

# Pastoral Burn-Out: Fact or Fiction

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As we begin to pursue the subject of Pastoral Burn-out, with a view toward the determination of whether or not that terminology reflects fact or fiction, I ask that you keep two general parameters in mind.

First, this is not a theologically-based presentation in the normally accepted form of pastoral conference essays. If that would be your desire, I think your program committee would have reverted to the time-honored formula of essay topics, namely "What Does the Bible Say About Pastoral Burn-out?" Thus you will not find a "this we believe; this we reject" format; nor will you be presented with a catechetical review of Scriptural passages in logical order. I say this because we are dealing with a phenomenon ranging beyond, found among, and affecting human beings regardless of religious or non-religious persuasions. All of this is not to say that Scripture does not have some very definite things to say about the condition under discussion. It does, and concerning causes, symptoms, consequences and of course, solutions, we will need to hear what God has to say.

Secondly, for some very personal reasons supported by recent intensified reading, study and investigation, I am convinced that this matter, because of its intangible nature, lends itself more to round-table discussion than to printed presentation. I really am convinced that a greater benefit might accrue to those interested in or affected by this matter to do some real heart-felt, gut-level give-and-take, rather than simply participating with eyes and ears in a canned printed presentation. Since there are no stacks of documents existent in our Wisconsin Synod circles from past presentations one always fears to be among the first to write, lest you write only to fill space and use time, or what may be worse - neglect to give proper exploration time or space to an atom-like consideration which when once split reveals a multitude of positives and negatives.

Yet, one may be surprised to know that a study of this subject in this particular pastoral-conference is not now unique. The Spring Pastor/Teacher Conference of the Central Conference/Western Wisconsin District, as well as one of the Pastor/Teacher conferences of the Michigan District have this very same topic under consideration. Doubting that there could have been three (3) geographically separate program committees conspiring with one another, I beseech you therefore to rid yourself of any Metro-North paranoia or sense of self-pity or false guilt.

## 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, way of life, or relationship

that failed to produce the expected reward or result.” To go on: “Whenever the expectation level is dramatically opposed to reality and the person persists in trying to reach that expectation, trouble is on the way. Deep inside, friction is building up, the inevitable result of which will be a depletion of the individual’s resources, an attrition of his vitality, energy, and ability to function”.

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. (There is an investment of time, effort and emotion into a charged situation over which the “helper” ultimately does not exercise final control.) 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. Ask the Conference of Presidents, ask the circuit visitors, ask the WLCFS counselors, and ask some wives.

### **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 done, never over, never finished, never completed. 4. The Pastor who is a 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 we love them; love them, because our Savior loved them first. 5. We understand that the essence of The Church is people; it is not program, not pew, not pious platitude. People - real alive people, with souls redeemed by the blood of the Lamb living in bodies sanctified by the Spirit as the temple of God. 6. We 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 of the ministry. 7. And we 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 teen-agers; 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 is: can their/our idealism be tempered by reality? Can we/dare we readjust our expectations? I suppose it can be said that if you don’t fit the above 7, 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 I would here 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" - our members who think this; maybe we believe it ourselves. It strikes me that it is just then that we have joined our friend Peter, saying rather proudly of our immune condition: Not me Lord, not me.

In the first - and final - analysis, we are people. That means we are human. We are susceptible. We 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. We may not be of the world, but we ought to believe that we 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, let me just list 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, or 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 quiet. 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. I know of one pastor (not of this conference) 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.

The account in I Kings 19 reveals that Elijah manifested some 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 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. Elijah exemplifies Freudenberger's description: "It's the letdown that comes in between crises 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" (p. 110). Elsewhere Freudenberger mentions the burn-out's questioning of "the value of activities and friendship, even of life itself" (p. 63).

The man who displayed such great energy in outrunning Ahab's chariot (Freudenberger speaks of the burn-out candidate's "sense of omnipotence") 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 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.

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 my pastor/friend Paul!

### **LINK IT WITH A LINE FROM LUTHER**

So that you be not disappointed. It is reported that as Melancthon 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 wrote: "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 no 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 moments or pages ago I included the words “we are still in the world”. That phrase bears repeating and enlargement. I am unable to count the number of sermons I have heard - and even probably preached - 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 I am not certain that 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 I get the impression that there is a great deal of shock or dismay when the consequences of sin confront us.

In this respect the Bible does have much to say about the cause of burn-out. Why are people, why are we emotionally drained and physically exhausted? Why are there headaches and sleepless nights? Why are we super-nervous or super-apathetic? 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 our expectations of the saints and what we see in 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, and I join them, 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 I said about some possibilities applying to pastors under section 2. In spite of our robes and charcoal gray suits and ease of operating on the yonder side of the Communion rail, we are cut from the same cloth as the people whom we serve. In delivering God’s Word and Will to them, our sinful pride wants us always to add the words “like me” - worship (like me), study the Word (like me), serve God (like me). We have a conflict with our pharisaical sinful flesh.

It seems to me that that conflict is intensified by the fact that much of our effort in life is directed at people who have the same conflict. We seek to encourage the drowning of the sinful nature of the souls entrusted to our care and thereafter to elevate their new man. And it is difficult for us 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.

So the continuing conflict - in ourselves and in those whom we serve - between sinner and saint can drive people and us to depression and despair. Paul concludes the recitation of his inner struggle with the words, “O wretched man that I am!”

Something probably needs here to be said about the charismatic, pietistic, “victorious life” theology of the mid-1980’s. And maybe, among “the brethren”, we pretend its 100% true. Don’t get me wrong. Being in union with and service to Christ and His Church is not misery. But it is patently not all victory. Too often our 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 pastors of many denominations (including some of us) 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 seems to me that in addition to the ecstasy of the post-Pentecost 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 comfort in seeing 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 guys fault. While it may be true that environment, bureaucracy, lack of compensation, 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 pastoral conference or a preacher's 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 us or that advice givers should not be advice takers. Physician, heal thyself.

Spiritual reminders are always in order. Remember your Call - you did not come here by yourself. None of us have taken our ministries upon ourselves. We were called by a group of Christians to serve them. We have the assurance that our Lord wants us to serve where we are serving. Sometimes we fall into the trap of thinking that we are not only shepherds of souls - but also lords of life, with the job of producing solutions to all of the people-problems with which we may deal. Sometimes we fall into the trap of thinking that they are "our members" - rather than the Lord's, which then leads us to forget that the only ultimate responsibility we have is faithfulness. The alcoholic's serenity prayer needs some application to the 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 a white shirt and black tie. It might do you some good to change into your "grubs" even for the 90-minute supper hour.

### **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 here today.

So we proceed. Who is #2? Our members, the people we serve, the people who need us and our ministry? I don't think so, not if we read Scripture properly. It seems to me that after taking care of #1, our Lord tells us to love our neighbor as ourself. So I am #2. Yes, I must love myself or else I am unable and unqualified to love my neighbor. We don't talk much in our spiritual circles about loving yourself. Somehow, even the mention of it smacks of prideful egotism, selfishness and self-service. And if you would really know me as I know myself, you would understand why there's so much in me that really deserves my own hate.

But Jesus says: Love yourself. And 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 I know that I may not be able to write like James (\_\_\_), preach like Paul (\_\_\_), exegise like David (\_\_\_), devotionalize like Gerhard (\_\_\_), 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.

And when I have learned #2 in response to #1 then I can move on to loving #3 -- thou shalt love thy neighbor. That's you!

A number of conferences ago, we were privileged to hear an essay presented by John Braun entitled "Some Concerns for the Parish Ministry". It was filled with meat, and I am somewhat concerned that we treated it as pabulum. But I would encourage you to go back and read from one of his sections, especially sub-titled "Brotherly Love Between Pastors".

In light of that re-reading I began to wonder if we knew just why we are considering the subject "Pastoral Burn-Out - Fact or Fiction?" There are some less than noble reasons for asking about the reality or the fictitiousness of this syndrome. 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.

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.

And so I need to enlarge my previous statement concerning my own unrecognized sinfulness as the chief cause of my burn-out. You must couple that with my unwillingness to let you see me as I really am. You see, I really don't think that I have a problem loving you. Please believe that. But I do have a problem letting you love me. To let you love me involves risk; it means letting you know that I need you and your love. It means that I must dare to take off my mask and open the closet of my heart and life. I must trust you to such an extent that I not only am willing but I am able to let you see my weakness, my tears, my frustration, my anger, my stupidity, my sloth, my insecurity and my insufficiency. If I cannot let you love me when I need your love, if I cannot let you be a little Christ unto me when I need Him, I will burn-out. But the minute I do it you must also know - the minute I do all of that and let you love me and feel even a hint of pharisaism, mockery, or pious platitude in response - the same moment will I fold back in upon myself, run to my cave or broom tree, all alone, and burn-out.

And to whatever degree those of the brotherhood who have experienced burn-out have suffered aloneness because of my masks, I offer more than an apology. I offer my sorrow over the fact that I may have caused you not to let me bear your burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ.

This is neither a sermon nor an indictment; it is a challenge and a prayer. God help us help each other, and thus be His instruments whereby bruised reeds shall not break and smoking flax shall not burn-out.