



MICAH FRIES + JEREMY MAXFIELD

LEVELING **THE CHURCH**

Multiplying Your Ministry by Giving It Away

Chapter 6THE DANGER OF
THE SUPER PASTOR

I have a good friend who also has years of experience as a pastor. He shared a story with me of being on vacation when he received a phone call from a deacon about an issue that had come up while he was away. The issue could have been dealt with when he returned from vacation, but the deacon insisted that the pastor return right away to deal with this specific area of stress in the church. When my friend replied, “Brother, I’m on vacation,” the deacon responded, “That doesn’t matter. You’re still the pastor when you are on vacation.” In a sense, the deacon was right, the pastor is the pastor at all times and at all places. But does that mean the deacon had a right to call the pastor to return home prematurely from his vacation?

Unfortunately, that’s exactly what church leaders in too many churches believe. They hired a pastor, and the pastor is always available. They probably would never admit it, but they thought they hired a Super Pastor, and the Super Pastor is always available. Too often, church members look to the pastor to be and do what only Jesus can be

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and do. Prolific writer and Catholic priest Henri Nouwen once wrote, “We ministers may have become so available that there is too much presence and too little absence . . . too much of us and too little of God and his Spirit.”¹ Let it sink in. As pastors, our presence can become a hindrance instead of a help for our congregants’ spiritual growth and health. We can “do” too much.²

Why should a church member wait for his or her prayer to be answered or to reach out in vulnerability to the church community when the Super Pastor is only a click away? Call. Text. Tweet. Message. Email. The church may even pay for his phone. It’s his job to save the day. Churches often fail to recognize that pastors and church leaders are broken, just like church members are. They are not only broken, but finite and limited. However, I’m not convinced that inappropriate leadership expectations from church members are the biggest problem with the Super Pastor syndrome.

The Super Pastor expectations that so often seem to go hand in hand with modern church leadership are a black mark on the church. The Super Pastor is the pastor who is always on call, ready to serve. Nights, weekends, and vacations are no barrier, they never miss a hospital visit, they always preach with passion, conviction, and so on. It’s exhausting, isn’t it? And like many pastors, I’ve bad-mouthed the whole concept and bemoaned its existence. But then one day I realized that its presence was, in large part, the fuel that kept my ministry—and even worse, my soul—going. And I don’t think that I am alone. I am pretty confident that the continued existence of the Super Pastor problem is the result of poor leadership from pastors even more than it is the result of bad expectations from church members.

It's easy to point our fingers at cultural influence while forgetting that we breathe the same air that everyone around us breathes. No matter what pedestal people may prop us up on or what platform we may or may not have, there's a part of our heart that likes attention. For some, the desire is easy to recognize, like a celebrity host who comically motions for more applause while telling the audience to stop. For others, it takes the loss of platform to recognize that the spotlight had become a comfort zone and even a source of identity. Most of us would probably say that we wouldn't be found at either end of the spectrum—openly craving or naively losing our identity in the role of pastor or leader—we believe we live in a healthy middle ground. But many of us live the Super Pastor story.

Many of us put on the cape and mask. Before we can move past the Super Pastor expectations of others, we have to be honest about it in ourselves. Leader after leader after leader has to struggle with this dual personality. We have a tug toward suiting up. Something inside us—something other than the call of God and work of the Spirit—wants to leave the mundane behind and be the one who saves the day. Take an honest look in the mirror and ask yourself whether you're willing to take off the mask. Is your chest puffed up, are your hands on your waist, and is your cape blowing in the wind?

What Propped Up the Super Pastor's Platform?

As former residents of Nashville who both worked in the heart of downtown, Jeremy and I were all too familiar with

the spectacle of tourists on Broadway. The daily commute from our office buildings took us right through this main artery of entertainment. At any given moment, no matter what time of day or night, this route was clogged with a mixture of tourists in cowboy hats and boots, jersey-clad sports fanatics, families walking dogs and pushing strollers, symphony-goers in formal wear, screaming bachelorette parties, client meetings, and vagabond street musicians starry-eyed with the dream of being discovered. When in a good mood, the eclectic chaos was alive, buzzing with life like the assorted neon signs that lit up Broadway. It was the closest thing that Middle Tennessee could offer in resemblance to cultural epicenters like Rome or Ephesus in which New Testament churches existed. On the opposite side of the river was an NFL stadium. The Titans apparently have a long history of losing that predates Nashville by a few thousand years. In ancient Greek religion, Titans were divine beings who were overthrown by the Olympians, including Zeus, Apollo, Athena, and Artemis of the Ephesians.

When picturing the weight that Super Pastors try to carry, imagine Atlas, the mythical Titan who was doomed to stand on the western edge of the world, supporting the heavens for the rest of eternity. The difference between Atlas and Super Pastors is that Atlas was forced to carry the burden as a punishment. We (Super Pastors) voluntarily lift unrealistic expectations onto our shoulders and could put them down if we chose to. But we don't. People may expect us to bear the load ourselves, and pastoral ministry and leadership is certainly a calling, but we're in this position by choice. We have no one to blame but ourselves collectively and individually. Our cultural worldview has led to

a number of ramifications in the church culture, and now we're finally at a tipping point for recognizing the massive problem that looms precariously overhead.

In chapter 3, we saw the danger of what happens when we expect professionalism by those who serve us. I don't mean that we expect professional behavior as much as I think we expect a certified professional to be the one doing the serving or work. We would never visit an unlicensed doctor, we can't show up in court with a lawyer who doesn't have a law degree, and we expect ministry to be done by professionals. In fact, when I recently had a tree cut down in my yard, I ensured that the person doing the job was insured and bonded so I wouldn't be liable for any shoddy work. This desire for professionalism coupled with a consumer-driven view of the church makes for a bad combination.³

As we discussed in chapter 4, most of us, I believe, shop for churches the way I like to shop for blue jeans. When I look for blue jeans, I look for the best store offering the most comfortable product and asking the smallest price from me (mostly because I'm cheap). So many of us do the same thing with the church. When we are looking for a church, we often refer to it as "church shopping." Our means of determining a good church generally center on finding a great church "product" that fits us most comfortably and asks the least of us. Once we have found a church we like, we expect a professional pastor to deliver us goods and services, of the spiritual kind. We view church as a place, not as a people, and we go there on occasion to get our spiritual "fill-up" where the professional dispenses the goods and services while we sit in the chairs, watching (many times

entertained), and we put some money in the plate on occasion so that we've rightly paid for the goods and services we are receiving from the pastoral professional. We then go home, "filled up" and ready to make it through another week, as if church is a place where go to get our "spiritual pit-stop." In this environment, pastors, we aren't creating disciples; we are crafting consumers, and we are very good at it.

And in chapter 5, we saw the power of independence. Like Atlas, our cultural worldview puts each of us at the center of the universe as the axis on which the world revolves. In this context, we have built the perfect three-legged platform to elevate pastors in order to serve spiritual needs in any and all ways we deem appropriate. We've propped leaders up and in doing so we've created the Super Pastor complex. But, while many pastors decry this publicly, I'm convinced most of us never really want it to go away. It occurred to me that the churches I have served are full of people with emotional baggage. In fact, every person

on the planet carries their own baggage. In the midst of this baggage, each of us tries to find ways to self-medicate to help us handle the baggage. Some use food, some use alcohol, some use sex, but we all use something. For the pastor, though, the emotional need is generally

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no different. We are broken just like the people in our churches. We are in need of redemption, of being put back together. And until Jesus returns, we will continue to deal with our brokenness.

As pastors and church leaders, we have our own various kinds of emotional baggage, and while we may occasionally self-medicate using the same means as everyone else, the truth is a fair number of us use ministry as a means of self-medicating. It can be intoxicating. Pastors and church leaders suffer from identity issues, morale issues, affirmation issues, or even purpose—and each of these emotional needs are served every time a consumer-driven people calls on us to serve, and we do, and then they affirm us as the great pastor who does what no one else can do. Let's be honest, when the sweet older lady grabs us by the arm at the end of the service and says, "Pastor, no one preaches to me like you do," it's like nectar to our souls. When the couple who has been fighting calls us to their house at two o'clock in the morning and we spend the next three hours helping them navigate their crisis and on the way out the door they grab us, give us a hug, and tell us, "I don't know what we would do without you"—it is indeed sweet. But ultimately, it turns sour.

The solution to this problem is found in Ephesians 4. Paul tells the church at Ephesus,

And he himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, equipping the saints for the work of ministry, to build up the body of Christ, until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of God's Son, growing into maturity with a stature measured by Christ's fullness. (vv. 11–13)

God's vocational design for church leaders is to equip the saints for works of ministry, not to do ministry for the saints.

The pastor's familial responsibility is to do ministry. The pastor's vocational responsibility is to equip the members of the church so that we all can do ministry together.

In other words, we enlist, equip, and deploy the people in our churches so that, together, we serve the ministry needs of our church family. At Brainerd, we tell our pastors that we bring them on staff not to do ministry, but to equip the church to do ministry. This doesn't mean that the pastors are exempt from ministry. Instead it reframes our understanding of ministry.

We contend that the pastor's familial responsibility is to do ministry. We all, pastors and members, do ministry as part of the church family. The pastor's vocational responsibility, then, is to equip the members of the church so that we all can do ministry together. We prevent anyone from taking the Super-Pastor approach when we hand off ministry, prepare others to do what we have historically done, and keep ourselves from always being front and center. Within this paradigm, pastors don't stop doing ministry. No, they do ministry but do so along with the rest of the body—and not because they are the pastor, but because they are a member of the body, and every member of the body is equipped to serve together.

The problem is that when we practically embrace a Super-Pastor model of church leadership, often in an effort to satisfy our souls that are longing for affirmation, we stunt the

ability of the church to be a place of multiplication. We can't afford to hand off ministry when we need that ministry, and the applause we get because of it, to continue feeding our souls. Pastors and church leaders, we have to acknowledge our complicity in the stunting of multiplication in the church. We are often the cause of people not being developed, trained, and sent out. We are a bottleneck for multiplication and growth. Most people, including ourselves, expect the primary work of ministry to come through us.

On the other hand, we also need to remember that “the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead lives in [us]” (Rom. 8:11). The same power that worked in Christ's resurrection and through the apostles at Pentecost has also been given to us. It can be said in our cities that “these men who have turned the world upside down have come here too” (Acts 17:6). So how do we unleash the potential of our churches to see a fresh movement of God?

This starts by turning our own leadership paradigm upside down. Imagine the movement and power of God being poured out through you in order to bless the people around you. The Living Water gives not only eternal but also abundant life, nurturing gospel seeds as they take root, grow to maturation and fruitfulness, and reproduce. In our current leadership paradigm of professionalism, many leaders are functioning as a funnel, distilling the grand things of God for more manageable consumption as we bottle-feed our congregations. Like temple priests, we've been the point of contact between God and the average person. People expect our presence to be like the finger of God, the tip of the funnel, providing the unique spiritual

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touch that people need. Ministry gets funneled through the leader to the people. The Super Pastor is in the middle, supporting all the ministry responsibilities, like Atlas on behalf of the mere mortals around him. But this isn't heroic. The Super Pastor is a myth, just like Atlas. The result is a minimal capacity for influence and impact.



Instead of being a bottleneck for ministry growth, we need to flip this funnel like a shower head, multiplying points of contact and ministry outlets. The surface area that we can now cover is exponentially greater. Our influence and impact increases. Now our leadership is a matter of equipping the saints for the work of ministry. We pour into them so they can pour into others. Each unique person, with his or her unique gifts, in his or her unique positions and spheres of influence can now work together to everyone's mutual benefit.



Unlike Atlas, who was doomed forever to be stuck between the heavens and the earth, you have a choice. You can step down from the pedestal you're propped up on, take off the Super-Pastor cape, and level the church. Start spreading the work of ministry around, multiplying impact by giving ministry away.

When we do this, Jesus is much more likely to get the credit. When we do everything, serving as the Super Pastor, we too easily get the credit as the one spinning all the plates. In the midst of it, we can even get more credit by appearing humble and overworked—all the while actually loving the attention and affirmation it affords to us. What might the church look like if we pushed back, in a truly countercultural way, against the rampant independence and consumerism and jettisoned the Super-Pastor approach by equipping the saints, doing ministry together, and exiting center stage? I'm convinced that Jesus would be honored. And pastor, you might just keep your ministry from ruining you while you try to use it to feed your soul.

Understand the Gospel

How do we resist the Super-Pastor syndrome? Obviously, we have to lead our churches to rightly understand what church leadership looks like, and the remainder of this book points us in that direction. But in this chapter, we need to look inward, at our own lives, and we need to consider the state of our own hearts and souls. In order for us to resist the siren song of using ministry as our own form of self-medication, our souls must first be rooted in an appropriate understanding of the gospel. God alone can satisfy and give us purpose.

Tim Keller has said that understanding our identity in Christ is significant because it is the only identity that is received rather than achieved.⁴ This is no small matter. Pretty much everything else in life is based on what we can do. How large is your church? How many baptisms did you have? How much is your offering growing? These are not bad indications about a church, in and of themselves, but they are horrible assessments of your spiritual identity. In a sense it is like loving your children, and ascribing to them worth, based on how well they wash the dishes, mow the lawn, and clean their room. I don't love my children because of what they do but rather because of who they are. They are mine. In the same sense, God values us not by any effort we exert but by the gift of Jesus on the cross. That's what the gospel tells us.

One reason why so many pastors gravitate to the Super-Pastor syndrome is that so few of us are able to really rest in the accomplished work of Jesus on the cross. We run toward being the Super Pastor, subconsciously thinking we need to be, while not recognizing that the Super-Pastor syndrome is a cheap knock-off of the real thing—namely the gospel, the hope of Jesus on the cross, in your place, securing your identity, purpose, and hope. There is not one thing you can do that will secure God's love and affection for you any more than what is present right now, at this moment. That is an incredibly liberating reality.

Understand the Church

We desperately need not only to understand our identity in Christ and the gospel but also to recognize that the church

is not ours. To be fair, I think we would all agree with that. The church is Jesus' body, His bride. Jesus is the head of the church. But understand that when I say that the church is not ours, I mean the church is not ours to use as some form of medication for the spiritual weaknesses that plague our souls. Not only are we not in charge of the church, but the church is not created for us to use for our personal benefit. This is important, because the church cannot deliver on that hope.

The church is not created for you to use for your personal benefit.

The church is Jesus' bride, created by God for Him. You and I, as pastors and church leaders, are given authority and responsibility, by God, to prepare His bride for Jesus, the groom. When we use the church for our own personal benefit, we are guilty of a kind of spiritual prostitution. This is dangerous territory. The bride, the body, is for Jesus. We are entrusted with a sacred responsibility to lead her and prepare her to meet her groom. She is more important, and greater, than we are. Pastor, if you believe that you are susceptible to using the church in this way (and I think nearly every Christian leader is tempted to), be honest with the Lord about it and ask Him to help you sacrificially and humbly lead the church.

Leading the church is not easy. We are called to do so with sacrifice and humility. We are also responsible for leading her with conviction and faithfulness. Getting this right is vital to leading the church to be a place where multiplication happens.

Getting this wrong can have devastating effects on not just the church but also our own lives.

Understand Your Heart

The man who came to be known as the Weeping Prophet had been set apart by God since he was in his mother's womb. It's a beautiful picture of the Lord's sovereignty and providence. The man experienced a profound calling to leadership, hearing the voice of God and then seeing two intense visions from God. But before God revealed the nature of his ministry through the visions, young Jeremiah already doubted his ability. He didn't feel skilled enough to qualify for the job. Yet the Lord chose him. But this didn't make his ministry any easier, nor more successful by earthly standards.

He earned his nickname of the Weeping Prophet through a difficult season of history and a lonely ministry. In seeing the stubborn sin of worldliness among God's people, he rebuked Judah with the harsh reality that "cursed is the person who trusts in mankind. He makes human flesh his strength" (Jer. 17:5), just like the original sin of proud independence of Adam and Eve in their effort to be like God. It's not only foolish and futile; it's cursed. While Jeremiah didn't suffer from the Super-Pastor complex, he did feel the crushing weight of despair that comes from working alone. And the people he pleaded with to come out of their worldly lifestyles were deceived into believing they were fine. After all, this was just how life was at this point; each neighbor looked alike as everyone was living out the same

self-indulgent delusion. Look honestly at Jeremiah's sobering words:

The heart is more deceitful than anything else,
and incurable—who can understand it?

I, the LORD, examine the mind,
I test the heart
to give to each according to his way,
according to what his actions deserve.
(Jer. 17:9–10)

How terrifying is the thought of the Lord judging your heart, mind, and actions? Are you drawing attention to yourself? Do you enjoy feeling needed? Is a false humility fooling everyone else but you and the Lord? Are you scared of giving away ministry? Are you insecure about developing other leaders? Are you worried that you'll be the leader to finally drop the ball and be remembered as the failure? Are you exhausted from doing everything yourself? Are you on the brink of crashing and burning as a Super Pastor?

Spend a few moments in prayerful reflection, and rest in the following prayer from the greatest leader in Israel's history—a man after God's own heart, but who was far from perfect. Despite your shortcomings and your situation, the Lord knows your heart and loves you with mercy and grace. Spend time in confession and repentance as needed. Praise God that He knows you perfectly and chose you specifically.

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LORD, you have searched me and known me.
You know when I sit down and when I stand up;
you understand my thoughts from far away.
You observe my travels and my rest;
you are aware of all my ways.
Before a word is on my tongue,
you know all about it, LORD.
You have encircled me;
you have placed your hand on me.
This wondrous knowledge is beyond me.
It is lofty; I am unable to reach it.

Where can I go to escape your Spirit?
Where can I flee from your presence?
If I go up to heaven, you are there;
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.
If I live at the eastern horizon
or settle at the western limits,
even there your hand will lead me;
your right hand will hold on to me.
If I say, “Surely the darkness will hide me,
and the light around me will be night”—
even the darkness is not dark to you.
The night shines like the day;
darkness and light are alike to you.

For it was you who created my inward parts;
you knit me together in my mother’s womb.
I will praise you because I have been remarkably and

wondrously made.
Your works are wondrous,
and I know this very well.
My bones were not hidden from you
when I was made in secret,
when I was formed in the depths of the earth.
Your eyes saw me when I was formless;
all my days were written in your book and planned
before a single one of them began.

God, how precious your thoughts are to me;
how vast their sum is!
If I counted them,
they would outnumber the grains of sand;
when I wake up, I am still with you.

God, if only you would kill the wicked—
you bloodthirsty men, stay away from me—
who invoke you deceitfully.
Your enemies swear by you falsely.
LORD, don't I hate those who hate you,
and detest those who rebel against you?
I hate them with extreme hatred;
I consider them my enemies.

Search me, God, and know my heart;
test me and know my concerns.
See if there is any offensive way in me;
lead me in the everlasting way. (Ps. 139)


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