



Pastors in Transition

This article addresses the incredible journey God is taking many Pastors, around the world through. It is the journey from traditional Church to Jesus' concept of Church, from formal ministry to spiritual ministry, from being the "head," to submitting to the "Head," from being the focus to returning the focus to Jesus. It is a challenging transition from being the traditional Church Pastor, to a shepherd after God's own heart.

When I refer to "Traditional Church," I am not automatically referencing the Church that meets in buildings or has a Church staff. Many in the House Church movement are just as traditional and hierarchical in their approach as any in the Institutional Church.

If you have wondered what God is doing in your life, and right now it feels all mixed up, hopefully this short article will bring some light in your darkness.

William Bridges, in his book "Transitions" identifies 3 phases in life transitions - Endings, The Neutral Zone, and New Beginnings. In describing these three phases I couldn't help recognize the application to former pastors transitioning from CEO roles over their mini Church corporations, or if uniquely skilled their mega Church corporations, into their new roles in the small home church environment.

Such transitions are amazingly difficult for many reasons. In this article I will attempt to address some of the transitional elements and phases, and provide some encouragement for those pastors working through their transitions.

Let me begin by saying, if you are one of those pastors, as I have been, you are reading this article with a deep inner "Oh God...please help me read something here that will help me discover some keys to get me through this horribly difficult season in my life." I know from experience how painful this time is in your life because I have been making my own transition. At times the agony may well be as intense as that experienced by one over coming an addiction to any powerful drug.

Phase One: Endings

God has come to you, via a variety of methods, whether those methods are friends, books, development of strange inner desires, new awarenesses, those who have wounded you and unwittingly been God's tool to open your eyes through revelation, and prayer, so as to let you know you are about to end one approach to Church, your ministry, who you are in the Kingdom, what is to motivate you, the place of Jesus, how you will experience personal significance, and what Jesus had in mind for Church in the first place. Prepare yourself...your world is about to be seriously rocked!

Let me also confirm a nagging inner suspicion you should be wrestling with, namely, what is the likelihood you are bringing along a lot of religious baggage with you, without realizing it? In other words, what is the likelihood you are about to create a miniature version of the

traditional Church in your own home? Answer: VERY LIKELY! Why? Because of massive conditioning over your lifetime, and reinforced by centuries of religious practices that need to be abandoned, but which are so ingrained in our thinking we can hardly detect them as being useless religious tradition, and tend to consider them to be essential elements to a vibrant faith and ministry.

We like to tell ourselves that we have left the Egypt of the traditional systems oriented Church, but in reality we are so imprinted by it we don't immediately see it all so as to leave it all behind. We may have come out of Egypt, but Egypt is far from coming out of us. You will struggle with this because you have already paid such a high price for your decision to leave the institutional Church, but as time passes you will discover getting the institutional Church out of you is not quite so easy.

So, have we actually come to an "End," of what we have supposedly left? The answer is both "yes," and "no," and that's ok. It really is, simply because it is virtually impossible it could be any other way. We would like to think we are the perfected revolutionaries we desire to be, but in reality there is just too much of the system wound into the fiber of our being to remove it in one fell swoop. It takes time! And, that time will not be wasted time. It may be excruciatingly painful time, but the pain will ultimately serve His higher purposes in our lives to bring us to the end of ourselves, as well as the end of useless Church traditions.

I encourage you to let these words stir you to prayerfully wonder before God as to what might still be clinging to you, from the system you believe you left. It will help you to be open to Him revealing what you still need deliverance from.

This brings me to phase two: The Neutral Zone

Plan on this journey taking years, rather than weeks or months. You may leave behind your title, your Church position and salary, and even the building you commandeered, but some of what you defined as ministry will take a bit longer to transition. For example, try to answer this question "What does being a 'minister' really look like for your life from Jesus' perspective?" Before you conclude you know the answer to that immediately, try to slow down your response time, out of a "need" to know the answer, and let Him slowly reveal it. Even He will take some time to open our eyes to what ministry really looks like from His perspective. I assure you, it will look radically different from what it used to look like, and in fact, it may look so different that it may initially look to you like you have permanently left the ministry, or feel like you have backslidden from your calling, or have somehow become a worldly person. Be patient with the process. You are changing within.

The nature of the Neutral Zone is that you feel stuck between two worlds, two paradigms, two identities, two purposes, two realities, etc. etc. This new place feels like no place at all. It feels like "lostness, loneliness, confusion, and unrest." If this is what you are feeling, as a result of leaving the systems approach to Church, don't be too alarmed, as this is normal for all of us. Uncomfortable? Yes! Normal? Yes!

As we think through the nature of the "neutral zone," consider what the Lord took Israel through, after He led them out of Egypt. Imagine how uncomfortable they were! I'm sure they thought they were immediately ready to take the promise land, but if they were then God was "out of touch" with their reality. Do you think? Not likely! So, if we feel many of the same things they felt, wrestle with grumbling, feel stupid, get angry at times, and wrestle with the whole "wandering thing," don't be too surprised with your feelings.

Somehow, in God's economy of things, we need to be taken out into a wilderness, i.e. a neutral zone, before we are ready to take the land of promise.

Here's a big rub...what if you or I are in our 50's, feeling like we only have a few good years left anyway, and wandering around in the wilderness feels like such a waste! After all, I've been a minister for 30+ years, am full of the Word, know "soooo" much, and to be stuck in some wilderness neutral zone feels like our lives are being wasted in the face of such worldwide need for what He has poured into us.

If you feel this way you are not alone, I truly believe it is a normal process, albeit a very uncomfortable one. I'm quite certain it perfectly ties in with what Jesus and Paul described in being a people of the cross. The work of the cross has sooo many seasons, and travels into so many different dimensions of our personhood, that at just the moment you think you are about complete in the "cross bearing" department, think again...you are just about to enter a whole new phase of its work, and this new neutral zone will be one of the most challenging experience of all.

The neutral zone is a place of not knowing, not understanding, uncertainty. Who am I? Is God done with me? Did I offend Him? Am I hopelessly off course, even though I'm as certain as I can be that I was to terminate the direction I was going, and move forward in this new way? Where are you God? Why don't you speak to me about me? You still talk to me about doctrine and other folks, but I can't seem to hear you for me? Why?

Such questions make this season very difficult. Add to this, if you are like most pastors, you became used to being called "Pastor," having your own private office, being given the respect of your staff and congregation far above that which anyone else received, you had a secure salary, benefits, and a retirement program. Now you have none of these. Now you must find alternative employment. Now you are "without portfolio," and it is really uncomfortable! This is your new cross, and it hurts. You have no pew to preach from, no captive and passive audience that honors you with quiet reverence while you share whatever is on your mind, without outburst, interruption, or apparent disagreement. Such things are heady things to give up. Figuring out who you are, without these things in your life, is no small journey.

The neutral zone is truly the "not knowing" zone. We must come to the place of recognizing we don't really know what "ministry" looks like to the Lord, or what being a "ministry" really means to the Lord for our lives. How could it be right for us to go week after week without a congregation to preach to? How could it be right to not meet with my staff weekly to discuss Church growth strategy, evangelism, the newest program, materials, and staff assignments? And, what about daily or weekly prayer times with my staff, to help them hear what God is telling me for the direction of the Church? How do I find meaning in life without all these things? This is all I've known for many years. Who am I if I'm not involved in any of these things? Very tough questions...

Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David all exemplify knowing exactly what you are feeling, and there is no indication they enjoyed it, but there is every indication they learned from it, grew in it, and later became immensely useful to the Lord in whole new ways. Could this be God's plan for our lives? Perhaps... Only God knows. What would you think if you found out His only intent for this great disruption in your life was to draw you away to Himself alone, and had no other use for you than for you to love and adore Him? Wouldn't that be an amazing thought, as relates to significance and performance?

Only God knows the full intent for this new season, and He rarely divulges much of His intent at any one time. Apparently He believes the journey is as important as the knowing. The question is, can we grow to the place of trusting Him for this, or will we languish in depression and sorrow, nursing feelings of uselessness and lostness? I can tell you, from my own experience, these have been very tough challenges, and I still am not comfortable with them, but I don't see Him being as committed to my comfort as with my growth.

And this brings us to consider "New Beginnings." What will these look like? How will we know when we have entered into this phase? Will it be better, emotionally, than the season we've just come through, or will it be a unique extension of our sorrow and brokenness? I don't know. I haven't arrived there yet. I can't speak to this now. I'd like to, but I can't.

I have this suspicion though...as with all God's dealings in our lives, they draw to a close just about the time we settle with ourselves and Him that they may well continue forever, and life just must continue on anyway. It is a place of peace in the midst of the storm, a repose in the face of contradictions, a rest within His love that says, "Ok Lord, You can't be wrong...I've given my life to You, and I move forward waiting on You to make each new step clear, no matter how long this takes or where it takes me." This is a good place to come to. From this place we are ready for the new beginnings. Prior to this and we would just make the new beginnings be about ourselves once again, and hopefully this season in the neutral zone has done some burning out of this approach to life. The idolatry of self will must be dealt with, if we are ever to be fruitful by His design and at peace with Him. Otherwise we just develop new traditions of the elders and doctrines of men. We steal His Church from Him once again. We make it all about ourselves instead of Him, and we continue to be the focus rather than Him. This must come to an end, no matter how much we must go through for it to come to an end...it just must happen.

May God bless you in this journey!