

IX 9Marks Journal



PASTORAL BURNOUT

ITS CAUSES & CURES

Biblical Thinking for Building Healthy Churches



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Editor's Note—Pastoral Burnout



Jonathan Leeman

Every job has its occupational hazards. Loggers lose fingers. Businessmen go bankrupt. Wrestlers grow cauliflower ears. What about pastors? Pastors experience burnout. Burnout isn't so much about physical depletion, though that may be a variable. It's about spiritual depletion. You spend all day ministering to people. But now you don't possess the emotional and spiritual resources to continue ministering. You're like a gas station with no gasoline left. Or a candle whose wick has burned down low.

I've had conversations recently with church members who raise their eyebrows at the topic of burnout. And understandably so. Paul speaks of laboring day and night (1 Thess. 2:9). He poured himself out like a drink offering (2 Tim. 4:6). He experienced beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger (2 Cor. 6:5). The man left it all out on the field.

But today, website after website talks about protecting pastors. And so here is 9Marks with our own contribution to this growing field of literature. Maybe our industry is growing soft? Maybe seminaries are churning out snowflakes?

If you're someone looking for a safe space, separated from the world's trauma, the pastorate is not for you. Nor is this 9Marks Journal. Pastoral work is and will remain emotionally grueling, physically exhausting, and spiritually fraught. Different men have different capacities, but you should give whatever you have as a sacrifice of praise. You should pour yourself out.

Christ expects this of every Christian (1 John 3:16). And yet, as a minister, you will model it for others (see 1 Thess. 2:8).

With those cautions firmly in place, however, you remain finite. You will reach the end of yourself. The psalmist, too, often reached the end of himself: "I am weary with my crying out; my throat is parched. My eyes grow dim with waiting for my God" (Ps. 69:3). Maybe "burnout" is just our pop-psychologized way of talking about where the psalmist so often lived. And the psalmist's cries, remember, point typologically to the One who spent everything (Ps. 69:7-9, 21).

Did Jesus, the Good Shepherd, experience burnout? I guess it depends on how you define burnout. But, no, he never lost the desire to minister, to give, and to love. And that's good news for you and me. You and I aren't Jesus. Only he perfectly rested in the Father, and only he was perfectly filled by the Spirit. Though Jesus tired physically, he always burned bright with love and grace. Worship him!

The end of burnout, the revivifying of your soul, won't solely come through physical rest or a Sabbath. It will come through resting in the Lord of the Sabbath (Matt 11:28-30; 12:8).

Therefore, of all the commendable pieces in this Journal, start with Nick Roark's. He lays out passage after passage from his favorite Puritans, those old doctors to the soul. Each of them speaks to the burned-out saint, and each ministers by pointing to nothing other than Christ. Christ is our refreshment, our ministry, our fire, our life.

I Was Burnt Out— And I Stepped Away



Shai Linne

This was not going to be a typical members' meeting at our church. I knew this. Brian and Frank—the pastors I'd served with since the church was planted two years before—knew this as well. But only a few people in our young congregation were aware of the announcement I was about to make. This was the day that I was resigning as an elder at the church I helped to plant. Though I'd come to a point of peace about my decision months prior, I knew that it would be a shock to some in the church.

But first, we did what we normally do at members' meetings. We prayed. We recited our equivalent of a church covenant in unison. We joyfully voted to bring in new members and accepted the resignations from those members who were moving on to serve God elsewhere. We handled other church business.

And then the time came: "And now, Shai would like to make an announcement."

I walked up to the microphone, adorned with the clothes on my back, jumbled thoughts, and a prepared statement clutched by

trembling hands. I didn't know what to expect. Rather than strike the wrong note with superfluous introductory remarks, I simply looked down at the paper and began to read:

To the Members of Risen Christ Fellowship,
In 1 Peter 5:1-4, it says:

“So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock.”

I want to focus your attention on a phrase in verse 2: *“not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you.”*

Part of what this verse means is that being an elder is something that a man should do joyfully and freely rather than merely out of obligation. Puritan author Matthew Henry comments on this, saying,

“These duties must be performed, not by constraint, not because you must do them, not from compulsion of the civil power, or the constraint of fear or shame, but from a willing mind that takes pleasure in the work”

This verse has resonated in my soul for quite some time now. For while I certainly love the church dearly and enjoy serving with the other elders, the last two and a half years has taken a considerable toll on me and my family. In the midst of it, I've found myself wrestling with my own low affections for the Lord and an increasing lack of delight in much of the work of pastoral ministry. In other words, *“a willing mind that takes pleasure in the work”* has not been my recent experience.”

So how did I get to this point? There are a number of factors that played into how I ended up where I was. For the purposes of this article—and like any good Baptist preacher should—I'll identify three.

WORK/HOME IMBALANCE

In his characteristically humorous way of highlighting the challenges of church revitalization, Mike McKinley wrote a book with a great title: *Church Planting is For Wimps*. Though church planting features many joys, anyone who's ever done it knows it's an extremely difficult endeavor. It's not for the faint of heart.

Along with the usual challenges that come with church planting—fundraising, building search, etc.—my family faced seemingly non-stop trials. To give some context, here's a brief modified timeline from the year we planted RCF.

May 2015. Birth of our youngest son Ezra, giving my wife Blair and I three children three and under.

June 2015. Moved from Northern Virginia to Philadelphia in preparation for launch in September.

July 2015. Our living room became a sprinkler park when I turned on the shower upstairs and water began to rain down through the light fixtures in the ceiling.

September 2015. RCF holds its first service.

October 2015. This time, the basement of our home floods.

October 2015. While driving with the entire family on a road trip, we hit a deer and totaled our car. Thankfully, the Lord preserved our lives.

November 2015. Blair has her first panic attack related to the accident, leading to our first trip to the E.R. and a difficult and often discouraging journey of various health issues for Blair that continue to this day, almost three years later.

And that was just the first six months. As my wife's condition worsened, I struggled with my inability to keep work at work in order to be fully present when I got home. The demands of a new church are many, but my wife needed me to care for her. She needed me to take on more responsibilities with our three young children as it became more difficult for her to care for them. My

life began to feel like I was strapped to a treadmill set to the fastest possible speed on the steepest possible incline. Pastoral ministry began to feel more like a burden than a joy, which leads to the next factor.

THE UNEXPECTED CHALLENGE OF VOCATIONAL MINISTRY

I always thought the ideal scenario would be to be on staff as a pastor. I mean, getting paid to study God’s Word and shepherd his people? Who wouldn’t want to sign up for that?

Unfortunately, when I took the position, my sinful heart came along with me for the ride. I never anticipated the conundrum I would feel when preparing a sermon in the office on a Saturday night; or teaching a membership class; or facilitating an elder’s meeting—all while wanting nothing more than to be at home with my family instead.

Far too often, I felt guilty, ashamed, and unspiritual when the thought that kept me going was not, “I am serving for the glory of God”, but rather, “This is my job. I have to do this to provide for my family.” Having my livelihood attached to my ministry began to do strange things in my heart and its motivations. It got to the point where I began to dread the very things I’d joyfully signed up to do years before. And I hated it. I hated when I felt that way. All this became a vicious cycle, replaying constantly in my mind. It was miserable.

AN UNHAPPY PASTOR

The bottom line is that I was an unhappy pastor. Don’t get me wrong—there were certainly many joys and many things I remain grateful for. First and foremost, there was our wonderful congregation, made up of dear brothers and sisters of different ethnicities and generations, united by a common love for the Savior and

his glory. I count it an honor to have been able to help shepherd the saints at RCF, even for a season.

As I talked through my difficulties with the other elders, they were very helpful, prayerful, and accommodating. As my wife's condition entered its second year, it became clearer that perhaps this could be a long-term thing that needed my presence and availability in a way that I couldn't see happening while in full-time pastoral ministry. Beyond that, I didn't want to continue serving as a pastor if it meant that I would regularly be "sorrowful"—forget the "always rejoicing." Finally, it became clear to me that I no longer desired to be an overseer, which the Bible assumes as a prerequisite to a man taking the office (1 Timothy 3:1).

At that point, I knew I needed to resign. All the arguments against resigning—"what will people think?" "what about our donors?" "it's going to be embarrassing"—proved to be more about my own fear of man and my own pride than glorifying to God. I knew that it could be an awkward transition; my once fellow elders would now be my pastors and I would simply be a member at the church I helped to plant. But I figured that it's better to be a happy member than a joyless pastor.

A NEW BEGINNING

By God's grace, we made it through that members' meeting. Though there were many tears, the congregation has been very supportive and encouraging in the months that followed. In retrospect now, a year later, I can say without a doubt that I made the right decision. It's been helpful for me to be more present for my family. I've experienced much joy in returning to my former vocation as an artist and writer.

I still have opportunities to preach from time to time, and to serve in other ways at the church. I haven't ruled out returning someday as a lay elder, if that's what the Lord and the saints at

RCF desire for me. But whatever happens, I've taken great comfort knowing that my identity is not in being a pastor, but in being a sinner saved by grace through the atoning work of Jesus Christ. And that's more than enough.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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I Was Burnt Out— And I Stayed In



Ed Moore

“**B**ecause it doesn’t know the words.”
That was the deadpan response our deacon chairman offered when someone at our quarterly member meeting asked why the fan in the church basement was humming.

A HAPPY ARRIVAL

I arrived at my current church in July of 1992, and for a solid decade our business meetings were marked by love, unity, and good-natured, corny humor. The church wasn’t a utopia. We were sinners and as such we would sometimes hurt and offend each other. Problems arose just like they do everywhere, but we usually solved our differences quickly and went about the Lord’s business joyfully. For the first ten years I served at our church, we concentrated on growing in grace through evangelism and discipleship. The church was, and remains, a modest size, and the members for

the most part peacefully enjoyed the Lord and one another.

Looking back, I regret my lack of appreciation for that peaceful season of life. Even though I'd served in ministry for many years prior to 1992, I still had a naïve and idealistic view of how temporary and fragile church unity can be. I would often hear my fellow pastors talk about the constant tension they felt in their congregations, the constant discouragement they felt in their hearts. I tried to be sympathetic, but I simply couldn't relate.

A TIME OF WAR

“Because they didn't know the words” is the short answer as to how we moved from being a peace-loving people to those skilled at war. You never know how bad your roof is until it rains. And in 2002, without warning, Noahic precipitation fell relentlessly on our local assembly in the form of dissension, gossip, backbiting, false accusation, public outbursts of wrath, and a general sense of distrust.

The scalpel that exposed the cancer below the skin was unremarkable: an innocent request from a faithful member to refresh the church by-laws. They'd been written in 1933 and had been scarcely touched since. In order to read, review, and, if need be, revise them, we first needed to find them. Eventually, at the bottom of a stack of irrelevant papers, we found a copy—perhaps we found *the* copy. Some of the language was so antiquated that we needed Rosetta Stone to decipher its true meaning.

Nobody took the assignment seriously. Looking back, this was a critical error, for our (my) sloppiness and failure to give attention to detail is what aroused a lack of trust. Be that as it may, the cancer in the church was metastasizing and would have surfaced eventually even if we'd treated the bylaw revisions conscientiously.

When we presented some changes that reflected our church's ecclesiology, we were accused of a conspiracy and an intentional attempt to destroy the church. Shockingly, these accusations

came from those who had previously been very supportive of the leadership.

The blow was so devastating and dramatic that I, for all practical purposes, quit. I didn't *technically* quit because I didn't actually submit my resignation. I quit in that I began tenaciously pursuing a move to another church.

Previously, I had been particular about my theological convictions. These convictions dissolved as I began my quest to find a new church. I went online and found a generic "pastor search" website and mailed out a ton of resumes, paying little attention to doctrine and theology. I was burned out. It didn't matter where I was going. I simply had to find a fast exit.

My burnout wasn't caused by physical exhaustion. The thought of taking a sabbatical has never appealed to me. My burnout also wasn't caused by discouragement from an unfruitful ministry. By God's grace, we'd seen a steady stream of salvations, baptisms, and evidences of grace among the saints. Simply put, my burnout had been caused by a furious season of infighting in the church.

So I felt as though I must move on. Yet for all the bait I cast into the sea of churches, I received only one bite. A church that was committed to "purpose driven" principles asked for an interview. I looked the other way, and put my best foot forward, trying desperately to get hired. Thankfully, that church didn't want me, and in order to feed my family I stayed put.

Meanwhile, back at the cage match, those who opposed the elders' leadership became increasingly vocal and influential. Those people, however, weren't as threatening as those who feigned friendship but secretly were foes. We began to categorize members—Christ's sheep!—as "friend" or "foe" in our elders meetings. We felt as though we couldn't trust anyone fully. The wagons were circling, and our goal was survival.

To the best of my ability, I had preached, taught, and stressed the importance of the Bible every week for ten years. I lived un-

der the false assumption that, because I constantly called people to submit to the Bible's claims, our church was well guarded from a collapse from within. I had assumed that, if we addressed controversies with chapter and verse, the church would experience a happy resolution.

But then we discovered that our critics didn't know Scripture, nor did they regard it as a means for settling matters theologically. I realized how easy it is for evangelical churches like mine to embrace slogans that affirm the Bible as God's inherent Word only to let those slogans be trumped by pragmatism and "ways that seem right to a man."

These discoveries emptied the bullets from our gun. If the 1933 church bylaws trumped the Holy Scriptures, then we had no Spirit-inspired rulebook and no defense.

As elders, we lovingly attempted to engage our opponents with texts of Scripture. They didn't physically stop their ears, but they might as well have. "Don't play Bible bingo with us," they said. They inscribed that mantra on their shields and kept fighting.

How does a pastor survive if you take the Bible out of his hands? Allow God's Word to be neutralized, and he'll burn out faster than a fire-cracker.

LESSONS LEARNED

"Because I didn't know the Word."

That's the baseline reason this dilemma got the best of me. I knew the Word in that I was well versed in the facts, stories, and major doctrines of the Bible. But I didn't know the Word with respect to proper ecclesiology. The elders themselves were godly, committed men with impeccable integrity. They, too, knew the Scriptures extensively.

But we were weak in our doctrines of membership, discipline, ecclesiology, and elder-led congregationalism. As I survey the

landscape of evangelical churches today, I would honestly say that our church, during our time of crisis, was comparatively solid when matched up with most. However, this is a small consolation that brought no comfort during the actual storm.

Looking back, I'm convinced that if we'd been more deliberate in our membership process, and if we'd engaged the offenders in the first steps of loving church discipline, then we perhaps could have averted some of our woes.

For ten peaceful years, our flawed ecclesiology never caused a felt pain. God was and is so merciful to our church. He's merciful not only because he gave us a decade of serenity, and not only because he allowed our civil war to cease. He was merciful and kind in allowing that storm to rock our church.

Personally, the season of burnout and distress taught me sympathy for my fellow ministers. My sinful pride of pastoring a church where peace abounds was brought to light, and along with it came the gift of repentance. I'm no longer as quick or brash or bold to pass out advice to fellow pastors without first tenderly taking into account the fragile nature of congregations comprised of sinners. Also, as a result of our trial, we've tightened up our ecclesiology and become more sober and vigilant in our decisions.

Speaking for myself, the greatest benefit of that horrid trauma is that it brought me closer to the Lord himself. This episode didn't come to an end because we, the elders, made a clever discovery or employed a strategy that turned the tide. Quite the contrary—I'd emotionally checked out. I had no gas left in my ministerial tank. "Burnout" isn't a biblical term, but it well describes what I was experiencing.

MINISTRY IS WAR

So, what was the secret of survival?

"Because I knew the Word, the incarnate Word Jesus Christ."

That's the bottom-line answer as to how the season of burnout was replaced with joy and a renewed zeal to press on. I cannot give you an answer as to how our church turned the corner and returned to being a place of harmony and love.

For purposes of this article, the simple answer as to how I personally survived is Jesus Christ himself! I was like Jeremiah, fully prepared to throw in the towel: "If I say, 'I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name,' there is in my heart as it were a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot" (Jeremiah 20:9).

I wanted to quit, but the Lord wouldn't allow it. If it was left up to me, I would have been long gone. So I don't wish to present myself as an example of perseverance in the midst of pastoral struggles. Truth be told, I am the exact opposite.

Paul explains our pastoral calling so well in the final chapter he ever wrote. He tells Timothy to "fulfill your ministry." A cursory reading of the two letters to Timothy shows that "ministry" often involves battles within the church. Before I was actually in the ministry, I thought it was made up of studying, preaching, teaching, evangelizing, and discipling. That's an accurate but extremely incomplete list. Ministry also involves war.

Attacks come from the world, to be sure, but even more deadly attacks come from fellow believers. Paul's final words express this frustration:

Do your best to come to me soon. For Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica. Crescens has gone to Galatia, Titus to Dalmatia. Luke alone is with me . . . Alexander the coppersmith did me great harm; the Lord will repay him according to his deeds. Beware of him yourself, for he strongly opposed our message. (2 Timothy 4:9-11a, 14-15)

Paul sums up his disappointment in verse 16: "At my first defense no one came to stand by me." If Paul, perhaps the greatest Christian

who ever lived, went through these trials relatively alone, then I know that my petty trials are hardly worth mentioning.

At the time, they seemed significant to me. I stayed in the ring only because “the Lord stood with me,” as Paul said to Timothy.

In part the Lord stood with me using a great deal of human support. My elders, my family, and a host of wonderful people in the church remained courageous and loyal. For their support, I remain very thankful.

But ultimately, my survival was a matter of Jesus himself being my portion, my guide, my comfort, and my rock while all of the world around me was crumbling. As I often sat alone in tears, physically trembling, unable to sleep and overcome with worry, it was in those dark hours that Christ upheld me and sustained me to press on.

This is why I stated above that God was very kind to allow this unrest to invade our church. Had it not been for the trials that led to burnout, I myself wouldn't have experientially known the kind mercies of Christ to sustain his shepherds when their strength has failed. The subjective nature of this deliverance was granted by Christ through his Holy Spirit, and it's anchored in the unchanging, objective truth of the gospel.

About two years after this crisis, a sermon by pastor Mike Bullmore introduced me to the glorious truths of the functional centrality of the gospel. The immovable facts that Jesus died for me and now lives as my mediator became the overarching truths that now motivate my life and ministry.

So for anyone who may be in the midst of burnout—due to exhaustion or apparent fruitlessness or conflict or some other hardship—please look to Jesus. Please cry out to Jesus. Please draw near to Jesus. Please go back to your first love and meditate on the glorious gospel and its bottomless benefits to those who have been redeemed by it. Knowing the Incarnate Word is not only the short answer—it's the *only* answer for overcoming burnout in ministry.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ed Moore is the senior pastor of North Shore Baptist Church in Bayside, New York.

When Your Husband Is Burnt Out



Anna Moore

Growing up in rural north Georgia, I never had aspirations to become a pastor's wife or a writer. Here I am doing both in Queens, New York! I've done one far longer than the other. For thirty-three years, I've had the privilege of ministering alongside my husband, Ed, who has been in his current role of senior pastor for 26 years. I wouldn't want to be anywhere else doing anything else.

But that's not always been the case.

Occasionally, we reflect on certain seasons of ministry that produced little to no long-lasting fruit. There have been a few of those over the years—times that you look back on and say, “What happened?” You think of people who slipped through the cracks and wonder.

“Where are they now?”

“Were they properly disciplined?”

“Were they even saved?”

“Did I do something to offend them?”

“What could we have done differently?”

Although we may never know the answers to all these questions, it does no good to beat ourselves up about it. Rather, we try to honestly assess the situations, learn from them, search our hearts, change when necessary, and realize God is sovereign and rest in Him.

But the fruitless times haven't been the most discouraging. Rather, seasons of turmoil within the church have caused the most hopelessness and disappointment. The attacks from within have required the most energy and effort. One such attack nearly brought us down and drove my husband out of the ministry.

It was about 10 years into his current position that the battle began—more than 15 years ago now. The first, peaceful decade came to an abrupt halt when the church divided over proposed changes to the church by-laws. The divisions felt like a personal attack—mostly because it was. I wondered, how could they betray my husband? How could they betray *us*? I was shocked that church members, some in leadership positions with whom we'd served for so long, were now acting out a scene from *Jekyll and Hyde*.

The assault seemed to come out of nowhere but obviously it had been festering for quite some time. There were filibusters at the business meetings as we discussed the rewriting of the by-laws. There were the darts of false accusations. There was betrayal. Some of the attacks that were levied at Ed and the other elders were not unfounded, but the spirit with which the criticism was given was malicious and ungodly. And all this dragged on for months.

My husband grew weary. He was most definitely burned out. Many nights, he'd sit in his chair in the living room and weep. He was ready to give up. I'd often heard it said to young men seeking to go into full-time ministry, “If you can do anything else and be content, then you are not called into the ministry.” When Ed said he was ready to move back to his hometown in Pennsylvania and

work in retail, I knew it was bad. Was he cut out for this? Had he really been “called”?

Before totally throwing in the towel, he began a desperate search for a job at another church. The only one that showed interest was on the opposite coast of the United States. That seemed far enough away from all the problems, but in God’s providence that church didn’t offer him the job.

So there we were, back home in the middle of it all. Though things were still bad, little by little relief came. The contentious folks began to leave, and the church members who stayed began to rally around the elders. Truth prevailed. A great sense of unity and peace pervaded the church.

How did this happen? What—or should I say *who* caused the change? Ultimately and simply put, God did! There really is no other answer. And as the tide turned, he graciously used various means to sustain this pastor, his wife, and the entire church.

As difficult as those months were, when one of us was particularly down, the other would usually have a renewed spirit and strength from the Lord in order to be an encourager. When both of us were so low that we couldn’t lift our own heads, the Lord was the lifter of our heads. I know my husband was far more crushed than me, but he often kindly shielded me from specific details of the attacks. And when there was nothing I could do to help him, I could still pray. We prayed a lot during this season.

One of the greatest gifts God has given to our church and to my husband is a plurality of elders. In these darkest hours of our ministry, these men stood for truth and tenaciously fought for the unity of the brethren. They were under attack as well. Their families felt the sting.

They rallied around my husband, not as “yes men,” but as loyal brothers and a source of great encouragement and reinforcement. On several occasions over the years, I’ve been overwhelmed by the kindness of God in using these various men at exactly the

right time, and in tearful joy I've expressed my gratitude both to him and to these elders.

During all of this turmoil, it wasn't just the two of us. We had four young children—little eyes and ears we wanted to shield from the onslaught, little hearts we wanted to protect from harm. I'm so thankful to God that we were able to maintain a somewhat normal family life throughout this battle. We were able to consistently have family devotions in which we continued our reading through the Bible in a year. Maintaining a sense of normalcy for our family became tremendously helpful.

Loyal, dear friends also showed their support. I knew they loved us and were praying for us. Just as my husband's enemies seemed to come out of the woodwork, those in support seemed to as well. Some of the ladies of the church were especially kind to reach out to me—calling me, praying with me, reading the Word with me. They knew I was suffering, too. When it was all said and done, the attacks actually served to make the church stronger and increase the love and unity among the brethren. Furthermore, Ed and the other elders had a renewed vigor to shepherd the flock.

But the most wonderful sustenance we had was that Jesus Christ stood with us. If all others had forsaken us, he would have remained. Why? Because he loves his bride, the church. We are precious to him—and to him I am most grateful!

Perhaps you're just beginning your journey as a pastor's wife. Perhaps you've been one far longer than me, or you're in the midst of a very rough season of ministry and your husband is experiencing burnout. Whatever the case, remember and rejoice in the gospel. Draw near to Christ. He, above all, will sustain you and restore your joy.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Anna Moore lives in Bayside, New York, where her husband Ed has served as the pastor of North Shore Baptist Church for 26 years.

Pastoring Amid Depression



John Starke

I don't remember all the details of the conversation. My wife and I were sitting together. It was the evening time. We had this corner in our apartment that we called "the nook." It was between the dining room and the kitchen and it had enough space to fit two arm chairs, a table between them, with a lamp. We spent a lot of time in that nook together, with many conversations. This one stands out to me because it was the first meaningful conversation we had about my sadness.

My wife mentioned noticing some emotional disconnect in me. I was attempting to explain it like when you fall asleep on your arm funny and it falls asleep. You sit up and you try to reach for a glass of water with that arm. You look at the glass and you look at your arm, but as much as you want to reach out, there's a disconnect with your intention to reach out and your arm's ability to actually do it. That's how I had felt in my emotional life. I had wanted to connect and reach out emotionally, but something inside me was asleep or disconnected. Something had changed.

It wasn't surprising to my wife that I had been sad. There was challenging circumstances at church. There was conflict, confusion, and for the first real time in my life, I had experienced being slandered and lied about, where I had lost my reputation with people that I cared for. I was exhausted. I was regularly in meetings until midnight, trying to work through really tough, relational dynamics. I lost a lot of confidence in myself. I didn't know which way was up and which way was down during much of that season. It lasted about 18 months.

But I began to notice that I wasn't just sad or discouraged about my circumstances. Something was different. There was a darkness that had set in. My sorrow and discouragement began to wrap around me and squeeze. It was hard to not experience my entire reality (my family, work, rest, prayers) through the filter of sadness and sorrow. "The flesh can bear only a certain number of wounds and no more," says Charles Spurgeon, "but the soul can bleed in ten thousand ways, and die over and over again each hour."¹ In other words, while depression may have been triggered by circumstances, it wasn't *just* discouraging circumstances that kept me low.

Depression was something that I had never experienced. I had always had the ability to see around the corner; to speak truth into circumstances and trust either in God or, sinfully, in myself to make it through. But now it was as if I had emotional blinders on that didn't allow me to see or feel much of anything else but my sorrow. My inner life seemed to reject a word of encouragement like a body that vomits up medicine. I could hold on to hope like I could hold on to smoke with my hands.

But the more I had opened up and talked about it, the more I heard from other pastors and colleagues that they had never experienced depression until they went into pastoral ministry or engaged some significant conflict or discouragement in their work. I wasn't alone. What was remarkable was that while words

¹ Spurgeon, "Honey in the Mouth," *MTP*, Vol. 37, p. 485.

of truth and encouragement often felt as effective as cough syrup for throat cancer, the abiding presence of a fellow sufferer was like the hand of God over my wounds. It helped enlarge my scope of reality. Depression was like being in a confusing, blindingly dark cavern, but the presence of someone who could give witness to my pain was like a voice in the dark, awakening some hope that there may be some direction *out*.

I was a pastor and depressed. Of course, depression doesn't *just* hit pastors and not *all* pastors will experience depression. But there was some unique challenges to being a spiritual leader and guide, while also feeling weakened by my emotional life that I didn't have many categories for. How could I help others if I felt helpless? How could I preach the fruit of Christian joy when it had literally been months since I had experienced it myself? Shame, guilt, and fear were emotions that seemed to be taking their turns swinging at me.

IT'S NOT ABNORMAL TO BE SAD

Here's the honest truth: Good pastors put themselves in the way of potential criticism and regularly within the realm and reach of other people's pain. It should not then surprise you, pastor, that you may experience depression even though you've never experienced it before. Carrying the consistent emotional weight of the various pains, fears, criticisms, suffering, and transitions of a congregation (big or small) is a challenging vocation. What it can do to your inner life can or will surprise you. But while it can surprise you, know that it's not abnormal. Apart from the pastoral weight, sadness is a normal Christian experience. "The Road to sorrow has been well trodden, it is the regular sheep track to heaven, and all the flock of God have had to pass along it," says Charles Spurgeon.

I know in some circles, there are stigmas against pastors seeking out counseling, but it is a good thing, even in seasons that don't feel like a crisis. Counseling and having someone give some direction to your inner life is a healthy pattern for spiritual leaders in every season.

Seek out help within the local church. Not everyone will be of help. Not everyone will understand, but do not be afraid to speak openly about it with your fellow elders if you have them. The local church can be (*ought to be*) a gracious place for people, even leaders, to fall apart. But often times, the complexities of depression can be challenging for lay leaders. It may be wise to seek professional counseling.

FINDING LANGUAGE

In my experience, finding language and categories to use in order to talk about my depression was a great first step towards healing. There is power in naming your trouble. I don't just mean being able to use the word "depression." But even more, there is something about metaphors used by fellow sufferers that seemed to open up my grasp of the storm inside me. Clinical words can help in categorizing and analyzing, but metaphors seemed to make my heart go, "That's it!"

Zack Eswine explains that metaphors sometimes help unfold the mysteries of the soul better than clinical terms because they don't over-explain but leave room; they allow for nuance and difference; they require further thought and exploration.² Finding good books (*Spurgeon's Sorrow*, by Zack Eswine or *Lincoln's Melancholy* by Joshua Wolf Shenk) are a good help in opening up new vocabulary. But learning to find a home in the Psalms is the best medicine.

I began to realize that the Psalms were filled with words from desperate, sad, hopeless, and confused believers. They had words

² Zack Eswine, *Spurgeon's Sorrow: Realistic Hope for Those Who Suffer from Depression*, Focus Books, 2014. 70-72.

for me that I didn't know I needed. What was a deeper, more surprising comfort was that they were inspired by God, who knows what men and women need to say when we *don't know* what to say. God knows how desperate we can get and has provided words for us to say in those times. "Here," he says, "use these words. They'll help." Yes, the Spirit groans for us when we lay wordless like a frail leaf, but the Psalms provide words, language, for when our souls need to reach for expression. "My soul melts away for sorrow." Psalm 119:28; "I am worn out from my groaning." Psalm 6:6. "My life is consumed by anguish and my years by groaning; my strength fails because of my affliction, and my bones grow weak." Psalm 31:10. "Let not the deep swallow me up." Psalm 69:15. "For my soul is full of troubles ... I am a man who has no strength." Psalm 88:3.

These words can feel like emotional handle bars as we try to make sense and grapple with our experiences.

SEEK BETTER HABITS

Too many of us sleep less hours than we should and eat more than we ought. We do not exercise and we overwork. Not only does this bring bad health, it leads to being emotionally unhealthy. Some basic weapons against depression is to pick up healthy habits.

Take a regular Sabbath. Fight for a day of rest every week. Resist making justifications to skip days off. Eat healthy and exercise. It has surprising effects on your thought life. Pray the Psalms. Build healthy friendships, even though you may have to sacrifice comfort for this. Pastors often know everyone superficially and no one deeply. Turn off your phone from dinner time to breakfast time. Take regular breaks from social media. These rhythms and habits don't cure your depression but they enhance your thought and emotional life.

After several months of depression, the cloud lifted for me. I experienced healing. Can I tell you something marvelous? The joy I

experience now with friends, my spouse, my kids, my church, is somehow deeper. I'm a better pastor, I think. Folks here and there who also have experienced depression or melancholy have expressed they feel like I'm a safe person to talk to. That's a gift. Can you believe it? The Lord somehow restored all that the locust had eaten and more. Praise the Lord! I would not have chosen to experience the darkness, but the darkness was transformed into a grace and I wouldn't exchange it for anything.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Waiting On the Lord to Renew Our Strength: Reflections on Pastoral Burnout



Ray Ortlund

But they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint. Isaiah 40:31

We were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. 2 Corinthians 1:8–9

What we call “burnout” is the experience of such profound depletion that our usual capacities for resilience, for springing back, for staying steady and confident

and perseverant are no longer enough. Burnout means something way down deep just collapses, and we can't keep going. We pastors understand burnout, and not only in the lives of others, but in our own.

TWO TEXTS

How does the Bible address burnout?

Isaiah 40:31 promises us the sustaining power of God. But Isaiah 40:31 was never intended to describe our lives down at the granular level of every moment. It was always intended to assure us of the overall trajectory of our lives. Verse 30, just before it, describes the exhaustion of the strong:

Even youths shall faint and be weary,
and young men shall fall exhausted.

Obviously, that verse is not saying that young people experience nothing but weariness and exhaustion. It's saying that, despite their boundless vigor, even *they* will, at times along the way, collapse from exhaustion. It's a general point, and it's unarguably true.

Verse 31 does the same, but from the other perspective. Those who wait on the Lord will become, despite their weakness, living proof of his amazing power to sustain and renew. But we're given no guarantee that those who wait on him (verse 31) will not also experience burnout (verse 30).

We have every right to include in our paradigm of normative Christian experience *both* the sustaining power of the Lord as our overall narrative *and* the crippling experience of occasional burnout.

Another verse, 2 Corinthians 1:8–9, fits meaningfully within the larger framework of assurance in Isaiah 40:31. Indeed, Paul's

suffering makes that assurance all the more meaningful. Paul wasn't running from the Lord or even neglecting the Lord. He was having his daily devotions, living by faith, and so forth. But even this faithful pastor hit the wall of limitation and defeat.

BURNOUT AND THE POWER OF GOD

And so it is today. Faithful pastors can be laid low by the intensities of ministry, such that they give up on life itself. And those down-cast pastors are the very ones who, as they wait on the Lord, will be renewed by his grace.

Therefore, if a faithful pastor experiences burnout, it isn't necessarily evidence against him. It's God turning that pastor into living proof that "God raises the dead" (2 Cor. 1:9). It's what the pastor's people need to see in him—not only the power of God sustaining him in the normal flow of ministry, but also the power of God resurrecting him from the extreme moments of defeat. Even this is pastoral ministry to people who themselves need hope when life is impossible.

A PERSONAL TESTIMONY

Some years ago, I went through a ministry catastrophe that shook me to my very foundations. During that episode, a new thought crept into my mind: *All your life you've believed that God loves you. But look at the bombed-out rubble that your ministry now is. Maybe the truth of your existence is the opposite. Maybe God hates your guts.*

Eventually I realized, by grace, that I had been right the first time. God really did love me. But before I got there, there were many nights when I woke up around 3:00 a.m., exhausted but unable to sleep. So I got up, made coffee, read the Bible, and cried out to God. It was all I had. And he got me through.

Indeed, I ended up in a better place than before, because now I had something to say about God's power to raise the dead.

God's purpose for us pastors is not that we never sink into the lowest of the low. God's purpose for us pastors is that, when we sink into the lowest of the low, we will find God himself waiting for us down there with deeper grace "to revive the spirit of the lowly" (Isaiah 57:15).

CONCLUSION

Recently, I found an article on prayer that my dad wrote for *HIS* magazine fifty years ago. The title of his article sums up prayer so simply, so helpfully: "Go to God, and hang on!" If you're burned out, utterly burdened beyond your strength so that you're despairing of life itself, my counsel to you is just that: go to God, and hang on. He is surely hanging on to you. He will renew your strength. And your ministry will be more profound than ever before.

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A Parable of Endurance from the Mission Field



Tim Keesee

*Tell you a little story and it won't take long,
'bout a lazy farmer who wouldn't hoe his corn.
The reason why I never could tell
But that young man was always well.*

*He planted his corn in the month of June.
By July it was up to his eyes.
Come September, came a big frost.
And all the young man's corn was lost.*

These lines are from the old bluegrass standard, “The Boy Who Wouldn’t Hoe Corn,” a cautionary tale about a lazy farmer. I come from a long line of farmers. Among them were quite a few fiddlers and banjo-pickers for whom this song provided a good laugh because every *real* farmer knows farming

is hard work. Farming methods have improved over the past century, but it's still a life of plodding, patient labor while battling weeds and weather. Yet it's the prospect of the harvest that drives the day-in-day-out, get-out-of-bed, get-to-the-field kind of life.

FUTURE HOPE AND PRESENT FAITHFULNESS

Future hope fuels present faithfulness. That's one of the truths found in Jesus' parable in Mark 4:26–29. Here, the King tells us something of what his kingdom is like:

And he said, "The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground. He sleeps and rises night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows; he knows not how. The earth produces by itself, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. But when the grain is ripe, at once he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come."

The "seed" is the Word of God, the life-giving message of the gospel. Even though the farmer can't make the seed grow, he still has a vital part to play in planting abundantly. He must have the initiative to get up and work, and the confidence to continue in hope day and night for weeks and months as he anticipates a harvest. Several veteran missionaries in gospel-deserted regions have told me that this parable is their go-to passage for perspective and endurance day by day, providing encouragement as they and their families labor over hard ground. But what is it in this parable that offers such staying power?

First of all, the King values the unglamorous drudgeries of faithful farming—getting out of bed and going to work. "He sleeps and rises night and day." Gospel work, especially when it is compounded with the wear and tear of cross-cultural ministry in a hostile context, is accomplished *because of* hard things not *despite* them. For example, learning a new language and a new script is hard work. There's nothing glamorous after months of study and practice to *finally* speak on the level of a local todd-

ler! But shortcuts in serious language acquisition (as well as low expectations by sending churches and sending organizations) contribute to ineffectiveness, frustration, fear, and often an early departure from the field.

But there's another key to endurance in this kingdom parable. The farmer does his part, but it's not enough. Life takes hold. First, beneath the surface, but then bit by bit the brown ground becomes green! How does this happen? Not even the farmer knows. He did his part, but something else had to happen. In gospel terms, it is indeed "something else," for "it is the power of God for salvation" (Romans 1:16) that brings new, lasting life. The Lord of the harvest is sending laborers to every corner of the harvest-field. Those servants plant, water, and weed—but they can't give life. God can—and God does: "But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ" (Ephesians 2:4–5).

PICTURES OF ENDURANCE

Samuel Zwemer, a pioneer missionary to Arabia, loved to point to the resurrection as the power behind the endurance, the confidence beneath the courage, and the Spirit with the witness. More than a century ago Zwemer wrote:

Because our Commander-in-chief is not absent but with us, the impossible becomes not only practical but imperative. Charles Spurgeon, preaching from the text, "All power is given unto Me. . . . Lo I am with you always," used these words: "You have a factor here that is absolutely infinite, and what does it matter as to what other factors may be. 'I will do as much as I can,' says one. Any fool can do that. He that believes in Christ does what he can not do, attempts the impossible and performs it."³

³ Samuel M. Zwemer, *The Unoccupied Mission Fields of Africa and Asia* (New York: Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions, 1911), 220.

Recently, I've had conversations with two veteran gospel risk-takers. One is a former Muslim who is planting a church in a 100% Hezbollah-controlled city in the Middle East. His ministry is characterized by acts of compassion, clear gospel witness, and the accompanying death threats. The other is a single woman who has labored as a missionary for 23 years, loving, serving, and winning the hard-to-reach women in a remote, mountainous region of Albania. I asked them both about endurance—what keeps them there demanding year after demanding year. Mohammed said, "Because Jesus is real. He is not a fairy tale or just a Sunday School lesson. He is alive!" For Theresa, endurance is seasoned with joy, for she loves his appearing (2 Timothy 4:8). Whether she's called up by death or by his return, she will forever be with the Lord. The prospect of seeing Jesus adds eagerness and urgency to her daily service, quickening her pace as she climbs the steep switchbacks of Tropoja.

There's a hint in this parable that the farmer is always a little surprised when the crop comes in. Even though he sees it happen year after year, it never grows old. He accepts his limited partnership in the final results with gratitude, full of secret satisfaction and quiet amazement over something that's bigger than he is—actually *Someone* who's bigger than he is. Our King continues to do the unexpected because he's not limited by our limitations. He's the God of salvation and sovereign surprises.

AN UNEXPECTED HARVEST

A friend who has served for years in Indonesia among an unreached people group shared this story with me from one of his co-workers:

Several years ago a friend of mine who served in Indonesia shared with me that when they first arrived in Indonesia their vision was to reach an unrea-

ched people group. They lived among them and for years continued in faithful practices. Yet there was no fruit that they could see.

They were preparing to return to the States for their first home assignment and just before they left, their house helper, a Muslim lady who helped them cook and clean, believed in Jesus! Obviously they were thrilled about this, that someone had believed. But at the same time they were also a bit discouraged to go back and have to say, “We’ve been here for this many years and only one person has believed.”

They finished their time in the States and returned to Indonesia. When they arrived back at their home, they were met by their house helper. She had a very concerned look on her face. “Sir, while you were gone, I have done something.” My friend was nervous, wondering what he might be about to hear. She continued, “While you were away, I led 30 of my Muslim friends and family to Jesus and we have been using your house to meet for Bible study.”

The missionary’s surprise over this unexpected harvest is just a tiny foretaste of the stunning joy that will be ours when the full harvest is gathered from “every tribe and language and people and nation.” Our future hope—anchored in the cross and the empty tomb—fuels present-day endurance in every corner of every field where the King’s servants faithfully put their hands to the plow.

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Discerning the Signs of Pastoral Burnout



John Henderson

Numerous times a year, for as long as I can remember, I speak with pastors looking for an exit from ministry. The reason isn't moral failure, or interest in another vocation, or lack of "calling." The reason, more often than not, is nebulous and hard to describe. When the pastor talks about ministry, he uses words like, "exhausted ... discouraged ... pointless ... distracted ... lonely." No matter how much he sleeps, or drinks coffee, or tries to motivate himself, the tank always feels empty.

Could this be what people call pastoral burnout? If so, how do we discern the signs? Answering that important question is the goal of this article.

Pastoral burnout could be defined as ***the moment or season when a pastor loses the motivation, hope, energy, joy, and focus required to fulfill his work, and these losses center upon the work itself.*** These aspects of burnout don't operate in isolation. They connect and overlap. From time to time, we might lose motiva-

tion or hope in ministry. On any given day, we can feel exhausted and joyless. But when all our motivations erode at once, and when their absence persists, I think it's *then* that we've entered a season of *pastoral burnout*.

Furthermore, these signs *center upon the work of ministry itself*. This distinguishes pastoral burnout from other trials: grief after the loss of a child or spouse, intense family troubles, or the experience of depression. A pastor could experience loss of motivation, hope, energy, joy, and focus in ministry for various reasons. But sometimes, ministry itself becomes the trigger point.

Motivation relates to heart affections and desires behind ministry. Paul says, "the love of Christ controls us" (2 Corinthians 5:14). He was willing to suffer beatings and imprisonment "if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God" (Acts 20:24). The promises of God motivated him (2 Corinthians 1:20). The spiritual health of the church for the glory of God motivated him (2 Corinthians 4:15). The splendor of grace motivated him, and motivation is essential to pastoral vitality.

When we lose all sense of motivation, perhaps because we've derived it for too long from the wrong things, we may be in a state of pastoral burnout. The wind that used to fill our sails has faded away. The love of Christ has become an empty idea. The promises of God and the edification of the church feel distant. The things that used to push us out of bed in the morning just don't push us anymore.

Hope relates to the overall purpose and point to ministry. After the great work of God on Mount Carmel and the defeat of the prophets of Baal, it seems that Elijah expected a big revival. Instead, he received death threats from Jezebel. So Elijah fled to the wilderness. When God met him, Elijah said, "It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my fathers" (1 Kings 19:4). All his jealousy for God seemed to be for nothing. All

his sacrifices and suffering seemed to end up at the same place. Now he says, “I might as well die.”

When we begin seriously asking, “what’s the point?” and struggle to find an answer, we’re likely crossing the border toward burnout. The magnet that used to draw us forward has lost its power. The wondrous light at the end of the tunnel has disappeared. No longer do we study, pray, and preach with “eager expectation and hope” (Philippians 1:20). We become cynical, sarcastic, and jaded.

Energy relates to bodily strength for ministry. Paul says to the Thessalonians, “For you remember, brothers, our labor and toil: we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you, while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God” (1 Thessalonians 2:9). Though tired, Paul had energy for the work. Though Jesus went nights without sleep, he found strength from somewhere for his daily labor.

When exhaustion is our regular state, no matter how much we sleep or rest, we’ve probably entered pastoral burnout. The fuel you pour into the tank just runs out the bottom, or it sits and sours without ever igniting into real energy. It seems as though the Spirit has departed. A persistent lack of energy for ministry is the most common sign of burnout.

Joy relates to the spiritual pleasure of ministry. Hebrews speaks to church members about the ministry of their leaders: “Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you” (Hebrews 13:17b). This implies there should be joy for the pastor in his work. Scripture tells us to look to Jesus, “who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross” (Hebrews 12:2).

When all delight in ministry fades away, when “leading the procession to the house of God with glad shouts and songs of praise” has become a thing of the past, nothing more than a vague memory, then we could be experiencing pastoral burnout. As a result, perhaps we’ll start looking to the world for escape.

When the burdens of ministry feel so overwhelming that we ask the Lord to kill us, there's something important he intends us to see (Number 11:10–15).

Focus relates to the engagement of the mind in the ministry. The apostle Paul was able to forget what lies behind and “strain forward to what lies ahead” (Philippians 3:14) because his eyes were fixed upon “the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 3:15). Because he didn't consider his life precious but did consider the grace of God as exceedingly precious, Paul focused on the details of the work God assigned (Acts 20:22–24).

When concentrating upon our work feels like climbing a mountain, when maintaining attention for more than five minutes seems impossible—alongside the other signs we've discussed—we're likely experiencing pastoral burnout. Do you regularly catch yourself staring into space? Do you read the same verses over and over without being able to grasp the meaning of the words? Have your movements become robotic, your thoughts jumbled, and your relationships confusing?

Discerning and defining pastoral burnout wisely is critical to finding the wise road out. Though this article isn't devoted to the solution, I must at least say the answer is found inside the grace of our God, the gospel of Jesus Christ, and the power of His Spirit.

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A Taxonomy of At-Risk Pastors



Jeramie Rinne

During a pastoral ministry class in seminary, my professor addressed the tragedy of pastors committing sexual immorality. I still remember the advice he gave us for avoiding such moral failure: “The first step in protecting yourself against having an affair is to admit that you are capable of having an affair.” Ouch.

That admonition applies to pastoral burnout, too. The first step in protecting yourself against burnout is to admit that you can, in fact, burn out. Even youths grow weary and faint, and even good pastors can fry. We all have a breaking point. Some pastors have more resilience and capacity than others, but no one is immune to profound emotional and spiritual exhaustion.

In this article, I want to help us humbly face the danger of burnout in ministry by considering some specific ways we may be at risk. Sometimes, the threat of collapse comes from external circumstances. Other times, it arises internally from our own weaknesses. Probably most cases of burnout include both.

Consider these five categories of at-risk pastors:

#1: THE SOLO PASTOR

Do you shepherd alone? Are you the only paid pastor in your church? Maybe you work with a lay deacon board or church council, but when you come to work everyday there's no one there, except the part-time secretary. The writer of Ecclesiastes summed up your burnout risk well:

“Two are better than one because they have a good reward for their efforts. For if either falls, his companion can lift him up; but pity the one who falls without another to lift him up.” Ecclesiastes 4:9–10

The solo pastor pours himself out by lifting everyone else up. But who lifts him? Ministry is often confusing, discouraging, and painful—and facing it alone can be a recipe for burnout.

When I look back at my own pastoral career, one of my greatest joys has been relationships with other pastors and church staff. My co-workers have provided me safe friendships for venting and laughing. They've helped me solve problems, shoulder tasks, defuse conflicts, and evaluate ministry. The solo pastor lacks these day-to-day partnerships.

Solo pastors, you can mitigate your burnout risk by pursuing collegial, life-giving relationships wherever possible. Meet weekly with another pastor in your town. Work with your church to bring on a pastoral intern. And most importantly, lead your church toward adopting lay elders. God's plan for the local church, and for you, includes a shepherding team (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5).

By the way, here's another twist on the solo pastor. Some pastors actually do have a staff and elders, but they're functionally solo because they isolate themselves. They don't have real friendships, and no one truly knows them.

Are you relationally solo? If you were falling apart or caught in sin, would anyone realize it?

#2: THE SILO PASTOR

It's not just solo pastors of small churches who face burnout. Meet the "silo pastor" in the big church down the street. He's an associate or assistant pastor overseeing a very defined program (a.k.a. a ministry "silo"). He might be the singles pastor or the missions pastor or the associate pastor of youth and family ministry. He's typically viewed as a "specialist" who leads ministry to a specific church demographic.

Sounds good, right? Who wouldn't love a chance to be on a big staff team in a large church? Who wouldn't want the responsibility of running an important department?

Yet ironically, that same silo can sometimes feel less like an opportunity and more like a prison. The silo pastor can get pigeonholed. He has a pastor's heart and calling, but he doesn't get many chances to experience pastoral duties like preaching or counseling or doing a funeral or attending an elders meeting because he's "just" the pastor of assimilation. Like the mid-level corporate manager who feels as if he's a replaceable cog in a big machine, the specialist pastor can get a sense that he's merely there to keep a program running and well-attended.

And that can slowly suck the life out of you.

Silo pastor, keep growing. Don't just give up and get by. Read. Pursue a degree. Take opportunities to collaborate with other staff in other ministries. Ask and beg your senior leadership for opportunities for pastoral tasks outside of your lane.

And senior pastors and elders, what are you doing to help your staff grow? Are you caring for their souls? Are you discouraging them—or are you developing them?

#3: THE SUPER PASTOR

The “super pastor” does it all. He attends most committee meetings, leads several Bible studies, weighs in on most decisions, serves as a denominational leader, edits all the church publications, and constantly checks his phone for texts, emails, and calls about church stuff. He works some (much) of his day off and never uses up all his vacation time. Ministry is his passion, his hobby, his identity, his life.

Super pastors get their super strength for perpetual motion from different sources. Some are fueled by a desire to please people. Others have an unstoppable drive for success and significance so they maintain blogs and launch ministries and catalyze movements. Ministry is their high.

Other types of super pastors exist, too. There are *super spiritual super pastors* who are so radically devoted to God that they see doing anything outside of ministry as a sell-out. Likewise, *perfectionistic super pastors* push themselves, and everyone around them, to strive for almost unattainable standards in the name of “giving the Lord our best.” And don’t forget the *savior super pastors*, who sense a crushing obligation to solve everyone’s problems and meet everyone’s needs.

Though Super Pastors fly high, they often crash—because none of us can do it all. None of us can keep everyone happy. None of us can fix everything. Eventually, something gives, and the hero burns out. And sadly, it’s often the super pastor’s family that pays the biggest price.

Are you a ministry workaholic? Does your wife agree with how you answered that question?

THE PRAGMATIC PASTOR

I’m quite familiar with this one because I consider myself a recovering pragmatic pastor. You can even read an article about my experiences here.

The pragmatic pastor is committed to doing “whatever works” in order to reach people. Rather than making ministry decisions based on Scripture, he devours the latest best-selling book written by the pastor of the fastest growing church. Being a pragmatic pastor means chasing trends, conducting surveys, tracking numbers, watching other churches, attending cutting-edge conferences, staying technologically savvy, and always reinventing things in that elusive quest to find what “works.”

I found the pragmatic path exhausting. It was burning me out. I had this nagging feeling that I was being blown by the winds of human wisdom, rather than steering the church by the compass of God’s Word. But when I stopped asking, “What works?” and started asking, “What does Scripture say?” I discovered a great staying power for ministry. You can weather much disappointment and suffering in pastoral work, without burning out, when you know that your task is simply to be faithful to what God has already said in the Bible.

What’s your philosophy of ministry? Can it sustain you for the long haul?

THE EMBATTLED PASTOR

One of the most common causes of burnout is conflict. A few persistent opponents can steal the joy of pastoral work. I’ve never ceased to be amazed at how one critical detractor on a Sunday morning can offset a dozen encouraging words.

Are you in a church that has lots of opposition? Are you weathering a firestorm of public attacks? Is your staff divided? Perhaps you’re working to bring needed reform. Unfortunately, not everyone agrees that the church needs to change, and now the dissenters are organizing themselves.

Take special care to watch over your soul in these seasons of strife. You can easily fry. It’s time to fast and pray. Get godly coun-

sel. Discipline yourself to spend more time pouring over God's Word rather than re-reading the latest blistering email from you-know-who.

STRENGTH IN WEAKNESS

How at-risk are you for burnout? Are you refreshed and happy, or are you one big crisis away from resigning and maybe leaving ministry altogether? It's a humbling question to ask because none of us like to admit our fragility. Pastors are supposed to have it all together, right?

And yet, ironically, it's when we confess and embrace our weakness to God that we find our real strength.

“Therefore I will most gladly boast all the more about my weakness, so that Christ's power may reside in me. So I take pleasure in weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions and difficult for the sake of Christ. For when I am weak, then I am strong.” 2 Corinthians 12:9–10

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Am I Burnt Out? 30 Useful Questions



Matt Schmucker

There are both internal and external forces that cause pastoral burnout. One's temperament, convictions, and preferences (internal) can cause excess stress leading to burnout. One's circumstances—like church size, growth rate, leadership, and support structure (external)—can also weigh heavily on a pastor's joy and longevity. Here are 30 questions—15 internal and 15 external—to ask yourself to discover whether or not you're on the road to burnout.

INTERNAL

1. Do I believe all things? In a 1 Corinthians 13 kind of way, do you “believe all things”—including believing the best about a fellow leader or congregant? Or am I more naturally suspicious?
2. Am I disciplined? Some of the strongest pastors I know are disciplined in their thought life, use of time, habits, and practices.

3. Do I take the long view? Do I have the ability either internally or with the help of friends to look beyond immediate trials? In other words, ask yourself if it's possible that things could be different five years from now.

4. Am I focused on the “Wildly Important”? In Cal Newport's book *Deep Work*, he challenges his readers to focus on the “Wildly Important” as opposed to the trivial and passing. Focusing on the most important work will lend itself to a deeper satisfaction in your ministry. Trying to keep up with social media and the happenings of your denomination will more likely get you of energy and contribute to a distracted state of mind. Flee the pursuit of the trivial!

5. Do I experience the victory that I preach? Secret sins—even the so-called small ones—rob us of joy.

6. Do my convictions run deep? The book of James has much to say about the man who doubts.

7. Do I live with that “Great Day” in view? If a pastor does, it will constantly remind him of the “greater judgment” that is coming and the great reward for the faithful.

8. Am I growing weary of doing good? It's an odd question but a real possibility according to Galatians 6:9.

9. Am I living on the force and strength of activities? This is tied to #8. In other words, are you sowing to the flesh or the Spirit? Do you find joy in the Lord and being his son—or do you find joy in all the activity and seeming fruitfulness born from your work in the church?

10. Am I an over-exposed introvert? If so, I need to know my limits and acknowledge my frailties. Rest before you're tired. You oversee a 52-week operation; you can't afford to falter.

11. Am I praying? Through prayer, am I acknowledging God as the sovereign mover in the lives of the sheep I'm called to shepherd?

12. Am I a procrastinator? Putting hard things off adds stress. Satan is a big enough foe; don't unnecessarily contribute to his advantage.

13. Do I delegate well? Trust Christ's design of the body; you don't have all the gifts.

14. Am I humble? Pride doesn't mix well with being the head of an all-volunteer organization.

15. Do I fear man or God more? Fear of man will rob you of your ability to say no, something every pastor needs to be able to do. God has ordained but a few things for his church. Fear God and do those things he has ordered.

EXTERNAL

1. Do I have friends? I mean real friends! A pastor can have 1,000 acquaintances and care for a multitude of sheep and have no friends. A friend will walk with you over a long period of time and know when to correct and when to encourage. He will hold your confidence and laugh with you.

2. How are my home finances? Having problems at church coupled with financial problems at home is almost unbearable and has driven more than one good man out of ministry.

3. Am I bogged down in administration? This is a real problem both for small and big church pastors, just in different ways. A pastor cannot avoid all administration as he "oversees" the church, but it cannot dominate his work.

4. Am I physically fit for the task at hand? Fall short on sleep, exercise, or good food and you physically wear down which can naturally lead to a challenged emotional and mental state. You don't need to be a CrossFit maven, but you can't ignore your body and think it won't contribute to burnout.

5. Am I working on my days off? A bow that is chronically pulled taut will lose its ability to launch arrows. Likewise, a minister who fails to rest will quickly run out of energy and quit. God prescribed rest in Genesis—at the beginning!—and he was wise to do so.

6. Do I take all my vacation days? Even if you don't think you need to take the days off, your family does. Lose your family and you lose your ministry.

7. Do I have young children? A man with a house full of small children will no doubt lack sleep, which can lead to burnout. Pace yourself and know that the season will not last forever.

8. Do I have a supportive wife? A difficult marriage or an even slightly unsupportive wife will gut a minister. Prioritizing one's marriage will add boatloads of good to your overall ministry.

9. Am I pressed on every side? Trials can ground a ministry and cause a man to want to mine for coal rather than souls. It's absolutely essential to develop a theology of suffering, to realize there is purpose amid trials, and to cultivate a prayer life that "casts all my cares" on God.

10. Do I have real and historical mentors? Are there men in your life whom you can imitate and seek counsel from? Are you reading biographies of historical figures that can provide a fresh perspective as you read about full lives of faithfulness in just a few hundred pages?

11. Am I doing all I can to repair broken or difficult relationships? It's draining to preach week after week in front of people—even just a few—who believe an unflattering narrative about you. Peacemaking is every Christian's calling, and it will also ease your conscience the next time you preach.

12. Is the routine of my work a problem? Is the weekly rhythm of sermon preparation and preaching a sought-after joy or a predictable grind? Does your very private preparation for a very public act energize or drain you? Some can't wait to "get in the study" while others feel like they have to go into recovery mode following the delivery of a sermon. Knowing and coping for your leanings will lead to longevity.

13. Is my happiness in ministry dependent on seeing evident fruit? Every ministry and minister goes through dry periods. Ha-

ving a “Big God” theology coupled with developing a patient posture will lend itself to a long run.

14. Is my conscience wound tighter than God’s? Shepherding a group of sinners and holding a very tight (weak) conscience is potentially a dangerous combination. Paul warns about the temptation to judge in Romans 14.

15. Do my ambitions match the Lord’s? To put it a different way, would your personal ambitions be any different if you were the head of a company instead of the pastor of a church?

If after taking this little survey you conclude you are near burnout, consider asking your church for a sabbatical to rest and reflect. You may conclude you just don’t have the makeup (internal) to be in the ministry. Or you may conclude there are some things that could be adapted (external) to ensure a long run. Either way, our lives should be marked by joy, not burnout.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Matt Schmucker was the founding executive director of 9Marks. He now organizes several conferences, including Together for the Gospel and CROSS, while serving as an elder at Anacostia River Church in Washington, D.C.

How to Avoid Accumulated Fatigue



Zack Eswine

Mentally, they're tangled and cut by thorn-bush thoughts. Physically, they fought bravely. Emotionally, they cried until they had no strength. Now suddenly, the power grid of their emotional, mental, and physical stamina gets hacked and shuts down. They have nothing left to give (1 Sam. 30:1–10). Two hundred fighting men, all loyal to King David, and they will sit this one out.

Accumulated fatigue signals the gradual build-up of circumstantial stresses, mental challenges, and relational sorrows. It doesn't ride right up to you and bandit you. It embezzles you instead. Like a slow-leaking tire, you don't notice the gradual siphoning of air, the subtle lean of the car from its depleted strength.

It's as if you've been doing life and ministry on emergency generators. The electricity went out long ago but the lights still worked, so you paid it no mind. But now, all the lights have burned out. To your surprise, so have you.

Constant criticisms and continuous slanders don't help. We cry for rest that only a change of scenery can provide.

My heart is in anguish within me;
the terrors of death have fallen upon me.
Fear and trembling come upon me,
and horror overwhelms me.
And I say, "Oh, that I had wings like a dove!
I would fly away and be at rest . . . (Psalm 55:4–6)

Strategic pause stops us for a while to keep us going. It collects the morning dew of sabbath and trickles its drops into each stressful hour, day, week, and month of our lives. Jesus says, "Come away by yourselves to a desolate place and rest a while" (Mark 6:31). Why then, do so many of us somehow believe that rest is foolish, and unrest is wise?

MOMENTUM

Momentum tempts us.

If the iron is blunt, and one does not sharpen the edge,
he must use more strength,
but wisdom helps one to succeed. (Eccl. 10:10)

If we have to resist rest to maintain momentum, it isn't God's energy we're trusting. Eventually, we begin to use more power than the work itself requires. Over time, this unrested exertion of additional effort builds up a wall that we or those we work with can no longer climb.

But, you might say, God blesses my preaching! People are coming to know Jesus! Look at how things are growing!

I don't doubt that God is faithful, but this is not because you are wise. We must never justify our foolishness because God was

faithful. Remember, those in our culture who do not want to slow down for strategic pause, love it that you don't require this wisdom of them. In fact, as soon as you begin to trust God's rhythm, many will leave and go somewhere else. But it's better to lose people by offering them God's wisdom than to keep them with folly.

If you don't mind, take a moment to read this out loud and slowly. Notice how day six and seven sound.

Day One: Work Rest

Day Two: Work Rest

Day Three: Work Rest

Day Four: Work Rest

Day Five: Work Rest

Day Six: Work Rest

Day Seven: Rest Rest

But what would it be like to become as explicit about strategic rest as you are with any other aspect of your personal or church mission statement?

"Come," Jesus says. "You are weary and heavy with cares. Your soul has no rest. Come to me. I will give you the rest you need" (Matt. 11:28–30).

SEASONS

Fatigue also accumulates because we forget to adjust for seasons (Eccl. 3:1–8).

When the kids were little, they went to bed early. Now they are older. Everyone stays awake at night deciding about boyfriends and girlfriends, or sexuality or God or depression or this friend or that job. We attempt the same work with double the emotional demand. Soon enough, we begin to see our life with family or friends as part of our job, as one more task on our to-do list.

Now add death or grief, unhealth or age, mistakes or sickness, birth or newness to a season. We become like a man with a broken arm. He can't text or type as fast. It takes him longer to dress and eat, to brush his teeth, to tie his shoes and drive. Everyone who knows him understands and gives room.

Sometimes the cast we or our spouse or our team member wears isn't visible. The broken thing needing time to heal is inside of us. If we don't pause to let it mend, the fracture only deepens.

What would it be like to account for seasons in your work life? How might this affect your goals? Instead of saying, "I want to multiply five home groups this year," you might say, "I want to multiply five soul-sustainable or seasonably resourced home groups this year."

Success isn't measured now, only by counting. We now have to account for rhythms and seasons. This is a remedy for accumulated fatigue.

FROM REST TO RECOVERY

When accumulated fatigue takes hold of us, a night of rest, a weekend get-a-way, or a six-week sabbatical likely won't help. We are like Elijah among the ravens, wrestling with our doubts in the caves with God (1 Kings 19). We are among David's crew who must sit this one out.

Needing recovery is no shame. King David made sure of it. He not only defended those who needed to stay back and recover, he publicly advocated for their honor and their role in the community (1 Sam. 30:21–25).

How did David know to do this? Perhaps because he knew God as the Good Shepherd. "He makes me lie down," David once said graciously of God (Ps. 23:2).

We too can learn this grace of God-given pauses. It becomes part of our testimony as leaders about his ways of grace. "He

makes me lie down” we learn to say. We learn that this too is faithfulness.

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The Greatest Cure for Pastoral Burnout Is Christ Himself



Nick Roark

Christian books ought to be like cisterns that hold the refreshing waters of life for weary and thirsty souls. The Puritans understood this. In his final sermon to his congregation in 1662, the Puritan minister Thomas Watson challenged his flock with the importance of reading soul-satisfying books: “When you find a chilliness upon your souls and your former heat begins to abate, ply yourselves with warm clothes and get those good books that may acquaint you with such truths as may warm and affect your hearts”⁴

The writings of the Puritans have warmed and affected my heart over the years. Below, you’ll discover some Christ-centered excerpts from what George Whitefield called “good old puritanical

⁴ Thomas Watson, “Parting Counsels,” as quoted in *Sermons of the Great Ejection* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1662/2012), 166.

writings.” I gladly share these quotes in hopes that weary and discouraged pastors may behold Christ Jesus in his beauty, be strengthened by the grace that is in him (2 Timothy 2:1), and strive to press on for his eternal glory.

It’s important to remember that the Puritans knew first-hand the challenges, discouragements, and toilsome labors that accompany faithful gospel ministry.

John Flavel (1627–1691): “The labours of the ministry will exhaust the very marrow from your bones, hasten old age and death. They are fitly compared to the toil of men in harvest, to the labours of a woman in travail, and to the agonies of soldiers in the extremity of a battle. We must watch when others sleep. And indeed it is not so much the expense of our labours, as the loss of them that kills us. It is not with us, as with other labourers: They find their work as they leave it, so do not we. Sin and Satan unravel almost all we do, the impressions we make on our people’s souls in one sermon, vanish before the next. How many truths have we to study! How many wiles of Satan, and mysteries of corruption, to detect! How many cases of conscience to resolve! Yes, we must fight in defense of the truths we preach, as well as study them to paleness, and preach them unto faintness.”⁵

So what do the Puritans have to say to the weary, exhausted, discouraged pastor? **Look to Christ.** By faith, look to Jesus Christ, the One who is mighty and glorious and whose steadfast love is better than life. Out of a love for the glory of God, the word of God, and the people of God, the Puritan writers consistently focus our gaze on Jesus Christ. As Joel Beeke writes, “They set forth Christ in his loveliness, moving us to yearn to know him better and live wholly for him.”⁶

The Puritans encourage us as discouraged pastors to consider the greatness of the mercies we have in Christ. Instead of ponde-

5 John Flavel, “The Character of a True Evangelical Pastor,” in *The Works of John Flavel* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1968), 6: 568–69.

6 Joel R. Beeke and Randall J. Pederson, *Meet the Puritans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage, 2006), xxi.

ring our failings, contentment may be found by plunging ourselves into the sea of God's mercies and love.

Jeremiah Burroughs (1599–1646): “Name any affliction that is upon you: there is a sea of mercy to swallow it up. If you pour a pailful of water on the floor of your house, it makes a great show, but if you throw it into the sea, there is no sign of it. So, afflictions considered in themselves, we think are very great, but let them be considered with a sea of God's mercies we enjoy, and then they are not so much, they are nothing in comparison.”⁷

Thomas Brooks (1608–1680): “Sit down and wonder at this condescending love of God. Oh! What is in thy soul or in my soul that should cause the Lord to give such gifts to us as he hath given? We were all equal in sin and misery; nay, doubtless, we have actually outsinned thousands, to whom these precious gifts are denied. Let us therefore sit down and wonder at this condescending love of God. Oh! We were once poor wretches sitting upon the dunghill, yea, wallowing in our blood, and yet behold the King of kings, the Lord of lords, hath so far condescended in His love, as to bestow himself, his Spirit, his grace, and all the jewels of his royal crown upon us. Oh! What heart can conceive, what tongue can express, this matchless love! ‘I will be thine forever,’ says Christ, and ‘My Spirit shall be thine forever,’ and ‘My grace shall be thine forever,’ and ‘My glory shall be thine forever,’ and ‘My righteousness shall be thine forever.’ ‘All I am and all I have, shall be thine forever.’ O sirs! What condescending love is this! Oh! What a Christ is this!”⁸

The Puritans knew that feeling weak shouldn't discourage us from drawing near to Christ. He already knows the weakness of our frame. He knows that we are dust. And he is merciful toward

7 Jeremiah Burroughs, *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1648/2002), 207, 209.

8 Thomas Brooks, “The Unsearchable Riches of Christ,” *The Complete Works of Thomas Brooks, Volume 3*, ed. Alexander Balloch Grosart (Edinburgh; London; Dublin: James Nichol; James Nisbet and Co.; G. Herbert, 1866), 3: 117.

the weak and broken-hearted pastor. God looks upon weak saints in the Son of his love, and sees them all as lovely.

Thomas Brooks (1608–1680): “The weakest Christian is as much justified, as much pardoned, as much adopted, and as much united to Christ as the strongest, and hath as much interest in Christ as the highest and noblest Christian that breathes.”⁹

Richard Sibbes (1577–1635): “What mercy may we not expect from so gracious a Mediator (1 Tim. 2:5), that took our nature upon him that he might be gracious. He is a Physician good at all diseases, especially at the binding up of a broken heart.”¹⁰

The Puritans wrote exquisitely about the transcendent loveliness and blessedness of Jesus Christ. Weary, burned-out pastors need to be reminded of the glory of being united to Jesus Christ, the One who is glorious and altogether lovely.

Thomas Adams (1583–1652): “Christ is the sum of the whole Bible, prophesied, typified, prefigured, exhibited, demonstrated, to be found in every leaf, almost in every line, the Scriptures being but as it were the swaddling bands of the child Jesus. . . . He is life and light, the sun and the sum, the founder and the finisher of all perfect blessedness.”¹¹

John Flavel (1627–1691): “There is nothing unlovely found in him, so all that is in him is wholly lovely. As every ray of God is precious, so everything that is in Christ is precious: Who can weigh Christ in a pair of balances, and tell you what his worth is? He is comprehensive of all things that are lovely: He seals up the sum of all loveliness. Things that shine as single stars with a particular glory all meet in Christ as a glorious constellation. ‘It pleased the Father that in him should all fullness dwell,’ (Col. 1:19). Cast your eyes among all created beings, survey the universe, observe stren-

9 Thomas Brooks, *Heaven on Earth*, in *The Complete Works of Thomas Brooks*, ed. Alexander Balloch Grosart, vol. 2 (Edinburgh; London; Dublin: James Nichol; James Nisbet and Co.; G. Herbert, 1866), 2: 338.

10 Richard Sibbes, *The Bruised Reed*, in *The Complete Works of Richard Sibbes* (ed. Alexander Balloch Grosart; vol. 1; Edinburgh; London; Dublin: James Nichol; James Nisbet and Co.; W. Robertson, 1862), 1: 45.

11 Thomas Adams, *The Works of Thomas Adams, Volume 3* (James Nichol: Edinburgh, 1861–62), 3: 224, 225.

gth in one, beauty in a second, faithfulness in a third, wisdom in a fourth; but you shall find none excelling in them all as Christ does. He is bread to the hungry, water to the thirsty, a garment to the naked, healing to the wounded; and whatever a soul can desire is found in him (1 Cor. 1:30).¹²

How staggering it is that this lovely One died in our place, shedding his own precious blood for our sins, as our substitute on the cross.

John Flavel (1627–1691): “If a pardon be sweet to a condemned malefactor, how sweet must the sprinkling of the blood of Jesus be to the trembling conscience of a law-condemned sinner? If a rescue from a cruel tyrant be sweet to a poor captive, how sweet must it be to the ears of enslaved sinners, to hear the voice of liberty and deliverance proclaimed by Jesus Christ?”¹³

By faith, discouraged and downcast pastors may look beyond the darkness of present trials to the bright hope of God’s promises in Christ. John Bunyan agrees: “Faith sees more in one promise of God to help, than in all other things to hinder.”¹⁴ Faith looks to God in Christ for the answers to all our fears, all our wants, and all our miseries.

William Bridge (1600–1670): “Faith is the help against all discouragements. Hoping, trusting, waiting on God, is the special, if not the only means appointed against all discouragements.”¹⁵

Bridge goes on to describe a conversation between the downcast Christian and God:

“Though God be strong and able to help me, yet I fear that God is not willing to help me. I know God is able, and that God is strong enough, but I fear the

12 John Flavel, *The Whole Works of the Reverend John Flavel* (vol. 2; London; Edinburgh; Dublin: W. Baynes and Son; Waugh and Innes; M. Keene, 1820), 216.

13 John Flavel, *The Whole Works of the Reverend John Flavel* (vol. 2; London; Edinburgh; Dublin: W. Baynes and Son; Waugh and Innes; M. Keene, 1820), 219.

14 John Bunyan, *Come and Welcome to Jesus Christ* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1681/2011), 202-203.

15 William Bridge, “A Lifting Up For the Downcast,” in *The Works of the Reverend William Bridge, Volume 2* (London: 1845), 2: 255.

Lord is not willing, and therefore I am discouraged.’

‘Yet, be of good comfort, saith the Lord, for my name is Merciful. The Lord, the Lord, the Mighty God, that is my name. Therefore, I am able to help thee. And my name is Merciful, therefore, I am willing to help thee. Be of good comfort! My name is Gracious. I do not show mercy because you are good but because I am good. Nor do I stand upon your deserving, but I show mercy out of my free love.’

‘Oh, but I have been sinning, I have been sinning a long time, ten, twenty, thirty, forty, fifty years. Therefore, I fear there is no mercy for me.’

‘Yet, saith the Lord, be of good comfort for my name is Long-suffering. I am slow to anger. Art thou abundant in sin? I am abundant in goodness. I forgive, even all sorts and all kinds of sins, and this is my name forever.’¹⁶

The Lord Jesus Christ is the discouraged and weak pastors’ complete happiness and strength. He came into the world to save sinners and to endear our hearts to him.

Thomas Brooks (1608–1680): “The greatest design of Christ in this world is mightily to endear the hearts of his people. And indeed it was that which was in his eye and upon his heart from all eternity. It was this design that caused him to lay down His crown and to take up our cross, to put off his robes and to put on our rags, to be condemned that we might be justified, to undergo the wrath of the Almighty that we might forever be in the arms of his mercy. He gives his Spirit, his grace, yea, and his very self, and all to endear the hearts of his people to himself. Oh! What heart can conceive, what tongue can express, this matchless love! I will be thine forever, says Christ, and my Spirit shall be thine forever, and my grace thine forever, and my glory thine forever, and my righteousness thine forever, all I am and all I have, shall be thine forever. O sirs! What condescending love is this! Oh! What a Christ is this!”¹⁷

16 William Bridge, “A Lifting Up For the Downcast,” in *The Works of the Reverend William Bridge, Volume 2* (London: 1845), 2: 263-264.

17 Thomas Brooks, *The Complete Works of Thomas Brooks, Volume 3* (ed. Alexander Balloch Grosart; vol. 3; Edinburgh; London; Dublin: James Nichol; James Nisbet and Co.; G. Herbert, 1866), 3: 117.

No matter how difficult or chaotic the season of ministry, the discouraged pastor may rejoice knowing eternal peace with God has been secured through Christ.

Thomas Watson (1620–1686): “I am persecuted, but I have peace; I am poor, but I have peace; in a prison, but I have peace; in a wilderness, but I have peace; though all the world be against me, God is at peace, my soul is in peace. He that is the God of peace is the God of power. He promises peace, and he promises no more than he can perform. He can create peace. He can make our enemies to be at peace with us. He can say to the proud winds and waves, ‘Peace, be still,’ and they obey him. He can give us rest *from* the days of adversity; he can give us rest *in* the days of adversity. He can give to his beloved sleep.”¹⁸

Thomas Brooks (1608–1680): “Once I was a slave, but now I am a son; once I was dead, but now I am alive; once I was darkness, but now I am light in the Lord; once I was a child of wrath, an heir of hell, but now I am an heir of heaven; once I was Satan’s bondman, but now I am God’s freeman; once I was under the spirit of bondage, but now I am under the spirit of adoption, that seals up to me the remission of my sins, the justification of my person, and the salvation of my soul.”¹⁹

The Puritans understood that Jesus Christ is the One who promised build his church. We are his servants, but being Lord of heaven and earth, he isn’t served by human hands, as though he needed anything. He is the Chief Shepherd of his flock and he alone is the One who sovereignly guides and guards his people all the way to glory.

The day before he died, **John Owen (1616–1683)** wrote a final letter to his best friend expressing the wonderful confidence all

18 Thomas Watson, “Sermon VII,” in *The Select Works of the Rev. Thomas Watson, Comprising His Celebrated Body of Divinity, in a Series of Lectures on the Shorter Catechism, and Various Sermons and Treatises* (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1855), 659–660.

19 Thomas Brooks, *The Complete Works of Thomas Brooks* (ed. Alexander Balloch Grosart; vol. 2; Edinburgh; London; Dublin: James Nichol; James Nisbet and Co.; G. Herbert, 1866), 2: 345.

gospel ministers may have in our mighty Lord: “I am going to him whom my soul has loved, or rather who has loved me with an everlasting love, — which is the whole ground of all my consolation. I am leaving the ship of the church in a storm. But while the great Pilot is in it, the loss of a poor under-rower will be inconsiderable. Live, and pray, and hope, and wait patiently, and do not despond. The promise stands invincible, that he will never leave us, nor forsake us.”²⁰

May the mighty promises of Christ fuel our faith until, at last, we see him face to face.

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²⁰ John Owen, “Life of Dr. Owen,” in *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William Goold, 24 vols. (Edinburgh: Johnson & Hunter; 1850-1855; reprint by Banner of Truth, 1965), 1: ciii. This letter was addressed to Owen’s best friend, Charles Fleetwood. It was written on August 23, 1683, the day before Owen died.

How Calvinism Makes Fewer Burnt-Out Pastors



Conrad Mbewe

We often hear that sound doctrine matters. It helps a church become stable, strong, and protected from the heretical winds that are always blowing.

Yet we don't often hear about the importance of sound doctrine to the pastor's own life—how it keeps him stable and strong over the long haul. Yet good doctrine is crucial for sustaining a pastor, and this is especially true of Calvinistic doctrine.

Calvinism biblically balances God's sovereignty and human responsibility in a way that should produce healthy and refreshed ministers. It goes a long way toward preventing one major occupational hazard of pastoral work, namely, pastoral burnout.

MORE THAN COMMON-SENSE ADVICE

As in any demanding profession, pastors can burn out due to the sheer amount of work to be done within the few hours each day. The workload can easily become too much for the emotional frame to handle.

Sadly, counselors then advise pastors to avoid burnout with the common-sense advice they give to anyone: take time for recreation and rest; tend to your family; and so forth. It's the kind of counsel you will find in leadership magazines for any secular organization.

Such advice is not bad. As I said, it's common sense. Yet Christians should look to a more foundational source of help: the gospel we believe in. In particular, pastors should remember God's sovereignty in all things, especially salvation.

HOW CALVINISM PREVENTS BURNOUT

A Calvinist, said B. B. Warfield, is someone who “believes in God without reserve and is determined that God shall be God to him in all his thinking, feeling, and willing...throughout all his individual social and religious relations...” How then does believing that God is God in all our thinking, feeling, willing, and relations prevent ministerial burnout?

To begin with, it's liberating to know God is in control of all things, especially if we're laboring on “hard ground” for gospel and biblical truth. We learn to labor faithfully and leave the fruit to God.

This confidence gave the apostle Paul poise in ministry. People compared him to Apollos. He replied, “What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth” (1 Cor. 3:5–7). He felt no pressure to be like Apollos.

This confidence is equally applicable when it comes to conversions. Calvinistic theology says we are responsible to pray and present the gospel. But it keeps us from thinking that we can do anything to bring about the conversion of sinners. We know that regeneration is a sovereign act of God. We must plant the seed and water it. But God alone gives growth. Jesus said, “The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit” (John 3:8).

The knowledge of God’s sovereignty is an all-important counterbalance for conscientious pastors who want to do a good job for the Lord. Knowing that spiritual work is a fruit of the Holy Spirit alone liberates us from the burden of doing something we’re incapable of doing. It removes an improperly-placed weight from the pastor’s shoulders, yet without taking away the responsibility of being faithful.

Lastly, the Calvinist’s passion for the glory of God *alone* causes a pastor to care less about the opinions of men. This passion involves more than developing a thick skin. Rather, as Warfield puts it, Calvinism is “that sight of the majesty of God that pervades all of life and all of experience.” It’s a positive preoccupation with who ultimately matters in life—God! You are liberated from working to please men, and increasingly work to please God alone.

So instead of only giving pastors commonsense counsel about how to prevent burnout, let us go one step further and encourage them to regularly refresh themselves in the strong old Calvinistic doctrines. That way, we will gaze upon God as we labor in the trenches of ministry. If we do so, we’ll find less burnout casualties in our ranks.

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Be Tender-Hearted and Thick-Skinned: How Humility Protects Pastors from Pastoral Burnout



Aaron Menikoff

They wanted to talk about my preaching. I hadn't been at the church very long, but they had some concerns. A few single women recently left the church, and these deacons were convinced it was my fault. My sermons, they insisted, must be too "masculine." I didn't know what they meant—I still don't! I certainly had no intention of preaching masculine *or* feminine sermons. Nonetheless, they weren't pleased.

Several months later, an older couple wanted to talk. They, too, had some concerns. It was about my family. They offered

constructive criticism, especially for my wife. In public, they were quite friendly and seemed to like us very much. Privately, they had reservations about us as a ministry team.

Around this time, another member told me something was wrong with the morning service. He couldn't quite put his finger on it. He seemed glad I preached the Bible, but he wanted something a little less serious and a little more joyful. He said our gatherings didn't have a "sense" of worship.

Welcome to ministry.

CRITICISM CAN BE HELPFUL

If you are a pastor, criticism comes with the territory. These examples are from my early years of ministry. A decade in, the church I serve has more unity than ever before. Still, there's always criticism. Just the other day a brother said the first point of my sermon was too long. He was right! I strive to heed godly criticism.

"The ear that listens to life-giving reproof will dwell among the wise" (Prov. 15:31). Everybody needs correction, and a good leader will receive it well. "Righteous lips are the delight of a king, and he loves him who speaks what is right" (Prov. 16:13). It is *right* to be exhorted to change when change is necessary. It is *good* to be told you're doing something wrong when you are, in fact, doing something wrong. Criticism may sting in the short-term but, if it's true, we can embrace it as a gift from the Lord. "Listen to advice and accept instruction, that you may gain wisdom in the future" (Prov. 19:20).

IN SMALL DOSES, PLEASE

The mature pastor knows criticism is helpful, but he'd like it kept to a minimum. This is because criticism hurts. Heap too many coals on the fire, and the steak is likely to burn. Heap too much criticism on the pastor, and he'll likely burnout. Criticism, however well-in-

tioned, can be harmful in large doses. No one will thrive in a perpetual state of discouragement. “Anxiety in a man’s heart weighs him down, but a good word makes him glad” (Prov. 12:25).

Unfortunately, pastors can control neither the rate nor the quality of the criticism that comes their way. Some of it is wonderful, helpful, and life-giving. Other criticism is simply unfair, unjust, and unkind. A batter can’t demand his favorite pitch, and a pastor can’t make a member be compassionate. Sometimes people say things that just aren’t true.

- “You care more about membership than people.”
- “You’ve never said a kind word to me, I don’t think you like me.”
- “You just want people to obey your commands, you aren’t *really* looking for input.”
- “You don’t love the older people, you just care about the young folks.”
- “You’re an okay preacher, but not much of a shepherd.”

Criticism like this may be completely unhitched to reality. Or it may have a grain of truth but be flung at you in a spiteful, hurtful way. Sheep have been known to bite their shepherd. How should pastors respond in the face of unjust criticism?

In a nutshell: don’t be thin-skinned, do be thick-skinned, and be sure to be tender-hearted.

DON’T BE THIN-SKINNED

The thin-skinned pastor won’t last very long in ministry because he will take every question about the direction of the church as a personal slight. Each member leaving feels like a dagger in his back. He has a hard time discerning between fair and unjust criticism. Spider-Man has “spider sense”—he always knows when

danger is nearby. Thin-skinned pastors always seem to sense a word of criticism is around the corner.

Some thin-skinned pastors demonize their critics. They see themselves as truth-warriors and wonder why the rest of the troops aren't falling into line. When people probe into the reasoning behind a decision, voice opposition, or simply and quietly disagree, a thin-skinned pastor takes it as a personal affront. A thin-skinned pastor may not change course, but he's disappointed and pained by any confrontation.

Other thin-skinned pastors are so nervous they question every decision they make. When people oppose their leadership, such pastors quickly assume they must be steering the ship in the wrong direction. They base the quality of their leadership on the noise of the crowd instead of the Word of the Lord.

Either way, the thin-skinned pastor cares too deeply about what others think. Their opinion casts a long and disheartening shadow over his ministry. He always feels the need to prove himself.²¹ Pastors like this build walls that keep people away. This is a dark and lonely place to be.

Simply put, thin-skinned pastors should probably not be in ministry because they will not last.

DO BE THICK-SKINNED

A thick-skinned pastor cares more about approval from the God he worships than approval from the church he serves. He can usually sleep well on Sunday night, because he knows the kingdom of God is not shaken by his less-than-stellar sermon. He can hear bad news in the afternoon—*the cancer is back, my wife has left me*—and still be emotionally available for his kid's soccer game that evening. The thick-skinned pastor finds profound comfort and strength in the reality of God's sovereign goodness.

21 See Jared Wilson, *The Pastor's Justification: Applying the Work of Christ in Your Life and Ministry* (Crossway, 2013).

Because the thick-skinned pastor knows the future of his church depends on the power of the Spirit and not himself, he makes decisions that serve him and his family well. He takes the time off he needs—even if a few members may question his priorities—because he knows his family and his church need a well-rested shepherd. He'll say no to some church functions to spend quality time with his wife and kids. He recognizes some may want him to be more available, but he proves with his schedule his family comes first.²²

Most importantly, a thick-skinned pastor lets the sheep chew on him because he knows, after all, they're sheep! Christians who have received a steady diet of topical teaching for decades may bristle at the idea of going through a book of the Bible chapter by chapter. The thick-skinned pastor isn't offended by their opposition; he patiently explains why he thinks expositional preaching is more helpful. A thick-skinned pastor may be criticized for leading a church away from special music to more congregational singing. But he doesn't get upset when people wrongly conclude he doesn't like music; he humbly explains why the moves he's suggesting are for the long-term good of the congregation's corporate worship of God.

In other words, every pastor will inevitably face a barrage of criticism. This isn't heaven. But the thick-skinned pastor will keep his eyes on the cross, his heart in the Lord, and his hand to the plough.

And because of that, he's more likely to last in ministry.

BE SURE TO BE TENDER-HEARTED

The skin of an elephant can withstand the sun of the Sahara Desert but, let's face it, who wants to hug an elephant? If a thick-skinned pastor isn't careful, he'll seem unapproachable. He may pit fidelity to God's Word against compassion toward God's people.

²² See Brian Croft, *The Pastor's Family: Shepherding Your Family through the Challenges of Pastoral Ministry* (Zondervan, 2013).

The apostle Paul is such a good example for us here. The same man who told the Galatians he did not seek the “approval of man” likened himself to a “nursing mother taking care of her own children” when he described his ministry to the Thessalonians. Thick-skinned: Galatians 1:10. Tender-hearted: 1 Thessalonians 2:7.

Even better is the example of Jesus. He demonstrated remarkable tenderness toward those who would reject him. The Savior described himself as a “hen [who] gathers her brood under her wings” (Luke 13:34). If our King could be so gentle to Jerusalem, then shouldn’t we be compassionate to the church of the living God (1 Tim. 3:15)?

Being thick-skinned has its dangers. We can be slow to accept good criticism. We can appear stern, detached, or uninterested in others. We can assume those around us are as thick-skinned as us and give criticism in a brusque, unhelpful manner. We can speak with a force, clarity, and abrasiveness that hurts the very sheep God has entrusted to our care.²³

Let’s work hard to avoid such pitfalls. The members of our church are precious in God’s sight, even when they bite. If we’re too thin-skinned, we’ll cave under the weight of their disappointment in us. If we’re too thick-skinned, we’ll push away the brothers and sisters God has called us to serve and lead. Therefore, be sure to be tender-hearted. The thick-skinned *and* tender-hearted pastor is best positioned to minister for the long haul.

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²³ See John Crotts, *Graciousness: Tempering Truth with Love* (Reformation Heritage, 2018).

One Cure for Burnout: Building a Network of Like-Minded Brothers



Kevin McKay

A couple of years ago, I would've told you that I love preaching and pastoring, that I can't think of anything I'd rather do more. I also would've admitted that I wasn't sure I could do it for another 10 years.

I had no idea how anyone could do this for more than 20 years. Then I read two helpful books: *Reset* by David Murray and *Zeal Without Burnout* by Christopher Ash. Both were huge helps in getting me to the place I am now.

But without a network of like-minded brothers in the ministry, I'm not sure those books would've been enough to keep me from burning out. Those relationships are vital for me as I pursue a long and fruitful ministry.

In the first year of our church plant, I got a taste of how isolation can make the normal burdens and pressures of ministry much worse. It's like throwing a bag of rocks on your back for an

already arduous journey. I've watched guys try and do ministry like this for years. They're already fighting discouragement at how slowly the church is growing, both spiritually and numerically, and that gets magnified by their efforts to essentially build the church on a deserted island.

They're alone, and they start believing lies. They know no one who shares their philosophical convictions about ministry—no one to share in their joys, or walk with them in their struggles. They have no one to lift up their eyes from their own ministry and remind them of the larger work that's God's doing in his kingdom.

How can anyone persevere in ministry like that? Well, they often can't. And here's why.

YOU REGULARLY NEED A BIBLICAL REMINDER ABOUT THE WORK OF THE MINISTRY.

The apostle Paul had to remind the Corinthians that the message of the cross is foolishness and a stumbling block to those who are perishing (1 Cor. 1:18, 23). The gospel only makes sense to those who are spiritually discerning.

But let's not forget that Paul feels the need to remind a church of this. Why? Because they were being attracted to the same kind of pragmatic values shared by the world (2 Cor. 11). Pastors are prone to do the same thing, especially when it seems like the gospel lacks power and the work is going slower than we think it should.

Without a network of like-minded pastors, we forget the biblical principles that excited us about ministry, and we more easily turn to pragmatic methods that have drawn crowds in other ministries. But building strong relationships with other like-minded pastors will remind us that there's more rest and power in a ministry that's completely dependent on the Lord (2 Cor. 12:9).

YOU REGULARLY NEED TO TAKE OFF YOUR PASTOR HAT WITH A FRIEND FOR A MINUTE.

C.S. Lewis said that friendship is born at the moment when one man says to another, “What! You too?” We pastors can find good and godly friendships with many in our own church, but there’s a unique responsibility that we carry for those same friends. Always “being on” as a pastor can be exhausting—and if your wife is the only one that allows you to take off your pastor hat for a minute, then you’re going to exhaust her. (And the church didn’t call her to be another elder).

But in a network of like-minded pastors we find the support and encouragement we need to keep doing what we’re doing. There’s something life-giving about sitting down with a friend who can empathize with your struggles and share in your joys as only a shepherd of their sheep can. In fact, sometimes we need *them* to shepherd *us*. Sometimes, we need to shepherd them. Friendships with other pastors are part of the way that God takes care of us and gives us spiritual rest (Proverbs 17:17).

YOU NEED TO FEEL LIKE YOU’RE A PART OF SOMETHING BIGGER THAN YOUR OWN CHURCH.

There are probably plenty of things in your church to be encouraged by. But if hoping to have a role in reaching the world and are *only* looking at what’s happening inside your own church, then ministry is going to feel something like running on a treadmill. You’re expending a lot of energy, but you’re not actually *going* anywhere.

When you’re only focused on what your church can do, or should do, or isn’t doing, you develop a kind of tunnel vision that keeps you from seeing God’s greater kingdom work. But by being a part of a larger network of churches that pursue the Great Commission together, you enlarge your perspective. Christ is building his church today, and you’re a part of that work.

As pastors, we should be concerned about what's happening across the world *and* what's happening in the pulpit next door. That concern will help us fight burnout. It will keep us from an unhealthy focus on our own ministry, even as it opens our eyes to be encouraged by what God is doing in the larger work that we're a part of. Furthermore, a widened concern for how Christianity is faring outside the walls of your church building will necessarily lead to the kind of relationships described above.

CONCLUSION

If you're reading this as a pastor and you need friends, then email another pastor in your area and ask them to read this article with you. Maybe it will start a life-giving friendship for both of you.

Here are some other ideas: Get more involved with your association. Regularly gather a small group of pastors together if you don't already. If you're a church member reading this, then make sure your pastor is encouraged to have friendships both inside and outside the church. Help your church value the ministry he has to other pastors—perhaps by setting aside money in the budget for it. This will not only be vital for your own church, but also for the larger body of Christ.

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Kevin McKay is the senior pastor of Grace Harbor Church in Providence, Rhode Island.

One Cure for Burnout: A Plurality of Like- Minded Shepherds



Jason Dees

“**D**on’t ever give your personal number to anyone in your congregation. If you get too close to these people you will regret it.”

That’s what a pastor once advised me when I was first beginning in pastoral ministry. This man had been very successful in ministry, and was a very gifted communicator. He’d led two very large churches, and I think his advice was given with an earnest concern both for me and my ministry. But sadly, this man had an unfortunately corporate and, frankly, unbiblical understanding of pastoral ministry.

A FAMILY, NOT A COMPANY

It’s easy in our current moment to think that the job of the

pastor is to build an effective mechanism that produces useful Christian products: good sermons, good music, an exciting and morally instructive children's ministry. In other words, it's easy to see the job of a pastor as similar to that of a CEO. But the biblical definition of pastoral ministry is more like what Peter writes in 1 Peter 5:2–4:

Shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. ⁴ And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.

When you look at how the church is described in the New Testament, the authors use words like “family” (1 Tim. 5:1–2, Eph. 3:14, 2 Cor. 6:18, Matt. 12:49–50, 1 John 3:14–18), “household” (Gal. 6:10, Heb. 3:6), “bride” (Ephesians 5:32), and “body” (1 Cor. 12:12–27, Eph. 4:15–16). In other words, the language the New Testament uses when talking about the church isn't marketplace language; it is covenantal language. It isn't exchange-of-goods language; it isn't we-offer-the-best-product-in-town language; it isn't *brand* language. Rather, the New Testament uses relational language; it uses we-depend-on-one-another language—just like a family, a household, a bride, and a body.

SHEPHERDS NEED OTHER SHEPHERDS

When a pastor begins to understand this, he'll see himself more as a father or a shepherd, and less as a manager or boss. He'll see his job less as a man who runs an organization and more as a man who cares for people and seeks to disciple, guard, protect, and stir others toward faith and good deeds.

When this transformation happens in the heart of a man, he

truly becomes a pastor. And once this transformation takes place, he will desire co-laborers for this task in order to serve the church. He'll realize that he cannot care for the church alone—like a CEO—and so he'll desire men who can do more than run his ministry mechanism. He'll desire men who are shepherds with different gifts, viewpoints, and perspectives.

A plurality of elders is a natural conclusion for those who rightly understand the New Testament church and the role of pastoral ministry. But more than that, a plurality of elders is a biblical conclusion and expectation.

Throughout the New Testament—from Acts to Titus to 1 Peter—a plurality of elders is commended and modeled. A healthy congregation needs the care and oversight of more than one man, and a plurality of elders gives affords many particular benefits: better teaching, a broader congregational perspective, a variety of gifts in leadership, and accountability among leaders. Such a list could go on and on.

CONCLUSION

Thankfully, the Lord gave me wiser counselors who helped me see that the advice I received to separate myself from the congregation was neither right nor wise. Since that conversation many years ago, the Lord has allowed me to transition established churches to a plurality of elders, and to plant a church that began with a plurality of elders.

Transitioning a church's polity and establishing a church's polity are both challenging ventures, but those challenges are far less than the challenge of rightly pastoring a congregation on your own. After all, when you're on your own, you are left to, at best, cursorily look after the souls that have been entrusted to your care, and, at worst, to ignore many of them altogether just due to sheer lack of time.

Graciously by his Word, the Lord has given us a better way to lead his church. He expects a plurality of gifted and qualified men

to care for his bride. If you currently pastor a congregation that has no qualified men other than yourself, then you should do two things: begin earnestly praying for such men and, second, perhaps reconsider if your standards are loftier than the Bible's.

You will be grateful for these men today. But pastor, you will be even more grateful for them on the last day, when you give an account for those souls that God has entrusted to your care (Heb. 13:17).

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Managing Expectations for a Sustainable Ministry



David Murray

“**W**e’re expecting a new pastor soon, after many years without one, and I’m worried that some in the congregation will be tempted to dump work on our new pastor. Can you guide us in how to support and protect our new pastor both from his own and others’ expectations, so that he will set off and continue at a sustainable pace?”

I was recently asked this great question by an elder and thought it would be a good one to answer in this public way so that others also may benefit from thinking through these things.

WEEKLY SABBATH

First, insist on the Sabbath principle. Instruct your pastor that he *must* obey the biblical principle of six days of work and one com-

plete day of rest. Ideally, it should be the same day each week (and he's not allowed to choose Sunday!) so that his body will get into a healthy and regular six-and-one rhythm.

The chosen day should also be made known to the congregation so that everyone knows not to contact the pastor on this day, except in an emergency. Even when it's thought to be urgent, members should be encouraged to contact an elder first so that he can make sure it really is an emergency. In my experience of counseling pastors, the single greatest cause of pastoral burnout is not taking a *full* day off every week.

FAMILY LIFE

Try to ensure that the pastor has at least three evenings a week at home to relax with his wife and family. If we assume that he's preparing for Sunday on Saturday evening and involved in ministry of some kind on Sunday evening, then that leaves five evenings a week. One of those evenings will usually be taken up with the church's midweek meeting (e.g. Bible Study or Prayer Meeting) and one should be taken up with pastoral visitation or counseling.

That leaves three evenings for his family. If there's an elders' meeting or some other church meeting one week, then that should take the place of the pastoral/counseling evening. Sometimes, emergencies and other events will mean an additional evening out, leaving only two evenings for family life, but that should be the exception rather than the norm. If the pastor's marriage and family relationships aren't established on a solid footing, then his ministry will suffer in the long-run (and so will his wife and children).

ACCOUNTABILITY

Establish a small group of elders (maybe two or three) to meet

regularly (maybe quarterly) with the pastor and report to the rest of the elders on how the pastor is doing. This should be a caring and compassionate group that will enquire as to whether the pastor is taking a full day off every week, is getting good sleep, has sufficient time to study, is exercising, is taking his full vacation time, is enjoying God in his private devotions, and so on.

They should make sure the pastor is not working more than 45–50 hours a week (on average). They should also help the pastor build as much daily and weekly routine into his life as possible so that he is working with his bodily (circadian) rhythms rather than against them. If necessary, this group can advocate for him at the full elders' meeting, rather than the pastor having to advocate for himself. If the accountability group is to be an asset to the pastor, its spirit should be supportive rather than inquisitorial or accusatory.

PATIENCE

For new pastors, sermon preparation will take much longer than it will for an experienced pastor. Allowance should be made for this in terms of expectations. After a few years of practice, he will be much more “efficient” in terms of sermon preparation, releasing more time for pastoral work and discipling.

ADMINISTRATIVE HELP

Try to keep administrative work to a minimum for the new pastor. By all means, expect him to work hard in preaching and pastoring, but if administrative/organizational work can be done by someone else, either paid or voluntary, then try to delegate it. Often, there are people within the congregation who have these gifts and can assist the pastor in this way.

COUNSELING TEAM

Try to build a team of counselors both inside and outside of the congregation so that the whole counseling load doesn't fall on the pastor. As people get to trust the pastor, more of them will come to him for counseling and eventually this will become overwhelming. Work toward training people in the congregation in specific problem areas like depression, addiction, marriage breakdown, abuse, and so on. This may take years to fully implement, but it will help take some of the low-level but time-consuming burden of counseling off the pastor. I would strongly advise the pastor to study and specialize in conflict resolution and peace-making because conflict is the second most common cause of stress, anxiety, and burnout in the ministry.

Encourage the pastor to build connections and relations in the wider community with doctors, counselors, psychologists, and social workers (all preferably Christians) who have particular expertise in the most complex counseling areas so that the most difficult cases can be referred to trustworthy professionals. This team approach spreads the load and utilizes the experience and expertise of those who are dealing with difficult problems all day every day. However, the pastor should be receiving regular reports from these professionals so that he can build trust, supervise the counseling, and continue to minister to specific spiritual needs.

If a congregation can do even some of the above, with the Lord's blessing, it will lay a wonderful foundation for a sustainable ministry.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Murray is a pastor and a professor of Old Testament and Practical Theology. He blogs at HeadHeartHand.org and you can follow him on Twitter @davidpmurray.

How My Small Church Hasn't Burnt Me Out



Jonathan Worsley

Theologically, the smallest possible church is two. Jesus said so in Matthew 18:20. Practically, though, I never believed I'd be in one. Indeed, having worked at two relatively large churches, in the UK and the US (250 and 1,000 members respectively), the thought of the preacher in the pulpit and a solitary member in the pew was unfathomable.

But four years ago, it happened. One Sunday morning, mid 2014, just one elderly lady from my church attended. As I looked down at my meticulous service notes, I'd be lying if I said I wasn't mortified.

Since then, our little London church has grown. By God's grace, we're now 21 members, and see around 35 on a Sunday. The church is growing—and exponentially so if we use percentages!

However, some weeks it still feels like we're on life support—like the weeks when my five-year-old son decides to raucously

sword-fight his younger siblings with the service sheet whilst I'm leading and my wife is playing piano; or the weeks when I'm sprinting to the local store because there's no bread for the Lord's Supper; or when a few local Christians decide to leave because "there's not enough church programs yet." These weeks have all happened and they've all left me feeling close to ministerial death.

And yet, our smallness hasn't killed me yet. How is that? Three thoughts have kept me alive.

1. KNOW THE TIME,

For both godly and ungodly reasons, I've often dreamed of being a Spurgeon or a Wesley. I recently walked around Lloyd-Jones' Westminster Chapel, and imagined what it must have been like to preach to a full capacity crowd. But those days appear to be gone. The UK is dark and it's getting darker. We have never been a Christian nation (no nation ever has), yet here Christianity is in the throes of winter as militant atheism blossoms like spring.

For most people today, Jesus is either a hollow mentor or a historical mirage. Three years ago, a headline in the British Magazine, *The Spectator*, simply read "2067: the end of British Christianity."

Obviously I cannot speak with such omniscience. Will British Christianity die on my watch? I trust not. Nevertheless, it's important to be realistic about growth whilst ministering in such days. The US situation doesn't map perfectly onto the UK one, but as one studies the progressively secular climate, the forecast looks dry. The Western Church seems destined to wilt. Although my stomach rumbles for growth, as I dream of harvest days gone by, acknowledging the fact that we minister in leaner days has often helped me manage expectations in a small church.

2. KEEP WATERING WITH THE WORD.

Recently, I've been meeting with two non-Christians to study Mark's Gospel. Their growth in understanding the gospel has been enormously encouraging. By the end, I wanted to hug them both. Yet initially, I wanted to shake them. My internal monologue read: *You've attended our church for 18 months! You've heard over 50 sermons! You've sung the gospel hundreds of times! How can you not get it!?*

I guess all pastors have such stories. The Word bears fruit in God's own time. Nevertheless, since pastors of small churches have fewer people to metaphorically water, a relentless and exasperated inspection for fruit is more common. Therefore, regularly mediating upon the fact that the Word is continuously at work—being always active (Hebrews 4:12) and never returning void (Isaiah 55:11)—has been vital.

If pastors are tenacious in watering prayerfully a harvest *will* follow. Leaders of small churches may be tempted to impatience since fruit is more sporadic, but fruit *will* be seen—eventually. Hugh Latimer, English martyr, wrote, “The drop of rain maketh a hole in the stone, not by violence, but by oft falling.”

3. KINDLE THE VISION OF THAT JUDGEMENT-SEAT.

One of the long-term killers in small church ministry is the perpetual feeling of worthlessness. Living in a highly affluent area of London, I feel this acutely. The world equates size with success (large = legend; little = loser).

Christians subconsciously take this philosophy into their ecclesiological setting. Leaders of small churches may shun the “celebrity pastor” badge and speak publicly of “faithfulness over fruitfulness,” but the truth is that many of us, in our pride, secretly salivate over the prefix “mega.” And there's a sense in which we should. We should all want larger churches—churches

that are growing in godliness *and in number*. Nowhere in Scripture does it say that a small church is somehow more desirable than an large one.

However, the Bible frequently correlates size and judgement: “Everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded” (Luke 12:48). In Hebrews 13:17, we specifically read that church leaders will give an account for everyone over whom they kept watch. The great shepherd will judge us for every sheep in our flock.

This future reminder doesn’t make me hope for a smaller church in the present, but it has helped me to keep worldly desires in check. The nineteenth century Scottish pastor John Brown would agree. Consider what he wrote to one of his newly ordained pupils who was sinking under the discouragements of small church ministry:

I know the vanity of your heart, and that you will feel mortified that your congregation is very small, in comparison with those of your brethren around you; but assure yourself on the word of an old man, that when you come to give an account of them to the Lord Christ, at his judgment-seat, you will think you have had enough.

My small church hasn’t killed me yet. In fact, it’s grown me.

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How My Mega-Church Hasn't Burnt Me Out



Mark Vroegop

I have a love-hate relationship with the mega-church. I love the number of people converted. I love the number of people who sing and serve with passion each Sunday. My heart rejoices when I consider the level of gospel influence through our church in reaching unreached peoples, planting churches, training pastors, relieving injustice, helping hurting churches, and deploying an army of passionate followers of Jesus into our city each week. This is what I love about pastoring a big church.

But there's another side to this. Over the last decade, our church has grown from 2,200 to 4,400. We've planted four new churches. Our staff grew to over 80, and by God's grace we have almost 40 elders. As a result, I've spent a lot more time developing "systems" of care—and less time actually making hospital calls. There's less margin for unplanned visits from people. I have awkward moments as I introduce myself to so-

meone who has been a member at our church for a year or two, and we've not met. I sometimes pray with people who call me "Pastor" but whose names I struggle to remember. My life is highly scheduled, very busy, and it often feels what some might call "corporate." These are the parts I hate.

I've been leading a mega-church for over a decade. While it's not always easy, it hasn't killed me. It hasn't burnt me out—at least not yet. Here are five things that have helped:

KEEPING STUDY SACRED

I've served in two churches of different sizes. While the pastoral dynamics are often worlds apart, the weekly lingering over the Word has remained the same.

And I'm thankful for that. Early on in ministry, I determined *not* to allow my weekly rhythm of sermon preparation to be obscured or undermined by other responsibilities. This commitment to feed the sheep the Lord has given me has become a consistent refuge for my soul. Furthermore, it's anchored me to the foundation of every pastor's calling—to preach the Word both in season and out of season, to churches both big and small.

PRIORITIZING MY LIFE

The competing demands on my time require that I relentlessly prioritize my schedule. I organize my life around being God's kind of person, partner, parent, and pastor—in that order. Cultivating intentional, undistracted time for my walk with the Lord, my health, and my family is essential.

I've created an ideal schedule on a spreadsheet so that my assistant can help me balance between administration and discipleship, meeting with staff and church members, attending meetings and making time for planning. Every week, my wife and I review

my plan to be sure it aligns with our values. I've survived by running my calendar, not allowing it to run me.

PRAYING FOR PEOPLE

I felt called to the ministry because I loved the gospel and people. But, perhaps surprisingly, leading a large church can be isolating and impersonal. That's one reason I created a staff and elders' prayer directory. Each page has a picture and the names of family members.

Also, our church members are divided in geographic regions (parishes), so that each elder, including me, is assigned about 100 people over whom we pray regularly. These two resources connect me to the needs of a smaller group of people. While I can't systematically and regularly pray for everyone in my church, I can intercede for some. I feel the most hope and encouragement for the future when praying for people by name is a part of my daily routine.

TRUSTING GOD'S PLAN

I believe God called me into the ministry and to my church. This is pretty basic, I know. But it matters when I'm frustrated with the "corporate" side of my role or when I've disappointed someone because I can't meet an expectation. I remind myself that as a pastor I have a divinely given role. I don't get to decide how I serve my church. Trusting God's plan for my life as I lead a large church means being content with complexity; it means being joyful amid long meetings. I've survived pastoring a large church the same way every pastor survives: trusting the Chief Shepherd.

CREATING PERSONAL PATHWAYS

The most disappointing aspect of leading a large church is the potential distance from the congregation. While I can't connect with every member, I have to try my best. Therefore, I'm available for prayer after

Sunday worship. I mingle in the foyer and visit with first-time guests. My email comes directly to me—no filter. And I maintain open appointments on my calendar for people who would like to meet with me. My pastoral accessibility is probably less than a smaller church, but these pathways help me survive and they help our people feel more connected to the pastor who preaches to them most.

Pastoring a large church hasn't killed me yet. While there are things I hate about leading a complicated, highly structured ministry, there's far more that I love. And by keeping perspective, maintaining priorities, and a large dose of intentionality, it's possible not only to survive, but to even thrive while pastoring a big church.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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How a Biblical Eschatology Protects Against Pastoral Burnout



Juan Sanchez

Pastoring sometimes feels like you're riding an emotional roller coaster full of ups and downs, twists and turns. Day after day, you watch people you love make decisions that bring you joy and make you cry—sometimes in the same day. Anxiety increases as you hear the clack, clack, clack dragging you slowly up the peak of conflict only to be pushed over the top into the free-fall of relational chaos, knowing only that a sharp turn is just ahead. No one blames you if you feel overwhelmed and want to get off the ride. You're not alone.

If we're to endure faithfully in pastoral ministry, we need to remember that we're leading the church in a time of tension—between the already and the not-yet. We're called to shepherd the

flock of God among us to the celestial city, laboring to point them to Christ and his glorious promises and warning them of the dangers of this present evil world, the temptations of our flesh, and the schemes of the Devil. If we're to do this well, we must understand what Christ has gained for us already in these last days and what we have yet to gain on the Last Day. When we fail to recognize this tension, we'll punch our ticket to the emotional roller coaster of pastoral ministry—a ride that often leads to disappointment, discouragement, and perhaps even pastoral burnout.

THE DANGERS OF AN UNDER-REALIZED ESCHATOLOGY

When we don't appreciate what Christ has accomplished for us, when we don't account for what's already ours through our union with him,²⁴ we'll be tempted toward pessimistic defeatism. Imagine doubting God's forgiveness or questioning your standing before God. Such a perspective will eventually lead to despair as you're left to your own devices to try and earn acceptance before God. It will be difficult—nearly impossible—to lead a church while dealing with such nagging doubts. Rather than run to Christ and rest in what he has accomplished, you may be tempted to leave the ministry altogether.

But I suspect the majority of us who continue in pastoral ministry have learned to preach the gospel to ourselves. We may not doubt our standing before God, but if we tend toward pessimistic defeatism, we may functionally doubt others' standing before God. Just think about how this under-realized eschatology might affect your ministry:

- Culture: Are you tempted to view this world as so irredeemable that you don't associate with unbelievers? Are you tempted

24 D. A. Carson, "Partakers of the Age to Come," 89-106, in *These Last Days: A Christian View of History*, edited by Richard D. Phillips and Gabriel N. E. Fluhrer (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2011), 91.

- to believe that things are so bad “out there” that you should avoid it altogether and encourage your church to do likewise?
- Evangelism: Do you view some unbelievers as beyond the grace of God? Are there unbelievers in your life that you’re convinced will never come to Christ, causing you to think, “Why even try?”
 - Discipleship: Are you so frustrated with church members who seem to struggle with the same sins again and again that you’re ready to give up on them?
 - Preaching: Have you come to the place where you feel it doesn’t matter how much you prepare or how faithfully you preach because it won’t hardly make a difference?
 - Leadership: Have you thrown in the towel in trying to raise up leaders in the church because you believe no one will rise to the biblical standards?

It’s no shock that such pessimistic defeatism will lead to burn out. When we don’t rest in the work that Christ has accomplished for us and for our people, we’ll be tempted to step into his sandals and rescue people ourselves. We’ll be tempted to think it’s finally up to us to change the culture; to convince unbelievers into the kingdom; to work out our people’s sanctification; to preach sermons that transform lives; to raise up biblical leaders.

But it’s not. We’re not the Savior of the world, and we’re not the Sanctifier of the Church. If an under-realized eschatology ever causes us to forget this, then burnout is inevitable.

THE DANGERS OF AN OVER-REALIZED ESCHATOLOGY

On the other hand, if we mistakenly believe that Christ’s finished work guarantees for us now promises that won’t be fulfilled until the consummation of all things,²⁵ then we’ll be tempted toward

²⁵ Ibid.

overly optimistic triumphalism. While we may not actually believe this world is fully restored and the saints are fully sanctified, we may functionally hold to a sort of prosperity theology in which we expect a substantial down payment on our future inheritance now. This inevitably leads to disappointment and doubt when Christ doesn't deliver what we mistakenly expect of him.

Think also about how an over-realized eschatology affects our ministry:

- Culture: Do you believe that because Jesus is King (Ephesians 1:19–23), we can go into our communities and redeem the culture so that we can cultivate a slice of heaven here on earth?
- Evangelism: Are you under the impression that because in this new age sower and reaper are working together (John 4:35–38), that you should expect to experience a fruitful evangelistic ministry in your church?
- Discipleship: Do you expect that because we all have the Spirit that all your church will equally love God's Word, one another, and you? Do you think that because we're all to be maturing in Christ, your church will never face conflict?
- Preaching: Have you become convinced that because God promises that his Word will never return empty that every sermon you preach will have lasting impact on your congregation?
- Leadership: Are you expecting every man who desires to be an elder to be qualified to serve such that you don't need to put processes in place to raise up leaders?

Surprisingly, even optimistic triumphalism will also lead to burn out. Why? Because when we assume we have more of the future blessings now than we really do, we set ourselves up for

disappointment and discouragement. And disappointment and discouragement lead toward doubt and eventual burnout.

So, where do we go from here?

KEEP THE TENSION

If we're to keep the tension between the already and the not-yet, then we must renew our minds and root our thinking in the gospel. In his first letter, Peter reminds the defeated Christians in Asia Minor that, because of Christ's work (1:2), they already possess a future inheritance that awaits them at the consummation (1:3–4). Already, he writes, these Christians are living in a privileged time, the age of salvation the prophets longed to see (1:10–12). But until the consummation, he assures them that they will face suffering that God will use to strengthen their faith (1:5–9).

So with a right perspective, the suffering Christians in Asia Minor can live amid suffering by looking forward to the blessings that await them in the final salvation.

As for the triumphalistic Corinthians (1 Corinthians 4:8–13), Paul admonishes them as his beloved children (4:14), exposing their spiritual immaturity (3:1–4) and calling them to love one another (13:1–13). Like Peter, Paul also grounds the Corinthians' identity and standing in Christ. Because of Christ's work, they're no longer what they used to be. So, by faith, they are to live as those who have been washed, sanctified, and "justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God" (6:11).

CONCLUSION

It's true that sometimes pastoral ministry feels like an emotional roller coaster ride and we're just hanging on for dear life. But it's also true that sometimes the reason for that feeling is confused

expectations that lead to an inability to live by faith in the tension of the already and the not-yet.

Instead, we should consider the Christian life a journey. Jesus has already blazed the trail for us; he's reached the final destination (Hebrews 12:2). We've not yet arrived, but Christ has given us everything we need. Let us, then, fix our eyes on Jesus and run the race that he set before us (Hebrews 12:1), knowing that as we follow in his steps, we're not only following him into suffering, shame, and death, but also into victory, glory, and eternal life.

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