

PROFESSIONAL CHRISTIAN

*Being Fully Yourself
in the Spotlight of Public Ministry*

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INTRODUCTION

So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us.

—1 Thessalonians 2:8

Public ministry trains a spotlight on us, illuminating some aspects of who we are, while casting other features into shadow. The small slice of ourselves that people see in the spotlight reveals real and true things about us, but we are far bigger than we appear in any instance—like a sermon, a conversation, or a photo—in which someone else encounters us. Even the people we’ve known and loved for years cannot know us as we know ourselves and as God knows us.

While many people in public-facing jobs encounter a similar gap between the fullness of who they are and the slice that others see in public settings, those of us in ministry often encounter more barriers to being fully ourselves. Whether we are on staff at a church or work in a religious organization like a school or nonprofit, we have serious responsibilities as leaders in our communities: We represent faith and even God to many people. We are often held to higher moral standards than people working in similar, but nonreligious, fields of employment. We have certain kinds of power over the people we minister to and with, and we’re often put on a pedestal as role models.

As professional Christians, our employment—the means by which we pay for our daily bread—intertwines

with our personal faith and with the beliefs and expectations that congregants, denominational leaders, or other organizational authorities have for us. In the United States, our employers have virtually limitless latitude in hiring and firing on religious grounds, and in many instances, the people we lead also wield financial power over us. While some of us made a knowing commitment to certain moral standards during our ordination process, what may have been unclear is that something as ordinary as clinical depression could lead to our employment being terminated. Even the waxing and waning of faith—so common, yet so rarely talked about—could bring financial uncertainty.

For many of us, being fully ourselves also means that we must negotiate between our gut feelings and ministry settings that specifically prevent those emotions from immediately surfacing. Whether we're caring for people through illness, counseling them through dark seasons of their lives, or simply leading Sunday services through the ups and downs of our own lives, we have a job to do, and to do it well, our spontaneous feelings often take a backseat to the needs of the people we serve.

Despite the difficulties, we must strive to be fully ourselves because it is good to be who we are. God made each of us unique, precious, complicated, and bigger than anything that paper and ink, or screen and pixels, can capture. All the bigness, all the beauty God made is good. In the broad contours of who we are and in our specific characteristics, God has given us our own ways to be in the world and to live into our spiritual gifts, including through our occupations in ministry.

We can disagree whether or not a cosmic fall has fundamentally marred our goodness, whether “all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags” (Isa. 64:6 KJV) means that something is wrong in our core, or whether an “ancestral

curse” or “original sin” has a place in our self-understanding. Whatever our different views, we Christians agree that we are each made in God’s image, that we bear God’s imprint, and that a major goal of our life is continually conforming to the image of Christ. In that regard we are fundamentally good, no matter what we think about the rest.

Because we can better minister with God’s gifts to us when we are more ourselves, thriving in ministry does not have to come at the expense of who we are. As we conform more to Christ, others see more of Christ in us. When our neighbors do the same, we see more of Christ in them. Christians have realized for centuries that being close to God doesn’t mean that our own selves fade like fabric in the light of God’s presence. Rather, to paraphrase a modern example, “when we are wholly God’s, we will be more ourselves than ever.”¹ The closer we are to the blaze of God’s glorious light, the more our truest colors shine.

A ROADMAP TO BEING OURSELVES IN MINISTRY

In this book, we’ll first explore the foundation for *being ourselves*—shorthand for *being fully ourselves in the spotlight of public ministry*. Then we’ll examine seven obstacles we often face as professional Christians. The first is that many people see us as faith representatives that they trust and hold up as role models, or perhaps immediately dislike and believe to be hypocrites. Whether or not we want the responsibility, we may find it difficult to be ourselves given the additional weight our words carry with some listeners.

Second, we don’t have an excellent conceptual framework to talk about what being ourselves can mean. Concepts like authenticity and sincerity, though helpful, are also flawed.

Third, much as we want to love our neighbors, we sometimes struggle to identify who they are and experience a blurring of lines around whom we are responsible for in ministry. We used to have a good sense of who our neighbors were and could be: anyone we encountered. However, in the age of the unlimited, often anonymous, internet, our neighborhood can feel as if it has gone from a finite number of people to an unmanageable sea.

Fourth, because of the spotlight on us, we must actively decide what parts of our lives to make public. Even when we realize the importance of protecting our privacy and energy, the act of curating what others see of us in public may feel like a fundamentally dishonest practice, as if we are pointing our cameras at a pretty vase of flowers while a mountain of dirty laundry looms outside the frame.

Fifth, being in the spotlight also means that we navigate the valid (and not so valid) ways that others' needs impact what we share publicly. For instance, whether we are preachers facing Jesus' words on divorce in a lectionary cycle of Scriptures or teachers coping with national politics in our classrooms, we must decide how and when to tackle hard issues.

Sixth, we all live through valleys and seasons of transition, but we cannot always share them publicly out of respect for professional boundaries, personal privacy, and the privacy of others. Maybe we are waiting for the results of a medical diagnosis or caring for a loved one through their mental illness. Maybe the denominational home that used to fit like a glove feels not only uncomfortable but wrong. It is difficult to discern how to live through these seasons with integrity.

Finally, we must often be fully focused on other people in the midst of their own joys and concerns, no matter our own feelings. We may be personally joyful but ministering

to someone on their literal deathbed. Or we may be uninspired when it is our responsibility to lead corporate worship. Holding our personal circumstances and emotions to the side, even temporarily, can feel disingenuous.

All these obstacles, yet our heartfelt desires remain to be truly ourselves, to be seen as we truly are (How wonderful the moments when we can say, “I feel seen!”), and to minister to our neighbors from the complex depths of our souls.

This book explores these difficult areas in both the broad strokes and the details of our lives, sometimes to find solutions, sometimes to get at an unresolvable tension, but never simply to apply a Band-Aid or encourage a self-destructive way out. We’ve seen those fake solutions and maybe tried them for ourselves: the emotional detachment that doesn’t transform the fundamental facts of our lives; treating ministry as purely social work, a reframing that removes “Christian” as an integral aspect of our profession but still doesn’t remedy the problem; scrunching into an ill-fitting job; finding temporary escape through alcohol or other drugs.

So instead of superficial hacks or a list of dos and don’ts, this book gives you a lens. This lens will help you understand how your full self relates to the incomplete picture that other people have of you in public ministry. And it will help you develop the tools you need to engage with the challenges and opportunities stemming from this reality.

A MULTITUDE OF COUNSELORS

Our own life stories and circumstances significantly shape our perspectives, giving us “situated knowledges.”² This

is why, drawing on my doctoral training in ethnography, I interviewed fifty other professional Christians as I wrote this book (though I use the term “professional Christian” to account for the wide range of occupations and roles in full-time ministry, not everyone I interviewed identifies with it). By bringing their voices to the question of how to be fully ourselves, we gain the wisdom of a multitude of counselors—their situated knowledges of public-facing ministry based on their varying personalities, ages, and so on. For more information about these interviewees, see the list in the back of this book.

Their knowledges include perspectives gleaned from many aspects of their lives, including their ministry roles (such as pastors, youth leaders, and teachers) and their experiences as ordained and nonordained people (approximately 65 percent of the former and 35 percent of the latter). They are Roman Catholics, Evangelicals, Eastern Orthodox, Oriental Orthodox, Pentecostals, historically Black Protestants, and mainline Protestants. Their theological leanings range from conservative to progressive. I interviewed approximately the same number of women and men, encompassing a range of sexual orientations and identities. They include abled and disabled people. All live in Anglophone countries (Australia, Canada, England, and the United States). They include Asian, Black, Hispanic, Middle Eastern, and White people. Finally, for many I interviewed, their knowledge comes from ministry beyond their local settings through media like writing and speaking. While none of them is perfect—of course they aren’t!—they are all people to whom I reached out because I thought, “They seem to navigate the ministry spotlight in a healthy and professional way. I should learn from them.”

MY STAKES IN BEING FULLY MYSELF

My situated knowledges include a broad perspective on denominations. For over twenty years, I have ministered on staff and as a volunteer leader in a wide variety of denominations from Evangelical to mainline Protestant and Roman Catholic; I grew up in Baptist churches and became Eastern Orthodox as a young adult; and I have attended services at dozens of Evangelical churches as an ethnographer. Since I began ministering as a musician at a young age, my primary experience of churches has been as part of a leadership team, not as a solo staff person or as a layperson in the pews. These experiences, mostly in denominations that I am not personally affiliated with, have been a source of joy as I have encountered the many ways God leads us corporately.

My situated knowledges also include being a White person in a biracial (Hispanic and White) family of origin and interracial (Asian and White) marriage with biracial children. My knowledge comes from being in my mid-thirties and being sometimes student-poor but mostly middle-class. I wrote a large portion of this book during the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused a host of disruptions and constraints, and underscored the oddities of being myself in an online season of ministry. (Who knew I'd ever lead a church book study in pajamas or chop veggies during coffee hour, much less nurse a baby in staff meetings?)

Finally, my situated knowledges come from a long-standing sense of being particularly challenged in my efforts to be myself.³ This feeling is partially due to my personality, yet much of my ongoing interest in being myself, not just for my personal fulfillment but in the broader questions this book addresses, comes from my experiences as a child and

adolescent in independent, fundamental Baptist churches with leaders who self-identified as fundamentalists. While I intended to leave this circle of Christianity since I was a tween, I spent over a decade untangling myself, a journey that rarely afforded me the space to be anything but a slim approximation of myself, and that often led to my feeling like I was lying by existing as well as I could.

As you can imagine, my formation in fundamentalism greatly shaped my perspective on the relationship between our own selves and how others perceive us in the spotlight of ministry. First, my experience of fundamentalism was of a profound responsibility to *appear* godly. Yes, also to *be* godly, but with a strong emphasis on how others perceived me and my behavior. For instance, my family watched some movies but didn't watch them in movie theaters because, even if we were watching an approved film, someone might wonder whether we were watching a bad one if they saw us at the theater. In this book, I take a very different angle on others' perceptions: we can't determine these (mis)perceptions and shouldn't give them too much weight, though we are foolish to ignore them entirely.

Second, beginning in middle school—around the same time that I realized I would eventually leave fundamentalism—I became the pianist (the main musician) in my church. As I grew increasingly alienated from the theology and resultant culture in the church, I continued to lead musical worship there for years. I was aware of this disintegration at the time, but until I wrote this book, I didn't understand that the issue was not only a personal one (in that I didn't fit there), but also a problem of leadership.

Third, growing up as I did in the nineties and aughts, my broader evangelical zeitgeist was one of a self-proclaimed "authentic faith." To me, it seemed like a lame attempt to make Jesus cool and relevant in a knock-off "if you like this

sexy music, here's some Christian Lite to try" kind of way. I've been allergic to the word "authenticity" ever since and have steered clear of commodities purporting to make me more authentic if I cough up the money. (Admittedly, I do occasionally purchase things I hope will make me cooler, to no apparent effect.) Though in chapter 3 I explore how authenticity is a concept that gives us insight into how to be fully ourselves, I remain suspicious of Christian branding attempts to make faith cool, a.k.a. authentic.

Taken together, these formative experiences sparked my research into how vocalists communicate their personal beliefs while leading worship (an aspect of my academic research focusing on theologies of music, worship, and liturgy; fundamentalist Christianity in the United States; and racism in musical discourse and performance practice) and continue to motivate my personal and professional interest in the question of how we can be fully ourselves in public contexts, particularly ministry-related ones.

LOVING OUR NEIGHBORS AS OURSELVES

As we approach the question of how to be fully ourselves in public ministry, I want to ground us in the most crucial thing of all: love. Much of this book is directly or indirectly about loving our neighbors. "Neighbor" can mean anyone, but here, I use "neighbor" to mean someone we interact with. A neighbor can be someone listening to our recorded sermon, someone reading what we've written, or someone in the pew on Sunday morning singing alongside us. Calling these people "neighbors" (rather than "congregation" or "audience") rightly reminds us that even when we are communicating and don't hear our neighbor's response, we're still in a kind of relationship with them.

Loving our neighbors as our whole selves is not an easy road, but it is the one that God continually calls us to walk. Pastor Paul Rock points us to the truth: “The way the Gospel is going to be most effectively communicated is through you being brave enough to be yourself and allow the Spirit of God to speak through you and your beautiful imperfection.” We can’t let fear lead us to create a false persona that others can criticize in lieu of our true selves. Instead, we must embrace the truth that counters this fear: only as our individual selves can we conform to the image of Christ and, in so doing, love God and love our neighbors.



KEY TAKEAWAYS

As we grow into the image of Christ, we become more and more fully ourselves. It is only as our individual selves that we love God and love our neighbors.

Being a professional Christian means that our livelihoods are contingent on our personal faith. This brings a host of complications to being fully ourselves in the spotlight of public ministry.

Our life stories and circumstances shape our perspectives, which is why this book includes a wide range of interviewee voices in addition to the author’s.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are times that you have experienced being more fully yourself as a way to love God and your neighbors?

2. What consequences have you experienced from having your faith tied to your livelihood? Do you think of yourself as a “professional Christian”?
3. What kinds of situated knowledge do you bring to your ministry?