

Pastoral Burnout: Its Causes & Its Cure

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Tragically and statistically, every month more than 1,700 pastors leave the ministry. One resource documenting such observations stated:

“Pastors are on a treadmill. They go from the ministry to a hospital visit to writing a sermon to meeting with congregation members. They just keep running until there’s no passion or energy left. They become exhausted and depleted. Vacations and sabbaticals can provide perspective. Another key is empowering other leaders so all the weight is not on the pastor’s shoulders.”

Is there any hope? What is a pastor to do? Is it hopeless? Is a man to enter full-time ministry with the already-understood-assumption that he’ll just end up burning out one day and throw in the towel? What can help? Is help available? Where can tired ministers turn? Where can discouraged shepherds go for shepherding of their own souls?

In this essay, I want to address the issue of pastoral burnout by discussing five important factors that must be understood that are directly related to the work of the minister of the gospel.

So what is pastoral burnout? According to a website titled by this very phrase: “*pastoral burnout*” is ‘*a state of physical, mental, spiritual and emotional exhaustion caused by extended and intense levels of stress, causing the body to over-produce adrenaline. It leads to the questioning of one’s abilities and/or the value of one’s work.*’

I. The Impossible Calling.

Being a pastor is an impossible calling. God has given an impossible task to feeble and frail men to do spiritual work for the lasting welfare of souls. And, by the way, this task is tireless and it is weighty. Men who serve as ministers of the Gospel have undertaken an impossible work, namely, of doing what only God can do. It is impossible to be a minister and caretaker of men’s souls. Men cannot reach the soul or impact the soul or raise a dead soul or sanctify a soul by sheer talents and trained abilities. Still, God *calls* men into the ministry of caring for souls. God calls these men shepherds and appoints them, by His sovereign plan and according to His ineffable wisdom, to do God’s work, in God’s way, for God’s glory and for the good of God’s sheep. This work, it must be honestly stated, is exhausting. Nothing less adequately defines pastoral ministry. It is hard. It is tireless. It is 24/7. It is exhausting. Not only does a man care for people and their needs but he finds himself overwhelmed and concerned over the welfare of men’s souls. The intensity cannot be matched in this world because pastors do not deal with earthly tasks with important ramifications. Surely it is true that ministers wage war with the Evil One himself and with the forces of darkness that are so powerful and so active and so cunning. And when the shepherd of souls cares for the souls of God’s sheep, he has many sufferings. He can relate to the Apostle Paul who pictured the ministerial work as a man in labor pains until Christ is formed in the people. But of course, the impossible task given to the pastor is to labor for the souls of the lost, for the upbuilding of the saved, and for the strengthening of Christ’s church. This preeminent goal finds its climax and joy in the magnification of Christ in and through His Church for the accomplishing of His purposes till Christ returns. Though this calling is impossible, it humbles the man and drives him to his knees for God’s supply of grace!

2. The Ultimate Need.

Since the pastor’s task proves itself to be utterly impossible, how does a saved sinner, a weak man at best, perform this duty for the glory of the Savior? With the many answers that statisticians would provide concerning various needs that pastors must obtain in order to remain in ministry, I would propose that one, singular, ultimate need exists. The pastor must guard his own heart. Proverbs 4:23 says: “Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life.” Jesus stated that “from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, fornications,

thefts, murders, adulteries, deeds of coveting and wickedness, as well as deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride and foolishness” (Mark 7:21-22). He continued: “All these evil things proceed from within and defile the man” (Mark 7:23). Jesus also proclaimed that every man’s “mouth speaks from that which fills his heart” (Luke 6:45). Paul tells his young protegee in the faith, Timothy, to not neglect the spiritual gift within him and, to do that, Paul exhorts him to “take pains with these things; be absorbed in them, so that your progress will be evident to all. Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching; persevere in these things, for as you do this you will ensure salvation both for yourself and for those who hear you” (1 Tim 4:15-16). Pastors must guard their hearts. One could say that a pastor can become so overly concerned about the hearts of others that he neglects his own heart; and this is tragic. Shepherds of God are those who could fit the description from the lips of God Himself: “shepherds after My own heart” (Jer 3:15). *The ultimate need in pastoral ministry is to guard one’s own heart. The ultimate guard of ministerial longevity and endurance is for the minister to watch over and guard and protect his own heart -- at all costs. Many men care for the souls of the congregation at the expense of their own souls which will only and ultimately lead to failure. To care for others while at the same time forfeiting the nurturing of one’s own soul is to miss the ultimate need for a shepherd.*

3. The Tragic Reality.

It’s all around us. News headlines find it gossipy to mention the failure of well-known pastors. One can hardly miss the overwhelming and tragic reality that many men leave the ministry for scores of reasons. Pastoral burnout soars. Unfaithfulness can be spotted all over the place as men fail sexually and prove themselves to not be one-women-men (faithful to the wife alone). Too much has been written on the sad reality of men quitting the ministry. Statistics indicate that men abandon full-time ministry because of discouragement, failure, loneliness, moral failure, financial pressure, anger, burnout, physical health, marriage/family problems, or being too busy/too driven. This essay could continue to mention the innumerable causes that compel men to burn out and forsake the ministry of gospel-work. Readers must understand that when men fall into sin, they don’t ultimately fall far. The visible, public, scandalous sin that becomes evident is just one of many unbroken sins along the way that remained unmortified. That is to say, men don’t just quit ministry or fall into a disqualifying sin. Just like oak trees, they begin small but over the course of time, they grow in strength and power till when the tree falls the crash is loud and it makes a massive amount of damage. The tragic reality of men forsaking the ministry is very evident and very hard. Is ministry just too hard? Does a man care that much about *his* reputation that he just can’t handle the pressure and afflictions any more? Did the pressure become too unbearable? Certainly he knew, as a pastor, that he would wage war with the devil, the flesh, the world -- yes, even, his own sinful and selfish heart -- and that this would be full of tireless labor. A question, remains, however, how does a man who has been called of God to care for the sheep of God, and who give themselves to a life of glorious and tiring labor for Christ *burn out* of the Lord’s work? How does this happen? What went wrong? When God calls a man and empowers the man and equips a man to do His work, *how does a man just burn out?*

4. The Indomitable Joy.

George Whitefield once said: “Lord, I am weary *in* Thy work but not weary *of* Thy work!” How could a man who preached daily and even numerous times each day for decades say such a thing? Whitefield could affirm this because God had captured him and captivated him with Himself. Ministers of the Lord who care for His people must be driven by an indomitable joy. This joy cannot be subdued or defeated. When God calls pastors to do His work, they must fight -- *daily!* -- for the unconquerable joy that is found *in Christ*. The problem arises when men do ministry and seek to find unshakable joy in the ministry, in a program, in a design, in a building, in a person, in a budget, in a sermon, and, even, in conversions! Pastoral burnout begins when a minister of the gospel has taken his eyes off of Christ and has placed them *anywhere* else. That’s the tragedy and that’s the root of the problem. A man who serves in the ministry of the Lord can protect himself by staking his confidence in the unsinkable joy of Christ Himself and all of His infinite beauties. The minister of the Lord must love Christ above all else. He must anchor his heart to the

warm tenderesses of Christ. He must fix his affections on Christ's overwhelming compassion, constant protection, and His everlasting salvation. After all, one of the safeguards against pastoral burnout is for the shepherd to remember one very important (and yet, easily forgotten) essential: *the pastoral ministry is simply a mercy-ministry*. It's not deserved and it certainly is not a right. It is a privilege and an honor to be set apart by God's sovereign grace to give loving, constant, affectionate, biblical, and soul care. The Apostle Paul wrote: "We have this ministry, as we have received mercy, *we do not lose heart*" (2 Cor 4:1). Even later, he wrote again: "Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day. For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison" (2 Cor 4:16-17). So what must ministers who care for God's people constantly remember? They must remember that the ministry of the Lord's work is a *ministry entrusted to a man by God's wondrous mercy*. And the man of God must find his unbeatable and unassailable joy in the *person and work and glory and splendor* of Christ. He must find his triumphant joy and deep-seated gladness in the presence of God and in the glory of Christ and not *primarily* in the work of the ministry that happens in the church.

5. The Ravishing Communion.

What's the secret? How does a pastor take proactive measures so that he does not become another 'statistic' of burning out of the ministry (for whatever reason). How does he prevent this pastoral fallout? What measures can he take? What is the divine prescription? Perhaps the secret may be simpler and more fundamental than many ministers realize. It's not a sabbatical, as helpful as that may be. It's not a rest from the preaching schedule, as profitable as that may be. It's not merely the delegating of some ministerial duties, as prudent as that may be. The answer rests in one word: communion. The man of God can guard himself from pastoral burnout as Christ ravishes his own heart so that the wonder of Christ's love, the sufficiency of Christ's propitiation, and the sweetness of Christ's intercession grips, grabs, and captures him. The man of God should frequently come to the ocean of God's grace, with his tiptoes at the shore, and gaze at the endless supply of divine power which enables the forgiven man to serve Christ for His renown. "Easier said than done!" quips a man who serves God and finds himself tired from the unending labors of ministry. This ravishing communion comes about as the pastor finds more joy in Christ Himself than in the *work of Christ*. He finds his love in the heart of Christ more than in his *sacrifices for Christ*. He finds himself overwhelmed by the gospel of Christ more than his *degrees in seminary in preparation for his ministry for Christ*. How does one attain this ravishing communion? For what man of God would not want this communion with the triune God: "the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all" (2 Cor 13:14)? The key to obtaining and maintaining this communion is through the discipline of meditating on Christ and his multi-faceted glory and His soul-ravishing beauty. The minister must discipline himself to know Christ so that he says with the Apostle Paul: "I want to know Him..." (Phil 3:10). He should pray for God to give him the heart of David who affirmed: "one thing I have asked from the Lord, that I shall seek that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord..." (Psalm 27:4). O that every minister would say with the psalmist: "I will meditate on your precepts and regard your ways. I shall delight in your statutes; I shall not forget your Word" (Ps 119:15-16). Let every pastor prepare his heart before he goes to prepare a sermon. Let every pastor fix his heart on Christ before he fixes his heart on the upcoming leadership meeting. Let every pastor commune with Christ before he communes with the people of Christ. Let every pastor be early with Christ before he meets with men. Let every pastor be affectionate in his love for Christ which will drive him and empower him to have love for the sheep that Christ purchased with His own blood. And by God's grace, after the undershepherd has done the allotted work given him by God's sovereign decree, "when the Chief Shepherd appears, he will receive the unfading crown of glory" (1 Pet 5:4). Truly all pastors must remember these heart-warming promises: "After you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen, and establish you. To Him be dominion forever and ever. Amen" (1 Peter 5:10-11).