



Might as well face it—

# “I’m addicted to church”

by Ron Benson

**M**y heart was beating out of my chest. I ducked behind a file cabinet when I heard someone coming down the hall outside the office. I didn’t want to get caught.

I wasn’t supposed to be in here. I had been banned from entering the building. I wasn’t even supposed to drive into the parking lot. Yet here I was, sneaking around the place like a thief. I yielded to my addiction and broke into the church building.

“Broke in” may be a little dramatic. The building was open. It was a Sunday night, so there were people around. And I had keys. I was the Senior Pastor, after all.

I violated the ban when I pulled into the parking lot and dropped my kids at Youth Group. I drove out of the parking lot, but pulled right back in again through another driveway. I parked at the back of the lot so I could see all the comings and goings. When it was quiet, I snuck into the church building.

I went into my office and sat quietly in my chair. *It won’t hurt for just a few minutes*, I thought. I skittered around to the secretary’s office to check my mail. Dodging people and staying in the shadows, I snuck into the sanctuary. *I can just sit here and worship a while*. I sat in the front pew. I stood on the platform. *This isn’t going to trip me up. I’m okay*. I gripped the sides of the big old wooden pulpit. I lost it.

I sobbed until I heard a voice, and then scurried to a door and out into the brisk night. *What am I doing?! I am certifiable! This is sick!* I sat for a few minutes in the car, trying to understand what just happened. *How did I get here?*

I had fallen off the wagon.

Perhaps *addiction* is too strong a word for my being glued to ministry success. I have not been addicted to anything, really, unless you count saltines and milk before bed. But when I attempt to describe what I was going through back then, it’s a word that fits. I had become addicted to church. I needed a twelve-step program:

*Hi. My name is Ron. I’m addicted to church.*

## The Center of My Existence

For thirty years of my life I have lived within spitting distance of a church. My dad was a pastor, which made me a PK (preacher’s kid). We lived, breathed, walked and talked church. When I became a pastor, I took up residency in a parsonage that had the same stucco, the same paint color, and the same blessed origins as the sanctuary barely twenty feet away.

It is not a stretch to say that in my formative years the church became a yardstick for behavior. Sure, my parents



**I wasn't supposed to be in here. I had been banned from entering the building. I wasn't even supposed to drive into the parking lot. Yet here I was, sneaking around the place like a thief. I yielded to my addiction and broke into the church building.**

wanted me to “be good” because that’s what God wanted. But lurking in the shadows was always the high-powered motivation of performance and spectacle, of “setting a good example” and “avoiding the appearance of evil.” Expectations were high for the pastor’s family. We lived in a fishbowl, and it was to be kept clean—no algae, no ick, no scum. Appearances mattered.

My dad, the preacher, delivered powerful messages about the grace of God. I loved his preaching, and through it I came to love grace and the Savior who offered it so freely. I believed in it, trusted in it and learned to preach it myself.

But there in the potluck line of Protestant puffery, grace was served alongside a heaping helping of rules. Dad once suggested any beverage from a can could easily be confused with beer, so cans were out. I secretly kept a deck of cards (the devil’s own Euchre deck) in the glove box of my car since they were frowned upon in the house.

I was excused from Square Dance Class in fourth grade because dancing was immoral. These were not hard-and-fast laws, but they were

subtle prescriptions for nuanced legalism. They flavored my view of God.

Through college and seminary I fought with God about becoming a pastor. I didn’t want to do that—didn’t want to put my wife and kids through the struggle that I’d grown to know. I understood that God’s grace challenged the legalisms of my heritage, but I also knew that not much had changed in corporate church life to make it easier to be a pastor. Maybe I also knew there was something dark lurking in me that would be activated in the context of ministry.

However, after seminary I eventually caved in and took a position as pastor of a wonderful little church in Southern California. After almost seven exciting years, God moved us to Michigan and another great church. I enjoyed being a pastor. I loved the people I served. But gradually, I took on the task of managing ministry myself. It tasted so good.

I’m not sure when it happened. It may have been the worship upgrades. Or maybe the bigger budgets. Seeing more people in pews fed the beast. Hiring more staff made me seem more successful. Adding a new state-of-the-art foyer added to the illusion. It wasn’t like we were a megachurch, or that I was a superhero. I wasn’t on TV, and I wasn’t writing books. But somewhere along the way I fell for my own publicity.

### **Atlas—a Champion of Grace?**

Ironically, I considered myself a

**Ironically, I considered myself a champion of grace, a defender against the tide of performance-based church. It was so sneaky, I didn’t see it at all. But I began to assume that the moderate success we were seeing as a church was somehow tied to me.**

champion of grace, a defender against the tide of performance-based church. It was so sneaky, I didn’t see it at all. But I began to assume that the moderate success we were seeing as a church was somehow tied to me. The work, the vision, the plan, the pushing and pulling, the building and growing—all of it came to be on my shoulders—at least that’s what I thought.

It was not forced there; I took it on. I built it up. I wanted it. I needed it to prove how important I was to God, that I deserved his love. I was Atlas, carrying *The Ministry*. It was working—until it didn’t anymore.

When it finally settled in, I sat in my newly renovated office and stared at the walls. I lost my ability to concentrate. Ideas, which used to come streaming out of my head like a fire hydrant, dried to a trickle. Passion, energy, love for God and people—all shriveled. I was out of steam. All my stuff was gone, and I had come to that big block at the end of the railroad tracks beyond which there was just no chugging anymore.

An alcoholic crashes with a bottle—a pastor with a meeting agenda, a budget spreadsheet, a sermon-prep chart, a commentary in his hands and the Hallelujah Chorus playing in the background. He sits dumbfounded and bewildered, impotent and drunk.

I know what you’re asking—*Where was God in all of this?* Yeah. Exactly.

At the church, attendance began dropping. Offerings followed. Success, according to all the typical





**Expectations were high for the pastor's family. We lived in a fishbowl, and it was to be kept clean—no algae, no ick, no scum. Appearances mattered.**

definitions, turned around and went south.

### **On My Own Steam—for All the Wrong Reasons**

Legalism is not found in the behavior itself, but in the motives and postures of the heart. It's a good thing, for instance, to read the Bible. God wants us to do this. But when we do it to earn heavenly brownie points, it's bad news. Sharing the good news of the gospel is great, but using converts to notch our belts for Kingdom benefits is dangerous. Being a good pastor, leading a church, overseeing multiplying ministries, seeing people respond and grow in grace—it's all very exciting.

But eventually, I was doing it for all the wrong reasons, and tempting it all on my own steam. The thing about your own steam is that the water tank runs dry, and the steam stops, and the big engine of your stellar works dies on the tracks.

I measured my worth to God based on my success in ministry. Success made me thirsty for more. But when ministry was not going so well, the result was a man who doubted himself, got defensive and was increasingly sensitive and on edge. For this and other reasons,

my marriage suffered as I mangled my priorities, bumping my wife to a rung under "The Church." I wasn't being a good dad. I tried to pray more, study more, read more, sing more—but nothing provided the fuel I needed. It seemed God had turned his back on me in spite of twelve years of hard work.

We went to a counselor to see if we could fix the damage in our marriage. After a draining, hours-long first session, the therapist turned to me.

"I've got one thing for you to do. You must do it today. I insist on it."

Hard to say *no*. Hard to say *yes*. "Okay," I said.

"If you don't do this, I will be very concerned about you. Unless you do what I ask, I'm afraid you are going to fry."

Frying didn't sound good. "Okay," I said.

"I want you to go home and do whatever it takes to take at least three months off work. A sabbatical. No work. No church. Nothing. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"Yes, I get it." But I didn't get it at all. In my mind I was saying, *Are you nuts?!*

He made me swear, in front of him, my wife and God that I would do what I said.

When my wife and I got in the car for the drive home, I met a strange mix of emotion. We both cried and giggled. We felt the world lift off our shoulders. We felt hope.

At the same time, I told my wife it would never happen. It was impossible. We couldn't afford to just take off three months, and the church was not about to hand me a three-month vacation. After all, attendance was down, giving was down, morale was down. Pretty much everything was down, including me.

### **Going Cold Turkey**

I also knew that putting the brakes on being a pastor would be one of the hardest things I would ever do. I *needed* ministry. God wouldn't

*like* me without all the stuff I was doing for him. Walking away from doing churchy things for Jesus was like going cold-turkey—removing all the bottles from your closets and pouring the stuff down the drain, taking all the cigarettes from your drawers and burning them. I didn't know if I could do it.

But I had said *yes*, and the more we talked and prayed, the more it seemed like the counselor was right—either I take this break or I was going to break. That day, I set about to talk to the people who needed to know. I talked first to my Associate Pastor, who would have to handle things while I was away.

He was encouraging, helpful and eager to preach. I talked to a mover-and-shaker in the church, and he thought it was a good idea. But I had to tell the rest of the leaders. It was this group that I dreaded most.

At that time I was meeting with some of them on Friday mornings



**An alcoholic crashes with a bottle—a pastor with a meeting agenda, a budget spreadsheet, a sermon-prep chart, a commentary in his hands and the Hallelujah Chorus playing in the background.**

I had become dependent on ministry—my works and words and position—because the ministry was providing evidence, false evidence, that I was redeemable, worthy, lovable, good enough...

for prayer. A few days after making my promise, Friday rolled around and we prayed as usual. But I sensed tension in the air. Usually this prayer meeting lasted under an hour because these four men had to get to their regular jobs and lives. But they lingered, sitting around the table, shuffling their feet, looking at each other—obviously nervous.

Finally one of them spoke. He said words that can cause a tingle of anxiety in any pastor. "Pastor, we need to talk to you." *Ahem. Here we go.*

They squirmed in their chairs and looked at their shoes.

"At our Deacons' meeting last week, we talked about you." *Oh man. Look out.* Such a revelation can cause a rise in blood pressure and an irregular heartbeat. As the blood rushed into my face, it disappeared in theirs.

"Pastor, we don't mean to make you angry or upset, but..."

## **Walking away from doing churchy things for Jesus was like going cold-turkey—removing all the bottles from your closets and pouring the stuff down the drain...**

I closed my eyes. *Oh man. This is it. It's over. I'm finished.*

"But we think it would be good for you to consider taking three months off for a sabbatical."

I could swear I saw them flinch, pull back, waiting for my reaction. And as I look back on the moment, if they had come to me even a week before, I might have given it to them. *The nerve! Talking about me behind my back! At a meeting! And suggesting that I needed a*



*break?! That I couldn't handle it anymore?! That I wasn't being successful?! But I didn't say anything.*

I got up from the table and walked to the door of my office. I closed it. I quietly took my seat. I looked up at them. I think I smiled. "I might just take you up on that, gentlemen."

### **Breaking My Dependency on Church**

The night I snuck into the church, sitting there in the car in the church parking lot afterward, I finally got it. I had become dependent on ministry—my works and words and position—because the ministry was providing evidence, false evidence, that I was redeemable, worthy, lovable, good enough to maintain my status in God's family.

Now that the dependency had been broken, I realized that none of it mattered. All my works never persuaded God to love me more, forgive me more, bless me more, or grant me the title "son."

Only Jesus could provide what I needed. I knew that when I first understood grace, but I had forgotten. I had been sucked under by the waves of performance-based living, and I was drowning in my self-made legalism. I could

I also knew that putting the brakes on being a pastor would be one of the hardest things I would ever do. I needed ministry. God wouldn't like me without all the stuff I was doing for him.

only be rescued—again—by his grace.

Those three months off were refreshing and beneficial. It took the first month just to give up on thinking the church was going to die without me. It didn't.

The second month I still had twinges of guilt, but managed to survive without preaching or leading or pastoring. By the third month, I knew that the whole experience was a reintroduction to God's amazing grace.

Our marriage was replenished and set on a healthier course. My perspective was readjusted. I went back to ministry with fresh enthusiasm and hope. I was more honest, more humble, more reliant on him and less on me.

I still consider myself an addict. I have been tempted, and I have fallen. But I am a pastor again, of another great church, and I am clean and sober. Today.

Charles Spurgeon, revered British preacher of the late 1800's said, "We must every now and then cry 'halt!' and serve the Lord by holy inactivity and consecrated leisure." When ministry becomes your addiction and you find yourself dependent on churchy activity to feed your need for God's love and approval, going cold-turkey may be the only thing to do. □

*Ron Benson serves Grace Christian Fellowship in Bay City, Michigan, a church that aspires to live up to its name in every way. If you'd like to interact with Ron about ministry addiction, or if you're a pastor in desperate need of a break, or if you'd just like to know if he's as crazy as he seems, you can visit his website at [www.ronbenson.net](http://www.ronbenson.net).*