

Compassion Fatigue: A Problem For Pastors

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In Acts 20:28-29, we learn that pastors are singled out and targeted for attack by the devil. This is from St. Paul's sermon to the pastors who would continue the work in Ephesus. It includes the exhortation: "Shepherd the church of God," which is repeated at so many pastoral installation services. But then Paul utters the shock, his prophecy: "I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among *you* [the pastors], not sparing the *flock*." This is Satan's way: destroy the flock by striking the shepherd.

From this passage we zero in on St. Paul's words about the divine call: "Take heed to the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers." But as you may have noticed, I left out three words which I believe are often left out in our consciousness as we go about our daily pastoral work. All your thought is of the divine call and the flock; often that is where you begin in your thinking about what you must do as a pastor. But actually St. Paul said: "Take heed *to yourselves and* to the flock ..."

When the apostle Paul tells pastors who or what they must "take heed" or pay attention to, this is the order: *first* oneself, *then* the flock. Why? "Savage wolves will come in among you [pastors]." One thing Satan is counting upon is that the pastor, who enters a selfless vocation, will think that paying attention to himself equates to selfishness, and so will not "take heed to" or be watchful in things that could reduce his capacity to shepherd. Nor is Acts 20:28-29 the only passage that says this. Divinely inspired St. Paul tells young pastor Timothy as a representative of all Christian pastors: "Take heed to yourself and to the doctrine" (1 Timothy 4:16), again "to yourself" being stated first - perhaps because the Lord knows what the pastor will neglect? Hmm. So this is not simply an historical, episodic description of what happened in the first century A.D.

The landscape is littered with the pastors who have broken down in some way. According to a book published this year, *Fail: Finding Hope and Grace in the Midst of Ministry Failure*, 1,500 pastors leave the ministry each month. No matter what survey you read, you will find statistics such as these: 80 percent of pastors report a general feeling of discouragement in their work; 70 percent report experiencing major distress; 33 percent report feeling burned out within the first five years of ministry; 33 percent say they have considered leaving the ministry; 45 percent report experiencing depressive or

“burnout” symptoms to the degree that they believe they need a leave of absence (of which, very likely, they have no possibility due to institutional limitations).¹

When you consider that these are only the *reported* responses, it is reasonable to assume percentages even may be a bit low. It also is a snapshot of those who may be on their way out of the ministry, or who continue in the ministry filled with hopelessness and discouragement. This leads in one direction toward clinical depression; in another direction toward malfeasance (such as pornography use or adulterous behavior, borne out by a statistic from the same source that 37 percent surveyed confessed to having been involved in inappropriate sexual behavior with someone in the church), and in yet another direction toward conflict in the congregation between a discouraged, guilt-laden pastor and his church members. Yet the same surveys show that, while a significant percentage of pastors surveyed might think they are failing or falling short in competency, at least three-fourths of the members in the congregations would give their pastor an A or a B in job performance, and only 4 percent would give a failing grade!

Compassion Fatigue, a Battlefield Diagnosis

One explanation for the dismal situation reflected here is *compassion fatigue*, an informal term for a diagnosis that has been around only since the mid-1990s: *Secondary Traumatic Stress Disorder*. It sounds awfully similar to a diagnosis that has become all too familiar from evaluations of soldiers returning from the World Wars of the last century, and the war zones of the present-day wars against terrorism: *Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)*. These terms come from the field of psychotherapy.

In this paper it is not my desire to leave theology behind and to put psychotherapy into the driver’s seat. Professor John Pless’ historical observation serves as a good warning for us today: “Attempting to integrate psychological insights into Christian theology and pastoral practice resulted in a theology that was forced to fit into the categories of current psychological theories.”² The social sciences should not drive theology. However, while we might be tempted cynically to dismiss *Compassion Fatigue* or *STSD* as an intrusion from psychology, I prefer to think of it as a contribution from the battlefield. We have no problem accepting the terms *Shell Shock*, *Combat Exhaustion*, *Survivor Syndrome*, and *PTSD*, all of which came from observing returning soldiers from World Wars I and II.³ As Acts 20 teaches us, pastors are on a battlefield.

¹ These statistics are quoted from two sources: (1) The internet article “A Big Place For Small Churches: Statistics,” quoting from the book *Pastors at Risk* by H.B. London and Neil Wiseman, Victor Press, 1993, accessed on September 19, 2014, at <http://www.smallchurch.com/resources/statistics>; and the internet article “Pastor Burnout Statistics,” accessed at <http://pastorburnout.com>, September 19, 2014. The first source cites surveys from 1991 and 1992; the second source cites a survey published in the New York Times in 2010.

² John Pless, *Your Pastor Is Not Your Therapist*.

³ Charles Figley, ed., “Compassion Fatigue,” 10, 22.

Holy Scripture testifies to this: If the evil foe is at war with the Shepherd and attacks the flock to scatter and destroy it [*St. John 10:11-12; St. Luke 10:3*]; if the Dragon is at war with the woman [the Church, *Revelation 12:1-6*]; and if our adversary the devil is seeking to devour the brotherhood of those who have fellowship with and are co-heirs with Christ [*1 Peter 5:8-9*], then would he not begin with those who are on the front lines in this battle, the pastors and shepherds? Not only does Holy Scripture testify to this, but experience and sanctified common sense testify to this as well, especially when we look at the research of compassion fatigue and its applications to the life of the church.

The diagnosis of *Secondary Traumatic Stress Disorder (STSD)* came into being as a direct result of therapists' observations of those who were caring for victims of trauma: for instance, in the 9/11 terrorist attack, school shootings, Hurricane Katrina, and the many present-day soldiers who have numerous deployments. A brain scan of a person who found himself in sudden danger on 9/11 – which revealed the brain to be suffering a maximum amount of trauma -- was found to be virtually identical with the brain scan of the coordinator of the first responders, showing that the brain's level of trauma rises to its maximum when participating in the sufferings of others.⁴ The symptoms of a person suffering *primary* traumatic stress disorder at every stage are identical to the symptoms of a person suffering *secondary* traumatic stress disorder.

This is one reason there are so many casualties among pastors. Simply put, there is a cost to caring. Absorbing information about suffering often includes absorbing the suffering as well. This is why it is also known as *secondary victimization* in psychology.⁵

As Christian pastors we would not speak the language of victimization. Or would we? We begin with Jesus, who entered into our suffering and made it His own.

For Us the One True Man Doth Fight

“[God] made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us. ... We do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet [was] without sin.” (*Galatians 2:21, Hebrews 4:15*). Christ also endured the temptations that come to pastors when they are worn out and weak, depleted and heavy laden. He came to share this suffering. The descriptions by which the Father calls Christ “My Servant” in Isaiah 42 and 53 are such that they cause Him to be named “the *Suffering Servant*.” He is the Paschal *Victim*. Not content that people remain victims of the evil foe, He took upon Himself our victimhood that He might turn it into victory by His atonement, which we call *vicarious*, or substitutionary. The Substitute Victim.

This says something about the pastoral office. The holy ministry is incarnational. The eternal Word who became flesh sends out His Word not to be disseminated by angels (disembodied spirits), but spoken from the physical mouths of flesh-and-blood

⁴ Anecdote related by Dr. Beverly Yahnke at a *Doxology* lecture, July 21, 2014.

⁵ Figley, 1, 9.

men who can be hurt and wounded. As Christ Himself took on human flesh that included emotions, and as He showed compassion, His ordained servants in administering the Word as medicine to wounded sinners, in showing compassion, enter into the emotions and suffering of people they are sent to serve. We are not substitutes, but there is an undeniable sharing in the suffering of others. "As the Father hath sent Me, even so send I you" (St. John 20:21, KJV).

In the gospels we see examples of what this sharing in the suffering of others did to Christ. After Jesus' so-called "long day" in Capernaum, in which first He confronted the forces of hell in expelling the demon in the synagogue service, then proceeded from there to Peter's house to heal his mother-in-law of a burning fever, and finally healed a long line of sick and demon-possessed people well into the night, "He went out and departed to a solitary place, and there He prayed" (St. Mark 1:35). Nor was this the only time, for St. Luke summarizes His ministry of teaching and healing in Galilee with the words, "So He Himself *often* withdrew into the wilderness and prayed" (5:16).

We get the picture that the need to be alone and pray was not optional for Jesus, the care He was giving necessitated that He receive, and His need was not only spiritual but physical. Likewise, Jesus' healing of the woman with the previously incurable flow of blood – taking away her ritual uncleanness – and His words, "I perceived power going out from Me" (St. Luke 8:46), show that such entering into the pain of others took something out of Jesus. In some way He was depleted.

Pastors experience this too. The apostle Paul spoke of his "deep concern for all the churches" (2 Corinthians 11:28), a concern by which the individual churches' and individual Christians' needs, temptations, struggles, and troubles became his own, something he shared. He entered into it. He says in the same breath that it "comes upon me daily." When St. Paul writes, "Weep with those who weep" (Romans 12:15), it is something that undoubtedly he himself first experienced and modeled as a pastor. We can categorize this as a fruit of the Spirit and part of the sanctified life; it is admirable and recommended. But we should recognize the other side of this, for a pastor who is called to do this at any time: empathy such as this affects the pastor and drains him.

Compassion Stress, or Secondary Traumatic Stress

As pastors we realize at times that we are depleted or drained. The study of compassion fatigue provides a way to understand the underlying cause. But before we compassion fatigue, which is an informal term for the disorder (STSD), comes *Secondary Traumatic Stress* (minus the disorder), or more informally, *compassion stress*.

This stress is unavoidable, and even psychology recognizes this: "Trauma workers, who intentionally put themselves into daily disorganization and disequilibrium, often

find it difficult to limit crises in their lives.”⁶ “Sensitivity has two distinct meanings. One is emotional awareness and accurate perception. The second meaning of sensitivity is vulnerability to pain. Often these two forms of sensitivity exist side by side in us. We are good outreach workers [and] therapists [*and pastors!*] because we are sensitive. And, because we are sensitive, we pay a price.”⁷ Another name given to compassion stress is *vicarious traumatization*. Again, this is the human cost of caring for others.

Entering the pastoral office you know this is unavoidable. You are prepared to shepherd sinful people, who have sinners in their lives, and live in a sinful world. You *want* to provide peace to the troubled sinner, relief for the wounded and hurting, comfort for the sick and suffering, and hope for the grieving. The fact that God sends you, a sinner, to minister to them is assurance that you will empathize with what they face. As pastors we strive to be more and more empathetic. However, the very empathy the Lord intends you to have will make you vulnerable to being adversely affected, over time, by all this participation in the suffering of others. “STS in itself cannot be prevented since it is a normal and universal response to abnormal or unusual events. The enduring or negative effects of this response, however, can be prevented from developing into a disorder (STSD).”⁸ At least, that is the goal.

When I first heard of compassion fatigue, I assumed it must be something pastors experience in relation to the *amount* of empathizing they do. For instance, this fatigue must be higher after performing all the ministry tasks related to a death and funeral; or it must be higher in the case of pastors at larger churches, where they have more members to tend, and the number of sick, shut-in members, and deaths would be higher. But this is not necessarily the case. For example, a research experiment in a hospital emergency room setting changed the number of patients per ER nurse from the usual load of 12-15 during a shift to two or three; with more opportunity to be better acquainted with the patient and his/her family members, and being closer to the emotions experienced by everyone affected, the nurses’ emotional stress skyrocketed with fewer patients.⁹

A pastor at a small church, who may only have one funeral per year, actually may be more vulnerable to compassion fatigue. The stress that comes from knowing his people’s constant worry whether the congregation will survive; the internal strife that comes when one member gets upset at something, and how a potential loss of a member or family will drastically affect the attendance numbers, the offerings, and the mood in the congregation; the pastor’s reminding himself of his call, that even so-called difficult members are not the enemy but are sheep, and that “the congregation is not the pastor’s topic of conversation, but rather the flock of Christ to which he has been commissioned by Christ,”¹⁰ combined with the fact that the pastor is often without a friend

⁶ Figley, 101.

⁷ Ochberg, Frank M., M.D. “When Helping Hurts.”

⁸ Figley, 178.

⁹ Anecdote related in a lecture by Dr. Beverly Yahnke, July 21, 2014.

¹⁰ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Spiritual Care*, 40.

in the congregation, distant from family and thus lacking a support system that members of the congregation have, bring to the pastor of a small congregation a heightened level of compassion stress. He cannot help it. It is the environment in which he lives and works. Such pastors need prayer and support from brothers in office, not pressure!¹¹

Compassion stress is not simply in reaction to a specific event of providing counsel to a person in distress. Pastors' constant involvement in the lives of those they serve has a cumulative effect. Those in secular fields of work with trauma recognize clergy to be "trauma workers," the National Organization for Victim Assistance listing clergy among the "crisis intervenors."¹² As Christian pastors, our definition of crisis is a little different. Not only are we called upon to help in the "extreme" crisis such as the diagnosis of cancer, addiction, divorce, abuse, suicide, terminal illness, and death. But we are also called to help people with these so-called lesser "crises" with which they struggle daily: guilt and shame, loneliness, anger and bitterness, sadness and discouragement, impatience and discontentment in their vocations, and doubts and fears. Pastors in modern times have been labeled "a quivering mass of availability."¹³

While these do not get the headlines or the attention, or make it into the special intercessions in the church service, the cumulative effect is *secondary traumatic stress* or *compassion stress*. Add to this the stressors of declining attendance, budget deficits, apostasy in the world at large and its effect on the church's members, divorces and cohabitation that divide families within the congregation and make closed communion difficult; and the fact that pastors live in a culture of criticism, often measuring their "success" through the eyes of others, tempted to think they must answer why there is declining attendance and offerings. Does this qualify as compassion stress? It certainly does, when the pastor's heart is bleeding for the people he is called to serve. This is Paul's deep concern for the church, and his weeping for those who weep. Or, as another brother pastor has said, the pastor is the one person whom God has placed in this people's midst to stay up at night worrying about them and praying for them.

¹¹ Sometimes attendance numbers and percentages are mentioned as a warning about the future of the synod's existence; an unintended consequence of this may be to add to the bad conscience of the pastor of a smaller congregation who likely is already pointing at himself, carrying a burden of insecurity and struggling with feelings of failure. Lloyd Rediger, who conducted surveys of Minnesota and Wisconsin clergy in the early 1990s, found that, when pastors rated their support system, "denominational officials rank near the bottom while seminary professors rank last. This is sad because both these categories of persons are very close to clergy during their training years and transitions. Both types of supporters are typically ordained themselves and would be expected to understand clergy needs. But pastors often regard them as privileged defectors from the ranks of everyday pastors. And they consistently report that they do not trust the motives of such persons, nor find them helpful in times of crisis or transition. Their lack of support is discouraging also because these persons are dominating influences in the church, who claim to care about the needs of clergy. Their influence and claim is viewed negatively by the majority of pastors." (G. Lloyd Rediger, "The State of the Clergy," published in *The Clergy Journal*, March 1995, <http://home.comcast.net/~glrediger/columns/survey.html>, accessed September 14, 2014)

¹² Figley, 102.

¹³ Lucas Woodford, *Great Commission, Great Confusion, or Great Confession?*, 8.

Lloyd Rediger, a retired pastor who has worked as a clergy consultant and conducted surveys of clergy in Minnesota and Wisconsin, agrees with this broader view of what is included in compassion stress, simply from judging responses from pastors:

Through working with hundreds of clergy over the years, as well as through my own experience, I have learned that there are enormous energy drains associated with being a clergyperson. One of these is the loneliness of the pseudo-intimacies common to pastoring. This is the curious experience of being available to parishioners in caring, intimate, and confidential ways. Ways which are not typically reciprocated. Another drain is the pervasiveness of the role. The expectations of this role (both the parishioners' and ours) never seem to go away. In addition, our profession is the only one in which personal identity, professional identity, and religious faith are all wrapped up in the same package. Another drain is the image of success. How do we know when we are "successful" if the usual indicators – money, fame, and power – are not legitimate goals for us? Our striving, therefore, may not always rejuvenate us with tangible rewards. Yet another drain is the sheer weight of other people's problems and pain, which we are expected to carry. It is much easier to imagine we do not allow caring and dependencies to drain us, than to actually set limits on such drains.¹⁴

Compassion stress, or secondary traumatic stress, which is unavoidable for pastors, can develop or deteriorate into PTSD, or compassion fatigue. These are the casualties of the battlefield that we are trying to avoid.

Whoever takes the office seriously must cry out under the burden. One has to make visits, listen to and bear the needs and sorrows of many people; one has to carry on numerous conversations with those one accompanies on life's way and always with those who encroach on one's time. One should make intercession for not a few people and, in order to do that properly, has to stay informed. One has to find the right word with the dying, at the graveside, for a wedding. One should – and here is the heaviest responsibility of all – preach out of genuine certitude in order that others are led to certitude. One should read and meditate upon Scripture. Where can a pastor find rest and recollection for all this work? We have to recognize that there are mortal dangers for the office and those who exercise it. Even the responsible, serious, and faithful pastor may be driven to external or internal perplexity. This can be a pure lack of faith. In the end, perplexity leads to insensitivity.¹⁵

Compassion Fatigue, or Secondary Traumatic Stress Disorder

Those who have researched compassion fatigue in the field of psychotherapy were motivated to do so partly because of "dismay about seeing so many colleagues abandon clinical work or research with traumatized people because of their inability to deal with

¹⁴ Rediger.

¹⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Spiritual Care*, 67. This little book grew out of Bonhoeffer's Finkenwalde experiment in 1935, from which he wrote the excellent *Life Together*.

the pain of others.”¹⁶ We too have dismay about seeing many colleagues, fellow pastors, leave or contemplate leaving the ministry. But that is not all. It may not be that the pastor is contemplating leaving the ministry. He may be ministering while feeling hopeless or discouraged. He may feel emotionally spent, have little energy for the tasks of the ministry, and go about his work mechanically. He may find himself operating daily under a burden of guilt for all that he does not do; this may manifest itself in self-loathing, bitterness and anger, and feeling trapped in the ministry. He fears that he will be found out, that church members will begin to ask questions and to disapprove of him or that a synod official will be called in. This is the picture of compassion fatigue.

This is not the picture of one who does not care or does not want to care; it is the picture of one who is *not able* to care, because of the cumulative effect of all the care one has given. Often it is the very one who is good at caring and empathy who is the victim.

Although the following comes from a psychology source, see if these actual statements of “trauma workers” [therapists] could be spoken by pastors:

- How can I work if I’m always going to have this response?
- I have to be strong for others, so I need to hide my feelings.
- Am I in the wrong line of work?
- Why does helping others carry such a big emotional price tag?¹⁷

Compassion fatigue is similar to burnout. It was in the late 1970s and early 1980s that *burnout* received official diagnosing of its stages. But there are key differences between compassion fatigue and burnout:

- 1) Burnout can take place in any workplace, regardless of whether it is in a “helping” vocation; compassion fatigue is the emotional fallout from providing care.
- 2) Burnout takes place gradually, while compassion fatigue can come on suddenly and rapidly, almost without warning – especially when pastors’ daily work continually involves them in compassion stress, numbing them.
- 3) A victim of burnout loses interest in doing the work and may despise the burden, while a victim of compassion fatigue still feels responsibility for providing care for people, and even still experiences “compassion satisfaction” along with compassion fatigue. He simply feels helpless with regard to finding relief. A guide for knowing whether it is burnout or compassion fatigue is to answer the question: “Do I love my work?” If the answer is no, it is probably burnout; if the

¹⁶ Figley, 6.

¹⁷ Figley, 113.

answer is yes, it probably is compassion fatigue (if the vocation involves providing care for others, as the pastoral office does).¹⁸

What does compassion fatigue look like in pastors? Here is an example:¹⁹

Burnout: Stages

1. Compulsion to prove
2. Intensity
3. Subtle deprivations
4. Dismissal of needs
5. Distortion of values
6. Heightened denial
7. Disengagement
8. Observable behavior changes
9. Depersonalization
10. Emptiness
11. Depression (clinical)

Clergy Version: Compassion Fatigue

1. Beginning of call – desire to exceed expectations
2. At end of stage 1 – rearranging expectations
3. Parish trumps personal priorities (Postpone personal or family needs; overeating, less exercise, etc.)
4. Loss of sleep, exercise, and nutrition; give yourself pep talks for basic duties
5. No energy for friendships; family outings are made without you, at your suggestion
6. Small frustrations make you crazy; intense resentment, festering anger, feeling unappreciated; “nobody understands me besides my wife”
7. Disillusionment; difficulty cultivating a spirit of thanksgiving; subtle paranoia; the ministry a joyless progression of to-do’s
8. Feeling trapped: “If I *weren’t* a pastor, what else could/would I do?”; avoiding people; emotionally resigned
9. Letting personal care go; “getting through the day”; elevated blood pressure
10. Emotional pain; guilt and shame; “failure”; panic about the future; self-loathing
11. “I can’t do this!”

¹⁸ Figley, “The Art and Science of Caring For Others Without Forgetting Self-Care.”

¹⁹ Notes from a *Doxology* lecture by Dr. Beverly Yahnke, July 21, 2014.

[This is just an example, borrowed from an experienced psychotherapist who has worked with pastors; a confessional Lutheran who now teaches psychology at Concordia University Wisconsin. A pastor may find items in various stages that apply and are warning signs.]

Compassion Fatigue = Acedia

The irony that through providing spiritual care the pastor can become incapable of caring is perhaps best revealed in the ancient category of temptations known popularly as the “seven deadly [or cardinal] sins.” The sixth of these, *acedia*, in the popular shorthand translation is usually known as “sloth,” but actually it is Greek for “lack of care” or “absence of care.” A most colorful description of this sad condition is given by the English writer and essayist Dorothy Sayers:

The sixth deadly sin is named by the Church *acedia* or *sloth*. In the world it calls itself tolerance; but in hell it is called despair. It is the accomplice of the other sins and their worst punishment. It is the sin that believes in nothing, cares for nothing, seeks to know nothing, interferes with nothing, enjoys nothing, loves nothing, hates nothing, finds purpose in nothing, lives for nothing, and remains alive only because there is nothing it would die for.²⁰

It looks like laziness, only it isn't. It feels like depression, but if it is to be treated only clinically, and treated as a chemical imbalance, something important may be missed, a real spiritual dimension. Separating this issue from depression may be a way to protect against the errant opinion that depression is some kind of sin or fault. *Acedia* may be part of depression, or may lead to depression, but it is not equivalent with depression. It is a spiritual condition. Certainly it is sin, or a vice; but it is the result of a specific way the devil attacks Christians. Pastors especially may be susceptible to it. “The greatest difficulty for the pastor stems from his theology. He knows all there is to be known about sin and forgiveness. He knows what the faith is and he talks about it so much that he winds up no longer living in the faith but thinking *about* faith.”²¹ It is possible for the pastor to work so closely with the holy things that he becomes desensitized to them; especially if he suffers from some form of *acedia*, or compassion fatigue/pastoral burnout, and is operating mechanically, he learns to say the words and receive no comfort from them himself. There is a hardening of the heart that grows worse and worse.

Kathleen Norris, a Christian writer who has written about her lifelong struggle with this vice in her memoir *Acedia and Me*, explains this well: “The boundaries between depression and *acedia* are notoriously fluid; at the risk of oversimplifying, I would suggest that while depression is an illness treatable by counseling and medication, *acedia* is a vice that is best countered by spiritual practice and the discipline of prayer. ... At its Greek root, the word *acedia* offers a kind of spiritual morphine: you know the pain is

²⁰ Dorothy Sayers, “The Other Six Deadly Sins,” p. 97-98.

²¹ Bonhoeffer, 68.

there, yet can't rouse yourself to give a damn."²² When pastors feel "burned out," it is persistent, they struggle to be motivated to do even basic aspects of their work, when "pastors are no longer willing or able to rouse themselves to tend the spiritual needs of the people entrusted to their care,"²³ very likely they are suffering from *acedia*.

Rev. Harold Senkbeil summarizes it as "disappointment with and spiritual disaffection from God's divinely ordained gifts ... Its deadening and deadly effect can be easily inferred, for when Christians are numb to Christ's saving work and the Father's gracious gifts by which He makes us and preserves us, they sink deeper and deeper into boredom, apathy and subsequent despair."²⁴ From her research of *acedia*, Norris highlights a picturesque summary of it by one of the fourth-century desert monks, Evagrius Ponticus, who called it "the noonday demon" because it would afflict monks in the middle of the day, when they were hungry and fatigued:

He spoke clearly of the inner devastation caused by the demon of *acedia* when it '[made] it seem that the sun barely moves, if at all, and that the day is fifty hours long.' Boredom tempts him 'to look constantly out the windows, to walk outside the cell, to gaze carefully at the sun to determine [the lunch hour]. But Evagrius soon discovers that this seemingly innocuous activity has an alarming and ugly effect, for having stirred up a restlessness that he is unable to shake, the demon taunts him with the thought that his efforts at prayer and contemplation are futile. Life then looms like a prison sentence, day after day of nothingness.'²⁵

Calling it a demon is an important insight. This is not just some condition that comes on; it is a demonic affliction, in which the devil tempts (in our case) pastors to despise their calling, to grow restless, to call good "evil" and evil "good." In the example from Evagrius, do you see how the restlessness leads (by way of idleness or, in the parish context, unproductiveness) to self-loathing? It would lead a pastor rather easily to doubt whether he should continue to hold a divine call. Of course this is the devil's intent to begin with. *Acedia* is one of his most potent weapons against a pastor! His goal is less to completely burn out the pastor, than it is to have the pastor continuing in office with a mindset of hopelessness and failure, to make him the walking wounded.

Sayers (who published her essay in 1943) adds to her description a statement which shows why it is so prevalent in our modern age with technology everywhere beckoning one away from his work and duties of his various vocations:

²² Kathleen Norris, *Acedia and Me: Marriage, Monks, and a Writer's Life*, 3.

²³ Harold Senkbeil, "Lead Us Not Into Temptation: *Acedia*, the Pastoral Pandemic," 269.

²⁴ Senkbeil, 267-268.

²⁵ Norris, 5.

It is one of the favorite tricks of this sin to dissemble itself under cover of a whiffling activity of body. We think that if we are busily rushing about and doing things, we cannot be suffering from sloth.²⁶

Therefore *acedia* thrives in the nervous activity of the “busy pastor” who has too much to do and too many distractions. “Not getting things done” is not always a result of bad time management; often it results from undergoing the attack of *acedia*. It is not too hard to guess how this may develop in one direction into depressive symptoms, or in another direction into malfeasance.

What to Do (and What Not to Do)

It is the purpose of this paper to provide an introduction to compassion fatigue and start the conversation. I feel inadequate to tie it up neatly with solutions. A struggle is a struggle. I do not want to make it sound like something easy. But there are some ways of dealing with this that are not advisable, such as:

- When behind, WORK LONGER AND HARDER! Or in other words: the Type A Behavior Response. This increases the strain and pressure on the pastor in his work, and it also takes him away more from family and other positive coping mechanisms, increasing the stress in multiple ways simultaneously.
- Withdraw by placing your name on a call list. This is attempting to run from the problem by running with it to another place, while not dealing with the problem.
- Withdraw by staying away from the assemblies of other pastors, or by staying away from interactions with church members.
- Withdraw by cutting short pastoral visits with the neat trick of “Let’s have a Bible verse ... Now let’s pray ... Now I will give you the blessing. Depart in peace.” If a pastor is at this point in his compassion fatigue or pastoral burnout, his level of energy is so low that sometimes he must do this. It is better than imploding and exploding. But if this is the case, he needs professional help.

The most important thing for the pastor suffering from compassion fatigue is to NOT BE ALONE. This is a difficult prospect for one who has an introverted personality, because social interaction is stressful. But at the very least, this means that the pastor needs to have a pastor. The pastor needs to receive pastoral care. The pastor who is suffering in this way often does not speak with kindness to himself, so he especially needs to hear the words of ultimate kindness spoken from the mouth of our Lord. The pastor needs to have a confessor, someone to whom he may unburden himself and especially so that he may hear the true voice of the Gospel being directed to him. “The load is too heavy to bear alone. We need someone who will help us use our powers in ministry

²⁶ Sayers, 97-98.

correctly. ... Everyone who cares for the soul needs a person who will care for his soul."²⁷ The chief goal of such pastoral care is for the pastor to receive a good conscience; not produce, but receive. Then a further goal of this pastoral care is to return the pastor to the joy in Jesus that will help him recover joy in the ministry and joy in all of his daily callings, especially in home and family. Hearing his brother pastor pray for him is also a great help.

The second most important thing that the pastor needs is daily ordered prayer and meditation upon the Word of God. This is especially true when the demon afflicting the pastor is *acedia*. Recall that this is what Norris wrote from her own experience: "Acedia is a vice that is best countered by spiritual practice and the discipline of prayer." Here is the Lutheran version: "The life of the pastor completes itself in reading, meditation, prayer, and struggle. The means is the word of Scripture with which everything begins and to which everything returns."²⁸ This thought from a 20th century Lutheran theologian reflects what first was taught by Blessed Martin Luther, whose famous instruction about the "making of theologians" prescribed *oratio* (prayer growing out of the hearing of God's Word), *meditatio* (meditation upon God's Word), and *tentatio* (spiritual testing and affliction that drives a person back to the external Word and prayer).

The third part, *tentatio*, describes what we have been discussing: the struggle. Our flesh does not want to struggle. Nobody wants to be "the walking wounded." But the wounds of a hurting pastor drive him to Christ, who is present for the pastor in the Word and Sacraments. This struggle does not the devil's work but the Lord's work in the end. The pastor is helped by it, and so is the church, if the pastor will *receive* the help he needs. Recent resources to help the pastor are *Grace Upon Grace* by John Kleinig and the *Grow in Grace* study by WELS Prof. Richard Gurgel titled "Reclaiming Our Christ-Centered Lutheran Devotional Heritage,"²⁹ divided into four separate papers: Drawing Our Devotional Life From the Gospel; Growing in the Gift of Meditating on the Word; Growing in the Gift of Word-Focused Prayer, and Growing in the Gift of Testing.

A final word of encouragement: When Spalatin wrote to Luther while experiencing troubles in the parish at Altenburg, downcast and wondering if he should even remain in the ministry, Luther responded that he himself mistrusted overconfident pastors, and the fact that Spalatin was driven to this self-doubt and despondency must mean he was so preaching the Gospel that the devil viewed him as a threat; it should be seen as confirmation of his divine call. So should we be heartened to realize in the midst of compassion stress and compassion fatigue that it results from faithfully carrying out our soldier duties on the battlefield; if we are wounded, we know enough to cry out for our Good Samaritan, Jesus, and seek the care that He gives in His inn, the Church, in His precious Word and Sacraments which are the healing balm. *Soli Deo Gloria!*

²⁷ Bonhoeffer, 66, 67.

²⁸ Bonhoeffer, 68-69.

²⁹ <http://wlsce.net/content/reclaiming-our-christ-centered-lutheran-devotional-heritage>

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