

PARADOX OF THE PASTORATE IN THE AGE  
OF DEPRESSION AND ANXIETY

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“And, apart from other things, there is daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches”

2 Corinthians 11:28

Forgiveness resides at the center of the Christian experience. Forgiveness is our core spiritual encounter, which defines our relationship with God and each other. This forgiveness-relationship between God and his reconciled children is reinforced by the prayer Jesus taught his disciples, “forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors” (Mt 6:12). Giving and receiving forgiveness is the bedrock of Christian relationships, as Jesus made clear to Peter (Mt 18:21–22). It’s no wonder then that preaching on forgiveness in its various forms is critical to remaining faithful to the historic gospel and in practicing essential discipleship. It is certainly a worthy topic for this year’s *Center for Pastor Theologians* symposium.<sup>2</sup>

However, the ability for people to actually receive and extend forgiveness is much more complicated than one might think.<sup>3</sup> For some, effectively extending forgiveness is not a matter of “want to,” nor is it a matter of truly understanding God’s forgiveness, nor is it a matter of obedience, but rather it is a matter of emotional and psychological well-being. Research from City University in Hong Kong suggests that the capacity someone has to extend forgiveness depends greatly on whether or not that person is suffering from depression and anxiety.<sup>4</sup> Simply put: someone who is anxious and/or depressed is far less likely to be able to extend forgiveness to others. Hence, in this paper, I will explore the cultural and experiential reality of

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<sup>2</sup> This essay was originally presented during the Center of Pastor Theologians Fall Symposium (Sept 30–Oct 1st 2019), which focused on themes of forgiveness. While much of the following research is pre-pandemic I have subsequently updated research to reflect COVID-19 realities.

<sup>3</sup> See the work of Evertt L. Worthington esp. *Forgiving and Reconciling: Bridges to Wholeness and Hope* (Grand Rapids: IVP, 2003) and *Forgiveness and Reconciliation: Theory and Application* (Philadelphia: Routledge, 2013).

<sup>4</sup> Man Chui Tse and Sheung-Tak Cheng, “Depression Reduces Forgiveness Selectively as a Function of Relationship Closeness and Transgression,” *Personality and Individual Differences* 40, no. 6 (April 2006): 1133–41.

depression and anxiety, especially as it relates to the pastor-theologian. My aim is to equip pastor-theologians with a better understanding of depression and anxiety so they have a greater grasp of its causes and possible treatments. The above goals will help them shepherd their flocks more skillfully and will help them personally battle depression and anxiety when the symptoms emerge in their own lives. The latter of these two goals is particularly important in our current cultural moment in which depression and anxiety appears to have free range in both Christian and secular communities. If pastor-theologians are able to experience more emotional and psychological health, they will have more energy to extend forgiveness for deep wounds suffered in the trenches of ministry. In this way, they can experience forgiveness that “surpasses knowledge” (Eph 3:19).

### I. UNDERSTANDING DEPRESSION AND ANXIETY<sup>5</sup>

Anxiety is the most diagnosed mental illness in America impacting roughly 1 in 5 adults (40 million) each year.<sup>6</sup> Pastors are twice as likely to experience anxiety than the general public.<sup>7</sup> Someone experiencing anxiety is, “introspective” and “turned-inward.”<sup>8</sup> This introspection is not positive self-examination but rather a constant, “brooding on his thoughts, actions, and abilities and too frequently finding them lacking in the qualities he believes should be there.”<sup>9</sup> Someone in chronic anxiety is stuck in patterns of self-orientation, which leads to self pre-occupation, negative self-talk and potential relational dysfunction. Rapee and Barlow define anxiety as a “loose cognitive-affective structure. This construct is composed primarily of high negative affect, associated with a sense of uncontrollability, and a shift in attention to a focus primarily on the self or a state of self-preoccupation. The sense of uncontrollability is focused on future threat, danger, or other negative events...characterized roughly as a state of ‘helplessness.’”<sup>10</sup>

It is not difficult to see how continual dealing with congregational drama could lead a pastor into frequent emotions of self-doubt, which in turn could easily mutate into self-oriented brooding.<sup>11</sup> In a poll conducted

<sup>5</sup> I'd like to thank Eric Bloom, Emily Stam, Larry Philips-Thomas, Saada Hilts, and Rashide Russell for their research and engagement with me on this topic.

<sup>6</sup> One can find the latest data from *Anxiety and Depression Association of America (ADAA)*. <<https://adaa.org/about-adaa/press-room/facts-statistics>>

<sup>7</sup> Rae Jean Proeschold-Bell, Andrew Miles, Matthew Toth, Christopher Adams, Bruce W. Smith and David Toole, “Using Effort-Reward Imbalance Theory to Understand High Rates of Depression and Anxiety Among Clergy,” *The Journal of Primary Prevention* 34 (2013): 439–453. Also see Kate Rugani “Clergy More Likely to Suffer from Depression and Anxiety: Demands put Pastors at far Greater Risk for Depression than People in other Occupations” *Duke Today* (2013) <<https://today.duke.edu/2013/08/clergydepressionnewsrelease>>.

<sup>8</sup> Denis Cronin. *Anxiety, Depression, and Phobias* (London: Granada, 1982), 16.

<sup>9</sup> Cronin, *Anxiety*, 16.

<sup>10</sup> Ronald Rapee and David Barlow, *Chronic Anxiety* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1991), 3.

<sup>11</sup> Jim Herrington, Trisha Taylor, and R. Robert Creech, *The Leader's Journey: Accepting the Call to Personal and Congregational Transformation*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2020),

by The American Psychiatric Association in 2017, it was discovered that nearly two-thirds of those interviewed in the general public were “extremely or somewhat anxious about health and safety for themselves and their families and more than a third are more anxious overall than last year.”<sup>12</sup> If that is the case for the general public then pastors, whose job it is to bear the burdens of their congregations, are in the epicenter of anxiety.<sup>13</sup> While it appears true that the spike of anxiety is a Western phenomenon,<sup>14</sup> for those pastoring in the West it is a reality that must be addressed.

Depression is different than anxiety, but its diagnosis is closely linked to anxiety. Depression is the second leading mental health diagnosis in America. According to the Journal of Primary Prevention, more than 7% of pastors “simultaneously experienced depression and anxiety.”<sup>15</sup> While anxiety is characterized as a seemingly helpless state of fixation on the self, depression is a loss of energy and motivation often needed to change one’s situation. J. I. Packer defines depression as a “downward pressure squeezing out and draining away whatever modes of energy and eagerness were there before.”<sup>16</sup> While anxiety implies an “effort to cope,” depression is characterized by “behavioral retardation and an associated lack of arousal...motor retardation and loss of pleasurable engagement, which are characteristics unique to depression.”<sup>17</sup> While anxiety refers to a kind of fixation, depression refers to a mood.<sup>18</sup>

#### A. CAUSES OF DEPRESSION AND ANXIETY IN THE PASTORATE

Since Paul confessed his own anxieties for his churches (2 Co 11:28), depression and anxiety have persisted for two millennia as an occupational

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9–23.

<sup>12</sup> Tim Newman “Anxiety in the West: Is it on the Rise?” Medical News Today (Wed. Sept 5: 2018) < <https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/322877> >.

<sup>13</sup> Steve Cuss, *Managing Leadership Anxiety* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2019).

<sup>14</sup> “[T]here are signs that it may be less common in the underdeveloped countries, the implication being that anxiety is related to such factors as affluence, complexity of life-style, and the social stresses imposed by our western culture.” Cronin, *Anxiety*, 7.

<sup>15</sup> Kate Rugani, *Duke Today* (2013).

<sup>16</sup> J. I. Packer and Michael Lundy, *Depression, Anxiety and the Christian Life*. (Wheaton, Crossway: 2018), 9.

<sup>17</sup> Rapee and Barlow, *Chronic Anxiety*, 11.

<sup>18</sup> “Depression refers first and foremost to mood. This may vary from feelings of slight sadness to utter misery and dejection. Secondly, it is used to bring together a variety of physical and psychological symptoms which together constitute a syndrome (the technical term for any collection of recognizable and repeatable symptoms). Finally, depression is used to indicate an illness which prevents the sufferer from functioning and requires active treatment to restore the body and mind to a state of health.” Jack Dominian, *Depression: What Is It? How Do We Cope?* (New York: Fontana, 1976), 9.

hazard for the pastorate.<sup>19</sup> Luminaries such as Augustine,<sup>20</sup> Ignatius,<sup>21</sup> Luther,<sup>22</sup> Spurgeon<sup>23</sup> and Packer<sup>24</sup> have all felt its weight. Anxiety is contagious,<sup>25</sup> and pastors meet with anxious people at a disproportionately high rate. Hence, with the “exposure rate” being so high, that they themselves would become “carriers” is a virtual inevitability.

Also the role of pastor is filled with countless unrealistic expectations. Its job requirements are literally written in Scripture and has 2000 years of interpretation attached to it.<sup>26</sup> On any given day a pastor may be expected to be a CEO, a personal counselor, a custodian, a crisis management professional, scholar, mystic, family oriented and available to the flock at the same time.<sup>27</sup> Because of unrealistic expectations, pastors fail in someone’s eyes every week, perhaps even every day. The repeated experience of failing, which is inevitable, is bound to lead to moments of discouragement and likely entire seasons of self-doubt. From there, it is easy to see “moral injury” not far behind.<sup>28</sup> If a pastor is already being criticized unfairly, one can begin to justify sinful practices such as plagiarizing sermons due to a relentless weekly deadline. Also overuse of alcohol, engaging in harmful sexual practices or financial wrongdoing becomes a temptation in order to “take the edge off” the constant low-grade feelings of disappointment.

The role of social media magnifies and sharpens these unrealistic expectations. People in congregations are equipped with multiple criticisms on either side of any decision a pastor might make. Social media’s barrage of messages telling what pastors “ought” to do and who they “ought” to be and all the ways they are doing their job wrong contributes to a feeling of helplessness.<sup>29</sup> These online critics are, of course, divorced from the actual

<sup>19</sup> Before Paul, Jesus openly recruited those who were sick and suffered from anxiety (see Mt 6:25, 11:28 and Mk 2:17).

<sup>20</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, 8:12.

<sup>21</sup> Thomas Clancy, “Studies in the Spirituality of the Jesuits” AASJS Vol. XI (January, 1979), 1-25.

<sup>22</sup> Ryan Griffith, “Martin Luther’s Shelter Amid the Flood of Depression” (TGC: July, 2017) < <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/martin-luthers-shelter-amid-flood-of-depression/> >

<sup>23</sup> Zach Eswine, *Spurgeon’s Sorrows: Realistic Hope for Those who Suffer from Depression* (Fearn: Christian Focus, 2015).

<sup>24</sup> Packer and Lunde, *Depression*, 9–13.

<sup>25</sup> Edwin Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix* (New York: Seabury Books, 2007).

<sup>26</sup> Timothy Witmer, *The Shepherd Leader* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2010).

<sup>27</sup> Unless a pastor structures his/her life in a disciplined manner, it will be nearly impossible to get into the “flow” of any part of their job without other aspects of the job crashing in.

<sup>28</sup> Anna Harwood-Gross, “Threatening ‘Moral’ Injuries” in *Scientific American* (March 24, 2020).

<sup>29</sup> See Scot McKnight’s recent series on the relationship between pastoral ministry and narcissistic behavior, “Help!, My Pastor Grooms Power with Fear: Many Pastors Groom Others for a Power Culture Shaped by Fear” (August 17, 2020). While it is certainly true that some power-hungry, abusive individuals find their way into the pastorate, violating the baseline qualifications of pastoral ministry in the process, I fear the *actual* impact of these

place and unique locations of the real pastoral ministries about which they are describing. Yet the effect is still felt and it is a contributing factor to declining mental health.<sup>30</sup> Research shows that cortisol levels (i.e. stress hormones) are highest in people whose job status and responsibility are constantly changing and/or being readjusted. Pastors almost certainly have disproportionately high cortisol levels due to the aforementioned stress.

Another reason for depression and anxiety is the counterintuitive explanation that a pastor's life is jammed packed with meaning and consequence. In *The Upside of Stress*, Kelly McGonigal argues that a meaningful life is a stressful life.<sup>31</sup> Pastors are the spiritual head for the local church – what could be more purposeful and beautiful than that? But with that sacred and honored duty comes a huge weight of responsibility. The joy of having meaningful work carries with it a significant burden of responsibility for that congregation. If that weight isn't carried in a sustainable way, then it can contribute to or be an actual cause of depression and anxiety. James, who knew full well the dangers of pastoral ministry, warned, “not many of you should become teachers.”

#### B. THE RISE, CAUSES AND OPPORTUNITIES OF DEPRESSION AND ANXIETY IN THE WEST

As depression and anxiety remain steady in the pastorate, we must acknowledge that the experience of depression and anxiety is accelerating at an alarming speed in the general public. Depression rates are 10x's higher than they were in 1960.<sup>32</sup> Fifty years ago the average onset age of depression was 29.5, today it is 14.5 years old. Only 30% of Americans would classify themselves as “happy.”<sup>33</sup> Since the Covid-19 Pandemic, these numbers have only gotten worse. While the data is still shifting, a mental health “tsunami” is coming.<sup>34</sup> According to COVID Response Tracking Study, Americans are the unhappiest they've been in 50 years.<sup>35</sup>

The burning question is, of course, why is depression and anxiety on the rise in the West? The answer to that question, I believe, brings with it an incredible opportunity for gospel advancement in our communities that we haven't seen in a generation. Truly, the fields are white for harvest.

So what is causing the rise in depression and anxiety? Besides the obvious circumstantial cause of the pandemic, three other distinct but

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tillating articles fosters an environment of heightened criticism and imbalanced scrutiny of normal pastors.

<sup>30</sup> Consider amending social media practices if not eliminating them altogether. Cf. Matt Ward “Pastor, Your Church Needs a Social Media Policy” <<https://www.pastortheologians.com/articles/2020/8/28/pastor-your-church-needs-a-social-media-policy>>.

<sup>31</sup> Kelly McGonigal, *The Upside of Stress* (New York: Random House, 2015).

<sup>32</sup> Shawn Achor. *The Happiness Advantage* (New York: Currency, 2010).

<sup>33</sup> See *The World Happiness Report*. <<https://worldhappiness.report/ed/2020/#read>>

<sup>34</sup> Lydia Denworth, “The Biggest Psychological Experiment in History” *Scientific American* (May, 2020).

<sup>35</sup> Tamara Lush, “Poll: Americans are the Unhappiest They've Been in 50 Years” APNews (June 16, 2020).

interrelated themes emerge as the culprits. The first cause is that the story of progress, critical to the secular enlightenment project, is not working. The narrative, which is baked into the consciousness of the West, that with enough time and technology enlightened human society can achieve utopia, is showing itself to be a thin, untrustworthy framework. The once popular idea held mostly in the majority culture that racism and its effects is mostly a thing of the past is now giving way to a bleak reality: the divides between rich and poor and the powers of racist society are not going away, indeed, they are growing.<sup>36</sup> As communities come to terms with these disappointments, an uneasiness and anxiety about the future spreads like a contagion. Mark Sayers states it this way:

It is not just at the macro level that the secular myth of progress is being challenged. Our private worlds are in crisis too. We see the rise of anxiety and mental health disorders, falling IQ levels, epidemic loneliness and social disconnection... In the West, poor mental health is now normative among emerging generations... With all these factors in play, we can see how many are having their moment of doubt.<sup>37</sup>

The role of social media only serves to spread and intensify this anxiety. For those already prone to anxiety and depression, the new reality of a future in doubt, is a relentless trigger for emotional and psychological distress.<sup>38</sup>

The second cause is the psychological incapacity to create lasting meaning for oneself. It has been commonplace to teach what Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi advocated in his influential book, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, on how to achieve happiness; namely, that there is actually no such thing as meaning, so we must make it up for ourselves. This belief in created meaning was a rejection of discovered meaning or meaning that could be “given” or “found” upon a quest for truth.<sup>39</sup> It was a rejection that traditional institutions of faith and family could confer meaning. Thirty years after preaching this message in multiple venues, it’s clear that “creating” meaning causes psychological instability resulting in nihilism and/or extended periods of profound emptiness and lethargy. Despite its good intentions, creating meaning doesn’t work the way it was promised.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Pew Research Center’s *Race in America 2019*. Several popular level and academic projects can be consulted such as Richard Rothstein’s *Color of the Law* (New York: Liveright Publishing, 2017), Jemar Tisby’s *Color of Compromise* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2019) and Frank Baumgartner, Derek Epp, and Kelsey Shoub’s *Suspect Citizens: What 20 Million Traffic Stops Tell Us about Policing and Race* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018). Also see Sheila Rowe, *Healing Racial Trauma* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2020).

<sup>37</sup> *Reappearing Church: The Hope for Renewal in the Rise of Our Post-Christian Culture* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2019), 30.

<sup>38</sup> Current research on this is vast. See “Online Social Media Fatigue and Psychological Wellbeing” *International Journal of Information Management* 40 (2018): 141–152.

<sup>39</sup> Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow*, 214–240.

<sup>40</sup> See Victor Frankl’s classic *Man’s Search for Meaning* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1959), which is an exploration of what happens when people have meaning in life and the energy



The third reason for the rise of depression and anxiety is an inflated belief in and reliance on the individual self. In his incredibly insightful work, *Lost Connections: Uncovering the Real Causes of Depression – and The Unexpected Solutions*, Johann Hari, a confessed atheist, admits that the doctrine of secular humanism as it is manifested in the autonomy of the self is a virtual generator of depression and anxiety. He states colorfully, “But what I was being taught is—if you want to stop being depressed, don’t be you. Don’t be yourself. Don’t fixate on how you’re worth it. It’s thinking about you, you, you that’s helped to make you feel so lousy. Don’t be you.”<sup>41</sup> The remedy he states is a community that truly loves each other sacrificially. A community that has a purpose beyond its own personal well-being and in which an individual could truly be known and loved.<sup>42</sup> In other words, he is convinced that the answer to the crisis of depression and anxiety in the West is something that looks and feels like the Body of Christ.

## II. PARADOX OF THE PASTORATE

It was the observation by Hari about what ails the West and his suggested remedy that led me to the current paradox of the pastorate. What our broader communities are aching for is precisely what the church is really good at. We help people discover meaning and purpose. The teaching of Jesus to deny the self and join a movement greater than the individual is the perfect antidote for an entire generation that is realizing the toxicity of and preoccupation with the self. But the paradox is this, culture is realizing it needs what the church is really good at, and, at the same time, pastors, who lead these churches, are themselves struggling with depression and anxiety. Pastors suffer from the symptoms that the gospel and the church can and has healed in the lives of their congregants and can offer as a tonic to the world.

Because the fields are white for harvest, my hope for pastors is to come to terms with their own experience of depression and anxiety and to make strides towards effective treatment. This paradox doesn’t have to be negative. Indeed, what might have been a shameful underbelly of pastoral ministry can be a powerful tool to connect with broader society in a meaningful way. Because pastors suffer from depression and anxiety, we have a built-in empathy for broader society and an opportunity to provide insight needed by society. But to do this with skill and integrity, pastors first must come to terms with their own experience of depression and anxiety. We can take our cues from Baxter,<sup>43</sup> Lloyd-Jones,<sup>44</sup> and Piper<sup>45</sup> that fighting for our own

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and resilience it provides and what happens to the soul when meaning dissolves. Also see Tim Keller’s *Making Sense of God* (New York: Viking, 2016), 57–76.

<sup>41</sup> Hari, *Lost Connections*, 218–240.

<sup>42</sup> Hari, *Lost Connections*, 164–178, 256.

<sup>43</sup> Lundy and Packer, *Depression*, 17–33.

<sup>44</sup> Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Spiritual Depression: Its Causes and Its Cure* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965).

<sup>45</sup> John Piper, *When the Darkness Will Not Lift* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2006).

personal joy is important for our pastoral witness and personal refreshment of the gospel. This starts with understanding the symptoms and patterns of depression and anxiety and developing a game plan for treatment when they emerge.

#### A. HOW DO I KNOW IF I'M EXPERIENCING DEPRESSION AND ANXIETY?

Many pastors have dealt with depression and anxiety since childhood, but others have symptoms emerge in the thick of pastoral ministry. On the CPT blog I shared a glimpse of my experience:

My text that Sunday morning was Romans 3:9–18, an exploration of human depravity, and I remember my goal was to get the hearts of my hearers “ready” and “needy” for a clear explanation of the gospel, which would come the following Sunday. I prepared well for my message; I was genuinely excited for our congregation and positive that we’d see lives changed as a result. The only problem was that, as I walked on stage to preach, I didn’t believe any of it. Not in God, not in the Gospel, not in the spiritual reality of the church. In a flash I was a stone cold atheist.

As I preached Romans 3 that morning, my faith returned mid sermon just as a swimmer comes up for air. That afternoon, I talked with my wife about my experience and we agreed to monitor it. It happened a few more times in different context for the next several months. At the suggestion of a dear friend, I saw a skilled counselor who listened to me and who walked me through my own life story. Through therapy I discovered I wasn’t having a crisis of faith as much as I was experiencing depression. My body was rebelling and giving me extreme anxiety around what I cherished most was its way of getting my attention.<sup>46</sup>

If depression and anxiety is new to you or an “old friend,” it is paramount to have a game plan ready. I’ve learned through experience and research that depression is more than just an occasional case of the blues. Anxiety is more than occasional “stuck in my head” moments. Rather it is a condition that generally has 3 elements:

- a) Frequency: how often does this happen?
- b) Severity: how bad is it when it happens?
- c) Duration: how long does it last when it happens?

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<sup>46</sup> David Morlan, “Conversion is Complicated – Faith, Doubt, and the Changeableness of the Human Heart” < <https://www.pastortheologians.com/articles/2019/8/25/conversion-is-complicated>>.



As Gregory Jantz states, “The more it happens, the worse it is, and the longer it lasts, the more likely you’re not just having a bad day – you’re dealing with depression”<sup>47</sup>

To be clear an actual diagnosis of depression and anxiety needs to be done under the care of a competent mental health professional.<sup>48</sup> Individually, the causes are usually one or a combination of psychological, biological, environmental, and/or spiritual issues. Each of these components is complicated and need to be evaluated under the care of wise counsel.<sup>49</sup> However, the following system of green, yellow, and red lights is a useful tool many mental health professionals use in the diagnosis process. Following the spotlight color code, check off how many of these following descriptions are true of your life.

#### GREEN, YELLOW AND RED LIGHTS OF DEPRESSION

##### GREEN LIGHT

- Take medicines as ordered
- Do fun and interesting activities
- No trouble sleeping
- Good appetite
- Keep regular sleep habits
- Keep all doctor appointments

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<sup>47</sup> Gregory Jantz, *Five Keys to Dealing with Depression*, 9.

<sup>48</sup> Of course, finding a competent professional is not always easily done. This may require a measure of research and vetting to find a good fit, which, if you are depressed, is especially hard to do! Perhaps asking a trusted friend might be a best first step.

<sup>49</sup> Often a sticky question about medication comes up in this journey: “Is it ok for a pastor to be on antidepressants?” Two books have been extremely helpful for me in processing the pros and cons of antidepressants. The first is J. P. Moreland’s *Finding Quiet: My Story of Overcoming Anxiety and the Practices that Brought Peace* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2019). In this work he shows the practical benefits of various antidepressants and, always the apologist, offers several arguments for why using medicine in that way is thoroughly biblical and need not be a source of shame for anyone (especially pastors) in the church. The second book is Harri’s *Lost Connections*, mentioned above. In this book he shows how antidepressants, while, at times, helpful (he himself has been on antidepressants for most of his life) also can function to cover up other issues of loss and disconnection that are not caused by chemical imbalance but rather by various possible relational and environmental problems. Thus, depression like this is actually a form of grief from “lost connections” and he argues it is to be treated primarily by recovering deeper connections with community, family and meaning. On the whole, I find Lundy’s advice helpful “in the domains of both body and soul, ‘the right medications’ are often absolutely essential but are as often only partially effective. Indeed, there may be several valid and effective permutations of the ‘right medication’, as well. Thus, medications are regularly necessary but not as often sufficient to restore or maintain well-being, and it seems, even counterproductive if not combined with the other necessary, ‘ingredients.’” Packer and Lundy, *Depression*, 48.

If you check off the greens, congratulations, you're an emotionally healthy pastor!

YELLOW LIGHT

- A loss of enjoyment in established activities
- Feeling restless, tired, or unmotivated at work
- An increase in irritability or impatience
- Feeling either wound up or weighed down
- Feeling overburdened with life and its activities
- A lack of spiritual peace or well-being
- A constant anxiety or vague fear about the future
- A fear of expressing strong emotions
- Finding relief by controlling aspects of your personal behavior, including what you eat or drink
- Feeling unappreciated by others
- Feeling a sense of martyrdom, as if you are constantly asked to do the work of others
- Exercising a pattern of impulsive thinking or rash judgments
- Apathetic when you wake up in the morning about how the day will turn out
- A sense of enjoyment at seeing the discomfort of others
- Anger at God for how you feel
- A recurrent pattern of headaches, muscle aches, and/or body pains
- Feeling left out of life
- Feeling trapped during your day by what you have to do
- Experiencing recurring gastrointestinal difficulties
- Feeling like your best days are behind you and the future doesn't hold much promise
- Displaying a pattern of pessimistic or critical comments and/or behaviors
- Binging on high-calorie foods to feel better
- Feeling social isolation and distancing from family or friends
- Feeling that it's easier to just do things yourself instead of wanting to work with others

- Feeling old, discarded, or without value
- Feeling trapped inside your body
- Dreading the thought of family get-togethers or social gatherings
- Feeling overweight, unattractive, or unlovable
- Sexual difficulties or a loss of interest in sexual activities
- Unmotivated to try new activities, contemplate new ideas, or enter into new relationships

If you checked off several yellows that means you are living in the yellow zone. Many people in the yellow zone “get by” as best they can. But any combination of yellow symptoms can lead quickly to the red zone.

#### RED LIGHT

- Overwhelmed by anxious, irritable, angry, or empty feelings
- Hopeless or helpless feelings
- Inability to concentrate, focus or make decisions.
- Increased agitation or complete inability to relax
- Thoughts to hurt self or others
- Unable to get out of bed
- Can't make doctors appointment

If you are in the red zone, that means you are in danger and that life adjustments are needed to bring your emotional life back into functional balance.

### B. PRACTICAL WAYS PASTORS FIGHT DEPRESSION AND ANXIETY

What follows is a theology-from-below approach to fighting depression and anxiety. It is a summary of proven practices and steps that help address and respond to depression and anxiety. After I lead us through these practical steps, I will then explore some important theological resources pastors are equipped with that can be valuable in the battle against depression and anxiety.

#### *1. Reach Out and Be Honest*

The first practical step pastors can take is to reach out and be honest. Pastors can feign authenticity and can appear spiritually healthy when in fact they are not.<sup>50</sup> For many pastors, and other health care providers, reaching out can be very difficult to do. Pastors are accustomed to be the person others go to in time of need. They are the ones who others “reach out” to for help. Many pastors already know the right things to do. This knowledge

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<sup>50</sup> Herrington, *Leader's Journey*, 40–41.

can be used negatively in that they can say the right things to get others “off their trail” that something might be wrong. Pastors, perhaps like no other profession, can become excellent maskers. They can give people the impression, with just the right amount of earnestness, that things might be “hard” but that they are “good.”<sup>51</sup> For example, the beloved pastor, Darren Patrick, was interviewed by a fellow pastor, Matt Patrick (no relation) on April 24th 2020 about the enneagram and the healing power of honesty. I listened to this interview live and I was moved, encouraged and convicted by his apparent honesty and clarity. Darren died of a self-inflicted gun wound on April 30th 2020. If you are experiencing symptoms of depression and anxiety you must be honest and reach out.

There is another barrier to reaching out. Reaching out with honesty for a pastor is more difficult than other professions. When I told my wife, Renee, after church that Sunday that I wasn't sure I believed in God, she listened, gave me a reassuring hug and instructed me not to tell a soul! My entire educational background, experience and income all depended on me believing in God. The pressure on her and my family if I “lost my faith” would be extreme and massively unfair to them. So, just saying, “reach out” actually isn't very helpful or doable for many pastors. In their great work, Resilient Ministry, Burns, Chapman and Guthrie make a critical distinction between “allies” and “confidants.”<sup>52</sup> Allies refer to individuals in the church and confidants are trusted persons with no connection to the particular church someone pastors. When a pastor “reaches out” to someone in the church, that individual is immediately put in an awkward situation in which their loyalty to the pastor is now in tension with their loyalty to the church and its potential instability. This is a situation that actually leads to pastors leaving ministry altogether. Community in the church is helpful to many but, in many ways, not to pastors themselves. Instead of reaching out to an “ally” in the church, the writers advocate reaching out to a “confidant” who has no immediate connection to a pastor's own church. This creates an environment for extreme honesty without potentially putting the pastor's job in jeopardy as a result.

When I was going through depression, reaching out to a skilled counselor not connected to my church was what I needed to unpack my struggles without worrying about the content of those meetings coming up in a church personnel committee meeting. Having a confidant provided a safe environment for me to continue pastoring while also processing personal life issues. Having a confidant is also important in doing the next step.

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<sup>51</sup> E.M. Bounds challenged pastors to be honest with themselves about their own earnestness and its ability to mimic real spiritual energy but in reality be fleshy and dangerous. E. M. Bounds, *Power through Prayer* (Christian Classics, 1910).

<sup>52</sup> Bob Burns, Tasha Chapman, and Donald Guthrie, *Resilient Ministry: What Pastors Told US About Surviving and Thriving*. (Downers Grove, IVP: 2013).

## 2. Do Your Work

The second major step is a willingness to do your own work. By work, I mean a resolve to journey through the various potential causes, both seen and unseen, felt and unfelt, that may be at the root of experiencing depression and anxiety. According to Gregory Jantz and his work at “The Center: A Place of Hope,” five interconnected parts of the self need to be appraised: the emotional, intellectual, relational, physical, and spiritual. I will briefly address four of them before unpacking spiritual resources in the final section of this essay.

### A. EMOTIONAL

Jantz highlights that when emotions of fear, anger, and guilt are experienced out of proportion to their emotional counterparts (optimism, hope, and joy) then depression follows. Each negative emotion can be good, normal, and biblical but when someone is dominated by one of them to the point it is all one feels then depression ensues. Jantz suggests that if you are being dominated by one of these negative emotion, it is vital to maintain a sense of personal agency. He says, “if you are emotionally out of sync, you can’t rely on how you are feeling to determine what you do.”<sup>53</sup> The key is choosing the right attitude. He continues, “mood and attitude are linked – they are interrelated but separate. Mood is how we are feeling; attitude is how we respond to the mood” (Jantz, 26). Hence, acknowledging one’s emotions is vital in the process but also remembering how to respond to those emotions is just as critical.

This is also why it is critical to do this work with the help of someone else. If one does emotional work alone, then it can easily drift from self-understanding exercise to reinforcing patterns of self-fixation. Someone else can help spark personal agency and appropriate challenge whereas self-analysis can lead to more anxiety and sinking feelings of helplessness. The enneagram, when used as a means of self-understanding, has been helpful to some in this space; however, I have also seen it simply re-enforce someone’s orientation around oneself (“I am made this way and people need to cater to who I am”) and inoculate one against having personal agency and meaningful emotional transformation.

### B. INTELLECTUAL

When emotions are out of balance the intellect will also be distorted. Strong emotions alter perspective and negatively impact how we think and what we think about. When this happens we can become stuck in an intellectual rut and have great difficulty seeing other perspectives rightly. Research by psychologists Daniel Simons and Christopher Chabris show that when people become locked into a particular viewpoint, they can totally miss other huge and obvious realities that are right in front of them. They

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<sup>53</sup> Jantz, *Depression*, 26.

call it “in-intentional blindness.”<sup>54</sup> So along with doing emotional work, you need to do intellectual work as well. Of course, pastor-theologians are eager for this sort of work but “intellectual” in this sense doesn’t mean research and writing. Rather it is coming to terms with what is actually true objectively compared to how one might feel about reality at any given point. We see David grappling with this sort of dynamic in Psalm 42:5 (also v. 11 and 43:5), when he writes, “Why are you down cast, O my soul? Why are you at turmoil within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God.” Strong negative emotions alter our perspective so that we can become fixated intellectually on life, perhaps honestly believing our thoughts are realistic assessments, when in fact our thoughts are distortions of reality.<sup>55</sup>

### C. RELATIONAL

Dysfunctional relationships are also factors in depression and anxiety. While the assumption of this essay is that depression and anxiety get in the way of forgiveness. It could be that for many, it is actually the other way around. One might be depressed and anxious because there is refusal to forgive others. Refusal to forgive others can cause a multitude of emotional and physical issues. Of course, it is also indicative of spiritual problems as well.<sup>56</sup> The Lord’s Prayer is hugely helpful in addressing relational issues. Daily praying for forgiveness as you forgive others is a habit of obedience to Jesus that creates a pathway to joy and is an antidote to relational causes of depression. As a pastor I’m often shocked how often wrongs against me build up in my soul. Like layers of soot, one baked on top of another, past wrongs can create darkness and numbness in the heart. So, admitting wrongs that have been committed against you and creating space to acknowledge those wrongs and the normative emotions that go with them is important. Then letting them go in a selfless act of forgiveness prevents those wrongs from having disproportionate (or hidden) influence on your life. It could be that deep forgiveness is key to experiencing any relational well-being and may well be key to overcoming bouts of depression and anxiety.

Relational dynamics can also trigger unhealthy adaptations that we can carry around in ourselves without really knowing it. They can be manifested in at least three ways: learned invisibility, learned helplessness, and learned worthlessness.<sup>57</sup> Learned invisibility says, “If I don’t want to be hurt, I shouldn’t stand out.” Here pastors learn to shrink back in difficult conversations to avoid getting damaged by the words of others. In other

<sup>54</sup> Christopher Chabis and Daniel Simons, *The Invisible Gorilla* (New York: Crown, 2010).

<sup>55</sup> This sort of blindness “is our frequent inability to see what is right in front of us if we’re not focusing directly on it.” Shawn Achor, *The Happiness Advantage*, 95.

<sup>56</sup> See Timothy Jennings, *The God-Shaped Brain: How Changing Your View of God Transforms Your Life* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2013). In this monograph Jennings shows how one’s perspective of God, and the emotions that prospective produces (i.e. fear or acceptance), shapes one’s own brain function, which then impacts other keys relationships in life.

<sup>57</sup> Jantz, *Depression*, 29.

words, we've adapted to stay out of the way as a means of self-protection. Learned helplessness says, "Bad things happen, but they're never my fault." This is an unhealthy form of victimization, which robs one of agency for change and is ultimately disempowering within relationships. Learned worthlessness says, "I'm never good enough." This is when you are in a pattern of saying "sorry" all the time and believe your thoughts and perspectives have no value in conversations.<sup>58</sup>

#### D. PHYSICAL

Another aspect of doing your work is taking account of your physical activity. Stephen Ilardi advocates that taking a physical activity inventory can help foster what he calls an "antidepressant lifestyle."<sup>59</sup> Many pastors are rarely encouraged to be physically active. Our schedules and job requirements and expectations, if left unchallenged, will leave very little room for physical activities. If we're experiencing anxiety and there are no regular patterns or habits of physical activities to get us out of our heads, we can reinforce a rut of hopelessness. Often when we're anxious, we are ruminating; that is, thinking of the same things over and over again. The idea here is to include activities to not think, but do. Ilardi says to turn away from the inner world of thoughts and memories to the outer world of other people and activities. Simple things like adjusting one's schedule to ride your bike to work instead of your car can pay big dividends. Any activity you enjoy or have a purpose with, seriously consider making that a part of your life. For example, my doctor encouraged me to start playing basketball again (the only sport I truly love to play). Even though there were obstacles (I didn't know of any leagues that a 40-something out of shape theologian could join), I recruited some players and before long created my own three-times-a-week pickup game. This has been incredibly enjoyable for me, great for my mental and physical health and has been one of the great losses in my personal life since the pandemic shut it down.

#### C. THEOLOGICAL RESOURCES IN THE FIGHT

When I presented this material during the 2019 Symposium, a question I received was what spiritual resources exist for pastors that are unique to the Christian gospel? What is different between secular approaches to treatment and the gospel? What does the gospel provide that secular treatments can't? Granted that much of the advice above is overlapping secular best practices and broad biblical wisdom, what follows are four

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<sup>58</sup> The countermeasure to this is to develop a small community around yourself with people you like and who give you energy. Also learning to say no to people, appropriately, who drain you disproportionately. The annual CPT symposium has become, over the years, just as meaningful as a group therapy community among people who understanding each other, as it is a context for intellectual advancements.

<sup>59</sup> Stephen Ilardi, *The Depressin Cure: The 6-step program to Beat Depression without Drugs* (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2009).



(not exhaustive) spiritual resources uniquely available for any Christian, including pastor-theologians.

### 1. *The “Ex-Centric” Life in Christ*

The power and agency of the Spirit of Jesus in the life of the pastor-theologian is a uniquely effective resource in the fight against depression. Believers have the Spirit’s power and agency as unique products of New Creation. This act of grace itself provides a source of power outside of the “self” of the believer. This is how Paul could affirm confidently, “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”<sup>60</sup> We have actual access to the personal power and agency of the living Christ through the Holy Spirit, such that Paul could say that it was no longer he who was living but Christ living in him. Yielding to this personal power and agency of Jesus is a critical spiritual resource in the fight against depression and anxiety. John Barclay describes this dynamic as living the “ex-centric” life in Christ.<sup>61</sup> That is, a power that doesn’t derive from within us, but rather comes from outside of us. One doesn’t “dig deep” to find this power, but rather yields to this power that comes from outside the center. Barclay describes it this way:

Because this new life is sourced elsewhere, outside of human resources and in the life of the risen Christ, Paul does not figure salvation as a reformation of the human person, like some newly discovered technique in self-mastery. Believers live a life derived from elsewhere, in a kind of “ex-centric” existence (an existence whose center is outside of oneself) that draws of Jesus’ life from the dead. They are, as it were, walking miracles, all the more evidently miraculous because this new creation life begins while they still inhabit bodies destined for an earthly death. In Romans 6–8, Paul repeatedly emphasizes the mortality of the body: “Let not sin reign in your mortal bodies” (6:2); what you inhabit presently is “a body of death” (7:24); the Spirit will finally vivify “your mortal bodies” (8:11). Whereas Christ has finished with death (6:9), believers have a state of permanent ontological incongruity: in one respect they are heading toward death (8:10), but in another they are alive, in a “newness of life” (6:4) that in source and character is the life of Christ.<sup>62</sup>

### 2. *Scripture and the Power of Change.*

Scripture itself, as God-breathed text is powerful enough to help bring real change. Because of the damage done by sticking bible verses on issues, it can be easy to dismiss too quickly the actual power and change that can

<sup>60</sup> Ga 2:20.

<sup>61</sup> John M.G. Barclay, *Paul and the Power of Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020), 91.

<sup>62</sup> Barclay, *Grace*, 92.

come from meaningful bible reading. Part of the dangers of simply looking to personal habits, as key to life changes and getting out of depression, is that it leans too heavily on one's own energy. But scripture itself is powerful. Peter Leithart reminds us that power resides, not just in the kernel, but actually in the husk of Scripture.<sup>63</sup> Allowing oneself to get caught up in the flow of Scripture, like being caught up in a rapturous symphony, ministers to our soul in deeply profound and mysterious ways.

Of course, Scripture does have to be read, and reading regularly (for personal benefit not just read-hunting for sermon preparation) is a habit to be developed; yet reading just any book regularly doesn't derive the same power, but instead there is unique power in the Scripture. A key reformational concept is the perspicuity of Scripture. It can unfold for us in powerful ways and provide joy and energy in times of depression and anxiety. If anxiety is the fixation on the self, then meditation on Scripture can redirect that obsessive behavior off the self.

### 3. *Grace for the Present.*

God's grace has the ability to sustain us when we don't see any progress. Paul found great relief when he learned to exult in his weakness rather than lean into his own strength.<sup>64</sup> His own strength, both physical and psychological was limited and unreliable. Thus, Paul learned to trust in grace as a sustaining power when his own psychological health failed him. This is also what's remarkable about the prison ministry of Paul. He literally couldn't do anything but learned to trust in God's power apart from his (Paul's) own ability. Paul's battle with the "thorn in the flesh" taught him that God's grace was enough for him in the midst of struggle and suffering.<sup>65</sup> God's grace could sustain him when he, in his own power and ability, couldn't sustain himself.

### 4. *Mission of God*

The gospel compels you to double-down on the mission of God in your life. Freedom comes from a total abandonment of your will for the will of God. Doing this enables "self forgetfulness," which is a key to breaking patterns of self-absorption.<sup>66</sup> Freedom of denying self, picking up a cross and following Jesus is significant.<sup>67</sup> A major characteristic of the disciples in the gospels is that they are both, strugglers on the way and enlisted into the mission of Jesus nevertheless. Nouwen put it this way, "The great

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<sup>63</sup> Peter J. Leithart, *Deep Exegesis: The Mystery of Reading Scripture* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2009), 1–34.

<sup>64</sup> 2 Co 2:1–5.

<sup>65</sup> 2 Co 12:9.

<sup>66</sup> Tim Keller, *The Freedom of Self-Forgetfulness: The Path to True Christian Joy* (Leyland: 10Publishing, 2012).

<sup>67</sup> Mark Leary, *The Curse of the Self: Self-Awareness, Egotism, and the Quality of Human Life* (Oxford: University Press, 2004).

illusion of leadership is to think that man can be led out of the desert by someone who has never been there.”<sup>68</sup>

### CONCLUSION<sup>69</sup>

Life lived between the two advents of Jesus, means that depression and anxiety will never fully leave us. But I also believe that pastors can experience a measure of freedom from these oppressive states as well. Indeed, it is imperative that we do. With such increasing unhappiness in our world, the pastor-theologian needs to fight the good fight for joy. Our joy may be key to missional advancement for the next generation.

Dealing with our depression and anxiety may also be key to our ability to receive and extend forgiveness to others in our ministries. Pastoral ministry is beautiful work but it is also a warzone and in a warzone there is real damage. Pastors often are collateral damage if not the outright targets of attack. In order to showcase the gospel we have to give and receive forgiveness to those who have hurt us and to those whom we have hurt. If we can't seem to do that, perhaps there are deeper emotional instabilities at work in our soul that need to be addressed and taking some of the direction in this essay may be an important step forward in that journey.

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<sup>68</sup> Henri Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer: Ministry in Contemporary Society* (New York: Doubleday, 1972).

<sup>69</sup> Two other spiritual resources to be explored are consolation/desolation and hope. In the Psalms the writers experience consolation and desolation. Consolation is when God responds to times on need with relief and comfort. Desolation is when those prayers of comfort are left unanswered. The idea though is that it is in the times of desolation when real growth and spiritual maturity occurs. The gospel also gives us vision for the future. The gospel gives real hope. Eschatological realities of the Kingdom of God coming in full, complete with the undoing of evil and the ultimate victory over death itself, gives hope. Hope is energy for today based on this reality of the future. As the writer of Hebrews wrote about Jesus “for the joy set before him...he endured the shame.”