

## PASTORAL BURN-OUT: A PASTORAL PERSPECTIVE

You may be right; the subject of Pastoral Burn-Out, new as it is, may already be old hat stuff. The band wagon picks up more trailers of essays, books, pamphlets and studies every day. From "Christianity Today" to Northwestern Publishing House - its your choice. Much of it, as it deals with stress and depression, lends itself to the realm of informational reading. Some is totally theological in nature and approach, almost reaching the time honored conference format of "What Do the Scriptures Say About...?" Other writings are psychologically based, examining only behavior and rational/irrational causes. Still more can be found with a totally medical perspective and application. You may read with discretion and perception.

Pastors who minister to the sheep of Christ's flock under their care, ought not to forget that they too need to: minister to themselves, be ministered unto, and minister to one another. It is with this approach that the subject of "Pastoral Burn-Out: A Pastoral Perspective" is presented.

### SAY SOMETHING ABOUT SEMANTICS

"Burn-out/ 'barn-aut'/n: physical and/or mental and/or emotional exhaustion caused by excessive demands upon energy, emotions, or resources." The mechanical/physical sense of the definition, and its activity and action, we can understand well-enough. There's the "poof-pop" of a light bulb burning out and leaving us in the dark. It may be a power tool that emits a shower of sparks and quits running just when we need it the most. Or it may be a motor that smokes and grinds to a halt. To burn out mechanically is to wear out or become inoperative as a result of friction, overloading, or overheating. In the aerospace industry, the term denotes the termination of rocket or jet-engine operation because of fuel exhaustion or cut off. In the context of the inner-city, "Burn-out" evokes the image of the charred shell of a building gutted by fire.

That's the imagery implied in the terminology. The definition, when applied to a human being, however, can be couched in many different words. All however, bear a similarity to a mechanical burn-out. A psychological definition of burn-out is: "The emotional exhaustion resulting from the stress of interpersonal contact ... a very special and distinctive kind of emotional exhaustion ... with the helping professional losing positive feelings, sympathy and respect for their clients." Another: "Burn-out refers to a feeling of physical and emotional exhaustion which comes after we have had prolonged involvement with people and work situations that demand our time, energy and strength." Perhaps the best for our purposes is the description of a burn-out as "someone in a state of fatigue, or frustration, brought about by a devotion to a cause, a way of life, or a relationship that failed to produce the expected reward or result." In application, that means that whenever the level of one's expectations is not tempered by reality, and you continue to persist in attempting to reach that expectation, trouble can be expected. We are not here

talking about the perfect principles of the Word; we are talking about perfectionism in life.

In a sense, then, burn-out is not a static condition; it is a dynamic; it is a process; it is a syndrome which, yes, ultimately reaches a conclusion of being "burned out." In our terms and for our purposes, there are some definite qualifying factors for the people who might be affected (or afflicted) by the burn-out syndrome.

- A) They are people-oriented people; caring people, helping people, concerned people of the "helping" professions;
- B) They are people who begin with high, perhaps even unrealistic, expectations;
- C) They are people who tend to strive long and hard with few or no results and;
- D) They are people who deal with other people usually in a crisis, problem or other sticky situations.

Underlying all of these qualifying factors is the basic dichotomy between expectation and reality, between idealism and realism. It is ultimately the inability and/or the unwillingness to reassess goals and readjust those that are unrealistic which leads to burn-out.

It is important to distinguish between burn-out and other spiritual maladies that may have similar characteristics or effects. For example, burn-out is not rust-out. The person who is inactive, uninvolved, and unengaged will never suffer burn-out. But he may certainly rust-out. Burn-out is not cop-out either. Pleading burn-out because you have exceeded 40-hours-per-week is, - charitably, a cop-out; judgmentally, a lie. But it is not burn-out. Cop-out and rust-out are both due to a flagging commitment, usually a result of the distractions of the world. Demas, who because of his love of this worldly system, forsook Paul, may have copped-out or even rusted-out, but there is no evidence that he burned-out.

As to semantics - call the syndrome what you want. A rose by another name is not a petunia. If you don't like the term "burn-out" - you can suggest something better. Just make sure it accurately describes what is out there, what is really going on. I think "burn-out" is accurately descriptive. And there is something out there, there is something going on.

#### POSE SOME POSSIBILITIES ABOUT PASTORS

I would suggest on the basis of the above that Joe Average WELS pastor bears many qualities, and I mean qualities, not deficiencies, which would make him susceptible to burn-out.

- 1) Pastors are "in ministry." Their lives are devoted and dedicated to serving, not tables or statistics, but

people. And God. And God! Who can serve him adequately, realistically, much less his people????

- 2) They have "fire"; they are "on fire." They are not just humanistically motivated helpers; they are Spirit-fired.
- 3) They are committed to a cause. It is the cause of the Savior. It is the continuing pursuit of the fulfillment of the Great Commission. It's not putting a new roof on the shed by tomorrow night. It's building the Kingdom, and it's never don~~y~~ never over, never finished, never completed.
- 4) The pastor who is a faithful pastor really cares. He is a Seelsorger. The secular social worker, or the pastor who views his position as a mere profession, can treat people as statistics or machines; to be fixed, treated, molded, or discarded. But pastors love people; love them, because our Savior loved them first.
- 5) Pastors understand that the essence of the Church is people; it is not program, not pew, not pious platitude. People - real alive people, of all ages, with souls redeemed by the blood of the Lamb living in bodies sanctified by the Spirit as the temple of God.
- 6) Pastors believe and are dedicated to the practice of the principles - 100% perfect are those principles as God's Word is perfect - as they apply to the duties and responsibilities we share.
- 7) And pastors are idealists - we daily deal in "ideals" - worship every Sunday, every day; above and beyond the tithe; always forgive your wife, how to grow perfect teenagers; do such good Greek and Hebrew exegesis that we have "all the answers."

Thank God our Seminary produces pastors who have all of the above qualities!! The questions are: can this idealism be tempered by reality? Can they, dare they, readjust their expectations? It can probably be said that if you don't fit the above seven characteristics, you don't have to worry about burn-out. It'll never happen to you.

Add to this the fact that there is a general public attitude that those who work in the "ministering professions" - and here you might say, pastor, teacher, counselor - there is an idea that somehow such people are inherently stronger, healthier, more well put together. Surely the pastor therefore has not only some special promise from God regarding special strength and special presence and special result, he also enjoys some special delivery system whereby God touches him every morning at 7:00 a.m., and maybe once again in the evening just before Ladies Aid or Church Council meeting. And maybe it's not just "they" - the members, who think this; maybe the pastor believes it himself.

But in the first - and final - analysis, pastors are people. That means they are human. They are susceptible. They are personalities, distinct and individual. There are strengths and weaknesses, talents and insufficiencies. There are square pegs and round holes, and round pegs and square holes. There are different weights of straws and different sizes of camels. As Christians, pastors may not be of the world, but they ought to believe that they are still in the world.

#### CITE SOME SYMPTOMS OF THE SYNDROME

Burn-out is not like the common cold. Its symptoms do not develop overnight. Nor can you say that if you sneeze more than three times in a half-hour you've got it. But there are indications in the patterns of behavior of an individual which indicate whether a person is on his way to, or actually experiencing, burn-out. Without going into detail, look at a list of some of them in their simplistic categories.

There are the physical symptoms; an exhausted appearance which does not go away; a weight change or changes, with recurring regularity; significant change in sleep patterns; and more than usual occurrences of gastric upset, headaches, of shortness of breath.

More important are the attitudinal symptoms which at their onset can usually only be recognized by the one afflicted. The talkative person just feels like being quite. The outgoing person becomes withdrawn; the easy-going person becomes irritable and touchy. A cynical, negative attitude develops in which the person is suspicious of everyone and everything, almost to the point of paranoia.

And finally, all of this of course leads to behavioral changes which are then publicly noticeable. The most common reaction of a person experiencing burn-out is an attempt to "get out." Experiencing burn-out is not enjoyable. An individual can become laden with fear, guilt and panic. There is the pastor who spent four days in bed with the covers over his head. He was escaping. That's not funny, that's tragic. In the latter stages of burn-out development, the individual ultimately becomes detached and isolated.

It has been alleged that burn-out, also in the ministry, is nothing more than depression. While there is no doubt that depression plays a good part in the burn-out syndrome, it is only a part. It is not the "blahs," or post-Christmas depression. It is not simply success-depression or "what do I do for an encore?" Some persons experiencing burn-out do not become depressed, but instead, become aggressive, portraying themselves as saviors of the world, with a false bravado, and "no problems at all." Super-pastors who claim to be super-pastors just may be wrong, and the "S" on their sweatshirt may stand for "suspect."

"Oh that I had wings like a dove." That's reality; how we handle that reality is the important issue. Failure to handle it will ultimately lead to burn-out.

## ELUCIDATE THE EXAMPLE OF ELIJAH

Perhaps no scriptural figure illustrates burn-out so clearly as Elijah, who, as James reminds us, was a man with feelings just like ours. In fact, common forms of burn-out might well be called "the Elijah syndrome."

Burn-out frequently occurs after intense "peak" experiences such as Elijah had in his triumph over the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel (though it can also follow from extended - but unsuccessful - attempts to achieve change). What an experience it must have been to see the fire of God fall and consume the sacrifice, the wood and stones, and even the water in the trench! But just a short time later, the prophet, too, was consumed, burned out, if you can follow the picture.

The account in 1 Kings 19 reveals that Elijah exhibited some distinct characteristics of burn-out. First, in traveling a day's journey into the wilderness, he shows what has been called "distancing, detachment." Of course, you can hardly blame the prophet for getting out of Jezreel, because Jezebel had vowed to kill him within 24 hours. But note that he leaves his servant behind in Beersheba (v. 3). Obviously, he wishes to get away not only from the wicked queen but from everyone else as well. This effort to get away from people is an unmistakable sign of burn-out.

As the prophet sits under the broom tree asking to die, he shows some of the advanced stages of burn-out: depression and despair. His request minces no words: "I have had enough, Lord. Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors" (that is, "I might as well be dead!" v. 4, NIV) Here we see the despondence that often follows prolonged intensity. You might say that it's the letdown that comes in between rises or directly after 'mission accomplished.' Frequently, following a triumph, high achievers (Elijah certainly qualifies) suffer periods of deep melancholia somewhat akin to the postpartum depression some women experience after giving birth. The feelings are remarkably similar: sadness, separation, sluggishness, and above all emptiness.

The man who displayed such great energy in outrunning Ahab's chariot now is completely exhausted, not just physically, but also mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. He stretches out and sleeps beneath the broom tree, awakens just long enough to eat food prepared by an angel, and sleeps again.

In his subsequent dialogue with Jehovah at Mount Horeb, Elijah manifests several more typical characteristics of burn-out. He reminds God that he has been very zealous in the Lord's service, showing a sense of bitterness at the level of appreciation the people - and perhaps God himself - are showing. Further, he reveals the typical burn-out's typical feeling of indispensability - that he alone is serving God: "I, even I only, am left." God informs the prophet that there are at least seven thousand others in Israel who have not bowed to Baal.

These feelings of indispensability and lack of appreciation often lead to another characteristic of burn-out: feelings of being

mistreated, even of paranoia. Elijah said to God, "They seek my life, to take it away." Who are "they"? He doesn't say "she" (Jezebel). The antecedent appears earlier in verse 10: the children of Israel who had forsaken God. But there is no evidence that Elijah was in danger from the Israelites, especially now that the three-and-a-half-year drought had been broken. (Elijah description by D.G. Kehl, cited in "Christianity Today")

It is important to recognize the feelings of the person experiencing burn-out. (It is equally important for us as individuals to be tuned in to our own feelings for they form a barometer of our condition.) These are the terms that can be used which form the causes, symptoms and practice of the syndrome: detachment; escapism; depression; despair; despondency; emptiness; value questioning; omnipotence destroyed; mentally - spiritually - emotionally exhausted; formerly zealous/now bitter; formerly plugging along/now giving up; still indispensable, but now unappreciated; "they wanted me, they called me, I served them; now they don't want me, they dislike me and what I do; I don't care any more, and I don't even care that I don't care!"

Elijah, and our pastor/friend under the bed covers!

#### LINK IT WITH A LINE FROM LUTHER

So that you be not disappointed ... It is reported that as Melanchthon stood before the Diet of Augsburg (a very stressful situation, where there was certainly going to be a gap between idealistic goals and resultant reality), Luther commented: "I command you and the entire circle of my friends to force you, under the threat of an anathema, to observe regular habits for the sake of your health so that you do not commit suicide and then pretend you did it in obedience to God. For we also serve God by doing nothing, in fact in now way more than by doing nothing. For this reason he, above all things, wanted the Sabbath so rigidly kept. See to it that you do not despise this. What I am writing is the Word of God." The words "pretend you did it in obedience to God" have to do with burn-out.

#### CONSIDER THE CONTINUING CONFLICT

A few pages ago you read the words "we are still in the world." That phrase bears repeating and enlargement. One is unable to count the number of sermons heard in which reference is made to the fact that the Christian is not of this world. He is different, strange, special, with unique principles, goals, morals, etc. How true. Yet it needs to be asked whether we have ever given equal weight to the other side of the coin - in the world. We know with our heads that Christianity does not mean immunity. Yet, somehow the impression is left that there is a great deal of shock or dismay when the consequences of sin, of reality, confront us.

In this respect the Bible does have much to say about the cause of burn-out. Why do we become emotionally drained and physically exhausted? Why are there headaches and sleepless nights? Why are we

super-nervous or super-apatetic? The true answer lies in understanding sin in its condition-form and in its commission/omission-form.

It is not our purpose here simply to focus on the sinfulness and sins of others, and how they affect us, although the manner in which we handle the difference between expectations of the saints and what we see in the reality of the sinners is certainly the difference between ideal and reality. When I use the words, Consider the Continuing Conflict, I really mean - in yourself. It is the considered opinion of some people that it is a lack of personal awareness of our own personal sinfulness which is the main cause of burn-out in pastors. Please recall what was said about some possibilities applying to pastors under section 2. In spite of their black robes and charcoal grey suits and ease of operating on the yonder side of the communion rail, pastors are cut from the same cloth as the people whom they serve. In delivering God's Word and Will to them, sinful pride wants always to add the words "like me" - worship (like me), study the Word (like me), behave (like me), serve God (like me). Pastors, too, have a conflict with pharisaical sinful flesh.

It seems that that conflict is intensified by the fact that much of the pastor's effort in life is directed at those who are struggling in the same conflict. Pastors seek to encourage the drowning of the sinful nature of the souls entrusted to their care and thereafter to elevate their new man. And it is difficult for faithful, principled pastors to understand that sometimes just holding the status quo is a positive result; after all, if nothing were being done, nothing accomplished, no results at all - things would be getting worse. If the Spirit were not at work at all, ... ouch!

So the continuing conflict - in ministers and in those who are ministered unto - between sinner and saint can drive people and pastors to depression and despair. Paul concludes the recitation of his inner struggle with the words, "O wretched man that I am!"

Something probably needs to be said here about the charismatic, pietistic, "victorious life" theology of the 1980s. And maybe, among the "brethren", some would pretend its 100% true. Don't get this wrong. Being in union with and service to Christ and his Church is not misery. But it is patently not all victory from the human point of view. Too often the message of "victory in Jesus" is like the half-time highlights of Monday night football. You see the long gainers and the touchdowns. Rarely do you see the broken patterns, the dropped passes, and the sacks. Countless church workers of many denominations are parroting claims about "I don't have any problems"; countless so called evangelicals are buying a "victorious life" theology that tends to promise that once a person is given the Spirit, the problems of being human are gone. But it ought to be remembered that in addition to the ecstasy of the post-Pentecostal miracles, the book of Acts tells us that Peter and John are arrested; Ananias and Sapphira fall over dead; Peter and the apostles are jailed; Stephen is murdered, followed by a massive persecution; Simon the sorcerer causes great trouble; the Jews plot to kill Paul; Herod kills James; Paul is stoned; Paul and Silas are

arrested at Philippi; riots start at Ephesus; Paul is mobbed and imprisoned in Jerusalem; and a great storm at sea shipwrecks him at Malta. And all this before they even had meetings, and organizations, and committees, and cars, and drive-in movies and TV. All this before we even get to Corinth or Ephesus.

There is a great feeling of comfort in seeing even the Lord of the Church sitting on a hillside outside of Jerusalem, crying over unmet desires. "How often would I .. and ye would not." The servant is not above his master.

#### PROSCRIBE THE POSTURING POTIONS OF PREVENTION

It is important to recognize and reject false cures for the onset or continuation of burn-out. Those range in variety from excessive work (which only accentuates the problem creating a vicious circle), to excessive play (which only brings additional guilt feelings to the person who already thinks he is a failure). Since burn-out is a process - a destructive set of job habits and attitudes - no one-shot remedy will be effective. Too often individuals attempt to use a few days off - a weeks vacation - as an attempt to deal with burn-out, only to find that they return to work now rested and burned-out instead of exhausted and burned-out. Still others resort to the time-honored Adam/Eve mechanism - it's the other guy's fault. While it may be true that environment, bureaucracy, lack of compensation, and even nit-picky members can add to and in some cases cause burn-out, the greater weight of control lies on the personal side of the coin. And finally, support groups - such as even a pastors' conference or a bowling league which function only as gripe sessions may do much to clear the air and allow ventilation to occur, but they do nothing positive to solve the burn-out.

#### ACCEPT SOME ADVICE

There is advice about attitude and advice about action; there is advice about spiritual exercise and advice about physical exercise. Let us not think that it does not apply to pastors or that advice givers should not be advice takers. Physician, heal thyself.

Spiritual reminders are always in order. Remember you Call - you did not come where you are by yourself. None of our fellow pastors have taken their ministries upon themselves. Pastors were called by a group of Christians to serve them and their children. They have the assurance that their Lord wants them to serve where they are serving. Sometimes they fall into the trap of thinking that they are not only shepherds of souls and teachers of minds but also lords of life, with the job of producing solutions to all the people-problems with which they may deal. Sometimes they fall into the trap of thinking that those people are "their members" - rather than the Lord's, which then leads them to forget that the only ultimate responsibility they have is faithfulness. The alcoholic's serenity prayer needs some application to the pastoral ministry - "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the



difference." The brevity of this next sentence emphasizes its importance: Pray, and use the Means of Grace.

As to other bits of advice - they seem all to boil down to: learn to separate between work and home, between professional and personal. Please understand that I am not advocating cold, clock-watching, computerized professionalism. I am advocating that you learn how to go home from work. I just do not understand how you can roll on the floor with your six-year old son at 5 o'clock in the afternoon with your work clothes on. It might do you some good to change into your "grubs" even for the 90 minute supper hour, especially if there is another evening meeting coming up.

#### BUT THE GREATEST OF THESE IS LOVE

Who is #1? Of course, it is our Lord Jesus. No one ever said he isn't. And no one suffering from burn-out says anything different either. That is not under discussion.

Jesus also says: Love your neighbors as yourself. There is a Scripturally proper way to love ourselves - in humble thanksgiving for what he has made us to be. How can we do less? If he loves us, accepts us, and recognizes us as his servants, how can we do less? If he calls us redeemed, restored, forgiven, where do we get off thinking that we can hate or dislike one of his saints?

Now each pastor may say: "I may not be able to write like James, teach like Tom, preach like David, devotionalize like Don, or even counsel like Kenneth. But whatever I am and whatever I have and whatever I can do is of him and to him and through him, and I ought to be pretty happy, and content, with that."

Then I can move on to loving others - thou shalt love thy neighbor. That's you! That includes fellow pastors!

There are some less than noble reasons for asking about the reality of the fictitiousness of this thing called "Pastoral Burn-Out". Are we involved in mental gymnastics? Do we just want to be acquainted with psychological terminology? Will such a study provide me with an easy excuse? Or have we done all of this so that we can pompously say, God I thank thee that I am not as other men are - dried up, dead, burned-out? No, I don't think so. I think we are rightly searching for ways to understand one another, to serve one another, to love one another. That's part of the pastoral, brotherly perspective of this document.

Destructive of that goal are the following tendencies of natural man - the establishment or perception of inside cliques, power groups, haves and havenots, the knowledgeable and the ignorant, the saints and the sinners.

It is one thing then for the pastor to deal with his own human burn-out tendencies. But he must also deal with those possibilities in the brethren. As the pastor is willing to confess personal weakness,

frustration, fears, anger, stupidity, sloth, and insecurity and insufficiency in himself, he ought to be able to face - yes, to accept - these in the brethren. That does not mean "stamp of approval"; it means love and understanding. Pastors are to be little Christs unto one another. But the moment one pastor comes to another with his burn-out related problems and feels even a hint of pharisaism, mockery or pious platitude in response, the same moment will the modern Elijah fold back in upon himself, run back to his cave, all alone, and burned out. Pastors ought to war against anything which would cause others not to let them bear their burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ. God help pastors to be God's instruments whereby bruised reeds shall not break and smoking flax shall not burn-out.

Loving oneself and others as Jesus loved; accepting oneself and others as Jesus did; forgiving oneself and others as Jesus forgave and forgives, this is not only expectation but also reality and therefore his antidote for the prevention of burn-out.

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