

My Self-Image and My Job
by Bob Young

[Note: I wrote this reflection during summer 2007, when I was contemplating a return to ministry and thinking about the nature of my job in Christian education.]

Here's an unfortunate truth based on the culture in which I have grown up: how I see myself is intimately tied up in what I do. My self-perception as a male, and thus my self-esteem, is largely based on what I do or do not do.

In our culture, a male generally develops his self-image based on what he can do. As a result, a person may have a positive self-image because he knows he has certain abilities, even when he is not using them. I have observed in counseling that if one changes what one does (e.g., for a living), the change often necessitates a rethinking of one's identity—who one is. Am I who I want to be, who I intend to be? Am I the person God made me to be? Am I filling the niche God had in mind for me?

How does one reconcile the things one does (for a living) and the call of God in one's life? Must the source of our living or livelihood (physical or economical) and our genuine life (spiritual) always be separated? Unfortunately, I fear that is the way it works for the majority of Christians. Interestingly, for those of us who have preached for most or all of our lives, our view of self is tied to our job, and is also tied to our view of our spiritual vitality. We have been blessed to do for a living what sustains us spiritually.

In a time when I see more and more reports of low self-esteem among ministers, the importance of the question only increases: How do I see myself? Why is it so hard (speaking as one who is not now in full-time ministry) to become involved in the evangelism of the local church? How is my view of self altered because I am not preaching but am working in Christian higher education? Do I think less of myself?

Or is the problem that I am not certain I am answering my call. To what am I called? How can I bring to reality in my life that I am called to being rather than doing? Is not the problem that we tend to measure our lives, even as preachers, but what we do (thus meritorious?), rather than by what we are becoming?

What am I becoming? I like myself best when I am involved in missions, preaching, church work, visits, outreach, evangelism, and compassion. Why am I not more willing to do such things daily if these are the things that help me like myself?

Should I seek to do something else (for a living)? What am I accomplishing for the kingdom when I try to talk people into doing something they may not want to do (even though they can benefit by doing it)? Can everyone benefit? Can I be certain of the benefits for all? Are those who teach classes committed to such a benefit for every student?

Or should I return to that to which I am confident God has supremely called me—ministry in some way—ministering, teaching, preaching, missions? Can I be satisfied with teaching the practice of ministry again and again, or must I be a practitioner?

Jan and I have talked about how the rhythms of our life seem most consistent with ministry. Is this something we have merely learned through the years, or is it a reality in our lives? I like the challenge of guiding folks on the spiritual journey, of sharing the good news, of facilitating the ministry of others, of helping others learn the impact of relationships (e.g. leadership development).

If I am at heart a teacher/preacher, even though I have the gifts for administration, would I not be happier if I were to spend my time teaching and preaching?

What impact might my advancing years and lessening energies have on the answers to these questions? How can I escape boredom? How can I reclaim my time? How can I make my time my own (and God's)?