



The Myth of the Perfect Youth Pastor

Are We All
Insane?

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Introduction

I just finished deleting emails in my inbox. This task has become more and more of a struggle as the spam emails have increased. But, as I was moving 250 emails into my Junk Mail folder in the hopes that our new filter would learn and move them there itself, I was struck by some of the subject lines. *Become a better you, The women won't leave you alone, Be her superstar* and a few more that I cannot repeat. Here is what struck me. I wouldn't have to wade through this garbage if somebody wasn't buying it. It's a matter of supply and demand. Someone is paying for the pills or buying the creams in order to *Increase their Manliness*. As an aside, if you're reading this and it's you who's doing it, STOP. Please, for the love of all that is decent, stop buying the stuff so my Inbox doesn't get so full!

But, someone is buying these things. Why? What would possess someone to purchase enlargement medication that has not been declared safe by any drug agency this side of a shady ally in some far away country? Here's why – perfection. Someone out there thinks having a larger penis is going to make them irresistible to the ladies. Someone out there believes the standard of perfection lies in their pants. The flip side is also true in female circles. Ladies everywhere are buying bust enhancement medication under the false belief that larger breasts will make them perfect. I guess the reasoning is if their breasts are perfect then they can land them the perfect man with the large, perfect penis. Who knows?

So, what does all this have to do with the perfect youth pastor? Well, when it comes to churches across the U.S. many have bought the pills. They have ridiculous ideas concerning what

makes a perfect youth pastor. Many have extremely unrealistic expectations. The same insanity applies to the expectations for all pastors, but this is an article about youth pastors.

Before I start, I want to make it clear that these do not represent the leadership at my current church. The Lord has given me and my family a wonderful church in which to serve and one that values me and treats me with respect. With that said though, I have known and even served in churches that were looking for the stereotypical traits they believed made a perfect youth pastor.

Myth #1

The perfect youth pastor must be between 22 and 35 years old in order to relate to youth.

I have two friends who were “let go” from a church in which they had collectively served for over 20 years. Coincidentally, they were both about the same age when the leadership of their church found a reason to “ask” for their resignations. Some investigation revealed that the leadership of said church had bought into the erroneous belief that good youth pastors can’t relate well to youth if they are over 35. These two guys were loved by their students and very effective at what they were doing, but that didn’t matter to the men who supposedly knew better.

Sadly, this happens in many churches. The leadership comes to the conclusion that a youth pastor must be as close to the age of the youth as possible in order to be effective. They use the logic that students need someone with whom they can relate and only young youth pastors have that ability. This is ridiculous and can be damaging on many levels. It is also illogical.

No one would even begin to suggest that the Children’s Pastor be close to the age of the children. If that were the case, we’d be hiring 16-year-olds to run our children’s ministries. But, when it comes to student ministry or even college-age ministry, this standard seems perfectly acceptable.

Why? Simply put, those who hold this view don’t know what makes someone an effective pastor to begin with. What makes an effective pastor is someone who loves God and loves

people. They enter the world of the people in their church. They go out to lunch with them. They spend time with them and their families. They call them. They know them. What makes an effective youth pastor is someone who is willing to enter into the world of teens. We hang out with them. We have MySpace and Facebook accounts (sometimes). We go to their schools. We attend their football games. We hang out with them and play Xbox. We find ways to show them we are interested in them. We call them and we know them.

Students are no different than most adults. They want a pastor who shows interest in them. They want a pastor who at least makes an attempt to understand them. They want someone who loves them and knows them. When we do that, we earn the right to speak truth into their lives.

It doesn’t matter if a youth pastor is 20 or 50. If they are willing to do the hard work of building relationships then they can be an effective youth pastor. If we are unwilling to do that, we will be ineffective no matter what our age.

Myth #2

The perfect youth pastor must be a dynamic, entertaining speaker

As a pastor, the ability to speak well is a plus, but it is not a requirement. I've sat under some very good speakers. They connected with their audience. They kept their audience interested. But, when the message was over, they hid away in their office and made no attempt to connect with people on a personal level. When someone was hurting, they dismissed their hurt. When someone needed counsel, they shared it, but with little sympathy or empathy. They never sat still long enough to have a meaningful conversation with the people they were supposedly leading and as a result, they were not very effective shepherds.

I've also sat under some pretty average speakers. They didn't connect well. They had a hard time communicating their message. But, they were loved by the people they taught. Why? Because they had compassion. They were genuinely interested in people and what was going on in their lives. Consequently, when they gave an average sermon, people listened because they knew they were loved. The Shepherd knows his sheep and those who are called to shepherd the Shepherd's sheep don't need to be the most dynamic, entertaining speaker in order to lead those sheep. They need to know them.

A good youth pastor doesn't have to be an amazing speaker. They don't have to be a captivating, dynamic, funny communicator. They do have to be able to communicate in some form or another, but the hour or so they teach each week is not nearly as important as the time they spend throughout the

rest of the week making phone calls, eating lunch, hanging out and simply showing interest in their students. When we do that, we earn their trust and they will be much more willing to listen to an average lesson from us because they know they are loved.

Myth #3

The perfect youth pastor relates well with every student.

Over the last 14 years I have heard many complaints from parents about their teen's youth pastor. One of the most unfair is "my child doesn't get much from the youth ministry. The youth pastor doesn't connect well with him/her."

While that may be a valid complaint, the subsequent solution is not as valid. The solution usually involves complaining to the lead pastor or a select few other parents who then come to the conclusion that the church needs a new youth pastor simply because he does not relate well to a small number of students.

I've been on this earth for 37 years. Over that time I have come to realize one thing; I will never please everyone. As likeable as I think I am, not everyone will like me. As funny as I think I am, not everyone will laugh at my jokes. Not everyone will like the way I teach. Unfortunately though, I have discovered that there are many people who expect me to relate well with every human being between the ages of 11 and 19. I once had an adult from another church tell me they needed a youth pastor like me. They had heard me speak and came to the insane conclusion that every student in the room adored me. I suppose they then reasoned that I must be able to connect with every student. I still laugh when I think of that conversation because I can point to dozens of students over the years that I had absolutely no connection with whatsoever. No matter how hard I tried, they did not respond to me.

Youth pastors do not possess a supernatural ability to connect with every teenager. In fact, I frequently tell parents not to expect me to fix their child...I may make things worse!

One thing we have working against us is that many of our students have no choice about where they go to church. Their parents can pick and choose a church based on their personal preferences and whether or not they like the pastor. If they don't connect with the pastor, they most likely find a new church to attend. Their children don't have that same luxury for the most part. They go to church where their parents go which means they are "stuck" with a youth pastor they may not relate with well.

Church leaders would be wise to remember this the next time they hear complaints from a small few about their youth pastor's ability to relate. They would be wise to view the ministry as a whole and see how well their youth pastor relates to the majority of teens.

Myth #4

The perfect youth pastor is married and his wife is actively involved in the youth ministry.

I was a single youth pastor for the first six years. I had it good. When I began looking for a full-time position in which to serve, I was amazed at how many churches required that their youth pastor be married. I asked a few of those churches to give me their rationale for that requirement and none of them made any sense to me. Below are three of those rationales and a little commentary to let you know what I think:

1. A married youth pastor will be less likely to get involved with a student.

WHAT? How many married pastors have had affairs? How many married pastors have gotten emotionally involved with a member of their church or youth ministry? The sad truth is many have gone down this road and it had nothing to do with their marital status and everything to do with the condition of their heart and their commitment to remaining above reproach.

Whether married or single, a good youth pastor will have safeguards in place to guard his heart. He will be accountable. He will have a desire to live a holy life. Marriage does not cure one of lust or wandering eyes.

2. A married youth pastor will be less likely to be involved in porn.

Ha ha! See above.

3. A married youth pastor's wife will be able to help him with the youth group.

Like I said, I was single for the first six years as a youth pastor. During that time I only had to deal with the expectations placed on me. Those expectations were sometimes unfair and difficult to deal with, but they were nothing compared with the expectations some people place on the wives of youth pastors.

My wife is one of the godliest women I know. She deeply loves Jesus and deeply loves people. But, when we got married, she had no interest in working with teens. I was fine with that, but some leaders in the church were not and they hurt her with some of their expectations and the way they verbalized them.

A youth pastor's wife does not have to love working with teens. She should be supportive of his ministry and encourage him in his calling, but she doesn't have to be called to it as well.

Myth #5

The perfect youth pastor must be “cool” in order to relate well to teens.

This is closely tied with Myth #1, but the older I get, the more uncool I become. That was a hard truth to grasp, but it is truth. When I was 20, I was still kind of cool. Now that I am nearing 40, my coolness has diminished considerably. I can try to look cool. I can dress like my students, but the older I get the creepier that looks.

A good youth pastor doesn't have to be cool. He doesn't have to listen to the newest music, have all the up-to-date clothes or watch the same movies. All he needs to do is love his students and coolness has nothing to do with performing that task.

Myth #6

A perfect youth pastor needs to have events every month for the students while attending all other church-wide functions.

We've all been there. We have a weekend retreat coming up. We're busy planning, scheduling, collecting deposits, collecting registration forms and renting vehicles. The retreat is a huge part of our yearly calendar, but it unfortunately occurs during the same month as the church-wide marriage retreat.

So, we wisely choose to prioritize things. First, is our families. Second is our ministry which means we focus our attention on the youth retreat. Falling way down on the list is the Marriage Conference. Instead of spending two weekends away from our children that month, we choose not to attend the marriage retreat. But, since it is a church-wide event and we are a pastor on staff our attendance is assumed and expected. Our decision is greeted with shock and condemnation from the senior pastor and leadership board.

Why is it that the youth pastor is required to attend every blessed church event on top of every retreat, lock-in and mission trip? I understand we are full-time staff and people expect to see us at these things, but maybe, just maybe instead of the leadership perpetuating that ridiculous expectation, they could back us up? Maybe they could tell people the truth?

I once got heavily criticized for not attending an all-day sight-seeing trip during a missions conference. This particular church hosted a week-long missions conference. During that week, the senior pastor did not teach or lead anything. He basically had to simply show up for these events that had been

planned and organized by the missions pastor. In short, the S.P. did NOTHING during this week. I on the other hand was responsible for planning, organizing and leading the Youth Missions Conference.

This sight-seeing trip was on a Wednesday - ALL DAY. So, I decided not to attend this event - a wise choice in my mind since Wednesday evening was our big mid-week youth meeting and I had a lot to do in preparation. Unfortunately the S.P. and several elders did not see it as such a wise move and I got reamed out for not going.

When I have a lock-in I don't expect the other associate pastors or the lead pastor to attend. I understand they have a life and a family as well as their own ministries to look after. I don't complain when they don't show up at a youth retreat. I don't expect the pastoral staff to show up because "people need to see them." As an aside, people really don't "need" to see them...they just think they should.

Before I go any further, I must again say how blessed I currently am. The other pastors on staff here actually make an effort to attend some of our youth events and that is a HUGE blessing to me. But, while I love it, I don't expect it. Our lead pastor actually comes to our annual laser-tag lock-in every year (our worship pastor came one year as well) and the students love kicking his butt at a team Halo match. There is also nothing quite as exhilarating as having the opportunity to shoot fake lasers at two pastors in one night!

Here's the kicker - not one student or parent would bat an eyelash if they came to a lock-in and the worship pastor wasn't there. No one would ask me where the lead pastor was and

why he wasn't there. Why? Because it's not expected of them. So, why is that same courtesy not given to youth pastors in many churches?

The next time you are tempted to ask, "why isn't the youth pastor here?" I want you to stop and think about that question. Take a look at his schedule. Take a look at the church bulletin and look at the youth events scheduled. Consider that your youth pastor teaches on average, twice a week. He has to prepare for those lessons. The good ones out there actually DO prepare and put lots of prayer and thought into their lessons. Consider that he may have a mission trip coming up and he just may want to spend some time with his family.

Senior Pastors, the next time you want to lay into your youth pastor for not attending something, ask yourself if you would do the same to the other pastors of staff. Consider whether you have the same expectations for them.

Youth pastors don't have unlimited energy. They may work with people who do, but that energy is not transferable.

On the flip side, if you are a youth pastor, make sure you return the favor. Back your lead pastor up when you hear people put unfair expectations on him. Back up the other pastors on staff as well. When someone complains that the Lead Pastor isn't at an event, defend him. He, as well as other staff pastors do much more than most people know or even see.

Myth #7

The perfect youth pastor must be able to coordinate babysitting for all other ministries in the church.

I don't know how many times it has happened, but each time it does, I get even more frustrated. Someone calls me in the church office and asks a question. These questions come in various forms, so I'll list the ones I have heard.

- 1. The young married class is having a dinner and we need some teens to watch their children. Do you think you could set that up?*
- 2. We're having a couples night and need a few teens to watch the children. Could you give me a list of students who can be trusted?*
- 3. Saturday is the annual church dinner and we need to keep the little ones busy. Would you be willing to open up the youth room, show a video and have some students down there to keep the children busy?*
- 4. Our annual business meeting is this Sunday and we need something for the children while we have the meeting. Could you keep them busy and get a few teens to help you out?*
- 5. We are trying to encourage our married couples to have a monthly date-night. I think it would be great if you and the teens could offer childcare so our marriages can be strengthened.*

Myth #8

The perfect youth pastor must be willing to help anyone who stops by the office no matter how busy they are with their own work.

Why is it that no matter how busy we are, no matter what we are doing, if someone comes into the church office needs furniture moved, a box lifted or some other job requiring manual labor, they invariably will come to the youth pastor's office to get help?

It was Wednesday afternoon around 4 o'clock. I was in my office with the door closed, busily preparing my lesson for that evening's youth group. A knock came at my door, so I stopped what I was doing. The next thing that happened almost made me hit the roof. The person at the door said, "would you mind helping me load some tables and chairs into my van?" That was annoying enough, but what this person said next really drove me insane. "I was going to ask one of the other pastors, but I don't want to disturb them...they are probably pretty busy."

I don't mind helping out. I don't mind moving tables or chairs, but please, for the love of all that is decent and right, don't ask me to help simply because I'm "just" the youth pastor and the other guys on staff are "too busy."

Does this happen to anyone else or is it just me?

Myth #9

The perfect youth pastor must be willing to live off the smallest salary, work in the smallest office and work with the smallest budget in the church all while believing what the people of the church tell them that “the youth ministry is very important to is”.

At the outset, I want to again be very clear that most of what I have written does not apply to the church in which I currently serve. *Myth #8 absolutely does not apply here.* I am treated very well. My gifts and abilities are valued. The staff at this church is amazing. The people in the church are wonderful, gracious and loving and I would not want to be any place else.

I fully realize that many who may read this are not in a church where they feel valued or where they are encouraged. You are told how valuable you are, but the paycheck doesn't say the same thing. You are told how important the students are to the church, but the budget doesn't seem to reflect that importance. You are told that you are a valued member of the pastoral staff while standing in the expansive Senior Pastor's office only to leave and squeeze back into your janitors-closet-turned-office to try and get some work done.

If that applies to you, please know that I am well aware of what you are going through and I pray for you frequently...maybe not by name, but certainly by circumstance.

I've been there. I know what it is like to ask for a raise to help support my family only to be told that I need to meet certain “benchmarks” when I had already literally given blood, sweat and plenty of tears. I know the feeling of not being valued.

Please understand, I'm not in ministry for money. I don't expect to get rich. I don't need a BMW or designer clothes. I don't need a Rolex (or even a Citizen) watch. But, I do expect fairness.

I don't really know what it's like to operate on a shoestring budget, but I know plenty of guys who do. A friend of mine was at a church where they had a Cemetery Budget larger than the youth budget. No kidding, the church seemed to think that taking care of dead people was more important than those who were alive and kicking. The youth pastor there was allowed to borrow money from the cemetery budget to do ministry to, you know, actual LIVE PEOPLE but had to pay it back so they could take care of rotting and rotten corpses.

Many church members would not think twice about spending thousands of dollars on new hymnals, organs or hand bells, but when it comes time to increase the youth budget or update the youth room, a sudden and unexplained budget crisis pops up.

Go to any church. Speak to any member. You will hear the same things:

“The youth are important to us.”

“We value youth.”

“Youth ministry is a priority to us.”

If that were true, then all we need to do is see how much those churches pay their youth pastor, how much his budget is, and what his office looks like. Jesus said (paraphrased of course), where our treasure is reveals where our priorities are. James

says, faith without works is dead. I say, if you really value youth ministry, then put up or shut up. That may sound harsh, but I make no apology for the statement.

Good youth pastors will be able to work with whatever they have, but, talent, skill and enthusiasm can only take a ministry so far. If a church wants a good youth ministry, they need to have some skin in the game.

Myth #10

The Perfect Youth Pastor's ministry will grow numerically even though the church as a whole won't change and never grows.

I had a discussion with my 90-year-old grandmother a few years ago. Her and my 92-year-old grandfather (apparently longevity is a family trait) have attended the same church for the last 70 years. It's crazy to think about that because we live in a society where church loyalty is outdated. People leave for all sorts of asinine reasons. But, Nan and Pap came from a different time – a time when one did not leave a church for stupid reasons - they just stuck around and ran the place into the ground.

Nan asked me a question. She said they needed someone like me (all grandmas say stuff like that) and wanted to know how they can get young people to start coming to their church. I smiled and laughed a bit and gave her an answer that was not entirely true. I told her I didn't know.

Truth is, I do know. I know that a church with 35 people, ALL over the age of 80 is not going to grow very much, not unless those 35 people are willing to change the way they do things. One thing I've learned as a pastor is 80 and 90-year-olds don't change very easily. I've also learned that no one changes very easily, no matter what their age. I also know there is NO WAY on earth I would ever attempt to work at a church like that.

You see, many people believe that a perfect youth pastor's youth ministry will grow by leaps and bounds even when the church as a whole is dying. I've heard of many churches who

want to bring in a youth pastor for just that reason. They want to grow their youth ministry which, they reason, will then grow the church. So, they hire the youngest, most inexperienced person they can afford (which usually is right above the poverty level in Nepal), and then proceed to heap huge loads of expectations on him. When he fails to meet those expectations in 6 months, he is hounded by the church leadership until he resigns in frustration. I'd be willing to bet there are thousands of potentially great youth pastors selling cars right now because they think they failed as a youth pastor. The reality is, they didn't fail at being a youth pastor, they just failed to meet the unreasonable expectations of a church and failed to have reasonable expectations for themselves. That's another topic though.

Here's how this situation usually plays out.

Step One

The new youth pastor is told he will be a valued member of the team. He is told that the church is fully in support of his efforts to bring young people to the church.

Step Two

The new youth pastor informs the church leadership that he needs a youth room.

The leadership tells him he can't have a youth room because the rooms are all used for the Ladies Quilting Group, the church library which no one uses, the storage room housing the churches historical records including blue prints from the first building, the Men's Bible Study, and the evangelism class

which talks a good game, but never actually gets around to doing any real evangelism.

Step Three

The new youth pastor requests a raise in his budget so he can do some community youth outreaches.

The leadership informs him that there is no money for a youth budget because they have to fund the annual Christmas and Easter Cantata as well as purchase new hymnals.

Step Four

The new youth pastor requests the use of the church bus to take a group of teens snow tubing.

The leadership denies the request because the idea of a bunch of teens tracking snow and mud in the bus is unacceptable.

Step Five

After meeting in his one-bedroom apartment for 5 months, the new youth pastor decides he needs to find a place with more space. So, he asks the owner of a local warehouse if he has any rooms he could use. The local business man readily agrees because he likes the new youth pastor.

A few days later the church leadership informs the new youth pastor that he cannot meet in the business owner's warehouse because the business owner either:

- Doesn't attend their church

- Is not a Christian (he's a LUTHERAN!)
- Has been divorced
- Let's his wife wear pants
- Also owns a bar on the other side of town

The leadership is also fuming that the new youth pastor did not get their approval for this.

Step Six

Using his own money, the new youth pastor purchases some new NIV Student Bibles to give to the teens.

The leadership chastises him and wants to know why he didn't buy King James Bibles and demands that he return the NIVs immediately.

Step Seven

The church's semi-annual business meeting is held. Having met the 20-member requirement for a quorum, the meeting begins. The new youth pastor is brought up to give his report which is then followed by a round of questions no one bothered to ask him in private. The questions include:

- Why aren't there aren't more youth in the church service?
- Why was there a cigarette butt found on church property?
- Why doesn't he tell the youth they aren't allowed to skateboard anywhere on church grounds?
- Sister Martha wants to know how the lamp in her Young at Heart class got broken.

- Why are there only 4 kids in the youth group? Isn't he working hard enough?
- Why was he seen at a local High School at 2 p.m. instead of being in the office working?

Step Eight

The church leadership meets in a private meeting *without* the new youth pastor to *discuss* the new youth pastor. In that meeting, accusations are made against the new youth pastor. The next day, the Senior Pastor meets with him to give him the summary of the meeting. The church leadership decides one of several things:

- The new youth pastor is not cut out for the job and the want his resignation.
- The new youth pastor needs some goals and accountability.
- The new youth pastor is fired.

Step Nine

The new youth pastor becomes a new or pre-owned car salesman and now believes that he is a failure at something to which he once believed he was called.

Myth #11

A perfect youth pastor will take responsibility for the failures and mistakes of every student in the youth ministry.

I was a wrestler in Middle School and High School. Suffice it to say, I was not very good for my first few years. Actually, that's an overstatement because it implies that I had some ability to wrestle and that is far from the truth. To put it simply, I was terrible. I got pinned more times than I can count. When I wasn't getting pinned, I was getting Tech Failed (something similar to the mercy rule in baseball whereby an opponent amasses a huge number of point in a short period of time prompting the match to be stopped to prevent any further embarrassment). One humiliating defeat after another piled up over the course of my first season. But, aside from consistently losing, there was something else that remained constant - the support of my mom and dad.

I didn't have a clue why a parent would faithfully attend their son's wrestling matches week in and week out only to see him get pounded - that is - until I had my own children. I am so proud of my son and daughter. We celebrate every little accomplishment from uttering the first word to pooping on the potty. Being a dad truly does inspire moments of pride. But, there's one more thing that is inspired by one's children...embarrassment.

I can't count how many temper tantrums we have endured in public places. There was the time the pre-school class was singing in the annual Christmas program. The church was full. The family members were all there. Then it happened...my son decided he wasn't going to sing and ran

off the stage crying. This was funny and cute to everyone watching, but to my wife and I, it was a bit embarrassing. Then there was the time the class came up on stage and my son wasn't with them. A little frightened, I walked downstairs only to find my son hanging out with another adult. Apparently he decided he didn't want to sing and ran away from his class as they were heading upstairs to perform.

Every parent has had to endure similar things at one time or another and every parent struggles with the feelings that come as a result. There are times when I take ownership of the behavior and feel as if it reflects poorly on me as a parent. I am quickly learning that I am not responsible for every childish thing my children do or say. I'm also learning that every other parent experiences similar things. Nothing makes a parent feel better than when they see another child throwing a fit! The truth is, they are children and as such, they will act like children and as a parent, it is not healthy to take responsibility for every childish thing they do.

Unfortunately, at times youth pastors feel the need to do the same thing. When one of our students fails, we feel like a failure. When one of our students gets pregnant, we sometimes feel as if we need to apologize to the parents for not doing enough. When we are at a retreat and our students aren't taking part in the activities, we feel it's our fault. Worse yet, when our group is spiritually immature, we quietly wonder if that is a reflection on our leadership or teaching ability.

I remember a time right after I started in Youth Ministry - we had just finished a youth retreat and I felt like a failure. None of the students seemed to enjoy themselves. None of them seemed to "get anything" out of the retreat. When I got home,

I drove to my parent's house and spoke to my dad. Soon after our conversation started, I began to cry. I felt like there was something I wasn't doing right and if I didn't figure out what that something was, my students were going to be lost.

My dad gave me some sage advice. It wasn't an earth-shattering revelation, but just a bit of wisdom from someone who had a lot more of it than I did. I am not the Holy Spirit (See, I told you it wasn't earth-shattering). I am not responsible for the spiritual growth of my students. I am not responsible for their actions, their attitudes or their sins. I can only do so much. I can only do my best and pray that God uses my feeble efforts to change the hearts of those students. That has been a difficult thing to learn because everything around me tells me something different.

When a student breaks something in church, the youth pastor is the one who usually has answer for it.

When a student gets caught making out in a dark corner of the church building, the youth pastor is typically the one who is blamed for "not supervising" the teens.

When a group of students are fooling around during the church service, who gets the call? You guessed it...the youth pastor.

If a student doesn't like the youth meeting, it is the youth pastor who must answer for that. Rarely will a complaint about a "boring" youth meeting be met with any requests for a little personal introspection on the part of the teen.

When a student doesn't have any friends in the youth program, it is typically the youth pastor's responsibility to find some

friends for them. If that student is socially awkward and can't make any friends it is usually blamed on the "unfriendliness" of the youth or the "cliques". That is blamed on...you guessed it...the youth pastor. It couldn't possibly be something those students learned from watching their parents sit in the same seat, next to the same people and shake the same hands every Sunday could it?

Youth pastors, I want to tell you something so listen up. Repeat after me if you must. Your student's failures ARE NOT YOUR RESPONSIBILITY. They are teens and worse yet, they are imperfect teens. They may have a perfect Savior, but they are far from it...just like you and everyone else. They will make mistakes. They will get pregnant. They will get arrested. They will get caught drinking and driving. They will break stuff. They will be rude at times. They will be loud.

Sometimes they won't like your lesson. They will not change. They will not grow. Don't take it personally. You are not the Holy Spirit and you can't change their hearts. Do the best you can with the gifts you have and let God do what God does best.

Churches, pastors and parents...listen up. Repeat after me if you must. Your youth pastor is NOT responsible for every stupid, foolish, sinful choice the teens make. He sees the students for a maximum of 3-5 hours each week. Parents, you see them for a lot more than that. Do not expect your youth pastor - in the limited time he has each week - to fix your child.

Do not expect your youth pastor to take responsibility every time your child gets in trouble at church. When they complain that no one talks to them at youth meetings, ask them if they talk to others or if they hide in the corner expecting everyone to

greet them. When they complain that the youth pastor is boring, his lessons are terrible and they don't "get anything from them" ask your child what kind of attitude they have. If they come expecting not to learn, they won't learn.

Teaching your child to take responsibility will go a lot further than blaming everything they do (or don't do) on someone else.

God has given all of us some very unique and special gifts. Among them is the gift to teach, encourage and lead, but one thing he has not given to anyone - even youth pastors - is the ability to change hearts. That's his job, so why don't we let him?

Myth #12

The Perfect Youth Pastor will make the teens visible to the church at large and get them involved with the Sunday morning worship service but will not attempt to change the culture of said church.

Over the years, I have become firmly convinced that the Church is full of insanity. If the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over, expecting different results, then the Church has its share.

I've been a youth pastor for a long time and there are several constants in youth ministry. For example, we can always count on there being at least one parent who punishes their teen by not allowing them to attend youth meetings. I never quite understood that one. A child gets into trouble and a parent punishes them by not allowing them to attend the one thing that may help them. As an aside...parents, please take other things away from your child when you need to punish them. How about football? Cheerleading? video games? I see little value in keeping a child home from youth meetings as a punishment only to allow them to continue to sit in front of the television playing Xbox Live. Alright, back to the topic at hand.

Constants... We can always count on there being at least one church member who has never taught a student, never attended a youth meeting and never been on a youth retreat, telling us we are doing things all wrong. These folks had their own children and feel the fact that they raised two teenagers qualifies them to evaluate and criticize everything we do with the 50 or 60 we have in our ministry.

Then there is the constant of having at least one person suggest we try an event only to find out the suggestion was nothing of the sort...it was a demand.

The one thing that has remained a solid constant throughout the last several decades is the question most youth pastors have faced. “Why do we lose young people after they graduate?” Many times the solutions to that problem continue the cycle of insanity. Some of the suggestions I have heard over the years include:

If the teens learn to appreciate the way we do things, they will stick around.

If the teens stop focusing on themselves and stop expecting to be entertained, they will stay after the graduate.

If the students learn that worship isn't about them, it's about God, they will be here for a long time.

These would all be great suggestions if there wasn't one huge, glaring problem – the overriding message in each of them is, “we aren't going to change, so the students need to adopt our practices, likes and styles”.

That's one thing that has irked me about youth ministry. Everyone wants the youth to “appreciate” the way we do things, but not too many people are willing to try and appreciate the way the youth do things. Compromise is one key to building strong, healthy relationships, but when it comes to youth, most churches expect the majority of compromise to come from the students. Without compromise on the part of the adults in church, no youth pastor – no matter how good – will

be able to get his students excited about being “visible” in church.

But, that fact doesn't stop people from believing in myth #12 – that a perfect youth pastor will get his students involved in church services while not attempting to change the culture of the church.

There is a huge disconnect between many older believers and teens. We want them to get excited about organs, hymnals and liturgies when most of them don't even know what a liturgy is and the mere mention of “organs” illicit embarrassment and a few giggles – especially among Junior Highers. Expecting students to get excited about some of our worship services is a lot like expecting them to get excited about Atari. They may play for a while out of sheer curiosity, but the interest will quickly wane.

If a church really wants students to stick around after they graduate, they will seek to understand the students. They will encourage their people to compromise as much as they desire the students to do so.

If we want students to be “visible” in church and to get excited about serving in the service, then the service should reflect some (note I did not say “all”) of their tastes and should incorporate some of what is meaningful to them.

Before I get attacked for being too “seeker sensitive” or man-centered, let me explain. Everything we do in our worship services is a reflection of culture. Traditional worship services are a reflection of cultural preferences as are Contemporary services. Even the “Emergent” church is a reflection of culture.

No style of worship can claim the higher ground when it comes to being more “God-Centered” because they are all a reflection of the likes and dislikes of the people attending.

That may irk some of you, but it’s true. Suits and ties are a reflection of culture. Sandals and shorts are as well. Older believers are encouraged by great hymns of the faith - hymns they grew up singing - and that is a reflection of their culture. Many younger believers enjoy songs that reflect their young faith and the music of their surroundings.

There is nothing wrong with a church reflecting a certain culture, but if that culture is unwilling to grow and change then the church will not grow and change. Worse still, if a church is not willing to incorporate different styles of worship and ministry then it is my opinion that the church is not fulfilling the “all nations” part of the Great Commission.

There is nothing inherently godly about a hymnal, an organ or a Baby Grand piano. There is also nothing inherently godly about a set of drums, a guitar and a video projector. There is also nothing inherently ungodly about any of the aforementioned things.

Churches, if you want students to be visible and to appreciate the way you do things, try a little reciprocation. Try to appreciate the way they do things. Try to appreciate the way they think. Incorporate some of their ideas into your church. If you can’t appreciate those things, then take heed to Colossians 3:13 and at least “bear” with them. If you aren’t willing to do that, then don’t complain that your youth pastor isn’t doing enough to keep the students involved in your church.

Let me be clear here - it’s okay to teach students to compromise, but we need to make sure our demand for their compromise is not motivated by a desire to simply keep doing things *we* like.

Additionally, don’t expect your youth pastor to get the students excited about being “visible” in church if your church refuses to see them for who they are and let them express themselves in culturally appropriate ways.

Myth #13

The Perfect Youth Pastor will “grow up” one day and become a real pastor.

Between the ages of 16 and 22, I had about 16 different jobs. From Kmart stock boy and Junior High Wrestling Coach to Cable Television installer and Army National Guard Journalist, I could never quite find anything that kept my attention. I was always looking for something else, never really satisfied with where I was at the time. That all changed when I met Jesus.

All the restlessness I had grown accustomed to evaporated. The yearning for something different was replaced with a yearning to fulfill my calling and that calling was Student Ministry. I didn't really know it at the time, but the many jobs I held, the experiences they gave me and the many lessons I learned all prepared me to be a youth pastor and that's all I wanted to be. I believed it to be a worthwhile calling. I believed youth ministry was a valuable and essential ministry. It's been 15 years and I still feel that way.

There's just one problem though. Not everyone shares that belief. Christians everywhere have bought into the notion that Student Ministry is just a stepping stone to bigger and better things in the life of a pastor. These people believe Student Ministry is the bottom rung on the Ecclesiastical Ladder of Success and their youth pastor is just padding his resume, waiting for his big break. For many youth pastors this could not be farther from the truth.

I have no desire to become anything other than a youth pastor. I have no desire to have “my own church”. This is what I am

called to do and that has been confirmed time and time again. There may come a time when I can no longer effectively serve as a youth pastor, but that doesn't mean I'm planning for that day.

When and if that day comes, I will listen to the voice of God and go where he tells me. Until it comes though, I will pour my heart and soul into something I believe to be a valuable, worthwhile and vital ministry – a ministry to people who deserve my utmost attention, love and commitment. I will not betray their trust by climbing over their backs to get where I really want to go – or where *others* think I should go.

I'm not a junior pastor. I didn't become a youth pastor just to get my foot in the door, hoping to move on in two or three years. I'm not a pastor-in-training either. While I will always be learning and growing, I am a pastor right now. I'm not looking to get experience for my next gig. This is my gig.

I'm a youth pastor and I wear that badge with honor and have immense gratitude to the God who called me to wear it.

Myth #14

The Perfect Youth Pastor has must be willing to put up with all the jokes about his ministry that devalue what he does.

Scene 1, Act 1

Several members of a local church are gathered together for a fellowship dinner. The youth pastor enters stage left.

Church Member #1: *Hey Pastor...it's so nice to see you here!*

Youth Pastor: *Thanks, great to see you too.*

Church Member #2: *So, how was your **vacation**?*

Youth Pastor: *Vacation?*

Church Member #2: *Yeah, the trip you just took with the teens.*

Youth Pastor: *(Trying to remain calm) Oh, you mean the mission trip? It was great! We took 45 middle school students on a mission trip, slept on a gym floor and woke up at 6 a.m. every morning. Then we went to our work site and poured concrete all day.*

Church Member #1: *Sounds like you had a lot of fun...I guess it's back to **work** now though.*

This is just one example of the many comments that are made to youth pastors everywhere. There are many others.

When we hold a lock-in with 100 screaming boys and girls, stay up all night and spend every waking moment policing the building for hormonally crazed students, we hear things like “must be nice to have a job where you get to play all the time.”

I fully realize many of these comments are not serious and made in jest. However, the frequency with which they are said gets pretty tiresome. Not only that, but they unwittingly devalue a youth pastor's role. Consequently, they devalue Student Ministry as a whole.

Missions trips and retreats can be lots of fun, but for the youth pastor they are not a vacation. When I go on a vacation, I usually don't have to...

- Organize the trip for 30-40 people
- Rent the vans to carry 30-40 people
- Find some way to carry the luggage of 30-40 people
- Deal with the behavioral issues of 30-40 people
- Make sure 30-40 people are in the vans after each rest stop
- Make sure each student is taking their required medication
- Make sure each child has eaten at least ONE healthy thing during the day
- Stay up late listening to lots of flatulence and the accompanying giggles
- Be on his guard for budding romances
- Comfort broken hearts after said romances end suddenly and tragically
- Sleep on a hard floor in sweltering heat
- Shower with absolutely no privacy

- Use the same bathroom as boys who don't know how to aim
- Use toilets that no one seems to know how to flush

I don't know about anyone else, but that does not sound like a vacation.

Don't be mistaken, I love doing what I do and I believe it to be extremely valuable. I would simply ask that others value it the way I do. If that's too much to ask then forgive me if I don't fake a laugh at your jokes about my ministry anymore.

Myth #15

The Perfect Youth Pastor will be able to convince any student who doesn't want to come to church to faithfully attend.

It's happened on numerous occasions. Someone approaches me on a Sunday and asks me to call their child or their grandchild or a friend of their child or a friend of a friend of their child. The child in question is usually involved with drugs or alcohol or they've recently been convicted of some misdemeanor or another. Sometimes they are struggling with depression, anxiety or they just plain hate the world.

It goes something like this:

"Pastor, do you think you could call my son's friend? He doesn't come to church, but I really think he could use your help and if YOU talk to him, I'm sure he'd come to church."

Or...

"My son just got caught drinking and driving. He has never been to your youth group, but he really needs some help and I think you'd be able to convince him."

Before I get too deeply into this, I need to be clear. I am by no means making light of the aforementioned things. Students are in a very difficult period of their lives and the mere fact that someone cares enough to find them help is wonderful. That said however, whenever I am asked to call a student I don't know to speak to them about an issue they don't know I know about, in order to offer help they didn't think they needed, I get a bit uncomfortable.

Call me crazy, but if some stranger called me out of the blue to offer help with something my mom or grandma told them about, I'd be a little put out and the last thing I would do is welcome that help with open arms.

Why do people think youth pastors have an innate ability to convince any teenager or young adult that they should stop whatever it is they're doing and come to church? More to the point, why do people think that's even fair to ask?

I know several counselors and they don't typically cold-call potential clients. My dad is a counselor and I know if someone asked him to call a friend to help them, he'd tell them no. Why? Because one of the first rules in counseling is people need to want help first.

I also know that not too many people would think about asking their senior pastor to call their brother's best friend who doesn't come to church, doesn't know the pastor from Adam and has recently been arrested for selling prescription drugs to friends. No one would think of asking their choir director to cold-call some complete stranger and ask them to be in the choir. But, people don't think twice about asking the youth pastor to do just such a thing.

I'm committed to student ministry. I love teaching and helping students. My spiritual gifts are supernatural (only because God has given them to me), but there is no gift that gives me the ability to feel comfortable about calling a stranger to help them with something they didn't even know they needed help with and then miraculously convince them to accept the help they didn't think they needed.

Myth #16

The Perfect Youth Pastor will allow unbiblical treatment of him and his ministry without voicing concern.

A few years ago I was being criticized for a few things. As is the case with most people, when the criticisms start flowing from our mouths, they rarely stop at just one.

Out of a large church with a large youth ministry, there was a small minority who were not happy. So, the church leadership decided to bring in a youth ministry "consultant" who proceeded to do a survey of various people. I was okay with this method until I found out it was an anonymous survey. People were asked to answer a litany of questions about me, my character and my ministry abilities and they were promised no one would know who said what.

The surveys came back. Honestly, there was some pretty good stuff in most of them. There were a few things that were not very good though.

To be fair, some of the criticism had merit, but I'm not writing this to debate the merits of an anonymous survey done almost 10 years ago.

What I take issue with is the manner in which the survey was taken and the actions that were taken as a result.

Youth pastors everywhere are frequently the target of anonymous complaints. Some churches do the right thing and ignore them. Many others do the unbiblical thing and allow those anonymous complaints to determine how they will

“discipline” their youth pastor. It doesn’t matter if the anonymous complainers are in the minority. It doesn’t matter how many people come to the youth pastor’s defense publically. The anonymous complaints are given more weight.

Church leaders and Senior Pastors, let me talk to you for a moment. If we were to ask people in your church to fill out a survey about you, how many complaints would we get? More to the point, would you even allow such a thing to be done? How many of you would formulate a plan of action for yourself based on the complaints of a small minority of people?

Let’s forget about a survey for a moment. Would any Senior Pastor or Elder board believe that the complaints of one or two people whether anonymous or not, merited a plan of action or a discipline procedure especially when an overwhelming majority of people in the church did not share those complaints?

Youth pastors deserve respect - if not for their abilities or God-given position, at least for the fact that they are created in His image. If you have issues with your youth pastor, deal with them, but do so in a manner that reflects that reality. If someone has a complaint about your youth pastor- anonymous or not – give him the benefit of the doubt until that person does the biblical thing and goes to his or her brother first. If they don’t do that their complaint should not be given a hearing. If they do the right thing and go to him, but the complaint persists, then weigh the evidence. That means you do a little investigating and find out if others feel the same way. Don’t formulate a discipline procedure based on one or two complaints.

This may seem like an odd “Myth” to write about, but everywhere I go, I hear stories of youth pastors who have been treated horribly by the leadership of their church. Each story is unique, but the manner in which they are treated is not. In many of the cases, these youth pastors have been told to – more or less – “suck it up” and when they have tried to defend themselves against exaggerated tales of wrongdoing they are told not to do so.

Youth pastors aren’t perfect, but they are pastors and leaders in the church. They should be treated with that in mind.

As a follow-up to the story above...God has done an amazing work, both in my life and in the life of the church mentioned. He used a bad situation to bring him glory. I am a better pastor and they are a better church. We have all learned some very hard, but valuable lessons which have made us look a little more like Jesus.

Myth #17

The Perfect Youth Pastor will have treat all students equally and not have any favorites. He will spend equal time with everyone.

Playing basketball in elementary and middle school was an exercise in futility for me. The physical ability was noticeably absent and if you add to that the fact that I just didn't take it seriously and rarely gave it my all, you have a recipe for a pretty poor ball player. I scored an average of two points each year and fouled out of most games. If you can not score I reasoned, then you may as well keep the other guy from doing it – at all costs.

There was a moment, after about six years of toiling in bench-warming obscurity when I finally realized this was not for me. My memory of the event is kind of fuzzy, but I remember being hurt and embarrassed. For the first time in my basketball career, someone had told me the truth.

I brazenly approached the coach and asked him if I could have more playing time. The old adage, “don't ask a question for which you don't want the answer” applied to this situation. No kidding...the guy laughed. Then he asked, “do you really think you deserve more playing time?” Then he said, “I need to play the guys who work hard and give us a chance to win.”

Obviously this was a different time – a time far removed from the *everyone's a winner* and *don't keep score because it might hurt someone's feelings* philosophies that dominate many sports leagues today.

If this scenario plays out today, that coach is guaranteed an angry phone call from a parent. He would undoubtedly be accused of playing favorites. He may even be fired. Today's youth pastors face something similar.

We work with a difficult group. For the most part when they were children, they wanted to be in church. They wanted to do the crafts and play the games. When they become adults, if they go to church, it will be because they want to be there. They will have a choice. Teens are different.

They have outgrown the joy of Elmer's Glue and Glitter and for the most part, have to be dragged out of bed to attend Sunday School. They are the one group who really does not want to be there. They would rather be sleeping, texting or eating. There are the exceptions of course - there are students who choose to be there and want to grow in their faith. They put in the effort and are engaged with the lessons. But mostly, they are the exception rather than the rule.

Over the years, I have grown very close to some of the students in my ministry. Typically the ones I grow close to are the ones who want to be there. Teaching them is a joy. Leading them is easy. It is a natural occurrence. People tend to enjoy the company of those with whom we share common interests and youth pastors are no different.

I do not ignore the students who are difficult. I still talk to them. I still try to teach them. I take them out to lunch, visit them in school and go to some of their games. But, for some people in past churches, that was not good enough. I was accused of favoritism. Complaints were made that I was not

spending equal time with each student. I was spending too much time with one group of students. Well, duh!

Here is the truth so brace yourself. There are two reasons youth pastors spend more time with certain groups of students. The first reason is that we are human. As I said, people are drawn to others who share their interests and goals. It is natural. The second reason is one of intentionality and intelligence. I spend more time with the students who are serious about their faith because they have the greatest potential to help me reach those who are not. I am one man. If I am spreading myself out, trying to be all things to all people, then I am not going to be effective. If I try to invest equal effort into every student then no one will get my best and the ministry as a whole will suffer.

Conversely, if I invest more time with those students who want to be there, who want to grow, then they will become my advocates and my partners in ministry. As they grow, they will influence the others around them. This model is not without precedent either.

I am by no means Jesus, but he spent an exorbitant amount of time with just 12 guys. He had his core group and if he were in today's church, he would probably get fired for the "favoritism" he showed. But, why did he do it? Was he being unfair to everyone else by spending so much time with the disciples? No. He was being smart. If he had tried to spend equal time with everyone, his effectiveness would have been seriously diminished. He was investing in this group so they could help, so they could continue the work after he was gone. If you have not noticed, the plan worked and has been working for over 2000 years.

That still may not satisfy someone reading this. You may be thinking it is completely unfair. Sorry, but I do not care. God has not called me to make everyone feel good, he has called me to lead a student ministry and the best way to lead a group of people is through multiplication and duplication. I will reach many more students if I have a group around me who shares my vision and commitment. That means I will have to spend more time with that group. That may look like favoritism, but it is not...it is biblical.

After my basketball coach told me the truth, I moved on. I quit playing (or trying to play) basketball, but I did not stop playing sports. I took up two new sports and found out that I was pretty good at that those. Funny thing is, while I was playing different sports, we were all shooting for the same goal – to bring a championship home to the school. We were all playing for the same objective, but doing so in different ways.

Every student in my ministry will not respond to me, my personality or my methods. They may not like the way I "coach" the team. But, if I train up more coaches who have different personalities and different styles, more students will be encouraged to play and pursue the goal.

Where Do We Go From Here?



I have spent a considerable amount of time writing about the expectations placed on youth pastors by others. Though it may not seem to be the case, I have tried to be as gentle as possible with the unbiblical expectations placed on us everywhere.

Now the gloves need to come off. It is time for a little personal introspection, a time to take a look at the expectations youth pastors have of themselves and the churches in which we serve. A warning is in order here...some of you may not like what you are about to read.

It is very easy to hold a mirror up to others and very difficult to look in that mirror ourselves, but it is time.

My personal conviction is that we youth pastors have dug our own holes in many instances. We have created many of our own problems. Oh, we love to blame others. We love to complain. We love to shift blame and scapegoat.

It is time to stop. The time has come to hold up the mirror and take a look at ourselves and see how we have contributed to our own struggles.

Myth #18

The Perfect Youth Pastor believes he is the sole authority on youth culture and how to minister to students.

Arrogance is commonplace on college campuses. No matter what college, no matter what the field of study, college students are renowned for believing they have it all figured out and no one is safe from their perceived wisdom.

Before I head down this road, a little background information is needed. I was a late-bloomer in Christianity, becoming a believer at 21 years old. Consequently, I was a late-bloomer in student ministry. I had never been part of a youth group, gone on a youth retreat, attended a youth lock-in or been on a mission trip.

Shortly after becoming a Christian, I started hanging out with the youth pastor at my church. We became friends and he is the one who encouraged me to pursue a career in student ministry. When I began my Bible College training, I was a baby Christian. I did not know the books of the Bible. I barely even knew the difference between the Old and New Testaments. In short, I was a biblically and ministerially ignorant. That did not stop me from having an opinion though.

I distinctly remember criticizing the youth pastor who had loved me and mentored me. Looking back, some of the criticism was warranted and I believe he would say the same today. But, I was in no position to be the one offering the criticism. It is easy to be idealistic in college. It is equally easy to sit in the safety of a Bible College classroom and criticize those who are in the real world of ministry. Untested methods

of ministry will always look better than those that are being tried with actual people in actual churches. The teaching skills of one who has never taught will always seem greater than the skills of the one who has to prepare multiple lessons week-in and week-out.

The arrogance did not stop at graduation though. You see, I had fallen into a trap that has claimed many youth pastors. It is the trap of thinking we know more than we do, are better than we really are and have the answer for any situation youth ministry throws our way. It is this trap which destroys many youth pastors and leaves a bad taste in the mouths of many churches with regard to student ministry and youth pastors.

During my first few years of student ministry I would have been a much better youth pastor had I not thought more highly of myself than I should. I did not have all the answers. I did not have the market cornered on teaching. Honestly, despite four years in college, I had no idea what I was doing, but that did not stop me from pretending.

Looking back, I see a young youth pastor who had a relatively successful ministry. But, I also see a young youth pastor who would have had an amazing ministry if only for want of a little humility.

Youth pastors, listen up...it is okay to admit we do not have all the answers. It is okay to take the advice of our volunteers, parents and other pastors. It is not a sign of weakness to ask for help when we know we need the help. Everyone around us knows we need the assistance and our credibility is damaged when we pretend not to need them.

Myth #19

The Perfect Youth Pastor is much smarter than his senior pastor and can do a much better job.

One of the many jobs I had in my late teens and early twenties was at a grocery store. I stocked shelves. I worked at the checkout counter. For six years I worked at this store and during that time, I had the privilege of witnessing hundreds of temper tantrums from little children.

Every parent knows the feeling of standing in the middle of a store with a screaming, whining or crying child and every parent knows the feeling that everyone around them is watching and quietly judging them and their parenting ability. The funny thing about these moments is that rarely do other parents judge other parents. The judging typically comes from the 16-year-old grocery store employee whose main goal in life is to get to the next level of Halo or find the perfect shade of lip gloss.

I know because I was that 16-year-old. Of course my main goal was to get to the next level of Pac-Man, but that is beside the point. The point is, the people usually doing the judging are people in no position to do so. They have not stood in the shoes of the parent with the screaming child. They have never had to deal with a child with a learning disability or emotional issues. In short, they have never experienced the pressure-packed life of a parent, but that does not stop them from quietly believing they could do better.

Over the years, I have met many youth pastors who take a measure of joy in criticizing their senior pastor. They speak to

members of their church about the shortcomings of the man they work under. They criticize him. They find fault with him. They quietly (and sometimes not so quietly) believe they could do a better job of leading the church in which they serve. They boast about their superior ability to speak and teach and feel it is appropriate to criticize every aspect of their senior pastor's presentation.

I need to be up front here...I have been that youth pastor at times. I have been puffed up and arrogant about my perceived ability to lead a church better than the men God has called to do so. One of the things the Lord has taught me over the last few years is; I was clueless.

I have no idea what my lead pastor goes through. While student ministry is difficult at times, it is only one part of the overall ministry of the church and the lead pastor is responsible for all of it. Truthfully, our elder board of which I am a part are responsible for the overall ministry of the church, but when something goes wrong, the lead pastor gets the call, not me or any of the other elders. While I have had the privilege of preaching on many occasions, I have no idea what it is like to prepare a Sunday message week-in and week-out for years on end.

While many youth pastors use their experience as a means to seek a "promotion" ([see Myth #13](#)), many are wholly unqualified to do so, but they have spent so much time criticizing those who do lead and building themselves up, they have overlooked their own shortcomings.

Being a youth pastor does not qualify us to lead a church. We need to be humble and honest and admit that. After that, we

need to throw our full support behind the one God has called to lead. We must defend him. We must encourage him. We must help him. We must pray for him.

Want to know what will happen when we do those things? We will be blessed. Our ministries will be blessed. Our gifts will be blessed. Why? Because God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.

Myth #20

The Perfect Youth Pastor spends five hours a week in the office and 35 hours playing video games and calls it work.

I love video games. Seriously...if I was single and had no children, I would probably have every game system known to man and I would never sleep or have meaningful interaction with another human being...unless you count Xbox Live.

Back in the day my brother and I played 24 straight hours of Asteroids on our Atari just to see how many times we could get the score to roll over to zero again. I am a sucker for a computer generated adventure, a monkey with a barrel or an eight-bit space ship shooting two-dimensional space rocks.

I also happen to love Television a bit more than I should. I get hooked on no less than two new shows a season. I could sit in front of the idiot box for days on end and not feel a bit guilty about doing so. I would eat in front of the television and I would happily fall asleep with the soft glow of digital entertainment soothing me.

I love technology. Every new cell phone, every new computer and every new Ipod has strange power over me. When I get a new cell phone, I obsess over the fingerprints on its sleek black frame. When a new computer comes my way, I spend hours getting everything just right - from the arrangement of the Desktop icons to the color of the Taskbar.

Student Ministry is perfect for me.

I work with a group of people who love many of the same things I do and that can be a dangerous thing. It is very easy to spend a few hours playing Madden football and claim it is work. It is very easy to spend a few hours watching television and justify it by claiming I am keeping up with youth culture. When Instant Messaging was the new thing, it was very easy to spend a few hours IMing students, claiming I was doing ministry.

Those things do hold value and I fully recognize them. I have had some very serious conversations through IM. I have had some fantastic conversations and have gained some valuable insight into the life of some students while playing Halo or NBA Live. I am not discounting the ministry that can and does happen through those things.

However, there are many youth pastors who abuse the unique nature of student ministry by playing games and claiming it as work. Many would find it perfectly acceptable to spend hours getting to the next game level and minutes preparing a lesson or praying for their students. Then we complain that no one takes us seriously.

Please realize that I am using video games, TV and computers to illustrate a broader point. We could substitute watching sports, mountain biking, etc and the point still stands.

We need to be honest about how we spend our time. It is not *all* ministry. It is not *all* work. Some of it is just an excuse to play.

Myth #21

The Perfect Youth Pastor will demand to be treated with respect like other pastors while acting like one of the students he leads.

Much of what I am going to write from here on out is going to be somewhat painful. It will anger some of you. It may hurt some of you. It may even convict some of you. If it angers or hurts, I apologize. If conviction is felt, you will have to take that one up with God.

If we were to get 10 youth pastors together in a room, they would undoubtedly wind up complaining about not getting any respect. If you have followed this series, you may think I am doing that as well, but I am not. While I do believe youth pastors, by and large are treated as second-class pastors, I do not believe we can claim it is all unfair. Quite honestly, some of that treatment is a product of our own immaturity.

We have all had students who think they deserve to be treated as adults simply for drawing breath. They demand to be treated with respect while acting like a child. They throw tantrums, stomp their feet and scream that they deserve to be given freedom.

Everyone deserves to be treated with respect as a human being, created in the image of God. But, that is just one aspect. Respect is also earned...and lost. Paul told Timothy not to let anyone look down on him because he was young, but he also told him to set an example. That example is what earned him greater respect. That example is what earned him the right to be

included into full adult fellowship. The same is true with youth pastors.

We deserve respect because we are created in the image of God. We deserve respect because we have been called to be pastors. But, we do not have the right to be included into full pastoral respect until we start setting an example and many times we do the exact opposite.

One Sunday a few years ago, I was preaching. After the service was over I was speaking to a husband and wife and they shared some disturbing information. They were visiting for the first time and when they heard that the youth pastor was speaking, they almost went to another church. Thankfully, by the grace of God, my message had pleasantly surprised them, but I asked them why they would leave just because the youth pastor was speaking. The answer was convicting. The reason, they explained, was because they had heard many youth pastors speak and had never had a good experience. Youth pastors ramble and never seem to put any real effort into their sermons, they said.

There are youth pastors who put a lot of thought and prayer into their messages and lessons, but apparently this couple had never heard any and they had formed an opinion based on those negative experiences. It is not fair and it is not right, but perception is reality to people and there is a perception that youth pastors are careless with the word of God. There are many other negative perceptions as well and we must realize none of them have been created in a vacuum.

Before we demand respect, we need to step back and take a look at ourselves. Do we take our ministry seriously or do we

use our position as a youth pastor in order to live in a state of perpetual adolescence? Do we submit to authority? Do we take responsibility for our mistakes? Do we demand grace without giving any? Are we careful with our words? When we get the opportunity to speak on a Sunday, do we rightfully divide the word of God or do we just wing it and hope no one notices?

We have a large hill to climb in many churches, but if we start taking ourselves seriously, others will do the same.

Myth #22

The Perfect Youth Pastor expects everyone in the church to compromise to suit the tastes of students.

I was pretty hard on churches in [Myth #12](#). Many churches expect students to appreciate the way they do things, but are not willing to change themselves. Many church members expect their youth pastor to teach students the art of compromise while refusing to change. It is a common problem.

Equally common though are the youth pastors who try to force change upon a congregation, but refuse to expect any from the students they teach. We complain about those “old people” who are stuck in their ways. We complain that our church needs to update the music and become “relevant”. The music is too outdated and the service is too boring. So, we hide in the youth room and make fun of all those stodgy old folks.

I fear in our quest to make church more relevant to teens and younger believers, we alienate some very godly people. We forget that relevance is relative. What is irrelevant to one believer is relevant and quite meaningful to another. A 19th Century hymn may not inspire a 19-year-old, but 19-year-olds are not the only people God desires to encourage and challenge.

In our drive to make church hip, cool, entertaining or a host of other adjectives, we have unwittingly communicated something very damaging to the students we teach. We have taught them that everyone else must bend and change to suit their tastes. Instead of teaching our students to bear with one

another, we have communicated a very selfish and self-centered message.

I cannot imagine what some of these students will be like 50 years from now. They will be the “old people” one day and will have grown up expecting every church they attend will bend over backwards to make them happy. I already feel bad for the pastors and youth at those churches.

Perhaps instead of demanding our way, we can start to teach our teens to appreciate different methods and styles of worship? I know it sounds crazy, but I think it is biblical. It also may be a whole lot more effective at winning others over and encouraging them to be more open to change.

Myth #23

The Perfect Youth Pastor will be a Singer, Guitar Player, Comedian, Dynamic Speaker and Technology Wizard.

I have been around student ministry for a long time and I have met some amazing youth pastors. They continually astound me with their gifts and talents. We were at a youth retreat a number of years back and the speaker was absolutely incredible. Every time he spoke, he did so for at least an hour to a middle school audience and had them captivated the entire time. He used hilarious video clips and had even created some himself.

At the end of the retreat, he broke out his guitar. He asked the group to shout out names of people at the retreat and things that had happened. Then he proceeded to make up a very entertaining song intertwining lessons we had learned, names of students and fun things they did during the weekend.

I was in awe and I was feeling quite inadequate about my own abilities. As if the self-inflicted wound to my pride was not bad enough, I had to endure a four-hour van ride with 15 middle school students who talked about this speaker the entire way home. My insecurities were on overload.

This was a long time ago, but the memories are still pretty fresh. I remember spending the next few months trying to be like him. I tried to emulate this speaker’s style. I tried to emulate his humor. I even tried to co-opt some of his personal stories and make them my own. In short, I tried to be someone I am not. In the process, I dishonored God and lied to my students.

I learned some really important lessons through that experience. First, I learned one of the tricks to the trade - that many retreat speakers typically have about five messages they recycle over and over. It is no wonder they are good at them – they have a lot of practice! That, however, is beside the point.

Second, I learned that God wants me to be authentic. He wants me to be honest. He wants me to use my story and how he has worked in my life, not someone else's.

He wants me to use my experiences and how he has shaped me through them. He wants me to be myself. He has given me certain gifts and abilities and they are no less important than the retreat speaker's gifts and abilities.

I have been created in Christ Jesus to do good works, works he has prepared me to do. If he has prepared them for me, then he has equipped me to do them. I do a great disservice to that plan when I try to use someone else's gifts to accomplish what I think is the plan.

Finally, I learned that I have been called to do what I am doing just like the retreat speaker has been. God called me in spite of the fact that I cannot play the guitar, do not have a goatee, have no real discernible skills with technology and do not have the ability to captivate an audience for hours on end.

Why did he call me? Your guess is as good as mine, but I have a sneaking suspicion that it has something to do with his ability to work through my weaknesses and not a whole lot to do with my abilities.

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