to entertain teenagers, appease parents, and placate church leaders. This has become our finish line.

The cycle is simple. Teenagers complain to their parents that the youth program is boring. Parents complain to the church leaders that they may have to visit other churches to find a youth ministry that works for them. The church leaders place pressure on the youth leader to provide a youth program that is exciting for teenagers, is well attended, and produces the right number of conversions and baptisms. Youth workers respond by producing a youth ministry program that will keep the paycheck coming and keep them in good

graces with everyone. I have to wonder though, if in so doing, we please everyone but God.

I cannot find an example in Jesus' ministry where He did anything in order to entertain or appease the will of the people. His call for discipleship in Matthew 16:24-25 was radical: *"If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whosoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it."*

Jesus walked with His disciples, teaching them how to minister to others and how to spread the gospel all over the world. He was focused on fulfilling His mission.

As I have thought more about the ministry of Jesus over the years, I have concluded that I have been running toward a false finish line, while God was calling the youth at our church further and deeper into His grace and love. Sure, there have been times when I have been convicted about the lack of long-term effect my ministry has had on the teens in our church. Yet, feeding my five growing children and keeping my job always took precedent.

When I look back over the years, I have always caved to the pressure applied by youth, parents, and even pastors to create a ministry that kept everyone happy. I have learned that even if you please everyone in a particular church, circumstances can change quickly and you can find yourself in trouble anyway. It is an uphill battle. I have subconsciously known it was wrong all along, but I was really not in a position to make changes.

Then one day, a thought occurred to me. Could it be possible that the programs I have developed, in an effort to please everyone involved, have been a distraction to God actually reaching and loving the teenagers with whom He has entrusted me? Is it possible that all of my clever slogans, creative programming, and hi-tech productions have become an obstacle to Jesus reaching His teenagers?

God impressed upon me that He was the One to whom I would ultimately be accountable. I needed to start standing up for what I knew was most important in the lives of His teenagers.

3. Respecting Tradition

A third reason we run toward a false finish line is our respect for youth ministry traditions. Some youth ministry traditions are forced upon us, and others we (sometimes unknowingly) propagate ourselves. Whenever I have taken on a new ministry, I am very quickly educated on those nonnegotiable "sacred cows" of that particular ministry. If I decide to cancel a fall retreat or a senior banquet, the honeymoon will be over more quickly than you think. A friend just recently experienced great turmoil when he eliminated a traveling choir program during the first few months at his new church. His first year was far more difficult than it needed to be.

We also bring some traditions along with us to a ministry that we believe are essential to our success. Our traditions may have been passed down to us from our mentors, our experiences, or even our denominations. These can be program designs, prayer emphases, Bible study materials, or even special retreats. Being a musician and songwriter, I am very passionate about the atmosphere and style of worship we provide for our youth services. I have carried this emphasis with me to every new church in which I have served. It is one my valued traditions.

We can often be just as passionate about our traditions as a church can be about theirs. As a result, a large amount of the planning and programming is reflective of these shared

traditions. We usually have to work fairly hard to sell a new idea to our youth ministry teams. Even then, we may have to agree to a trial period for a new program. Often our new idea came from something we read about in a new book or heard about from another youth leader across town.

I wonder how much of our planning is truly driven by prayer and the leadership of the Holy Spirit, and how much of it is driven by convenience and tradition? In his book *Family-Based Youth Ministry*, Mark DeVries echoes this sentiment: "Much of our thinking and planning about youth ministry gets done outside the context of our faith. And when dependence on God's grace is excluded from our thinking, we wind up trusting human strategies (and our own abilities to work those strategies)."

I wonder what would happen if our youth ministry teams would fast and pray for 40 days, seeking direction from God for the vision and structure of our ministries? When we gathered back together to share what God had revealed, would it be anything similar to the programs that currently exist? Would we have to be brutally honest and admit that some (or most) of the structure exists for the wrong reasons — to provide a stage for leadership, to eliminate the griping and complaining, or to carry on the status quo? Also, are we afraid that we will fail if we leave our ministries entirely in the hands of God, or that the results won't make us seem very successful? Are we willing to trust the Holy Spirit in His ability to reach and change His teenagers?

Time for Change

I knew that God wanted to work miracles in my ministry that only He could take credit for, and that it was time to remove these obstacles. I desperately wanted to help and not hinder God's work in our youth ministry. I knew the changes I needed to make required a more contemplative approach to ministry.

So, I began to pray about leaving a church that resisted these changes and demanded a false finish line. It took several painful years to finally find a new place of service where the leadership understood the ultimate finish line: to see God drawing teenagers into a passionate personal relationship with Him.

This past summer, one of my former youth, Jake, served on staff with us as one of our youth ministry summer interns. I first talked with Jake when he was freshman and rode with me while I made hospital visits. Four years later, I stood with him as he announced to our church that he was surrendering his life to full-time ministry. It is an amazing encouragement to know that somehow in the midst of my struggles in ministry, former youth like Jake commit their lives to Christ and choose to serve Him and His church for a lifetime. This is what keeps me going.

In part two of this article, I will describe the more prominent changes that I have made in my youth ministry philosophy and programming over the past five years. I will also share the profound effect these changes have had in the lives of the students whom I serve.

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