

Take the pastor off the pedestal

What would happen if we gave every preacher the freedom to be real?



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SPRAINED GLASS WINDOWS

I still remember the day my pastor admitted to being human.

Now, I am a pastor's kid. I know pastors are human. But I didn't know they could admit to it from the pulpit.

I grew up seeing the pressure the pulpit put on my dad and mum, feeling the pressure it put on us as kids, and I developed an eating disorder because of it. Because kids are very aware of hypocrisy and know that only God is perfect and yet for some reason, congregations seem to have this expectation of their pastors as well.

No doubt there are professions which God calls to a higher standard of moral code, like teachers and

preachers, yet this only increases the temptations these positions face and we should be all the more gracious. We should be all the more willing to offer accountability partners and space in which to admit wrong and to invite the real stories so that men and women in these roles are not forced to break—and eventually sin—in private.

A pastor is no more perfect than any of us who have been saved by grace. We all have a past. And it's this past that gives the present credibility. It is our human moments that make us need Jesus. If our pastors aren't free to need Jesus, they'll stop being effective.

I still remember the day when I sat in that pew and listened to my pastor tell us he'd been a single dad for years before going into seminary. How he'd made some choices he wasn't proud of but how God had caught hold of him.

And every Sunday I listen to him pray before he preaches, asking God

in front of the whole congregation to not let him stand in the way of the word God wants to speak. To be a vessel for truth and to forgive any sin which stands in the way of him being this vessel.

What would happen if we gave every preacher the freedom to be real?

Would we still have those like Mark Driscoll losing their licenses and churches falling apart for the fraud done in dark places?

Would we still have 50 per cent of preachers admitting to a porn addiction, as some studies have found?

Would we still have burnout and anxiety and stress disorder and affairs at the skyrocket rate we do now among those in ministry?

Or would we have a body of believers that, instead of simultaneously worshipping and judging its spiritual leaders, lifted them up on penitent and compassionate prayers and banded around them in accountability and care?

Would we have Aaron and Hur holding up Moses' arms so that he didn't tire in battle (Exodus 17:11)?

Would we have the church of Acts meeting together regularly and not only worshipping together, but sharing all of their possessions? The congregation serving as ministers instead of an audience?

For this is what we all are. 1 Peter 2:9 says we are a royal priesthood, saved from a sordid past not by our good deeds but purely by the love of Jesus. Beggars, who have found the bread and are now leading others to it.

So let's stop seeing the splinter in our preacher's eyes and instead, beg God to remove the log in our own. One church body at a time.

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Better than wine, stronger than death

Love songs from a wild and impassioned poet



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CROSS CULTURE

"Love is better than wine," is how the writer of the Song of Songs put it. "Love is stronger than death."

Solomon, said to be the wisest of men ever, is credited with the words that resonate with meaning even now, almost 3,000 years later, even in our time, as insecure and fickle an age as any.

Of course, Solomon had his own changeability, apparently collecting women like chattels, with enough wives and concubines to show a new catch on his arm every day of the year. Even so, the ancient king's underlying message remains: love, the sort felt in the deepest part of our loins, is a gift to be celebrated.

For some believers, the Song of

Songs' vivid picture of two lovers in unrestrained passion has been interpreted as something else. Over the centuries, especially during times when Christians haven't wanted to talk much about sex, it's been seen as an allegory more than anything, purely a representation of God's agapé love.

I've never fully bought this—it seems too convenient an explanation that seems to come from what God must see as the most humorous sin of all: people trying to be more spiritual than He is.

Then again, what if?

What if the Almighty is more like that wild and impassioned poet? What if He carries a certain divine torch, an obsessive love like that bush that burned in front of Moses, a fire that was never consumed? What if Jesus even enjoyed that moment with that sinful woman while she washed His feet with her tears and dried them with her hair?

Or is that kind of sexy God too

hot to handle? Maybe too revolting to even imagine?

Aren't we more comfortable to see the Divine as less a personality with feelings and more a dry ideal or principal to hold up? Even if we picture the Creator as emotive, isn't it still easier to feel his love as a cool love, like an engineer's, calculating and detached?

Maybe then, allegorical or not, the Song of Songs is given to us so we can imagine God, and ourselves and our neighbours, in a different way.

This Valentine's Day, my neighbour is a Ugandan woman, Dorothy. She's planned her wedding reception to be on the front lawn of our African home, a place that she knows well because for years she had helped care for our children.

Of course, love in Africa is as uncertain as anywhere. Africans, like any people, can turn love into something else, something of their own image—manipulative, fearful, divisive—and so relational breakdowns are as common in Africa as

anywhere else.

But what if love really is more powerful than death? What if love always does overlook the wrongs of others? What if love really is the only debt we owe each other? What if love casts out even your darkest fears? What if true love can't even be measured?

Then this is not human love. This is the love of God. It's what God looks like. It's what we, family and friends, have prayed for and prayed with Dorothy over the years.

Known to her Ugandan friends as "Holy Girl" for her insistence to wait—"Mr. Thom, I'd rather be single"—she prayed for the right man well into middle-age, against various cultural pressures. Finally, one day he arrived.

Now we look on for this marriage to be filled with that sweet wine.

And much more.

Thomas Froese writes on themes of culture and faith. He blogs on fatherhood at www.dailydad.net. Read his other work at www.thomasfroese.com