

Five Questions for Pastoral Side Quests

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 14 March 2025

Preacher: Chris Oswald

- [0 : 0 0] Oh Oh Oh Oh Today I am going to discuss my uneasy sense of what's developing in the Theobro culture.
- I'm not going to name any names because I don't feel like my concerns are firm enough or well-defined enough to call anybody out.
- And besides, if I were to do that, I'd probably need to reach out to them first. So these are just things that I'm seeing. And I suppose that I, in recording this podcast, wind up accidentally stepping into the concerned bro category.
- Because these are concerns. And that's okay if I get labeled a concerned bro because I don't care. Anyway, for those of you who are wondering what this is all about and maybe you're not super online, that's great, by the way.
- Good for you. But I'm going to trace this to how I understand this situation to have unfolded. Again, not going to talk about particular people or particular controversies, just the phenomenon at large.
- [2 : 0 0] And the phenomenon at large is what I would describe as pastors of local churches who also have various on the side are doing. And yet, potentially, as my understanding is of past.
- That's kind of the background. It's becoming X is way more free than it used to be when it was Twitter. It's easier to get to algorithmically. It's easier to get to the people who would be interested in you.
- It's easier to produce content than it's ever been. It doesn't take much money at all. And we walked out of an environment back in the 90s and 2000s.
- I was a part of this, like a little bit of a part of this, where I think before then a poverty theology had settled in on pastors. And so you would really see fairly often pastors, you know, content in the work of their ministry, not making enough money to take care of their family.
- And so you would see situations where, honestly, I think that a lot of people suffered in pastoral families, wives in particular, but children also.
- [3 : 1 6] Because there was a mentality of, like, well, yeah, I'm a pastor. Like, of course, I'm going to be poor. And, of course, like there's a reasonable level where that's true. I would say poorer might be more consistent to the truth.
- But there's also a level where a lot of men back in the 90s, earlier than that, too, were kind of slackers in that respect. And what they should have been doing is they should have been looking for other ways to supplement their family's income.
- And I have tried. I don't think I've always succeeded. I certainly have never succeeded in making, you know, my family's life extremely comfortable. But when things got stupidly bad because of ministry or, you know, the orphan, I would go do somewhat successful.

Or we left for Kansas, this kind of problem that people were having toward, I think, just a family to have income-wise. And it wasn't easy again to really push back against that and say, you know, pastors, men, it's not okay for your family to be poor just because you're in the ministry.

You need to go out and make some stuff happen and take care of these folks. And it was also Driscoll who had kind of a model for that in that he was both a content producer, he was a relatively prolific writer, and produced a bunch of other kinds of content.

[4 : 38] And this is before podcasts were super popular. But he was definitely bringing in a second stream and was able to take care of his family because of that. Well, a lot of guys these days who are in the Theobro camp and really don't align theologically with Mark Driscoll at all anymore and have moved way more toward the far right side of the theological spectrum and, you know, are open advocates for patriarchy and so on and so forth.

Well, a lot of those guys, I think, carried that essential lesson forward and that Driscoll pounded into them. A lot of these guys were part of that movement in one way or another or influenced by it.

And so they are admirably dedicated to the hustle, which I love. I feel like I want my family motto to have always been, you can just do things.

Because the truth is, is that we live in this incredible country with incredible opportunities and we have so much freedom and so many resources if we screw up. And it's okay if you don't.

You can really go out and the Theobro guys aren't content to let their family \$1,000 a year. So they're like, well, that's a start. That's probably not going to be enough for my family. So that's good.

[5 : 51] But what they've done in response to that is they've, most of them have not gone out and learned how to hang drywall or develop kind of one of your more traditional side hustles, woodworking, whatever.

What they've done is that they've turned to this content producing model. And, you know, there was a time when that model was pretty lucrative.

And not lucrative, like no one's ever making tons of money on that stuff. A few exceptions, but for the most part, nobody really is. There was a moment where that space wasn't very crowded.

Not many people were trying to produce Christian content. And so you weren't really competing for attention. You weren't really having to differentiate yourself. You certainly weren't trying to manipulate an algorithm to deliver more people who were already mostly in agreement with you.

And so back then, you could kind of just be like a content producer in some way, you know, writing books or, you know, having a small publishing company, a magazine.

[6 : 57] Doug Wilson did this years ago. He had a magazine. You could do that stuff, but you didn't have to just engage in controversy in order to build a following.

But now you really do. You really do. It is extremely difficult in the congestion of today's content producing environment to build a following, you know, save 100 Patreon followers at \$10 a month.

That's \$1,000 extra a month. That would be a nice ad for a pastoral family. You know, nice, humble, kind of reasonable ad.

Well, it's not easy any longer to get people to your content without having to monetize controversy.

It's just not, you know, that's not. And I think the Bible is just as far as it depends on us, on and so forth. And it's good for you to go do something. You know, get out of your brain. I shouldn't go downstairs or go to the church and just do, you know, something that just needs to be worked on.

[8 : 06] Anyway, so this model that they've engaged in, it's caused, I think, some problems. And I don't see it winding up to be a good thing for them.

One of the interesting phenomenon that I've heard from a number of these guys is they cite Proverbs 13, 22, a good man leaves an inheritance to his children's children, but the wealth of the sinner is laid up for the righteous.

They cite that passage as a God-given command to make enough money to pass on to your children's children.

And that is simply not what that verse is saying at all. That is a verse saying that a man's character causes God to bless him, and that blessing will be in either tangible, physical, you know, currency and money and property, but also just in, like, wisdom and orientation to the proper ways of living and so forth.

So I started noticing these guys taking a really prosperity gospel kind of verse, and I would just, are they doing that verse wrong? Building a platform that I'm not saying, and that would, we just need to understand that the problem is that.

[9 : 30] So what my concern is, their concern is they're actually doing the opposite. Appoverished in basic content building. That's, you know, I don't know in that whole thing, but I would say that, you know, we're told to respect our leaders and watch the outcome of their life.

And this is just why I would tell you constantly, the only guy you know well enough to listen to most fundamentally is your pastor. And that's not because you know your pastor super well or because he's not potentially a problem.

But you do need a lot of evidence, you know, to understand whether you should trust someone in a pastoral role. And that evidence has got to be kind of just played out before you over time.

So, yeah, you know, I have some concerns. I'm not screaming about them. No one's asking me about them. But as a broader thing, I have developed a bit of a diagnostic that I think can help people kind of understand, not only for themselves, but also for their pastors, kind of orient themselves in some basic ideas.

So here's the main thing. Being a good pastor is really just about being what I would call a good generalist. You know, shepherding is kind of like a do-whatever-is-necessary job.

[10 : 57] The main goal is to feed the sheep. I don't know if we've talked about this in our shepherding conversations, but, you know, the reason that sheep go out to pasture is to eat. That's the only reason.

They're not there for any other purpose. So the reason to go out to pasture is to eat. So you can kind of say that the pastor's primary job is to feed sheep. But then, you know, you've got to also realize that they are going to get themselves into trouble out there in the pasture.

They are going to be highly vulnerable to predators and so on and so forth. So while it's kind of true that a pastor's main job is just to feed the sheep, you also have this larger sense of you've got to be good at everything or you've got to be willing to do anything it takes to keep the sheep safe and to keep the sheep out of trouble and so forth.

So pastoring is kind of a generalist job. It really just involves sort of being willing to do whatever. But at some point, it's not unusual for a pastor to start having a particular insight or passion for a certain area of life.

And so now they might be, in addition to a generalist, they might take on some specialization. And that's okay. You know, that happens all the time and the church has been blessed mightily by this.

[12 : 13] Calvin was a pastor. And I... He was a pastor. I mean, honestly, he's a good pastor in the sense that he fed the sheep all the time. But, you know, look, Calvin also did some other stuff too.

You know, he was really... He was really committed to his specialty of doing, you know, formal theology. So pastors will be...need to be good generalists, but they might develop a specialization.

Not all will, but some will. And sometimes those specializations bring extra income. Sometimes they don't. But we are told so routinely in the Bible that we've got to watch out, especially pastors, for this weird relationship to money, that we need to be aware that a specialization can sometimes be cloaking a money issue.

And if not a money issue, then sometimes a recognition issue. There's a desire for a greater, a larger audience. Lots of things like that. So I started thinking through that because, you know, over time, pastors will be like, well, I want to start...

I want to start, like, doing marriage conferences. Or I want to start being a guy that's good at apologetics. Or I want to start being an expert on missions or so forth. It's like, okay, cool. How do we help you sort that out in a way that is healthy for you and healthy for the church and healthy for the kingdom?

[13 : 36] So I've thought about that because it's come up a fair amount over the last year as I've talked to other younger pastors. And I came up with a list of five questions that I believe will help a church, an elder board, and a pastor discern whether or not he is...

Whether or not specialization is appropriate for him. The first one would be, is he capable of fulfilling his generalized calling while also leaning into a particular area of application?

This comes down, I think, a lot to questions related to his own organization and administration of his life.

Is his life ordered enough? Is he capable of spinning many plates? Does the man have just sort of basic proficiencies to run life?

I suppose in some ways, friends, that this is also a good thing to think through with... If you're thinking about getting a side hustle, you've got your main job and starting to think...

[14 : 41] Maybe some of these questions would help for you. But I'm mostly thinking of how to think through a pastor that's exploring specialization. The first question, is he capable of fulfilling a generalized calling while also leaning into a particular area?

Number two, is he competent in the area of specialization he's chosen? I think this is huge. Like, you don't want to let your pastor friend go out and do something he's actually not any good at and hasn't invested enough work into to become good at it.

That would be bad. He's going to look bad. That's going to waste his time. It's going to hurt his credibility, so on and so forth. So is he capable of fulfilling both things?

And is he competent in the area of specialization? Third question, does his specialty complement his general ministry to the church, or does it compete with it? Now, that's a complex question to answer, because if you're just counting hours, for instance, you might make an argument that there's a competition that's taking there.

He's spending hours doing this when he could be doing that. So that's one way you might think about it. But there are other layers to that, including there tends to be a positive feedback loop between a man who's just pursuing his God-given passions and the goodness of the local church.

[16 : 01] So there's some reason why you might want to encourage him to go pursue this passion. It might just make him a better pastor in general. There are also ways where it could just bless the church in other ways.

I would say that I have not been a heavy lifter with Knox, but I am committed to it. It's on my mind a lot, and I do try to give time to it, especially time in prayer.

But also, I kind of feel like I'm just very willing, happy to do anything that's necessary for Knox. And then the question just becomes, okay, you're doing this other thing.

Does this compete with or complement the more general ministry? I'm not going to answer that question here. I think it probably, obviously I wouldn't be doing it if I didn't think it complemented it. But you can imagine kind of the way that that question would get complex, if nothing else, and it'd be a good question to ask.

Number four, is this area of specialization aimed at glorifying Christ, or is self-exaltation more evident? Is this side thing, this specialization he's undertaking, is it aimed at glorifying Christ, or does it kind of look like potentially there's more of a self-exaltation behind this?

[17 : 19] Again, a complicated question. And then number five, is this person exercising this specialization in a way that is consistent with the Bible's teachings, ethical teachings, so forth?

So take ethics, for example. Say I went out and got a side hustle where I was selling something, and it just happened to be in a field of sales. Because not all fields of sales are like this, but some are, where hedging the truth here and there is kind of necessary.

Well, then I'm not able to do that, right? Because I'm violating basic biblical ethics in that job. Circling back to the Theobro thing, I would be wanting to know, are you exercising this specialization in a way that is consistent with what the Bible teaches about godly discourse?

So I would point, for instance, to 2 Timothy 2, 23, have nothing to do with foolish, ignorant controversies. You know that they breed quarrels, and the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome, but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness.

God may perhaps grant them repentance, leading to a knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil after being captured by him to do his will.

[18 : 50] You see that? If your pastor is doing a side hustle where he's a salesman, then you want to ask, are you being honest? But if your pastor is doing a side hustle where he's producing content, then you need to ask, are you stirring up controversy and monetizing it?

Are you being quarrelsome? Are you breeding quarrels? Are you patiently enduring evil? Are you correcting opponents with gentleness? Those are the questions you need to ask a pastor with a content-producing side hustle.

Remember, one of the foundational things I'm pretty confident in is that in today's content production environment, controversy is almost a necessity for producing, for selling, for selling content.

Okay, so those are some questions that I wanted to pass on to you. They may be helpful for you to think through in terms of other things. If you're taking on a second job, if you're thinking of adding something else to your already existing ministry, these five questions might be helpful to you.

Are you capable of fulfilling both your general calling while leaning into a particular area of application? Are you competent in the area of specialization that you're choosing? Does this area complement the broader commitments you've made or does it compete with them?

[20 : 12] Number four, is this area of specialization aimed at glorifying Christ or is self-exaltation more evident? By the way, that's why I love anonymous construction worker side hustles.

It's so good for a guy who lives in the spotlight to not be in the spotlight. So good for the soul. And number five, is it exercised in a way that is consistent with the Bible's clear teaching about that area?

For instance, content production, you'd really want to spend a lot of time reading the pastoral epistles and especially 2 Timothy 2, 23 through 26.

So I hope that was helpful to you. I'm just trying to clear the docket of a bunch of content that I've produced, hopeful that it's helpful to someone. All right. God bless. Be well.