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Coveting My Neighbor's Church: Dealing With The Monster Of Jealousy

By Silas Shotwell

I get to church early; I usually do.

I walk into the empty auditorium and begin my usual Sunday morning prayer: "Oh God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Creator and Life Giver, the Was, the Is, the Is-to-Come, bless me this day as I seek to be a witness for you. Make my words powerful and true. Oh God, bring the people here today that are of your choosing." And then I turn first one direction and then the other as I continue, "Bring them from the north, from the west, from the south, and from the east." I conclude my prayer with other praise and promises. Then I prepare for the people to come in.

They do come. Sixty, eighty, sometimes even a hundred precious souls. I welcome them, challenge them, encourage them. I have the sense that God has brought them here and that he permits me to be the one to address them. It is all very satisfying . . . usually.

But sometimes I think of other congregations. I think of churches in Texas or Tennessee where hundreds of people, even thousands, are pouring into church buildings. I even remember my own former churches, where I spoke to hundreds instead of dozens. In fact, when I preached in Oklahoma in the early '80s, I would sometimes speak to a thousand! Am I somehow less capable now?

And what about those other large churches? Do their ministers know more than I know? Do they speak better than I speak? Does God love them more than he loves me?

I don't get asked to speak at college lectureships. I'm almost sixty, have written no best-sellers, and get paid about half of what I used to make.

I look at younger guys, less committed guys, downright unspiritual guys, and they are preaching in places that I can't.

Jealous?

Who, me?

Of course not.

Of course not!

(Most of the time.)

I would like to have a secretary. I once had three. I would like to have an associate. I once had five.

I finally did get health insurance after five years of being without.

Sometimes it feels unfair. I've had some "important" experiences—representative of Churches of Christ to the Congress on World Evangelization in Switzerland, meaningful conversations with Schaeffer, Stott, Graham, Colson, and other evangelical notables. I wrote radio scripts for a prominent evangelist in Churches of Christ. A famous small-group expert told me some of my work on small groups was an improvement over hers. Doesn't that all count for something?

I think I have more to say than lots of guys who preach in bigger places. I love the church and have a heart for ministry! In my work with Safety Net, a number of preach-

ers from large churches have confessed to me that preaching is mainly just a “job” for them.

So why am I where I am, doing what I am doing in this small place? These are the occasional thoughts of a wounded healer who struggles with jealousy.

Yes, jealousy—the green-eyed monster that turned priests and Pharisees against Jesus. That evil incentive that forced Judaizing teachers to follow the apostle Paul from place to place to destroy his work.

“But I can’t be jealous. I teach and preach against jealousy.”

Oh, but I am. Jealousy lies along my pathway like a coiled rattlesnake. I can never disregard it or pretend it isn’t there. I have to deal with it. Kill it! Or else it will get me.

For the most part, I have dealt with it. My congregation is small, my elders are elderly, our copier jams, and our overhead projector looks like it has a huge sunspot on it. We don’t have small groups, because our congregation *is* a small group.

But our folks are loving, accepting, and dedicated. We do not have power struggles or political games. They are *for* me and I am *for* them. We move more like the tortoise than the hare but we *are* moving.

There is not someone looking over my shoulder wanting my job. There are no hidden agendas or underlying currents. I frankly wouldn’t trade where I am and what I am doing with most preachers I know. Though my community may not be gigantic or glamorous, I know I am making a real impact here and in the lives of the people in my congregation. I have a genuine satisfaction in taking care of little things. And there are *no* little people. These are *my* people. They are important. We trust each other. I know they are behind me all the way, and they know I am not using them as a stepping-stone to another place.

But jealousy *is* a problem with so many of us. It comes when we equate our ministries with the success standards of the world—how much we make, how much growth we are experiencing, how flashy we are. During the past five years, I have ministered to over three hundred church workers through the Safety Net program. The vast majority of them struggle with self-image. They have been hurt by others and have sometimes hurt themselves.

One of the occupational hazards of ministry is that our personal sense of self-worth becomes intertwined with the success of our ministries. “If the church is big, then so

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am I” or “If the church is small, then I must be small.” That simply is not true.

“Should I stay; should I go? Where can I do the most good?” “The most good” is nebulous and not necessarily attached to larger numbers.

I remember when a renowned homiletics professor was asked who he thought was the best preacher. He did not want to answer. But when pressed, he said, “It’s probably someone in North Dakota that none of us ever heard of.” That means more to me now than it ever has before.

We know of Elijah and Ezekiel and even of preachers today who do not feel listened to. But we would rather that be someone else. After all, “I could handle the big church without its affecting my pride.”

Sure. Say it a little louder. Maybe you can at least convince yourself! I’m pretty sure that the Lord has me figured out. I think he knows I couldn’t handle wealth. I think he knows I tend to decompose in the spotlight. And I think God wants me to be right where I am.

So I look out at my sixty-to-one hundred, and I thank him for every one. I study as hard as I did when preaching to a thousand. I thank God for his grace in allowing me to preach at all.

And I thank him for cowboy boots. Big, size 11, buffalo-skin cowboy boots. I couldn’t wear them in city pulpits in suburbia. But out here in a country church in Oregon, they are great for STOMPING SNAKES!

“Get behind me, Satan! I’m doing a work for my Lord, and I won’t allow your jealous spirit to infect me. I’m saved by grace. Sustained by grace. Empowered by grace. You have no control over me. Get lost! Oh—I forgot. You already are!”

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