

Burnout: A Pastor's Perspective

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Looking out the second floor library window at South Florida University, I watched the breeze ripple the pond and noticed a turtle ease its way along the edge in an almost continuous quest for a bite or two for lunch. I watched about ten minutes marveling at his slow, steady pace and recalled how Aesop tried to teach us all the value of pacing!

Given the turtle's circumstances I was sure he'd never "burn out", unlike the hare who had run so furiously and had been so sure of himself. I've been like the rabbit—a little hare-brained at times in my ministry; foolish enough to think that people's lives depended on me; that if I wasn't there, everything would collapse, or that, everything was collapsing because I was there.

That's an easy view to get sucked into. I remember a seminary professor who described the ministry, by way of a warning, as being in a room of four walls that weren't fastened at the corners. You'd rush to stave up the north wall only to discover your attention was needed down on the south side of the room. You'd no sooner get that one braced back straight, than the east, west, or north wall would need you to shore it up again. The task was never ending, and if you weren't there holding the four walls up—if you let down your guard for a second, everything would collapse on you.

Statistics show that after about five or fifteen¹ years of this the guy in the center of the room is ready for change. "Let 'em fall! So what." "Let that one come down, I'll manage the other three." "Why isn't anyone helping me?"

When placed in the room initially and given the task of keeping the room intact, the fellow ran about so eagerly, even gleefully, perhaps thinking as Pastor James Schaefer so aptly puts it, "I'm just God's little helper." But after years of this, his enthusiasm wanes. He starts out saying to himself, "I can do it." Gradually, almost imperceptibly, his litany changes:

"I'm having trouble doing it."

"Why did I want to do it?"

"I can't do it."

"I don't want to do it."

"I shouldn't be doing it."

The attitudes he reveals, the ways he reacts to the repeated pressures and how he manages his circumstances are symptomatic enough to be called a syndrome and receive a catchy name—Burnout. The writers I read had a field day with the term—it enjoyed the company of playmates such as "rust out", "wiped out", "walk out", and "cop out", not to forget the one author who said he was "bombed out" by all the articles written about burnout.

Whatever it is called or contrasted with, however, it is generally agreed that burnout is physical and/or psychological exhaustion related to chronic, unrelieved pressures.² Of special

¹ Morrison, James H. ed. *BurnOut Theology News and Notes*, v.21:1 David G, Congo "What Causes Burnout?", p.7

interest to us in the preaching ministry is the definition given in a Christianity today article: “burnout is someone in a state of fatigue or frustration brought about by devotion to a cause, way of life, or relationship that failed to produce the expected reward.”³ It has many of the characteristics of depression, but is unusual enough to require specialized attention.

At this point for us non-clinical people, I think a few definitions and a digression into the nature of “stress” would be helpful.

Stress is a syndrome caused by pressure. Pressure is a problem that demands a physical or mental adaptation on our part.⁴ Pressure is in the given situation to which the body is forced to respond—the response is the stress. When the situation becomes chronic, the stress becomes “stress syndrome”—a patterned mental and physical state manifested by many symptoms and characterized by the depth and persistence of those symptoms. The book of Job gives some classic statements that might well come from one burned out.

“Oh that I might have my request, that God would grant what I hope for, that God would be willing to crush me, to let loose his hand and cut me off! Then I would still have this consolation—my joy in unrelenting pain—that I had not denied the words of the Holy One. What strength do I have, that I should still hope? What prospects, that I should be patient? Do I have the strength of stone? Is my flesh bronze? Do I have any power to help myself, now that success has been driven from me? ... Does not man have hard service on earth? Are not his days like those of a hired man? Like a slave longing for the evening shadows or a hired man waiting eagerly for his wages, so I have been allotted months of futility, and nights of misery have been assigned to me. When I lie down I think ‘How long before I get up? The night drags on, and I toss till dawn. My body is clothed with worms and scabs, my skin is broken and festering.’” (Job 6:8-13; 7:1-5)

According to the acknowledged leader of stress investigation, Dr. Hans Selye, stress is the “non-specific response of the body to any demand made upon it, including both internal and external stimuli.”⁵ (By this definition, burnout is a type of stress)

As the demands of those internal and external stimuli increase, there comes a point, *varying with individuals*, where an involuntary bio-chemical process is triggered.⁶ Interestingly enough, these *involuntary* reactions of mind and body don’t distinguish between pleasurable

² Karl Albrecht, *Stress and the Manager*, Englewood Cliffs, N.J. pp 50-54. This book is by far the best out of the lot as to the physiology of stress and its mental, physical, and bio-chemical ramifications. Its charts, suggestions for countering stress and general approach are down to earth; practical; and sane.

³ D.G. Kehl, “Burnout: The Risk of Reaching Too High,” *Christianity Today*, v. 2s :20 1981, p. 26

⁴ Albrecht, *op cit.* p 47

⁵ Alan Reuter “Stress in the Ministry: Can We Fight Back?” *Currents in Theology and Mission* v.8:4 Aug. 1981 p 221

⁶ Albrecht, *op cit.* pp. 47-81

stress (what Dr. Selye calls “eustress”) and unpleasant stress (called “distress”). Brilliant successes can be just as contributory to burnout as horrendous failures or losses.

A professor of psychiatry at the University of Rochester⁷ studied 275 cases of sudden death and identified four main categories that caused a stress overload resulting in the deaths:

1. traumatic disruption of relationship with a loved one or anniversary of the same
2. a situation of physical danger, struggle or attack.
3. an extreme sense of failure, defeat, disappointment, humiliation or loss of self respect.
4. a sudden moment of triumph, public recognition or reunion with loved ones.

At such points the body is ready to “fight” or “take flight” to relieve the stress. A verse from Job illustrates the “fight” principle: “Oh that I had someone to hear me! I sign now my defense. Let the Almighty answer me; let my accuser put his indictment in writing.” (Job 31:35)

As the body readies itself, there is a first stage that now sounds the alarm for the body to prepare for an all out response to what threatens. The second stage is resistance. Here the body strains to resist, escape or accommodate the stressor. If it cannot accomplish this, the third stage is reached which is collapse—death as in the cases above, or the collapse of all the resources generally used to fight the stress. When one is “burned—out” this is the stage they are in. The difference between the stress syndrome and the burnout syndrome can be illustrated by a car battery that went dead because of a drain on its power. Although stressed, if given rest and a charge, it can be as good as new...burnout however, is like a battery that will no longer accept a charge. Its effect is permanent; and while it can be counter balanced, it leaves a permanent change.

There are two kinds of stress that affect the body-physical, such as occurs in exercise, illness, environmental conditions etc. and emotional—it is the emotional stress that leads to burnout in pastors, who as a group are also frequently under physical stresses.

Dr. Seyle suggests emotional stress is caused by a person’s own thought patterns which apparently center on expectations—the belief that something is going to happen and it is going to be terrible. Let’s turn again to Job and let him express it: “For sighing comes to me instead of food; my groans pour out like water. What I feared has come upon me; what I dreaded has happened to me. I have no peace, no quietness; I have no rest, but only turmoil.” (Job 3:24-27)

These stress patterns of the mind are classified into four general categories:⁸

- 1: Time stress—the feeling that one “must” do something before a deadline; the general feeling that time is running out; and that something terrible is going to happen when it does.

As pastors we live with this stress daily as we are reminded about the very purpose for our work—“As long as it is day we must do the work of him who sent me. Night is coming when no one can work.” (John 9:4) “I tell you, now is the time of God’s favor, now is the day of salvation.” (2 Cor. 6:2) Our desire to complete the planting in time for growth and harvest places time stress on us—needlessly I might add, though we’ll look at that later.

- 2: Anticipatory stress—commonly known as “worry”, a feeling of anxiety about an impending event. Sometimes a generalized

⁷ *Ibid.* pp 34-35

⁸ *Ibid.* pp 86ff.

anxiety with little or no basis; a fear that horrible but unnamed catastrophes are about to befall us.

We pastors also deal with this stress—especially as we think about our counseling cases. When the phone rings, do we dread it, wondering whose life has fallen apart now? Jeremiah speaks of our empathy and love for the people, while noting the stress associated with “people service:” “Since my people are crushed, I am crushed; I mourn, and horror grips me. Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then is there no healing for the wound of my people.” (Jer 8:21-22)

- 3: Situational stress: this is finding oneself in a threatening situation that is at least partially beyond one's control. It may involve physical danger or injury, but more often it involves the loss of status, significance or acceptance in the eyes of others.

As I wrote this, I couldn't help but think of my pastor friend who had a dish of dog-water thrown in his face during a kitchen table discussion with some of his delinquent members. That was situational stress. A clear Biblical example can be found in the book of Daniel, chapter 6 verse 7: “The royal administrators ... have all agreed that the king should issue an edict and enforce the decree that anyone who prays to any god or man during the next thirty days, except to you, O King, shall be thrown into the lions den.”

- 4: Encounter stress: This is anxiety about dealing with one or more people whom one finds unpleasant and unpredictable. There is a vague but intense feeling of apprehension when one discovers that conventional rules for social behavior no longer apply.

Christians, frequently meet this type of stress because others expect them to be able to “take it” without lashing out in return. Certainly, pastors are to be the outstanding example of this Christian characteristic, and so they too encounter stress in this area: “In everything set them an example by doing what is good. In your teaching show integrity, seriousness, and soundness of speech that cannot be condemned, so that those who oppose you may be ashamed because they have nothing bad to say about us.” (Titus 2:7,8)

People react to the above stresses in three ways—in a functional manner, a malfunctional manner, or a dysfunctional manner.

A functional reaction obviously means a person is handling their eustress or distress in a manner acceptable to their peers. Malfunctional means there is an inconsistent handling of the stress. This is a warning signal. Sometimes the reactions are appropriate sometimes they are not. And dysfunctional means there is a consistent inability to handle the stress in an acceptable manner.

With all this in mind, let's take a peek at the symptoms of the stress syndrome called Burnout.

Burnout occurs mostly among “people” workers.. A burned out person seems to have been exhausted by the demands of the people he seeks to help. The “fight” or “flight” mechanism leads people to protect themselves by withdrawing, sometimes in subtle ways, at other times by actually withdrawing their person from the situation.

The most popular forms of escape from stress are:⁹

1. Drinking liquor

⁹ *Ibid.* p 36

2. Frequent or heavy eating, especially sweet foods
3. Smoking
4. Drinking coffee, colas, or other high caffeine drinks
5. Using marijuana, heavy drugs, or mind-altering pills
6. Using prescription drugs such as tranquilizers and pain pills
7. Using patent medicines to suppress specific symptoms
8. Using sleeping pills
9. Withdrawing psychologically; robotizing one's behavior; self-destructive behaviors
10. Lashing out at others, displacing anxiety and anger onto other people.

The appeal in all of these is the unconscious substitution of a known pleasant feeling for the unpleasant stress syndrome. In our reaction to the pressures of life, Satan and our Old Adam certainly tempt us as they connive to have us seek what is pleasurable in immoderate behavior to compensate for the unpleasant stresses we have. There must be some other solution however, as Paul reminds us "Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature." (Romans 13:13,14)

Lest we think that as Pastors we don't succumb, look over the list again, carefully. Besides the obvious coffee, cola, cigarette, cocktail dangers that hover around us, pastors have been known to seek escape by detaching themselves by language, as when they refer to the people they work with, not as John or Mr. Smith, but as "that old trouble maker," that "alligator", that "thorn in my flesh," or even the generalized term, "the congregation."

Some pastors detach themselves by means of a gallows-type humor, or in a subconscious but angry attack disguised as "teasing."

Other pastors detach themselves by aloofness, cutting down time for visitations, immersing themselves in paper work and making less time for people contact.

Finally, some others detach themselves by leaving the ministry—though the conclusion cannot be drawn that everyone who leaves is "burned out."

Though I used Job as an example of stress, it seems to me that D.G. Kehl in a *Christianity Today* article¹⁰ showed good insight into a Biblical example of burnout when he wrote of Elijah:

The account in I Kings 19 reveals that Elijah manifested some of the distinct characteristics of burnout. First, in traveling a day's journey into the wilderness, he shows distancing, detachment. Of course, we can't fault 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 burnout.

As the prophet sits under the broom tree asking to die, he manifests some of the advanced stages of burnout: depression and despair. His request minces no words: "I've had enough, Lord, take my life. I am no better off than my ancestors." (that is, "I might as well be dead." (v.4 NIV) Here we see the despondency that often follows prolonged intensity. Elijah proves a classic example of what Freudenberger says: Its the letdown

¹⁰ D.G. Kehl, "Burnout: the Risk of Reaching Too High," *Christianity Today*. v. 2s:20 1981 p. 26

that comes in between crises or directly after ‘mission accomplished.’ Frequently, following a triumph, high achievers 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 burned-out person questions the value of activities and friendship... even of life itself ... The man who displayed such great energy in outrunning Ahab’s chariot (sense of omnipotence) now is completely exhausted, not just physically, but also mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. He stretches out and sleeps under a 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 burnout. 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 are showing. Further, he reveals the burnout’s feeling of indispensability—that he alone is serving God: “I, even I only, am left.” These feelings of indispensability and lack of appreciation often lead to another characteristic of burnout: 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” meaning 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 one half year drought was broken.

Whether we agree with all the points Kehl makes, we can look at Elijah, Job, the Book of Lamentations, the Psalms and other places and draw a description of burnout. We could illustrate the burned out person as one who has been demoralized. His emotions have been blunted. He doesn’t have the energy to think, or feel, or function. He can no longer muster fresh ideas. His hope of achievement and success is gone, and with it his satisfaction with himself, so that he is *depersonalized*. He *disengages* from activity, while trying to compensate by increased effort. This simply hastens the *detachment* along. He becomes *depressed*. Feeling he is just being used, he becomes paranoid. He believes he is pulling the train all by himself, while everyone on board is dragging their feet just trying to “break” him. He puts *distance* between him and his people. He loses his drive, and becomes *defeatist*. It’s hard for him to even get out of bed in the morning and do a full days work. He ends up weakly *defiant*—feeling helpless in a hopeless situation—*displeased* with himself, *disappointed* with his ministry, and *disturbed* over the whole thing.

(Certainly sin is involved in all this; but the fact that the burnout syndrome refers to the involuntary shutdown of the body physically and mentally reminds us of the pervasiveness of original sin; it is not a matter of control for us—it is an uncontrollable condition for which we need and receive forgiveness, and which, like original sin, causes sins in our lives).

It is one thing to write these things out in a somewhat clinical manner, but quite another to experience them. Speaking from experience, it is as if with each day your body becomes heavier and heavier as your mind slowly turns to a lump of Tennessee clay, as in my case.

I had to muster all the energy I had, just to get out of bed. I’d sit at my desk wanting to crank out a meaningful sermon and after hours of diligent and faithful study, my pen would creak out a generalized line or two. Fortunately, my Lord was with me. “Unless the Lord had given me help, I would soon have dwelt in the silence of death. When I said, ‘My foot is slipping,’ your love, O Lord, supported me. When anxiety was great within me, your consolation brought joy to my soul.” (Psalm 94:171-19) Second in line to the comfort the Lord gave me directly from his word, He encouraged me through the efforts of my wife and her strong

faith and dedication to the Gospel, my congregation., my fellow pastors and a broken leg all combined to return me to life — wiser, much wiser, and permanently changed.

As one who has had burnout singe his beard, and I know there are others of you in the same straits that I was, I'm eager to encourage you all.

I don't believe simply listing the symptoms or giving cutsey titles to the pressures helps. I'm not even sure that knowing what contributes to burnout or what its proposed deterrents are will help. It may be the kind of thing one has to experience like foolish Adam and Eve. They could have known about evil as God knows about it—knowledge without participation. They elected, however, to know it personally through experience. That is our bane, also, I'm afraid.

No one wants to heed the warnings to slow himself down; or to pace himself properly. For to do so, seems to imply laziness or unfaithfulness to God and the high calling of the Gospel.

The more appropriate solution our Old Adam proposes and which seems more logical because of our human nature, is to counter burnout with increased, more efficient, more productive activity. (Try to take care of original sin that way and see how far you get.)

Increased activity isn't the solution. Burnout isn't rustout. It goes without saying that we aren't to be lazy in meeting the tasks God gives us, but the few who are inactive, uninvolved, or disengaged need never worry about burnout—it results only from the stresses that occur from *activity*.¹¹ (Also doesn't mean every active pastor will burn out.)

Neither does burnout mean copout; a good excuse for getting out from under the demands of ministry ala Demas who forsook Paul because of the distractions of the world.

Burnout results from activity—all of us to a degree or another know the “feeling.” For years it was expressed in a Lenten letter as the empathetic encouragement was given to our district pastors “to focus on the message.” We “burnout” from Advent to Easter, and then can cope along through the summer.

What contributes to this for pastors? Christians to the degree that they are involved with other people are particularly susceptible to burnout. They expend great amounts of energy in helping others. “Carry each others burdens and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.” (Gal. 6:2) This susceptibility becomes intensified for called workers. Our ministry focuses on giving and sharing rather than on receiving. “Dear children let us not love with words or tongue, but with actions and in truth.” (I John 3:18) So in an attempt to meet all the demands placed upon them, to rise to all the expectations, pastors become workaholics. They feel they have to attend every meeting; take part in every decision; and “make it all happen.” “So you also when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, “We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.” (Lk. 17:7) The pastor is expected to keep tabs on everything and everyone all of the time. I'll never forget when I received a phone call from a Synod official threatening withdrawal of financial support unless I took steps to correct the message received in a letter from an errant member—which incidentally I knew nothing about. I was apparently expected to be the all-seeing, all-knowing, all powerful one in the congregation—a role mistake made by the best, most diligent pastors.

After all, since the Almighty God has called them into the ministry and promised to be with them “we commend ourselves... in truthful speech and in the power of God”(2 Cor.6:4,7) does it necessarily follow that by virtue of their call they have become Almighty too? Of course not. It is scriptural to believe since God has called me that He'll provide me with His strength,

¹¹ Gary Collins, “Burn-out: The Hazard of Professional People Helpers,” *Christianity Today*, v. 21:13 April 1977

but that is not to be misunderstood as if I possess His fullness. On the contrary, Paul writes: “But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.” (2 Cor 4: 7)

At my young age, because of the privileges God has given me in his service, I’ve sat and talked with pastors who feel inadequate and spiritually weak. Our mission counselor is one who possesses the ability to encourage one and discuss weaknesses without condemnation. That his ability and behavior are so highly prized by us indicates how rare those qualities are.

For some reason, perhaps the idealism of the seminary years, pastors just coming into the field believe their congregations aren’t supposed to have problems; or pastors changing locations seem to believe their task is to straighten up or correct existing problems. Such an approach points to an acknowledged source of difficulty for pastors—the dichotomy between their expectations and reality.¹² “The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved.” (Jer 8:20)

In almost every other job, there are tangible criteria by which to judge success or productivity. Whereas the results of our labor are determined only by subjective judgments here on earth. Only God can know what he is specifically accomplishing. “How unsearchable are his judgments and his paths beyond tracing out. Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?” (Rom. 11:33,34)

So it seems we are caught in a game of cat and mouse with Biblical goals and statistical goals sporting around in a maze with each other. Really it doesn’t matter how elusive either one is; neither seems to grow at the rate expected. People don’t change quickly. They have a persistent Old Adam, so they resist and delay. As one crisis is resolved and one improves, another crisis erupts and more needy people appear on the horizon.

The pastor is likely to keep on working even when fatigue sets in. And when people don’t change, or when progress is short-lived the pastor may blame himself. He may think he has failed. He feels responsible for the people God has entrusted to his care and neither they nor he is turning out as he envisioned. He feels he needs to work harder, perhaps if he said something different; perhaps if he’d deny himself, his family he finds himself floating from one meeting to another—one task dissolves into the next all in an attempt to cover all the bases and keep everyone satisfied. His life is on the line. He lives under the constant stress of keeping that old line of plates all spinning on the ends of their sticks—while he is fearful of letting one stop and crash to the ground. He goes on, and on, and on, till his body and mind just won’t let him go anymore. He has worn out, and that in no way reflects a weak faith, or a slack dedication.

The books and articles I read all proposed solutions which ranged from three step processes such as AIM,¹³ aware, implant, and manage; or RED¹⁴, relax, exercise, and diet; to a 12 or 15¹⁵ step process that if implemented would surely hasten burnout along its merry path.

I was disturbed by the solutions proposed in all of the books and articles I read, but one; not so much because of the actual suggestions but because of the underlying assumption which I believe contributes to burnout in the first place and which cannot be solved by any process.

¹² Louis McBurney, “The Danger of Aiming Too High,” *Leadership*, v.5:3

¹³ Rediger, G. Lloyd, *Coping with Clergy Burnout*, Problem presentation part of this book is good; the solution portion leaves lots to be desired.

¹⁴ Albrecht, *op.cit.* pp 221-227

¹⁵ Reuter, *op cit.*

The assumption that concerned me is that the pastor is primarily an agent of change who uses the Word of God to change people's lives—to bring them more in conformity with God-pleasing doctrine and practice.

No wonder so many pastors are so frustrated, overworked and ready to succumb. They've bought into the job description of the Holy Spirit, and they probably take over liberal doses of the work of the Father and the Son at the same time. The task of creating a perfect, more holy people is a never-ending one needing a limitless facilitator—that task belongs to God. “Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord Almighty.” (Zech 4:6)

And when our Old Adam uses our high calling and the life and death importance of our work as an encouragement for us to assume the responsibilities God himself alone can handle, then we're in trouble.

When we begin to think that because of our work we do not or should not have the same limits “of energy, insight, and time that we know other human beings have,” then we are abrogating to ourselves God's attributes. We pretend we can actually take over responsibility for another person's life, marriage, family, faith or for a congregation's growth in grace. We pretend that our marriages, families, and financial affairs will not fail like anyone else's when we do not give them the appropriate attention. We pretend we can go on and on without proper rest, change of pace, exercise, nutrition or spiritual nurture, and there will be no consequences. We pretend that because we are in this noble calling, called the ministry, we somehow become free of human limits(.... you will be like God.)”¹⁶

Is that what God expects of us? “So then men ought to regard us as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the secret things of God. Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful.” Nigel Turner in his book *Christian Words* says that *pistos* denotes trust; “often the confidence that what one is doing is right;”¹⁷ perhaps trustworthiness would be a better translation than faithfulness. Trustworthiness indicates the placing of one's reliance in something or someone; entrusting one's affairs to another. God has entrusted his affairs to us, and expects us to rely upon him in order to meet them. Does faithfulness therefore demand giving till you give up? Does God expect you to wear yourself out for his kingdom? Is it more God-pleasing to burnout than rust out?

The great Apostle Paul didn't think so and God spoke through him, “Let us not become weary in doing good for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.” (Gal 6:9) By that, does God mean “never rest!”? Paul continues, “therefore as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people.”

Kenneth Wuest's expanded translation perhaps makes the point more clear “Let us not slacken our exertions by reason of the weariness that comes from prolonged effort in habitually doing that which is good—for we shall reap if we do not become enfeebled through exhaustion and faint.”¹⁸

Faithfulness has its limits, because we have limits. Paul speaks of man's limits when he addresses the Corinthians' stewardship: “Now finish the work so that your eager willingness may be matched by your completion of it according to your means. For if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what he does not have.”

¹⁶ Rediger, *op cit* . p 29

¹⁷ Nigel Turner, *Christian Words*, p. 18

¹⁸ Kehl, *op cit*. p.27

(2 Cor.8:11,12 The passage used earlier from Luke 17 about “doing our duty” suggests we are to be faithful in everything he has told us to do and he has not told us to do everything.

He has not told us to change people’s lives. And he has not called us to do that. We are called to proclaim his Word. In that job he has not given any of us all the talents, abilities, or strengths we need to be a “perfect” pastor. None of us can expect ourselves to be such, nor need we believe the expectations of other people in this area. Success or Failure is impossible for us in the Lord’s church since he is the head, he is the one holding the responsibility. And if he can’t make it a “success” then no one can. (But of course his church is perfectly successful, and we need to remember that. Since he is the one responsible and we know we have to answer to him we can rejoice in our ministry because we know how he feels about us. “This then is how we know we belong to the truth and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence whenever our hearts condemn us. For God is greater than our hearts and he knows everything.” (I John 3:19) In addition, we can say with Paul “I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed I do not even judge myself. My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me ... He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men’s hearts. At that time each will receive his praise from God.”(I Cor. 4:3-5) As for all Christians, we pastors should remember our value is not determined by our productivity, but by Christ’s love shown us in forgiveness. And our kingdom successes are not determined by our hard work, but as God blesses our faithfulness.

Lest I’m misunderstood, I want to make clear I’m not against hard work. It is important in achieving our goals, and it is a good antidote to the real danger of laziness when it comes to fulfilling ones potential in a job without a time clock. “But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry.” (2 Tim 4:5) The longer hours and more intense work that become necessary when we try to usurp God’s responsibilities or attributes are what I’m against. We are to learn to work within our limits and at the responsibilities God has given us. “It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God’s people for works of service so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.” (Eph 2:11-13) We are not facilitators of “change” but proclaimers of “grace” with responsibility for results in God’s lap. Whether we served him or not, he would still accomplish his will. Fortunately for us, he chooses us to use as he has equipped us and within the limitations of the life he has given us.

I believe to properly meet the challenges of proclaiming the good news without burning out, we need to overcome the all-too-common attitude that sees the church as a pastor’s creation rather than God’s. “To the degree that we deny the limitations of our humanity we shade the face of God from our people. The task of the preacher is to be so transparent that others see God rather than you or me. That task can never be done perfectly by us. Only Jesus could say “ He who has seen me has seen the Father. But people should be able to look at us and see something of God—not that we have to become the superstar of the congregation or the idol. That is cultic. Rather we need to be like John the Baptist... ‘I am not the Messiah, I am not Elijah, I am not the expected prophet. I am a voice crying in the wilderness, “ Make straight the way of the Lord.”’ Our task is no different. We are messengers not the message. We are earthen vessels, not the treasure. We are creatures, not the Creator. We are dusty witnesses not super stars.”¹⁹

¹⁹ Collins, *op.cit.* p. 81

Being a faithful, dusty witness is what we strive for, but we are to be faithful within our limitations. Perhaps the concept of limitations is too simplistic a solution to burnout, but I see it as the key that unlocks burnout's death grip.

As a pastor no matter how much I love the Lord; no matter how much I love his church and the work of his kingdom I have to realize I am limited:

My time is limited.

My abilities are limited.

My understanding is limited.

My empathy, sympathy, capacity for work and love are all limited. My commitment to Christ and his Gospel are to be unlimited, because of his mercy, but the work I do for him is bound by my limitations, even as is my faith.

Jesus the limitless God-man knew how humans are limited. "Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death." (Hebrews 2:14-15) He understands our limitations, he had to deal with them himself. During his ministry he frequently got away from people and teaching. He may have spent the time in prayer; perhaps he studied the Word; sometimes, however, he spent time just visiting. He had only so much time for himself, his disciples, his people and his work. He had to balance them. One time after a confrontation with the Jews he was balancing his life with a trip away from Judea, when word came from Mary and Martha that Lazarus was deathly ill. Jesus, with his omniscience and power, knew immediately what would take place. He knew Lazarus would die and an even greater miracle than healing would take place. But can we explain his two day "procrastination" by saying he knew everything would be alright? Mary and Martha were disappointed. If Jesus had been there, they believed Lazarus could have been healed. Similar situations occur for us. Jesus didn't always jump when someone called for help. He knew his priorities. Of course you and I, limited as we are, wouldn't delay over someone's call for help, but there are many instances when a pastor is expected to drop what he is doing for small matters that have been blown into importance.

Faithfulness doesn't mean we always have to drop what we are doing, but that we know the priorities of God's kingdom, and are about the business of taking care of them.

Besides time limitations, unlike Jesus, we have ability limitations. I suspect many of us have thought to ourselves after a sermon, Bible class, counseling session or evangelism presentation "If only I'd said something else." "If only I had explained my point another way." "if only I had used that other Bible passage." Then we repeat the conversation in our mind, playing it over and over readying ourselves for the next encounter as if our own words had the power to convert and change in and of themselves. We need to speak as carefully as possible, but the heritage we now work to overcome in our laypeople is a tight-lipped fear of saying the wrong thing that sees the only solution to misrepresenting God is saying nothing.

We are limited—or else we wouldn't need the Holy Spirit or his Words. It is not a case of co-operation in the sense that we contribute this much of our natural abilities, and the Spirit makes up the difference necessary to finish the task. Rather it is a case of co-operation with the Spirit in that He works through us, using our abilities, but remaining solely responsible for accomplishing the task. "We ought to always thank God for you, brothers loved by the Lord, because from the beginning God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit

and through belief in the truth. He called you to this through our gospel, so that you might share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.” (2 Thess 2:13,14)

A third limitation we are wise to acknowledge is that our responsibilities are limited. We can look at Paul’s ministry to understand this. He was appointed the Apostle to the Gentiles—large enough task, yet limited. “I am thankful I did not baptize any of you except Crispus and Gaius ... for Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel—“ (I Cor 1:14,17) As valuable as baptizing was to the kingdom, it was not his responsibility. The well known example of Moses in the old Testament illustrates the problems that arise when a leader is viewed as indispensable: “Moses’ father-in-law replied, ‘What you are doing is not good. You and these people who come to you will only wear yourselves out. The work is too heavy for you; you cannot handle it alone... you must be the people’s representative before God and bring their disputes to him. Teach them the decrees and laws, and show them the way to live and the duties they are to perform. But select capable men from all the people... have them serve as judges for the people at all times ... have them bring every difficult case to you, the simple cases they can decide themselves. That will make your load lighter, because they will share it with you. If you do this and God so commands, you will be able to stand the strain, and all these people will go home satisfied.” (Exodus 18:17-23 selected)

We don’t have to make every decision. But responsibilities are limited. The book of Acts sets up a similar principle “It is not right for us to wait on tables”. Yet how many pastors do general janitorial work because it is necessary for the church’s image and no one else will do it?

Don’t we have our hands full with the jobs God has given us? Do we need to take on more so that all our work is strained? Do we need to take on those jobs others could do better, more efficiently, and with greater joy and service to the kingdom? “In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Grecian Jews among them complained against those of the Aramaic speaking community because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, ‘It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. ... We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.’” (Acts 6:1-3)

We *are* limited. We need to remember that as we go about our work. And we need foremost to remember that our battle is not against flesh and blood, but against the “powers of this dark world, and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.” (Eph. 6:12) For that we need a constantly replenished source of strength.

What a friend we have in Jesus
All our sins and griefs to bear.
What a privilege to carry
everything to God in prayer.
Oh, what peace we often forfeit,
Oh, what needless pain we bear,
All because we do not carry,
Everything to God in prayer.

Have we trials and temptations?
Is there trouble anywhere?
We should never be discouraged,
Take it to the Lord in prayer.

Can we find a Friend so faithful
Who will all our sorrows share?
Jesus knows our every weakness,
Take it to the Lord in prayer.

Are we weak and heavy laden,
Cumbered with a load of care?
Precious Savior, still our Refuge
Take it to the Lord in Prayer.
Do thy friends despise, forsake thee?
Take it to the Lord in prayer.
In his arms he'll take and shield thee,
Thou wilt find a solace there.²⁰

The Psalmist David writes what trouble I would have been in had I not had this confidence: “The Lord is my light and my salvation—whom shall I fear?” (Psalm 27:1) We need spiritual strength—*personal* renewal. ”Be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes.” (Eph 6:10,11) And we find it in the Word of God. “Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.” (Col. 3:15,16) His Word will teach us to

balance our ministry, “Until I come devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching. Do not neglect your gift which was given you through a prophetic message when the body of elders laid their hands on you. Be diligent in these matters; give yourself wholly to them so that everyone may see your progress. Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers.” (I Tim 4: 13-16) We need to pace our work load, paying attention to all the responsibilities God has given us as Christians, not just pastors—self, family, health, welfare, and growth. We will pace ourselves, not in the shooting off like a stick of dynamite, followed by collapse; but in a steady unhurried pace, like a dynamo. “I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brother, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it, but one thing I do: forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. All of us who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. Only let us live up to what we have already attained.” (Phi. 3:12-16) “When I nurture and manage myself *modestly* and *responsibly*, then I am capable of being an effective tool for others.”²¹

The university’s Aesop’s turtle reminds me of the value of pacing—slow and steady wins the race.

The Apostle Paul states the goal and the importance of not burning out as he says good-bye to the Ephesian elders:

²⁰ The Lutheran Hymnal, # 457

²¹ Rediger, op.cit. p 31

I served the Lord with great humility and with tears, although I was severely tested by the plots of the Jews. You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house. I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus.

And now compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there. I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardship are facing me. However I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the gospel of God’s grace. (Acts 20:19-24)

The sooner we remember our limitations, the sooner we act out of the knowledge that we are dependent upon God, he is not dependent upon us, nor is his church, the better off we’ll be.

“The fire in our spiritual lamps is to burn the oil in the wick, not the wick itself, for when that happens, the wick smokes calling attention to itself. It is soon burned out. Believers are commanded to be fervent in spirit, but the flame of the candle must not consume the candlestick.”²²

The “burning” must not consume the Busch.

²² Kehl, op.cit. p 28

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