Acedia and the Evagrian Antidotes to Pastoral Burnout

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ACEDIA AND THE EVAGRIAN ANTIDOTES TO PASTORAL BURNOUT

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ACEDIA AND THE EVAGRIAN
ANTIDOTES TO PASTORAL BURNOUT

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Acedia and the Evagrian Antidotes To Pastoral Burnout

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This is dedicated to Jean who loves me and my writing even when I do not; and to Jason, Ben, Tommy, Matt and Seann, whose encouragement keeps me in the stadium.

This is in memory of my Papaw, Ken Damp, who inspired me to continue my education.
INTRODUCTION

Pastor [...] Enters Treatment for 'Depression, Anxiety and Pastoral Burnout'

Evidence Grows of Problem of Clergy Burnout

Popular [...] Pastor Confesses He’s Tired, Announces Sabbatical

“Preacher Burnout:” Job Demands Creating Stress For Many Pastors

Another day, another headline, another statistic, another burned-out pastor.

In a study based on the interviews of more than 14,000 pastors, The Barna Group’s 2017 report, The State of Pastors, found that a third of those reporting were at risk of burnout. Based on similar research, an estimated 1500 “people leave pastoral ministry each month due to burnout, conflict or moral failure.” “4 in 10 pastors across the country say they doubt their call; 3 in 10 say they think about leaving the ministry; 10 percent say they’re depressed some or all of the time; [and] 40 percent report being depressed or worn out some of the time.” These recent reports are greatly alarming and confirm that pastoral burnout demands attention and understanding.

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In this dissertation, I will consider the following. In this chapter, I will define pastoral burnout in its modern context, explore its symptoms and survey the suggested solutions for recovery from it. In doing so, I will argue that ultimately pastoral burnout is a spiritual malady and a spiritual solution is required for its remedy. In chapter two, I will introduce an ancient spiritual ailment, *acedia*, as the root of all ministry malaise and demonstrate that its origins with Evagrius Ponticus and the anchorites of the Egyptian desert in the fourth century have much in common with contemporary context of clergy. In chapter three, I will explore the manifestations of *acedia* in ancient monasticism and their equivalents in modern ministry as the soil in which burnout blossoms. In chapter four, I will apply the Evagrian antidotes to *acedia* to present day pastoral burnout in order to provide a path for the recovery from burnout and prevention of it in the future. Finally, I will conclude that an awareness of and attention to *acedia* is the spiritual solution necessary to meaningful, fruitful and enduring ministry.

To begin, let us ask: What exactly is burnout and how does it function in the context of pastoral ministry? According to German psychologist Herbert Freudenberger in one of the first scientific studies of its kind, burnout is a “state of fatigue or frustration brought about by devotion to a cause, a way of life or a relationship that failed to produce the expected reward.”⁸ Thus, burnout in ministry is broadly defined as this same state of exhaustion and generally “implies that [a pastor’s] energy is gone.”⁹ In his book, *Coping with Clergy Burnout*, G. Lloyd Rediger clarifies, “The word burnout is descriptive of the condition. It suggests the same intense use of energy as does the verb “burn,” and “out” suggests the exhaustion of resources. Both parts of the

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word are accurate descriptions.”¹⁰ Burned-out pastors are tired, exhausted, and depleted in all areas of life. Simply put, for modern ministers, “burnout is the exhaustion of all physical, emotional, and spiritual resources.”¹¹ The introductory headlines and statistics show that in conditions like these, it is difficult for pastors to thrive, even survive, in ministry.

Since the 1980s a boom of books have been written attempting to understand burnout; its symptoms, causes and remedies. These works not only alert our awareness to this ever-present concern for pastors, but also provide tools with which pastors might treat burnout and recover. In the following chapter, I will survey the signs of burnout, reflect upon the suggested causes, consider the prescribed remedies, and argue that a misaligned focus on external causes fails to identify the root of the problem and thus ultimately proves futile against an internal and spiritual malady.

¹⁰ G. Lloyd Rediger, Coping With Clergy Burnout (Valley Forge, Pennsylvania: Judson Press, 1982), 12.
¹¹ Rediger, Coping with Clergy Burnout, 16.
CHAPTER ONE: THE PROBLEM OF PASTORAL BURNOUT

If you wake up on Monday morning with a sense of dread that another Sunday is on its way... you might be experiencing burnout.

If you know a parishioner is sick and needs a pastoral visit but you cannot summon the energy to pick up the phone, let alone, stop by their hospital bed... you might be experiencing burnout.

If you sit at your desk on a Saturday night with an empty page, watching the cursor blink without a word written but knowing you have to stand on stage in the morning and utter some semblance of a sermon... you might be experiencing burnout.

If the simple joys of ministry elicit nothing more than a yawn at the routine of it all... you might be experiencing burnout.

What does burnout look like? Well, you know it when you see it. As William Pratt suggests, “burnout has been defined most commonly by a symptom pattern and not by an explanation of causes.”¹² Thus, the signs and symptoms of what you see in the burned out pastor provide the clearest definition. Will Willimon describes it well. When a pastor is burned out, he writes, “the least task - visiting a prospective church member, attending a committee meeting, filling out an annual report - becomes drudgery.”¹³ H.B. London and Neil Wiseman add, “You slowly find yourself beginning to hate the telephone. You begin to avoid people. You go into a panic whenever there’s a new problem. You lose confidence in yourself. And you often become narrowly focused on petty issues.”¹⁴ In Leading on Empty, Wayne Cordiero expounds upon his own experience of burnout, writing “slowly, the unwelcome symptoms began to surface. Ministry became more arduous. My daily tasks seemed unending, and e-mails began to stack up. People I deeply cared about became problems to be avoided, and deliberating about new vision no longer stirred

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¹³ Willimon, Clergy and Laity Burnout, 25.
¹⁴ London and Wiseman, Pastors at Greater Risk, 180.
my soul." In describing his own burnout, William Pratt writes of his hopeless condition, “I was exhausted, depressed, withdrawn, irritable, physically, emotionally and spiritually depleted. ... My depression often led to feelings of despair and sometimes suicide. My thinking became clouded. Sometimes I would sit in my office and be unable to make phone calls or accomplish any reading or writing. My prayer life diminished. I functioned, but I was dying inside. I did not know it then, but I know it now. I was burned out.” Unfortunately, but unsurprisingly the examples of the experiences of burnout could go on and on.

Sadly, all of these examples echo my own experience of burnout as well. I am currently in my fourteenth year of full time professional ministry as an ordained elder in The United Methodist Church. I am only thirty eight years old, with the potential of another thirty four years of ministry before mandatory retirement, and some days I wonder if I can last another week. Sure, there have been seasons of satisfaction when the work I was doing surpassed my highest hopes of my calling. But at other times, I have wondered if God called the wrong number. Surely, I would be better off doing anything other than this. On those days, ministry is not just drudgery, it’s soul-crushing toil and fulfilling the pastoral tasks of the day makes my vocation feel like a back-breaking burden I can no longer bear. Burnout seems too mild a word. There is nothing left but ashes.

My experience of burnout ebbs and flows but when it arrives on the scene, it looks like the following: It is Monday morning, and I know Sunday is coming. I sit at the computer staring at a blinking cursor and know that in only a matter of days, I must stand before the congregation with something to say. However, right now, I am completely uninspired, there are no words. I

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know I have important e-mails piling up that require my attention, but cannot summon enough energy to check them, let alone respond. Another member has called to have a conversation, but I dread what topic the matter will concern. I don’t call her back. I hear about another parishioner who is sick and the thought of offering compassion and care weighs me down. I will deal with her later. Tomorrow morning I’ll teach a Bible study, but I’ve yet to pick the topic or consider what I might say. And again, I dread Sunday, there is always Sunday, one after another and whether I feel like it or not, whether I feel particularly inspired or not, I must have something to say. The blank manuscript reflects the emptiness of my spirit. There is nothing there, no resources to pull, no well from which to drink. I know that anything I write feels more like scraping the bottom of the barrel, not an overflow of insight. Maybe I should pray? I don’t even feel like it. I feel empty. I am exhausted. I am burned out.

I find no comfort knowing I’m not the only one. Burnout is too common a problem. Again, Lyle Schaller provides another helpful illustration of one minister’s burnout and the impact it had on the congregation:

“Our pastor told us he was ‘burned out’ and needed a sabbatical, so we gave him a six-week leave of absence in addition to his regular vacation,” explained a leader of a county-seat church. “That was nearly three years ago. He came back from that sabbatical charged up and raring to go. It was obvious to all of us that he needed and deserved that leave of absence, and it was clear that we had done the right thing. This past Sunday, he announced from the pulpit that he was burned out and was planning to leave the ministry for a secular job. Sunday after next will be his last Sunday here with us. Some of us feel guilty that we have failed our pastor. Did we not do something we should have? After all,
he’s only forty-six years old, and he could have spent another twenty years in the ministry. I hate to see someone who’s been called by God give up the ministry after all that training.”¹⁷

This unnamed pastor’s experience, alongside of Cordiero’s, Pratt’s and my own serve to show that the best definition of burnout is the one based on its symptoms. At its most general, burnout:

“implies that our energy is gone. We cannot summon the energy to do what needs to be done. We appear distracted, tired, empty. I agree with John A. Sanford’s belief (Ministry Burnout [New York: Paulist Press, 1982]) that the metaphor of “burnout” is not quite appropriate for the phenomenon among … the clergy we are describing. Burnout is a term borrowed from rocketry. It denotes a lack of energy when a rocket, soaring upward, runs out of fuel and falls back to the earth. In one sense, the metaphor may be a bit self-congratulatory. To describe oneself as “burnt out” implies that one is like a brilliant, upward moving rocket that tragically runs out of energy and plunges downward. [But] to say that you are suffering from burnout ignores that you may never have even left the launching pad!”¹⁸

Whether one has run out of physical, emotional, mental or spiritual energy and come crashing down, or fails to summon the energy to get off the ground in the first place, the prevalence of pastors experiencing burnout requires a greater understanding of its attributed causes. Thankfully, much work in this regard has already been done.

¹⁸ Willimon, Clergy and Laity Burnout, 21.
What Are The Causes of Burnout? - External Contributors

Surveying the last forty years of literature around pastoral burnout, I have found that the most frequently attributed causes of burnout center around external factors. Christopher Ash writes in *Zeal Without Burnout*, “a substantial part of my own experiences of near-burnout was caused by factors *outside my control.*”¹⁹ In almost every case, the causes of burnout are either explicitly stated or implied as related to *external* causes. As the Barna Group reports, “a pretty accurate slogan for church ministry: *Where you control nothing and are responsible for everything.*”²⁰ As a catch-all, the external factor most frequently cited as the cause of burnout is workplace stress. In the experience of the modern pastor, this stress takes shape in a number of ways.

First, there is the never-ending nature of ministry. Because the care of souls begins before birth and seemingly stretches on into eternity, when can one say that the work of ministry is ever really done? While a pastor may be able to check through a to-do list, like a never ending game of *Whack-a-Mole*, as soon as tasks are done for the day, more pop up everywhere. Pastors often feel that they are “always on,” working 24/7, and burning the candle at both ends. Paired with a lack of clear job expectations and ever-increasing congregational demands, ministry takes an open-ended shape that is difficult to measure. Without clear instructions or boundaries, pastors often find themselves overextended, overcommitted, and in over their heads. This is especially true in the contexts of the solo pastor, acting as preacher, song leader, youth director and janitor all-in-one. Where a pastor lacks support, the “pressures of inadequate staffing…”²¹ can exacerbate the above concerns and quickly deplete the pastor’s energy.

¹⁹ Ash, *Zeal Without Burnout*, 27.
²⁰ Barna Group, “The State of Pastors,” #.
²¹ Ash, *Zeal Without Burnout*, 27.
Second, the work of ministry is repetitive. Every preacher knows that as soon as one sermon is preached, there remain only one hundred and sixty seven hours until the next is due to be delivered. Week after week, there is always another Bible study to teach, another congregant to visit, another phone call to be made. As Mike Graves writes in *The Fully Alive Preacher*, “I’m thinking of ministers who know what it means to dread yet another sermon, yet another Sunday. Maybe it’s the overall drudgery of preaching, or perhaps it’s the toll of revealing ourselves in public week after week. Homiletical burnout. The question is what to do about it.”\(^{22}\) The answers will come later, but that is the question indeed.

Not only is the work repetitive, but so are the people. Unlike the high school teacher who sees her classes matriculate at the end of each academic year, pastors are stuck, for better or worse, with the same parishioners year after year. Every pastor has members who bring them life and a smile to their face, and each pastor has congregants who they hope against hope would find their spiritual home outside of the pastor’s care. If it is said that familiarity breeds contempt, then this same familiarity with parishioners breeds burnout as well.

Third, ministry is emotionally taxing. Because those to whom we minister are hurting people, pastors face the highs and lows of human experience at an intense level. For every baptism of an angelic infant or funeral for a celebrated saint who has truly had a life well and long-lived, there are unspeakable tragedies which weigh heavy on a pastor’s heart. There are the late-night emergency phone calls, the unscheduled hospital visits and weeks when the only news brought to the pastor’s attention is bad news. After swimming in the seas of the pain and loss of others for too long, pastors can experience what has been called “compassion fatigue.” Pastors who find themselves in this place of emotional exhaustion for too long often feel so burdened by

the burdens of others that they are crushed by the weight of it all and thus burn-out. Other pastors experience “compassion fade,” where as the crises increase, the capacity to care decreases to apathy. London and Wiseman expound upon this writing, “Others get to the place where they can’t stand the intense emotional demands that come from representing Christ at the bedside of a dying leukemia patient at 3:00 P.M. and then the same day officiating the wedding of a wonderful young couple at 6:30 P.M.; or when they have to referee conflict between two or three outspoken board members in a discussion group and be forced to serve the same people Communion on the next Sunday.”23 Whether fatigues or fade, situations like these result in a pastor running low on compassion and can make it difficult for her to summon up energy to care.

Along with compassion fatigue, there is also the emotional strain that comes with the persona that is expected of pastors from members of the congregation, the community and even the pastor himself. While a restaurant worker can remove their apron at the end of a busy lunch shift, pastors often feel that their calling does not afford them opportunity to take off what my wife calls their “preacher hat” and exist outside of their role. Even when a pastor is “off,” for vacation or illness, there is often a corresponding guilt associated with not being “on” and attending to congregational concerns. Additionally, pastors tend to feel like they are living in a fishbowl, with those in the community interested in the goings-on of the preacher and her family. Already weary from repetitive and unending ministry, a pastor’s emotional resources are additionally depleted as she struggles trying to keep up with expectations of what she should do and she should appear.

Fourth, burnout results from a disparity between the hopes of ministry mountaintop highs and the low valleys and plain places of daily pastoral work. This is especially true of the newly

23 London and Wiseman, Pastors at Greater Risk, 195.
ordained as they begin ministry with high hopes and idealistic expectations of what their ministry will look like. As Rediger claims, “the single most energy-draining pressure point I find among clergy is the gap between expectations and reality.” No pastor dreams of empty pews and endless funeral processions, but this is often the reality which pastors face. As the gap widens between the pastor’s expectations and reality, disappointment and disillusionment can settle in. Ash provides this collection of disheartening difficulties:

“Discouragement is deeply demotivating. You and I sweat away in preparation and in one-to-one Christian encouragement with somebody, we labour in prayer, in church leadership or service, and there seems so little fruit. An individual you invested in falls right back into sin. A church you lead splits or is stagnant. You preach your heart out and someone smiles and tells you they enjoyed the humorous aside you included in the middle; and your heart sinks. The youth group you help with is going badly. If you have been in ministry for any length of time, you will know all too deeply what I am talking about.”

This disparity between what a pastor hopes for and what they experience in daily ministry is often wide, and when a pastor remains perpetually disappointed, burnout is nearly inevitable. As the Barna report again verifies, “Pastoral dissatisfaction and disappointment seems to be associated with a church’s trajectory of growth. And since dissatisfaction and disappointment raise a

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24 Rediger, *Coping with Clergy Burnout*, 39.
pastor’s burnout risk, church decline seems to play an outsized role in a pastor’s chances of actually burning out.”

Even from the beginning research into burnout, this disparity in expectations and reality was named. Again, as Freudenberger first named in his original definition, “burnout refers to a decline in energy, motivation, and commitment and occurs when high expectations for achievements do not come to fruition despite devotion to a cause or way of life.”

Over time, these disappointments can wear the pastor down to the place where she wants to give up on professional ministry altogether.

As listed in the metrics for burnout risk in Barna’s report, pastors who remain in these conditions are planted in the unhealthy soil in which weeds of burnout can grow wild. According to Barna, these pastors “[feel] less confident in their calling today than when they began ministry; rate mental and emotional health as average, below average or poor; seldom or never energized by ministry work; frequently feel inadequate for their calling or ministry; frequently feel emotionally or mentally exhausted; have suffered from depression during their ministry; not satisfied with their pastoral vocation; not satisfied with ministry at their current church; tenure at their current church has been a disappointment; tenure at their current church has not increased their passion for ministry; their primary day-to-day tasks do not fit their calling or gifts.”

In addition to the open-ended, repetitive, emotionally taxing and often dissatisfying aspects of ministry that contribute to burnout, additional external factors include lack of appreciation by the surrounding culture, insufficient institutional and denominational support, lack of family encouragement and involvement, absence of friendships, self-imposed isolation and many others.

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27 Francis, “The Oswald Clergy Burnout Scale,” 243.
29 Willimon, Clergy and Laity Burnout and Rediger, Coping with Clergy Burnout.
What Are The Causes of Burnout? - Internal Contributors

While these external causes are sobering, but when paired with internal conditions, they raise even greater alarm. Again, burnout has been defined as the “exhaustion of all physical, emotional, and spiritual resources.” As such, there are internal physical, emotional and spiritual contributors which lead to this exhaustion.

First, burnout can be related to internal contributors that are physical in nature. Lack of exercise, poor sleep habits and a fast-food diet are all common for the busy pastor on the go. In their 2014 study, the Duke Clergy Health Initiative found that clergy in North Carolina were diagnosed with higher rates of angina, diabetes, asthma and joint disease than the general population. Most staggering was the finding that that 41% of these North Carolina clergy were obese, a difference of 12% more than the laity. There are many contributing factors to this but as the authors note, “church gatherings are an excuse to eat badly, and we clergy attend these multiple times a day, every week of the year, slowly wearing ourselves down…” Who can resist yet another King Ranch chicken casserole or a fresh-baked pecan pie? Church members regularly treat the staff to homemade cookies and cakes that fill the workroom and during the Christmas holidays, who among the clergy has not put on the festive fifteen?

When it comes to the physical contributors to burnout, if the apostle Paul tells us that our bodies are a temple for the Holy Spirit, for many pastors, we are in need of an extreme temple

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30 Rediger, *Coping with Clergy Burnout*, 16.
32 Proeschold-Bell and Byassee, *Faithful and Fractured*, 82.
33 1 Cor. 6:19 (New Revised Standard Version).
makeover. Rediger lists the outward signs of physical burnout: “Low energy. Weight change. Exhausted appearance. Significant change in sleep patterns. Motor difficulties such as lack of coordination, tremors, twitches. Frequent headaches and gastric upset. Loss of sexual vigor. Hypochondriacal complaints.”34 Couple these signs with the long term stress and adrenaline that accompanies increasing demands of ministry, and a pastor is primed for disaster. As Cordiero relates, “When the mind is put under the constant stress of deadlines, anxiety results and throws the body into crisis mode. Blood pressure increases, heart rates rise, and cholesterol counts swell. This accelerated wear and tear results in ulcers, anxiety attacks, and heart disease.”35 In summary, the physical bodies of pastors are often built on such unhealthy foundations that when the storms of life come, like the house built on sand, they come down, “with a great crash.”36

Second, ministers burn out because of internal conditions of mental and emotional exhaustion and when they face these, fail to have the resources needed to restore or take time to be replenished. In Reset, David Murray flashes what he calls the emotional warning lights. “You feel sad…or are on the verge of tears. It’s been a long time since you had a good laugh… Instead, there’s emotional numbness. You feel pessimistic and hopeless… Worry stalks your waking hours…You find it difficult to rejoice in others’ joy… At times, you feel so hopeless and worthless that you think it would be better if you were not here.”37 These internal emotional indicators, increasing in intensity, paint a depressing picture for the pastor on the edge of burnout. In fact, in The State of Pastors, Barna found that of the pastors surveyed, “almost half have faced depression.”38 For those pastors clinically diagnosed with any number of mental health disorders,

34 Rediger, Coping with Clergy Burnout, 15.
35 Cordiero, Leading on Empty, 52.
the external contributors to burnout explored above can easily overwhelm and lead to burnout. And while many denominations require psychological testing as part of the process leading to ordination, there is little, if any, continued testing, diagnosis or treatment for such mental stress and hardship.

Additionally, many pastors find themselves emotionally exhausted because they are experiencing an internal loss of meaning about the ministry they are called to practice. As Rediger notes, “the studies of the effects of loss of meaning by Viktor Frankl, Abraham Maslow, and other behavior scientists and theologians have only emphasized what the Scriptures have taught for centuries. Human beings without meaning and purpose will go through “random floundering” (Maslow’s term) and the consequences in anxiety and energy loss will be heavy.” Pastors might find themselves in the midst of a counseling session with laity, well-prepared sermon or heated staff meeting and wonder, “what on earth am I doing here?” With this feeling of purposelessness, ministers continue to expend emotional energy as they minister, but do not receive it back as they find their work just does not seem to make a difference. As Willimon strongly declares, “burnout occurs when energy is expended without fuel being added. In my opinion, the fuel that supplies the energy to minister as clergy or lay ministers is a conviction that what we do has meaning. Energy to stay committed arises out of meaningful attachments. When we no longer find meaning in what we do, even the smallest action drains us. Burnout is the result of lack of meaning.” Without meaning, it is no wonder that so many pastors fizzle out.

Third, for pastors who have made a vocational commitment to serve God, from where else do they derive meaning but from spiritual resources? So when these stores are dried up as well, from where do they derive purpose and vitality for lifelong ministry? Though he does not

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39 Rediger, *Coping with Clergy Burnout*, 28.
use the word burnout in his description, Peter Scazzero calls out “the emotionally unhealthy leader [as] someone who operates in a continuous state of emotional and spiritual deficit, lacking emotional maturity and a “being with God” sufficient to sustain their “doing for God,””41 “they give out for God more than they receive from him.”42 The signs of a pastor dealing with an internal spiritual deficit are many. Rediger notes these signs as “loss of prayer and meditational disciplines.... Loss of faith in God, the church, and themselves....Listless and perfunctory performance of clergy-role duties. Loss of joy and celebration in spiritual endeavors.”43 For pastors who are seen to be the models of holiness, Barna has found that many “rate their spiritual well-being as average, below average or poor; say it is very or somewhat difficult to invest in their own spiritual development; receive spiritual support from peers or a mentor several times a year or less; say their tenure at their current church has not deepened their own relationship with Christ.”44

On the contrary, pastors who pray regularly, read Scripture devotionally outside of sermon and Bible study preparation, fast, rest in the presence of God on a Sabbath day, and practice other spiritual disciplines receive the replenishment that they need to thrive in ministry without the internal threat of spiritual burnout. Thus when these ministers experience external contributors to burnout, find their dreams for ministry do not match their current reality, suffer through a series of ministry disappointment or disasters, or question the meaning of their ministry or life in general, they have a store of soul soothing supplies readily available for them. Again, Barna notes “while the specific discipline doesn’t seem to have a discernible effect, the consistency of one’s spiritual practice correlates to overall satisfaction and low risk metrics. Pastors who are

42 Scazzero, The Emotionally Healthy Leader, 26.
43 Rediger, Coping with Clergy Burnout, 15-16.
satisfied with their vocation and very satisfied with their current ministry, or who rate low on spiritual or burnout risk, are most likely to report practicing their top essential discipline (usually prayer) every day or more often.” But those ministers who have not cultivated these practices and only run to Christ in a crisis, are at great risk of burnout. Or, as Anne Jackson puts it, “if you wait until you’re thirsty before you drink water, you are already dehydrated.”

**How To Treat Burnout - What Can Be Done?**

So what can be done to stem the tide of this epidemic of clergy burnout? In much of the literature about burnout, the authors conclude their works with chapters providing remedies to burnout based on their physical, emotional, relational and spiritual symptoms. At times, these remedies for pastoral burnout read like a laundry list of clichés. In one such book, under the title “How to Prevent Burnout,” the following is suggested: “Check your potential for burnout…Always have something new in process… Commit to improving ministry skills… Be realistic about your use of time… Consider…time away.” Most prescribed remedies correspond on a one-to-one basis. Are you too busy? Take a day off. Is your ministry feeling too repetitive? Try something new! Have trouble keeping your eyes open? Try taking a nap or an extra cup of coffee.

For example, in *Switch Off*, the authors consider a case of a burned-out pastor lamenting that her work never ends, her efforts fail to satisfy her congregation and her desire to help has left her overextended and exhausted. The authors suggest in their “clergy guide to preserving energy and passion for ministry” that the pastor learn to say no to responsibilities, people and opportunities that stretch her beyond her limits. Admittedly, the role of the pastor “is complicated:

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46 Anne Jackson, *Mad Church Disease: Overcoming the Burnout Epidemic* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2009), 100.
47 Jackson, *Mad Church Disease*, 7-8.

By giving herself the opportunity to switch off some of these roles, this pastor may recover from burnout and prevent a relapse. The solution is simple, they say, just switch off:

Another such formula is suggested in Reset in which David Murray suggests alliterative antidotes for the ailments of pastoral burnout. Under one such heading, Relax, Murray suggests ministers that are “always on” relieve their stress by practicing a digital detox discipline; muting phones and computer notifications, only checking email four to six times a day, and taking scheduled social media fasts. When a pastor agrees to take such actions, they may find themselves with time to be still and rest in the presence of God, or it may allow them to quiet themselves for long enough to realize just how burned-out they really are.

Again, in an attempt to overcome the burnout epidemic, Anne Jackson suggests a symptom-based regimen of remedies. If your burnout is primarily physical in nature, try working out, getting better sleep and saying “no to the latte and yes to more water.” If you are struggling emotionally, try journaling about your emotions, talking with a counselor or reframing your situation. Or maybe your burnout is based on relationships worn thin by distance and discontent? Brainstorm into whom you need to invest more time and how you might make that a quality relationship. Try not to talk so much about church at home. And don’t forget to date your spouse.

In each of these resources, burnout is addressed categorically by its symptoms and the argument is made that by following pastors will find quick relief. Pastors struggling with burnout

50 Murray, Reset, 92-95.
51 Jackson, Mad Church Disease, 143.
52 Jackson, Mad Church Disease, 132-170.
will find the prescriptions proposed in the burnout literature more than sufficient to address particular concerns. Because burnout can involve the pastors’ physical, emotional, occupational, relational and spiritual wellbeing, it is no surprise that the suggested treatments to burnout run the gamut of these same groupings as well. There is no doubt, occupational burnout is alleviated with better time management and personal boundaries, and physical burnout is alleviated by exercising often and following a healthier diet.

Alongside of these, of course, spiritual burnout is addressed as just one more part of the overall problem. But for pastors who deal primarily in spiritual matters, could it be that by addressing spiritual burnout as just another category in need of behavioral correction, we risk addressing the symptoms of burnout and miss identifying the illness at its root? London and Wiseman posit the possibility of a spiritual concern at the heart of burnout, writing, “one helper of pastors believes clergy burnout is more often than not a crisis of faith because the minister gives too much for too long without continual replenishment. If this describes you, your soul needs tending.”

Here a direct connection is made between not just the spiritual disciplines and burnout but of the pastor’s spiritual life and their experience of burnout. Countering this, Willimon writes, “I expect that we clergy tend to ascribe far too much significance to theological factors in a persons’ commitment to the church - this person is not really dedicated to the work of the kingdom of God - rather than to psychological, sociological, and life crisis factors...”

Surely these other factors are at work as well, but, here, Willimon dismisses the theological factors to the peril of overall clergy health.

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53 London and Wiseman, Pastors at Greater Risk, 207.
54 Willimon, Clergy and Laity Burnout, 27.
When pastoral burnout is addressed based on its symptoms, those who seek a return to vitality risk a failure to address burnout at its root. Because the symptoms are varied and the attributed causes external, the remedies most often prescribed are applied as a panacea to burnout which can bring about temporary relief, but often paint over the cracks of the causes at burnout’s root. Like prescribing ibuprofen when the illness calls for antibiotics, the patient may no longer have headaches, but the infection festers.

Likewise, rather than just one aspect of multi-faceted burnout, I argue that, at its core, pastoral burnout is a spiritual malady and only a spiritual solution will cure. By attaining a clear understanding of the spiritual condition at the heart of burnout, pastors will gain an awareness of their condition, find relief from its symptoms, find meaning in their vocation, and joy for lifelong ministry.

This spiritual malady is called *acedia*, and it is to this that we turn our attention.
CHAPTER TWO: INTRODUCING ACEDIA AS THE ROOT OF PASTORAL BURN-OUT

_Acedia: An Awakening_

On a cold January day, at the depths my personal burnout, I heard the word for the first time. It was the last day of doctoral classes, at the pinnacle of my academic career, and I was still learning new vocabulary. *I tried to sound it out, “ah-kay-dee-uh? Uh-say-dee-uh? Uh what? Can you repeat that?”* The professor acquiesced, repeated the word and spelled it out on the white board. *Acedia*, he told us, was first written about by a fourth-century desert monk named Evagrius Ponticus and was relevant to the task of writing a dissertation. Defining the word as a type of torpor or listlessness in the midst of a task, *acedia* might cause the desert monk to get distracted or despondent, and similarly we writers may find ourselves equally tempted. If we came to a point of struggle, where we just did not feel like writing and that the work would amount to nothing, the professor suggested we take Evagrian advice of *staying in the cell until the job is done*.

The class continued on, but I was stuck on this new word and began to do my own research. There was something in his description that struck a chord within me and I had to know more. As I explored the experience of the monk, I found him staring out the window of his cell, unmotivated to do the work he was called to do. The monk had committed his life to serve God, but all he could think about was other places he could be, other things he could be doing. He knew he needed to pray, but he just did not want to. There was work to be done, but he did not bother raising a finger to do that. It was like the monk was depressed, but not quite. It was not that the monk was sad, he was just numb. Numb to the things of God, and for a monk, that was no small problem, that was deadly. And it sounded a lot like me.
In this one word, and my exploration of the monk’s experience of it, I was naming something I had experienced again and again for a long time. Like the classic fairy tale Rumpelstiltskin, I had been experiencing the oppression of a longtime companion about whom I did not know his name.\textsuperscript{55} I too had stared out the window of my office, counting the hours until the day was done. With a growing to-do list of ministry tasks, I regularly experienced this sense of being trapped between knowing the good that I needed to do and the lack of desire to do it. Like the monk who excitedly embraces the ascetic life, willingly forgoing the luxuries of life for love of the Lord, I remembered when the idea of being able to proclaim the word of God filled me with inexpressible joy, my adrenaline pumping to begin the exegesis and see what the Holy Spirit would reveal. But now, like the monk who can no longer summon the energy to fulfill his fundamental tasks of fasting, work and prayer, with the task of preaching week upon week, I, too, dragged myself kicking and screaming just to begin. The excitement was gone. The energy had dissipated. I was spent. I was burned out.

Could acedia be the answer to understanding pastoral burnout? Could the experience of a fourth-century monk begin to unravel the mystery of modern ministry malaise? Could the works of Evagrius, this spiritual guide to desert hermits, have the remedies needed when a minister’s energy for ministry has run dry?

In what follows, I will argue affirmatively that indeed, acedia is the key to understanding, recovering from, and preventing burnout in the lives of modern clergy. That by exploring the experience of ancient anchorites we might better recognize the ennui that entraps evangelists. That by sitting at the feet of Evagrius, this spiritual father to his desert followers, we might hear the practices which would lead us from acedia’s distraction and despair into faithful flourishing in

vocational ministry. So now, let us begin by painting a portrait of a word that is difficult to define: *acedia*.

**Defining Acedia**

Listlessness, torpor, apathy, depression, boredom, sloth, defining *acedia* is elusive as nailing Jell-O to a wall. Russian Orthodox monk and scholar Gabriel Bunge adds, “repulsion, inertia, indolence, lassitude, dislike, dejection, despondency.”

One self-published author provides this colorful characterization: “Like a medusian godhead, *acedia* grows with hundreds of self-cannibalizing dreadlocks. Amongst them are weariness, listlessness, boredom, ennui, meaninglessness, despair, despondency, anhedonia, suicidality…, nihilism, angst, insomnia, restlessness… loss of motivation, tediousness, fatigue, lethargy, emptiness, disillusionment, melancholia. And, of course, the infamously escapist and agenda-abortive mid-day nap.”

Indeed, far beyond the concise definition offered in the classroom, *acedia* seems to have its root in a myriad of related terms.

Like a mirror to the multitude of Greek words that are translated into the singular English word, ‘love,’ English translations for the Greek *akedeia* are seemingly inexhaustible. As Bunge adds, “Like so many concepts of the ascetic-technical monastic vocabulary, *acedia* is overloaded with so many and various shades of meaning that it is nearly impossible to express it adequately.

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with a single word.” As we will see, the more detailed our picture of acedia, the better we understand its relation to pastoral burnout.

First, in its origin, the Greek word, *akedeia*, means, quite literally, a “lack of care,” and it was first applied in the context of a family member who failed to attend to a deceased body. What was viewed as an essential task of the responsible relative was neglected and disregarded and the body lies there to decay. When directly applied to the monk or the pastor, *acedia* is rightly defined as a general lack of care for spiritual matters. As we will see, this can manifest itself in apathy towards prayer, Bible reading and a multitude of other essential ministry tasks. Crucially, those experiencing *acedia* are not necessarily able to explain the reason for this attitude, they simply could not care less.

Three examples illustrate this aspect of *acedia*. First, in his work, *Either/Or*, Soren Kierkegaard puts it this way, “I do not care for anything. I do not care to ride, for the exercise is too violent. I do not care to walk, walking is too strenuous. I do not care to lie down, for I should either have to remain lying, and I do not care to do that, or I should have to get up again, and I do not care to do that either. Summa summarum: I do not care at all.” The one experiencing *acedia* is not roused by emergency, necessity, or duty. No matter the task, the response is numbness. A second example is found in a children’s book character, Maurice Sendak’s Pierre. As Kathleen Norris summarizes in *Acedia & Me*, Pierre, “responds to all parental inquiries by saying, ‘I don’t care.’ When he encounters a lion who offers to eat him, and responds with his habitual ‘I don’t care,’ the lion pounces and devours him. The book is a perfect exposition of acedia: happily, when the lion is shaken upside down, Pierre emerges, laughing because he is not dead, and because life is worth living. If only I could so easily free myself from the lion of acedia. Often I

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58 Bunge, *Despondency*, 45.
59 Norris, *Acedia & Me*, 16.
can. But if I become to weary, I can care for so little that it becomes hard to care even whether I live or die.”

Like Norris, I was surprised to find that in that one of my favorite books from childhood would so perfectly describe my ongoing adult condition. Third, in Mike Judge’s *Office Space*, a cinematic exploration of *acedia*, the protagonist Peter Gibbons describes his daily experience of his work this way, “It’s not that I’m lazy, it’s that I just don’t care.”

Peter cannot explain his lackadaisical approach to life, there are no clear reasons for his apathetic approach, it just is the way he is, and he is perfectly happy to stay that way. That is *acedia* at work.

Second, this apathetic experience of *acedia* lends itself to be described as laziness or sloth. In her engaging book on the seven deadly sins, *Glittering Vices*, Rebecca DeYoung traces the evolution of *acedia* from its origins in the Egyptian desert of the eastern church to its appropriation by John Cassian in the west. In his interpretation of Evagrius, “Cassian uses language like “laziness,” “sluggishness,” “sleepiness,” “inertia,” and “lack of effort” in his descriptions of *acedia*, such as this one: ‘[Monks] overcome by slumbering idleness and *acedia*… [have] chosen to be clothed not by the effort of [their] own toil but in the rags of laziness… [and] have grown remiss as a result of sluggishness and … are unwilling to support themselves by manual labor.’”

The one experiencing this aspect of *acedia* moves at a snail’s pace. They are the couch potato, wearing pajamas all day, too lazy to make his bed or comb his hair. DeYoung asks, “Does laziness really rank with sins like envy and lust in its evil destructive power? Since when was sitting on the couch watching reruns of The Office and munching on a bag of chips a moral and spiritual failure of the first order?”

Well, as we will see, when that laziness so consumes a pastor’s life

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60 Norris, *Acedia & Me*, 17.
61 *Office Space*, directed by Mike Judge (20th Century Fox, 1999).
62 Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung, *Glittering Vices: A New Look at the Seven Deadly Sins and their Remedies* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, 2009), 84.
63 DeYoung, *Glittering Vices*, 80.
that they fail to live into the high and holy calling which God has set before them, this sloth is a grave sin indeed.

Third, related to apathy and laziness, acedia has been used as a description of chronic boredom. In its work, acedia robs any enjoyment from daily experience. It is a taedium vitae, a boredom with life and it makes a colorful world appear in washed-gray. Prolific author Andrew Solomon describes this experience after the success of his first novel, “In June 1994, I began to be constantly bored….I started to feel numb. … I tried to schedule pleasures. I went to parties and failed to have fun, saw friends and failed to connect; I bought things I had previously wanted and gained no satisfaction from them.”

The one experiencing acedia is “deeply dissatisfied with the world around him, but he still feels desire and wants to do something, though he does not know what to do.” There is nothing around that excites, nothing that stimulates the emotions, nothing to look forward to or celebrate about. It’s just all boring.

Fourth, as we have seen in the variety of suggested synonyms for the difficult-to-define word, the same acedia that is suffered through as boredom, can also be experienced in over-activity. This is the person with the never ending to-do list. They are the walking cliché, living life a mile wide and an inch deep. Their work, though never ceasing, amounts to little as they trifle their time away on tasks that Stephen Covey would place squarely in quadrant three, neither urgent nor important.

As J.L. Aijian writes, “acedia can manifest as a lack of productivity, but it can also become hyperactivity.” And this hyperactivity can lead the one enduring acedia to look like a sailor with a broken oar, paddling furiously but not getting anywhere.

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66 Stephen Covey, The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People, #.
Finally, for now, our last attempt to define *acedia* is as a form of depression, despondency or despair. Again, Judge’s character Peter Gibbons, feeling the oppressiveness of *acedia*, considers his career as a computer programmer and laments, “So I was sitting in my cubicle today, and I realized, ever since I started working, every single day of my life has been worse than the day before it. So that means that every single day that you see me, that’s on the worst day of my life.”68 This is when the tedium and apathy and meaninglessness aspects of *acedia* come together and one recognizes the tragedy of their situation. As Bunge describes, “*acedia* thus represents a type of dead end. A distaste for all that is available combined with a diffuse longing for what is not available paralyzes the natural functions of the soul to such a degree that no single one of any of the thoughts can gain the upper hand!”69

As such, these broad brush strokes illustrate our understanding of *acedia*, but for us to truly make application to its relation to pastoral burnout, let us now consider its original context with Evagrius Pontus and the community of the desert monks. As Kathleen Norris writes, “*acedia* is not a household word, unless your ‘house’ happens to be a monastery.”70 So now, to the monastery we go.

*Evagrius and the Experience of Acedia*

We begin with a brief introduction to Evagrius Ponticus. Evagrius of Pontus was born in 345 AD in ancient Turkey, the center of the developing world of Christendom. With great serendipity, Evagrius was ordained lector by Basil the Great, ordained deacon by Gregory Nazianzus

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69 Bunge, *Despondency*, 58.
and later served under Gregory of Nyssa in Constantinople. As a young man, Evagrius fell in love with a married woman and then, in 382 AD, after an angelic vision, fled Constantinople for Jerusalem. While in Jerusalem he lived with Melania the Elder who took him in and counseled him to take up the life of a monk. In 383 AD Evagrius began to live the life of an anchorite monk in the towns of Nitria and Kellia in the Egyptian desert and remained there until his death in 397 AD.  

It was there in the desert that Evagrius first introduced the world to the concept of *acedia* in the context of the Christian life. As a student of Macarius the Great, in the tradition of Antony, Evagrius became a monk par excellence and was looked to as model to the monks living in the Egyptian desert. Because Evagrius was condemned as a heretic in the sixth century, as he was thought to be in the spiritual tradition of Origen, many of his works were lost. However, the works which remain paint a portrait of the monastic life, its commitment to asceticism and the temptations that, if succumbed to, lead a monk to abandon the monastic life altogether.

Evagrius was a spiritual guide and father to the monks, and they came to him for his wisdom. He was motivated by their eagerness to grow in the pursuit of holiness and it inspired his prolific writing. Describing his way, his student Palladius writes, “This was his habit: on Saturday and Sunday, the brethren gathered at his place; all during the night they discussed their thoughts with him, and listened to the words of encouragement until daybreak. Then they went away filled with joy and praised God, for Evagrius’ teaching was very sweet.” After teaching

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72 Bunge, *Despondency*, 15.
to the general audience, Evagrius would meet individually with the monks who were facing particular concerns and temptations so that he could give them instruction on how to persist in their ascetic practices.

Evagrius had great empathy for the monks’ experiences of the difficulties of the desert life because he was experiencing them himself. He knew that the commitment to solitude, poverty and prayer was a calling from God, but one that could at times be discouraging. So Evagrius made “no secret of the fact that he did not find it easy to persevere all his life in the desolate desert.”73 The desert-practiced asceticism included strict dietary regimen, sleep deprivation and other acts of extreme faith. His writings on the monastic life detail the external and internal conditions with which monks battle in their attempt to stay faithful and steadfast in their calling.

Because of Evagrius’ awareness and personal experience with the conditions that threaten monastic life, he was a relatable and reliable guide to his contemporaries and by extension, likewise can be to pastors today as we seek to understand burnout and the spiritual conditions that threaten to unravel a spiritual vocation.

For the monks who followed God’s calling into the desert, Evagrius is clear that the goal of the monastic life was to become more like Christ in every way. The Christian life is a journey from sinful man towards Christ-likeness. By voluntarily withdrawing to the barren Egyptian desert, the monk chose to leave behind all family, possessions and desires from their previous way of life and direct their thoughts, life and livelihood to God and God alone. Thus they went to the desert, a place they assumed to be free of all temptations of their former life. However, as Jesus knew from his forty days of fasting and as Nault describes in The Noonday Devil, “the desert is

73 Bunge, Despondency, 14.
simultaneously the place of intimacy with God and the place of spiritual combat.” It was in the desert where the battle was most intense. Indeed, for Evagrius, it is in this spiritual warfare that acedia presents itself as an existential threat to the monk and his commitment to his vocation.

By virtue of his renunciation and the spiritual disciplines intended to satisfy worldly desires with divine goodness, “although the monk has to a large extent abstracted himself from the multiplicity of sensations in the secular world, he must still deal with the impressions left by the senses on his mind, whether stored in the memory or actualized in the mental representations …of his thoughts.” Thus, although the physical things themselves have been removed beyond the monk’s immediate reach, the memories of the things remain. These thoughts, or logoismoi actively threaten to fill the monk with temptations to engage in worldly practices and leave the spiritual life behind. As a harbinger of the seven deadly sins, Evagrius explicitly named these eight thoughts as gluttony, fornication, avarice, anger, sadness, vainglory, pride, and acedia. In doing so, Evagrius provides us with one of the first systematic categorizations of the vices that threaten the devout Christian life. And it is these thoughts, especially acedia, that lead the monk to thwart all attempts at a holy life, burn out and ultimately abandon his calling altogether.

In our quest to understand the spiritual condition at the root of burnout, it is helpful for us to consider how these evil thoughts in the life of the monk. For Evagrius, thoughts were not passive, nor were they morally neutral or harmless, in fact, thoughts were, by nature, diabolical. In his translation of the works of Evagrius, Robert Sinkewicz describes: “Behind each thought there stood a demon at work [and] Evagrius […] frequently use[s] the terms ‘thought,’ ‘demon’, and

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75 Sinkewicz, Evagrius of Pontus, xxv.
‘evil spirit’ interchangeably. Although at times it seems almost as if Evagrius has reduced the
demonic reality to a mere psychological manifestation, at other times he makes it abundantly clear
that he perceives the demons as individual, rational beings that seek with savage ferocity to per-
vert the human mind from its natural activity, the contemplation of God.”76 For the monk, this
contemplation of God is prayer, the “mind’s conversation with God,”77 and to distract the monk
from it is the most harmful thing that this thought can do.

Prayer is the essential work of the monk. Prayer is how one gives to and receives from
God. It is the pathway of “the mind’s ascent to God”78 as one grows in Christ-likeness. It is the
essence of the monastic life. For Evagrius, “prayer is utterly indispensable. It is in fact ‘nourish-
ment for the mind’. Without this nourishment, the mind is enfeebled and incapable of resisting
demonic temptations. We can therefore better appreciate why Evagrius, returning to the meta-
phor of ascent, instructs his audience, ‘When you pray, lead your thought up to God, and if it be-
comes distracted and descends, lead it up once more.’ Just as we do not eat once only, but often,
likewise we must pray not just once but often.”79 Prayer is the lifeblood of the monastic life, and
so it is no surprise that prayer that is the prime target of the logoismoi, namely acedia. As we
will see, if the demon can win the war against the monk’s prayer life, it can get him to give up
everything. The same will be claimed about acedia’s spiritual damage in the life of the modern
pastor.

Acedia, Evagrius posits, is the most deadly thought to those in the monastic vocation. Be-
cause the monk has sworn off most of the material things of the world, many of the temptations
of non-monastic Christians, including gluttony, avarice or fornication, fail to attract the attention

76 Sinkewicz, Evagrius of Pontus, xxv.
77 Evagrius, On Prayer, 3.
78 Evagrius, On Prayer 36.
79 Casiday, Augustine - Reconstructing - 138.
of the monk, but *acedia* strikes at the very root of his calling. Evagrius writes, “With men of the world, the demons fight mostly by means of things. However, with the monks, mostly through thoughts; for they lack things on account of their isolation.”\(^{80}\) Thus, the aim of the monk in prayer is to remain intimate with God and undistracted. Again, if prayer is “mind’s conversation with God,”\(^ {81}\) the goal of the thought of *acedia* is to interrupt that conversation at any cost.

As the monk is settling into his cell at mid-day for a time of sustained prayer, this is exactly when *acedia* attacks. Referencing Psalm 91, Evagrius gives us his most detailed description of its work:

“The demon of *acedia*, also called the noonday demon (cf. Ps. 90:6), is the most oppressive of all the demons. He attacks the monk at the fourth hour [viz. 10 a.m.] and besieges his soul until the eighth hour [2 p.m]. First of all, he makes it appear that the sun moves slowly or not at all, and that the day seems to be fifty hours long. Then he compels the monk to look constantly towards the windows, to jump out of the cell, to watch the sun to see how far it is from the ninth hour [3 p.m.], to look this way and that... And further, he instills in him a dislike for the place and for his state of life itself, for manual labour, and also the idea that love has disappeared from among the brothers and there is no one to console him. And should there be someone during those days who has offended the monk, this too the demon uses to add further to his dislike (of the place). He leads him on to a desire for other places where he can easily find the wherewithal to meet his needs and pursue a trade that is easier and more productive; he adds that pleasing the Lord is not a question of being in a particular place: for scripture says that the divinity can be

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worshipped everywhere (cf. John 4:21-4). He joins to these suggestions the memory of his close relations and former life; he depicts for him the long course of his lifetime, while bringing the burdens of asceticism before his eyes; and, as the saying has it, he deploys every device in order to have the monk leave his cell and flee the stadium.”

If the aim of the monastic life is Christlikeness, and a means through which this is accomplished is pure prayer, the scandal of acedia is that this thought will use distraction, boredom, apathy, laziness, despondency or any number of the multitude of its definitions to suspend the spiritual life altogether. Therefore, monks must “be wary of the ever present danger of acedia that will inspire within him a kind of boredom, a feeling of the tedium of ascetic practice and ultimately dissatisfaction with his cell and his current circumstances.” Once these have taken root, acedia entraps the monk into playing a most dangerous game. Why? Because acedia poses an existential threat to the monk’s reason for living. “This temptation draws the monk to relax his efforts and ultimately to abandon his commitment to the monastic life.” When the monk fails to resist and gives in to acedia’s work, their chances of faithfully fulfilling their call are thin.

**Bridging the Contexts**

Although they have not put on the habit of the monastic tradition, all Christians are susceptible to the vices, including, but not limited to, gluttony, lust and pride. But like the monks, it may be that modern pastors are susceptible and threatened by acedia most of all. For the pastor’s vocational life, it is acedia that is the most deadly sin of them all. Arguing this, Bunge describes

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82 Evagrius, Praktikos, VI.12.
83 Sinkiewicz, Evagrius of Pontus, xxiii.
84 Sinkiewicz, Evagrius of Pontus, xxix.
Evagrius’ characterization of acedia in its relation to the other seven vices, “the vices which plague humankind are the same from time immemorial and everywhere; only their concrete forms vary by people’s particular conditions of life. But acedia is one of the deadly vices!”

However, unlike its more flashy vices, acedia often operates insidiously, unnamed and hidden from view. Pastor Wayne Cordiero shares his experience, “I … had no idea how to confront the silent predator that was stalking me - sometimes far behind, and at other times so close I could feel its breath on my neck.” He did not know how to confront it, and, in fact, he does not even know its name. This is the current condition of many pastors as they experience burnout. They know how they are feeling, they can point to some internal and external contributors, but as much as they attempt to apply a solution, they are clueless as to the spiritual malady at work. It is therefore that by encountering acedia, learning to speak its name, recognizing its effects, that we see just how deadly acedia is and how it is the spiritual malady at the root of a pastor’s burnout.

It is to the work of acedia in the life of the modern pastor that we now turn.

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85 Bunge, Despondency, 23.
86 Cordiero, Leading on Empty.
CHAPTER III

MANIFESTATIONS OF THE MALADY IN MONKS AND MODERN MINISTRY

For the few modern sources that reference acedia it does not take long for one to encounter descriptions that mirror burnout. In *The Care of Souls*, Senkbeil writes:

“How can you tell if you suffer from acedia? Here are some of the clear warning signs:

* Ministry begins to lose its luster and you find it harder and harder to rouse yourselves to tend to the souls entrusted to you.

* Or conversely, you might throw yourself into frenetic ministry to other just to avoid having to tend your own soul, since you’ve grown cold and numb to the things of God.

* You lose touch with both the art and the craft of ministry; you find yourself acting not out of your pastoral habitus but just going through the motions and impersonating a pastor.

* Ultimately the word of God and prayer become more and more an official duty and less and less a personal treasure.

If any of these cluster of symptoms become the norm for you rather than the exception, I think you can be pretty sure you’re experiencing acedia.”

In his assessment, Senkbeil includes symptoms of burnout that we first encountered in chapter one; ministry feeling repetitive, absence of meaning, devotional habits lacking and the feeling that one is masquerading as a pastor and not truly living into one’s calling. But as we dig deeper into acedia’s manifestations in modern ministry, we will find just how fitting the term is in describing all of the highs and lows that pastoral burnout includes.

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As the symptoms of *acedia* run the gamut from restlessness and frenetic activity to a hopelessness and ennui in which one cannot rouse themselves to do any activity no matter how small, the signs of *acedia* in ministry run across manic-depressive spectrum. I use this term outside of its clinical definition believing that the phrase accurately describes the means by which *acedia* presents itself: highs of overactivity and restlessness and lows of despondency and despair. While most works referencing burnout focus on its more obvious depressive aspects, this chapter will consider both the melancholy and the frenzy. When exploring the question ‘What does *acedia* look like?’ it is good to consider a both/and understanding, inclusive of all its aspects. This will serve pastors best as they consider the impact of *acedia* in their ministry and prepare to recognize it, resist it and recover from it as they seek to maintain meaningful ministry.

**Depressive Descriptions of Acedia**

In the work of Evagrius we find parallels between the descriptions of *acedia* in the desert monk and the modern day pastor. To begin, as they will find more immediate resonance with the pastor in burnout, let us look at the depressive aspects of acedia. In Evagrius’s *On The Vices Opposed to the Virtues*, he catalogues nine vices and their virtuous counterparts as a type of glossary for the struggles of the monastic life. Here, Evagrius provides a general description of *acedia* that describes its more depressive aspects.

“As *acedia* is an ethereal friendship, one who leads our steps astray, hatred of industriousness, a battle against stillness, stormy weather for psalmody, laziness in prayer, a slackening of ascetics, ultimately drowsiness, revolving sleep, the oppressiveness of solitude, hatred of one’s cell, an adversary of ascetic works, an
opponent of perseverance, a muzzling of meditation, ignorance of the scriptures, a partaker in sorrow, a clock for hunger.”

It is important to note that there is no order to which the expressions of depressive acedia appear. Indeed, acedia will use any means necessary to take the monk or pastor “out of the stadium” of ministry. However for the purposes of this chapter I suggest the following progression to show the cumulative effect as acedia advances and pushes one further and further away from her calling and deeper into burnout.

First, acedia seeks to have the pastor neglect spiritual disciplines, removing her from the very resources needed to fuel ministry. Acedia works on the minister’s desire as she finds herself becoming cold to the very God she claims to serve and comes to see essential spiritual tasks as inconsequential. Second, acedia suggests that the daily tasks of ministry are repetitive and boring and that her work is meaningless. Third, having convinced the pastor that her ministry routines are fruitless, acedia works to persuade the pastor to question her calling to vocational ministry and wonder if indeed she ought not leave ministry altogether. Finally, in its extreme, having grown spiritually numb and detached from her vocational calling, the pastor may give up on life itself.

By grounding ourselves in the original desert context in which the concept of acedia was experienced in the life of the monk, we will observe the similarities common to all ministry and apply acedia’s work on today’s pastor.

A. So Long Spiritual Disciplines…

88 Evagrius, On the Vices Opposed to the Virtues, 6.4.
89 Evagrius, Praktikos, 12.
To begin, as *acedia* is the spiritual malady at the root of burnout, it starts its destructive work on the spiritual practices of the monk and pastor. For the monk who has left everything and committed to a life of prayer, *acedia* makes for “*stormy weather for psalmody, laziness in prayer, a slackening of ascetics.*” In the above description, Evagrius continues, and shows us how *acedia* sets as its prime target the spiritual vitality and commitments of the monk, acting as *an adversary of ascetic works, an opponent of perseverance, a muzzling of meditation, ignorance of the scriptures.* Thus, as the monk has committed to living a life built around rigorous spiritual disciplines, *acedia* afflicts the monk with carelessness and apathy towards his work.

In his work *On the Eight Thoughts*, Evagrius describes:

“The monk afflicted with *acedia* is lazy in prayer and will not even say the words of a prayer. As a sick person cannot carry about a heavy burden, so the person afflicted by *acedia* will not perform a work of God [with diligence]. The former has lost the strength of his body and the latter has dissipated the exertions of his soul.”

The first work of *acedia* is to induce the monk to neglect prayer, scripture reading and other spiritual disciplines. *Acedia* does so by making the monk spiritually sloppy, sometimes praying meanderingly and without intention and other times speed-reading through the assigned Psalms of the day just to get it done. Referencing Evagrius and his disciple John Cassian, Gabriel Bunge writes, “Indeed, the aim of the monastic life is ‘constant and uninterrupted perseverance

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in prayer,’ a statute which in its highest form is ‘dialogue of the intellect with God, with no inter-
mediary.’ When the monk falls into despondency, this desired aim suddenly becomes an unbear-
able burden.”93 With cunning persuasion, acedia says, “This is too difficult. Why continue to bear it?” Evagrius elaborates, writing:

“At the time of the office, whenever the spirit of acedia should fall upon you, it suggests to the soul that psalmody is burdensome, and it sets laziness as an antagonist to the soul, so that with unmatchable speed it gives the flesh over to the memory as thought apparently wearied for some reason.”94

Though the monk continues to rise for prayer each morning and throughout the day, when the Office begins, acedia makes the monk weary and makes prayer just one more task to get through and not a source of grace and delight. Acedia inspires novelty in prayer to distract the monk from his union with the brothers, chanting or singing when others are reading in unison, and rushing through the readings to complete the task more speedily. In To Eulogios, Evagrius writes,

“Sometimes he drives the tongue to babbling when acedia envelops the soul, sometimes he encourages the chanting of the readings... The demon of acedia instills laziness when one rises for prayer, and in turn, when one is praying or doing psalmody, he hastens to cause agitation.”95

93 Bunge, Despondency, 77-78.
94 Evagrius, To Eulogios, 9.8.
95 Evagrius, To Eulogios, 9.9.
Acedia also suggests minimalism in prayer and scripture memorization, another key aspect in the disciplines of the monastic community. Thus, Evagrius suggests monks pray against “the thought of listlessness that deprives us of reading and instruction in spiritual word, leading us astray as it says, ‘Look, such-and-such holy old man knew only twelve Psalms and he pleased God.’” It is almost as if the monk is wondering, “How little do I have to do and still be called a monk?” Each night, monks would read through twelve psalms and pray a personal prayer, a small task, but for the monk suffering acedia, it was too much to bear.

At the apex of spiritual sloth, acedia “shuns the reading and meditation on spiritual words and which advises us to ask the Lord that we might learn the Scriptures through his Spirit...” At this point, the monk is operating on auto-pilot, doing little active work and seemingly hoping they will gain knowledge of the scriptures via osmosis. At this stage, the spiritual disciplines of the monk cease to be active and this is a dangerous place indeed. As Bunge comments, “One has to be especially careful, for the death of one’s prayer life is the death of the spiritual life in general.” For the monk afflicted by acedia, to cease prayer altogether foretells a certain spiritual and vocational death.

When we wind the clock forward sixteen centuries, the parallels are clear. For the pastor suffering acedia, the very spiritual work which for the pastor should be the source of the delight and joy has become the very thing which she is loath to do. Acedia “makes [pastors] want to avoid activities and people that bring us face-to-face with our identity in Christ - most obviously,
things like prayer, worship, scripture and the sacraments.”\textsuperscript{100} If the encounter with Christ that comes through spiritual disciplines is that which gives abundant life, acedia “comes only to steal and kill and destroy”\textsuperscript{101} the spiritual life of the pastor. By removing commitment to these means of grace, acedia turns up the heat and starts the slow boil that leads to burnout. Indeed, it is this slow simming acedia that is at the spiritual root of every case of pastoral burnout.

Indeed, without naming acedia, the books on burnout reference the lack of personal spiritual disciplines as a key factor. In his book Reset, David Murray describes how the spiritual warning lights flash when, “Your personal devotions have decreased in length and increased in distraction, with little time or ability for meditation and reflection.”\textsuperscript{102} In Mad Church Disease, Anne Jackson includes the following spiritual signs that a pastor is facing burnout: “No desire for Bible reading. No desire for prayer. Feel spiritually empty.”\textsuperscript{103} Note Jackson’s phrasing. It is not just that the disciplines of prayer and scripture reading are lacking, but the desire as well.

This is where acedia does its most damaging work, making one’s affection for godly actions unappealing. Describing the pastor in such sad spiritual shape, Jackson writes, “you may be spiritually empty and dry. Your sensitivity to the sin in your own life has diminished. You know you’re not in regular fellowship with God, and right now you don’t even care.”\textsuperscript{104} Acedia strips the pastor of even the desire to do this spiritual good and the effect of this is spiritually deadly.

One is reminded of Thomas Merton’s prayer as he admits, “I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope

\textsuperscript{100} DeYoung, Glittering Vices, 93-94.
\textsuperscript{101} John 10:10 (New Revised Standard Version).
\textsuperscript{102} Murray, Reset, 30.
\textsuperscript{103} Jackson, Mad Church Disease, 96.
\textsuperscript{104} Jackson, Mad Church Disease, 121.
that I will never do anything apart from that desire.”105 For the pastor with acedia, that desire to please God is the very thing that is missing. As Senkbeil describes, when struck with acedia, it is “as if your soul has been injected with spiritual morphine. You become listless and unresponsive to the work of the Holy Spirit through his means. A pervasive numbness prevails; a numbness not just of emotion, but of heart and soul.”106 In the depths of his affliction with acedia, the pastor has lost all desire to pray and to attend to the spiritual practices most vital to meaningful ministry.

Though the Apostle Paul was not talking explicitly about spiritual disciplines, one can see acedia’s work in the pastor failing to practice the very things which he knows is good for his soul reflected in his inner struggle in Romans 7. “I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. … 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. Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it.”107 In the life of the pastor who struggles with prayer, it may be that sin of acedia living in her that keeps her from doing the very spiritual practices she desires.

In modern ministry, the instances of acedia in the area of spiritual disciplines are many. First, acedia convinces pastors that they are too busy to pray. There are always urgent tasks to complete on the to-do list, and the case can always be made by the pastor or someone else that they are equally important. Prayer becomes one more thing on the pastor’s task sheet, and it can always wait until later. Indeed, sometimes prayer might wait all the way until the formal pastoral prayer on Sunday, and even then, it can be delegated to someone else. Thus, if prayer was ever

106 Senkbeil, The Care of Souls, 212.
107 Rom 7:15,18-20 (New International Version).
part of the pastor’s routine, *acedia* works to remove prayer completely. And if you are only praying when you are leading congregational prayer, it is a sure sign you are suffering from the effects of *acedia*.

Second, *acedia* causes the pastor to question the purpose of prayer. *Acedia* causes the pastor to wonder, “What is the point of it all?” “When you become chronically disillusioned with holy things and apathy toward God’s work becomes unrelenting, it may be that you’re not dealing just with an emotional low, but *acedia*. That’s a spiritual temptation, part and parcel of the enemy’s attack in spiritual warfare.” If *acedia* has not caused the pastor to stop praying altogether, *acedia* strips prayer of its power and makes it seem ineffective and flaccid in evoking response from God or in softening the heart of the pastor. If God is not listening, if prayer does not do anything, and if I do not feel any differently when I pray, why bother?

Third, *acedia* causes the pastor to have limited use for a utilitarian view of Scripture. The Bible is seen as useful for preparing sermons and teaching Bible study and but not as a part of one’s devotional life. The scriptures are a tool to be used where needed and no longer something about which one might echo the psalmist, “Oh, how I love your law! It is my meditation all day long. … How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!” Instead it makes meditation on Scripture as unappetizing as puréed Brussels sprouts to a toddler. The pastor might brush off the Bible when it comes time for public reading, but otherwise, it sits on his desk collecting dust.

Fourth, *acedia* views worship as work that the pastor is employed to do, not an opportunity for the pastor’s spiritual edification and enjoyment or God’s glory. Amy Freeman writes:

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“Acedia tries to cloud our thinking about regular Sunday worship. For instance, to persuade us that other activities would be fulfilling, it might whisper, ‘All things are sanctified by the Lord, and one could just as well worship on the golf course as in a sanctuary made by human hands.’ Or acedia may suggest that we are too busy to make time for worship this week, because we are doing other good things. ... When all else fails, acedia will call attention to how boring or spiritually dry the sermons, prayers, and songs of worship have been of late...”

As Freeman describes, acedia can make the wonderful work of worshipping God seem like an unappealing act to be avoided in favor of less demanding activities.

Pass on prayer, skip scripture, waste no time on worship; it is easy to see how detrimental the work of acedia is on the pastor’s soul, making her lazy, careless, and cold to the opportunity to encounter God through God’s provided means. Though this is often the first manifestation of depressive acedia, it is this aspect that poisons the roots of ministry from which all burnout blossoms. As Senkbill concludes, “Whenever we grow numb to Christ’s saving work and the Father’s gracious gifts by which he makes us and preserves us, spiritual boredom takes hold, followed by apathy and subsequent despair.” As acedia strips the pastor of all spiritual practices, the joy of the Lord is no longer her strength, nor the foundation upon which all other tasks of ministry flow. As we will see, once acedia has altered the pastor’s affections for the spirit, she then finds that acedia makes all of ministry lifeless.

112 Neh 8:10 (New International Version).
B. Making Ministry Monotonous Again and Again

Evagrius warns the monks about the effects of *acedia* on their daily practice of ministry describing how it brings about a *hatred of industriousness*, and makes the monastic life boring and mundane, ultimately causing, *drowsiness, revolving sleep*. With the absence of robust spiritual practices paired with the routines of uninspired activities that the monk must attend to, *acedia* weighs the monk down with thoughts of just how difficult and monotonous their daily work is. As such, Evagrius warns “against the thoughts that show us the monastic life, that there are many afflictions and great labors in its discipline,” and “against the soul that in listlessness receives thoughts that take away its hope by showing how very difficult the monastic life is and that a human being can scarcely endure its way of life.” One can imagine that at this state, the monk has become tired of doing the things that the monastic life requires. Prayer is burdensome, joyless and without purpose and the work is unappealing and seems more than the monk can bear.

Evagrius imagines the monk in the throes of *acedia* struggling “against the thought of listlessness that rejects manual labor and leans the body in sleep against the wall.” If the monk does not sleep, then he just stares, paralyzed by boredom. I again invite you to read Evagrius’ humorous descriptions of the work of *acedia*, he writes:

*The demon of acedia, also called the noonday demon, is the most oppressive of all the demons. He attacks the monk about the fourth hour and besieges the soul until the eighth*

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hour. First of all, he makes it appear that the sun moves slowly or not at all, and that the
day seems to be fifty hours long.\textsuperscript{118}

Indeed, when \textit{acedia} is at work, the monk and the pastor both inquire, “How long, O
Lord, how long, will this day last?” The sun stands still and the monk finds his assigned work
unbearable, longing for a change. As the sun rises and sets each day, so the monk finds himself
engaging in the same routine tasks each day. Likewise, though the job is more complex than the
simplicity of monastic living, the work of a modern pastor includes daily and weekly patterns re-
lated to the call to “preach the Word of God, lead in worship, read and teach the Scriptures, and
engage the people in study and witness.”\textsuperscript{119} The fourth century monastic life consisted mostly of
the simple tasks of prayer and work but the “job of clergy is complicated: Spiritual leader.
Fund-raiser. Visionary. Person who mops up the puddles when the roof leaks.”\textsuperscript{120}

While it might appear that the variety of roles would keep the pastor always on his toes and
energized just by trying to keep these all in balance, when \textit{acedia} takes hold, such aspects of the
pastor’s vocation become boring, and he experiences the tasks of his calling as sheer drudgery,
no amount of variety can entertain or inspire. \textit{Acedia} robs the pastor of the joy of everyday min-
istry and makes each opportunity to live out their vocation just another item a never-ending list.
Ministry is experienced on auto-pilot. \textit{Acedia} makes ministry boring and strips it of its meaning.
The pastor is no longer energized by the work and the verse from Ecclesiastes, “Whatever your

\textsuperscript{118} Evagrius, \textit{Praktikos}, 12.
\textsuperscript{119} UMC Book of Discipline 2016, Paragraph 340, 2, a, 1.
\textsuperscript{120} Bradley, \textit{Switch Off}, 7.
hand finds to do, do it with all your might,”[121] falls on deaf ears. Everything seem boring and purposeless and even the most basic ministry tasks are performed with lifeless ministry. As Willimon concludes, “when we no longer find meaning in what we do, even the smallest action drains us.”[122]

Again, see how aptly the quote from pastor Wayne Cordiero describes this work of acedia in the pastor’s life, “Slowly, the unwelcome symptoms began to surface. Ministry became more arduous. My daily tasks seemed unending, and e-mails began to stack up. People I deeply cared about became problems to be avoided, and deliberating about new vision no longer stirred my soul. Although I never doubted my calling and gifting, what began as a joy that filled me now became a load that drained me.”[123] Without the spiritual practices which nourish the pastoral life, it is easy to see how quickly acedia drives the pastor’s ministry to hold “the outward form of godliness but denying its power.”[124] Echoing this to David Murray in his book Reset, “one pastor confided: ‘My ministry had become a shell without the heart, a matter of endless duties without joy. I was standing up every Sunday telling God’s people true things, good things. But they were no longer things that I lived personally. It was my job.’”[125]

Consider another pastor’s description of their burnout which leaves the hidden danger of acedia unnamed. “‘I felt fried inside. I lost enthusiasm for what I was doing. The work that had been a great passion for me had become just a job. I was dragging myself through each day.’”[126]

[123] Cordiero, Leading on Empty, 22.
[125] Murray, Reset, 23.
[126] Cordiero, Leading on Empty, 8.
Again, it does not take long for *acedia’s* gutting of spiritual practices to impact the daily work of pastoral ministry. The spiritual malady at the heart of burnout has affected all outward manifestations of the pastor’s work. And indeed, for pastors in this stage, ministry work is just that, work. As Senkbeil describes, “ministry… became first a chore, then a burden. ... The holy things of God began to lose their luster; he found himself less and less inclined towards prayer and God’s word. He grew impatient in his ministry, and it became harder and harder for him to listen to the troubled hearts and souls of his parishioners.”¹²⁷ It is clear that *acedia* makes the spiritual vocation spiritless.

Cumulatively, over time, *acedia* saps the life out of the minister, leaving him a shell of who he once was. In *Zeal Without Burnout*, Christopher Ash describes a fictional pastor’s experience that illustrates the effects of *acedia*.

“He stared vacantly out of the window. So much to do. So little energy. His open Bible glowered, chiding his failure to read, work, wrestle, write. His inbox and in tray ticked up and up, each task whispering, ‘So much to do. So many people. Such deep needs. So little time. So little energy.’ Prayer burdens stacked up, day after day after day. After these years of effort and pressure, he had nothing left. No resources, no emotional reserves, no intellectual energy, nothing. And so he stared with empty eyes.”¹²⁸

Without spiritual practices to strengthen him, and no sense of purpose to guide his work, it is no wonder that this pastor experienced burnout. Again, as this example reveals, *acedia* does insidious work under the surface of ministry that poisons its fruit and makes ministry lifeless. As each experience with burnout shows; when “you are bored with the small stuff of ministry,”¹²⁹ when

¹²⁷ Senkbeil, *The Care of Souls*, 212.
“motivation and drive have been replaced with avoidance, passivity, and apathy as you drag yourself through the day,”\textsuperscript{130} when your day is filled with “listless and perfunctory performance of clergy-role duties [and you are filled with the] loss of joy and celebration in spiritual endeavors,”\textsuperscript{131} it is clear that \textit{acedia} is at work.

What seminary graduate who revels in the opportunity to preach his first sermon, or first-time pastor who gushes at her chance to baptize a cooing infant “in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,” would ever imagine there might come a time when such work would feel boring? But this is exactly what \textit{acedia} does. It makes transformational and life-giving ministry lifeless and uninspired. Left unnamed and untamed in the life of a pastor, this deceptive thought next takes aim at the pastor’s vocational calling itself.

\textbf{C. Calling ‘Calling’ Into Question}

Once the monk has been stripped of his spiritual resources and begins to go through the motions of his monastic work, it is not long before \textit{acedia} begins to tempt the monk to abandon his calling altogether. Evagrius provides examples as to the manner in which \textit{acedia} accomplishes this.

First, as mentioned above, \textit{acedia} seeks to convince the monk that the work is too difficult. Again, “against the soul that in listlessness receives thoughts that take away its hope by showing how very difficult the monastic life is and that a human being can scarcely endure its way of

\textsuperscript{130} Murray, \textit{Reset}, 29.\textsuperscript{131} Rediger, \textit{Coping with Clergy Burnout}, 16.
life.”\textsuperscript{132} Here, acedia suggests that the monastic way of life is not how human beings were intended to live at all and for the monk to continue on is unproductive, even inhumane.

Second, acedia then tells the monk that the monastic vocation is meaningless altogether and that it is unnecessary for the monk to pursue such a life. So along with the thought that says “that a person can acquire purity and stability apart from the monastic life,”\textsuperscript{133} if God can be served anywhere, why endure such difficulties in the desert?

Third, an additional tactic that acedia attempts is to convince the monk that his motivations for entering the monastery were not holy but instead only self-serving for his own glory. Evagrius writes that acedia seeks to persuade the monk to believe, “it is not on account of God that we have left the world and embraced monasticism, but on account of our sins or on account of our weakness, because we could not excel in the affairs of the world.”\textsuperscript{134} If the monk only entered the monastery for his own purposes, why endure such hardship now?

Fourth, acedia convinces the monk that he is better off giving in to “the soul’s thoughts that have been set in motion by listlessness and want to abandon the holy path of the illustrious ones and its dwelling place.”\textsuperscript{135} For ultimately, acedia, “deploys every device in order to have the monk leave his cell and flee the stadium.”\textsuperscript{136} Again, this is acedia’s end. As Gabriel Bunge posits, “Is it any wonder if the unfortunate victims comes, after a while, to doubt the meaning of the monastic life?”\textsuperscript{137} When struggling with these aspects of meaning that acedia unearths, it is not hard to imagine why so many monks were tempted to abandon the hermitage altogether.

\textsuperscript{132} Evagrius, Antirrhetikos, VI, 14.
\textsuperscript{133} Evagrius, Antirrhetikos, VI, 41.
\textsuperscript{134} Evagrius, Antirrhetikos, VI, 46.
\textsuperscript{135} Evagrius, Antirrhetikos, VI, 52.
\textsuperscript{136} Evagrius, Praktikos, 12.
\textsuperscript{137} Bunge, Despondency, 82.
Likewise in modern ministry, when the daily tasks are experienced as nothing more than a job and the spiritual foundation is taken away, *acedia* lies in wait to convince the pastor that he needs to “flee the stadium,”¹³⁸ and no longer serve in ministry. Bunge bridges the gap from desert monk to modern vocational ministries by describing how Evagrius “unmasks as a temptation of *acedia* all secret doubt about the authenticity of one’s calling, of one’s decision to follow a certain type of life, whether it be as monk, priest, or married man. These thoughts infiltrate slowly, and with time they hollow out inner confidence, like water dripping on stone.”¹³⁹ Having been under the influence of *acedia* for longer than he could bear, one pastor reflected on his own experience, “You have little joy in your work, you dread it, and you are so miserable that you would consider doing anything else but your present job. ‘I was confused, … and soon my confusion turned into bitterness toward God. ‘What do you want from me? I work all the time. I have no hobbies, no down time, no joy, no life.’ I began to hate the ministry.’”¹⁴⁰

Once *acedia* has sunk these claws into the modern pastor, without help, the pastor continues ministering unmoored from his vocational foundation, unsure of his calling and thus, susceptible to burnout from ministry altogether. Again, left unaddressed, *acedia* does not cease until the monk has left the monastery, the preacher her parish, and the surest way to do this is to convince the pastor that her calling was not from God, but only of her own creation. In this vulnerable place, “for the demon it is an easy thing to make the despondent person believe that what was involved in the game was human, all too human, but nothing more. Such a fatal illusion, as you

¹³⁸ Evagrius, *Praktikos*, 12.
¹³⁹ Bunge, *Despondency*, 83.
see, by which many are taken in.” Like the experience of the monk above, acedia might attempt to convince the pastor that they are only in ministry because they could not be successful in other worldly careers.

As the tasks of ministry are sheer drudgery, surely any other career would be better than struggling through. The longer the pastor succumbs to this activity of acedia, the more they divest themselves of the work to which they are called. In Glittering Vices, Rebecca DeYoung dissects the downward spiral that pastors face when they remain subject to this side of acedia. With no end in sight to the repetitive tasks, “reality is oppressive, unbearable, and distasteful. The slothful person tends to cope by mentally and emotionally ‘checking out.’ The slothful are inwardly unwilling to be moved; they are stuck between a self they cannot bear and a self they can’t bear to become. Their outward behavior - sluggishness and inertia - reflects the state of their heart.”

Acedia seeks to convince the minister that it is futile to continue on in this sorry state. As Christopher Ash writes in Zeal Without Burnout, “Discouragement is that little voice on your shoulder, whispering in your ear that all your hopes and aspirations are nothing more than youthful naivety. There is no point persevering. How corrosive that little voice is; how ruinous to gospel zeal and drive!” This is the discouraging voice of acedia urging the pastor to give up and abandon their vocation all together.

For a pastor who at one time has been certain of their calling and clear about the direction of their vocation to be met with such uncertainty can be unnerving. Again, “despairing resignation is the form sloth takes if we can’t get to escape, either in reality or in fantasy, from the thing

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141 Bunge, Despondency, 83.
142 DeYoung, Glittering Vices, 94-95.
143 Ash, Zeal Without Burnout, 96.
that makes us sad. When we acknowledge this predicament, we tend to sink under oppressive hopelessness and despair... Hence, the inner tension and ‘trapped’ feeling that often characterize this vice. We can’t escape the truth about who we are called to be, and yet we refuse to face it.”

The modern pastor may then feel left with a choice, to be faithful to the calling they were once sure of and endure a lifeless ministry, or abandon ministry and live in fear of “not fulfilling [their] potential before God.”

D. Acedia’s End - Giving Up on Life Itself

If acedia can convince the monk and pastor to question spiritual disciplines, the daily tasks of ministry and even their vocational calling itself, then acedia can go one step farther and push some to give up on life itself.

Evagrius describes such a state in Antirrhetikos:

Against the soul that, due to the thoughts of sloth and listlessness that have persisted in it, has become weak, has been brought low, and has dissipated in the miseries of its soul; whose strength has been consumed by its great fatigue; whose hope has nearly been destroyed by this demon’s force; that has become mad and childish with passionate and doleful tears; and that has no relief from anywhere.

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144 DeYoung, Glittering Vices, 94.
145 Rediger, Coping with Clergy Burnout, 27.
146 Evagrius, Antirrhetikos, VI, ?.
In this state, both the monk and the pastor are at a loss of where to turn. Their worlds have turned dark and there seems to be no real escape. Without help or hope, the only option that makes sense is death. As Evagrius writes,

*But if the demon persists for a longer time, he begets thoughts that counsel the soul to make its escape or force it to flee far from its place. This is what the saintly Job once considered and suffered when he was harassed by this demon, for he said, 'If only I might lay hands on myself or at least ask another to do this for me.'*”

Along with the example of Job, monks and modern ministers who struggle with this extreme end of depressive *acedia*, will find themselves in the company of Moses and Elijah as well. During the waning years of his wilderness wandering, and as the people whined to their weary leader for meat, Moses turned to God and threw up his cry in desperation, “I am not able to carry all these people alone, for they are too heavy for me. If this is the way you are going to treat me, put me to death at once - if I have found favor in your sight - and do not let me see my misery.”

Might Moses have been struggling with the unnamed *acedia* all along? And when Elijah throws himself down at the base of the broom tree asking that his death come quickly, “It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life,” do we not see the depressive deceptions of the demon at work?

Without help, in the struggle with *acedia*, for some modern pastors, as it was for some desert monks, “suicide is in many cases nothing more than the last desperate attempt at a flight

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147 Evagrius, *On Thoughts*, 12.
from one’s own inner emptiness into nothingness, a ‘solution to the conflict,’ which Evagrius by the way explicitly rejects several times.”

Unfortunately, as many recent news reports have shown, in the struggle with these depressive aspects of acedia, paired with diagnosed mental illnesses, some pastors have found the path forward hopeless, the burden too much to bear and the results deadly.

This is acedia at its most extreme and destructive end. But it does not have to be end this way and as we will see, acedia is resistible, burnout is not inevitable, and there is much reason for hope.

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150 Bunge, Despondency, 85.
Manic Manifestations of Acedia

“Acedia is an ethereal friendship, one who leads our steps astray, hatred of industriousness, a battle against stillness, stormy weather for psalmody, laziness in prayer, a slackening of ascetics, ultimately drowsiness, revolving sleep, the oppressiveness of solitude, hatred of one’s cell, an adversary of ascetic works, an opponent of perseverance, a muzzling of meditation, ignorance of the scriptures, a partaker in sorrow, a clock for hunger.”

As has been made apparent, just when you think you can wholly define acedia, you are introduced to another aspect of its demonstrations. Acedia’s depressive aspects are most clearly identified in the stories of the pastors who experience burnout, but it is in its manic tendencies which color in the details of the portrait of modern pastoral burnout. As Evagrius notes, acedia is that which “leads our steps astray,” oppresses solitude and engenders hatred for one’s place and serves as an “opponent of perseverance.” Acedia may present itself as workaholism and over-functioning, endless distraction and wandering, restlessness and vocational vagabondage, and an escapism that prefers any activity to the one to which the pastor is called.

152 Evagrius, On the Vices Opposed to the Virtues, 6.4.
153 Evagrius, On the Vices Opposed to the Virtues, 6.4.
154 Evagrius, On the Vices Opposed to the Virtues, 6.4.
A. Overactive Workaholism - All This Effort, For What?

Strangely, acedia, often defined as sloth, can be a temptation not to laziness but to meaningless overactivity. As Dorothy Sayers writes, “[I]t is one of the favorite tricks of this Sin to dissemble itself under cover of a whiffing activity of body. We think that if we are busily rushing about and doing things, we cannot be suffering from sloth. And besides, violent activity seems to offer an escape from the horrors of Sloth. So the other sins hasten to provide a cloak for Sloth…. But these are all disguises for the empty heart and empty brain and empty soul of Acedia.”155 The kind of work Sayers refers to is the kind of empty ministry that comes from a pastor who has had the vital spiritual practices removed. The pastor’s ministry now rests upon sand, and no matter how much effort he puts into keeping the house upright, when storms come, the foundation is bound to crumble.

The trick of acedia is in convincing the pastor to believe that a busier ministry schedule adds up to a more fruitful ministry. Thus, the harder the pastor works, the more effective and edifying her ministry must be. Wayne Cordiero admits to this insidious aspect of acedia, “the habits I developed early on - my self disciplines, unrelenting work ethic, and the drive for excellence - would cloak my inner struggles and anesthetize the pain.”156 Because he was working hard, and doing what he was called to do, he justified, there was no way he could burn out. But as Josef Pieper points out, “Not only can acedia and ordinary diligence exist very well together; it is even true that the senselessly exaggerated workaholism of our age is directly traceable to acedia, which is a basic characteristic of the spiritual countenance of precisely this age in which we live.”157

This workaholism that can characterize the ministry of some pastors often masks an inner emptiness when the pastor already knows that something is not right. Assessing the work habits of modern Americans, Tim Kleiderer admits that, “Busyness serves as a kind of existential reassurance, a hedge against emptiness; obviously your life cannot possibly be silly or trivial or meaningless if you are so busy, completely booked, in demand every hour of the day.”¹⁵⁸ Thus when pastors begin to feel any of acedia’s depressive effects, “They seemed to sense something was breaking down; so they tried harder to accomplish their tasks. They would eat on the run, never take time off, keep more and more erratic hours, and try to drive everyone working with them to work harder.”¹⁵⁹ At this pace, pastors are like hamsters running in wheels, running furiously but never getting anywhere.

In Reset, David Murray enumerates the warning lights that foretell when a pastor may be close to experiencing burnout. If “you work more than fifty hours per week, although not very efficiently, productively, or satisfyingly,”¹⁶⁰ you are experiencing the acedia which can lead to burnout. Related to the overwork that acedia inspires, pastors invest more and more time only to find little movement in the ministry areas in which they are striving with futility. No matter how much additional work is being invested, “we have the unfulfilling experience of making a millimeter of progress in a million directions.”¹⁶¹ Under the influence of acedia pastors keep working harder and harder with little to show of much importance or impact. If pastors are able to take time for reflection, and recognize the meaninglessness of all of their labor, they may find the depressive aspects of acedia ready to ensnare them with despair.

¹⁵⁹ Rediger, Coping with Clergy Burnout, 14.
¹⁶⁰ Murray, Reset, 28.
Ultimately *acedia*’s temptation towards ceaseless work and overactivity operates as if it is “the Christian virtue of brotherly love! But it is nothing more than an illusion, a dangerous self-deception. It is the illusion of a full appointments calendar that blinds us to our inner emptiness. It is all the more dangerous as it serves so-called high goals and is therefore unassailable. The longer this illusion continues, the more disastrous the consequences. The sudden end of the delusion, the dreadful awakening, inevitably comes sooner or later. One will either give up in desperation, dropping everything that up to then had ostensibly made up the content of life, or one will clutch at new and ever stronger doses of distraction.”¹⁶² As we will now see, for the one experiencing *acedia*, distraction is a medicine of which they just cannot get enough

B. Distraction - Looking Out Windows and Chasing Squirrels

With iPhones, laptops, and an endless scroll of new content on social media the opportunities for distractions in daily life are endless. This is no less true for the pastor. A new notification here, and pester ing pop-up window there, and it is surprising that any work of substance ever gets done. But lest the modern pastor think he is alone in chasing *acedia*’s squirrels of distraction as they come, Evagrius recounts the common distracted disposition of a monk in the throes of manic acedia:

*The eye of the person afflicted with acedia stares at the doors continuously, and his intellect imagines people coming to visit. The door creaks and he jumps up;*

¹⁶² Bunge, Despondency, 74.
he hears a sound, and he leans out the window, and does not leave until he gets stiff from sitting there.\footnote{Evagrius, \textit{On the Eight Thoughts}, 6.14.}

In this first description, one imagines a monk, who is given the task to sit in his cell and pray, finding the task boring and so yearns for anything, anything at all to direct his attention elsewhere. He wonders who he can talk with, who might need his help. This monk is eager to do anything but the task at hand. Evagrius describes this listless one elsewhere as “\textit{a person afflicted with acedia [who] proposes visiting the sick, but is fulfilling his own purpose,}”\footnote{Evagrius, \textit{On the Eight Thoughts}, 6.6.} just to no longer have to focus on his primary work. This monk is always quick to lend a hand and “\textit{undertake a service, but considers his own satisfaction to be a precept.}”\footnote{Evagrius, \textit{On the Eight Thoughts}, 6.7.} This monk is always willing to help if it means he can avoid do the work he is supposed to do for just a while longer.

With a keen assessment sounding almost like patristic attention deficit disorder, Evagrius describes the distracted monk under the influence of \textit{acedia}:

\textit{When he reads, the one afflicted with acedia yawns a lot and readily drifts off to sleep; he rubs his eyes and stretches his arms; turning his eyes away from the book, he stares at the wall and again goes back to reading for awhile; leafing through the pages, he looks curiously for the end of texts, he counts the folios and calculates the number of gatherings. Later he closes the book and puts it under his head and falls}
asleep, but not a very deep sleep, for hunger then rouses his soul and has him show concern for his needs.”

In Reset, David Murray flashes a mental warning light, when burnout is near, “Concentration is hard, distraction is easy.” This is indeed the sad shape of the modern pastor experiencing this manic manifestation of acedia. One imagines the pastor with a never ending stack of books by the bedside, having so much to read, but an attention span sufficient for skimming the dust jacket. Often for the pastor suffering acedia, this distraction looks like procrastination that delays the most important and essential tasks of ministry in favor of whatever the day may bring, whether an extra long lunch with a parishioner, a lingering pop in meeting with a colleague, or another round of online solitaire. Acedia can convince the pastor that everything they are doing around the church is of equal importance and lead them to trifle away their time in endless distractions, instead of hunkering down and writing the sermon or doing the exegetical work of Bible study that the pastor finds difficult to do.

C. Restlessness - I Gotta Get Outta Here!

Not only does acedia tempt the monk with many distractions but also causes a restlessness that leads the monk to shun stability and the commitment made to a single place and instead

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166 Evagrius, On the Eight Thoughts, 6.15.
167 Murray, Reset, 26.
seek variety of location. *Acedia* is that which “leads our steps astray,”\(^{168}\) and engenders a “hatred of one’s cell,”\(^{169}\) and convinces him that “pleasing the Lord is not a question of being in a particular place: for scripture says that the divinity can be worshipped everywhere.”\(^{170}\) When experiencing *acedia* the solitary monk grows tired of his roof and four walls and is driven out of his cell.\(^{171}\) And once this monk begins to covet other locations, there seems to be no end to the excuses that *acedia* can come up with. Evagrius lists the monk’s excuses with increasing effect.

> Against the miserable soul that is listless and chooses other places in which to live\(^ {172}\)

> Against the thought of listlessness that shows us other places and advises us to acquire a cell there on the pretext that there we will be able to meet our needs without toil and to provide peace and consolation to the brothers who come to us.\(^ {173}\)

> Against the thought of listlessness that is eager to find another cell for its dwelling place on the pretext that the first one that it had was very foul and full of moisture so that it got all kinds of diseases from it.\(^ {174}\)

Like a monastic parody of *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*, for the monk in *acedia*, one cell seems too small, another too difficult, another too moldy, no cell seems just right. Even


\(^{171}\) Evagrius, *On the Eight Thoughts*, 6.5.


within the context of one single monastery, acedia engenders a wandering that no room can satisfy. Here, acedia is far more cunning than it appears on the surface, for, as Bunge explains, “the temptation of bodily vagabondage is the tangible manifestation of that fundamental evil which undermines all spiritual life: the vagabondage of thoughts. The anchorite therefore settles his body in his cell and his thoughts in remembering God.”

When the monk is unmoored from the cell, so his thoughts become detached from God as well, and he begins to think it best for him to seek them elsewhere.

The pastor experiencing acedia also experiences an inner restlessness that nothing seems to satisfy. Whether it is in fantasies about a new position, new church, or even a new office in which to work, acedia makes it so they never are satisfied with where they are. Acedia infects pastors with a case of the if onlys. If only I served that church downtown. If only I had that size staff. If only I had a budget as healthy as theirs. If only the bishop would have appointed me there. For the pastor in acedia, the answer to their restlessness is never internal, but always somewhere, out there. It is always a problem to be solved with an external answer. And often that answer is thought to be a new location for ministry.

Ash includes the story of a pastor, Dennis, who found that, having hoped that changing churches was the answer to the burnout he was experiencing, found acedia to be waiting for him again when he arrived. “A church in Tennessee contacted me. It was bigger - and nice - and they really wanted me. I jumped at the chance for a new beginning and success in another city and didn’t look back. The overused cliché, ‘The definition of insanity is trying the same thing over and over and expecting a different result’ described me to a T.”

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175 Bunge, Despondency, 68.
176 Ash, Zeal Without Burnout, 71.
found that moving churches did not make him any less susceptible to burnout and the temptations of acedia remained.

In this state, pastors may continue to try all types of outward fixes, hoping for satisfaction in things that are big and bold, flashy and new. Variety is highly valued by the pastor in acedia, and being rooted in place is insufferable. As Evagrius advises the monks, “A sick person is not satisfied with a single type of food; the monk caught in acedia with a single type of work.”¹⁷⁷ “One wife is not enough for a man given to pleasure; a single cell is not enough for the monk given to acedia.”¹⁷⁸ A pastor may try myriad ministry settings and opportunities, but without addressing acedia directly shall remain fruitless and unfulfilled. Again, Evagrius describes, “A plant that is transplanted will not bear fruit; a wandering monk will not produce the fruit of virtue.”¹⁷⁹ For the pastor caught in the distraction and restlessness of acedia, DeYoung concludes, “life becomes one long project of distracting ourselves from the truth about our predicament. Augustine famously said that we would be ‘restless’ until we find our ‘rest in [God].’... Sadly, this escapist strategy can take even ostensibly pious forms: we can spend our whole lives avoiding the demands of true discipleship, love, commitment, and change, even if we constantly and busily engage in lots of religious activities.”¹⁸⁰

If the restless urges do not lead one towards a new location for their vocation, then acedia may lead them to find any means of escape at all. Acedia’s constant refrain is like the Southwest Airlines commercial campaign slogan, “Wanna Get Away?” Under the influence of acedia the pastor yearns to go anywhere and do anything besides what they are called to do in their current

¹⁷⁷ Evagrius, On the Eight Thoughts, 6.12.
¹⁷⁸ Evagrius, On the Eight Thoughts, 6.13.
¹⁷⁹ Evagrius, On the Eight Thoughts, 6.11.
¹⁸⁰ DeYoung, Glittering Vices, 95
vocation. Vacations can be helpful and should be incorporated to the calendar of any healthy person in modern ministry, but if, once you return to work, you find yourself ready to go on yet another adventure as soon as possible, it is very likely *acedia* is at work. This restlessness is never satisfied. *Acedia* longs for more and more. Gabriel Bunge puts it this way, “An entire entertainment and travel industry is occupied today with just this: to lighten the burden of despondency for our poor contemporaries, or rather, to prevent them even from realizing they are afflicted with this evil. There must be no standing still, no emptiness! ... But the evil is not remedied by this, only postponed. The beautiful illusion vanishes and despondency returns and requires yet stronger doses.”¹⁸¹ *Acedia* will not relent. It will not resolve on its own. And, as we will see, this particular aspect of *acedia* has its antidote.

D. Maximal Spiritual Fervor - All Systems Go!

As previously explored, a core aspect of the depressive manifestations of *acedia* is a withering away of spiritual disciplines. If any habitual disciplines remain, pastors suffering *acedia* put forth the bare minimum. Anne Jackson describes this minimalistic effort that some moderns pastors exert in prayer, stating that “21 percent of pastors pray less than 15 minutes a day”"¹⁸² For the pastor experiencing *acedia*, to pray for a quarter of an hour might feel almost saintly and to consider Jackson’s claim that “the average pastor prays 39 minutes a day,” might feel like an insurmountable task. At this stage, sometimes, as we have seen, *acedia* leads to the pastor abandoning prayer altogether. But other times, *acedia’s* work has the opposite effect. In these situations, once the pastor realizes that their spiritual disciplines have ceased, like the overzealous

¹⁸¹ Bunge, Despondency, 72.
¹⁸² Jackson, *Mad Church Disease*, 52.
monk, the pastor in may overcorrect, swing into a high speed lane, and then run out of gas, exhausting himself trying to emulate the lives of those with extreme spiritual disciplines. Evagrius describes this manifestation in the life of the desert monks writing:

*He who engages in the training of bodily ascetic works with greater harshness, let him not engage in such work for reasons of praise nor let him put on airs for reasons of glory. For if the demons can make the soul conceited in these matters, they can fortify both the harshness and the ascesis of the body with glory and draw the soul on to the attainment of greater ascetic works with the result that it puts on even greater airs. They speak interiorly through the thoughts, introducing such notions as these: ‘Just as so-and-so undertook a very rigorous ascetic regime and so-and-so attained a great reputation and after he died was still talked about, so you too, mount to the height of ascetic achievement so you can bring glory on yourself and have your great reputation spread abroad so that even after your death people will speak of you profusely!’* 183

When the monks consider such spiritual superstars, they attempt to follow in their footsteps but under the influence of *acedia*, do so at their peril. *Acedia* opens the doors for the vice of pride, practicing these spiritual disciplines not for God, but for self-adulation and the praise of others.

The same experience is found *acedia’s* work on pastors. Jackson writes, “In *Preacher and Prayer*, E.M. Bounds describes the prayer habits of several Christian men - and not just voca-

tional pastors: … Edward Payson prayed so often that deep grooves were formed on his hardwood flood by his bedside from where he knelt. Abolitionist William Wilberforce spent at least two hours in prayer early in the day. John Welch, a Scottish preacher, would think he wasted his day if he spent less than eight to ten hours a day in prayer, sometimes in the middle of the night.”\textsuperscript{184} The pastor in \textit{acedia} hears this, thinks that this description should be his prescription, and takes up the task with foolhardy zeal. This pastor may be able to sustain such holy habits for a while, but as these disciplines are taken up for self-satisfaction and without a true spiritual focus on God, when the habits do not hold, \textit{acedia} again succeeds and the pastor feels that he has failed. Evagrius describes \textit{acedia}’s victory:

\begin{quote}
He evokes the memory of certain other anchorites who have always lived in this way and... compels him to become their imitator so that in pursuing an immoderate abstinence, he may fail to attain even a moderate one....The demon of acedia also imitates this demon suggesting to the persevering (ascetic) an extreme withdrawal, inviting him to rival John the Baptist and Antony, the very first of the anchorites, so that, unable to bear the prolonged and inhumane withdrawal, he flees with shame, abandoning the place, and the demon then makes his boast, ‘I prevailed over him’.\textsuperscript{185}
\end{quote}

Like this monk, in my seasons of spiritual dryness, when \textit{acedia}’s actions have exhausted my spiritual resources and stripped me of my desire for the divine, there have been times where I have been tempted to try extraordinary efforts to reignite my faith. As the demon invited the monk to emulate John the Baptist, \textit{acedia} has led me towards the imitation of a different John,

\textsuperscript{184} Jackson, \textit{Mad Church Disease}, 52.
\textsuperscript{185} Evagrius, \textit{On Thoughts}, 35.
the methodically disciplined Mr. Wesley, the spiritual father of the denomination in which I pastor. Following in his footsteps, I tried fasting on Wednesdays and Fridays and ended up feasting on a burger and fries by noon. I started the season of Lent intending to be, like Wesley professed, a *homo unius libri*, “a man of one book,”\(^\text{186}\) reading nothing but the Bible for each of the forty days, but, by day three, was wooed to read the work of other writers and set the Scriptures aside for Easter Sunday. I would wake at 4:00 a.m. to pray, only to fall asleep midway through the meditation, and experience the same shame of the disciples as they heard Jesus’ question, “Are you asleep? Could you not keep awake one hour?”\(^\text{187}\) When *acedia* wins, I reply to Jesus, “Indeed, I could not.”

As demonstrated in my own experience, feeling let down by the flurry of spiritual activity, sometimes the pastor who struggles with *acedia* feels it is better to not bother with spiritual disciplines at all, than to try them and fail. As we have seen, in this state, the workings of depressive *acedia* are apt take hold, first leading the pastor to neglect spiritual disciplines, and on it goes. Without help, *acedia* sinks its teeth in deep and can be the undoing of the modern ministry. If no intervention is attempted, burnout is inevitable. But this need not be the case. *Acedia* may be the root of all burnout, but burnout is not the predetermined result in each case of *acedia*. With an acute awareness of its workings and active application of the antidotes we will explore, burnout can be avoided and *acedia* can be overcome.


As has been argued, it is only by naming and understanding the spiritual condition of *acedia* that a pastor can identify burnout, recover from burnout, and prevent future burnout. The good news is that recovery from burnout is possible and the remedies are plentiful. It is Evagrius of Pontus who first introduced us to *acedia*, and it is Evagrius that first applied its antidotes to the lives of the desert monks. Gabriel Bunge details the hope of recovery that Evagrius provides:

“*The unrelenting anatomy of the phenomenon of despondency could well lead many to the mistaken conclusion that the disease is incurable. But that would be a fallacy and basically nothing more than a further illusion of despondency. Like all an-cient monasticism and the early church in general regarding the possibility of victory over evil, Evagrius is unshakably optimistic. Evil is fundamentally non-being, a fake, parasitic being. As such, it has been unmasked by Christ, put on display, and deprived of power. The demon has no more power over human beings; though the despondent man, like a fool, comes to belong to him once more. Despondency, this conglomerate of all imaginable vices, for Evagrius is a thoroughly curable disease; indeed, the medication he prescribes for it is surprisingly simple.*”

For Evagrius, the demonic thought of *acedia* has no power over the Christian but that which he allows. The solution then is not to close one’s eyes and pretend *acedia* is not there, but instead like the Book of James insists, the monk and the pastor must, “Resist the devil, and he will flee

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188 Bunge, *Despondency*, 87.
from you.”¹⁸⁹ Acedia is the spiritual malady at the root of pastoral burnout, and as our attempt of prevention and remedy, Evagrius offers us an explicitly spiritual cure. I argue thus, that through following the surprisingly simple remedies Evagrius provides, like in the lives of the monks for whom they were originally prescribed, pastors will find the antidotes to acedia effective, recover from burnout and be on a path towards spiritual and vocational flourishing.

**SPIRITUAL WARFARE**

As argued throughout this work, acedia is a spiritual condition that only a spiritual treatment will cure. Therefore, we begin by considering the most direct spiritual approach that Evagrius suggests. In the Evagrian tradition, acedia is understood to be prompted by evil thoughts, or demons. Thus, the first category of the antidotes to acedia is spiritual warfare, specifically through scripture and prayer. Finding its roots in Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, in seeking to resist acedia, pastors are guided to “Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.”¹⁹⁰ Unlike most modern writings related to burnout, in which spiritual aspects are placed as coequals to physical, emotional and mental considerations, the work of Evagrius leads us to see that, while other factors may be at play, burnout rooted in acedia is best addressed as a chiefly spiritual concern.

A. Antirrhesis - Talking Back

The first remedy Evagrius suggests in great detail is taking up “the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.” Seeing the temptation of Jesus from the gospels of Matthew and Luke for his inspiration, Evagrius sees Jesus’ quoting of scripture as a response to the devil’s provocations as a prescriptive way of dealing with diabolical influence and temptation. Serving as a mentor to a monk named Loukios, Evagrius crafted a guidebook providing specific responses to the demonic suggestions that were most common to the anchorites. Loukios seeks out such help from Evagrius because he believes that Evagrius has much firsthand experience in the demonic combat with which he is currently struggling. According to Loukios, Evagrius “has achieved such a level of success in his contests with the demons that the demons fear him and he has summoned others to take up the fight. It is because Evagrius has personal knowledge of the demons and the combat with them that Loukios seeks a treatises from him.”

In his Antirrhetikos, Evagrius considers each of the evil thoughts in which a monk might need guidance in resisting temptation and provides a response directly from scripture. As Nault summarizes, “the idea of the selection is simple: if the wicked thought tells you such and such, you must reply with this Scripture verse.” Against thoughts of gluttony, fornication, love of money, sadness, anger, vainglory, pride and acedia, Evagrius catalogues some 498 responses. Throughout Antirrhetikos, “we find the thoughts, circumstances, and anxieties with which the de-

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mons assailed the monk, and we observe a primary strategy in the struggle to overcome such assaults: antirrhesis, the speaking of relevant passages from the Bible that would contradict or, as Evagrius puts it, cut off the demonic suggestion.\textsuperscript{194}

When it comes to more carnal thoughts, the application of antirrhesis is straightforward. For example, considering gluttony, Evagrius prescribes “Against the thought that wants to be filled with wine on a feast day: Do not get drunk with wines for that is debauchery”\textsuperscript{195} and “Against the thought that desires to be filled with food and drink and supposes that nothing evil for the soul comes from them: And Jacob ate and was filled, and the beloved one kicked; he grew fat and became thick and broad, and he abandoned the God who made him and departed from God his Savior.”\textsuperscript{196} For Evagrius, the direct recitation of these passages of scripture is sufficient to combat the temptations of gluttonous thoughts.

Consider also Evagrius’ scriptural responses to the thoughts of lust and greed. “Against the thoughts that establish in our heart fornication...: We must not indulge in fornication as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day.”\textsuperscript{197} “Against the inner thoughts that want to acquire riches...: Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal.”\textsuperscript{198} As Jesus answered the devil’s attacks to “tell these stones to become bread,”\textsuperscript{199} with the response from Deuteronomy 8:3, “one does not live on bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God,”\textsuperscript{200} so the monks that struggle with such outward temptations have scripture responses aplenty.

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{194} Brakke, \textit{Talking Back}, 2.
\item \textsuperscript{195} Evagrius, \textit{Antirrhetikos} I, 60.
\item \textsuperscript{196} Evagrius, \textit{Antirrhetikos} I, 6.
\item \textsuperscript{197} Evagrius, \textit{Antirrhetikos} II, 59.
\item \textsuperscript{198} Evagrius, \textit{Antirrhetikos} III, 41.
\item \textsuperscript{199} Matt 4:3 (New International Version).
\item \textsuperscript{200} Matt 4:4 (New International Version).
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
For monks that struggle with thoughts of *acedia*, Evagrius provides Biblical responses fitting with the myriad definitions for the word. A few examples from the life of the anchorite will suffice. For the monk who feels the oppressive heat of noon day, “*rejects manual labor and leans the body in sleep against the wall: How long will you lie down, sluggard? ... You sleep a little, and you lie down a little, and you nap for a while, and you fold your arms over your breast for a little. Then poverty comes upon you like an evil traveler*...(Prov 6:9-11).”

For the hermit struggling under the difficult disciplines of the ascetic life and considers that there must be a way to serve God outside of this voluntary suffering, Evagrius suggests Lamentations 3:25-27, encouraging endurance and commitment to the regimen, “*The Lord is good to those who wait for him,*” and “*It is good for a man when he bears a yoke in his youth.*” Against the *acedia* that results in despondency, depression and despair, those thoughts that “*take away my hope: I believe that I will see the good things of the Lord in the land of the living* (Ps 26:13).” And for the monk who is ready to give up and completely “abandon the holy path...: For you need endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised.”

Having experienced *acedia* during his time in the desert and finding such recitations an effective remedy against these thoughts, Evagrius is able to provide an exhaustive list of powerful rebukes for the monk to employ.

Though the *Antirrhetikos* addresses concerns of the fourth-century monastic, the handbook is useful for modern pastors who experience burnout caused by *acedia* and little adjustment

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201 Evagrius, *Antirrhetikos* VI, 28.
202 Evagrius, *Antirrhetikos* VI, 40.
203 Evagrius, *Antirrhetikos* VI, 41.
204 Evagrius, *Antirrhetikos* VI, 12.
205 Evagrius, *Antirrhetikos* VI, 52.
is needed to contextualize Evagrius’ work as the principle stands intact. When the minister suspects that *acedia* is at play, liberally employ the scriptures as a line of first defense. In this way the pastor may be encouraged by the verses and the thought of *acedia* repelled. The following examples are offered in summary of the whole. For pastors who find their work to be repetitive to the point of drudgery and are tempted to find another area of ministry or another position that might offer more variety or excitement, Evagrius suggests Genesis 3:19 as a reminder that toil is expected in the work of all humans. “*By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, until you return to the earth from which you were taken. For you are earth, and to earth you shall return.*”

When the minister has no desire to pray, finds the words of scripture uninspiring, becomes lax in spiritual matters, or has developed a distaste for the disciplines that sustain, “against the thought of listlessness that shuns the reading of and meditation on spiritual words: *And the book of this law shall not depart from your mouth, and you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may know how to do all the things that are written, and you will prosper...Look, I have commanded you.*”

When the pastor is preparing a sermon or Bible study and becomes tempted to leave the work, finding any excuse to do something else, “against the thought of listlessness that is eager to find another cell for its dwelling place on the pretext that the first one that it had was very foul and full of moistures that it got all kinds of diseases from it,” Evagrius suggests the simple declaration from Psalm 131, “*Here I will dwell, for I have chosen it.*” The biblically based resolve to remain in one place will be considered below as an essential antidote to *acedia.*

For those pastors who have long suffered from burnout and feel like giving up, Evagrius suggests

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206 Evagrius, *Antirrhetikos* VI, 133.
207 Evagrius, *Antirrhetikos* VI, 8.
to those “saddened because of the spirit of listlessness that has persisted in it,”\(^\text{209}\) to recite James 1 and remember, “whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance.”\(^\text{210}\)

For each manifestation of *acedia* that the pastor encounters Evagrius’s *Antirrhetikos* has a counter. *Essentially, it is not the intention or understanding of the speaker, but the effectiveness of the scripture that makes the impact.* In the throes of the battle with temptation it may be that the pastor does know feel very bold or strong in their response, or it may be that they do not understand the words that they are speaking. In that case, the injunction is to speak the words anyways. As related in one anecdote from *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*:

> “The brother said, “I recite, Abba, and yet their is no compunction in my heart because I do not understand the force of the saying.” And he said to him, “In your case, just recite. For I have heard that Abba Poemen and many fathers made this statement: ‘The charmer does not understand the force of the words that he says, but the beast hears, understands the force of the saying, and submits. So too with us, even if we do not understand the force of the things we say, when the demons hear, they withdraw in fear.”’\(^\text{211}\)

As Brakke concludes, “The words that the monks speak have such power that the speaker need not understand their “force,” that is, both their meaning and their effectiveness, for them to

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\(^\text{209}\) Evagrius, *Antirrhetikos* VI, 56.

\(^\text{210}\) Evagrius, *Antirrhetikos* VI, 56.

\(^\text{211}\) Brakke, *Talking Back*, 22-23 - Apophthegmata Patrum 5.37 (=N 184) - Find Qupte in Original Context
repel the demons.”212 When the pastor at the end of her rope, so burned out that she has no desire for the things of God, she ought to be encouraged simply to say the words of Scripture. Knowing she is tempted to acedia she may choose to create a list of scriptures from Evagrius’s work that are most encouraging to her symptoms, preferably committing them to memory, so that when the despondent thought comes, as were Jesus’ responses in the desert, her replies might be swift and effective against acedia’s schemes.

B. Prayer

As Evagrius has described acedia as “atonia, a slackness of soul,”213 and declared “despondency: a dislike of prayer,”214 prayer, whether or not one feels so inclined, is the remedy to get the soul back in shape. Thus, the second spiritual salve that Evagrius prescribes in the work of spiritual warfare is to “pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication.”215 As Bunge notes, “[a]cedia has devastating consequences above all on the life of prayer”216 and “one has to be especially careful, for the death of one’s prayer life is the death of the spiritual life in general.”217 Evagrius poetically describes the monk in this precarious situation: “The monk afflicted with acedia is lazy in prayer and will not even say the words of a prayer. As a sick person cannot carry about a heavy burden, so the person afflicted with acedia will not perform a work of God. The former has lost the strength of his body and the latter has dissipated the exertions of

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212 Brakke, Talking Back, 23.
213 Bunge, Despondency, 89.
214 Bunge, Despondency, 119.
216 Bunge, Despondency, 77.
217 Bunge, Despondency, 79.
Thus, in order to cure the monk who, because of acedia, has become slovenly in his recitations or strayed completely from the practice of prayer, it is incumbent upon him to begin praying again, even if only for a few words.

In fact, brief prayers are one key to reigniting one’s affection towards spiritual practices. Evagrius implores anchorites suffering acedia to use ‘short, concise, uninterrupted, incessant, intense…prayers’ to interrupt the flow from thought of acedia to its sinful conclusion. For the pastor whose acedia looks like a coldness towards prayer and, outside of leading worship on a Sunday, has stopped praying altogether, Evagrius’s prescription is a simple yet satisfying salve.

As prayer is “the mind’s conversation with God,” even short prayers keep the conversation going. One is reminded of Jesus’s commendation of the tax collector’s prayer in Luke 18 who simply prayed, “God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” Among others, including the Lord’s Prayer, this simple petition helps the one with acedia maintain openness towards communion and conversation with God. As Evagrius notes, “Pray not as the Pharisee but as the Publican in the holy place of prayer, so that you also may be justified by the Lord.”

In Remedies to Acedia in the Rhythms of Daily Life, Amy Freeman relates how “Father Thomas Dubay commends what he calls ‘life-triggering prayer’ in which ‘all sorts of diverse happenings can … ignite a short sentiment directed to God.’ For instance, we might pray, ‘Lord, grant me patience’ in a difficult situation, or praise God when we admire the beauty of a flower garden. Another good habit is to pray before and after each task that we do, however briefly.”

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218 Evagrius, Eight Thoughts VI, 16.
219 Bunge, Despondency, 109.
220 Evagrius, On Prayer, 3
222 Evagrius, On Prayer, 102.
223 Freeman, Acedia, 42.
These brief prayers, woven into the happenings of a pastor’s day can be a means through which their spiritual battery can be jumpstarted and draw the pastor to closer intimacy with God.

In addition to these concise prayers, as desert monasticism was defined by strict practices of prayer including the recitation of the Psalms, Evagrius recommends that psalmody is a key to breaking through acedia. For the pastor who has lost the desire to pray, reading the Psalms can be the key to reigniting one’s spiritual fervor. While the simple recitation of the Psalms can be “an excellent remedy against despondency,” Evagrius argues that it is even more beneficial to chant, sing and exalt in the Psalms in order to have one’s entire person engrossed in the psalmody, blocking out all other distractions and becoming “lost in wonder, love and praise.”

It is this single-minded focus on prayer that proves most effective against the demonic thought of acedia when it comes. Hear how Evagrius describes the reaction to the pure prayer of the monk: “When the devils see that you are really fervent in your prayer…it meets with failure and it becomes saddened and loses heart.”

In his review of the spiritual disciplines of pastors facing burnout, Dennis Okholm lamented, “One study found that while 65% of the pastors surveyed said they worked fifty or more hours a week, 52% indicated that they spent only one to six hours in prayer each week and 5% reported that they spent no time in prayer at all… The toll that acedia’s commitment to tasks takes on a pastor’s prayer life is devastating…” When acedia is at its height, it threatens to kill a pastor’s spiritual life as a whole and sever the prayerful activity which is meant to be a “continual intercourse of the spirit with God.” And so whether one feels like praying or not, to just

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224 Bunge, Despondency, 111.
226 Evagrius, On Prayer, 10.
228 Evagrius, On Prayer, 3.
continue to pray is the point. Evagrius describes a common scene, “At times just as soon as you rise to pray you pray well. At other times, work as you may, you achieve nothing. But this happens so that by seeing still more intently, and then finally reaching the mark, you may possess the prize without fear of loss.” No matter the mood, no matter the season, no matter the effort, though he may face all resistance, the pastor must pray.

In his work *Freedom for Ministry*, John Richard Neuhaus affirms that the breakthrough to burnout, what he calls spiritual staleness, can only come through steadfastness in prayer:

“In times of staleness, then, we need not to break out but to break in, to enter more deeply into the center of self and God and to renegotiate once again the terms of ambassadorship. We should neither deny our weariness nor defy it with the quick fix of self-willed enthusiasm and action. Rather, like the Psalmist, we entrust it to God, making no secret of what is no secret to him, unleashing the deep to call unto the deep, knowing that he is the cause both of our complaint and of our hope. There is no substitute for this renegotiation. If we accept substitutes, we end up in fraudulent ministries, and the fraud sooner or later becomes apparent to us, if not to others. ‘As a hart longs for flowing streams, so longs my soul for thee, O God’ (Ps. 42:1). We must hold out for that, and learn to hold on while holding out. Spiritual integrity consists not in being satisfied but in being insistent.”

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For pastors in the depths of *acedia*, recovery of prayer is a priority. For Evagrius, “it is the defense against sadness and discouragement,” it “is not only one human occupation among many, but the very action in which man is truly himself,” and it is the only hope that pastors really have if they wish to survive and hopefully thrive in ministry.

As we have seen, *acedia* is the spiritual root of burnout, and as such, resisting it through spiritual warfare requires that one sharpen the weapons of scripture and prayer. By using these there is hope of recovery for both the monk and the pastor alike. As Senkbeil concludes in *The Care of Souls*: “We do not wrestle with flesh and blood in either of these matters: sexual lust, *acedia* - or for that matter a whole raft of other temptations. Ultimately this whole struggle is a spiritual battle, beyond the range of our puny intellect and feeble willpower to curtail. That’s why you can’t fight this battle, not really. You can only defend yourself and call in the champion to fight for you. Christ Jesus, who by his blood and cross has conquered the fight already, intercedes for you at the Father’s right hand. ... So call upon him in every trouble, won’t you? Pray, praise, and give thanks to him. He is good, and his mercy endures forever. Whenever you are at the end of your rope - mentally, physically and spiritually exhausted - he will then be your strength and stay.”

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232 Bunge, *Despondency*, 120.
Perseverance - Standing Firm

“The demons make war on the soul by means of thoughts and they are countered in turn with a more difficult warfare by means of perseverance.”²³⁴

The second category of antidotes to acedia are those related to perseverance - “the Evagrian cure-all against despondency.”²³⁵ As seen in chapter three, one of the most evident symptoms of acedia is a restless desire to leave one’s current situation, whether location, routine or vocation. When the work of ministry becomes tedious, repetitive, or boring, in this manifestation of acedia the burned out pastor begins to search for anything that will change his situation. Thus, to persevere in place, activity and occupation is a spiritual exercise of staying put. As the letter to the Ephesians reminds us, perseverance is the spiritual practice that allows the monk and the pastor to “stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand.”²³⁶ Again, the leap from the fourth-century life of the monk to the modern pastor is but a skip across the pond of time. First let us consider the antidote to acedia related to remaining in the pastor’s physical location.

²³⁴ Evagrius, To Eulogios, 15.15, p. 42.
²³⁵ Bunge, Despondency, 10.
Persevere in Place

Evagrius writes:

“If the spirit of acedia comes over you, do not leave your dwelling or avoid a worthwhile contest at an opportune moment, for in the same way that one might polish silver, so will your heart be made to shine.”

For the monk suffering with acedia, the apparent answer to his restlessness is to leave the cell and to find another place to reside. For Evagrius, the answer is always to stay and pray and to consider the fight against acedia a divine opportunity to grow closer to God. As Evagrius relates in the Antirrhetikos and elsewhere, the listless monk is tempted to leave the cell for any number of reasons: to visit family, seek the advice of another monk, help someone in need, find a cell with a more appealing aesthetic, or “a cell…[where he] will be able to meet [his] needs without toil.” In each and every case, Evagrius’ advice to the wandering monk is steadfast,

“You must not abandon the cell in the time of temptations, fashioning excuses seemingly reasonable. Rather, you must remain seated inside, exercise perseverance, and valiantly welcome all attackers, especially the demon of acedia, who is the most oppressive of all but leaves the soul proven to the highest degree. Fleeing and circumventing such struggles teaches the mind to be unskilled, cowardly, and evasive.”

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237 Evagrius, To Monks in Monasteries and Communities, 55.
238 Evagrius, Antirrhetikos VI, 33.
239 Evagrius, Praktikos, On the Eight Thoughts, 28.
This same restlessness often leads the pastor to believe that the best course of action is to leave and find another location for work. As we have seen in considering its manic manifestations, for the minister battling acedia, the grass always looks a bit greener somewhere else. This manifests itself in being unsettled and unsatisfied in one’s present working location. At times during my own experiences of acedia, I find many excuses to seek out new locations to work on a sermon or other task that I am loathe to do: The office is too loud and I cannot hear myself think. I need a bit more background noise to work. It is too hot. It is too cold. Maybe I will find some inspiration elsewhere. These distractions of location delay my work, subject me to give in to these listless temptations, and just when I am settling in to a new place, find me no less settled than I was before. I have come to a rest, but the restlessness remains. As one author put it, “wherever you go, there you are.”

Again, the cure for acedia is not external as in finding a particular locale, but is found within. “What must be changed is not one’s place, but rather one’s heart.”

Additionally, acedia leads the pastor to look for other ministries or churches where they believe they would be put to more effective, if not, easier work. For example, the United Methodist system of itineracy can be a vehicle for a pastor experiencing acedia to start up conversations with District Superintendents or Bishops about changes of appointments. Under the illusions which acedia presents, that such a change would remedy the situation, the pastor may be moved to a new parish and experience the same restlessness all over again. As one study notes, “one out of nine [pastors] move every year [and] the typical tenure with our current employer lasts about four years.” These statistics may derive from multiple variants, but certainly acedia

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is one. When pushed to its end as we will see, this searching can end in the pastor looking for work outside of ministry.

For Evagrius, the prescription that he gives to his restless monks is the same he would give to pastors experiencing this aspect of burnout. *Stand firm! Stay put!* As he does to the monks, Evagrius’s injunction to modern pastors when suffering *acedia*’s invitation to go elsewhere is to stay physically and to not budge for any reason, no matter how strong the temptation. By doing so, Evagrius recommends a commitment to place that seems counterintuitive. What harm does it really cause for the pastor to go wandering about? What is the hurt in trying out different working environments? How could it be unhelpful to look for alternate locations if serving God is still in mind? Evagrius sees these visits outside of the cell, or the study, as a succumbing to the temptations which *acedia* brings. Okholm expounds upon the problems that comes when one yields to these impulses, writing “…Here then is the other paradoxical nature of *acedia*: the remedy for the listless soul is to stay put. Change can be good, but often it can leave us untethered, uncentered, disoriented, and confused. When it comes to *acedia*, to get somewhere we need to remain where God has put us.”

In committing to stability of place, the pastor develops the grit that is required to get hard work done and the clarity to recognize that indeed, in this current context, there is good work to be done. Staying put, even doing so simply for endurance’s sake, positions the pastor in a place where the Holy Spirit might move once again and bring about fruitful ministry. Evagrius encourages, “*enter your cell and sit down, and your cell will teach you everything.*” A wise word for modern pastors to combat *acedia* is to start with the prayerful

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question, “What is my cell, and in what way is the Lord calling me to remain there, and for how long?”

Persevere in Practice

Second, in the midst of acedia’s activity on the monk’s daily tasks and routine, Evagrius offers the following:

“Perseverance is the cure for acedia, along with the execution of all tasks with great attention [and the fear of God]. Set a measure for yourself in every work and do not let up until you have completed it. Pray with understanding and intensity, and the spirit of acedia will flee from you.”

As acedia manifests itself in the feelings of drudgery and boredom in particular, pastors ought gird themselves with perseverance in the very tasks that can seem burdensome. While the pastor experiencing burnout might resist the repetitive nature of the tasks of ministry, in remaining steadfast to these very tasks there is a remedy to acedia itself. Freeman concludes, “All of the practical affairs and forms of service in our daily life can become a remedy to acedia if we stick with them.” The key is to view all of the work of ministry, mundane or miraculous, as tasks that are worth sticking to. For it is in sticking with them, persevering, that blessings, immediate

246 Evagrius, On the Eight Thoughts, 6.17-18.
and eternal, are realized. As Okholm suggests, “It is the mundane routine of the daily office, fulfilling the quotidian tasks of everyday existence, following the ‘schedule,’ and returning day after day to the same place (such as a workplace) and community (such as workmates or spouse or family) that provides the specifics for hypomone.”

Thus, in standing firm with one’s routine commitments to ministry, even through gritted teeth, a stifled yawn or a cloud of depression, a pastor may be able to find the blessings on ordinary ministry.

In Clergy and Laity Burnout, William Willimon conveys this same sense of Evagrian perseverance by considering the concept of duty, a word that, like acedia, involves a sense of the dullness and drudgery of ministerial routines. He references Jesus’s parable of the dutiful servants in Luke 17 as means to convey that part of the calling of ministry is to remain steadfast in the work because we are servants of the Lord. We will not always view ministry as a mountain-top experience. There are times where ministry will be nothing but mundane, as the pastor experiencing acedia knows all too well. Willimon relates, “People don’t like to believe that their pastor visits them in the hospital, marries their young, buries their dead, listens to their troubles, and preaches the gospel out of something so mundane as duty…[but] What all of us need is something to keep us in ministry even when we don’t feel like it, even when it doesn’t please us to visit the sick, prepare our sermons, or teach the third grade Sunday school - even when no one affirms or praises us.”

It is persevering during times where ministry is duty and not a delight that the pastor pushes back against the destructive forces of acedia.

For pastors just starting out in ministry, especially those who are fresh out of seminary, when excitement to start pastoring is at its height, it is healthy for them to be given a realistic

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249 Willimon, Clergy and Laity Burnout, 92-93.
picture of their work; that at times it will feel just like that, work. And when it does, a commitment to perseverance is required. DeYoung rhetorically questions, “Why did Evagrius […] describe the relevant remedial virtues as courageous endurance, long-suffering, and perseverance? How is staying the course supposed to help? The idea is that enthusiasm and energy will wax and wane, and periods of felt alienation from God or spiritual burnout will threaten. Given the human condition and our sinful nature (both our physical frailty and fickleness of will), what we need most against the daily weariness of acedia is steady commitment and daily discipline, even when we don’t feel like it.”250 By having a realistic vision of the ups and downs of ministry, and practicing perseverance, acedia can be anticipated and guarded against. Because the truth is that in the throes of acedia, the pastor simply does not feel like doing the work they are called to do, they may not even believe that they are called to do it anymore. But even still, especially in these situations, the pastor must persevere, stay put, stay strong, and stay where they are, no matter what. But if she does not, the consequences can be tragic.

Persevere in Profession

Third, as we have seen, the ultimate goal of acedia is to have the pastor give up and leave ministry altogether, if not life itself. This is ultimately the end of pastoral burnout without treatment. Evagrius calls on monks, and therefore pastors, to stand firm against acedia’s schemes that tempt toward such abandonment and develop a commitment to stay, no matter what. The pastor

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250 DeYoung, Glittering Vices, 97.
must go to battle against it, and through perseverance, cut off acedia at is head.\textsuperscript{251} When one resisting acedia and the darkness of despondency looms heavily, tempting one to leave ministry altogether, it is all the more important that one persist and remain faithful to the task and calling.

As Nault describes, “When you are in a tunnel and you see nothing at all, it is advisable to remain near the handrail; otherwise, without noticing it, you will wander off and get turned around.”\textsuperscript{252} When it becomes tempting to do anything else but the work that one is called to do, it is then that one’s mettle is tested and one is called to stick to the task and stay put. Nault continues, “The handrail is fidelity to one’s everyday routine, fidelity to one’s rule of life. Perseverance sometimes consists of remaining without doing anything, or else, on the contrary, doing everything that one did not think one had come to do. But ultimately little matters. What does matter is to endure.”\textsuperscript{253}

Evagrius clarifies that for the monk in this fight with acedia to stick with their vocation and calling, a struggle for the soul is at stake. Thus he entreats, “let your perseverance serve as the commander through the course of all your counter-efforts,”\textsuperscript{254} “in order that your reward may rain upon you more abundantly.”\textsuperscript{255} Relating a coup that acedia attempted upon his vocation and the rewards he received as a result of the struggle, Alan Ung writes, “Everyday I was tempted to quit. Acedia set in. ... My desire to quit was so overwhelming that all I could do was to go to work, one day at a time, and pray for help. Unwittingly I was cultivating a rhythm of work and prayer. By not quitting, I was becoming a Christian mystic in the marketplace. … All these lessons - of spirituality, resilience, friendship and teamwork - would never have emerged if

\textsuperscript{251} Evagrius, \textit{On the Vices as Opposed to the Virtues}, 6.4.
\textsuperscript{252} Nault, \textit{The Noonday Demon}, 43.
\textsuperscript{253} Nault, \textit{The Noonday Demon}, 43.
\textsuperscript{254} Evagrius, \textit{To Eulogios}, 8.
\textsuperscript{255} Evagrius, \textit{To Eulogios}, 8.
I had not remained.”256 Indeed, “with regard to this temptation, monastic tradition is explicit: without perseverance in place, no spiritual fruit is possible.”257 But through vocational commitment and resolve, the harvest in ministry is abundant.

In a recent exchange on Twitter, Thom Rainer posted the following, “Many of you have considered quitting at some point. What circumstance did God use to change your mind?”258 In response, Chuck Winters echoes the Evagrian injunction through his tweet, “In chapel one day at Southwestern Seminary back in the 70’s our speaker said that successful ministry is summed up in two words, ‘I stayed.’”259 Rainer’s question again emphasizes the pervasive problem of clergy burnout. At its end, if untreated, leaving ministry is the inevitable result. And so the struggling pastors are encouraged to repeat the speaker’s proclamation, each time they are assaulted by acedia, “I stayed.” This is the fundamental response to the pastor’s calling that we dare not let slip from our minds. No matter where our ministry might lead, or what tasks God might call us to do, no matter how mundane or discouraging, we stay. DeYoung concludes, “In a nutshell, this discipline is about not running away from what you’re called to be and do - whether through busyness at work or through imaginative diversions - but rather accepting and staying committed to your true spiritual vocation and identity and whatever it requires.”260

In conclusion, by steadfastly committing to stay in place, vocation and practice, a pastor begins to develop the resiliency necessary to withstand the temptations of acedia which lead to

256 Ung, “Acedia in the Workplace,” 80.
257 Nault, The Noonday Demon, 149.
258 Thom Rainer (@ThomRainer), “Many of you have considered quitting at some point. What circumstance did God use to change your mind?” Twitter, March 19, 2021, 11:37 a.m.
259 Chuck Winters (@achuckels), “In chapel one day at Southwestern Seminary back in the 70’s our speaker said that successful ministry is summed up in two words, ‘I stayed.’” Twitter, March 19, 2021, 11:50 a.m.
260 DeYoung, Glittering Vices, 96.
burnout. When pastors are confronted with the daily difficulties of ministry, those who withstand over the long-haul are those with the steadfastness and grit that is produced through consistent practice. Indeed, the “greatest remedy is to resist the urge to get out or give up, and instead to stay the course, stick to one’s commitments, and persevere.”\textsuperscript{261} Returning again to the State of Pastors summary, Barna echoes the same, stating, “It is my belief, further confirmed by this project, that the Christian community in North American does not need stronger leaders; we need more resilient leaders. Resilient pastors develop the inner resources and supportive relationships that enable them to prioritize their own spiritual, emotional and physical needs; to view challenges realistically; to learn from their mistakes; to consider alternate perspectives and new processes; and to expect that God is at work even in adverse circumstances.”\textsuperscript{262} According to Evagrius this resilience, this perseverance, is the remedy for \textit{acedia}, for pastoral burnout, and the recipe for a ministry that lasts.

\textit{Additional Antidotes - The Full Armor of God}

The final remedies to \textit{acedia} resist categorization but are potent antidotes nonetheless. These remedies are also strange to the modern pastor but, when taken as ministry medicine, may be what the spiritual doctor ordered.

\textsuperscript{261} DeYoung, \textit{Glittering Vices}, 97.
Manual Labor

The first additional antidote to acedia is hard work, specifically manual labor. For the desert monks, this practice is exemplified in the tradition of Antony.

“Once when Anthony was [sitting] in the desert [he fell into] boredom and irritation [akedia]. He said to God, ‘Lord, I want to be made whole and my thoughts do not let me. What am I to do about this trouble, how shall I be cured?’ After a while he got up and went outside. He saw someone like himself sitting down and working, then standing up to pray; then sitting down again to make a plait of palm leaves, and standing up again to pray. It was an angel of the Lord sent to correct Antony and make him vigilant. He heard the voice of the angel saying, ‘Do this and you will be cured.’ When he heard it he was very glad and recovered his confidence. He did what the angel had done, and found the salvation he was seeking.”

For Evagrius, the lack of physical labor is the setting at which acedia most often strikes. While the desert monk’s primary task was to study and pray, there was a daily routine based around the work of that particular monastery. Thus, manual labor was built into the daily lives of the monks. Evagrius writes:

“Give thought to workings with your hands, if possible both night and day, so that you will not be a burden to anyone, and further that you may be able to offer donations, as the holy apostle Paul advised. In this way you can overcome the

demon of acedia and eliminate all other desires inspired by the enemy. The demon of acedia lies in wait for laziness and ‘is full of desires,’ as scripture says.”

These twin temptations of acedia, restless distraction and despondent idleness, are focused into useful production through manual labor. Expounding on this, Amy Freeman writes, “this remedy for acedia, which is based on the close relationship between body and soul, addresses the two primary symptoms of the vice. One the one hand, physically working our bodies can help us break out of an idle spirit; furthermore, focusing our bodies in a coordinated effort can help us work out our psychosocial distractions.” Freeman goes on to describe how concerted physical effort has a way of shaking off the apathy and focusing energies that often distract so that after the manual tasks have been completed, one is more able to focus on the spiritual work at hand.

Whether or not it should be, the reality is that much of the pastor’s life is spent sitting down at a desk. More than ever before this includes staring at a computer screen. As David Murray reflects, “Sometimes I am envious of house painters, plumbers, landscapers, carpenters, and others who get to work with their hands and have something to show for it at the end of every day, or at least every week. What do I and other “knowledge workers” have to show for our work every seven days? Virtually nothing?” Though the preacher produces a weekly sermon, pastors rarely see immediate effects if and when the sermon has an impact on the listener. Though the product of one Sunday sermon may make an indelible impact in the life of a parishioner, the pastor is usually unaware of its fruit.

264 Evagrius, Foundations, 8.
265 Freeman, “Remedies to Acedia in the Rhythm of Daily Life,” 37.
266 Murray, Reset, 83.
Because the monastic community depended upon a form of manual labor to gain the resources to maintain their way of life, there existed a necessity in having productive work with measurable rewards. For modern pastors, it is the manual work of others which affords pastors the luxury of being be able to do their mental work. Thus, Murray continues, “there’s not a lot of physicality to this. … for pastors in particular, there often just isn’t anything to show for weeks and weeks, months and months, years and years of mental sweat, blood and tears.” Thus, though the work may be unnecessary for survival, many pastors may find it useful to engage in regular physical activity and manual labor in order to thrive in all aspects of their lives.

Recently, I have moved from a parsonage in which lawn service was provided to my own home where I have chosen to tend to the yard myself. I have found it uniquely fulfilling after a long week of staring at a screen to start up the lawnmower knowing that at the end of the work, I will have a freshly mown lawn to show for it. After the work is completed, I can declare the work done. Until the grass grows high once again, I can I know I have done something productive and meaningful that is good for my family, healthy for my body, and restoring for my soul. For the monks, “at that time, when physical labor was still an affair of slaves, the fathers valued working with their hands in an uncommon way…” In a similar way, though manual labor is often not required of pastors, and it would be perfectly acceptable for me to hire someone to mow the lawn and keep the yard in shape, hard manual labor is discipline worth engaging to shake loose the bonds of lethargic acedia.

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267 Murray, Reset, 83.
268 Bunge, Despondency, 98.
Additionally, where manual labor is lacking, pastors will find it useful to engage in regular physical exercise to stave off the temptations of *acedia*. As seen in chapter one, this recommendation toward exercise is cited often in books on pastoral burnout, though outside of the context of *acedia* and its spiritual implications. Indeed just like prayer and scriptural memorization and meditation, physical training is of spiritual value\(^{269}\) and can be a remedy to *acedia*-related burnout as well. Though not monastic manual labor per se, this physical activity may also heed the Evagrian advice: “*Give thought to working with your hands, if possible both day and night... In this way you can also overcome the demon of acedia and eliminate all other desires inspired by the enemy.*”\(^ {270}\)

**Tears**

When one is in the midst of a bout with *acedia*, especially its depressive manifestations, the last thing one might want to do is cry even more, but Evagrius strangely suggests that one’s tears can be a helpful remedy for the malady. For Evagrius tears serve two specific purposes in addressing *acedia*.

First, tears “are the acknowledgement that one needs to be saved.”\(^ {271}\) As seen in the previous chapter, for the monk and for the pastor alike, *acedia* can manifest as a lack of interest in one’s own spiritual journey. As Nault describes, “the word *akedia* means precisely the lack of concern for one’s salvation. Tears are therefore a remedy for *acedia*, inasmuch as they are the physical, external manifestation of the fact that one needs to be saved.”\(^ {272}\) As such, the gift of

\(^{269}\) 1 Tim 4:8 (New International Version).
tears can be a means through which one’s sin nature is revealed, need for forgiveness is recognized, and justification accepted once again. Tears can be a means of grace to the despondent soul. Evagrius advises, “Pray first to receive tears, so that through compunction you may be able to mollify the wildness that is in your soul, and, having confessed against yourself your transgression to the Lord, you may obtain forgiveness from him.”

Thus tears are that outward sign of the inward work of God softening the soil for the seed of salvation to implant and the flower of faith to bloom again.

Second, tears not only soften the heart to God’s work of justification but also are at work in its sanctification, making one more sensitive to the ongoing movement of God and be more able to respond to it. Where acedia strikes, a pastor often disregards the disciplines that serve as her inner spiritual resources and can become hardened to God’s work in her life. After being softened by the tears that flow from the confession of sin and reception of forgiveness, the continual practice of shedding tears is “like water that flows over the shell of our stony heart, so that it might become a heart of flesh. Little by little tears will transform our heart to make it docile to the Lord. They will make a notch so that mercy might pour into that gap, into that wound, just as the mercy of God was engulfed in Christ’s wound of love on the Cross.”

Tears keep the heart open to God and the soil of the soul receptive to God’s work. Tears are God’s gift to human beings for their own spiritual self-repair. Evagrius offers us instruction:

*When we come up against the demon of acedia, then with tears let us divide the soul and have one part offer consolation and the other receive consolation. And sowing within*

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ourselves goodly hopes, let us chant with holy David this incantation: ‘Why are you saddened, O my soul, and why do you trouble me? Hope in God; for I shall confess him, the salvation of my face and my God’ 275

How should a modern minister apply this advice? Admittedly, I do not cry often. Occasionally a movie will move me to choke-up or a scratchy contact lens might cause my eye to water, but shedding tears is not my most ready response. For those who can cry easily, a direct application of this antidote may prove incredibly helpful and effective. For pastors like me, in attempting to follow this Evagrian cure for acedia, we could cut up some onions to cause the tears to flow, but I am not convinced that it is the actual droplets that are the aim. Rather, it is the condition of the heart that is the concern. Indeed, Evagrius relates that “even if you pour forth fountains of tears in your prayer, entertain absolutely no exaltation within yourself for being superior to most people.” 276 The aim is to maintain openness to God and sensitivity to the Spirit, humble awareness of one’s sinful state and a constant claiming of the gift of salvation.

Reflections on Death

Finally, Evagrius advises that the desert monks meditate on their mortality. As is later echoed in the Rule of St. Benedict, in order to stave off acedia and infuse everyday living with meaning and purpose, Evagrius suggests that one must live, “as though he were to die tomorrow.” 277 He writes, “Sit in your cell, collecting your thoughts. Remember the day of your death.

275 Evagrius, Praktikos, 27.
277 Evagrius, Praktikos, 29.
See then what the death of your body will be...Remember also what happens in hell and think about the state of the souls down there, ... Think of their grief without end and the tears their souls shed eternally. But keep the day of resurrection and presentation to God in remembrance also. ... Consider also the good things in store for the righteous... strive to obtain those joys but be a stranger to those pains.” 278

Like a macabre vision of modern productivity guru Stephen Covey’s second habit of highly effective people, begin with the end in mind, to meditate on death is to keep in mind the “end or goal toward which every Christian is journeying” 279 at the forefront of one’s existence. Where those suffering from acedia often feel entrapped by the temporal nature of everyday existence, in the drudgery and tedium felt in a time of acedia, considering the finite nature of one’s life helps remind one to redeem and give time meaning. If lack of meaning and purpose is one of the weightier symptoms of pastoral burnout, reflections upon one’s mortality may provide the inspiration to make the most of every opportunity in one’s short time on earth. Let us consider a few practical applications of this remedy.

One practical way a pastor might implement this is to write their own obituary and then regularly reflect upon it. Scanning newspaper obituaries, those that stand out are the ones in which an individual’s life purpose was clear. The deceased knew what was important to her, she knew the work for which she was created and called to do, and she pursued it throughout her life. Though I am aware that many obituaries paint a rosier picture than reality, when reading through these posthumous summaries I am often inspired to see the threads that remain connected and consistent throughout an individual’s life.

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279 Nault, The Noonday Devil, 42.
Bluntly stated, writing one’s own obituary is a means by which one may “practice at dying, the renowned melete thanatou.”\(^{280}\) In his Praktikos, Evagrius related the following story:

“The monk must ever hold himself ready as though he were to die tomorrow, and in turn must treat the body as though he would have to live with it for many years. The first practice, he would say, cuts off the thoughts of acedia and makes the monk more zealous; the latter keeps the body healthy and always maintains its abstinence in balance.”\(^{281}\)

Reflecting on this, two things stand out as most related to the suggested practice. Primarily, writing one’s obituary is a clarifying practice. It helps to focus upon what is most important and to measure the extent to which one’s stated priorities match daily practice. A pastor in acedia may then evaluate the current state of life and be motivated to attempt changes to bring his life more in line with his stated aim. In personal application of principle, I keep this document easy to find and available for regular review. It helps to shake off the shackles of acedia and reorient my focus on the possibilities of ministry that lie ahead in my life yet to be lived.

Additionally, writing an obituary is also an aspirational endeavor as the practice encourages the writer to strive for that which you would like to be remembered. As the Apostle Paul writes, “Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.”\(^{282}\) As such, this practice reminds us that “we

\(^{280}\) Bunge, Despondency, 112.
\(^{281}\) Evagrius, Praktikos, On the Eight Thoughts, 29.
do not have our true homeland here. It teaches us to evaluate the realities of this life dispassionately and to live accordingly,” and to push forward through acedia to live out a meaningful life.

Additionally, while pastors often have opportunity to order and officiate funeral and memorial services, a related exercise is to attend memorial services as an observer and not as a presider in order to consider “the thought of one’s death and of heavenly rewards will renew one’s hope and thus repulse the demon.” As a similar reminder, a pastor may adapt the ancient practice of memento mori, the placement of a skull, hourglass, or other representation of death upon one’s desk or in one’s home as visual reminder of that Ash Wednesday refrain, “[Remember] you are dust and to dust you shall return.”

As Christopher Ash lifts up his own prayer for ministry in Zeal Without Burnout, “Lord, make my life of service worth something; make it sure. May it be that, at the end of time, this collection of dust, this temporary mortal frail feeble sinful Christian may have achieved something by your grace that will last to eternity.” Indeed, this reflection on death is an antidote that infuses the pastor’s life with purpose and passion that is so poisoned by the dim view acedia gives to life’s meaninglessness.

Whether through the time-tested spiritual practices of scripture and prayer, the commitment to perseverance of place, practice and profession or the additional antidotes of manual labor, tears and reflections upon death, it is clear that there is great hope for the pastor suffering acedia.

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283 Bunge, Despondency, 113.
286 Ash, Zeal Without Burnout, 98.
These remedies prescribed by Evagrius are easily applicable today and prove effective at withstanding the insidious assault of *acedia* that seeks to remove pastors from ministry altogether. With these remedies at work, modern pastors are equipped to respond to the newly named *acedia*, take the off-ramp on the road to burnout and travel toward the fruitful and purposeful ministry to which they were called. By actively resisting the *acedia* through these means, the pastor may find that, in the end, he experiences that which eluded him. He may discover joy.
CONCLUSION

Since my awakening to acedia in the classroom on that January day, I have become aware that my battle with this demon is deeply personal. Over the past few years, I have felt many of the symptoms of burnout explored in chapter one and have tried the popularly suggested remedies from the burnout books. Sometimes a quick fix seemed to be effective, but a few weeks later, I was in worse shape than I had been before. Burnout was a constant condition and a miserable milieu from which to serve in professional ministry. I longed to be set free from burnout’s captivity but knew not what to do or where to turn. Like the miller’s daughter in the fairy tale, I was stuck attempting to spin straw into gold, but without knowing my captor’s name, I found that all of my efforts were futile. As a divine messenger, the works of Evagrius Ponticus have revealed its name, and like the young girl shouting “Rumplestiltskin!” I have found freedom in naming it aloud, “Acedia! Acedia! Acedia!” In discovering and claiming acedia as the name for what ails them, modern pastors seeking recovery from burnout take their first step as well.

Once I named the enemy, the fight could begin. Having attempted to shake off the symptoms of burnout through major and minor adjustments to my physical, mental and emotional habits, it has only been through an active engagement in a spiritual struggle that the higher ground in the battle against burnout has been gained. The sheer fact that there is a war to be waged gives me hope and should encourage any struggling pastor, who thinks herself a lost cause that victory is possible. Without acknowledging acedia as the enemy, all attempts to make progress against this ministry malaise may be for naught. But by striking pastoral burnout at its spiritual root, the odds of advancement against acedia are in her favor.
As this work has argued, at the root of all pastoral burnout is the spiritual malady called *acedia* but the good news is that *acedia* need not lead to burnout. Modern ministers need not become another sorrowful statistic in the long line of callings cut short. Instead, by using the ancient Evagrian tools and actively engaging in a battle with *acedia*, pastors can find relief from its symptoms, find meaning in their vocation, and experience joy for ministry that lasts a lifetime.

In order to receive these rewards, the pastor must remain engaged in the fight, they must persevere, they must not quit, they must “stay in the stadium.” 287 Evagrius tells the monks, “*Just as an athlete cannot be crowned if he does not contend in the wrestling match, so too can no one become a Christian without a struggle.*” 288 In the journey to attain Christ-likeness in the desert, Evagrius invites the monks to expect resistance from the demonic *logoismoi* which wage war against their souls. Thus, pastors engaging in ministry on the front lines, when experiencing the same resistance, should not be taken by surprise, but instead, be prepared to face the struggle head-on.

Armed with the Evagrian antidotes, pastors may heed the words of the Book of James and “consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance.” 289 This same perseverance “gives birth to hope,” 290 and from that hope, finding joy in ministry is possible. Indeed, as Gabriel Bunge writes in summary of Evagrius’s conclusions, “*Acedia* is the exact reverse of joy. The one who ‘endures’ during temptation ‘will always pray with joy.’ Indeed an ‘ineffable joy,’ unknown until that point, falls within his reach, a joy that lies ‘beyond any other joy.’ It is this fullness of

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290 Evagrius, *To Monks In Monasteries and Communities*, 5.
the ‘joy’ which only Christ can give… and no one is able to take it away.”  

When the pastor is prepared for the presence of *acedia*, he knows how to respond, and can even come to welcome its signs as an opportunity for spiritual growth.

In his treatise to Eulogios, Evagrius describes the divine blessings that are promised when the tempted one comes to face *acedia* prepared. Like a solider polishing his sword before battle, the pastor “*who trains the soul in advance to be illumined with the most sublime thoughts cleanses beforehand the radiant monument of prayer.*” Then, “*by rushing vigorously into battle [he] may the more quickly force him to withdraw from you.*” The pastor who is equipped with and in position to use the Evagrian antidotes will find that each time *acedia* arises, he readily rises up to meet the challenge and does not allow the seeds of burnout to take root and grow. By maintaining this constant attentiveness to the activity of *acedia*, the pastor remains ready to rise to the occasion when the enemy is at hand. When *acedia* shows up in the pastor’s life, he can see its presence not as a burden, but instead as a blessed battle through which joy in and meaning for ministry can be won.

In this way then, as J.L. Aijian writes, *acedia* “oddly enough, can be a friend.” Ultimately this is how Maurice Sendak concludes his cautionary tale about the consequences of *acedia*’s work in young Pierre’s life. Instead of seeing *acedia* as a lion let loose that will not relent until it swallows the young boy whole, *acedia* becomes a tamed lion, and seen as only as “*weekend guest*” who comes and goes.

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291 Bunge, 125-126.
As it was for the desert monk, so too in the lives of modern ministers, *acedia* will come and go. Its presence is predictable but the power of its poison is limited by the Evagrian antidotes that the pastor employs. By resisting *acedia* thorough these remedies, not only is burnout an experience from which pastors can recover, but one that can be prevented from ever taking root. When modern ministers stay in the stadium, they may find that “a state of peace and ineffable joy ensues in the soul after this struggle,”296 and strength for a lifetime in ministry is found.

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