

WISCONSIN LUTHERAN SEMINARY

MAINTAINING JOY IN MINISTRY: THE NECESSITY OF VERTICAL FULFILLMENT
AND HEALTHY HORIZONTAL AWARENESS

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ABSTRACT

Through his Word, God fills the human heart with a joy that is unlike anything this world has to offer. The pastor, in his calling, is immeasurably blessed to be able to spend the majority of his days reading God's Word and sharing it with people. The conclusion could be made, then, that pastors are the most joyful people in the world. But this is not always the case. Many pastors struggle to maintain joy in their ministry and are left wondering what is so wrong and why they cannot seem to find the joy they once had in their calling. How can a pastor maintain or regain joy in his ministry? While this is a multifaceted topic for which volumes could be written, this paper addresses the spiritual side of a pastor's lost joy. It explores what biblical joy is and the dangers of losing it through academizing of the Word of God. Finally, in a theological and practical manner, the paper explores how to regain or maintain joy in ministry through vertical, Christ-given fulfillment accompanied by a horizontal awareness of the role a pastor has for his people and vice-versa.

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INTRODUCTION

On the surface, it seems there could hardly be a more joy-filled occupation than serving the Lord in the pastoral ministry. It is simply a fact that the pastor is privileged to spend more time each week delving into the rich depths of God's Word than is possible in most other professions. He spends hours in exegesis of his sermon text, in pondering the text's malady and cure and considering how to communicate it to his people. He spends hours in preparation for Bible class, contemplating how to word his questions in a way that causes the people to draw God's wonderful truths out of Bible accounts. He gets to witness first-hand the growth of his people as they gather around the Word. He gets to see the faces of prospects attending his Bible Information Classes light up, as they understand for the first time the unconditional, unadulterated gospel of Christ's life, death, and resurrection to redeem us. He gets to hold the hand of his beloved members on their death bed, as he shares the message of Christ's forgiveness that gives them peace through their very last breath. The pastor has the unique opportunity of studying and sharing God's Word for a living. It might be assumed that pastors have more joy than those of any other occupation.

The statistics, however, would indicate a different story. One does not have to dig very deeply to find a multitude of studies and statistics that expose the mental, emotional, and spiritual state of many Christian pastors in the trenches of ministry, and the results are disconcerting. A survey by Pastor Eugene Cho in 2011 reports that 75 percent of pastors interviewed had experienced at least one major "stress-related crisis" in their ministry.¹ The same study indicated that 40 percent of pastors had debated resigning their call in the last three

¹ Eugene Cho, "Death By Ministry." Sermon Central, April 21, 2011.
<https://www.sermoncentral.com/pastors-preaching-articles/eugene-cho-death-by-ministry-802>.

months, 50 percent said they would leave the ministry if they could find an alternate sufficient means of income, and 70 percent said they were in an ongoing battle with depression.²

Furthermore, in his research, he discovered that a purported “1500 pastors leave the ministry each month due to moral failure, spiritual burnout, or contention in their churches.”³ The statistics are staggering, if not terrifying.

While it is uncertain exactly who was interviewed for Cho’s survey and to which denominations they all belonged, it would be perhaps naïve to assume that pastors in WELS are exempt from the battle for maintaining joy in ministry that is brought to light by these general statistics. With just one year of ministry experience as a vicar, I have already experienced to some degree this battle for maintaining joy in ministry. I realistically expect that, as a full-time pastor, there will be times when I, and all other pastors, are brought to the ugly front lines of it.

Ministry is not easy. The old joke that pastors only work one day a week can be somewhat humorous because it is so far from the truth. In fact, many pastors struggle to find just one *day off* per week. The nature of the job is that a pastor’s work is never finished. Even after a pastor finishes everything he planned to get done for the week, there’s often a lurking feeling in the back of his head that there’s more ministry work he could be doing. There’s always a homebound member who would find immense joy in a devotion and Lord’s Supper. There’s always a prospect that could be followed up on. There’s always a delinquent member who needs to be reminded of how much the congregation misses her, and how much she is missing out on without gathering around the Word with the body of Christ. There’s always a door in the

² Cho, “Death by Ministry.”

³ Cho, “Death by Ministry.”

community that hasn't been knocked on in a while. The list of ministry tasks that a pastor could do is endless.

Meanwhile, the pastor is trying to manage his time as faithfully as possible in order to be faithful in his vocation as a husband and a father. Gone is the illusion (if it ever even existed) that a pastor can reasonably operate on a strict 9-5 schedule to ensure sufficient time with family. The reality of the current age is that evenings will fill up quickly for the pastor with meetings, evangelism calls, Bible Information Classes, and more. The pastor's schedule often puts a strain on family life.

Add to that the immense sense of pressure and responsibility placed on the pastor's shoulders to carry out that work. The writer to the Hebrews says about pastors, "They keep watch over you as men who must give an account" (Hebrews 13:17). As a shepherd, pastors are responsible for the safety of their sheep. The pressure is on.

Furthermore, the fact is that ministry does not always go as smoothly as we naively envisioned when we first embarked upon the eight-year educational journey to receive our MDiv and our assignment at graduation. Pastors are in the emotional and spiritual trenches with their members. They feel the emotional toll as they try to counsel a couple whose marriage is falling apart. They feel the pain and possibly the guilt when a strong member ends up leaving the church for another denomination. They feel the frustration and worry as strong personalities collide within the congregation. Day after day, the hardships of ministry threaten to stamp out a pastor's joy.

Yet it is the nature of mankind to search externally for the source of any given problem. It always has been, ever since the Fall into sin. Instead of owning up to his failure to serve as head of his household, Adam blamed Eve for giving him the fruit and God for giving him the woman.

Instead of owning up to her failure to fear, love, and trust God above all things, Eve blamed the serpent who deceived her (Genesis 3:12-13). When confronted, it is the nature of mankind to look for external excuses.

Pastors too, when confronted with the sobering reality of ministry's struggles, can point to all kinds of external reasons for why they begin to feel trapped in a joyless ministry: modern ministry is too demanding; my people just won't listen; I can't convince my people to volunteer enough; I don't get enough undisturbed vacation time. The list goes on. Paul David Tripp, in his book *Dangerous Calling: Confronting the Unique Challenges of Pastoral Ministry*, writes, "You tell yourself again and again that you are not the problem—that it is or they are, but not you. And you tell yourself that you don't really need to change; it's the people and circumstances around you that need to change. What you are doing, although you probably aren't aware of it, is building elaborate, seemingly logical arguments for your own righteousness."⁴ Don Matzat, LCMS pastor and author of *Christ-Esteem*, looks back on his early years of ministry and echoes this same mentality. He writes, "I had always blamed other people, circumstances, and situations beyond my control for my unhappiness. 'If I could change the circumstances,' I reasoned, 'I could be happy.' But into each situation I entered, there was a singular constant: ME!"⁵ While there will undoubtedly be some complications in the pastor's ministry that are outside of his control, the problem of a seemingly joyless ministry is often a problem that begins in the pastor's heart.

⁴ Paul David Tripp, *Dangerous Calling: Confronting the Unique Challenges of Pastoral Ministry* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 33.

⁵ Don Matzat, *Christ Esteem: Where the Search for Self-Esteem Ends* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1990) 54.

My intention is not to trivialize the gravity of a pastor's hardships, nor the toll they take on him and his family. Those are very real struggles that can continually threaten the pastor's physical, emotional, and spiritual health. Rather, my intention is twofold: 1) to suggest that the lack of joy brought to the surface by external ministry struggles can really be a symptom of an internal problem growing in the pastor's heart, and 2) to address these heart issues biblically and practically, finding relief and rest in the rescuing grace of Christ.

There are important questions to be asked in regarding joy in ministry. Where is the source of the pastor's joy? To whom or to what is he fleeing, either intentionally or unintentionally, to obtain it? What is biblical joy in the first place, and what does it look like? How does he maintain it throughout his ministry? These can be helpful questions of evaluation for a pastor to ask himself, whether he is in the midst of a joy-crisis or attempting to proactively prevent it. Throughout this paper, we will explore these and other questions to be reminded that the pastor will find and maintain joy in the trenches of ministry through vertical fulfillment given by God in Christ accompanied by a healthy horizontal awareness.

BIBLICAL JOY: AN INNER EMOTION OF THE SOUL

“I’ve got the joy, joy, joy, joy down in my heart. Where? Down in my heart! Where? Down in my heart! I’ve got the joy, joy, joy, joy down in my heart! Where? Down in my heart to stay.”⁶ Perhaps we remember singing these simple words as a child in Vacation Bible School or Sunday School. While the message of this children’s song is, on the surface, somewhat rudimentary, it is perhaps more profound than we give it credit for. It expresses an important truth when it comes to our study of biblical joy: the joy of a Christian is a joy of the heart, an inner emotion of the soul. Biblical joy will not *always* be accompanied by laughter and dancing. Joy will not always bear with it a smile on one’s face. Nor is joy always absent in the presence of tears. This is true because biblical joy goes much deeper than “feelings.” It is an inner joy of the heart.

We can see this truth exemplified in our Savior. Jesus didn’t always have a smile on his face. As the Son of God, he did not exempt himself from the sadness that accompanies life in a sinful world. “Rather,” Paul writes in Philippians 2:7, “he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.” Our humble Savior felt the sting of sorrow on earth. In one of the shortest verses of Scripture, John expresses a truth that is at the same time simple and infinitely profound. He records very bluntly in John 11:35, “Jesus wept.” Upon hearing that his friend Lazarus had died, Jesus, the almighty God-Man, the one who knew that in a matter of moments he would use his almighty power to raise Lazarus from the dead—yes, *this* Jesus—broke down in tears. It was not as if his inner joy in continually carrying out the

⁶ George William Cooke, “Joy in My Heart,” 1925.

salvation of sinners was suddenly gone or replaced. His sadness and inner joy existed simultaneously.

However, that inner joy of the heart or soul is not altogether disconnected from the outward emotions. For that reason, the examples of joy in Scripture often portray “a spontaneous and complete joy involving the whole man—body and spirit, interior and exterior.”⁷ These two truths concerning biblical joy, that it is an inner emotion of the soul and that it often manifests itself outwardly, are expressed beautifully in the example of Mary. She had been told by the angel Gabriel the astounding news that she would bear the Savior of the world in her womb. After hurrying to share the news with her cousin Elizabeth, she bursts into song: ““My soul glorifies the Lord and *my spirit* rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me—holy is his name” (Luke 1:46-49). While her joy was, at its core, an inner emotion of the soul, it certainly expressed itself in an outward way. The joy that she had down in her heart in knowing that she would see firsthand the Lord carrying out his plan of salvation promised from of old erupted to the surface as she burst into song.

The pastor will want to keep these scriptural truths of joy in his mind as he endures the hardships of ministry. There is not something wrong with him if he doesn't *always* have a smile on his face, regardless of circumstances. There is, as Solomon expresses in Ecclesiastes 3:4, “a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance.” Yet the inner joy of the pastor's soul in knowing that his Savior went through hell on the cross in his place will affect his natural demeanor. It will change his outlook on life and ministry. His inner joy of the soul will, over time, be noticed by his flock and his family, as it finds its way to the surface. Likewise, if

⁷ Christian Duquoc, *The Gift of Joy* (New York: Paulist Press, 1968), 18.

his inner joy is beginning to dwindle or be stifled, the people around him will begin to notice, no matter how hard he tries to hide it. If he, his family, or his flock notice his increasingly habitual impatience, agitation, or pessimism, it is imperative for the pastor to conduct some deep, honest self-evaluation. For the spiritual well-being of the pastor, his family, and his flock, it is crucial for him to ask himself some questions. What's going on in his heart? From where is he seeking joy?

LOOKING FOR JOY IN ALL THE WRONG PLACES

“Rejoice in the Lord always,” Paul says (Phil 4:4 NIV). Or to word it another way, “Have joy in the Lord always.” A striking imperative, to be sure. A point so important, that he cannot help but repeat himself: “I’ll say it again: Rejoice!” Upon first read, this bold statement might sound like an overstatement, if not a total impossibility. Perhaps it would be more realistic if he had said, “Rejoice, most of the time.” That statement might make more sense, as we’re living in a sinful world, with all the troubles, sorrows, and let-downs that accompany it. But the problem with that statement is that it omits the most important phrase in Paul’s exhortation: Rejoice *in the Lord* always!

Rejoice *in the Lord* always because you know that no matter how badly you’ve messed up as a pastor or as a husband, as a father, or just as a Christian, through Christ “he has clothed [you] with garments of salvation and arrayed [you] in a robe of his righteousness, as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels” (Is 61:10). Rejoice *in the Lord* always because you know that “the Lord your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you,” even in the darkest hours of your ministry (Deut 31:6).” Rejoice *in the Lord* always, because you know that no matter how weak and helpless and inadequate you feel, “[Your God’s] power is made perfect in weakness;” he is never weak; he *is* your help (2 Cor 12:9). Rejoice *in the Lord* always, because you know that these “present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us” when God takes us to our eternal home in heaven (Rom 8:18). Rejoice *in the Lord* always, because you live your life in the Lord’s protecting, saving, healing bubble of his grace. Rejoice *in the Lord* always,

because his grace for you is not just for your death bed. It is real. It is now. It is yours. Rejoice *in the Lord* always!

The pastor knows these beautiful gospel truths by heart. He has been reminded of God's love and promises for him in Christ nearly every day for decades, possibly even since childhood. He gets the humbling privilege of preaching these gospel truths to his people every Sunday. He *knows* they are the true source of his joy. The message of Christ crucified and risen has not been suddenly wiped from his memory.

But the pastor is not exempt from this temptation to seek joy in all the wrong places and forget Paul's all-important phrase *in the Lord*. Tripp writes, "Why would it surprise us to know that pastors too fall into identity amnesia and begin to seek horizontally what they have already been given in Christ? Why would we conclude that pastors are protected from self-righteousness and defensiveness just because they are in full-time ministry?"⁸ The pastor's title doesn't remove him from Satan's crosshairs. In fact, Satan might very well zoom his scope ever closer on the pastor in the hopes that by so doing, he will lead others astray and kill two (or two hundred) believers with one stone of lies. One might conclude that the pastor may even be in greater danger of intentionally or unintentionally replacing this God-given, vertical fulfillment with a fulfillment found in all the wrong places—a method that has never proved to be a true, lasting solution for any human in the history of the world.

This is not a new discovery. King Solomon came to the same realization thousands of years ago, as he, under divine inspiration, authored Ecclesiastes. He was the man who seemed to have had it all. He was the wisest man on earth, both at his ancient time, and thereafter.⁹ He was

⁸ Tripp, *Dangerous Calling*, 79.

⁹ 1 Kgs 3:12: "I will do what you have asked. I will give you a wise and discerning heart, so that there will never have been anyone like you, nor will there ever be."

one of Israel's greatest kings, under whom Israel enjoyed relative peace and prosperity. He had wealth beyond what most of us could possibly imagine. He had love. He had family. By every standard that the world has for measuring what should provide lasting joy and fulfillment, by all external means, Solomon should have gone down in history as both the wisest man to ever live, and the most joyful. One might assume that a book of the Bible written by such a man would be bursting at the seams with joy and optimism! But as the reader scans the first verse, a decidedly opposite tone sets in: "The words of the Teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem: 'Meaningless! Meaningless!' says the Teacher. 'Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.'" These words pose a strikingly grim conclusion that sounds more like the pessimistic writings of Eeyore from Winnie the Pooh than the writings of a successful, believing king.

But Solomon's ever valuable insights give us a glimpse into what life is like without the Lord, and a glimpse into what life is like when one continually seeks lasting fulfillment and joy in anything but the Lord. As he looked back on his life, particularly during the times when he began to lose sight of the Lord's promises that he knew so well; when he underwent trials that threatened his physical and emotional well-being; when he began to rely on horizontal, external things for the source of his joy and fulfillment, his conclusion was that without the Lord, it was all meaningless. Without the concept of Paul's phrase *in the Lord*, all these external circumstances and treasures amounted to nothing, like a breath that gets lost in the wind. When he lost sight of his vertical fulfillment in God, he was left hopelessly grasping horizontally for something, anything to fill the hole that was growing in his heart. But nothing could fill it.

It is not unlike those shape-sorting toys for toddlers that facilitate motor skills and problem solving. No matter how hard the toddler tries to jam the square block into the circular hole, it is just never going to fit. So, the toddler may, in frustration, grab for the triangular block,

and become momentarily delighted that it can squeeze into the circular hole. But something is off. There are still gaps along the tringle's sides. The square or triangular block will just never fill the circular hole.

So it is when a person tries to seek joy and fulfillment by filling the God-shaped hole in his heart with things of this world that don't fit. Timothy Keller makes a comment that fits quite nicely into this illustration. He says, "If you try to put anything in the middle of the place that was originally made for God, it is going to be too small. It is going to rattle around in there."¹⁰ An individual might find something that seems to provide a temporary fix, but in the end, that hole remains.

Thus, his hard work in various areas of his life begins to feel fruitless and maybe even pointless. Solomon continues in verse 3: "What do people gain from all their labors at which they toil under the sun?" He begins to feel like an insignificant speck in the grand scheme of an always spinning, yet never truly changing world. He may find that his sermon and Bible class preparation has become an endless task that always ends up back on his desk, rather than an endless opportunity to hear the crushing and restoring message of his God in the words of Scripture. His work becomes more of a burden than a joy. Solomon notes this in verse 8, "All things are wearisome, more than one can say." He tries grasping horizontally for *something*, *someone*, some *experience* that will provide lasting fulfillment, but it's never enough: "The eye never has enough of seeing, nor the ear its fill of hearing." His attempts to fill that hole with being recognized as an exceptional pastor and leaving a legacy fall flat, as he realizes that "what has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun. Is there anything of which one can say, "Look! This is something new"? It was here before

¹⁰ Timothy Keller, *The Freedom of Self Forgetfulness: The Path to the True Christian Joy* (Leyland, ENG: 10Publishing, 2012) 15.

our time” (Eccles 1:9-10). Keller comments, ““By comparing ourselves to other people and trying to make ourselves look better than others, we are boasting. Trying to recommend ourselves, trying to create a self-esteem resume because we are desperate to fill our sense of inadequacy and emptiness.”¹¹ But it never works. Anything and everything horizontal with which a person tries to replace the lasting fulfillment and inner joy of Christ begins to feel, as Solomon puts it, “meaningless.”

It may become increasingly evident that the pastor is not finding the joy *in the Lord* that his weary soul constantly needs. He may relate to what Don Matzat described: “I knew that my sins were forgiven through the death of Jesus Christ, but I was becoming increasingly unhappy with my condition. In addition, I was also becoming increasingly disenchanted with the pastoral ministry.”¹² It begs the question, “How can someone who spends the majority of his days studying God’s Word be so often and so continuously missing out on the joy *in the Lord* that it offers and gives?” We will explore what I believe to be the root problem that is so often at the bottom of this, before examining the two common effects of it in a pastor’s life.

¹¹ Keller, *Freedom of Self-Forgetfulness*, 20.

¹² Matzat, *Christ-Esteem*, 48.

THE ROOT PROBLEM AND ITS EFFECTS ON THE PASTOR

Academizing the Word

As always, digging to the root of our sinfulness, exposing the infectious sickness of our corrupt hearts, is not a fun endeavor. But it is an endeavor that is important—even necessary—for maintaining both joy in ministry and a healthy relationship with God and his Word. These are two concepts that are intimately related, as we shall see.

Reflecting on his own life experience as a parish pastor, as well as the experiences of countless other pastors he's spoken with in his current unique ministry of speaking to thousands of churches worldwide, Tripp has identified some key issues going on within pastoral culture that are invaluable for the pastor to recognize as he seeks to retain or maintain joy in ministry. One key issue that Tripp has encountered is what he calls an "academizing of the faith."¹³ He defines this term most clearly in a paragraph where he theorizes where it starts. He writes, "It begins with a distant, impersonal, information-based handling of the Word of God. It begins with pastors who, in their seminary years, became quite comfortable with holding God's Word distant from their own hearts."¹⁴ Tripp is not alone in identifying this temptation for pastors. WELS Pastor Nathan R. Pope, in his book *Motivation for Ministry*, identifies this same enticing temptation in his own life. He writes, "I am curiously tempted to treat the Bible as the chief textbook from which dogma is drawn rather than as God's living Word whose purpose it is to draw me into a personal relationship with him."¹⁵ Pastors with different backgrounds, different

¹³ Tripp, *Dangerous Calling*, 49.

¹⁴ Tripp, *Dangerous Calling*, 52.

¹⁵ Nathan R. Pope, *Motivation for Ministry: Soli Deo Gloria: Perspectives for Every Pastor* (Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Pub. House, 1993), 209.

denominations, different Seminary training, and different dynamics of ministry are, in varying terms, identifying this same concept of unintentionally turning the study of God's Word into purely an intellectual endeavor as a real danger to their ministry.

We in WELS, who maintain such high regard for the Word of God in our teaching, preaching, and worship, might find ourselves falling unsuspecting into the trap of academizing God's Word. It is easy for the pastor to read 2 Timothy 3:16-17 with great zeal, excitement, and a boisterous "amen!" when it comes to the application of God's Word to his people's lives: "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work." It can be somewhat more difficult for the pastor to recognize and appreciate that the God-breathed Scripture is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training *the pastor himself* in righteousness. It can be difficult for him to see how that powerful Word thoroughly equips *him*, not just for serving his people, but for combatting the devil's never ending sermon of lies that he preaches to the pastor's heart.

The case could be made that one of the devil's favorite and perhaps most successful deceptions is to get the pastor, seminary student, or lay-leader to view God's living and active Word simply as a theological encyclopedia or as a tool to complete a task, win an argument, or gain prideful respect. For the Word of God used as intended is the devil's biggest fear. It silences every lie that spills out of the devil's mouth. It exposes the hopelessly sinful condition of the human so that he is faced with the damning truth that he cannot save himself. It is a window to heaven through which we see our triumphant Savior whose tender heart drew him to hell on the cross so that heaven would be opened for sinners whom he loved. It is the means through which the Holy Spirit creates, strengthens, and sustains faith in Christ unto life everlasting. It is the very

vitalizing antidote that is so crucial for the survival of a person's soul. The Word of God is power. The devil would gain no small victory in slowly, over time, tempting a person to unintentionally put a shield up over his own heart, blocking the Word of God and its power. It would be a great tragedy indeed if the pastor would use God's Word as a tool for others, while failing to use it for the constant Christ-given healing of his own constantly sin-broken soul. This is academizing the Word.

Tripp's conclusion on where this academizing of faith or the Word begins, however, deserves evaluation. As mentioned in the quote above, he pinpoints its origin in the seminary classroom. He continues, "I am convinced that...it begins with classrooms that are academic without being pastoral. It begins with brains becoming more important than hearts. It begins with test scores being more important than character."¹⁶ I have to admit ignorance on what the seminary culture is like at the Reformed Episcopal Seminary where Tripp received his M.Div or Westminster Theological Seminary where he earned his D.Min in Biblical Counseling.¹⁷ Nor do I know the seminary culture that the pastors whom Dr. Tripp has encountered over the years have experienced. It seems to be a reoccurring theme that he has identified in pastors from various denominations. I respect him for humbly yet boldly identifying the general issue in seminarian training, not out of bitterness but out of genuine desire to confront the issues going on in pastoral culture.

It's perhaps necessary, then, to evaluate our own pastoral training in WELS at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary to see if what Tripp says is true of our seminary training as well. After reading this section of his book, I sat through a semester of class with seven different professors.

¹⁶ Tripp, *Dangerous Calling*, 52.

¹⁷ "About Paul Tripp." <https://www.paultripp.com/about>.

Throughout the semester, I intentionally tried to detect this academizing of the Word in the classroom and in seminary culture. I am firmly convinced that academizing of the Word does indeed begin at the seminary—but NOT by fault of the professors or of our system.

Rather, what I was looking for in my professors and in the system, I instead found to be increasingly more evident in myself. I admit this not to draw attention to myself, but to illustrate the problem which Tripp identifies, and which may indeed be going on inside the hearts and heads of other seminary students. I caught myself at times going to class more concerned about messing up a translation than I was about growing in the faith through God's living and active Word. I caught myself at times studying God's Word for assignments "just to get it done," rather than finding the joy that God desires to vertically transport into my heart through the Word. I caught myself at times not coming to chapel not as a beggar in desperate need of the healing that only Christ and his sacrifice gives, but as a critic. I caught myself at times evaluating the preacher's style and his identification of specific law and gospel more than I found myself being crushed by the specific law of the text and restored by its specific gospel. My thoughts drifted ashamedly too often towards "*I would have dug deeper into the law, I would have pointed them to this shading of the gospel in the text, I would have encouraged the people in this way,*" rather than hearing how this text crushed *me* with the law, healed *me* with the gospel, and empowered *me* in my life of sanctification. In short, when I come to God's Word unguarded, I often find myself acting more as a slanted mirror, deflecting the message horizontally to my future hearers, rather than as an active recipient of God's vertical message for me.

Meanwhile, what I observed for two previous years on the seminary campus, one year off site under a bishop, and what has been reaffirmed this year back on campus is a seminary culture that is academic, yet at the same time highly personal and pastoral. Our professors have

emphasized the importance of daily, personal devotion with God. They have been helpful in encouraging us in concrete ways to implement it. They have shown us not only how to apply God's Word to others, but also to ourselves. They have humbly admitted their own weaknesses, flaws, and sinfulness, and treated us as sinner-saints addressing sinner-saints. They have been shamelessly brought to the brink of tears because that night in the town of David, not only has a Savior been born to *you*, but a Savior has been born to *me*. They have encouraged us to continually take the time to let that sink into our own hearts before we preach the gospel in word or song. They have encouraged and facilitated peer-coaching, so that seminarians have a friend with whom they can mutually confess their struggles and be encouraged and built up by the gospel. They have, even in dogmatics classes, taught the true teachings of Scripture in a practical, personal, pastoral way. They have invested their time into getting to know each student in the classroom, in the hallways, and in fellowship events. They have been our pastors. They have been our brothers.

I acknowledge the possibility of a sort of loyal pride in the seminary of my own beloved synod. I recognize that it is not a perfect place and that there is always room for improvement. I believe that there will always be benefit, for professors and students alike, to guard against the ever-present temptation to handle God's powerful Word merely academically. But my examination of the curriculum, professors, and culture of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary is that it fosters and equips its students for an academic yet highly personal, self-applying study of God's Word.

But the identification of my own shameful academizing of the Word in a culture that fosters otherwise leads me to believe that this is an issue for which the blame cannot be pawned

off on external circumstances.¹⁸ This is an issue of the heart. This is an issue which may very well find its conception in the heart of a seminary student. This is an issue to which any pastor or seminary student is always susceptible.

This creates the occasion for self-evaluation for any believer, but especially for the pastor and seminary student, who may be in particularly strong danger of this particular sin. Is the pastor coming to the Word of God each day in his devotional time as a beggar in desperate need of being refreshed by the message of God's unending forgiveness for him in Christ? Or is he (whether intentionally or unintentionally) using his devotional time as just another task of the day, through which he can gain more biblical knowledge to relay in references or applications to his people?¹⁹ Or maybe his devotional time is all but non-existent at this point, under the time constraints of ministry. Is he approaching his sermon text in order to be personally crushed by God's law and restored by God's grace, so that he can faithfully preach to his people what has already been preached to his heart? Or does he sit behind his Bible both attentive and inattentive, both listening and at the same time not listening? Is he, after so many years of studying God's Word, able to parse law and gospel, able to identify specific law and specific gospel of any given text, able to hear clearly what God says to the pastor's flock, while, at the same time, diverting the message from reaching his own heart? Is he caring for the souls of his sheep, while forgetting

¹⁸ To be fair, Tripp sees it as a serious issue of the heart as well. He doesn't blame the whole thing on the seminary culture. Tripp does, however, seemingly find the root cause of academizing the faith in the seminary culture. But if one experiences this academizing of the Word in a culture that promotes a healthy, personal, continued use of the Word, he is left to the sobering conclusion that the human heart, tempted by the devil, can be in God's Word without being *in* God's Word. He can see the truths of Scripture with his eyes and brain, while at the same time not see it with his heart.

¹⁹ Here, I am addressing intentions and motivations rather than results. It is a fact that the preaching and teaching of a pastor with a consistent devotional life will inevitably be more enriching to his people than the preaching and teaching of a pastor who finds little or no time for personal devotion. They will be blessed second-hand from it. But if the pastor is using his devotional time primarily for *them*, he may miss out on the blessings a flourishing devotional life has for *himself*.

the ever-important job of every Christian, pastors included, to care for the soul of himself? In other words, is the pastor using the Word of God to convey God's message horizontally to his flock, while ignoring the same cutting and healing message of God that is being spoken vertically to his own soul? These are important questions of self-evaluation, not just to be asked now, but to be asked and guarded against conscientiously and continually any time the pastor opens his Bible. For it is through the powerful Word of God that our Lord so graciously chooses to pour out the Christ-given joy to the soul that is so crucial for ministry and life. But if the pastor is indeed academizing the faith and the Word of God, it will lead him to one of two extremes.

False Sense of Arrival

Academization of the Word of God can lead the pastor into a ditch in which he lies stagnant in his own falsely-perceived sense of arrival. There are varying degrees of this. Matzat writes, "It was not a life-and-death-matter. I wasn't happy with myself, but then again, I wasn't really miserable either....I knew that I was a sinner, but like many Christians born and raised in a religious family, I was not a very 'bad' sinner. My sense of sin was not great enough to cause me to despair and hunger for a deepened relationship with the Lord Jesus."²⁰ This comfortable stagnancy is dangerous for any Christian, the pastor included. Tripp writes, "Ministries are derailed because leaders begin to think they have arrived and don't do the protective things that they warn everyone else to do."²¹ A false-sense of arrival creates impending danger to the pastor, to his flock, and to his family.

²⁰ Matzat, *Christ-Esteem*, 37.

²¹ Tripp, *Dangerous Calling*, 68.

If the substance of faith is merely dry intellectual knowledge, then by all means, the pastor might feel as if he's arrived to a level of spiritual maturity and sanctification far beyond those in his flock and family. But faith doesn't consist merely of intellectual knowledge. That's part of it, but it's not the whole. Faith also consists of assent, the belief that this knowledge is true, and trust that these Scriptural truths apply to *me*. The pastor may be finding it increasingly easy to see how the sermon text each Sunday applies to his people, or even easier, to "that sinful world out there." Yet he may find it ever harder to see how it concretely applies to himself, both in law and gospel. He may find himself becoming increasingly impatient with the never-ending struggles with sin of his members. He may find himself ignoring the "Nathans" that God sends his way with the crushing message of "You are the man!" while he listens intently to the Pharisee standing pridefully at the front of his heart.²² When these symptoms occur, he may be approaching this false sense of arrival.

But the pastor has not arrived at the peak of spiritual maturity or sanctification. No man, woman, or child on this earth has arrived. In fact, we will not arrive there until the Lord calls us home to heaven or returns in glory. Until then, we are engaged in a battle against sin; a battle that is continual and active; a battle that is non-linear, with progress and setbacks. The apostle Paul writes, "For I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing.... What a wretched man I am! Who will

²² Tripp points to similar issues that became exemplified either in his own life or in the lives of pastors with whom he's crossed paths throughout the years. He implies that these are symptoms that, when habitual, can indicate impending ministry disaster or a ministry meltdown. On pages 32-39, he references an anonymous pastor to demonstrate these symptoms in a concrete way. The pastor was becoming more impatient and angry at his kids and more distant from his wife. Those around him noticed his demeanor had increasingly become one of constant complaint. He started to shrug off the concerns of others and put himself on an island. His work became wearisome, and his devotional life was slipping. He saw the congregation as the problem and dreamed of escaping the joyless ministry in which he felt trapped. He was on the road to an impending ministry meltdown.

rescue me from this body that is subject to death?” (Rom 7). Paul, a shining example of what it means to deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow Jesus, did not consider himself to have arrived. Nor was he content with where he was at in his sanctification. It gnawed at his conscience daily. He called himself a wretched man. Matzat writes, “The apostle Paul didn’t have a problem—he considered himself to be the problem.”²³ Regardless of what those around him saw, or what we see 2000 years later, Pastor Paul knew his own heart and recognized its wretchedness. But he did not stop there. He put it on the table for the Roman Christians to hear, and subsequently, for the Church thereafter to hear. He did not go off on a tangent of examples. But he did not need to, because the sinfulness that he saw in his heart was much more serious than outward symptoms.

When the pastor scrapes through the outward “symptom” sins that coat his heart, and peers into the dark depths of his own heart, he will see himself for who he really is. Scraping at the heart is not a comfortable experience. It is painful. It is much easier to just recognize the outward symptoms and shrug them off. But if the pastor wants true, lasting healing, he has to first dig deeper. What he finds there will scare him. He will see the distrust. He will see the motives of self-glorification. He will see what Paul saw: an active God-hater living in his heart, relentlessly attacking his soul and fighting against everything that is the will of God. Its name is Old Adam. And the battles it wages are too much for the pastor or anyone else to fight on his own. He will be forced to retreat. The question is: to where?

It is endearing and humorous when children find such joy in building “a fort” in the living room. By “fort,” of course, they mean leaning couch cushions and pillows together and placing blankets upon them. They can crawl inside and feel secluded and safe from any danger.

²³ Matzat, *Christ-Esteem*, 49.

Their eyes cannot see anything beyond the shroud. They feel safe. However, that “fort” provides no real safety. All it takes is for a clumsy toddler or a curious puppy to send the entire “fort” crashing to the ground.

But it is not so endearing or humorous when the pastor retreats to such a “fort.” He can set in place the cornerstone of his M.Div diploma. He can stack his seminary notes and sermon archives into a tower of defense. He can build up the walls with his ministry experience. He can reinforce them with his ministry successes. He can place over it all the blanket of intellectual head-knowledge of dogmas that he has learned over the years. Just to be safe, he can pad every crevice with memorized quotes and thoughts from the Confessions and Church Fathers. And he has himself a “fort!” He can retreat to his own self-built fort and feel safe temporarily. He can slam the door shut with his nametag that reads “Pastor, Minister of the Gospel, Reverend.” But what protection does this offer in the real, ugly battle with sin? What defense does this give him against the devil, who prowls around like a roaring lion, ever more deliberate and ever more threatening than a clumsy toddler or a curious dog? What security does this give him from the enemy *within* the walls: the hostile, aggressive enemy named Old Adam that resides in his own heart? The answer to these questions is: nothing. Nothing protects the pastor who hides in a self-made fort constructed of intellectual pillows and self-righteous walls. He lies vulnerable to encroaching danger from within and from without. He is hiding in a fortress that can offer him no protection and, subsequently, no joy. The battle is too much.

What he needs is deliverance. Praise be to God, that Paul’s lament over his wickedness did not end with “What a wretched man I am!” In verse 24, he cries out for deliverance, not from his circumstances or the sins of the people around him, but deliverance from *himself*. “Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death?” And his answer, the *pastor’s* answer, lies in

verse 25: “Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!” The pastor is not his own fortress. His Savior-God is. Martin Luther’s flagship hymn expresses this truth beautifully:

A mighty fortress is our God,
 a trusty shield and weapon;
 He helps us free from every need
 That has us now o’ertaken..
 The old evil foe
 Now means deadly woe;
 Deep guile and great might
 Are his dread arms in fight,
 on earth is not his equal.

With might of ours can naught be done;
 Soon were our loss effected.
 But for us fights the valiant one,
 Whom God himself elected.
 You ask “Who is this?”
 Jesus Christ it is,
 The almighty Lord.
 And there’s no other God;
 he holds the field forever.²⁴

May the pastor, seminary student, and every Christian ever find solace not in the makeshift “fort” of his own self-righteousness, but in the real, indestructible fortress of our God and Savior. No enemy can penetrate it. The battle has been fought and won. Jesus fought it for us, in our place. He never retreated. He walked straight into hell on the cross and stood before the wrath of God for our sins unshielded. He died our death. He rose victorious, the retribution made, the payment accepted by God. And by the grace of God, his victory is ours. Under the blanket of Christ’s righteousness, the pastor finds protection from every evil force, both from within and from without. The pastor retreats to the righteousness of Christ which God graciously blankets him with and protects him under. And in this never-ending battle against his enemies within and

²⁴ Christian Worship, 200.

without, the pastor looks forward with great anticipation to the day when he will be freed from temptation and guilt, when the pastor and all those who believe in Jesus will be secured forever in the glorious, joyous fortress of heaven.

Continual, Self-Loathing Despair

So far we have addressed one possible effect of academizing the Word: a prideful false sense of arrival. But academization of the Word can have an opposite and equally dangerous effect: a continual, self-loathing despair. The flops of ministry have led him to feel increasingly unqualified to be a pastor. The guilt stock-piles. He begins to feel ashamed of who he is. He shudders at the thought of his people seeing him for who he truly is. The divide between who he is when he is wearing his “pastor-hat” and when he is wearing his “me-hat” grows larger. He flees to sinful escapes to find some semblance of joy or, at the very least, to help him temporarily forget his present reality. He puts on a façade to his flock that he is okay when he is not. He begins to feel like he is living in hiding. He is “tired of being a phony.”²⁵ Matzat writes, “While God says we are sinners, we want to be considered saints, so we live a charade. Our greatest fear becomes being unmasked....our lives become controlled by the opinions of others.”²⁶ His ministry is beginning to be defined by obligation and need for approval rather than by Christ-given joy.

Meanwhile, he is preaching to his people that *their* sins are forgiven, that *their* Savior loves them, that God sees *them* as holy through Christ, that God is with *them* always, that Christ empowers *them* to live their lives. But as the pastor reads his Bible and prepares for his sermons

²⁵ Matzat, *Christ-Esteem*, 48.

²⁶ Matzat, *Christ-Esteem*, 43.

and Bible studies, it becomes all about Christ for *them* and not about Christ for *him*, for the *pastor*. He is academizing the Word of God. Thus, the gospel has lost its sweetness to him. It has transformed from the only powerful, vitalizing balm for his soul to a dry series of facts that are true for *them*. He is losing his joy. But he need only listen—truly listen—to what his God is saying to him personally each day in his Word.

VERTICAL FULLFILMENT

The weight bearing down on the pastor is so heavy. It is too great to bear as he tries to carry out his ministry with a sprint. He tries to “do better.” But he’s met with even more disappointment in himself. He slows to a walk. He looks around for excuses that justify his failures. But the weight grows heavier. He comes to a halt, as he turns his head back to compare himself to others in ministry that he perceives as being “worse.” But it doesn’t change his condition. He is exhausted. Under the crushing weight of his guilt, the sin-broken pastor is brought to his knees, wondering how God could love him, wondering how God could be pleased with a pastor that struggles with so much sin, so many selfish motives, so much distrust.

But just at that moment, as he feels totally overwhelmed and completely helpless due to what he sees in his own heart...he feels a hand rest on his shoulder. And it’s not the kind of touch that startles him. No, it’s the kind of touch that comforts him and reassures him that he is not alone, the kind of touch that carries with it hope. As he finally lifts his eyes off himself, he glances at the hand on his shoulder, and notices the distinct hole from the nail that pierced it.

“Dear friend, I want to show you something,” Jesus says, as he hands him his Bible. As the pastor begin to page through, vivid images flash before his eyes as he is transported from scene to scene.

Atop a mountain, he looks down over the kingdoms of the world in all their vastness and splendor. It takes his breath away! And there is Jesus atop that mountain, being tempted by the devil in the wilderness, being offered all the pleasures that all the kingdoms of this world have to offer. And yet the pastor hears his Savior’s determined voice: “Away from me, Satan!”²⁷

²⁷ Matthew 4

As the pastor turn to another page of his Bible, the ground below his feet begins to rock and sway. As the image comes to life, he feels drops of water against his face and sees the subtle waves carrying the boat. And there is Jesus, visibly exhausted. Not just physically, but emotionally exhausted, after being begged to leave by the very ones he had just used his almighty power to help. Yet he is directing the boat toward the shoreline, toward the crowd of people awaiting him there. The exhausted Savior sails toward the people who so desperately need him to teach them, to show them he truly was who he said he was, to heal them, to have compassion on them.²⁸

The image starts to fade as the pastor sets his Bible on the ground. “But Lord!” he says. “I haven’t served as selflessly as you! And as I’ve examined my heart, I don’t think I can!” “My dear friend...I know,” Jesus says, as he places his comforting hand upon the pastor again. “That’s why I did.... Here, keep reading.”

As the pastor opens his Bible again and begin to read, the next image makes him wince. It is ugly. It is painful even to see. There is Jesus, with a jagged crown of thorns on his head, and slashes upon his back. His sweaty, marred body is carrying a cross, so heavy, and yet he is weighed down with the ever more crushing weight of the sins of the world. And yet he presses forward deliberately, with eyes fixed on the hill in the horizon.

Shaken, the pastor turns the pages of his Bible again. The image fades. Another takes its place. And there is Jesus, hanging upon that cross in agony, crying out to his Father in heaven who stopped listening. As his breaths become more shallow, this time, he makes eye contact with the pastor. He cries out in a loud voice, “It is finished!” and gives up his spirit.²⁹

²⁸ Mark 5

²⁹ John 19

With trembling hands, one final page turn brings every scene together in a glorious, triumphant climax. The pastor now stands before the open tomb on the very first Easter Sunday. And there is Jesus, walking out of his own grave, very much alive, and very much victorious.

The image fades. But Jesus is still standing before him, with a smile on his face. “All this I did for you, Pastor,” he says. “This is what I was talking about on the journey to Jerusalem when I reminded my disciples ‘For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.’³⁰ I lived a life of constant service for *you*. I laid down my life for *you*. I didn’t do it because I had the expectation that you would be the perfect pastor. I did it because I knew that you wouldn’t be. I did it because I knew that you needed me to be *the* perfect, self-sacrificing Servant in your place. I knew the price. But I wanted to do it. I wanted to pay the ransom to set you free for the here and now, and for forever.”

As the pastor closes his Bible, the burden that so heavily weighed on his shoulders has been lifted. He stands up on his feet again, and moves forward *with joy* toward his tasks. And there is Jesus still beside him, giving him the strength to carry out his ministry.

Vertical Identity in Christ

The devotional thought above illustrates that to maintain joy in ministry, it is important for the pastor to continually lift his eyes away from himself to see Christ, and thus, to see his new identity in Christ. Matzat emphasizes this truth beautifully. He writes, “When you look away from yourself unto Christ Jesus, you see your new identity, your perfect righteousness, your glorious position with God in the heavenly places. Your life in this world, your peace, your joy and contentment is not dependent upon ‘how’ you look. It depends upon ‘where’ you

³⁰ Mark 10

look.”³¹ John M. Brenner affirmed this truth by writing, “It is important for those of us in the public ministry always to remember who we are—sinners declared innocent for Christ’s sake.”³²

Regardless of whether the pastor is going through a particularly rough period or a particularly smooth period in his ministry, it is vital for him to remember how God views him in Christ.

It is not the successes or failures that give the pastor his identity and empower him to accomplish his ministry tasks. It is the grace of God in Christ given vertically from God to the pastor, just as it is given to all Christians. The pastor’s identity has already been decided. There is no one who loves him more than his Father in heaven. And there is no one whom his Father in heaven loves more than him. Christ has purified him from every selfish motive, every inadequacy, every sinful escape. John writes, “And the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin” (1 John 1:7). The blood of Jesus purifies the pastor from *all* sin; even the one that keeps him up at night; even the one that assaults his conscience periodically for years; even the one that makes him feel disqualified to stand before God’s people and preach the gospel. Jesus’ blood has washed over it all. “As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.” (Ps 103:12). So far has Christ removed our sins from us, that they are no longer a part of our God-given identity. God looks at the pastor, and he sees only the perfection of Christ. The same thing that the pastor preaches to his people is true for the pastor too, sealed by the promise of God.

If the pastor should begin to doubt that this is true, he need only look to his baptism. Luther wrote, “There is on earth no greater comfort than baptism.” It is a striking comment that

³¹ Matzat, *Christ-Esteem*, 92.

³² John M. Brenner, “Serving in the Public Ministry of the Gospel Is a Privilege and an Honor,” (WLS Essay File) 7.

may cause even the WELS pastor to pause. But it is true. Through baptism, God promises personally, “Not only the sins of the world, but your sins—yes, *yours!*—have been washed away forever.³³ *You* are so completely covered over by the righteousness of Christ that no spot of sin remains in God’s eyes.³⁴ *You* are saved.³⁵ Through baptism, *you* are connected to Christ’s death and resurrection.³⁶ At baptism, God graciously gave *you* your identity: a beloved child of God, washed in the blood of Christ and clothed with his righteousness, so that God looks at *you* and says, “This is my son, whom I love. With him I am well pleased!”

This vertical identity is not just a dry, intellectual dogma. It permeates the pastor’s day-to-day ministry as he seeks to maintain joy. Identity in Christ draws the pastor to personal devotional time in Word and prayer. The pastor is bombarded by a confusing racket of voices at all times. He hears the voices of praise from some members. He hears the voices of dissent from others. He hears the voices of those in the unbelieving world who hate him because of Christ. He hears the voice of his Old Adam and the devil who never cease chattering messages of self-glorification in his ear. He hears his own voice in his head, which whiplashes him between self-praise and self-loathing. With so many voices chattering at the same time, what he needs is a consistent voice, a voice he can trust to tell him who he is and who his God is. What he needs is

³³ Acts 22:16: “And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name.”

³⁴ Gal 3:27: “For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.”

³⁵ 1 Pet 3:21: “and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also—not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a clear conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

³⁶ Rom 6:3-4: Or don’t you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.

regular, undisturbed time when he can sit at the feet of the one who will not lie to him and talk to the one who will not turn His ear from him. What the pastor needs is a healthy devotional life.

There is a direct correlation between the quality and consistency of a pastor's devotional life and his joy in ministry. Tripp writes,

I am more and more convinced that what gives a ministry its motivations, perseverance, humility, joy, tenderness, passion, and grace is the devotional life of the one doing ministry. When I daily admit how needy I am, daily meditate on the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and daily feed on the restorative wisdom of his Word, I am propelled to share with others the grace that I am daily receiving at the hands of my Savior.³⁷

The pastor who prioritizes time spent digging into God's Word, confessing the sins of his broken conscience, and praying to God for forgiveness and strength will be blessed immeasurably through it. Nathan Pope theorizes that Luther was such a great pastor and Reformer because of his healthy balance between Scripture study and prayer.³⁸ Brenner writes, "The gospel alone can instill in us the joy of serving in the face of the problems, challenges, and frustrations each of us face as we strive to carry out our calling to God's glory."³⁹ Only the gospel can bring joy to the heart and empower the pastor to carry out his ministry. The pastor's desire to regain or maintain joy in ministry is contingent on applying these gospel truths to himself, cherishing them, fleeing to them, and living in them continuously. The pastor will want to discover the time and place each day when he can give God's Word his undivided attention and pray without interruption. As he is renewed each day through devotional time in the vertical fulfillment of identity given by Christ, he will find himself maintaining an inner joy that continues regardless of external

³⁷ Tripp, *Dangerous Calling*, 35.

³⁸ Pope, *Motivation for Ministry*, 209.

³⁹ Brenner, "Serving in the Public Ministry," 1.

circumstances. And as he basks in his Christ-given identity, he will also find joy in a Christ-given purpose.

Vertical Purpose in Christ

A pastor's joy is intimately connected with his vertical purpose in Christ. Pope writes, "When humans repent of their sins and come to believe that they have forgiveness in Christ, then, and only then, do they find true purpose. They live to give God glory (sanctification), and to the extent that they consciously set out to do that, they soar to individual heights of happiness in knowing that God feels pleased to accept their sacrifices of faith."⁴⁰ Pope encapsulates an important biblical truth.

Let us return to Ecclesiastes once more. King Solomon had thoroughly expressed the meaninglessness of a godless life. But at the end of the book of Ecclesiastes, he paints a picture of vertical fulfillment that lies in stark contrast for those living *in the Lord*. He writes, "Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the duty of all mankind" (Eccles 12:13). To paraphrase, Solomon's conclusion was this: "You want to find meaning and fulfillment and joy in your life? Trust in your God and his promises of deliverance. Find joy in them. Find continual purpose and fulfillment in a life of service to the God who saved you." How utterly meaningless and unfulfilling it is to live one's life without a Savior-given identity! By contrast, how utterly fulfilling it is to live one's life under God's grace, finding joy in one's *Christ-given purpose* in life!

Nathan Pope picks up on this important facet of vertical fulfillment for the pastor as he strives to maintain joy in ministry. His book is centered around the concept of the Christ-given

⁴⁰ Pope, *Motivation for Ministry*, 158.

purpose of glorifying God and the joy that is found in doing it. He makes an interesting observation regarding the typical Lutheran teaching on salvation. He notes:

Lutheran terminology describes it as a rescue from sin, death, and the devil. This is looking at salvation from the negative, as a rescue *from* something bad. You might think of this as the negative half of salvation. I ask you to think also of the positive half of salvation. Salvation as a rescue to something good deserves equal treatment, does it not? Salvation comprises two equal actions: God rescues us *from* something (bad) and restores us *to* something (good)...Christ has liberated sinners from the scourge of Satan, renewing and restoring them for a new and better life with their fellow human beings in this world and for a never-ending life with God in heaven.⁴¹

Pope raises an interesting point that is perhaps a slight overstatement. It is true that Scripture itself often describes heaven by using negative terms: no more sin; no more suffering; no more weakness; no more tears; no more sadness; no more guilt, etc. It is also true that in Lutheran circles when the scriptural picture of redemption is used, it is generally expressed in the negative: Christ has bought us back *from* sin, *from* death, and *from* the devil. But in my experience, at Lutheran grade school, at Luther Preparatory School, through the pastoral track at MLC and WLS, and attending WELS churches, the *ad quem* of salvation has not been entirely overshadowed by the *a quo*, at least when it comes to salvation as a future reality. Lutherans talk about how perfect heaven will be. They talk about the joy of residing with their Savior at the heavenly banquet forever. They talk about how, on the Last Day, Christ “by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body” (Phil 3:21). They talk about the joy in a future in heaven secured by God in Christ. They talk about salvation *from* sin, death, and the devil, and salvation *to* everlasting life with our Savior.

⁴¹ Pope, *Motivation for Ministry*, 59-60.

But Pope perhaps raises a valid point that we in WELS, striving to be Christocentric in our preaching and teaching, may not always show as effectively as we could the joy of what Christ has saved us to *right now*, the effect of the gospel in our lives *now*. This facet of vertical fulfillment maybe encroaches on uncomfortable ground for many of us. In WELS, by the grace of God, we caution so severely against any notion of self-righteousness or comfort from our works. Praise God for that! May God ever maintain in our synod an utter reliance on our Savior for 100% of our salvation! But perhaps the temptation exists for us, in guarding against reliance on self, to go to an extreme that God doesn't intend. Perhaps we are so guarded that we begin to cast a shadow over the real joy *in the Lord* that exists in carrying out our God-given callings. There is indeed a real gospel-driven joy *in the Lord* that exists in thankfully serving our Savior by serving others.

God saved us, not so that we could endure this life with a pessimistic attitude of 70-80 grim years before we get to go to heaven. He saved us, not so that we could go about our days and tasks with the attitude of "meaningless, meaningless, everything is meaningless." Through Christ, God saved us to a future heaven, yes. Likewise, he saved us to an ever present reality of his gospel promises in our lives. But he also saved us to a purpose. He saved us to the purpose of fearing God and keeping his commandments. He saved us to the purpose of glorifying God with our thoughts, words, and actions. He saved us to the purpose of glorifying him in our marriage, friendships, and ministry. And while our works of glorifying God are not a condition of our salvation, they are a result of our already promised salvation, secured by God's grace in Christ. And that grace-driven and grace-motivated result can and does give us real, lasting vertical fulfillment each day as we go about the tasks that the Lord has placed before us.

Remembering his vertical purpose in Christ will shape the way a pastor views the people, circumstances, and trials that exist where he serves. Brenner quotes C.F.W. Walther, saying, “When a place has been assigned to a Lutheran candidate of theology where he is to discharge the office of a Lutheran minister, that place ought to be to him the dearest, most beautiful and most precious spot on earth.”⁴² Later, Brenner writes, “When we have accepted a call, we can be certain that God himself has placed us into our office. He wants us to be in this particular place at this particular time.”⁴³ The place in which a pastor serves is exactly where God wants him, whether it makes sense from a limited human perspective or not. The pastor’s Christ-given purpose, as one washed in the blood of Christ, is to serve the blood-washed people in *that* church, in *that* community, at *that* time.

Remembering this can have a tremendous impact on the pastor’s fulfillment in his calling and his joy in ministry. Regardless of perceived importance or perceived results of his hard work, it is exactly the work that God has placed before him and is considered by his God as the most precious of offerings. Through Christ who cleanses our ever-imperfect work in his blood, God chooses to view our service to him as flawless and ever-important. No matter how mundane a pastor might perceive certain aspects of his ministry to be, he can find fulfillment in faithfully working to the glory of God, an endeavor that is never a waste of a pastor’s time. Mark Paustian writes, “Even as the pastor strives for a ministry that is vitally addressed to the caring for souls, the doctrine of vocation lights up his more mundane duties as much as those times he is handling God’s Word.”⁴⁴ Elsewhere he says, “We sense a startling depth to routine duties that once

⁴² Brenner, “Serving in the Public Ministry,” 10.

⁴³ Brenner, “Serving in the Public Ministry,” 13.

⁴⁴ Mark Paustian, “Unleashing Our Calling: Today’s Christians Find Fulfillment in Their Vocations,” (WLS Essay File: September 18-19, 2006), 21.

seemed hopelessly flat. If things formerly mundane are not fully transformed into heart-absorbing interests, they are, at very least, ‘sweetened with the honey of God’s good pleasure.’”⁴⁵ With a Christ-given identity and a newfound purpose in him, the pastor will begin to look at his work, his people, and his church and say, “Meaningful, meaningful! Utterly meaningful! Everything is meaningful when I’m serving the God who graciously saved a wretch like me.” As he revels in this biblical truth of God’s grace, he will begin to find fulfillment and joy in the work that is set before him.

But still, there will be times when the burden seems too great for the pastor to bear. From the pastor’s perspective, there might be times when he is tempted to give up, times when he wonders, “God, why did you send me here to fail?” In times such as these, it can be difficult to see how God could possibly work out the pastor’s present, intense sufferings for anything good. He hears the promise. He has memorized it. He has recited it to his people in times of suffering: “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose (Romans 8:28).” He knows it to be true. But the problem is, he cannot see it. But thank God that He has a bigger perspective than we do on our lives, our good, and the good of others. Matzat writes, “Most Christians today do not realize how important weakness, failure, discouragement, disappointment, suffering, testing, and trials are in the development of their Christian life. Through these dealings of God our natural sinful pride is being dealt with. God calls us away from ourselves so that through burying, rejecting, and denying self we may turn in faith unto our Lord Jesus and experience his life, peace, joy, and power.”⁴⁶ Paustian poetically echoes this thought:

⁴⁵ Paustian, “Unleashing Our Calling,” 6.

⁴⁶ Matzat, *Christ-Esteem*, 79.

In both the most difficult and in the most futile of vocations, we are taken to the end of ourselves, praying prayers that admit what we are. With our whole being, with a pathos and energy not possible without the heavy weight of our callings, we seek his face...*and find it*. That finding is joy; that cross is dear. Disappointment in life's unrealized dreams puts us each in touch with the truer dream of our Christian heart. 'What do I really want?' the crushed soul asks, and answers, 'I want...to know you, Jesus...to somehow make you known...to see your face in heaven.' *'Then come and know me.'*⁴⁷

In the pastor's ministry struggles, his heavenly Father is bringing him to lay flat on the ground so that he has nowhere else to look but up. There he sees his Savior, still forgiving him, still loving him, still in control, and still empowering him with the strength to carry out his tasks that the pastor does not have within himself. For that reason, the apostle Paul says in 2 Corinthians 12:9, "I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me."

Regardless of how the day, week, month, or year goes, God has placed the pastor exactly where he needs to be so that at the end of the day, the pastor can pray the same prayer: "Bleed on me, Jesus. Bleed all over me and my works of today.' That, and: 'Thank you, Father. We spent this day together. It was a good day.'"⁴⁸ It is a prayer appropriate at the end of a day marked by failure. It is a prayer appropriate for a day marked by success. It is the prayer of one who recognizes the depth of his sinful weakness, who trusts the depth of Christ's forgiveness, who basks in the freedom of newfound identity, and who knows his Christ-given purpose. His Christ-given vertical fulfillment will help the pastor maintain joy in ministry, as he also strives to become more horizontally aware.

⁴⁷ Paustian, "Unleashing Our Calling," 18.

⁴⁸ Paustian, "Unleashing Our Calling," 1-2.

HORIZONTAL AWARENESS

The Pastor's Need for Spiritual Care from Others

One might assume that the vertically fulfilled pastor would become less and less tuned in to the horizontal. If his fulfillment is delivered to him vertically by God, logic might deduce that he would begin to pay less attention to what is going on around him horizontally. But vertical fulfillment does not eliminate the necessity of healthy horizontal awareness. The horizontally aware pastor will recognize and remind himself that he is not alone. People need him, yes. But he also needs people. Pastor Rodney Busch, in a paper delivered to the South Atlantic District Conference in 1984, writes, “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.”⁴⁹ As the pastor carries out his ministry, his eyes will be opened more and more to his need for others to direct him to his vertical fulfillment in Christ.

The question must be asked, “Who is the pastor’s pastor?” Pope raised a similar question to pastors of varying Protestant denominations with varying responses. He summarizes the results:

In general, most ministers told me that for pastoral help they turned to their denominational supervisors (superintendent, bishop, coalition chairman). Second place honors went to wives! Denominational colleagues, neighboring pastors, and friends, in that order rounded out their personal choices. Two ministers had no answers.... [One Missouri Synod pastor] wrote ‘basically, the Lord Jesus Christ [is my pastor].’⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Rodney Busch, “Burnout: A Pastor’s Perspective,” (WLS Essay File: 1984), 7.

⁵⁰ Pope, *Motivation for Ministry*, 202.

The results of Pope's study demonstrate varying degrees of a real gap in spiritual care offered to pastors. The responses that suggested Jesus as their pastor seemed to be driven by the fact that there was no other viable option.

Pope's own answer to this question is, "Christ is my pastor, not by default (I can find no one else), but because of his abilities (whom better can I find)."⁵¹ His argument is that there can be no pastor more qualified to help than his Savior. There can be no pastor more willing to help than the Savior who invites, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28). There can be no pastor whose office hours are more open than our Shepherd who continually hears our prayers and answers them. Thus, Jesus is the pastor's perfect pastor.⁵²

I cannot fault Pope on his evaluation of our Great Shepherd Jesus. Certainly, Jesus is the greatest, most qualified, most helpful pastor that will ever exist. It has already been stated in this paper that in order to regain or maintain joy in ministry, the pastor must come knocking on Pastor Jesus' office door every day in devotional time spent in God's Word and in prayer. Pope effectively reminds pastors of one side of the question "Who's the pastor's pastor?"

But the Lord didn't just commission pastors for outreach purposes, nor simply to have someone to preach on Sunday mornings. He also commissioned pastors because sometimes we just need to hear the law and the gospel from the mouth of someone other than ourselves. Tripp writes, "None of us is wired to live this Christian life alone."⁵³ This is true partially because we are not always our own best judge of our spiritual condition and needs. Tripp writes, "Although

⁵¹ Pope, *Motivation for Ministry*, 202.

⁵² Pope, *Motivation for Ministry*, 203.

⁵³ Tripp, *Dangerous Calling*, 73.

we are able to see the sin of others with specificity and clarity, we tend to be blind to our own.”⁵⁴

The pastor can live in denial and tell himself lies that blind him from what is becoming increasingly evident to those around him. The pastor needs a healthy horizontal awareness, because he needs to have a humble, listening ear to the dangers the people around him perceive. Tripp even calls self-examination a “community project.”⁵⁵

Tripp makes a strong point that has valid Scriptural grounds. As the apostle Paul talks about the body of Christ, one can clearly see the intimately close, active relationship between the different members as they admonish and encourage one another. He points out the diversity of roles between different members of the body of Christ, but he emphasizes the unity between them. In 1 Corinthians 12, he writes, “But God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.” The pastor is not the head of the body. Jesus is. The pastor needs the other parts as much as they need him. He needs the skills and talents of the others. He needs the encouragement that the others have to offer. He needs, at times, to be confronted with what another member of the body of Christ sees. If the eye sees an infection growing on the foot, she isn’t going to say, “Oh well, that’s the foot’s problem, not mine.” If the foot is confronted with the uncomfortable message of what the eye sees, it would be unwise to go in defense mode and say, “I don’t believe you.” If the pastor’s wife or a member or a fellow pastor expresses concerns over the spiritual health of the pastor, he cannot and should not implicitly say, “I don’t need you.” The pastor needs a healthy horizontal awareness to be able to recognize that the

⁵⁴ Tripp, *Dangerous Calling*, 34.

⁵⁵ Tripp, *Dangerous Calling*, 73.

people that God places in his life are often able to identify the problems in him that he cannot see himself.

But the pastor doesn't just need the body of Christ in order to point out his sin and stamp out his pride. He also needs the body of Christ to announce the absolution to him. The pastor can so easily get lost in the voices in his own head. He can so easily become fixated on the guilt of his many inadequacies of his failures as a pastor. Sometimes, he just needs for someone to tell him "*Your sins, Pastor, are paid for by Christ and forgiven.*"

I recall a story a pastor once told me of such an occasion. He had had a ministry flop. He made a mistake. And that mistake was haunting him. He couldn't quite get it out of his head and move on. Finally, one of his members said to him something like, "Pastor, who do you think you are? If Jesus forgave your sins, who are you to not forgive yourself?"

This story has stuck with me. It shows that sometimes the pastor needs spiritual care from the people to whom he gives spiritual care. Tripp describes the scriptural model of a pastor and his members as "a man in need of help in training people to be ready to give him the very same help."⁵⁶ He, at times, needs to hear the law and the gospel from a mouth other than his own. He needs someone to provide him with the spiritual care that he offers his people.

Tripp offers various practical ways in which the pastor can receive spiritual care from others in the parish. He suggests that every pastor seek out a "spiritually mature person to mentor you at all times."⁵⁷ It is possible for such a relationship to exist within the congregation itself, although it presents some difficulties. The pastor of a large church with multiple pastors could come to the other pastors for pastoral care. But in a smaller church with only one pastor, he must

⁵⁶ Tripp, *Dangerous Calling*, 89.

⁵⁷ Tripp, *Dangerous Calling*, 80.

look somewhere else. The pastor may seek spiritual care from a highly trusted, mature elder, but some of the things on the pastor's heart may include confidential information that he should not disclose to someone in the congregation itself. The Circuit Pastor, in theory, takes on a role that could be utilized for this purpose. But realistically, the time constraints of a Circuit Pastor may prevent him from serving every pastor in his circuit in this way with the frequency and consistency that is needed.

In recent years, WELS has made significant strides in recognizing this need for the pastor to be pastored, implementing a mentoring program for pastors as they get assigned into the ministry. I pray that this system continues to be used, intentionalized, and prioritized. The pastor is not alone in the ministry, nor can he survive alone in the ministry. The pastor needs someone to lead him by hand to Pastor Jesus' office, and to remind him and assure him that the forgiveness that Jesus promises is true for *him* too.

The Pastor's Need to Recognize His Role and Limitations in Serving His People

Horizontal awareness does not just mean recognizing the important, God-given roles of other people in the pastor's life. It also means gaining an accurate understanding of what *his* God-given role is in people's lives—and what it is not.

God calls the pastor to shepherd his flock. He calls him to administer the means of grace to his people. He calls him to diligently care for the spiritual well-being of his sheep. He calls him to seek after lost sheep. He calls him to bring the good news out beyond the Great Shepherd's sheep-pen. God calls him to do this and expects faithfulness, both "faithfulness to God's Word and faithfulness in carrying out the responsibilities God's people assign to [him]."⁵⁸

⁵⁸ Brenner, "Serving in the Public Ministry," 9.

Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 4:1-2; “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.” There is little room for laziness in the ministry. It is no small task that God assigns to his pastors. And with a Christ-given identity and purpose, the pastor truly desires to thank his Lord by serving him faithfully in his various ministry tasks.

But this may, at times, leave the pastor feeling stretched thin. From a practical standpoint, he will be intimately involved in ministry responsibilities in dozens of areas: preaching, worship planning, adult Bible class, BIC class, Catechism class, shut-in visits, hospital visits, funerals, delinquent calls, prospect follow-ups, evangelism, long-term planning, administrative work, home visits. The list goes on. As the pastor tries to faithfully perform all the duties of pastoral ministry, he may be haunted by the constant guilt of not being able to immediately address every need that he sees in his congregation and outside its walls. Busch writes,

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.⁵⁹

This picture of ministry seems to portray the pastor's job as restlessly and anxiously holding the church together, as he is endlessly pulled in every direction at once.

This illustration could potentially help one to realize the importance of diligence, attentiveness, and faithfulness in a pastor's various ministry tasks. It perhaps demonstrates the old saying, “An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.” A pastor's careful planning could help to prevent a ministry catastrophe.

⁵⁹ Busch, “Burnout,” 1.

However, one wonders if this is a healthy way for a pastor or his members to view the ministry. One also wonders if this is really the model and expectation that God has for his pastors. Busch suggests that it is not. Furthermore, he theorizes that a pastor can only carry on for so long with such a perspective before he reaches exasperation and burnout.⁶⁰ God does not call pastors to be the aroma of Christ everywhere at the same time. Zach Eswine, in his book *Imperfect Pastor*, writes, “You and I were never meant to repent for not being everywhere for everybody and all at once. You and I are meant to repent because we’ve tried to be.”⁶¹

The pastor has limitations. He will need to rest. He will need to take time off. He will not be able to address immediately every possible need of every possible person he knows or does not yet know. He will need to spend time with his family. He cannot be in all places at once. He is human. He is not God, nor does God want him to be God. Yes, God wants and expects the pastor to be faithful. He expects the pastor to strive for excellence. He expects the pastor to take seriously his call and the responsibilities that come with it. But, as Paustian writes, “The point of articulating such responsibility in the callings of a pastor is not to achieve it all by the strength of our resolve, but to be willing to be crushed in utter dependence on Christ.”⁶² God wants the pastor to realize his limitations, his weaknesses, and his inadequacies so that he learns to trust not in himself, but in his Savior who is the Head of the Church and controls all things for the good of the Church.

As the pastor seeks to maintain joy in ministry, he will want to remind himself of two important concepts in the realm of his horizontal role to his people. He will want to recognize his

⁶⁰ Busch, “Burnout,” 1.

⁶¹ Eswine, Zack. *The Imperfect Pastor: Discovering Joy in Our Limitations through a Daily Apprenticeship with Jesus* (Wheaton: IL, Crossway 2015), 74.

⁶² Paustian, “Unleashing our Calling,” 22

limitations and be okay with them—even rejoice in them—for God’s power is made perfect in weakness. At the same time, his Christ-given identity and purpose will cause him to strive for faithfulness and be “pleased to present [his] best, such as it is, before an audience of One, the Lord Christ in whom we have nothing more to gain, nor anything left to prove.”⁶³

⁶³ Paustian, “Unleashing our Calling,” 6.

CONCLUSION

This has by no means been an exhaustive study on biblical joy and its application to the pastor. Volumes could be written examining exegetically the concept of joy in Scripture. More could be written on the balancing act between physical health, emotional health, psychological health, and spiritual health, and how that all can affect a person's joy. More can (and should) be written concerning the specific application to a pastor as he carries out his ministry. But I pray that this paper can help highlight the importance of avoiding the deceptive paths that lead a pastor or seminary student to find himself lost in a joyless ministry. I pray that many might be encouraged as they seek to maintain their joy in ministry through vertical fulfillment in a Christ-given identity and in Christ-given purpose in their lives. I pray that pastors and seminary students will grow in horizontal awareness in their God-given roles. Finally, I pray that Christ and his forgiveness for us broken sinners be ever at the forefront of our hearts and minds, as he carries us through a joy-filled ministry and walks us through heaven's gate.

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