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Editor's Note

Luther's theology is a soul care theology. I have been making that statement publicly for years now. We who are confessional Lutheran pastors and theologians sometimes take that for granted. We realize that Luther's emphasis on our daily need for the gospel of Jesus Christ through the many tribulations (what Luther called *Anfechtung*) of this life. We and the people we serve in word and sacrament suffer through *Anfechtung* caused by our own sin, but also because we live in a world that is sinful and decaying. It is easy to ask, Does God really care about me? Other theologies tempt people to focus on other questions like "Am I one of the chosen?" (Calvinism) or "Am I doing enough for God to accept me?" (Roman Catholicism and Protestant Holiness theologies). Luther's theology always points us back to Jesus, his cross and his resurrection *for us*. We Lutheran pastors pray that God's people who hear our preaching and teaching are comforted by that gospel message.

I assert that the reason we study Christian theology is for the care of souls. The reason we study exegetical theology is for the care of souls. The reason we study systematic and doctrinal theology is for the care of souls. The reasons we study historical theology and homiletics, and catechesis and evangelism are, ultimately, for the care of souls. Luther called pastors *Seelsorger*, which means "care giver of souls." When we think of "care of souls" in modern parlance, we tend to equate it with one-on-one counseling. I wish to assert that while the care of souls is that it's also much more.

Pastoral Care Companion (Concordia Publishing House) says this in its introduction:

It is helpful to distinguish between the ordinary and extraordinary means of pastoral care. The ordinary means include preaching, catechization, confession/absolution, prayer, and the liturgy itself. Extraordinary means of pastoral care are just that—they are out of the ordinary. Counseling, intervention, and referral are examples of the extraordinary . . . The wise pastor will know when others must be summoned to care for physical or psychological maladies. As others may render helpful service in caring for bodily and mental affliction, the pastor will devote himself to spiritual care—the care of the soul.

Our Lord Jesus Christ, on the night he was betrayed, on the last night he was directly caring for his disciples before his crucifixion, promised them the ultimate soul care giver who was coming for them at Pentecost:

And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another helper (advocate, counselor, paraclete) to be with you forever . . . These things I have spoken to you while I am still with you. But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid. (Jn 14:16, 25–27)

Paul points out that we, the church, serve as the continuing instruments of the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit, in—

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort (paraklesis, encouragement, counsel), who comforts (parakaleo) us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort (parakaleo) those who are in any affliction, with the comfort (paraklesis) with which we ourselves are comforted (parakaleo) by God. For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort (paraklesis) too. (2 Cor 1:3–5)

I assert that the reason we study Christian theology is for the care of souls. The reason we preach gospel-focused sermons, both on Sundays and for funerals, weddings, and other occasions, is for the care of souls. The reason we teach Bible classes and catechesis is for the care of souls. We study exegesis and systematics and church history not to be perceived as intellectual academics, but to be better at the care of souls. We do evangelism, and share the story of Christ with the unchurched, because we desire to care for their souls.

This issue of the *Concordia Journal* and the next focus on the care of souls. The articles in this issue focus on the importance of the person of the soul care giver, and how it is not selfish, but necessary that pastors be aware of the challenges of the pastoral office, and of caring for the needs of their own souls. I want to thank the executive editor, *Seelsorger* Kevin Golden, for agreeing to and encouraging these two editions. Dr. Golden, an Old Testament exegete, was my pastor (in a vacancy role) for two years, so I was able to observe how he cared for the souls of our congregation at Concordia Maplewood. I use the term *Seelsorger* rightly to describe him.

In these two special issues we have invited several theologically gifted women, soul care givers who are professional counselors, psychologists, or deaconesses, to be

contributors. I believe you will be edified by what they have to say. The first is Dr. Beverly Yahnke, the co-executive director of DOXOLOGY: The Lutheran Center for Spiritual Care and Counsel. She has been a leader on the frontline of the care of souls of Lutheran pastors, and in teaching them how to better care for the souls of their parish members for decades. In her essay she asserts that the spiritual care of souls is sorely needed in our parishes today, but that various cultural realities (e.g., individualization, secularization of suffering, distrust of pastoral authority) are deterring souls from seeking what they need. Too many Christians are turning to alternatives like AI and social media. She ends with suggestions that pastors can consider to make themselves more approachable (like EQ and different models of ministry) for spiritual care, as well as preaching and teaching in ways that invite the flock to seek that individualized care.

Dr. Mark Rockenbach's article then expands on the importance of how pastoral Emotional Intelligence (EQ) invites the flock to better trust him with that individualized care. He explores how we pastors might be able to improve our EQ and even consider combining our intellectual intelligence (IQ) and Emotional Intelligence into Faith Intelligence.

The final article by Dr. Stephen Pietsch is on the soul care of pastors with depression. He overviews the pervasiveness of depression in our culture, and then delves into how pastors, including historical figures (like Luther and Walther) and us today, have been prone to struggle even more intensely with melancholy, largely because of the complications of the office. He does a deep theological dive into the spiritual and psychological reasons for depression among pastors, and how we tend to use denial and bravado to cover over our fear, human weaknesses, shame, and troubled consciences. Most importantly, he suggests how to use the gospel in its many forms to help other pastors who struggle with their own issues, especially depression.

I do pray that reading this issue will be edifying for your soul, and for your ability to care for the souls of others.

Rick Marrs
Guest Editor

Articles

Recovering the Art of Spiritual Care Need, Deterrents, and Pastoral Responses

Beverly Yahnke



Beverly K. Yahnke is Executive Director for Christian Counsel with DOXOLOGY: The Lutheran Center for Spiritual Care and Counsel. She founded and was Director of Christian Counseling Services in Milwaukee where she served

as a clinical psychologist. She has also served as Chair of the Department of Psychology at Concordia University Wisconsin.

When individuals request outpatient psychological care, it's routine for a Christian psychologist to inquire whether the client has spoken with his pastor about the concerns prompting treatment. The client's response is surprise and inquiry as to why a conversation with one's pastor would be considered relevant to clinical issues. Clients then explain unapologetically

why they have not considered speaking with their pastor about personal matters involving pain, dysfunction, confusion, or shame.

Over the last four decades, my clients have taught me a great deal about their rationale for being clergy-avoidant. One man mentioned to his pastor that his marriage was unravelling. He admitted that the conversation was more of a public service announcement for the pastor than a request for assistance. Women mentioned being reluctant to speak to their pastor, fearing their issue wasn't "bad enough" to merit the pastor's time. Others worried that asking for care seemed "needy."

The Need is Abundant

There are countless reasons for congregants to seek a conversation with their pastor. Lest we forget, one hundred percent of the people in our congregations struggle with the congenital diagnosis of sin. Yet it's possible that the pastor, who has been called to care for them in Christ's name, may not always be aware of the various kinds of burdens his sheep may bear. Our pews are inhabited by dear and faithful souls,

The pastor may hear only rarely from those who need him most.

some bearing solitary struggles, others bearing secrets or living in spiritual confusion. Some souls carry about sins that “don’t feel” absolved. Each Sunday, they gather, confess their sins publicly, receive God’s holy absolution,

sing, hear the word, and receive the Lord’s gifts before returning to their daily lives with a word of benediction.

Pastors’ special care and counsel are also vital for those who may struggle with issues that, at first blush, don’t appear to be spiritual in nature. The National Institutes of Health reports that more than one in five US adults live with a mental illness, ranging in severity from mild to severe.¹ The American Psychological Association reports that the current DSM-5-TR (Diagnostic Statistical Manual) has identified 298 mental health diagnoses.² How enormous is the pastor’s task when one in every five congregants is touched by such diagnoses and would find comfort and blessing in receiving pastoral care?

Yet, the pastor may hear no mention of spiritual or psychological needs going unmet. Those who genuinely need their pastor to listen, to care, to teach, to encourage, to absolve, to pray and to bless may never ask for care. The pastor may hear only rarely from those who need him most. How can this be?

A pastor’s years of faithful teaching and preaching often result in a relationship of respect and affection from one’s parishioners. Ironically, that cherished relationship may be the very reason congregants hesitate to seek pastoral care. Many would rather remain silent than say anything to their pastor that would invite his disapproval or his judgment. For many, the vulnerability required for honest pastoral conversation may come at too great a cost—the loss of privacy.

One need not have a psychiatric diagnosis nor a marriage in disrepair to merit a conversation with one’s pastor. This is an age of cultural upheaval, political turmoil, moral confusion, family strife, and excesses of every sort. In response to the wiles of the devil, the world, and our own sinful flesh, spiritual care conversations with one’s pastor are a gift of God we ought not refuse.

This paper will examine why some souls are unlikely to receive spiritual care. First, it will identify the God-given benefits of individual pastoral care, and then it will consider the cultural and personal deterrents to reaching out. The discussion will also examine oft-used alternatives to pastoral care and identify some pastoral missteps that can contribute to laity avoidance. The paper concludes with recommendations for recovering the practice of the cure of souls. The discussion is not intended to be exhaustive. Instead, the goal of the paper is to increase awareness of opportunities to renew the practice of providing individual spiritual care and to invite pastors to engage in a personal appraisal of their pastoral practices.

Spiritual Care of Souls

The *ordinary* means of soul care are given in the Divine Service where God's word is proclaimed, the Sacraments are administered faithfully, and the baptized and catechized receive the body and blood of the Lord Jesus under bread and wine for the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation. This essay, however, will explore what the church has historically termed *the extraordinary* means of soul care—*cura animarum*.

This extraordinary care takes place in individual conversation, wherein the Holy Spirit works through the word spoken by the pastor and received by the hearer in faith. Unlike psychotherapy, the goal of pastoral care is not personality change or enhanced emotional functioning.

Rather, pastors serve as physicians of the soul, called to determine an accurate diagnosis of the soul's needs and to provide a spiritually appropriate response. In this context, the soul is invited to speak candidly and to respond to pastoral inquiries concerning faith, hope, and conscience so that the love and wisdom of the Good Shepherd may be applied to wounds of misbelief, unbelief, or despair. Pastors are intended to be *Seelsorgers* entrusted with bringing God's comfort and care through the word and the forgiveness of sins. Such conversations may include, but are not limited to, individual confession and absolution. (The laity's neglect of and resistance to this treasure of the church merits treatment beyond the scope of this paper.) For broad historical and contemporary perspectives on the pastoral care of souls, readers may consult the work of Gregory,³ Senkbeil,⁴ and Pietsch.⁵

Deterrents to Seeking Spiritual Care from One's Pastor

A pastor's care for his sheep and lambs is not always welcomed or received. One pastor shared his frustration, noting that each month the parish nurse set up a table in the fellowship hall to take blood pressures. The maintenance staff began putting up chairs so that parishioners could wait comfortably to see the nurse. Parishioners lined up. Waited. The pastor said he felt invisible and wondered if wearing a stethoscope around his neck might increase his appeal. Admittedly, the parish nurse knew everyone's name, the names of their children, their health records and engaged them with friendly chatter and a warm smile. The nurse was "safe." She would not ask any questions that might lead to shame or embarrassment. Small reassurances and her words of encouragement drew people to see her each month. The discouraged pastor wondered, "Why aren't my people coming to see me?" Countless influences deter parishioners from seeking spiritual care.

Cultural Realities

Expressive Individualism

Expressive individualism, a dominant worldview in contemporary western culture, shapes how many see themselves, the church, and truth itself.⁶ Those who adopt this perspective have come to believe that they must examine themselves to discover who they are and communicate unapologetically to others what is right and most satisfying for them. Their highest good and their soul's highest aspiration is to express self without deferring to external norms such as family, tradition, or religious authority. Naturally, when such souls rely on an internal compass for happiness and

These souls are desperately in need of spiritual care but unlikely to seek it.

flourishing, they may well reject both faith and family. Such souls are likely to take pride in their alienation from social or religious boundaries and may well delight in their aberrance (authenticity).

Those who regard themselves as their own ultimate authority have no reason to accept an invitation to be reconciled with God the Father through the sacrifice of his Son. Worse, laity with this worldview are not in church regularly. On the rare occasion they may converse with their pastor (ordinarily at the urging of a family member), the pastor learns that challenging or contradicting the other's self-expression is regarded as unloving.⁷ These souls are desperately in need of spiritual care but unlikely to seek it, and if they seek it, they are unlikely to receive what is offered. Being one's own highest good may well come with unanticipated eternal consequences. The pastor perseveres prayerfully, nevertheless, with kind offers to connect with these self-absorbed souls for ongoing conversations.

Secularization of Suffering

When a Christian soul is suffering, he is ordinarily grateful for a pastor's care. The culture, however, can warp how souls in the community of faith regard the personal experience of suffering. Some now regard suffering as failure. The failure to purchase the right goods, services, or a failure to receive appropriate and timely physical or mental health care. Others imagine that they will be judged for their inability to care for themselves, or failure to "adult" and tend to their needs intelligently.

Secular reframing of suffering severs it from biblical wisdom and truth. The timeless debate regarding the problem of suffering weighs in heavily with the argument that a good and loving God could not allow pain, evil, or suffering. Left to personal reflection on such weighty matters, the sufferer may not only resist pastoral care but also find one's faith unravelling.

When a parishioner has no answers as to why he is suffering, and when that

soul finds no comfort in the word preached nor the sacrament distributed faithfully, he can become demoralized, particularly if he is suffering with serious illness or incapacity. He hears the sermons and Bible studies discussing the need to embrace suffering. For him, there is no comfort in hearing, “we also glory in our sufferings because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us (Rom 5:3–5).

These foundational concepts of the faith ring hollow to a secular soul in deep anguish. A 30-year-old client diagnosed with terminal brain cancer asked me how the church could imagine that any of “that Scripture” was helpful. He had talked with his pastor just once following his diagnosis. He had not asked his pastor how to take possession of God’s promises in suffering. He had not talked with his pastor about his fears and his faith. His pastor offered the young man Scripture verses to read, perhaps assuming that he would find them comforting. The pastoral visit closed with a prayer. My client’s verdict was, “I tried God, and he didn’t work for me; I’m still dying.”

Doubting souls in pain turn to whatever provides immediate, reliable, perceptible help. Suffering is not regarded as spiritually transformative for the secular soul. It is a problem to be fixed. Pastors wisely employ Luther’s Large Catechism explanation to the first commandment, *countering the secular view*, making clear the need for Christians to rely entirely on their Lord in every trial: “Whatever you lack of good things, expect it of Me, and look to Me for it, and whenever you suffer misfortune and distress, creep and cling to Me. I, yes, I, will give you enough and help you out of every need; only let not your heart cleave to or rest in any other.” A secular definition of suffering results in embracing secular remedies to the exclusion of receiving spiritual care that can teach, admonish, call to repentance, and wrap the fearful and afflicted soul in love.

By the grace of God and the care of a pastor, one may be able to transition away from secular perspectives. We long for personal conversations that teach us how to apply the wisdom of Scripture to the pain in our lives, and visitation that nurtures us with the love of Jesus Christ in every calamitous situation.

Moralistic Therapeutic Deism

The culture has shaped other souls who may seek the help of God, albeit rarely. Their principal goal is to secure personal happiness. Their god is not the God of the Bible, although they do attribute to Him the creation and distant overview of the world. They define God as one who wants people to be happy and to honor the moral teachings of Scripture.

For those who adopt this perspective, God isn’t a vital part of life. They may believe that God can occasionally be useful in resolving problems and can be

The misguided souls have little interest in acquiring wisdom about the biblical God.

summoned, if needed. They don't fear sin, death, or the power of the devil. They are confident that good and moral people all go to heaven. These souls attend traditional parishes, often with family members.

These souls believe they do not need to seek spiritual care from

a pastor who preaches biblical truths. The misguided souls have little interest in acquiring wisdom about the biblical God. Such conversations would only contradict their mistaken beliefs about the mysterious and distant God they follow. They believe that the pastor is unlikely to be useful in helping them to achieve their principal life goal: personal growth and self-fulfillment.

The wise pastor will work diligently to cultivate a sustained personal relationship with such individuals. Conversations that don't begin with confrontation or catechesis are most likely to succeed. For this group of souls, desirous of happiness, casual conversations across time may be required. This allows these souls to enjoy sufficient trust and willingness to be receptive to learning what God teaches about how to secure and sustain happiness in life. Cultivating such relationships requires prayerful persistence, often over an extended time.

Distrust of Pastoral Authority

The Norman Rockwell days of respect for and simple compliance with authority have passed. Now, distrust of authority is a badge of honor among all kinds of souls. Public officials and heads of state routinely issue reversals of position as if they were rhetorical windsocks. Consequently, the public has been taught not to trust because facts and truth are not always factual or true.

Yet, Scripture is clear. The office of the Holy Ministry, by the power of the Spirit, gives authority to mere men, whose qualifications are set out in 1 Timothy 3:1–7. In faith, the flock receives the biblical guidance that they are to “Obey your leaders and submit to them” (Heb 13:17). Despite the extraordinary care given to calling men who serve in this office, clergy have not escaped the authority crisis.

For over four decades, the Roman Catholic church has been devastated by thousands of accounts of sexual abuse of children by clergy. The saints recoiled with disbelief and then with rage at the betrayals committed at the expense of children. Trust, respect, and authority for the clergy in all church bodies were damaged.

The Barna Group examined attitudes about current pastoral authority among Protestant Christians. They sought to determine whether a corrupt culture has irretrievably damaged trust between a pastor and his people. Their findings include:

Forty-four percent of Protestant pastors report that speaking about moral or social issues is more difficult now than it has ever been.

Sixty-nine percent of Christians believe that their pastor is very reliable when speaking about matters of how the church can help people live according to God's will.

Twenty-one percent of US adults believe that pastors are a very credible source on today's issues.⁸

Barna reports that a parishioner's judgment of his pastor's reliability varies according to the topic. Only 69 percent of souls are inclined to trust their pastor's discussion of spiritual matters; they are not at all confident about the pastor's counsel on matters of politics and daily life.

Admittedly, the Christian is wise to be wary when receiving care and counsel in matters of faith and practice from a pastor in whom he has little confidence or whose authority he does not respect. Although pastoral and personal authority may seem intangible, parishioners make judgments about the pastor's authority and his practices. Conventional wisdom suggests that pastors bear a special burden. Every public statement they make and every public action they take will either enhance or undermine the trust of the souls they serve, and consequently, influence those who will seek their care and counsel. Once a pastor's personal or professional reputation has been damaged or lost, his authority will be impossible, to restore.

Personal Constraints Deterring Souls from Seeking Pastoral Care

Women and Faith vs. Men and Faith

Women are often imagined to be souls lacking confidence or sufficient resolve to request spiritual care. Men's reluctance is more often believed to protect one's pride. Or one could speculate that men seem to have less experience with transparent self-disclosure. Apart from conjecture about gender influences, the research is telling.

Barna moves beyond hunches to report that after studying a group of men and women for twenty years, the data indicate that women have experienced more detrimental spiritual change in faith and practice than had men. Of fourteen indicators of faith and practice, women experienced significant declines in religiosity in ten of those areas (e.g., church attendance, Bible reading, and sharing their faith). Seventeen percent of the women had become unchurched. Men experienced decrements in only six of the fourteen indicators of faith and practice. Barna reported that only one-third of men firmly believed that the Bible is accurate and true.⁹ The documented loss of religious belief and practice among men and women over the

twenty-year study supports the contemporary trend away from affiliation with one's church. The survey could not document any uptick in spiritual care requests. Overall, however, women continue to be more likely to request spiritual care than men.

Shame and Guilt

Tragic life circumstances should evoke a desire for spiritual care. However, shame often isolates individuals, suppresses the conscience, and seeks silence. Shame may also include painful truths about others who have sinned against this soul, in cases of trauma or abuse. Although shame is a spiritual issue, it often goes unaddressed as the church seems more accustomed to responding to guilt. The shamed soul regards its behavior with regret, disgust, and often self-hate. Despite competing definitions, shame can be understood as the powerful life-shaping emotional turmoil that emerges after engaging in sin or being sinned against. Souls are catechized to know that holy absolution addresses guilt. Some are left to wonder what addresses shame. Although fluent in the language of sin and guilt, death and resurrection, the church hasn't always devoted a great deal of time to talking about shame.

One might consider shame as a powerful form of *incurvatus in se*, forcing one to retreat inward and to rely on personal resources. Yet, rescue from shame can come only from without. Consequently, shame-filled individuals are powerless to comfort themselves and may be so wrapped in self-loathing that they cannot reach out to another.¹⁰

Some clients who have sought psychological care carried with them burdens of guilt and shame that they had borne for decades. They had spoken to no one. Ever. Conscience-defiling matters such as abortion, theft, and abandonment of family had not driven the person to seek an opportunity to speak the truth before God in confession. They had not received the life-giving word of absolution and a new identity of life in Christ, both forgiving sin and relinquishing shame forever.

The victory of Jesus Christ over sin and death is also a victory over shame. There is much teaching to do, and those caught in the trap of guilt or shame will benefit enormously from hearing their pastors speak routinely and confidently about such matters from the pulpit and in Bible study, regularly inviting personal conversations.

Significant Psychological Diagnoses

Psychiatry acknowledges that for countless reasons, some individuals bear deficits that diminish their ability to function effectively in their personal lives and in many of their vocations. Traditionally, individuals bearing significant mental health diagnoses may struggle with interpersonal settings. Some prefer avoidance of the church, finding it difficult to participate fully in a community of faith. Those with heartbreaking depression, for example, may not attend church or Bible study with any regularity. Although some of these souls could benefit enormously from the

comfort and care of their pastor, they may be very reluctant or unable to seek his care. They may even have trouble receiving an offer of well-intentioned care.

Happily, parishioners with less serious mental health diagnoses who have a long acquaintance with their pastor do tend to seek his care first, before seeking psychological assistance. Pastors would be wise to establish healthy boundaries so that they continue to provide essential spiritual care for the soul, while ensuring appropriate psychological assistance is also provided. A pastor serves his parishioner well when he makes clear that a referral for mental health services presumes that the soul will continue to seek spiritual care from the pastor, as may be helpful.

Christians occasionally use alternative helpers instead of receiving spiritual care from their pastor.

Previous Clergy Interactions

Most souls use personal experience to shape current opinions and to inform future expectations. Early experiences with feeling awkward or uncomfortable in the presence of one's pastor can influence whether we would ever risk talking alone with our pastor about matters of personal importance. B. F. Skinner wasn't wrong about reinforcement. We repeat those behaviors that are rewarded with feelings of satisfaction, encouragement, and validation. We meticulously avoid doing those things that we found emotionally awkward, uncomfortable, or that left us feeling shamed or misunderstood. Every pastoral interaction shapes our future willingness to seek spiritual care from anyone in the office of holy ministry. Souls will come away from each pastoral interaction with inferences about the pastor, including competence, kindness, and pastoral presence. Each interaction with a parishioner influences that individual's likelihood of ever again seeking spiritual care when appropriate.

Popular Alternatives to Spiritual Care

Distressed souls, worried hearts, and guilty consciences have often found solace beyond their pastor's study and outside of their church. To whom else might they turn for encouragement and hope? Some have poured out their hearts to alternative care communities available on help lines. Airline passengers, Uber drivers, bartenders, and hair stylists have all served as captive confessors. Admittedly, talking about life, sin, death, and the power of the devil is important. Finding the proper audience is even more important. Christians occasionally use alternative helpers instead of receiving spiritual care from their pastor.

AI

The power, possibility, and productive capacity of artificial intelligence have made this technology a vital resource. AI burst onto the scene, lauded for its unparalleled capacity to do nearly instantaneous problem-solving in the areas of math and science. Given its extraordinary ability to learn, reason, solve problems, and inform decision-making, it was also tested in the world of human interactions. AI functioned very effectively, generating useful verbal content in response to human inquiry about any facet of life, hope, fear, and failure.

In its worst incarnation, ChatGPT provides seeking souls with all manner of AI friends, mentors, therapists, confidants, and even AI lovers created by individuals with unhealthy needs and preoccupations. These AI tools may have already provided disastrous guidance for many countless people around the world, and the damage to souls is already incalculable.

AI invites a soul to spell out its woes in self-disclosing keystrokes. To examine its “healthier” resources, I tasked AI with the question, “How can AI serve as a companion or digital friend to a Lutheran with spiritual needs?” What follows is a small portion of AI’s response:

*AI can serve as a **digital friend or spiritual companion to a Lutheran** by aligning its support with Lutheran theology, practice, and pastoral care traditions - though always as a supplement, not a substitute, for human pastoral care or divine relationship. While AI can't offer the means of grace (word and sacrament), it can provide meaningful assistance that reflects **Lutheran distinctives**—comforting the conscience, pointing to Christ, and upholding the theology of the cross. A Lutheran with spiritual needs would be served with:*

Christ-Centered Encouragement

Safe Spiritual Confidant

Support for Daily Devotional Life

Support Between Pastoral Visits

Lutheran Theology for Everyday Questions

Liturgical and Hymn Support

The resources point to the Lord’s Supper, the word preached, and holy baptism. Pastors can be relieved to note the warning that AI is not intended as a substitute for human pastoral care. Yet, for souls who are shy, isolated, struggling with shame or who may lack confidence, they can turn to their computer, at any time of day or night, to receive distinctly Lutheran, personalized biblical encouragement, prayers based on their needs, daily devotions with a Scriptural focus reflecting their life circumstances, as well as liturgical prayers, psalms or ancient texts. Souls may also ask

different questions of AI, prompting less salutary responses, such as “Why are the teachings of the LCMS to be disbelieved?”

Gecker reports that over 70 percent of teens use AI digital friends regularly.¹¹ Over one third of users report that their “conversations” with AI companions are as satisfying or more satisfying than interacting with human beings on matters they regard as serious and important. Some who have interacted with a digital friend believe that they have received spiritual awakening and world-altering truths. The immediacy, privacy, and endless availability of AI “help” have addictive qualities. Pastors who have reviewed such AI responses report that clergy will be wise to examine what distinctly Lutheran spiritual help is available online and underscore the insight that even AI recommends having pastoral visits. Pastors may choose to offer other online spiritual resources and teach insightfully about the significant threats to well-being that are posed by AI friends.

Social Media

Social media seems to be an innocent form of sharing information, music, and pictures among friends. Yet, people may not even “be” who they claim to “be” online. Who can imagine using such a resource in lieu of requesting genuine help or spiritual care?

Pew Research reports that adults use a variety of social media regularly, with Facebook topping the list, featuring 81% of moms and 66% of dads using the platform nearly daily.¹² Social media offers an easy way to ask a question and receive many responses, without requiring that the seeker reply to, or adopt any of the suggestions.

There are multiple websites and Facebook pages that could be helpful to a struggling soul, but one is left to their own resources to find, interpret correctly, and apply those helps in one’s life. Social media represents a genuine risk for the seeking soul for many reasons, including the fact that social media is about merit metrics, counting “likes,” and “loves” or “rage” responses. What is “good” is determined by the community. The community may endorse all manner of plans and practices at odds with biblical wisdom. Social media rarely points to the essentials of the faith or the need for pastoral care.

Yet, social media platforms are available 24/7. Experience teaches its adherents that someone will always be able to offer help, encouragement, support, understanding, or recommendations. Logging on is simpler than seeing one’s pastor, and it is a no-fault enterprise where false gospels (self-esteem and positive thinking) and the absence of the law allow for faithful souls to become confused or comforted falsely. A convenient, low-risk alternative to spiritual care may be the only request for assistance some souls may make. Pastors have much teaching and preaching to do, offering appropriate admonitions regarding the risks of social media, and offering, instead, winsome invitations to personal conversation.

Online Worship

During COVID-19, the traditional practice of spiritual care and public worship ground to a full stop. Congregations began to video or livestream services for the well-being of members. Although online worship seemed an essential response to an impossible situation, congregants acquired a new perspective regarding worship and spiritual care.

Churches everywhere began to embrace “excarnation” or excarnate worship. Charles Taylor speaks of ours as an “Age of Excarnation,” defining that as, “the steady disembodiment of spiritual life, so that it is less and less carried in deeply meaningful body forms and lies more and more in the head.”¹³ Due to legal and circumstantial constraints of all sorts, worship during COVID-19 was often an excarnate practice.

Conducted without the benefit of community or the possibility for reception of the Lord’s Supper, worship became, for many, a cognitive exercise that they observed others “perform.” The faith community suffered as congregants acquired a new habit: church on demand. The sacramental gifts of the Incarnate Lord Jesus were unavailable in the excarnate service, and the real presence was received only as virtual presence and digital information.

Despite the significant limitations of online worship, parishioners continued in this manner beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. Some of those souls have still not returned to the weekly Divine Service at their parish.

Falsely believing their spiritual needs are being met by logging on their church’s website, their losses accrue. Oesch explores the Christian’s life as inherently incarnational, where embodied beings participate in the mystery of the incarnation from birth to resurrection, and receive the means of grace as embodied souls. He concludes that our sacramental identity as embodied souls must dwell in community.¹⁴

The ongoing absence of incarnate worship in the lives of some Christians has likely resulted in their resolution never to seek spiritual care *in vivo*. They’ve found virtual interaction and worship to be a satisfactory alternative.

Congregations may want to consider if they would like to limit access to their online worship services. Perhaps those who are shut-in, or away for work or school, should be among a smaller number of souls who receive the online service links. Or perhaps the pastor would want to connect personally in a winsome way with those souls who have become wholly reliant on virtual worship. Otherwise, excarnate worship is a temptation that may continue to leave many beyond the pastor’s reach and ability to provide care.

Psychotherapy

Counseling or psychotherapy can be a wise choice when a Christian is troubled. When guidance is required, due to any number of concerns, counseling is regarded

as a reasonable option. Many who have come of age in a therapy-friendly environment have had treatment as a child or may have browsed through psychotherapeutic self-help books, blogs, and podcasts.

Many have found various psychological approaches to be helpful, and their friends have endorsed psychological care. Among women and in many other groups, the stigma that has been historically associated with seeking psychological care has diminished in response to increased education and encouragement to pursue personal wellness.

Those who prefer psychological counseling to spiritual care are quick to underscore that counselors are licensed or certified by state examining boards. Counselors have acquired specialized training and are acquainted with research-based therapeutic strategies to address whatever diagnosis has been made. We're familiar with the medical model and know what to expect: assessment leads to a diagnosis that can result in a treatment plan allowing the counselor to address the goals that are important to the individual. The searching soul hires a counselor as a skilled employee with the expectation of receiving distinctly professional care, once weekly, for as long as desired. The soul has absolute privacy and the certainty of confidentiality. One can simply stop attending sessions whenever one wants because the soul is unlikely to ever see this person again. No ongoing, unwelcome entanglements are required.

When I inquired why a client had not spoken with his pastor about a recent infidelity, the gentleman reported that he had left his wife and family. He reported that he respected his pastor, and that his pastor was "a good guy." He explained, though, that his pastor would be entirely out of his depth with a situation so convoluted and destructive as his marriage. The client noted that he didn't think talking about religious realities would be of much help. Ultimately, this man did seek spiritual care with his pastor as he continued receiving psychological treatment for depression. He noted that it was just easier to talk about such things with a professional who is a total stranger. After ongoing encouragement, he agreed to see his pastor and admitted, begrudgingly, that talking with his pastor had been more helpful than he imagined.

When it can be helpful to the soul and with the consent of the individual being assisted, pastors and mental health care professionals can collaborate to provide the finest possible care for the individuals entrusted to them. Souls need not receive one kind of professional care to the exclusion of another.

The stigma that has been historically associated with seeking psychological care has diminished.

Pastoral Contributions to Laity's Avoidance of Spiritual Care

Model of Ministry Doesn't Embrace Spiritual Care as Vital

Many parishioners join congregations that reflect their preference for a certain ministry model. Among competing models, a church may have a pastor seen by his people as a gospel-sharing entertainer, a CEO, or perhaps a business manager. Or souls may regard their pastor as a gifted administrator, a wonderful speaker, or even a faithful teacher. Yet, in some parish settings, the pastor does not seem to bear the primary identity of a shepherd, one who desires congregants to seek individual spiritual care. Although the pastor may be called upon to provide “emergency” spiritual care (difficult birth, death, trauma), the pastor’s regular expression of ministry doesn’t underscore his desire to be seen by his people as a “physician of souls.”

Souls will not request care when the biblical foundations for such care are not taught. Souls will not request care without the development of meaningful relationships in sync with careful pastoral teaching and preaching to normalize and discuss the comfort, guidance, and blessing available in this practice. Many churches are pleasant communities, but the pastor may not have chosen to follow the way of the Good Shepherd. Hauerwas observes, “Many congregations are a conspiracy of niceness, a community that lives under a covenant that says, ‘I promise never to tell you the truth about you if you will do the same for me.’”¹⁵ Pastors must prepare to be shepherds, so the flock can receive the vital spiritual care intended for them.

Dual Relationships

When a pastor provides personal spiritual care for someone who is also a close friend, family member, or colleague, the resulting dual relationship must be managed intentionally, with vocational boundaries of “pastor” and “friend” defined and discussed. The power imbalance between the pastor and the other individual is clear. Can the friend hear words of admonition or a call to repentance from his fishing partner-pastor? In the pastoral role, the pastor is called to listen compassionately, proclaim the law, call others to repentance, pronounce absolution, offer encouragement, pray, and give blessing.

A dual relationship can inhibit the pastor from exercising his full pastoral authority. Frequently, the pastor doesn’t imagine that a dual relationship is problematic. Yet, his connection with the individual may have unintended consequences. A female may misunderstand ongoing spiritual care conversations as an expression of her pastor’s attraction to her. The pastor might hesitate to speak difficult truths to a friend for fear of damaging a long-valued friendship. As a result, the conversation may become stunted, prioritizing the preservation of the friendship over the delivery of necessary spiritual care. Alternatively, the pastor may provide precisely the spiritual care required, but the friend—expecting a more informal conversation—

may be taken aback by the pastor's formal spiritual comments, and leave feeling hurt or misunderstood.

Without careful preliminary conversations between pastor and friend, dual relationships can lead to blurred boundaries, miscommunication, and regret for both pastor and his congregant/friend.

Emotional Intelligence

Although the pastor may make clear his knowledge of the Lord Jesus and preach his love, his promises, his forgiveness, comfort, strength, and hope, the laity may not perceive the pastor as one with whom they can communicate easily or comfortably.

Laity who are reluctant to seek spiritual care from their pastor can provide a recital of pastoral limitations that begins with, "I would talk with him, but he is just too . . ." The sentence may be completed with an array of descriptions and allegations, none of them flattering, many of them false. Perhaps the pastor is seen as humorless, non-responsive, or perhaps he is perceived to be too busy, too light-hearted, too young, or too old to be of help. Parishioners are drawn to pastors who exude energy, interest, optimism, integrity, humility, warmth, enthusiasm, and compassion. That shouldn't influence whether one seeks spiritual care—but it does.

A lay person's all-purpose dismissal is, of course, How could I possibly relate to him? What could he possibly know about . . . teenagers, middle-aged single women, toxic marriage, or alcoholism? It is easy to paint the portrait of a pastor ill-equipped to identify with, or to invite meaningful relationships with others. Some pastors are regarded as clearly out of touch with, and incapable of understanding, or responding to "real life."

A pastor's ability to connect with others effectively is mediated by his use of emotional competencies. Emotional intelligence (EQ) has become a professionally useful means of describing how well individuals understand themselves and others. There are four core elements comprising one's overall EQ. The four core areas of this non-cognitive ability include: the capacity to monitor one's own emotions and those of others and the ability to manage emotions in oneself and relationships. The poorer one's ability to understand the needs and feelings of oneself and others, the greater the difficulty one may have with effective communication. Managing one's feelings and responding appropriately to others is foundational to any meaningful relationship.¹⁶

Having administered over nine hundred EQ tests to LCMS pastors, I've discovered that many pastors have found the EQ concept invaluable in explaining some of the challenges, roadblocks, and disappointments they've encountered interpersonally in ministry. Happily, since EQ is a competency, personal competencies and social competencies can be taught and enhanced significantly for ongoing service in ministry.

Not surprisingly, communication competencies matter. Listening matters.

Maintaining a high regard for others' needs and emotions matters. Projecting genuine interest in others matters. A parishioner must be able to infer that his pastor genuinely cares about him and his family before seeking care from him.

Some pastors may not have a desire to cultivate meaningful relationships with their people.¹⁷ Barna reports that only 25% of pastors surveyed reported they are flourishing in their relationships. Barna explains that at least 75% of pastors may not desire or may be struggling to strengthen their relational practices.

Some pastors report that they're never quite certain how they can help, or they feel unprepared to take on the intensity of some personal and family situations that emerge in spiritual care. Some have been told that their faithful teaching and preaching have been received as "robotic" or impersonal. The pastor may appear "tone deaf" to the emotional realities underlying spiritual needs. A joyless invitation to the Lord's table or a monotone proclamation of the resurrection is an "emotional disconnect" for some laity. The comfort that was intended is not received. EQ invites pastors to examine how others perceive them. It is an encouragement to use their First Article gifts intentionally. Pastors might fruitfully reflect upon whether any of their EQ habits are getting in the way of inviting others to receive spiritual care.

Not surprisingly, pastors who may struggle with clinical depression, compassion fatigue, acedia, or significant domestic disruption are likely to find it most difficult to attend to and meet the spiritual care needs of their flock.¹⁸ Often, they have less cognitive and emotional energy to offer, and others may detect "pastor isn't feeling like himself these days" and choose not to trouble him by requesting a conversation. Advanced training in EQ is readily available online or in continuing education settings.

Towards Recovering the Individual Cure of Souls

Among some clergy, there has been a genuine desire to recover the practice of spiritual care conversations and the cure of souls. Harold Senkbeil¹⁹ has revisited the necessity of providing pastors with additional formation and training in the art of spiritual care and has received a warm reception among many Lutheran theologians as well as in broader Christian circles. Even laity have found that understanding the process, goals and biblical foundations for spiritual care increases their desire to talk with their pastors.

Continuing Education and Specialized Retreats

Seminaries and ongoing continuing education must equip pastors to teach, invite, and provide spiritual care for their flock. Seminaries may consider adding the competency of "pastoral conversation" to curriculum objectives or ensure that fieldwork provides case reflection or actual spiritual care conversations. Seminary formation allows the greatest opportunity to shape a man's understanding of, attitudes

about, and capacity to engage in soul-serving spiritual care conversations with the sheep and lambs. A seminarian would be well-served if he chose to receive spiritual care before he receives a call.

A seminarian would be well-served if he chose to receive spiritual care before he receives a call.

Continuing education offered by DOXOLOGY: The Lutheran Center

for Spiritual Care and Counsel is devoted explicitly to the spiritual refreshment of pastors in worship, meditation, and the mutual conversation and consolation of pastors. It remains dedicated to teaching the art of spiritual care (*cura animarum*). The opportunity to learn in the company of one's brothers, taught by seasoned *Seelsorgers*, is a gift of remarkable value that a pastor gives his congregation. A pastor's desire and ability to provide individual spiritual care for his congregation can also be influenced dramatically when he seeks a pastor with whom he can share the contents of his heart and conscience.

Teaching, Preaching, and Inviting the Flock to Receive Care

Occasionally, pastors have the opportunity and privilege to bring the grace, hope, and promises of God to one soul at a time. Through patient teaching, pastors normalize the request for spiritual care, correct misconceptions, ease fears, and highlight its blessings—while also inviting discussion about the many deterrents that may keep a soul from asking for help. Pastors prepare the laity for private conversations, explaining what to expect, with the reassurance that such care is rooted in grace and shaped by Scripture and the confessions. Gentle teaching prepares souls to request and to receive this care, yet in some parishes, this gift has been lost.

Choosing to recover this care in our parishes will allow the church to restore an embodied witness to the work of the Good Shepherd, who seeks the lost, binds up the wounded, and keeps vigil with all. Soul care is not a rare pastoral artifact, but something that is given, in Christ, through the hands and heart of one's pastor. Working to restore the practice of spiritual care conversations will be a blessing for the sheep and for the shepherd, who will also find fresh joy in his vocation of soul care.

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How Can Pastors Be Intelligent About Emotions?

Mark Rockenbach



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Program at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. His areas of expertise include pastoral care, Christian counseling, gender dysphoria, forgiveness and reconciliation, congregational conflict and congregational field research.

Daniel Williams graduated with academic honors from the seminary and received a fellowship at a prestigious university in Chicago. During his two-year fellowship he focused on the interdisciplinary study of historical religious contexts and their impact upon contemporary Jewish faith. He became an expert on the topic and was as a graduate instructor. Daniel

was living the dream, and he did not want it to end. But the university fellowship program did finish, and the seminary placement director assigned him to serve a congregation in Kansas with two hundred members.

The ordination and installation service went well and was attended by congregational members, family, and local clergy. His favorite seminary professor preached, and the people showed him great hospitality. Members of the church greeting him after the service with excitement. “Pastor Williams it is good to have you here.” “Pastor Williams if you need anything let us know.” “Pastor Williams you are an answer to our prayers.” “Pastor Williams welcome to our community.” While all of this was nice, Daniel could not stop thinking to himself “My intelligence is going to be wasted at this place.”

After a few months, the elders asked to meet with Pastor Williams. The pleasantness at his ordination and installation had soured. The elders were questioning his approach to ministry. They were concerned that he spent too much time in his office. Very few people in the community knew him. He only made shut-

in calls when the family requested a visit. The elders were not against making changes. However, they were never consulted when a change took place, and the members of the congregation got the impression that one hundred years of how they did church was wrong, according to Pastor Williams.

Pastor Williams impatiently listened to the ramblings of the elders. Yet, he could not stop thinking to himself “My intelligence is going to be wasted in this place.” He was depressed about leaving his work at the university, he was not satisfied with being in Kansas, and he felt that serving as a pastor was below him. His plan was to serve in the congregation for a couple of years and then get a job as a professor of theology.

The stress of listening to the elders complain was building within Daniel. Suddenly he stood up, cutting the elders off and said with great haste, “I am the pastor, and I will do ministry as I see fit. There is nothing more to discuss. This meeting is over!”

This story reflects the challenges of low emotional intelligence among some clergy. Emotional intelligence, also known as emotional quotient (EQ), has gained a lot of traction among scholars and contemporary society. A person with high emotional intelligence can do four things:

1. Be aware of their own emotions and behaviors (Self-Awareness).
2. Manage their own emotions and behaviors (Self-Management).
3. Be aware and understand the emotions and behaviors of others (Social-Awareness).
4. Be able to care for and/or lead people with empathy and effective communication (Relationship-Management).

	Recognition	Regulation
Self	<i>Self-Awareness</i> Being aware of your own emotions and behaviors.	<i>Self-Management</i> Managing your own emotions and behaviors.
Others	<i>Social-Awareness</i> Being aware and understanding the emotions and behaviors of others.	<i>Relationship Management</i> Being able to care for and/or lead people with empathy and effective communication.

The question this article will answer is, how can a pastor be intelligent about emotion- being self-aware and able to care and lead others in a life of faith with empathy and God's word?

Pastor Williams had a high intelligence quotient (IQ). He was a critical thinker who could logically think through any problem and provide detailed answers to theological questions. He was highly respected as a scholar and was awarded with stellar grades and a university fellowship for his abilities. He did exceptionally well with the American College Testing Program (ACT), Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) and Graduate Record Exam (GRE). These cognitive tests have been used for years to determine how successful a student might be in an academic setting. There was no question that Daniel was highly intelligent.

However, more than 80 percent of US universities no longer require the SAT or ACT, as part of the admission process.¹ The ability to logically think and make decisions (IQ) is important but it is not the full picture. Intelligence quotient only accounts for about 25 percent of the factors that contribute to being successful.² Which means 75 percent of factors that contribute to success does not include IQ. Successful people are logical (IQ), but they are also emotionally aware and able to manage emotion (EQ).

Self-Awareness

Self-awareness is the ability to be aware of your emotions and behaviors. Daniel felt that being a pastor was a waste of his intelligence. This was a common thought pattern that became a filter for how he interpreted himself and the world around him. When a person becomes fixated upon certain thoughts and continues to play those thoughts over and over in their mind it is called rumination.³ It was the cognitive looping that kept Daniel locked into a negative thought pattern. And Daniel was extremely good at doing this because he had high cognitive abilities (IQ). Yet, he was not able to understand how this rumination was having a negative impact upon his behavior toward others (EQ). In addition, Daniel struggled to think about the situation from any other perspective. He was internally focused on his disappointment about being in a non-scholarly context. Daniel lacked the skills to bring intelligence to his emotional rumination.

To understand how one brings intelligence to our emotions it is important to look at how the brain works. Everything you experience comes into the lower level of the brain. The lower level of the brain does not cognitively interpret anything. You see, hear, smell, taste, or touch something. These experiences enter your brain

The ability to logically think and make decisions (IQ) is important but it is not the full picture.

near the spinal cord and travel to your prefrontal cortex right behind your forehead. The journey from the brain stem to the prefrontal cortex travels through the limbic system. The limbic system was made popular by Paul MacLean, an American psychologist, who claimed that it was the limbic system that gave animals the ability to express emotion.⁴

But it is the prefrontal cortex that separates animals from humans. When the emotion of the experience reaches the prefrontal cortex, it is the prefrontal cortex that brings intelligence to the felt emotion.

At times, this process does not work because it is damaged. A textbook example is Phineas Gage. In 1848 Phineas was setting an explosive to clear a path for railroad construction. Something went wrong and the explosive ignited, and an iron rod went through Phineas' head passing through his prefrontal cortex. Before the accident Phineas was a well-mannered man. After the accident he became angry and ill-mannered.

We can't always change the events that are taking place around us, but we can have influence upon how we respond to them.

The prefrontal cortex is part of the executive functioning of the brain that brings intelligence to emotion. That part of the brain was damaged, and Phineas had a difficult time with his emotions. When a person has low EQ, it is possible that their brain has been damaged. In one of my counseling cases a wife brought her husband to me for care. The wife explained that he was always good to her and never

raised his voice or became angry. But for the last few months her husband was quick to be angry and did not seem to care about her feelings. I asked if her husband had hit his head recently. Initially she said no. But I investigated further and asked if he had hit his head on a cabinet, door frame, or if he had fallen down some stairs. She explained that he had fallen down the basement stairs when he missed a step. I recommend that they make an appointment with their medical doctor. The test results showed that her husband had damaged his prefrontal cortex.

The prefrontal cortex may not be damaged by an injury, but it could be underdeveloped. In most cases the prefrontal cortex is fully developed when a person has reached the average age of twenty-five.⁵ But for various reasons (hormones, heredity, environment, drug use) it is possible that some people may have an underdeveloped prefrontal cortex.

A major cause of death among teenagers is correlated to their underdeveloped prefrontal cortex. This is the reason there is an age of consent and laws about when a person can vote, drink, and drive. A well-developed prefrontal cortex can make

emotional intelligent decisions. For example, you are at a family gathering and a relative calls you names and insults you. This emotional experience is received by your lower brain stem which wants to react by slugging the family member in the face. However, a person with high EQ will not react with pure emotion. A person with high EQ will pause and allow the brain to run the emotion through the prefrontal cortex. A person with a well-developed prefrontal cortex and high EQ will not react by slugging the relative in the face. When intelligence is brought to the emotion the person being insulted will respond rather than react. We can't always change the events that are taking place around us, but we can have influence upon how we respond to them.

Pastor Williams had no brain injury. It did not appear that Pastor Williams's brain was underdeveloped. It might be appropriate to say that his prefrontal cortex was overdeveloped. Daniel processed experiences cognitively without giving any consideration to emotion. There are many factors that can contribute to cognitive overdevelopment. For example, our previous experiences and memories impact how we emotional and cognitively think about a situation. According to Curt Thompson, 80 percent of emotional conflict in a marriage is a result of events that took place before the couple knew each other.⁶ If that is true of marriage it might also be true of other relationships.

Pastor Williams grew up in a family that shamed anyone for being emotional. Only cognitive abilities were rewarded. Daniel remembered his father telling him that only weak people showed emotion. His academic schooling reinforced this idea that there was no place for emotion in scholarship. This concept, that emotion was bad, was branded into his thinking and played on a continued loop within his head.

In addition, this idea was enabled by fellow scholars he became friends with while at the seminary and university. Daniel had contacted some of his friends and told them about the meeting with elders. With anger he repeated to them many times, "My intelligence is going to be wasted at this place." His friends agreed with him. They told Daniel not to listen to his elders because they have no theological training. With the encouragement of his friends, Daniel preached and taught on various theological topics so that his congregation would have the right understanding of church doctrine.

While Daniel's friends meant well (remember Job's friends) they were not providing wisdom that would increase his emotional intelligence. Daniel needed to increase his emotional intelligence through a cognitive-emotional approach. This approach acknowledges that emotions are not merely primal (limbic system) but that with assistance a counselor or seelsorger can bring intelligence to his emotions.

Pastor Andrew Richardson heard rumors in the community about the situation with Pastor Williams. Andrew enjoyed the theological depth that Daniel brought to previous conversations and was concerned about the rumors. Daniel was delighted

when Andrew stopped by the church for a visit. Andrew listened to Daniel with compassionate active listening then provided guidance to help him understand how a lack of emotional intelligence was negatively impacting his ability to shepherd the church. Andrew reflected the emotion of anger that Daniel was feeling. It seemed that Daniel was disappointed that he could not use his scholarly skills to be a professor, and he felt the congregation did not appreciate his theological intellect.

Self-Management

Self-management assumes that you have good self-awareness. Pastor Williams was blessed to have a fellow pastor assist him in being more self-aware. Daniel could now see how his emotions were reactive because he had failed to bring intelligence to them. He blew up at the elders because he felt they did not respect him. Andrew suggested that if he feels this anger building up, he should pause the conversation but not end it. Daniel could say something like ‘I appreciate you bringing this to my attention. Would you be willing to give me a week to process this and then we can meet again.’ Daniel needed to learn how to create space for him to think through the emotions he was feeling about the situation. This space sets the stage for Daniel to respond to the situation rather than react.

A person with high self-management will be motivated to do things differently. Daniel was motivated to try a different approach. Logically what Andrew suggested made sense. But emotionally he was still wrestling with anger and disappointment. Andrew suggested one more thing that might help Daniel when his emotions start escalating. He encouraged Daniel to write down his thoughts and emotions. This approach would help Daniel to get the thoughts and emotions outside of his head so that he can engage them from a different perspective.

Why do some people struggle with being motivated to manage their emotions differently? Research conducted by Walter Mischel in the 1960s could help provide some insight. Mischel was a psychologist who studied preschool aged children at a preschool on the Stanford University campus. In the study the children were sat at a table with a marshmallow. It was explained to the children that the adult would be leaving the room. When the adult was outside of the room the child could eat the marshmallow, or they could wait until the adult returned. If the child did not eat the marshmallow while the adult was gone, the child would get another marshmallow. Mischel’s research tested a child’s ability to delay gratification. Some of the children were able to wait while others were not. Those children that were able to wait were evaluated when they were adolescents. Those who resisted the temptation to eat the marshmallow had higher emotional intelligence as an adolescent than those children who could not resist the temptation to eat the marshmallow. This indicates that the ability to delay gratification as a child increases EQ in adults.

A child that can delay gratification is motivated to do so. They can play the long

game. They don't get emotionally rattled in the moment but can bring intellect to the emotion. The emotion says eat the marshmallow, but emotionally intelligent people can delay the emotional fixation on the marshmallow and manage the emotion in a way that provides a response rather than a reaction to the situation.

Daniel does have emotions. However, he struggles to understand his emotions and manage them. Daniel gets angry very quickly when others challenge him or don't agree with him, and he becomes instantly disappointed when he does not get what he wants. Daniel is like the child sitting in front of the marshmallow. He wants instant gratification. He wants his desires fulfilled right now. When those desires are not met, he emotionally explodes. It is difficult for Daniel to delay gratification. Instead of patiently waiting for the Lord to call him into the vocation of being a professor, he is emotionally distraught. Daniel is fixated on the marshmallow that he has been told he can't have. This fixation blinded him to the people who were eager to have him be their pastor.

Daniel shared his feeling of anger with one of his scholarly friends studying theological psychology. His friend encouraged him to read about catharsis theory. The theory says you should release anger by being angry. The creation of rage rooms is based upon catharsis theory. These rooms are set up with various objects such as TVs, furniture, dishes, etc. You enter the room with a baseball bat, sledgehammer, axe, or crowbar and smash all the items in the room. The idea is that by releasing all your anger on these objects you will be less angry.

Daniel found a rage room in a near-by city and paid for a twenty-minute session. The rage room experience was gratifying. For twenty-minutes he smashed old TVs, couches, and chairs. However, when he returned to reality, all the negative emotions including anger returned.

The rage room is an example of how people behave when you don't bring intelligence to emotion. When you use aggression to deal with your anger it only reinforces the anger and makes you more aggressive. Ruminating on your anger fans the flame of that anger.

A month after the rage room experience, Daniel stopped by Andrew's office for more conversation. Daniel told Andrew all about going to the rage room and how good it made him feel. It was catharsis to imagine that the TV was one of his elders as he smashed it with a hammer. However, as he was driving back to the church all that anger returned with vengeance. He began to think of ways he could replace the elders or simply remove the office of elder from the church governance.

Andrew compassionately listened to Daniel and then asked him if he thought those feelings of anger were sinful. Daniel paused for a long time. Andrew's question was bringing intelligence to his emotions. The rage room only encouraged an expression of primal emotion. But Andrew wanted to help Daniel bring faith intelligence to his emotions.

When faith intelligence is brought to our emotions, we can live out our lives according to God's word. Faith intelligence is trusting in the word of God knowing he created us, redeemed us, and sanctified us. We are reminded in 2 Timothy 3:16–17 “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.” God's word gives us all that is needed to believe and live out a Christian life. If God's word is vacant there is no hope, peace, and joy. The blessing of God's word is that it “fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy spirit you may abound in hope” (Rom 15:13). Jesus said, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid” (Jn 14:27). Jesus continues in John “I have said these things to you that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world” (Jn 16:33).

Relying only on your intellect or emotions is tempting. We tell ourselves that we can do this without God. But as Jesus reminds us, the world cannot give as he gives to us (Jn 14:27). Faith intelligence is trusting in God to help us interpret what is going on and providing a godly response.

Consider the story of King David who spent the night with Bathsheba, who was not his wife, and she became pregnant. Relying only on his own intellect and emotions, he reacted by manipulating the situation, so it looked like the child belonged to Uriah, her husband. When that plan failed, he arranged for Uriah to be killed in battle (2 Sm 11). The Lord sent the prophet Nathan to bring faith intelligence to the situation. Nathan showed compassion and empathy in his approach as he told King David a story. Nathan told David that there was a rich man who had many sheep and cattle. There was also a poor man who only had one little lamb that he raised from birth. The little lamb was like a child to the poor man. On one occasion the rich man had a visitor that was hungry after his long journey. The rich man did not take one of his own sheep to feed his guest. Instead, the rich man took the only lamb of the poor man and killed it and prepared it for the traveler (2 Sm 12).

King David emotionally responded with burning anger, and he said to Nathan “As the Lord lives, the man who has done this deserves to die, and he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity” (2 Sm 12:5–6).

“Nathan said to David, “You are the man!”

“Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, I anointed you king over Israel, and I delivered you out of the hand of Saul. And I gave you your master's house and your master's wives into your arms and gave you the house of Israel and of Judah. And if this were too little, I would add to you as much more. Why have you despised the word of the Lord, to do what is evil in his sight (2 Sm 12:7–9)?

David's faith intelligence was lacking. He trusted in himself rather than trusting in God. David despised the word of God and indulge in his own intellect and emotions. But God did not abandon David. Nathan arrived with God's word that called David to account. And King David responded, "I have sinned against the Lord." Nathan declared holy absolution, "The Lord also has put away your sin: you shall not die" (2 Sm 12:13).

Faith intelligence looks to God's word for wisdom and direction in how we should live out our lives. And when we have become lost in our own intelligence and emotions, we need someone like Nathan to rebuke us, forgive us, and guide us. Andrew had become a Nathan to Daniel.

Andrew asked Daniel if he would be willing to read a bible passage that addresses anger. Andrew had Daniel read aloud James 1:19–20, "Know this, my beloved brothers; let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God."

Andrew asked, "Daniel, what do these verses say about anger?" Daniel was silent as he looked down at the verses. Andrew was helping him to bring faith intelligence to his anger.

Forgiveness is rooted in the word and promises of God.

Daniel spoke "These verses are difficult to read. Apparently, I am not a righteousness man because of my anger."

Andrew asked, "So what are you going to do about it?"

Daniel replied, "I don't know."

Andrew suggested "Would you like to participate in the rite of Individual Confession and Absolution?"

Daniel had never personally experienced confessing his own sins and having a pastor proclaim forgiveness. Personal forgiveness was never modeled for Daniel. Therefore, it was difficult for him to imagine what it feels like to be forgiven.

Daniel only knew what it felt like to defend his intellectualization of forgiveness. He was hesitant to try something he never experienced before. Yet, he trusted Andrew and agreed to participate in the rite of Confession and Absolution.

Daniel confessed his sin of anger and his sin of not being content with what God had given him. Pastor Richardson placed his hand on Daniel's head and proclaimed that "in the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ, I forgive your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Daniel, go in peace."

Forgiveness is not rooted in our emotions. Forgiveness is rooted in the word and promises of God that were fulfilled by the shedding of Christ's blood on the cross. "Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins" (Heb 9:22). The forgiveness of sins is a gift from God, "For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 6:23). This gift of forgiveness is

for sinners, “God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8).

Any contrite sinner who has sat in the pit of despair because of their sins, will tell you that there is an emotion of joy, peace, and comfort when the pastor declares that your sins are forgiven. The emotion is a response of gratitude for what God has done for us.

For the first time in his life, Daniel felt those emotions as Pastor Richardson placed his hand on his head and spoke the words of absolution.

Social-Awareness

Social awareness is the ability to look beyond yourself and be aware of the emotions and behaviors of others. Everyone you meet has a story to tell about their lived experience. Some are more willing to share that story than others, but everyone has a lived experience. Their lived experience is shaped by their perspective.

The perspective of a person who was raised on a farm is quite different from the person who grew up in a city. The perspective of a person who was raised in the church is different from the person who was not raised in the church. The perspective of a person who lived in Texas is different from the person who lived in Chicago. And these lived experiences shape and form how we think and emotional connect with the world around us. Being aware of the perspective of those around us is important.

Pastor Richardson and Daniel were meeting regularly. Daniel felt comfortable with Andrew and appreciated his gospel approach to ministry. Daniel was doing better at brining faith intelligence to his emotions and relying upon the forgiveness of God. However, it seemed that he continued to misunderstand the emotions of others.

For example, Daniel wanted to update the Sunday school curriculum. He arranged a meeting with all the teachers and was excited about making the Sunday school program more theological. During the meeting Pastor Williams presented the curriculum that he had decided would be taught. But he was surprised by the lack of enthusiasm of the group and astounded when half of them resigned from teaching Sunday school. He assumed that the teachers misunderstood the reason for the switch in curriculum, he sent out an email that detailed the theological benefit of the new program.

Pastor Richardson compassionately listened and asked if he had talked with any of the Sunday school teachers. Daniel said that he gave them an opportunity to talk during the meeting, but they sat there saying nothing. Daniel got the impression that they agreed with him and were willing to use the new curriculum.

Pastor Richardson explained that many times our assumptions are not a fair reading of others. It is not possible to know how people feel or think about a situation unless they communicate with us. Pastor Richardson suggested that Daniel reach out to a few of the Sunday School teachers and ask for their expert opinion about the Sunday school situation. Daniel could say, “Would you be willing to help me

understand how I contributed to the issue?” In addition, Daniel would need to use compassionate active listening. Pastor Richardson reflected that he has observed Daniel trying to fix things or give advice to others without giving the other person an opportunity to talk about their lived experience.

Pastor Richardson gave Daniel a handout he refers to when listening to others. He highlighted a few of the phrases that would be useful in conversation:

- Tell me about...
- From your perspective...
- What is your opinion about...
- Can you give me an example...
- Let me see if I understand what you are saying...
- What do you think should happen next...

Daniel found it difficult to listen to others without trying to solve the problem. But this experience taught him the importance of engaging with others and better understanding the situation from their perspective. The ability to understand the lived experience of others from their perspective and feeling compassion for them is called *empathy*.⁷ Daniel was learning how to bring intelligence to the emotions of others by being aware of their perspective and lived experience. As Daniel listened to the Sunday school teachers talk about their feelings and thoughts, he was empathetically validating their experience.

Showing empathy includes both cognitive and emotional components when listening to another person's perspective.⁸ A key component of empathy is *empathic concern*, this is when you are genuinely interested in another person's feelings.⁹ The Sunday school teachers experienced *empathic concern* from Pastor Williams and were more willing to collaborate with him.

Relationship-Management

Self-awareness, Self-management, and Social-awareness are building blocks upon which Relationship-management sits. Relationship-management is the ability to care for and/or lead people with empathy and effective communication. Daniel was well on his way to being empathic by compassionately listening to the lived experience and perspective of his people. Now he needed to consider how he was going to communicate that empathy as their pastor.

Andrew and Daniel had become great colleagues and friends through their many conversations. Daniel was feeling more confident about his ability to bring intelligence to his emotions. Yet, he felt as if the elders were keeping their distance from him. Pastor Richardson reflected to him that the elders were probably ruminating about the angry outburst from Daniel during the elder meetings.

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Pastor Richardson asked Daniel “Do you remember when I asked you to read that passage from James about anger? I want you to read it again.” Daniel opened his bible and read the passage. “Know this, my beloved brothers; let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God” (Jas

1:19–20). Pastor Richardson asked, “Do you think you have been quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to get angry with the elders?” Daniel knew the answer and quickly responded, “No.” Pastor Richardson suggested that it would be wise for Daniel to confess this sin of anger to his elders and ask them to forgive him. Pastor Richardson was bringing faith intelligence to the angry outbursts that Daniel displayed in front of his elders.

There are several styles of leadership: transactional leadership, task leadership and transformational leadership.¹⁰ Daniel was initially a task leader. He created a list of things that needed to be accomplished, and he would check off each item as they were completed. A transactional leader gets things done by negotiating a quid pro quo arrangement with his people. It might look like this; Pastor Williams agrees to switch back to the old Sunday school curriculum if the Sunday school teachers who resigned agree to return. There might be a place for task and transactional leaders. However, it is best for pastors to pursue transformational leadership. A transformational leader focuses on being self-aware and able to care and lead others in a life of faith with empathy and God’s word.

Pastor Williams met with his elders and confessed to them that he had not treated them well. He specifically confessed that he sinned against them when he allowed his angry emotions to spew all over them. He told them he was sorry and that he would hope that they would forgive him.

What Pastor Williams did with his elders is the fruits of being a transformational leader. In theological terms I would describe this as a pastor who is above reproach (1 Tm 3:2, Ti 1:6–7). A pastor who is above reproach is a man who lives his life according to God’s word and promises and is willing to confess sin and receive the gift of forgiveness through Jesus Christ. The elders were willing to forgive their pastor and some of them even confessed their own sins.

A transformational leader who is above reproach models for his people a life of faith according to God’s word. Initially Pastor Williams operated more like a task leader who was not self or other aware and struggled to be a shepherd to his flock. But with the care of Pastor Andrew, and the patience of his congregation Pastor Williams was able to bring faith intelligence to his emotions.

Conclusion

Both cognitive and emotion are important for faithful service as a pastor. Seminaries should attend to both when shaping and forming pastors for ministry. Ecclesiastical supervisors and congregations should continue to encourage the development of both cognitive and emotional aspects of being in the office of the ministry. When cognition and emotion are separated from each other it is like separating a turtle from its shell. Cognition and emotion complement each other. Highlighting one over the other makes being a pastor more difficult. An overly cognitive pastor knows all the right answers but struggles to connection emotionally with his people. An overly emotional pastor connects with his people but may have weak theology. When faith intelligence is brought to our emotions, the pastor is self-aware and able to care and lead the church in a life of faith with empathy and God's word.

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The Soul Care of Pastors with Depression

Stephen Pietsch



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Martin Luther's Letters to the Depressed and their Significance for Pastoral Care Today. He is working on a monograph focusing on Luther's general approach to pastoral care for those experiencing distress or suffering.

We have all been there. You are driving along, everything is fine, and then you hit a patch of black ice. You literally could not see it coming. One moment you have a destination, passengers, and a means to get there. All is predictable and stable, and you are in charge, or so you think. Then the next moment the car is going in circles, and you do not know whether you will live or die. In

a split second (which feels like you are watching it in slow motion), the bewildered questions begin to form in your mind. At what point did things start sliding? What should I have done differently? Why didn't I see the signs of it all ahead? The adrenaline is pumping, your "fight or flight" response does not know which way to go, and all you can do is hold on, hope for the best, and see where the whole thing ends. Perhaps the most jarring sensation is a profound loss of control. You are no longer making choices. They are being made for you, and it is not a good experience.

This is a pretty good description of what it is like as a pastor who suffers from some life altering mental illness. As pastors, we are expected to be above the problems of everyday life. We may have come to believe that ourselves. Unreasonable maybe, but true. People do not want their pastor to have problems, and when he does, oftentimes the congregation does not know what to do or how to handle it. Not him too, of all people! Is he broken? Is he dangerous? Can we still trust him?

Depression has been with us in this world and in the church for millennia.

These same questions and thoughts pass through the pastor's own mind too, as "the cars spins" that is, as he strives to get some kind of grip on what is going on inside him and what it means. Most of the time however, these

efforts fail to gain traction as the mind and emotions start to turn in circles.

As time passes the struggle changes and morphs into other sensations: exhaustion, confusion, hopelessness, self-recrimination. And where is God? Well, that is the question.

This article explores, first, the basic spiritual dynamics which are in play with pastors going through depression, and then, some essential points on how the counsel and comfort of Christ may address them in their suffering.

These observations and reflections are drawn from twenty years of walking with depressed pastors, and from the author's pastoral-theological research. It is not offered as an exhaustive or definitive survey.¹ I hope, nevertheless, that it may speak to the lived experience of pastors who have known depression or are, even as they read, in the midst of their battle with that illness.

Another Age of Melancholy

The rate of depression among pastors in the United States is high. According to the Duke Global Health Institute, clergy are more likely to suffer from depression than the rest of the US population.² In 2019 studies showed that in the LCMS 24 percent of church workers had been diagnosed with either anxiety or depression.³ Broader studies show that the figures are much higher among clergy in the United States generally.⁴ If you look around at the ranks of your own friends and colleagues, you may well have seen this for yourself. Overwork, compassion fatigue, congregational decline, high levels of scrutiny, false expectations of visible ministry success (from self or from members) sometimes play a part in pastors encountering mental health troubles.⁵

It is not just the sphere of human causality at work here. There are the more identifiable spiritual evils at play too, not least the devil's insidious attacks, using all the human weaknesses and delusions we pastors suffer from, as Luther says, to "cause a fire or a flood" in our lives and ministries.

With rates of depression so high, it might be tempting to think this is some kind of new plague that twenty-first-century clergy are battling as they face tough times for the church, high pressure, fast lifestyle, high stress, and so on. But this is not new. It has been going on for centuries. Depression has been with us in this world and in the church for millennia.

Our era of escalating mental illness is not unique. The church's history has known

many other times of reversal, decline, and difficulty, times when the underpinning foundations of Christian civilisation have been shaking. Such times have historically been accompanied by mental health crises, in which depression especially has come to the fore. Over the centuries, the illness has afflicted many pastors, not to mention great church and Christian leaders—Luther, Kierkegaard, Spurgeon, Lewis, Walther, Gerhard, Wyneken, Bonhoeffer, Mother Teresa, to name just a few.

The Renaissance and Reformation in Europe were nicknamed the “age of melancholy” by historians because of the explosion of mental illness in that period. The nineteenth century was also a time of great flux and turmoil for Lutherans, during which depressive illness was quite common, also among pastors and church leaders. In the early history of the LCMS, for example, depression played a significant part in the life of C. F. W. Walther, who suffered his first major depressive episode in the wake of the desperate spiritual crisis of 1838–1839 among the Saxon Lutheran immigrants to Missouri.

Not that depression’s prevalence in history should downplay its destructive effects. Depression is horrible, even in its milder forms. It is a form of suffering that is often persistent and long-lasting. It has its own particular complications and agonies for those who are ministers of the gospel, who are called to lead others into the joy and hope of salvation and the sanctified life. Its nature and experiences are directly and starkly opposed to the pastor’s calling and life. These two battling forces (hope and despair) rend a pastor’s soul, as he hears the call to be faithful in proclaiming the good news of Christ and at the same time feels the deadly undertow of his own inertia and despondency. Pastors suffering with depression need compassion, understanding, love and support, both from those charged with their spiritual care, and their brothers and sisters in faith generally.

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Understanding the Malady

Depression’s “Disagreeing Likeness”

Talking to pastors who have struggled with depression, I have often been faced with indignant comments like: “It was not that way for me” or “my depression was not as you describe it.” I am reminded of a strikingly insightful comment about the illness made by the seventeenth-century writer Robert Burton in his massive survey, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*:

The power of Babel never yielded such confusion of tongues as the chaos of melancholy doth variety of symptoms. There is in

all melancholy *similitudo dissimilis*, like men's faces, a disagreeing likeness still; and as in a river we swim in the same place yet not with the same numerical waters.⁶

Every face is "the same": it has two eyes, a nose and a mouth, but every face is also unique. So it is with depression. While there is a reliable list of common features case to case, at least observationally speaking, at the personal level, depression is a notoriously "changeling" illness. Peoples' experience of it is sometimes marked not only by differences, but by paradoxes and apparent contradictions. Different aspects of depression predominate for different people and often shift as the illness progresses. For example, many pastors with depression experience comprehensive exhaustion and the strong impulse to pull back from *engaging with people* as their main struggles. Others report as their main symptom feelings of *spiritual failure, self-loathing, and*

worthlessness. Still others talk about *losing their energy and motivation for ministry* utterly and struggling to go on. Sometimes pastors say they have lost their pastoral heart; they feel spiritually numb, or dissociative, like they are not in themselves but somehow watching from outside, or like they are robots moving from one ministry task to another with little real personal involvement.

Wisdom from earlier ages shows us clearly that in, with, and under the clinically identified illness is the spiritual malady of depression.

However, despite the "same or similar features of depression's face"

in all cases, the experience of each sufferer is unique. It is very important to note this reality as we interact with people who are experiencing depression, lest we falsely assume that one person's experience is the same as another's. One must not just learn about the illness the person has but *learn the person* himself. Depressed pastors, although they may be fighting the same illness as their brothers, do not all display the same signs or feel the same emotions. When we engage with them, seeking to understand something of their pain in order to walk with them empathetically, we need to *listen deeply* in order to *learn their journey*.⁷

Spiritual & Psychological

In our highly medicalised culture, depression is chiefly seen and treated as an *illness*. Medical professionals have a well-developed set of signs and markers that tell them they are dealing with major clinical depression.⁸ There is a diagnosis and often medication, possibly psychological therapy, and/or psychiatric treatment too. All this is very important and appropriate, and we need to receive these first article curative

gifts with thanks and gratitude. But wisdom from earlier ages shows us clearly that in, with, and under the clinically identified illness is the *spiritual malady* of depression.⁹

Yet it is precisely this interconnectedness which causes problems. Is it physiological or psychological? Is this a spiritual problem or a medical one? Do I go to my family doctor, a counsellor, or my pastor? *What* after all, is going on here? The sad reality is that very often, pastors delay getting help because they do not know what help they actually need. I would also observe that pastors are influenced in how and from whom they seek help by the stigma and shame attached to depression in the church. Does he want his colleagues (or his district president) to know? If his illness is being kept under wraps in the church, from whom could he, or would he, seek this essential spiritual care?

This spiritual dimension is so important. Sometimes there is a heightened *spiritual awareness* together with heightened *spiritual resistance*. Depression is, as we noted, often marked by baffling contradictions and paradoxes: feelings of spiritual need and longing but also apathy or difficulty and even disgust at reading and receiving God's word, difficulty praying and participating in worship. The brothers may feel and express great need of others' comfort and help yet feel the overwhelming wish to be left alone.

Denial and Bravado Covering Weakness and Shame

The lie that pastors should be able to deal with anything is sometime believed, not just by parishioners, but by pastors themselves. They too can be misinformed and misguided and even be proud and deluded. They can be tempted to displays of bravado, showing that they are able to meet the expectations of their parishioners, that *they can handle* whatever challenges may come along. They may believe on some level that the office has given them a "bullet-proof coating" that protects them from all problems or that if they "fake it" long enough, they will eventually "make it" and come through unscathed after all.

This has often led to pastors pushing themselves headlong into overwork and burnout leading to depression, then on into the stolid denial that there is a problem before they at last find themselves struggling with severe depressive symptoms and their ministry in severe trouble.

Given the growing prevalence of depression and anxiety in western societies, this mindset of denial is surprisingly persistent, and sometimes continues even after recovery. A few years ago, I had a short conversation with a pastor I knew who was in the middle of suffering severe depression. He was unrecognisable. The ebullient and confident personality I had previously known was gone. In its place was a silent, thin, fearful man who was barely able to relate, except to voice his despair and shame. Some months later, a mutual colleague told me that he had recovered well and was back in active ministry. I bumped into him soon after this at a district event and said "Great

to see you so well. Welcome back!” This was greeted with an expression of irritated embarrassment. He said “Yes, well it was only that I was overtired and needed a break. That’s all it was.” It became obvious that the experience had taught this brother little. He anticipated that he would simply pick up where he left off and keep going as he had before, as if he had been away somewhere on holiday and was now returning. I have seen two other similar situations with pastors, where recovery from depressive illness was followed by embarrassed denial. It is quite understandable. There is stigma, shame, guilt, and distrust attached to mental illness in our society, especially in the church. As one pastor asked in conversation with me “Can a pastor who has ‘lost his mind’ or had a ‘nervous breakdown’ ever be trusted, or trust *himself* again?”

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Perhaps this shows that we need to be far more proactive and committed to preparing pastors for the realities of mental illness, though this is difficult. The experience of depression is unimaginable to those who know nothing of it. It is very difficult for those who feel well and strong to conceive of the possibility that one’s mental strength, confidence and abilities

can be reduced to rubble by an illness that one cannot see “on the outside” or even describe in clear terms.

On the other hand, one wonders how this may change as the young pastors now graduating in their twenties and thirties move into ministry. Their generation (Gen Z) have grown up with a far greater incidence of mental illness in childhood and adolescence.

The Assault on the Pastor’s Conscience in Depression

In his own writing about depression, his own and others’, Luther often quoted the old monastic saying, “a melancholy head is the devil’s bath.” The weakened and vulnerable soul is prey to the devil’s attacks: negative, hopeless thoughts and feelings—his “flaming darts” (Eph 6), as Luther frequently called them, fired at the heart and crucially, at the conscience.

The conscience understood biblically is much more than our “organ for knowing right and wrong.” It is the spiritual switching yard of the whole human soul, which enables us to receive and respond to spiritual reality. It operates in some ways as our “spiritual windshield.” When the windshield on our car is dirty, the world outside our car is obscured and we have at best a partial and impaired understanding of what is really happening on the road in front of us as we drive. When the conscience is polluted, by the build-up of sin, evil, and suffering in the world, our spiritual windshield is dirty. We see spiritual reality through “a glass dimly.” There is a loss of

transparency. Our vision is distorted. Our relationships, both with God and others, are impaired. We make spiritual and pastoral judgements and responses from a wounded or corrupted conscience, which does see spiritual reality properly, but shows us a darkened and misshapen image of it.

We do not clearly see our own sin or the sins of others as they are before God. Nor do we see the light of God's grace shining through that opaque lens. We are, partially at least, spiritually *unsighted*.

As Paul warns Timothy, the lack of a pure conscience impacts on a pastor's ministry. His windscreen needs to be clean in order to face the people and tasks of ministry that demand a "pure conscience." He writes,

The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith. Certain persons, by swerving from these, have wandered away into vain discussion, desiring to be teachers of the law, without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make confident assertions.
(1 Tm 1:5–8)

A good conscience, together with a pure heart and sincere faith are needed so that the pastor operates from love and with clear vision of spiritual truth. In 1 Timothy 3:9 Paul also says that a pastor needs to "hold to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience" that is, have a clear windshield through which to see the mystery of the gospel of Christ (3:16) which gives us the forgiveness of sins and the promise of life. Seeing it clearly, he can serve as faithful steward of Christ's mysteries. When we can see them clearly, we can proclaim and teach them clearly to those we serve. When the pastor's conscience is distorted, his hearing of God's word is also distorted, and his application of it to the lives of others may well also be distorted. In such a situation neither the law nor the gospel can be seen clearly, either in the pastor's own life or in the lives of others.

Obscured or distorted by the darkness of depression, the conscience can be impaired in several different but associated guises.

- Confused - the pastor becomes disoriented and unable to make sound spiritual decisions and judgements.
- Punitive - the pastor is overwhelmed with scrupulosity, guilt (real or imagined) and shame over his own sinfulness or failures.
- Fugitive - the pastor flees from his conscience and tries to hide his illness and his struggle to cope with it.

When the pastor's conscience is distorted, his hearing of God's word is also distorted.

- Indignant - the pastor's depression causes him to be angry and resentful, blaming himself, God and/or others as the cause of his depression, and his sworn enemies.

The Fugitive Conscience—A Brief Case Study

A pastor struggling with depression has a fearful conscience because he is using alcohol to self-medicate and help himself cope and is afraid of this being exposed. While he is not drinking in an uncontrolled or excessive way or necessarily showing signs of alcohol addiction, he is drinking more than is healthy. While he has not stopped to reflect deeply on this, he knows this is sinful and harmful and his conscience is touched by it; he feels guilty and ashamed about it. He instinctively feels he needs to hide his overuse of alcohol. He refuses to admit it to himself or to God, and of course must hide it from his parishioners, lest this important coping tool causes him to be judged and condemned by God and others, especially from those to whom he is supposed to be an example (1 Tm 3:3). His uneasy conscience affects his confidence in his pastoral relationships, diminishing his freedom and transparency in his interpersonal interactions. He becomes highly sensitive to comments and/or perceived criticism from others which might point to or hint at his alcohol overuse. His conscience is fearful of being exposed and shamed. This causes him to avoid the issue of alcohol and addiction in his pastoral work, to avoid certain people whose conversation, pastoral needs and so on make him nervous, and to hide ever more carefully his alcohol use from others by drinking secretly.

Very common with pastors suffering depression is a *punitive* conscience, which is plunged into guilt, shame, and self-accusation.¹⁰ An example of this is shown in Luther's letter to his old friend, George Spalatin in 1545. Spalatin had made a pastoral mistake in giving marriage advice which had quite significant consequences. Realizing his error triggered a deep depression in which he condemned himself utterly and went into a major decline in which he abandoned his ministry altogether. Luther appeals to his old friend "It is quite enough that you have sinned. Now, let go of it; don't let your despondency lead you into an even greater mistake."¹¹

Most of the time God protects us from knowing the worst of our own sinful nature and the damage it does,¹² however in depression, the conscience may gain a glimpse into the deeper recesses of its own sinful morbidity. The conscience may be deeply shocked by it and become punitive and accusing. The conscience assaulted in this way can close itself off completely in a spiral of despair, as was sadly the case with Spalatin, whose depression was finally fatal, despite Luther's consolatory appeals.

The Punitive Conscience—A Brief Case Study

A pastor is struggling with moderate-severe depression and is receiving treatment for this illness. One of the most difficult experiences associated with his depression is that

his conscience is assaulted by a deep, unremittingly punitive sense of guilt, spiritual self-loathing, and worthlessness. He feels that he is no longer a real Christian since he has continued to turn his back on God's commands and has failed repeatedly in his faith—in his devotional life, care for his family and others, and in many other ways. He sees and hears his own failure in all conversations with others, even as they try to comfort and encourage him. His own members have mostly now given up trying to offer him any help, because whatever they say seems to deepen his self-judgement. His conscience tells him that his ministry has been and is now just a sham, a hypocritical pretence, and that he is utterly unworthy and unable to go on. His therapist has told him that this feeling is part of the illness itself, but he knows in his heart that he is a great sinner and that he is under God's just judgement. He seems unable and unwilling to receive any assurance of God's forgiveness, grace, or mercy for himself, even though he does not deny the gospel per se.

Comfort for Pastors with Depression

Very often people urgently want to know *what they should do* when they help a depressed pastor. This is commendable, and there are of course some important concrete and hands-on things one should actively attend to.¹³ But what is just as important, especially for those giving *soul care*, is to pay attention to what God has already done and is doing with the person, and how *his Word and gifts* address their situation.

Pastors: Starving Cooks

Many pastors are “starving cooks.” Like chefs in a restaurant, they spend all their time cooking and serving food for others. They become so habituated to this work through its unrelenting familiarity that they lose their own appetite, even though they are themselves dying of hunger.

The pastor's heart and conscience need to be fed and nourished as a matter of priority, so that he can feed others. It has always struck me that the church's liturgical tradition for the distribution of the sacrament is that the presider at the Lord's table, together with others who are distributing Christ's body and blood, *eat first*, so that they can then serve others. What is enacted here ritually points us to the right ordering of the pastor's life and ministry more generally. He needs to *be served* with the gospel so that he can serve others.¹⁴ Or to return to an image used earlier, his conscience, like the windshield of a car, needs cleaning so he can clearly see his Lord Jesus Christ and those whom he is serving in Christ's name.

Confession and Absolution

Being depressed in itself is not a sin. However, depression brings its own real temptations and sins which need to be recognized, repented, confessed, and forgiven. Pastors frequently make significant mistakes in their lives and ministries as they battle

depression. They may, for example, have a confused conscience which leads them into bad pastoral judgement and false practice, or a fugitive conscience which leads into addictive or abusive behaviour, or an indignant conscience which makes them angry or resentful with others, especially those they serve in ministry.

Pastors frequently also struggle with false and misleading feelings of guilt and shame. When depression becomes severe, this falsely punitive conscience is a common symptom. When depression enters this severe stage it can induce psychosis, in which a pastor begins to see his whole life and ministry as nothing but unredeemed sin and failure, as he starts to spiral into depressive despair.

These wounds of conscience require the ministry of a Seelsorger—a carer for souls. The depressed pastor needs a minister of law and gospel to shepherd him, a confessor to help him discern and know his own heart and conscience clearly, to diagnose real and false guilt, so that he can speak personally and powerfully to him the forgiveness of sins, absolving him from his guilt and releasing him from shame.¹⁵

Dr. Todd Peperkorn, author of *I Trust When Dark My Road: A Lutheran View of Depression*, reflects,

In my own struggles with depression and anxiety, having a pastor not only kept me alive, but freed me to try to make sense of how all of these different things worked together. My pastor brought me Jesus, and even though the words of absolution took a long time to sink in, his holy persistence in delivering the Gospel to me was a key element in my own healing. In the words of one of my own spiritual fathers, Harold L. Senkbeil, “Every pastor needs a pastor.”¹⁶

The School of Meekness

In the work of supporting pastors through mental health struggles over the years, I have heard many times from clergy colleagues (Lutheran and non-Lutheran) that experiencing depression did indeed change them and their ministries. One of them reflected “I had to learn how to wait. I learned the only way I could that God really was God, and that I was not.” Others have shared that they had learned a range of new skills and sensibilities, for example, to pay attention to their own needs, to turn away from relying on the praise and approval of others, to benefit from the gift of personal confession and absolution, to seek and accept support from others, to say when they feel they cannot meet the requests others have made of them, and to be less dismissive of other peoples’ emotional and mental struggles.

One of the great lessons from Walther’s experience is the way he was spiritually mature enough to know and admit his vulnerability and weakness in the depressive struggles he suffered at various times in his life.

In 1860, at the age of forty-nine, he suffered a severe depressive breakdown,

ostensibly due to overwork and tension. It was serious and he was unable to go on working. He wrote to his congregation in St Louis,

I may and must now reveal to you that the last half of the previous year has been one of the most difficult times of my life. I was physically incapable of attending to even half the office that I am dignified to carry out among you in unworthy fashion. Even more, the prospect that I would again be capable of the same became gloomier and darker month by month. I owe it to you to be transparent . . . and more than that my own relationship with my Lord and God filled me with deep aversion and vexation . . .¹⁷

Luther too is remarkable (especially in his time) for the vulnerability and openness he displays to others concerning his depression. When we are able to do this, we do not (as we may fear) lose the respect of others, but rather gain their regard and confidence, together with new opportunities to come closer to them. When we show that we are not—and feel no need to be—master and lord of all situations, we also free others to live more honestly and humbly.

The “theologian of glory” leaves no room for others (or Christ for that matter) but tries to overcome all problems on his own terms. It is the theologian of the cross who is able “call himself what he is,” a redeemed sinner and child of God by grace alone, and a dependent servant of the Word.

None of this means that pastors who are unfortunate enough to have experienced depression should have less confidence and joy in ministry. On the contrary, with those who have suffered and recovered from depression, it often enables greater freedom, joy, and confidence than ever before, but this time, in *God’s* sustaining mercy and gifts. It is the meek who inherit and receive God’s gifts.

Neither does any of this mean that pastors who experience depression are so because they are prouder than others or have less self-awareness, so that they deserve—more than the rest of us—to learn a hard lesson. We are *all* “in school” under the cross of Christ, being conformed to him.

In ways and for reasons that may be quite unclear to us, God sometimes uses the cross of depression to “cruciform” us. When he does so, he provides for us so that we may “suffer divine things,” and grow in *receiving* from him.¹⁸

The Spiritual Crisis of Depression and the Cross

We may shake our heads wisely at the theologian-of-glory pastors who think that pastoral ministry is characterised by success and wellness, not by weakness and suffering. We may know all the right formulae about the “theology of the cross,” the importance of suffering and “strength being made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor 12:9). But this does not mean that the theologian of glory *lurking in us* (and his close friend,

the devil) will not lead us into this very same blind alley in our own struggle with mental illness. Our own sinful pride and the evil one teach us to rely on our own strength and then goad us to despair when this strength dissolves and we fall. When a pastor's conscience is assaulted and distorted by depression, his profound sense of his own weakness and hopelessness may and frequently does *overshadow everything*. Those who once knew the theology of the cross seem to know it no longer. Those who once loved the gospel of Christ and preached it powerfully may seem to lose it utterly. In his 1545 letter to Spalatin, Luther writes:

... perhaps Satan has snatched away from your sight and memory all those verses of Scripture for which you were prepared for battle by the work and benefits of Christ. Yes, he has done the same with all your outstanding sermons about grace which you taught the church and encouraged and confronted it with great confidence and joyful spirit.¹⁹

It may be shocking for us to contemplate the thought that such dark doubts and uncertainty could overtake ordained servants of the gospel, so that they lose sight of Christ's grace and forgiveness. I have come to appreciate over time that in situations where "all has become darkness," the best thing I can do is walk beside the brother loyally and quietly, keeping vigil, and waiting for the light to reappear, all the while praying and believing that it will. I pray that he may know he is not alone, despite his great loneliness. I pray also that may he even sense that the one keeping watch with him is not just his human brother, but Christ, his true brother.

We may well never fully understand—or understand at all—how God's precise purposes for us and our ministry could be served by the cross-experience of depression. Yet, in it all faith still confesses,

according to his purposes, God ordained before the world's beginning, by what crosses and sufferings he would conform every one of his elect to the image of His Son. For His cross must and will work all together for the good of every Christian who is called according to His purpose. FC SD XI:49

When God ordains the cross of depression for one of his servants, it becomes a means through which he unites him to Christ, who, through his passion and death, encompasses and redeems the suffering of the world and every individual in it. God's revelation of himself on the cross shows him, on the one hand, scandalously at one with

Christ's ministry is defined by suffering and our ministry in his name will be too.

our sin and suffering. On the other hand, it shows us miraculously at one with Christ in his holiness and love. To serve Christ and his word is to be “cruci-formed.” Christ’s ministry is defined by suffering and our ministry in his name will be too. Preachers of the cross are formed by the cross.

Our Highest Wisdom and Most Golden Art

Perhaps unexpectedly, this suffering-filled word of the cross has a very impressive track record as comfort for depressed Christians and depressed pastors. It is the consolation Luther offers most often to those suffering severe melancholy, who are sunk deep in despondency. In a *Table Talk* from 1534, he speaks about Christ’s brutal suffering and death for the sins of all humanity, noting the injustice and incongruity of it all. He then goes on to say,

So we hold this teaching as our highest wisdom, our truest and most golden art; divine power through which we are saved. This applies especially to those who are plagued by higher spiritual *Anfechtung*; I mean those who cannot endure Satan’s fiery and poisonous darts of sadness and depression of spirit, terror and fear of God’s wrath and eternal death. They should have this [Christ’s death on the cross] always before their eyes and comfort themselves with it, so that when they go on feeling the unbearable agony, they may know that God has not cast them aside, but holds them dear, for the sake of Christ, because He is in the process of forming in them the image of His only begotten Son. They should have no doubt; because they suffer with Christ, God will also redeem them in Him.²⁰

Luther’s comfort to the depressed soul here is that the deep agony of severe depression is not just chaotic or meaningless pain, the random collateral damage of disrupted moods or body chemistry. The feeling that all the agony is utterly pointless, aimless, and anonymous is a large part of depression’s despair. The cross shows us however, that it all has a divine meaning, a heavenly *telos*. It is “divine power” at work because it participates in Christ’s suffering and its heavenly purpose. This agony of soul, therefore, not only has meaning for this life here in the world (though what exactly this is may remain hidden from us), but *eternal* meaning and purpose in the one whose suffering eschatologically redeems, renews, and heals all creation.

This meditation on Christ’s suffering and death offers comfort by showing what Christ has done and is doing in the life of the sufferer. It does not tell the sufferer or his soul carer to *do something* to make himself feel better. It does not offer five simple steps to victory over depression, every one of which are impossible for a depressed person anyway. It rather completely *reframes* the sufferer’s experience, showing what

it really is and what it really means *coram deo*. Receiving this Christ-given consolation has the potential to transform a depression sufferer's life.

Luther's Practical Theology of Joy

Pastors who experience the doldrum effects of depression often report that their lives and their ministries are joyless and grey. The riches of God's word and grace which ought to enliven the heart and mind fall flat. Preaching, leading worship, visiting, and so on, feel pointless and exhausting, drained of all enjoyment, as does life in general. This is consistent with depressive symptomology more generally; it is called *anhedonia*, the loss of enjoyment in life and its good gifts.

Indeed, joy is possible in the midst of the worst suffering imaginable.

Luther's perspective on this is perhaps unexpected, yet spiritually (and psychologically) very sound. He has a disconcerting habit in his letters to people with depression (including pastors) who are sad and despondent, of repeating Christ's command in John 16:33, "be of good comfort," almost as

if he thinks his readers could simply decide to snap out of their dark mood and return to enjoying life.²¹ Such advice is often not welcomed by depression sufferers, who frequently feel drained of will and energy of any kind.

Yet something deeper and more profound underlies Luther's counsel here. He is speaking about joy *biblically* defined and described. Joy, unlike happiness, is not a mood or affect that comes to us as a result of things being right in our outer world or right *inside* us, providing us with subjective wellbeing. Joy is rather a divine gift which comes from outside us (*extra nos*) and breaks into our lives and experience (*intra nos*), whatever the external or internal conditions of life may be. Indeed, joy is possible in the midst of the worst suffering imaginable.

The divine gift of joy is not in the common sense, "natural" but *supernatural*. Luther and the reformers saw joy as the *Grundgefühl* (basic default emotion) of the Christian life.²² In the midst of difficulty, testing, and even persecution, the Christian rejoices. Joy is the environment, the general spiritual "climate" of our lives, since we are in Christ, saved and safe for eternity. Luther's point is that our depressive sorrows, difficulties, and struggles may be influenced in some way by external issues, but they come fundamentally from *within* us. But joy, as God's *external* gift is a fresh, new, and uplifting power that is available to us, even in depression, as comfort and release.

All this may still not sound very practical; more like a burden than a comfort to depressed pastors who are expected to exemplify and model joyful faith, even as they struggle to get out of bed and get dressed. You cannot after all *decide to feel* something when depression is robbing you of your very ability to face life.

But here is where Luther's theology turns a crucial corner. As he read Scripture's injunctions to rejoice in suffering (Rom 5:3–5; 1 Pt 4:12–14; 2 Cor 4:17), he realized that joy is a gift of the Spirit, which is indeed received by faith, but which also *engages the regenerate will*. Joy does involve experiencing good and enjoyable feelings but is also a practice. It involves our positive actions, attitudes, and habits, which are in turn joy-activating. Sometimes joy *comes to us*, and sometimes we need to *go to it*, but it is always there, a promised fruit of the Spirit. Despite his inability to feel the joy of God's grace as personal experience, Luther clings to Scripture, which tells him—against his experience—to rejoice *in the Lord*. This rejoicing does not originate from within and move outward, but comes from outside, from God, and moves inward.

Sometimes joyful *feelings* come unbidden and unsought, as a delightful surprise, breaking into a depressed person's life unexpectedly. Sometimes, on the other hand, we need to put our faith to work and begin with joyful *behavior*. We need to rejoice against all that we feel and sense within us. As we *do joy*, especially joy in praising God, we grow, sometimes slowly and sometimes more quickly, into affectively *experiencing joy*.

A Brief Case Study

I once visited a pastor who suffered a long and ministry-interrupting period of depression. He took me on a tour of his woodwork shop and garage, where he had repaired and made furniture and even invented new gadgets. “This place, he said, “has been my refuge of joy and depression breaker.” He told how he had gradually found his way to it all, at first in a small way, then more fully. He reflected how he began to realise that his workshop was one of the gifts through which joy began to break the power of depression in his life.

Luther repeatedly points depressed correspondents to the external created joys of life: riding, hunting, games, food and drink, music, and humor, but chiefly of course the gospel of Jesus Christ, which is the prime and supreme source of joy, through whom we receive all (Rom 8:32).

His view of joy is not primarily subjective in the contemporary psychological sense, but *receptive*. It is part of the Christian's *vita passiva*—the life received from God through his Word and gifts, not the life we build for ourselves through our careful cultivation of subjective wellbeing. Christian joy is therefore primarily the Holy Spirit's gift, received by faith. While we certainly participate in it, we cannot create or “realise” it for ourselves. It does not ultimately depend on what is happening in our own emotions, moods, or situation in life. If, in our despondency and depression, we act on God's promises and engage in joyful behaviour of some kind, this too is faith receiving and using God's gift. Joy is therefore available to us even in deep depression. It is perhaps most readily recognised and received amid such suffering, in the shadow of the cross. Suffering and pain do not necessarily

Pastors who suffer with depression often worry that their parishioners will be scandalized and are tempted to try to tough it out.

diminish life's richness and joy but may indeed deepen it. We may, at times, need to let go of our attempts at self-constructed wellbeing in order to experience joy because our human ideals get in the way of God's real gifts.²³

Conclusion

Like the driver sitting in a ditch after an encounter with black ice on the

road, a pastor facing depression must face the fact that "it all went out of his control" and reduced him to a passive object. It is not only bewildering but humiliating. It is so hard to face one's own powerlessness.

The sense of downfall can be so strong that it is hard to imagine that one's ministry may have any future, or that God could bring healing and strength once again. It is very hard to accept that those who had been counting on us in ministry have been left hanging, because we can no longer cope. Pastors who suffer with depression often worry that their parishioners will be scandalized and offended by their illness and the problems it may cause and are tempted to try to tough it out and conceal their struggle. This brave performance, put on to protect others as well as the pastor himself, always falls apart, one way or another.

This is what happened to Walther in 1860, when his depression became so severe that he could finally go on no longer in his ministry. In the end he had no choice but to allow his utter incapacity and weakness to become known by others. He was ashamed and guilty about what he considered a huge failure in ministry, which he believed would most certainly be the end of his pastoral vocation.

But as he recovered, hope and joy did return. His journey with the cross of depression came to its end, as it does for most of us. In the letter he wrote at this time to his congregation in St. Louis, he reflects on his illness, and on God's mercy and grace to him in allowing him to recover and continue his ministry. One short sentence stands out to me as I read this deeply moving piece. It captures powerfully the reality that underpins us in ministry whatever may happen, and however we may fall or fail. It is true comfort and hope for all pastors struggling with depression: "For I, weakest of men that I am, have nothing but the treasure of the Word."²⁴

Endnotes

- 1 This article is the first of two planned for *Concordia Journal* on this topic. The second article, scheduled for Winter 2026, will cover different issues from those dealt with in this piece.
- 2 See <https://globalhealth.duke.edu/news/clergy-more-likely-suffer-depression-anxiety-0#:~:text=A%20number%20of%20factors%20were,the%20Duke%20Global%20Health%20Institute>. (Accessed August 20, 2025).
- 3 See *The Reporter* website: <https://reporter.lcms.org/2024/new-research-informs-worker-wellness/#:~:text=For%20example%2C%20the%20study%20found,and%20leads%20ONM%20Worker%20Wellness>. (Accessed August 20, 2025).
- 4 Barna site the self-reporting studies they did in recent years, which suggested that as many as 59% of clergy in the United States experienced depressive thoughts and feelings in 2021. See <https://www.barna.com/research/pastors-thoughts-suicide-self-harm/> (Accessed August 25, 2025).
- 5 Not all clergy depression is related to ministry issues. My experience would suggest that sometimes the triggering causes are harder to ascertain. Underlying causes which are not directly related to ministry demands, like childhood trauma, complicated grief, and undiagnosed PTSD, have on occasions been identified by psychologists as causes in the depression suffered by clergy.
- 6 Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, NYRB Classics (NY Review Books, 2001), 397.
- 7 See Beverly Yahnke, *Pastoral Care for Suffering People* at https://www.doxology.us/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/32_pastoralcare-yahnke.pdf (Accessed August 25, 2025)
- 8 A widely used example would be the PHQ-4, the *Patient Health Questionnaire 4*, designed to screen patients for both anxiety and depression.
- 9 See Stephen Pietsch, *Depression and the Soul* at <https://www.doxology.us/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Depression-and-the-Soul-Pietsch.pdf> (Accessed August 25, 2025).
- 10 Dorothy Rowe SP – Of Good Comfort
- 11 Luther's letter to George Spalatin, 1545 trans. Elmore Leske and Stephen Pietsch, in Stephen Pietsch, *Of Good Comfort: Martin Luther's Letters to the Depressed and their Significance for Pastoral Care Today* (Adelaide ATF, 2016), 273.
- 12 Martin Luther, *The Fourteen Consolations*, LW 42:125.
- 13 There are several important basic dos and don'ts: encourage professional help; listen without judging; help the person with their tasks and routines; encourage leisure activities, physical activity and exercise; be patient and understanding with the person when they are struggling with life. Learn the warning signs for suicidal ideation, ask direct and caring questions if you suspect a crisis, and remember to look after your own mental health as a caregiver.
- 14 See Hermann Dietzfelbinger's wonderful short essay, "Who is my pastor?" in John Doberstein, *The Minister's Prayer Book* (Collins, 2001), 319–324.
- 15 See Stephen Pietsch, *Why Pastors should Go Frequently to Confession*, at <https://www.doxology.us/why-pastors-ought-to-go-regularly-to-confession-15-theses/> (accessed August 19, 2025)
- 16 Todd Peperkorn, from notes written to me as we consulted on this topic ahead of working on our articles for *Concordia Journal*, August 2025.
- 17 Quoted from Walther's letter to his St. Louis congregation in February 1860, trans. Matthew C Harrison in *At Home in the House of my Fathers* (Concordia Publishing House, 2001), 142–143.
- 18 John W Kleinig, *Grace upon Grace: Spirituality for Today* (Concordia Publishing House, 2008), 12–26.
- 19 Martin Luther, Letter to George Spalatin, 1545, quoted in Pietsch, *Of Good Comfort*, 274.
- 20 WA TR VI.6618, trans. Stephen Pietsch, 2011.
- 21 See the collection of Luther's letters to the depressed in the back of Pietsch, *Of Good Comfort*, 225–287.
- 22 Pietsch, *Of Good Comfort*, 222.
- 23 Pietsch, *Of Good Comfort*, 235.
- 24 C. F. W. Walther's letter to the Evangelical Lutheran *Gesamtgemeinde* of the Unaltered Augsburg Confession in St. Louis, in Harrison, *At Home in the House of my Fathers*, 144.

Homiletical Helps

Tangible: Theology Learned and Lived Meditation, Mindfulness, and Martin Luther

Tangible: Theology Learned and Lived is a podcast from the department of Theological Research and Publications at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. The following is an edited transcript of portions of the August 30, 2024, episode titled “Meditation, Mindfulness, and Martin Luther” with guest Dr. Rick Marrs.

Jessica Bordeleau:

Welcome to *Tangible: Theology Learned and Lived*. We’re exploring the ways in which theology permeates all aspects of life. Through conversations with faculty at Concordia Seminary St. Louis, we will challenge you to deepen your theology and live out your faith in Christ. I’m your producer and host, Jessica Bordeleau. I speak with a variety of professors on a variety of topics, something different every episode; but all pointing to the intersection of faith and daily life because it’s tangible, theology learned and lived.

Today we’re talking about meditation and how we as Christians should explore the topic. I have Dr. Rick Marrs in the studio. Dr. Marrs is a professor of practical theology here at Concordia Seminary St. Louis. He brings together two areas of study that puts him in a unique position of expertise. He has served as a pastor, but he also has a PhD in psychology and spent years working as a counselor and licensed psychologist. He authored the book *Making Christian Counseling More Christ-centered* along with numerous other Bible studies and training programs. I’ve gotten to work with Dr. Marrs on a couple of projects, which I’ve thoroughly enjoyed. We developed an online course called Stress and Worry in the Life of a Christian. You can find it at Lutheran Hour Ministries. Dr. Marrs, it’s great to have you on the show.

Rick Marrs:

It's very good to be with you, Jessica. I'm looking forward to this.

Bordeleau: We're talking about meditation. It's often recommended by mental health professionals, but is it appropriate for Christians?

Marrs: That's the big question that a lot of faithful Christians ask, and I think they should ask. There's a whole body of scientific evidence out there that shows that meditation, often called mindfulness in the culture now, is psychologically beneficial. But a lot of Christians are concerned that any form of mindfulness or meditation is practicing Buddhism. Well, there are Christian forms of meditation. Christians have been doing meditation for thousands of years. I've been studying this for decades now and addressed it in my book. I look forward to talking about it in more detail with you today.

Bordeleau: Let's clarify that term. What is meditation?

Marrs: A lot of what passes for meditation began in Asia. The transcendental aspect was more heavily incorporated into eastern religions. The problem with transcendental meditation is that it often encourages people to look inside themselves for their answers.

Christians have been meditating on scripture for thousands of years because they know that scripture helps to point them outside; to their need for a savior, to the salvation that they have in Jesus, to his prayers, and to the Psalms. In fact, I like to point out to Christians that there are several Hebrew scriptures and New Testament scriptures that point towards meditation.

Our culture of Christians has become more reticent to practice meditation. So, the word itself shows up in English translations somewhat less frequently, but there are a few places. Psalm 19, "let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight. Oh Lord, my rock and my redeemer." That's one Hebrew word, (הִגְיוֹן) *higayon*. in Psalm 104: "let my meditation be pleasing to him. As for me, I shall be glad in the Lord." That's another Hebrew word, (שִׁיחָה) *sichah*. in Psalm 119:97: "Oh, how I love the Lord, how I love your law. It is my meditation, my (שִׁיחָה) *sichah* all the day."

So again, several Hebrew words that get translated as *meditation* still in our English versions today. What should we meditate on as Christians? How can people practice similar sorts of mindfulness, techniques on breathing, being aware of our muscles and how they are tense . . . things like that. That's just a standard first article sort of issue to be aware of. We don't want to be too afraid of meditation.

Bordeleau: Why would psychologists or counselors want to use meditation with their clients?

Marrs: There's a lot of research evidence. When people are anxious, their bodies change. They start breathing more shallowly and with a more frequent pace. They don't realize that it actually changes the level of oxygen and carbon dioxide in their blood. That can exacerbate the anxiety and make them feel more and more anxious. When we are not breathing deeply, it changes the way that our bodies feel in general. As the psalmist said in Psalm 139, "we are fearfully and wonderfully made." It's wild how that can change how our neurons interact with each other in our brains and influence the rest of our bodies. As people practice some meditation, they can feel less anxious and be more focused on God in their prayer life.

Bordeleau: This seems relevant with the high percentage of people dealing with anxiety and stress, even teens and children. We need some way to calm down, something that is God pleasing and includes our spirit as well as our mind and emotions.

Marrs: I know you're probably not going to bring this up, Jessica, but you wrote a little devotion book called *Just Breathe: Devotions for Overwhelmed Youth*. I was really glad to have that come out.

Bordeleau: You were my advisor for that book, thank you. I've seen so many young people struggle with stress and anxiety. I was working with a group of college-age students, to do some leadership training. I had my curriculum and Bible studies all set. When they came to the training, the students were so stressed. They were overwhelmed with the demands of life: school, parental expectations, work, maintaining friendships. We tried to do the leadership training, but they were somewhere else in their minds. I actually stopped what we were doing and put the training resources away. I found a recording that you made of a biblical meditation with deep breathing and body awareness techniques. We listened and followed

along with the 20-minute meditation exercise. You should have seen the looks on their faces when they were done! They were calm and refocused. We opened our curriculum, and we kept going. The holistic difference was pretty significant.

Dr. Marrs, you've been researching Luther's view of holistic care. You've referred to it as "soul care." Tell me more.

Marrs: Yes, the first half of my book is about Luther and soul care. He was such a wonderful soul caregiver; that we know from history because he sent out thousands, over 2,600 letters to thousands of people across Europe. At that time, they didn't have psychologists and psychiatrists. People who were struggling with depression or debilitating anxiety, would ask Luther if he'd write them something. Luther would write letters to these people, princes and nobles, friends of friends, people that he knew. One of my other colleagues, Dr. Stephen Pietsch, has studied these letters much more than I have. He wrote a book called *Of Good Comfort* (available at amazon.com) about Luther's letters of spiritual counsel to encourage people that he was counseling who were struggling with depression.

Bordeleau: If a Christian leader, like Luther, was so involved counseling people, why is there a stigma among Christians about seeking professional help with mental health issues?

Marrs: Most people in the history of modern psychology were not Christians; Sigmund Freud, B. F. Skinner, Carl Rogers . . . so there were very few Christians entering into the field of counseling and psychology. When I was considering going into this field in the 1970s and 1980s, some pastors were trying to tell me not to do it; they didn't trust it. But my focus has always been how can Christians use first article gifts, like those we receive from the field of psychology, in ways that are amenable to the Christian faith. I think we can and should do that. I think Luther would applaud that as well. Luther focused on *oratio, meditatio, and tentatio*.

Bordeleau: You'll have to translate those for me.

Marrs: Yes, those Latin terms—reading, meditation, and testing or struggles—that people have. When Luther was taught how to pray in the monastery, he was taught to read, meditate, pray, and then contemplate the higher things. *Contemplatio* was what he was taught, but after he rediscovered the gospel,

he started teaching his own students to contemplate, to think about the struggles that they were having and pray to God about those temptations, those *tentationes*. In German, it would've been *Anfechtung*. So *meditatio* is just something that we've been teaching students for 500 years.

I am a big believer that proper distinction of law and gospel is very important, theology of the cross is very important, what Lutheran theology has to say about our created bodies, and how Luther treated the word of God are all very important. I wrote one chapter of my book on each of those topics. The second half of my book shares some counseling techniques that pastors and Christian counselors can use. The techniques flow out of soul care theology, whether the counselor is a Lutheran or not, they can still use some of Luther's techniques. One of which is Christian meditation, the topic of the book's last chapter.

Bordeleau: And again, the name of that book is *Making Christian Counseling More Christ-like* (available at westbowpress.com). There'll be a link to it on our website, concordiatheology.org.

How would we start to incorporate meditation into our own spiritual life?

Marrs: After working as a psychologist and counselor, I first became a pastor when I was forty-two- years old. I got to my congregation and started teaching church leaders to pray the Lord's prayer with pauses. Instead of the forty-five seconds that we normally do, just to take two to five minutes to pray the Lord's prayer, slowly. Say the first *Our Father who art in heaven*, then pause for twenty or thirty seconds to contemplate what that means; wow, we are his children, and we can go to him as children go to their dear father, as he says in the catechism. Just contemplate that. Contemplate what it means, and then just go to the next. Just go through the Lord's prayer, slowly meditatively. I thought I was coming up with something kind of new, but then I learned about a little booklet called *Letters to Master Peter the Barber*. In it, Luther encouraged this man to pray the Lord's prayer, the Apostles creed, the Ten Commandments slowly and meditatively. So here I was, in my forties, thinking I was creating something new! I should have known Luther was ahead of me.

William Hulme, a fairly conservative professor at Luther Seminary wrote a little book that I came across early in my career called *Let the Spirit In: Practicing Christian Devotional Meditation*. It was an influential little

book, just like seventy-five pages or so. At the end of his book, he takes people through a meditative experience. I've taken about a third of what he's used in that book and expanded on it. I use it as a tool to lead groups in meditation.

Bordeleau: If our listeners would like to make use of this meditation, we have a recording of Dr. Marrs leading it. It's available for free on concordiatheology.org. We have recordings in English, Spanish, and Portuguese.

I have a final question for you, Dr. Marrs. What do you want our listeners to remember?

Marrs: That meditation can actually be Christian, and that Christians can get the benefits psychologically and spiritually from meditation. They don't have to be afraid of mindfulness upsetting their faith. Christians have been practicing devotional meditation for hundreds of years. We can use these same sorts of words and processes, using God's word to guide our meditative practices. So don't avoid meditation, just practice it in Christian ways!

Bordeleau: Well, that's it for today. Dr. Marrs, thanks for being here.

Marrs: Thank you very much, Jessica, for having me.

Bordeleau: And I'd like to thank our listeners for being here. You can find links to the books we mentioned, as well as the recordings of the meditations in English, Spanish, and Portuguese; they're all on our website. Just go to concordiatheology.org and find the August 2024 Tangible episode, "Mindfulness, Meditation, and Martin Luther." We have many more free resources there. Check it out!

I'm your producer and host, Jessica Bordeleau. Join me next time when we talk about the intersection of theology and daily life, because it's tangible: theology learned and lived.

Reviews

Reviews

A Christian Guide to Mental Illness (2 Volumes). By Stephen Saunders. Northwestern Publishing House, 2016, 2019. Hardcover. 468 and 587 pages. \$89.58 for the set.

Every church should have both volumes of Dr. Stephen Saunders's *A Christian Guide to Mental Illness* (ACGMI) in its library. Every parish pastor should invest the time to read both volumes. For years I have been instructing seminarians that they should have and read a textbook on abnormal psychology. Now I say that if they can only afford one, they should have ACGMI.

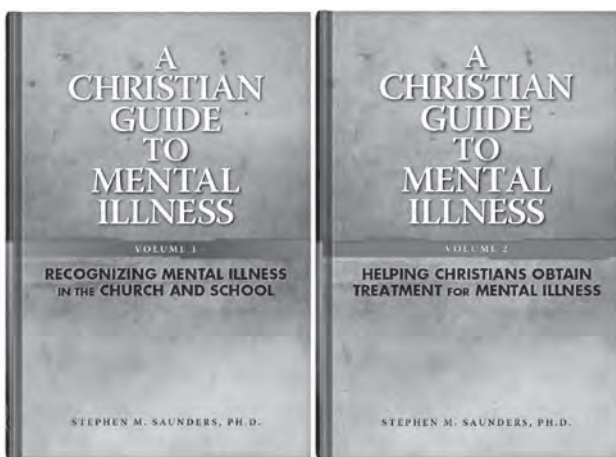
Dr. Saunders has the background to author ACGMI. He has been a practicing psychologist for decades and is the Director of Clinical Training of Marquette University's doctoral program. He is also a committed LCMS Christian who has devoted many hours in writing not just these volumes but writing curriculum for Lutheran school teachers about children's mental health, and a book about Luther and mental health. He also served admirably on the LCMS Task Force for Mental Disorders, speaks at DOXOLOGY workshops, and provided many other services in the church. He understands, and writes clearly about, the intersections between mental health

counseling, theology, and the spiritual care of souls. He begins each chapter with a Bible verse fitting to the topic.

ACGMI has many well-written, poignant stories about clients' struggles with mental health and spiritual issues, and how they might apply in church settings. The author includes many interspersed sidebars that either highlight a key aspect to a particular mental illness or share a helpful narrative of someone's struggles with various forms of mental illness.

Saunders includes numerous, helpful discussions on topics many pastors need more knowledge about, like impairment vs. distress, Severe and Persistent Mental Disorders (SPMIs) like schizophrenia and bi-polar disorder, PTSD, Substance Use disorders, and Personality Disorders, and the Church of Scientology (and how they have complicated the cultural understanding of mental illness).

The middle chapters of volume 1 describe the most common and distressing mental illnesses (e.g., the



depressive disorders, anxiety disorders, stress-induced disorders, substance use disorders), along with chapters about child abuse, mental illness among the elderly, domestic abuse, and suicide issues. For the pastors and parochial teachers with limited training in these things, these are essential reading.

Volume 1 concludes with chapters about the proper Christian understanding of mental illness and the essential role that churches can play in comforting those who struggle with mental illness with the gospel. These may be the most important chapters for church workers to read. Saunders aptly points out that too many people struggle with a theology of glory understanding of mental illness, which leads them toward more guilt, shame, despair, and anxiety because they come to believe that “the reason for my suffering is my lack of faith.” Many people who do not suffer from mental illness themselves also interpret persons with mental illness from a theology of glory perspective, tending to blame their malady primarily on bad choices or subtle punishment from God. Saunders encourages pastors to clearly proclaim a theology of the cross in their preaching and teaching, and especially in their care of souls. He emphasizes that faith in Christ is a gift from the Holy Spirit, and that mental illness should not be attributed to weak faith. He intersperses some writings from both Robert and Daniel Preus to strive to convince pastors and theologians to think clearly about mental illness.

Volume 2 is subtitled *Helping*

Christians Obtain Treatment for Mental Illness. The first chapters are informative, but I could see many pastors skimming over the five chapters about the history of mental illness, the development of science in this arena, and the history of psychiatry, clinical psychology, social work, and professional counseling. Chapters 6 through 9 overview the mental health services system, discussing issues like treatment settings, treatment providers, ethical and legal issues, and insurance and other issues related to paying for mental health treatment. I will return to some reservations I have about chapter 7 below, but in general Saunders is helpful in overviewing the mental health system. Chapters 10 through 12 overview how mental illness professionals typically perform formal psychological evaluations and intake interviews, and then the typical process of mental health treatment. These chapters are helpful not only for church professionals, but also for parishioners who are wondering what they can expect when they seek out a therapist for help.

Chapters 13 through 20 of volume 2 overview the causes and treatments of mental illness, including biological treatments. Chapter 14 gives numerous lists of current medications typically used for depression, anxiety, psychoses, bi-polar, ADHD, and so on, as well as the limits and reservations of their use. Saunders then overviews the major theoretical strategies that guide mental health professionals, especially cognitive-behavioral strategies. Some readers will perhaps skip through the

history of some of the theories, but I believe it is important for pastors to understand those theories so that they can better refer parishioners to psychotherapists. Saunders has some interesting outtakes about “Luther the Behavior Therapist” (vol 2, 382) and “Luther on Cognitive Errors” (vol 2, 407) that he later expands upon in his book *Martin Luther on Mental Health* (Concordia Publishing House, 2023). Saunders has other interesting sidenotes, including one about “trigger warnings” (vol. 2, 391–392). Chapter 20 discusses empirical evidence about the effectiveness of psychotherapy and medications. It is solid information, but I wish it were longer and more in depth (the chapter is a mere seven pages).

Chapters 21 through 27 provide practical assistance to persons with mental illness. They include helpful guidance for both pastors and laity on having helpful conversations, eliminating stigma, showing empathy, domestic abuse, mental health first aid, handling crises, and helping family members. Chapter 24 has good questions that pastors should use when they are interviewing prospective mental health professionals, including questions to ask about their attitudes toward conservative religious beliefs.

Saunders does say he has “many concerns about faith-integrated counseling” (vol. 2, 169), and his deep Lutheran faith shows through in his concerns in chapters 7 and 24. I share many of those concerns, but there were places in those chapters

I thought he conflated the Biblical Counseling movement with “Christian counselors.” “Biblical counselors” are usually not “professional counselors” who are licensed in their states, but “Christian counselors” usually are (in my experience), and almost always have at least a master’s degree. Many biblical counselors use “only the Bible” to guide their clients and are guilty of not properly distinguishing law and gospel, often turning faith into a work. A few “biblical counselors” do confuse the situation further by calling what they do “Christian counseling,” and the AACC (American Association of Christian Counselors) is one of many groups that provides certification for biblical counselors, which can further confuse those seeking help. It is also true that many Christian counselors are Baptists, Calvinists, Methodists, or Pentecostals, and know little about Luther’s soul-care theology. But in my experience, they are interested in learning more about Luther, especially if it will help them treat Lutheran counselees that pastors refer to them. We now have several books that pastors can share with Christian counselors so that they might better understand how to navigate the “interface” (a term I prefer over “integrate”) between spiritual/faith concerns and mental health. Those books include Saunders’s book *Martin Luther on Mental Health*; my book *Making Christian Counseling More Christ Centered* (WestBow Press, 2019); and Stephen Pietsch’s *Of Good Comfort: Martin Luther’s Letters to the*

Depressed and their Significance for Pastoral Care Today (ATF Press, 2016).

In my experience, pastors should not assume that even Lutherans who are Christian counselors are familiar with the application of Luther's theology.

If your church library does not have ACGMI, you should get both volumes and make people aware that they are available for their edification.

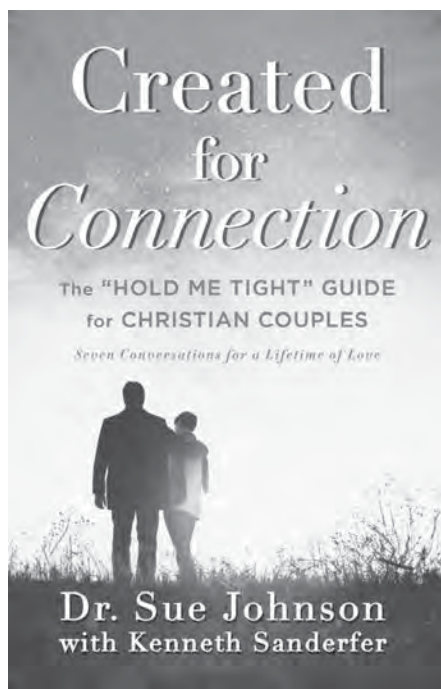
Rick Marrs

CREATED FOR CONNECTION: The "Hold Me Tight" Guide for Christian Couples. By Dr. Sue Johnson and Kenneth Sanderfer. Hachette Book Group, 2016. Hardcover. 324 pgs. \$30.00.

Psychologist Sue Johnson, in collaboration with Christian therapist Ken Sanderfer, presents the Emotion Focused Therapy (EFT) approach that Johnson developed which has strong verified outcomes. *Created for Connection* is a streamlined version that relates EFT to Christian beliefs and biblical wisdom (10).

Marriage requires courage. In looking for resources to support couples/families, pastors might consider *Created for Connection*. Here are some reasons why.

Emotion, from the Latin *emovere*, means "set in motion from us." In marriage, prioritizing our spouse's emotion harnesses one way to build connection and strengthen the one-flesh union. "It all happens quickly—emotions come and go. Emotions tell us what matters. They orient and direct us, like an internal compass" (118).



Emotions are integral to our bodily existence. EFT enhances communication by incorporating the whole body which is reacting quickly to the emotions being experienced. This approach tunes us into our emotions and those of our spouse by paying attention to our bodies, and secondary or softer emotions that drive the need for connection with one another. Therefore, our communication in marriage works best when it is forming/developing a secure attachment with the other. Sue Johnson gives the example of how successful parents work to give positive emotional, physical, and intellectual time to their children. She indicates that we can do the same with our spouses to make strong connections.

The book provides seven

conversations that capture defining moments in a love relationship. These instruct the reader to shape interactions to create a secure and lasting bond.

The first three conversations de-escalate tension in the relationship. First, the couple learns to recognize a negative pattern of communication. They are taught to name it and to demonize the pattern/cycle, rather than the person. Second, the couple finds the raw spots through recognizing defensive or aggressive reactions, replacing them with softer, more vulnerable, feelings. This facilitates attachment and bonding. The third conversation revisits a negative loop cycle, acknowledging the negative steps made and emotions felt to help them repair, heal, and console and change the cycle together.

They have learned to attune to their own body's reactions and share that with their partner. This lays the groundwork to continue the next four dyadic conversations with continued positive outcomes. In the fourth conversation, *Hold Me Tight*, partners understand their needs, their partner's needs, and are more engaged on a regular basis. This is where the couple builds a more positive communication loop in sharing their desires and needs. The fifth conversation is a specific conversation to forgive injuries. The offense can be an emotional, physical, or intellectual injury. These cause a disconnection. Showing remorse therefore helps the apology to invite forgiveness and connection. The sixth conversation is described below. The seventh, capstone, conversation,

Keeping Your Love Alive, highlights ways to daily build positive connections. This is where the couple finds hope and lessens the negative assumptions and resentment from conflicts.

Johnson's sixth conversation, *Bonding Through Sexual Touch*, deserves special emphasis. Couples' therapists handle the topic of physical touch and sex differently. Some address it first, others later. I like where Johnson positions this conversation. Research highlights that healthy couples ascribe sex 15–20% of the total success measurement while, unhappy/unhealthy couples ascribe 50–70% of their distress to sexual problems (201). It is usually the first thing to falter but not the true problem. Her approach provides helpful tools for the couple in earlier conversations that enriches this significant conversation. The authors miss an opportunity to say that this gift is best received within marriage.

As a pastor, EFT helps you facilitate these dyadic conversations between spouses. It avoids the trap of getting caught in the details of a conflict. It helps you advocate for both persons and their marriage. You help them discover raw spots and tune into bodily reactions to circumvent withdrawal or aggression. In this way you can help empower them to solve their own problems.

Sue Johnson's *Emotionally Focused Therapy* helps couples use "we" language to address negative communication loops. This helps each person claim their own emotions and moves in "the dance" of their relationship. They can discern

changes each will make and what each might do differently. The couple then begins to feel and operate as if they are on the same team and to grasp the impact they have on each other.

Sue Johnson's work highlights that a secure adult attachment within marriage is vital for a healthy union. This truth mentioned throughout the book is motivation to keep prioritizing marriage. A loving, healthy connection with one's spouse enables the ripple effect of love for children, extended family, neighbors, and society.

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THE SOUL OF DESIRE: Discovering the Neuroscience of Longing, Beauty, and Community. By Curt Thompson, MD. InterVarsity Press, 2021. Hardcover. 233 pages. \$16.98.

This is the third book by Curt Thompson that I have read. I first read *The Anatomy of the Soul* six years ago, then *The Soul of Shame*. Both were helpful and I was looking forward to this book. *The Soul of Desire* did not disappoint as it continues his tradition of giving practical wisdom that connects faith and brain science. This book was also helpful in portraying beauty and community.

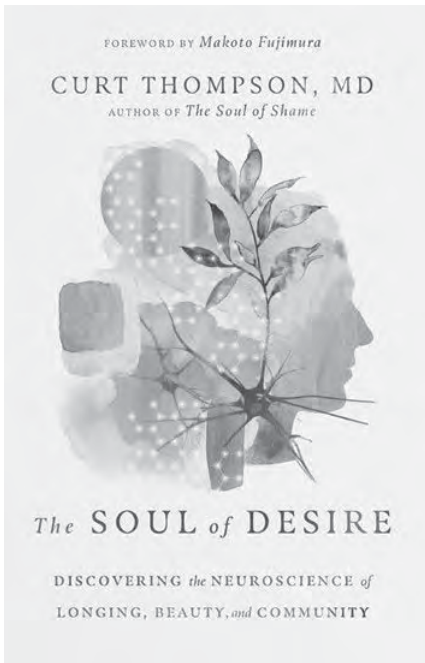
The ten chapters are rich in wisdom for healing difficult relationships. Added to this are several examples of healing through seeking beauty in the world of visual art. The book's theme reflects

Psalm 27:4 "That I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze on the beauty of the Lord and to inquire in his temple."

Thompson endorses using the senses to embody faith to develop and heal neurons. He relates how this influences our desires. "What do you want?" he asks. He then draws out the patient's response with a homework assignment: spend some time each day looking at the same piece of artwork for six weeks. As an example, he refers a patient to gaze at *The Return of the Prodigal Son* by Rembrandt as part of his therapy.

Thompson gives practical wisdom in applying neuroscience. Interpersonal neurobiology (INPNB) is used often in the book. It is an interdisciplinary framework that explores the interconnectedness of the brain, mind, and relationships in shaping human well-being. Thompson has unpacked human longing in a way that is fulfilled in being seen and known by God and one another in family and community. Integration as it relates to INPNB is the harmonious or balanced communication between the brain, mind, and relationships. Thompson reveals this key to human flourishing.

In the world of INPNB, we speak of emotion as the neurobiochemical and interpersonal energy around which the brain organizes itself (23). Emotion is an integral part of our desires. Desire is our experience of an entire collective convergence of what we sense, image, feel, and think. It is what we are primed to do behaviorally that in essence is



“what we want.” Thompson brings into view the work of James K. A. Smith’s daily habits and rituals that form one’s desire of “the good life.” This is one way to help patients determine their desires.

The first few chapters recall the creation story in Genesis with the repeated phrase, “and God saw that it was good.” This is not simply good versus bad, but good as aesthetically beautiful (60). God saw that which engages the visual senses, and that it was good, beautiful. He is a God who looks at and sees his creation. Its goodness, therefore, emerges as a function of being seen by God. In the same way, Thompson points out that goodness and mercy are brought into being precisely because we are seen by and drawn into Christ, who himself is God (Col 3:1–4) (59). Redeemed

by Christ, our longings are met in relationship with him and one another in him. As creatures, the author notes, we can develop and heal by focusing on beauty and naming what we desire. This is what Thompson means by dwelling in the house of God.

The second half of the book weaves the concepts, habits, and practices from the first half into what he calls confessional communities. Group therapy is effective for mastering coping skills in a safe environment. He describes these confessional community examples and the patients in them. Confessional community participants talk about sins and receive support and forgiveness from others in the group. Sharing these stories normalizes “confession” in the process of healing relationships within families, communities, and friends.

While Thompson’s work describes a clinical practice, could these types of groups be present in Christian congregations? I think so. Small group ministry, confession and absolution with a pastor, the mutual consolation of the brothers/sisters, and confessions and forgiveness within families are some ways congregations experience beauty and healing. In practice, some of these could become more decidedly “confessional communities” to strengthen mutual consolation with the gospel.

All along he is interweaving works of visual art to help the individual hone skills for using the senses in healing. He describes the Japanese art of *kintsugi*, an expensive and lengthy process to fix broken pottery that repairs fractures

with gold lacquer bonding. This process mirrors how a neuron is healed. Thompson shows this as a contrasting image to our “instant fix” mentality. Healing does not happen quickly!

He talks about pieces of art throughout the book. Four pieces of abstract artwork by Makoto Fujimura, who wrote the foreword, are reproduced and included in the middle of the book. Other pieces are referenced but images aren’t included.

This book is about relationships but also filling one’s senses with beauty. This includes “the new creation” and “heaven.” Thompson suggests that confessional communities give us a way to practice for our future life in the here and now. It can be a valuable practice that helps us reflect God’s love and mercy to our neighbor as we live as “new creatures” in Christ, picturing the congregations as being “new creation” communities.

Thompson’s concluding chapter addresses the practice of confessing to one another to be ready to confess to God on that final day. We can draw comfort knowing that on that final day he will welcome us as we worship in the face of his glory.

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CHRISTIAN ETHICS: A Short Companion. By Gilbert Meilaender. B&H Academic, 2024. Paperback. 160 pages. \$22.99.

Always on the lookout for a text that might be exploited to better serve a syllabus, or perhaps the students using the syllabus, I was delighted to receive a copy of Meilaender’s book *Christian Ethics*. The subtitle made it even more enticing; what could be better for an introductory course on ethics than *A Short Companion*? Coming in at just 128 pages of text, the book not only keeps its word on brevity, but delivers marvelously as a ready companion for those venturing into the captivating world of Christian ethics.

The first of the eleven chapters sets the table for the rest of the book. It is a masterpiece that demonstrates the great gift of a theologian of Meilaender’s caliber devoting his considerable skill to the work of establishing the foundations. He rightly introduces the classic utilitarian, deontological, and virtue strains of ethical thought without oversimplifying, dismissing, or privileging any of the three. His evenhanded guidance and deft use of a litany of important thinkers from antiquity to the present make this and every chapter a treasure of helpful insight. While Meilaender certainly unfolds his own ways of thinking—including some classic themes and tools that have been present from the very beginning of his career—he consistently alerts his readers to those names and ideas that must be understood and appreciated if one is to gain even a basic understanding of the field. Yet he does it without being ponderous or tedious. All of this is to say that Meilaender ably accomplishes his purpose and delivers

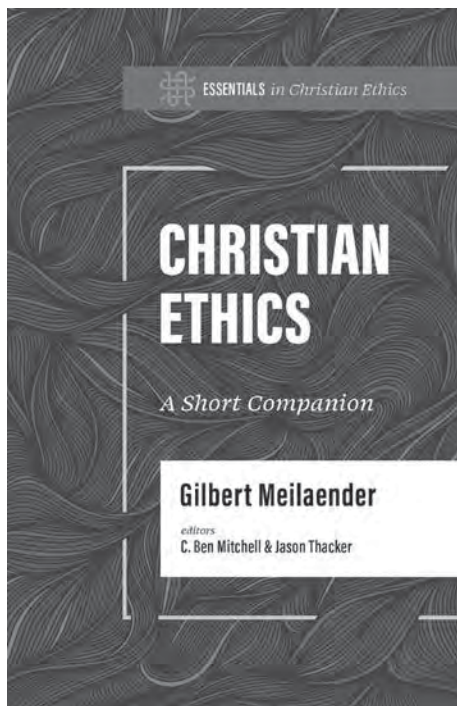
a fine introduction to the richness, complexity, and significance of Christian ethics. This is a book that should, and no doubt will, be included as a standard on college and seminary course reading lists.

For good or ill, every book—and every book review—always provides new revelations not only *for* but *about* the reader and reviewer. Such was certainly the case with this engaging read. I have always known Meilaender to be deeply in tune with the strain of Christian thinking that reflects keenly, thoroughly, and positively on the intricacies and mysteries of human love, desire, and motivation. And here, quite consistently and unsurprisingly, his love of kindred spirits, Augustine and C. S. Lewis pervades the

text. This is helpful especially, I realized as I read, for one like myself who still has yet to cultivate a similar appreciation for this part of our shared heritage. Yet, for all the times that I found myself wondering about the author's fascination and wonder related to things that tend only to baffle or trouble me (I will admit it, when it comes to human desire and love, I am decidedly sympathetic with the skepticism of Nygren and Prenter), there were far more times when I would delight to see Meilaender reach for familiar and powerful tools like grace as pardon and power or Niebuhr's framework in *Christ and Culture*. I suppose that a critic could see this as a man trapped in an earlier era; but I think it rather reveals the steady consistency and reliable power of truthful tools used well.

It is difficult to imagine any reader working through Meilaender's limp prose and ending in disappointment. Whether a bona fide novice, or one immersed for decades in the study of ethics, every reader should find something in this companion that will shed new light or prompt a new trajectory of thought. I look forward to many more journeys through this text in the years to come as it finds a secure place at the top of required reading lists for future courses. Blessed by engaging Meilaender's compendium on ethics and love, my students and I will never lack for fuel sufficient for marvelous discussions. For that, we can all be grateful.

Joel Biermann



SEELSORGER

A JOURNAL
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CURE OF SOULS
VOLUME 10
2025

He Must Manage His Own Household Well

Rev. Dr. Tyler C. Arnold

Habitus for a Distractable Pastor

Rev. Dustin M. Beek

SEO for a More Visible Church

Rev. Dr. Christopher Jackson

Strategic Planning for the Care of Souls

Rev. Jason Schockman

A Shepherd Model for Conflict Management

Rev. Daniel T. Turchiano

Retrospective

By the Numbers

Pastoral Epistles

Book Reviews

Shepherd the flock of God that is among you,
exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but
willingly, as God would have you. (1 PETER 5:2A)

Available now: *Seelsorger* Volume 10

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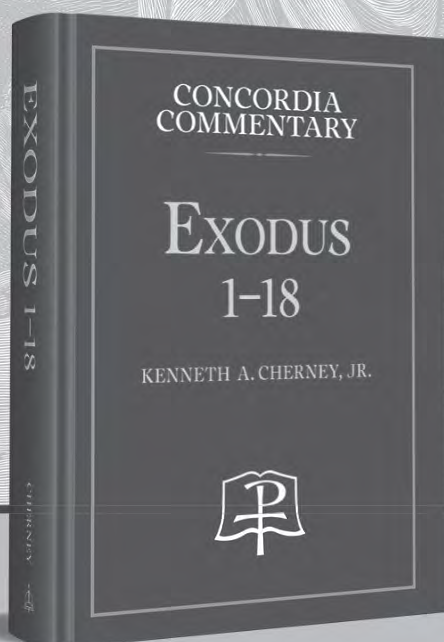
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