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“Encouragement and Weapons Against Prevailing Sin in Pastor and People”

Savoy Declaration 13:1-3:

(1) They that are united to Christ, effectually called and regenerated, having a new heart and a new spirit created in them, through the virtue of Christ’s death and resurrection, are also further sanctified really and personally through the same virtue, by His Word and Spirit dwelling in them; the dominion of the whole body of sin is destroyed and the several lusts thereof are more and more weakened and mortified, and they more and more quickened and strengthened in all saving graces, to the practice of all true holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord.

(2) This sanctification is throughout in the whole man, yet imperfect in this life; there abideth still some remnants of corruption in every part; whence ariseth a continual and irreconcilable war, the flesh lusting against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh.

(3) In this war, although the remaining corruption for a time may much prevail, yet through the continual supply of strength from the sanctifying Spirit of Christ, the regenerate part doth overcome, and so the saints grow in grace, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.

The Approach and Emphasis

The original topic I was assigned is slightly different than the one printed in the brochure. The original title was: “Encouragement and Weapons Against **Prevailing** Sin in Pastor and People.” It’s not a significant difference, but I did key in on the word “prevailing” as I began to prepare and used it as a springboard for the direction of my address. In my presentation, then, I will not simply be offering “encouragement and weapons against sin...,” I will be sharing “encouragement and weapons against **prevailing** sin...”

For the sake of clarification, “prevailing sin” focuses on something a bit more particular than “residual sin” or the abiding “remnants of corruption in every part.” It refers more specifically to sin that has “extensive power over us,” or “has gained superiority over us.” It is sin which stubbornly and habitually gains the upper hand in the life of a believer and often leaves him feeling defeated and wondering if the “regenerate part” will ever enable him to “overcome, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.” In this sense I need to change the title of my presentation even further, and call it: “Encouragement and Weapons Against **Particular Prevailing Sins** in Pastor and People.”

I will also approach my topic from a more experiential standpoint than in years past—keying in on sins I have found to prevail in the lives of pastors. Since I myself am a pastor, most here are likewise pastors, and my previous ministry position consisted primarily of pastoring the missionaries or pastors who made up 65-70% of my congregation in Honduras, I will share what I have found to be “prevailing sins” that pastors in particular are susceptible to; address them in the order of the frequency I have run into them, and leave it up to you as pastors (if you should so desire) to apply these “encouragements” and “weapons” to your people.

Stating My Presuppositions Up Front

In my personal discussions with other ministers and missionaries (and even in the examination of my own soul) one truth of Scripture has been confirmed over and over again: Each believer is “*fearfully and wonderfully made.*” We have all been “*knit together in our mother’s womb*”—and I would have to add *uniquely*—with different genetic profiles, personality types, and inherited gifts, traits or defects. And it doesn’t end there. Every one of us is not just the product of God’s creative work in “*nature*” but also our parent’s influences in “*nurture*” as well. We all have a unique history, having been influenced by slightly different social contexts, family traditions and cultures. Our worldview, outlook, priorities, values and behaviors have been formed and informed by a different blend of life experiences and instruction.

Therefore, though we *all* wrestle with residual sin or “*the remnants of corruption in every part*” (which no honest person would deny), I have found that in terms of the particular sins that prevail in each person’s life, they tend to differ in direct accordance with the factors mentioned above. The addictive and compulsive characteristics of residual sin that remain in everyone tend to manifest themselves differently in each particular individual depending on their own particular weaknesses, ability to deal with stress, conflict, praise, criticism, or power. It has to do with latent insecurities, needs, idolatries, emotional dispositions, addictions or susceptibilities. Though residual sin remains present in every part in every person, some of those remnants tend to lie dormant in one person while in another they are fertilized by some compulsive craving or sinful disposition which feeds it in their hearts (as opposed to others) like seeds that have fallen into a manure pile.

King David’s “*prevailing sin*” seems to have been lust. He was a passionate man—whether it be in the process of taking on Goliath, celebrating his victories by dancing with all his might before the Lord, training his hand for war, playing music, writing songs, or giving expression to his thirst and cravings for God in the Psalms. He was passionate in all he did. But often, as Gordon MacDonald has pointed out, “*An unguarded strength is a double weakness.*” Being passionate about the things one does is good, but it’s often hard to give free reign to that passion in the spiritual realms and then shut it down, for instance, in the sexual realms. This seems to have been the case with David, who also appears to have passed this characteristic on to his son Solomon. Better yet, it was a *prevailing sin* (or “stronghold” in David’s life) that seems to have found even *greater expression* in the heart and life of Solomon who “*loved many foreign women besides Pharaoh’s daughter...*” having, “*700 wives of royal birth and 300 concubines*” (ie: “live in prostitutes”).¹

Yet he’s not alone. Moses “prevailing sin” seems to have been outbursts of anger.² Jacob’s appears to have included lying and deception.³ Peter’s was stubborn arrogance.⁴ And Paul’s appears to have been envy or coveting. Not only do we get a sense of this from Romans 7:7-12, but we also see a glimpse of it in Philippians 3, and again in Galatians 1:14 where he tells us, “*I was advancing in Judaism beyond many Jews of my own age*” (NIV). Envy often creates a competitive spirit of “one-upmanship”—an ingrained attitude that can be helpful in sports, but is extremely unwise, divisive and even destructive when it is applied to the spiritual life.⁵

Thus, given the fact that each believer (by nature, nurture and volition) is more prone to certain sins than others, or wrestles more intensely to break certain habits, compulsions or addictions than others, so also the “*sin that prevails*” will tend to be different in each individual. Some pastors struggle with

¹ I Kings 11:1-3

² Exodus 2:11-12; Exodus 32:19-20; Num. 20:9-11.

³ Gen. 27:35-36. This is even reflected in his name which can figuratively mean: “to deceive.” His sons bore this trait as well – Gen. 34:13.

⁴ John 13:7-8; 13:37-38.

⁵ II Cor. 10:12; Gal. 5:26; James 3:14-16.

envy, greed or gossip, while others do not. Some are given to complaining, lust or pornography, while others are not. Some battle with substance abuse, compulsive spending, oppressive self-loathing thoughts, gossip, a critical spirit, and relational coldness, while others do not. For still others it's assailing doubts, depression, anger issues, arrogance, a controlling personality, self-righteousness, workaholism, unhealthy inhibitions, insecurity, lack of self-discipline, inability to receive criticism graciously, and so forth and so on *ad infinitum*...

So with that being said, let's consider some of the prevailing sins in pastors and the encouragements or weapons we can use in "*the continual and irreconcilable war*" against them.

Encouragement #1 - Weapons Against the Prevailing Sin of Permitting our Experiential Nearness to God to Languish.

In 1651 the Church of Scotland drew up what they called "*a humble acknowledgement of the sins of the ministry.*" Horatius Bonar called it, "*one of the fullest, most faithful and most impartial confessions of ministerial sins ever made.*"⁶ Included among the many sins of ministers were: 1.) Entering the ministry without a commission from Christ to do so. 2.) Acting out of self-interest rather than the interests of Christ and His church, or 3.) Seeking the pastoral office to secure a livelihood rather than glorify God through the gaining of souls. But this one was also listed: "***Lack of nearness with God.***"⁷

It is a perennial problem, and for good reason. Pastors (in general) tend to be self-motivated people. More than that, they are often "driven people" who have an almost compulsive need to achieve, sometimes far greater than their counterparts in "secular" employments. Why? Because unlike those whose motivating factor is often simply increased financial prosperity or social prestige, pastors see the honor of God, and the health and nourishment of His flock, and the salvation of souls, and the wise stewardship of their short time on earth, and the furtherance of Christ's Kingdom priorities as being intricately tied up in *what they do* and *how well they do it*.

But given what the Bible and the Savoy Declaration say about the aspects of corruption that remain even in the regenerate heart, we should not be surprised to find other less noble motivations thrown into the mix. One such motivation (which I have found common in younger pastors and recall wrestling with myself) is the very real need to "*succeed*" in the ministry—not solely for the sake of God's glory, but for the sake of proving to oneself (and others) the validity of God's call on our lives. In the minds of many a pastor and his parishioners "success" erases any question of the validity of God's call upon a person's life. We may not be consciously aware of it. We may even deny it plays a part in our compulsive workaholism or around the clock efforts to achieve, since it reeks of being impure selfish ambition. Yet it's often there—like weeds hidden amidst the wheat—fueling our priorities, our scheduling choices, and the compulsive need to achieve that drives so many of us—especially coming right out of seminary.

Likewise, when we add into that equation the fact that American culture gauges the worth or value of persons on the basis of their ability to produce or achieve; throw in the additional evangelical obsession with church size and head counts as proof of God's blessing; mix in the skyrocketing cost of housing and other necessities—and then view it all in light of the fact that many pastors (like missionaries) are totally dependent for their livelihood on the support of a congregation that either consciously or unconsciously measures "success" by increased numbers—it can't help but fuel in pastors an unspoken but acutely sensed pressure (better yet, a compulsive need) to achieve and produce.

⁶ Horatius Bonar, Words To Winners of Souls, Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, Phillipsburg, NJ, 1995, pp. 25.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pg. 26.

One needs only read “missionary prayer letters” or “the annual pastor’s report” in many churches to see how deeply this mindset pervades so much of what we do. A. W. Tozer observed and lamented its effects in his own day when he wrote: *“Immediate ‘results’ are all that matter, quick proofs of present success without the thought of next week or next year. Religious pragmatism is running wild among the orthodox. Truth is whatever works. If it gets results it is good. There is but one test for the religious leader: success. Everything is forgiven him except failure.”*⁸

The honest observer would have to admit that little has changed in the past fifty or so years since Tozer penned that statement. And such factors, if unchecked or ignored, can lead to a slew of spiritually destructive tendencies in pastors— theological compromise; the “truth is whatever works and gets results pragmatism” Tozer speaks of, psychological manipulation, the abuse of authority, people and relationships, burn-out, anger, bitterness, disillusionment, and a sense of personal inadequacy or workaholic tendencies where one is continually cranking up the degree of their activity, performance and weekly work load to the level needed to produce the desired (or demanded) results.

It’s a reality that has driven many a good man from the ministry. In fact, it’s like a swirling liquid vortex one gets sucked into so slowly they don’t realize it’s happening until they feel themselves being pulled down by things beyond their control. It can even make the pastor feel like the circus showman who has numerous plates spinning and balancing on top of short sticks as he frantically runs back and forth from one to the other trying to keep them all spinning and balanced so they don’t fall off and smash on the floor! Trying to force numerical growth is often like that. The pastor realizes he can’t slow down lest the momentum he’s trying to build diminish and things come crashing down all around him.

And what’s the most common side-effect of this unfortunate “produce or else scenario”? *Pastors (or missionaries) become so busy serving God that they lose touch with the God they serve in the midst of their hectic service for Him.* In this environment pastors can become so addicted to the adrenalin of their incessant activity for God that they wake up one day down the road only to discover there is a big difference between running on the adrenalin rush of incessant activity and being carried along by the influences of the Holy Spirit (and pastors can and do often confuse the two)!

Yet, whereas the Spirit renews our strength and refreshes us even in the midst of our busyness, the adrenalin rush of incessant activity eventually leaves us empty and burned out—like the crash I’m told one experiences with an energy drink, when all it’s sugar and caffeine eventually wears off.

[Something New?](#)

Our hectic pace of service for God can cause us to become relationally disconnected from God, because time spent doing, organizing and planning replaces time spent in intimate communion with God. Our busyness causes us to fall into the prevailing sin of many American pastors—*prayerlessness*. Yet if we think we can justify nudging out time spent in communion with Christ for “more immediate and pressing priorities” we only fool ourselves—*for there is no more urgent or pressing priority!* Bill Hybels is right—we are *“Too Busy Not To Pray.”* Few of us have learned the secret Luther knew so well when he wrote to a friend: *“I have so much to do today I must spend the first three hours in prayer.”*

Yet lest we fool ourselves by thinking we are somehow wrestling with something new, it is good to be reminded that this is *not* by any means a new problem! Edwards spoke of it in the 1700’s, and Bonar, writing in the mid-1800’s said:

We (pastors) have time for everything but prayer. Why is there so little anxiety to get time to pray? Why so little forethought in the laying out of time and employments so as to secure a large portion of each day for prayer? Why is there so much running to and fro,

⁸ A. W. Tozer, *The Root of the Righteous*, Christian Publications, Camp Hill, PA, 1986, pp. 8-9.

yet so little prayer? Why so many meetings with our fellow men, yet so few meetings with God? Why so little being alone, so little thirsting of the soul for the calm, sweet hours of unbroken solitude, when God and His child hold fellowship together as if they could never part? It is want of these solitary hours that not only injures our own growth in grace, but makes us such unprofitable members of the church of Christ. In order to grow in grace *we must be much alone*... In one single quiet hour of prayer (our soul) will often make more progress than in days of company with others. It is in the desert that the dew falls the freshest and the air is purest. So with the soul. It is when none but God is near; when His presence alone, like the desert air in which there is mingled no noxious breath of man, surrounds and pervades the soul; it is then that the eye gets the clearest, simplest view of eternal certainties; it is then that the soul gathers in wondrous refreshment and power and energy. And it is also in this way that we become truly useful to others. It is when coming out fresh from communion with God that we go forth to do His work successfully. It is in the closet that we get our vessels so filled with blessing, that, when we come forth, we cannot contain it to ourselves but must, by a blessed necessity, pour it out whithersoever we go.⁹

In Honduras I was habitually confronted by missionaries who lost touch with God in the process of serving Him. And I can tell you from the experience of listening to their personal testimonies (and from experiencing it myself)—it’s a scary thing to be a pastor (or missionary) who must stand before others two or three times a week preaching and teaching about Jesus when you have lost all intimate, soul-sustaining connection with Him.

There is a huge difference between ministry that flows from an intimate conscious awareness of the presence of Jesus—a Jesus we met with in glad communion this very morning and have continually conversed with throughout the day—and ministry done by a person who has lost all sense of intimate contact with Jesus weeks, months or even years ago. It’s frightening—***indeed it’s something we need to repent for***—if we have become pastors who find ourselves relationally distant and disconnected from the Saviour we are called to love and serve with all our heart, soul, mind and strength.

Some Scriptural Admonitions

This issue (I believe) is at least in part what the “*angel of the church in Ephesus*” addresses in Revelation 2:1-7, and again in 3:14-20. In chapter 2, the angel conveys a message of warning and rebuke to a church that is *doing all the right things*, and *has been doing all them all along*, but is now doing them *without the love for God and one another* that once filled their hearts and motivated them in all that they did. “*You have left your first love,*” says the Lord, most likely in the process of doing what they were doing.

Speaking of this condition Robert Mounce says, “*A cooling of personal love for God inevitably results in the loss of harmonious relationships within the body of believers... Brotherly love was the distinctive badge of Christian discipleship, but at Ephesus hatred of heresy and extensive involvement in the works appropriate to faith had allowed the first fresh glow of love to God and one another to fade.*”¹⁰ In such cases there is only one acceptable remedy—repent and make whatever changes are necessary to restore the nearness and intimacy of that affectionate relationship with Christ which they once enjoyed and saw overflow into their relationships with each other.

⁹ Horatius Bonar, Words To Winners of Souls, Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, Phillipsburg, NJ, 1995, pp. 44-45.

¹⁰ Robert Mounce, The Book of Revelation, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, MI, 1980, pg. 88.

Jesus (if we understand this passage correctly) will not permit (at least not for very long) service rendered in His name that is devoid of affectionate love for Himself, His flock and those we seek to reach with the Good News of God’s gracious and free pardon in Him. Yet they have lost it, and appear to be doing nothing to restore it. In their service for Jesus they had lost that “*rich relationship of mutual love shared by persons who have just experienced the redemptive love of God.*”¹¹ They were doing all the right things, but “*the eagerness to root out all mistaken men had ended in a sour and rigid orthodoxy.*”¹² Theological precisionists can often overlook one important truth: “*Without love, the congregation ceases to be a church.*”¹³

The same element seems to have been present in Laodicea. The imagery of Jesus standing outside the church of which He is Head and seeking to regain entrance into it is very sad but powerful imagery. The context makes it clear this is *not* an evangelistic text. These are *not* unbelievers whom Jesus is calling to and asking to “*savingly open the door of their heart to Him.*” These are regenerate believers who over time (and surely in a way so gradual they never saw it happening) have come to nudge Jesus out of their own lives and the communal life of the church, thinking they possess in themselves all that they need. They are doing “Christian” things (v. 15), but those “things” lack the vitality and life that comes from habitual reliance upon God and constant intimate communion with Christ through the Holy Spirit. They are neither hot nor cold, but lukewarm—the condition of spirit we all gradually fall into if we allow ourselves to become distanced from the One who is said to be light, heat and fire.¹⁴

[The Weapons for this Prevailing Sin](#)

The prescribed remedy in both cases is the same—***repent***. “*Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest and repent.*”¹⁵ They are to repent for allowing lesser things to nudge Jesus from His place of preeminence and supremacy in their lives. “*The invitation is addressed to each individual in the congregation: “if any man” hear and open.*”¹⁶ And if one does “open the door” to Jesus intimate presence again, what is the divine promise? “*He enters and joins them in table fellowship.*”¹⁷ “*Christ and the believer dine together, which in the East was an indication of special friendship and covenant relationship.*”¹⁸ In other words, it is an invitation to restored or “*blessed fellowship with His Savior and Lord.*”¹⁹ It is a call to restored relational intimacy.

Yet, in addition to repenting the angel offers the Ephesians two other “weapons” to battle the common prevailing sin of forsaking one’s first love: “*Remember the height from which you have fallen*” and “*Do the things you did at first.*” The two together could be summarized this way: “*Think back (as a congregation and as individuals) to the way it used to be between you and Me, and you and each other, when the fire of that first love burned in your hearts. Repent for allowing it to deteriorate into the sad state it’s now in, and then set yourselves to doing the things you remember doing at first.*”

The memory is a powerful weapon in the process of both preventing spiritual decline and restoring it once it has declined. The Psalmists and the prophets continually call the people of God to “remember”—remember God, the wonders and miracles He has done, His mercy and kindness and

¹¹ Ibid., pg. 88.

¹² William Barclay, The Daily Study Bible – The Revelation of John, The Westminster Press, Philadelphia, PA, 1957, pg. 77.

¹³ Robert Mounce, The Book of Revelation, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, MI, 1980, pg. 89.

¹⁴ Exodus 14:24; Jeremiah 20:9; Song of Songs 8:6; John 1:4-5; I Thess. 5:19; etc.

¹⁵ Revelation 3:19.

¹⁶ Robert Mounce, The Book of Revelation, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, MI, 1980, pg. 129.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ William Hendrickson, More Than Conquerors, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, MI, 1986, pg. 79.

¹⁹ Ibid, pg. 79.

righteous acts, His love and faithfulness, and on and on... In fact, the cause of much spiritual regression is found in our failure to “remember.”²⁰ “Remember,” says the angel to the church at Sardis, “*what you have received* (ie: the grace of pardon, regeneration, justification, reconciliation, adoption, the Holy Spirit...) *and heard* (the Gospel!); *obey it and repent.*”²¹ We frequently need to think back and call to mind the things God has done for us, and “*the things we did at first*”—the employments we used to secure large portions of time with Him, and the sweetness of those past times of affectionate communion with Him. Then, heed the angelic admonition and *start doing those same things again!*

Driving it Home

This gives me pause to ask you: Do you frequently reflect upon the mercies you’ve received from His blessed hand? Do you remember the things you did at first, in the care of your soul and in the nurture of your relationship with Christ that you don’t do now?

Do you, like me, remember the days when you read your Bible in a devotional rather than academic way—not for the purpose of preparing a lesson, or studying the historical context of a passage, or parsing Greek verbs, or preparing a sermon—but simply for the sake of wanting to meet Jesus in His Word face to face and know Him better. Times in prayer that you wished would never end? Hours spent in what Edwards called “ejaculatory prayer” where the Holy Spirit “*appeared as an infinite fountain of divine glory and sweetness, being full and sufficient to satisfy the soul, pouring forth itself in sweet communications, like the sun in all its glory, sweetly diffusing light and life.*”²²

Do you remember the days when you couldn’t be deterred from rising early in the solitude of the morning to be sure not to miss the opportunity of meeting with Christ before the day began, because when you did the whole day seemed distinctively “off kilter.” Days when we saw the indispensable need to do what George Mueller advised when he wrote, “*The first great and primary business to which I ought to attend every day, was to have my soul happy in the Lord. The first thing to be concerned about was not, how much I might serve the Lord, or how I might glorify the Lord, but how I might get my soul into a happy state, and how my inner man may be nourished...*”²³ We do ourselves and our growth in godliness a distinct disservice when we forget to do this, or worse yet, think it isn’t one of our primary daily priorities and necessities.

Ecstasy and delight are essential to the believer’s soul and they promote sanctification. We were not meant to live without spiritual exhilaration, and the Christian who goes for long without the experience of heart-warming will soon find himself tempted to have his emotions satisfied from earthly things and not, as he ought, from the Spirit of God. The soul is so constituted that it craves fulfillment from things outside itself and will embrace earthly joys for satisfaction when it cannot reach spiritual ones... The believer is in spiritual danger if he allows himself to go for any length of time without tasting the love of Christ and savoring the felt comforts of a Savior’s presence. When Christ ceases to fill the heart with satisfaction, our souls will go in silent search of other lovers... Because the Lord has made Himself accessible to us in the means of grace, it is our duty and privilege to seek this experience from Him, in these means, till we are made the joyful partakers of it.²⁴

²⁰ Psalm 106:7

²¹ Revelation 3:3

²² Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, Vol. 1, Banner of Truth Trust, Carlisle, PA, 1984, pg.47.

²³ Quoted in John Piper, *Desiring God*, Multnomah Books, Sisters, OR, 1996, pg. 122.

²⁴ Maurice Roberts, *The Thought of God*, Banner of Truth, Carlisle, PA, 1994, pp. 57-58.

Encouragement #2 - Weapons Against the Prevailing Sin of Relational Adultery and Excusing Marital Disharmony.

I recently told a group of adults in the Adult Bible Hour at my church that there is an intricate, inseparable, and divinely ordained connection between the health of a pastor's relationship with his wife and the health of his relationship with Christ. It doesn't take long to learn this lesson. Maybe you as well have run into this scenario on a Sunday morning:

Things go well all week long. You are excited about the message you have for your people. You sense it is exactly what God wants you to share with them for His glory and their edification, and so you look forward to the Lord's Day service with great anticipation. You wake up early on Sunday morning, start to get ready, and then it happens—for some inexplicable reason all havoc seems to break loose! The kids wake up cranky—one trips coming down the stairs and bursts into tears while the other, distracted by all the commotion, spills his yogurt on the carpet! You try to keep your cool and keep things moving, but it seems like one calamity after another. Your 13 year old son bumps into his 12 year old sister and a needless argument ensues. Irritation builds up until you yell at your wife for being upstairs putting her last minute make-up on while you're trying to get the family out the door! She doesn't seem to understand how all this is affecting your once excited spiritual condition, so she yells back and asks why you don't understand your need to help out with the kids as she gets ready, since while you were getting ready she was busy getting them breakfast and doing some last minute ironing!

It's amazing how many times pastors have expressed similar scenarios taking place on a Sunday morning in particular. Why? *Because Satan knows that no pastor can mount the pulpit on a Sunday morning and preach with unhindered focus, clarity and power when he and his wife are at odds with one another.* This is especially true if hard or harsh words were spoken and left unresolved, and she ends up sitting right there in the front pew with that "you hypocrite" look on her face (at least that's what our afflicted consciences assume she's thinking)! This happened to me in Honduras, though not on a Sunday morning, since I learned long ago to head to the church at 4:30 am to avoid even the slightest possibility of such things occurring! God would not let me open my mouth to preach until I stopped the service, and there in front of the whole congregation, publically asked Nancy to forgive me for being so insensitive and critical the night before. I couldn't preach with my spirit being at odds with my wife—at least I couldn't preach *unhindered*.

And it's not just in regard to preaching. There seems to be a direct correlation (a divinely intended correlation?) between the health of the relationship a pastor has with his wife, and the overall health of the ministry he carries on at his church. As I went on to tell that class: *"When things are going badly between Nancy and me, it spills over negatively into my ministry at the church, and when my relationship with her is going well, it spills over positively into all I do at the church."* I can try to fight it, or hide it, or deny it, but the effect it has for better or worse is there whether I want to admit it or not!

What this means is that as a pastor I cannot afford to allow my relationship with my wife to deteriorate. As my help-meet whom I am called to *"love...as Christ loved the church,"*²⁵ I owe her my affectionate care. She is my wife, and I have covenanted before God to forsake all others and love her in that way. More than that she has become one with me in such a way that Paul can say, *"He who loves his*

²⁵ Ephesians 5:25 - by far one of the hardest commands in the Bible!

*wife loves himself.*²⁶ To fail to care for her is as foolish as to fail to care for a part of me. To allow relational disharmony to persist in my marriage is tantamount to allowing a gangrenous infection in my arm to fester and grow untreated! The effects of not loving Nancy not only deprive her of what she needs and deserves as my covenant partner, but also rob me (and vicariously my children and the people under my pastoral care) of the spiritually life-enriching effects God intends to spill over from my life into the lives of those closest to me. I not only owe it to Nancy to love her, I owe it to my kids and my congregation to keep our marriage in a healthy and loving state. As the divinely ordained head of my family²⁷ that responsibility falls primarily upon me.

[A Growing Trend?](#)

In Honduras I had to encourage six missionaries to leave the field (over the eleven years that I was there) due to infidelity of a physical nature. But I had to confront an even more prevalent infidelity as well—what I will call “emotional infidelity.” It’s an infidelity that is easy to excuse because so often it is accompanied by physical chastity. I’ve seen it in the states as well. Many pastors and lay people excuse this form of “adultery,” and even consciously nurture it, because it *has not*, and *will not* (so far as they have tried to convince themselves) ever become “physical.” Jay Kesler described this mindset well: “*Growing up in a more Victorian age... I had been taught that as long as you weren't sexually unfaithful, other kinds of intimacy didn't matter. Now I realize how wrong that notion is.*”²⁸ Who, when honest, could disagree?

Sometimes this emotional adultery is overt and sometimes it is hidden from the view or the perception of all onlookers under the guise of mere “friendliness” with the opposite sex. In fact, since only God and the pastor himself can truly know what is going on in his heart, it is hard to say that it’s not simply friendliness. Likewise, I’m not suggesting there are not many good and purely platonic relationships between pastors and women in their congregations. I have no intention of denying this is so. But there are many that are not simply *general cordial friendliness*—something we know from observation and personal experience. Some drift into a more *particular* friendliness—friendliness with a flirtatious intent. Friendliness directed toward one particular woman. Friendliness that over time finds itself mingled with thoughts and affections that transgress the boundaries allowable for a man who pledged before God to “*forsake all others*” and “*be faithful (to the wife of his youth) as long as they both shall live.*”²⁹

In such cases it is safe to say that regardless of whether this emotional form of adultery ever becomes physical, such emotional forays, fantasies or the secret giving of one’s husbandly romantic affections to someone other than his wife (especially when it is excused or secretly nurtured) is not only dangerous, *it is sin*—a sin that often gains strength and prevails precisely because *we give it permission to persist* through moralistic rationalizations and volitional endorsements in the heart.

I’ve spoken with many (I’ve argued with at least four pastors/missionaries) who told me there was nothing wrong with the emotional fixation or adulterous intimacy they engaged in with another woman (including the writing of love notes) because it had not become physical or sexual.

²⁶ Ephesians 5:28

²⁷ Ephesians 5:23

²⁸ Jay Kesler, *Being Holy Being Human: Dealing With the Incredible Expectations and Pressures of Ministry*, Baker Books, Grand Rapids, MI, 1994, pg.

²⁹ *The Book of Common Prayer*, The Celebration and Blessing of a Marriage, Morehouse Publishing, Harrisburg, PA.

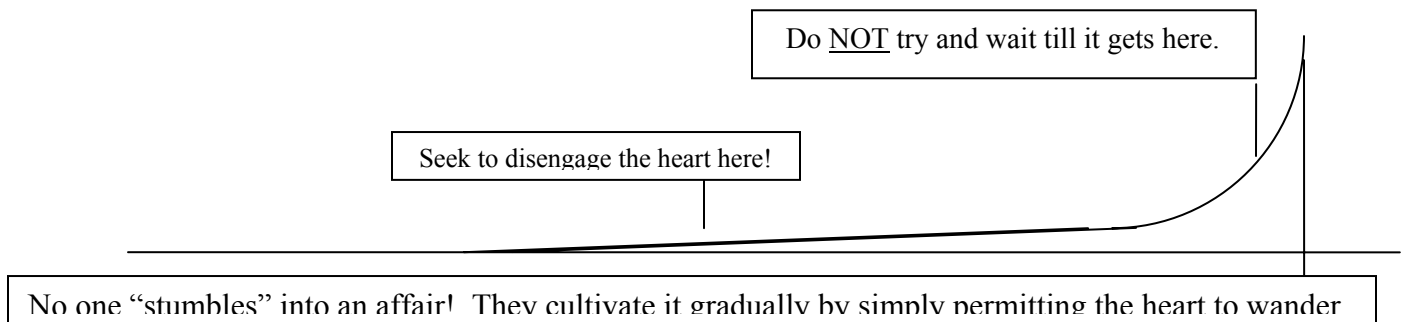
Warning Signs

When any pastor finds himself enjoying the company of another woman more than his wife; when he shares with that woman on a more in-depth or intimate level than with his own wife; when he discovers that his affections for that woman are becoming stronger than those which he has for his own wife, he should see red flags going off all over the place, pull back immediately and guard his heart!

When he finds himself enjoying close physical proximity to one particular lady, or finds himself seeking her out in a crowd, or desiring to converse with her in particular, or even finds himself purposely going to a place where he knows she will be so that they might possibly “*bump into each other by chance*,” he should beware that sin is crouching at his door and seeking to prevail. In fact, it *will* prevail, and in a very real sense *already has prevailed*, simply by permitting it to persist or secretly nurturing such desires in the heart. If there were ever a scenario in which one could see the words of James played out in a vivid high definition display, it is this one: “*Each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.*”³⁰ It’s a sin that must be nipped in the bud *immediately*, lest the *emotional adultery* that prevails in the heart come to be an *emotional and physical adultery* that prevails in her bedroom as well.

The road to sexual intimacy usually begins with the growth of emotional and intellectual intimacy, and there's plenty of opportunity for that in the pastorate—social contact, counseling, significant conversation about personal topics. The development of a warm relationship into one with sexual overtones can be very subtle, which makes it all the more dangerous; dealing with sexual temptation would be a lot easier if it were based just on physical desire, which is easier to recognize.³¹

The Graph of Infidelity and the Need to Repent Before it Prevails



The Current Situation

According to a study done by Christianity Today, 23% of all pastors confess to having acted in a sexually inappropriate way with members of the opposite sex³²—usually with someone in the church—and those figures only reflect the pastors who under a promise of confidentiality and anonymity were honest enough to admit it. The real figures are surely much higher. In fact, 79% of the pastors polled said

³⁰ James 1:13-15

³¹ Jay Kesler, Being Holy Being Human: Dealing With the Incredible Expectations and Pressures of Ministry, Baker Books, Grand Rapids, MI, 1994. Christianity Today .<http://www.ctlibrary.com/57081988>

³² Christianity Today .<http://www.ctlibrary.com/57081988>

they personally know at least one other minister who had engaged in an extramarital sexual relationship while pastoring a church. Yet, lest we point fingers, it's probably good to recall that as men we are *all* susceptible to such temptation. No honest man can claim total immunity. *"We all struggle in this area, and some have fallen,"* says Kesler in a book written primarily to pastors. *"It's a serious problem, one of the most serious we face in the tension between being holy and being human. There's probably no surer way to damage a pastor's ministry."*³³ He even goes on to point out that,

Given the usual process by which sexual sin comes about, it naturally follows that the most important part of resisting sexual temptation is to maintain a good marriage relationship... I know that with all the demands we face, including obligations to our children, finding the time to maintain this kind of relationship with a spouse isn't easy — but there's simply no more important human relationship in the world for us to maintain. It's worth the effort and time and money it takes.³⁴

³³ Jay Kesler.

³⁴ Ibid. Jay goes on to share the following material as another weapon against the prevailing sin of sexual temptation:

"Another big help to me in actually avoiding lust has been what I call contextualization. I pastored a church for fifteen years, and after about the twelfth year it dawned on me one day that I'd never had a sexual thought about any woman in the church. That amazed me, frankly, because I'm a sexual being like anyone else. I have sexual thoughts. I notice when I see a beautiful woman on the street; I didn't go blind when I became a Christian. In fact, earlier in my Christian life, when my buddies and I talked honestly, we all admitted that maintaining sexual purity was one of the major struggles of the younger man. Why hadn't I had sexual thoughts about women in the church? As I thought about it, I finally realized it was because I saw each of them in context. I knew all the people there so well that I knew everyone's husband, wife, son, and daughter, and many of the parents and grandparents, too. No one could be an object of lust to me without my being reminded of that person's other relationships. I knew that everyone there was a dear person to other people I knew and cared for. This included the women, and I couldn't look at them apart from their contexts of family and friends. The only way you can prey on people and turn them into some kind of objects, especially for lust, is to mentally get them out of context. Conversely, if you think of them in context, you're not nearly so tempted to lust. Thus, I find it a good practice in ministry to continually think of people in context. For example, suppose I'm driving down the street and see some beautiful teenager who's dressed in an attention-getting way. My automatic response now is to contextualize her, to say to myself, "Hey, she's about the age of my daughter. I wonder who her parents are and how she gets along with them?" And suddenly the sexual part of it disappears. The girl hasn't changed, but my perception has. Instead of being an object of sexual thoughts, she's become someone's daughter, someone's little girl. The same thing is true now that I find myself a college president on a campus that has its share of beautiful coeds. I can't say I haven't noticed them—I'm not blind—but I can honestly say that I don't think of them as a sexual turn-on. To me, they're all someone's daughters, someone's sisters, someone's granddaughters. After I realized how my mind's eye was seeing people in context, I also realized that this is a biblical principle. It's what Paul told Timothy to do in — relate to older women as mothers, to younger women as sisters.

I've also seen enough lives and ministries ruined by sexual sin that that's a deterrent for me. I've had frightening temptations in my own life that help deter me, too; just thinking about what might have happened if they'd gone another step in the wrong direction scares a lot of sense into me when I need it. We might call that putting yourself in context when you're tempted. One time when I was much younger, I was flying to Denver on business, and a young woman in her twenties was sitting next to me. As we were flying, I noticed she was crying. I wondered if I should say anything or just respect her privacy. But after several minutes, I finally said, "Is there any way I can help you?" "I don't know," she said, then looked away. "Well, I'm involved in youth work, in Youth for Christ," I said. "And I'd be happy to just talk to you if that would help." She began to open up then. She said she had been engaged to a young man, and she'd just learned that he had run off to marry another woman. "The worst part of it is I'm still a virgin," she said. She went on to say that she had always believed that if you kept yourself pure, everything would turn out right. Now she had decided that since a "wild girl" had stolen her man, her remaining pure had been to no avail, and she was going to go to some ski lodge and make up for lost time. "Do you think it's worth giving up what you've always believed because of one painful experience?" I asked. "I don't know," she said, then sank into silence. Finally she continued, "Well, where are you staying tonight?" I told her, and she said she was staying there, too. Then she suggested that maybe after we arrived we could "have a couple of drinks together and see how the evening turns out." In effect, she was inviting me to help her initiate her new lifestyle. "I don't want you to be confused," I said. "Let me show you my pictures." I took out my wallet and showed her my family photos. Though I didn't realize it at the time, I

Encouragement #3 – Weapons Against the Prevailing Sin of Mixed Up Priorities.

One night I was awakened from my sleep breathing heavily and perspiring. I had been dreaming that I was driving my car at a good clip when I came to a hill and proceeded down it. Sensing the need to slow down, I stepped on the brakes of my car only to discover that they had been cut! My foot went to the floor and the car sped down the hill at break-neck speed! With no ability to stop, and dreading a head on collision, I wrestled with all my might just to keep the car from running headlong into the telephone poles I was clipping on the side of the road as I sped down the hill out of control. It was my efforts at trying to stop the “car,” and a heart-stopping near miss with another pole that eventually woke me from my sleep sweating and out of breath.

If you know anything about dreams you will know the meaning. It was not prophetic. God was not in any way saying I would soon have a “car accident.” It was a warning from God—a warning that I needed to slow down. The “car” was me, and I was going at such a frantic clip in my life that if I didn’t slow down I stood in danger of “crashing.” The “gas peddle” was the adrenalin that was fueling my increased pace of life, and the “cut brake lines” were my inability to slow myself down (Adrenalin can be very addictive.) It was God’s way of confirming something Nancy had been telling me for *months*—I needed to slow down and cut back on the hours I put in at the church.

She was suffering, our relationship was suffering, my kids were suffering, and I was suffering. I had returned not long before from a visit to the emergency room in Fall River where the doctor told me I was suffering ulcerations in the lining of my stomach due to stress.

My church was like many New England churches—small—about 30 people when I first arrived (35 on a really good Sunday). The office was in the parsonage, along with the church copier and typewriter (an antiquated manual one). I was the church secretary, worship leader, Sunday School Superintendent (not too hard since there was only one child in the entire church besides my two who were both still in diapers!), ex-officio member of all the boards, church handyman, taught two Bible studies, led a weekly early morning men’s prayer meeting, taught Adult Sunday School class, preached Sunday morning and evening, and with an aging congregation did much hospital and nursing home visitation. I also had a part time job making crafts and furniture to supplement our \$800 a month salary, had at least two or three foster children in the house at any one given time, and my own two children both under two.

To make matters worse, the leadership had some people who were decidedly non-evangelical in their orientation. They wanted the church to grow, but not that way! And it also didn’t help that the head deacon had informed everyone present at my ordination council that the church had been through many

was putting myself in context. Looking at your wife and children really cools a potentially hot situation. After I showed her the photos, I went on, "I sympathize with the pain you feel. If you need someone to tell you you're pretty, let me tell you that you're very pretty. If you need someone to tell you you're sexually attractive, let me tell you that you're very attractive and desirable. But if you want me to say I'm willing to act on that desire, no, I'm not going to do it. You're vulnerable right now; you're in a difficult situation. Further, I'm married. I'm also a Christian. And I'm not going to do it because it would mean taking advantage of you and violating my commitments and my faith." Then I explained a bit of how my faith commitment guides my life. She was silent for a few minutes, but then she said, "Well, if I thought that by waiting the rest of my life I could find another man who would turn down the offer I made to you tonight, I'd stay a virgin till I found him." I replied, "There are more guys like me out there than you may think. I hope you don't go through with your plan." When we got to Denver, I put the young woman in touch with some female YFC staff, and she stayed the night with them. They spent a few days with her and then sent her back home. So far, thank God, I've never been given that kind of offer when I was vulnerable. But I have been tempted, and it's always helped me to put both the woman and myself in context... Sexual temptation is all around us these days, and if we're honest with ourselves, we know we're often vulnerable. In spite of all we do to avoid tempting situations, there will be times, such as my experience on the plane, when temptation will stare us right in the face. Our job is to prepare ourselves and keep our marriages strong before we find ourselves in those situations so that when the temptations come, we'll be able to maintain our integrity—and our ministries."

struggles and pastors in the past decade, and I was their “last attempt” at keeping the doors open. “If it doesn’t work out with Jeff,” he said, “we will close the church doors and sell the building.” That was it. I had been given my mandate. I couldn’t fail (them or God). I would make that church work if it killed me—and it nearly did!

Then one day a man came to my church with his five children. He had been a pastor, but due to many unfortunate circumstances, he had been forced to leave the pastorate. He attended for a few months only to pull me aside one day and say: “Jeff, you’re putting in too many hours at the church.” And after a few more pointed admonitions and a candid confession that he had worked so hard at his previous church that he also had neglected his relationship with his wife, he ended with these words: “*Jeff, if you were to leave this church today, chances are that five or ten years from now no one would even remember your name. But your family will be with you always.*”

That was it—my wife’s pleas, followed by the ulcer, followed by the dream, followed by the loving rebuke of another pastor was enough! I’m dense, but not so dense that I couldn’t realize God was using every possible means of grace to get me to slow down and reorient my priorities. As a result I cut my hours back from 70-75+ per week to just over 55.

[A Common Problem](#)

What was my problem? I had a skewed view of the protestant work ethic; a misunderstanding of what it meant to glorify God; a fear of failing in the task laid upon me by God and an innocent (yet potentially deadly) reversal of two simple life priorities. Until that time I had always placed things in this order: *God first. Church second. Family third.* God, I believe, was simply asking me to reverse the order of the last two: *God first. Family second. Church third.* It’s so easy to unwittingly feed prevailing sin simply by reversing those last two priorities.

How does it happen? By misunderstanding and misapplying Luke 14:26 – “*If you do not hate father and mother....*” It happens through theological ignorance, spiritual immaturity and the adoption of some semi-Gnostic influences that somehow convince us that what we do for God somehow outweighs what we need to do for our families. Numerous pastors (much more seasoned than I) have struggled with this in an ongoing way, failing to heed Paul’s admonition that “*He who does not care for his own family or relatives is worse than an unbeliever*”—even if he’s a pastor!

As Josh McDowell once said when asked if he ever put ministry before his family, “*Never,*” was his response. And as I waited to see how he could say this, he responded: “*My family is my ministry—the primary ministry God has given me charge over.*” He’s right. There is no “love God” vs. “love my wife and kids” dichotomy. I mean, there often is, but it’s an imaginary one we have created in our minds. To love God places upon me the *demand* that I love the family He has entrusted into my spiritual care, and to love my family *is* to love the God whose name I honor by doing so, or dishonor by failing to do so.

There are probably few pastors alive today who have not wrestled with this at some point in their ministry. In fact, many pastors grow to regret it was a lesson they learned too late—seeing their children grow to resent them, the church, and our blessed faith, because “dad” cared more for the spiritual and emotional welfare of others than he did for his own wife and children. It’s a sin that “prevails” because it is so subtle and deceptive, and hard to let go of if we somehow “need” to receive the accolades that come our way for our sacrificial service and commitment to the church.

In this regard we would do well to adopt the Puritan belief that each family is a “church” and the husband/father is the pastor/priest of his wife and children. McDowell’s statement reflects a Puritan ideal—“*My family is my ministry—the primary ministry God has given me charge over.*” We need to recover that understanding. Our wives and children are the *primary core constituents of our congregation*, and it is our duty to lovingly pastor them, first and foremost. Not only that, they are the closest of the

“neighbors” God *commands* us to love—the ones residing under our roof. They depend upon our pastoral care, provision and instruction more than any of our other “parishioners.”

Encouragement #4 – The Prevailing Sin of Neglecting the Confession of our Sins to Another.

There are few things I have found pastors to dread more than confessing their sins to another person. I would concur with Bonhoeffer: “*Confession in the presence of a brother is the profoundest kind of humiliation. It hurts, it cuts a man down, it is a dreadful blow to pride. To stand there before a brother as a sinner is an ignominy that is almost unbearable.*”³⁵ Yet there are few things I have found to be more useful as a weapon against particular prevailing sins. Nothing is more disconcerting than exposing the depravity of our soul to another, yet nothing is more helpful in humbling the sinner and emptying sin of its potentially destructive power over our lives. Audible transparent confession of particular sins to another brother in Christ has a profound effect upon us and sin’s influences in us. James knew that as well as any, and thus he could admonish all believers: “*Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.*”³⁶ The imperative nature of the admonition makes it stronger than a mere suggestion.

Yet sadly enough, though I have heard the last half of that one verse expounded on hundreds of times in my 27 years of involvement in evangelical circles, I have never heard the first half focused on in any of those messages—an overreaction to what most evangelicals consider something “Catholics” do. Yet (contextually speaking) the two segments cannot be separated from each other, nor preached on correctly if separated, for in the context the “powerful and effective” prayer spoken of in the last half of the verse is prayer for the person who has just confessed their sins publically in the presence of the elders of the church! It is a verse about confession and heartfelt prayer for the healing of people struggling with the *particular sin issues* they just confessed! And although “*the elders of the church*” are the one’s being confessed to, it is a practice elders themselves are not exempt from.

Yet it should also be pointed out that many pastors do not confess their sins to another, not because the *practice* is too “Catholic,” but because *their view of their role as pastor* is too “Catholic.” They gladly hear confession from others in the evangelical version of the “Roman confessional” (the church office), but fear the role reversal of confessing their own sins to another. And it’s not merely an overly catholicized view of their role as pastor that is at fault. It’s the lack of grace that often prevails in many churches. Many pastors I know would welcome confession if they didn’t fear they would be rejected or shunned if they were actually honest enough to reveal the depth of their inner struggles openly and transparently *with someone from their congregation*.

It may be that Christians, notwithstanding corporate worship, common prayer, and all their fellowship in service, may still be left to their loneliness. The final break-through to fellowship does not occur, because, though they have fellowship with one another as believers and as devout people, they do not have fellowship as the undevout—as sinners. The pious fellowship permits no one to be a sinner. So everybody must conceal his sin from himself and the fellowship. We dare not be sinners. Many Christians are unthinkably horrified when a real sinner is suddenly discovered among the righteous. So we remain alone with our sin, living in lies and hypocrisy. The fact is that we *are* sinners! The grace of the Gospel, which is so hard for the pious to understand...says: You are a sinner, a great,

³⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Life Together, Harper and Row, New York, NY, 1954, pp. 114.

³⁶ James 5:16

desperate sinner; now come as the sinner you are to the God who loves you. He wants you as you are; He does not want anything from you—a sacrifice or a work. He wants you alone... This is the message of liberation through truth.³⁷

Despite all our talk of grace, and our proficiency in the doctrines of grace in Reformed circles, grace is often very lacking in our churches when it comes to dealing with sin—especially in relation to pastors. People often seem to forget that Paul’s pastoral admonition should also extend to pastors as well: “*If someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently,*”³⁸ not crucify him mercilessly!

Yet this fear leads both pastors and parishioners to get their shovels out, dig a hole in the earthen floor of the basement of their soul, and bury their sins where no eye find them. We are so good at masking our struggles, and pretending all is well, until our lack of wellness is evidenced in a public scandal that “unthinkably horrifies” the pious. We claim to believe in “total depravity” or “radical corruption” which gives rise to a “*continual and irreconcilable war*” (at least we believe it in *theory*), but we cringe to admit it’s *really* going on—especially in us—the pastor.

Yet, as many Christians have hopefully discovered, burying sin only causes it to grow. Sin concealed is sin fertilized. Evil concealed is evil empowered. Nothing is more spiritually dangerous, and nothing feeds the power of prevailing sin more, than a Christian who keeps their struggles, sins and deep dark secrets buried in the damp soil of the basement of their soul, where like mold not exposed to the light of day, it simply spreads and grows.

Sin wants to remain unknown. It shuns the light. In the darkness of the unexpressed it poisons the whole being of the person. This can happen even in the midst of a pious community. In confession the light of the Gospel breaks into the darkness and seclusion of the heart. The sin must be brought into the light. The unexpressed must be openly spoken and acknowledged. All that is secret and hidden is made manifest. It is a hard struggle until sin is openly admitted... Since the confession of sin is made in the presence of a Christian brother, the last stronghold of self-justification is abandoned. The sinner surrenders; he gives up all his evil. He gives his heart to God, and finds the forgiveness of all his sin in the fellowship of Jesus Christ and his brother. The expressed, acknowledged sin has lost all its power... He is no longer alone with his evil for he has cast off his sin in confession and handed it over to God. It has been taken away from him. Now he stands in the fellowship of sinners who live by the grace of God in the Cross of Jesus Christ. Now he can be a sinner and still enjoy the grace of God. He can confess his sins and in this very act find fellowship for the first time. The sin concealed separated him from the fellowship, made all his apparent fellowship a sham; but the sin confessed has helped him to find true fellowship with the brethren in Jesus Christ...³⁹

There are few things that can destroy the power of prevailing sin more than the continual transparent confession of our struggles to a trusted Christian friend or brother who is both compassionate enough to sit with us and listen and pray, and yet honest, and secure and fearless enough to speak the truth we need to hear—even if he feels it would put the relationship at risk. This is even more necessary for pastors who already feel the immense pressure of living in a fishbowl, and sustaining

³⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, Harper and Row, New York, NY, 1954, pp. 110-111.

³⁸ Galatians 6:1

³⁹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, Harper and Row, New York, NY, 1954, pp. 110-113.

an impeccable (often unrealistic and unachievable) image in the community. This constant pressure, when unabated can actually feed the power of sin, unless he finds someone with whom he is able to let his guard down, unburden his soul, and be real with his struggles in the presence of someone who cares.

Unrealistic pressures and expectations, and the need to pretend we “have it all together” combined with an inability to “let our guard down and be human” can actually feed the prevailing sins of pretending, hypocrisy, anger, jealousy, unforgiveness, joylessness, a critical spirit, frustration and hard-heartedness. Yet being honest, and letting that guard down, and confessing particular struggles and having “*a righteous man*” pray specifically for those prevailing sin-struggles, is a divinely prescribed means of grace that actually leads “*the regenerate part to overcome.*”

Encouragement #5 – The Prevailing Sin of Failing to Trust God in Affliction

Probably the most prevailing sin for any man, apart from the sin of self-righteousness, is the sin of failing to trust God under afflictions. John Flavel expresses it well when he says in his classic work “Keeping the Heart”:

When providence frowns upon you and blasts your outward comforts, then look to your hearts. Keep them with all diligence from repining against God or fainting under His hand. For troubles, though sanctified, are troubles still. Even sweet briars and thistles have their prickles. Jonah was a good man, and yet how peevish was his heart under affliction! Job was the mirror of patience, yet how his heart was decomposed by his troubles! You will find it as hard to get a composed spirit under great afflictions as it is to form liquid metal. They shake to the core and cause tumults in even the best of hearts!⁴⁰

Flavel is right. There are few things more likely to dismantle and discompose the heart of even the most mature saint, than severe and painful afflictions of heart, body and mind. And (as with Job) this dismantling can sometimes happen to a greater degree in those who firmly believe in the absolute sovereign control of God over every aspect of His creation.

Those who believe that the term “*sovereign*” means God is “*in charge*” (like the president of the United States supposes himself to be) rather than *in control* (as the Absolute Potentate the Bible is—the One apart from whose “*will,*” or “*willing it,*” even a nameless sparrow cannot fall to the ground) may actually have an easier time keeping their heart from “repining” against God. In fact, if they follow the sub-Christian views of God’s foreknowledge and sovereignty put forth by some⁴¹ they may actually feel sorry for God, and be His comforter, since in their minds He would *like* to prevent all suffering, but alas He *cannot*—His hands tied by His own inherent weaknesses, mutability and self-limitations. In their minds, God is “let off the hook,” in the same way that we let our friends off the hook when they yearn to help or change our circumstances but lack either the power, resources or ability to do so.

Yet those of reformed theological persuasion have no such luxury. Our understanding of God’s infinite power, glory and might erase such a possibility. We know and are fully convinced, as the Savoy clearly states, that, “*God from all eternity did by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will, freely and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass.*” Even if He does so in such a way that He is neither “*the author of sin,*” and “*does no violence to the will of the creature,*” and does not thereby do away with “*the contingency of second causes,*” we know He could still prevent, lessen or eradicate our afflictions if He should so choose. This makes the temptation to “repine” (like Job)⁴² or “become despondent” (like

⁴⁰ John Flavel, Keeping the Heart, Soli Deo Gloria Publications, Morgan, PA, 1999, pg. 29 (language updated in places).

⁴¹ Ie: Gregory Boyd and John Sanders.

⁴² Job 16:11-13/ 19:21-22/ 23:13-17...

Paul)⁴³ an even greater temptation for those whose majestic view of God makes Him the ultimate Governor behind, and Lord over, every affliction.

In regard to the weapons against this sin, which I've found to prevail more in the hearts and minds of reformed people than non-reformed people (even if not expressed outwardly) I offer the "weapons" I as a reformed thinker have found to be of great comfort and help to myself and others under my care.

1.) The Doctrine of Justification:

Nothing sustains the soul more during times of intense pain than the assurance that the afflictions I am experiencing do not come my way from the hand of an angry God or as an expression of His wrath or condemnation of me for something I did or am doing. And nothing gives me more assurance of this than the biblical doctrine of justification. Wilcox put it well: "*Christ drank up all the Father's wrath at one draught; and nothing but salvation is left for you.*"⁴⁴ God poured out all His righteous anger, wrath and condemnation against my sins upon the Sin-bearer as He suffered in my stead, and thus there is no more vengeful anger, wrath and condemnation against those sins still to be poured out upon me. To even suggest it is to say the sacrifice of Jesus was insufficient to pay the penalty for all my sins.

I may and will still be exposed to His discipline, punishment and Fatherly chastisement for my sins, but that "rod of affliction" will be wielded out of love for my soul, not punitive justice.

As far as believers are concerned, God has executed the justice we should have received on His Son on the cross. Christ fully satisfied the justice of God and turned away His wrath from us. Therefore, God's punishment of us is always corrective. It is always administered in love for our welfare. In times of adversity Satan will seek to plant the thought in our minds that God is angry with us and is disciplining us out of wrath. Here is another instance we should preach the Gospel to ourselves. It is the gospel that will reassure us that the penalty for our sins has been fully satisfied. It is the Gospel that supplies a good part of the armor of God with which we are to stand against the accusing attacks of the Devil.⁴⁵

2.) The doctrine of Adoption:

Standing up under affliction requires more than the assurance of wrath appeased through judicial pardon and the knowledge of my justification. I am sustained through the knowledge of it, but I must also be able to draw near to God in the afflictions that proceed from His hand. I must know that He is not only a pacified Judge, but my "Father in heaven"—literally "*Abba Father*"—an Aramaic term that means He is our "Papa" or "Daddy." Strange as that sounds to our ears, and hard as it is for our minds to grasp, and slow as it is to filter down to the affections, it is true. I gain strength and comfort in my afflictions by remembering that God views me as a child—never anything but a child, called to draw close to my heavenly Father ("Abba" or "Daddy") that loves His child infinitely more intimately than my earthly dad ever did when he carried me as a little child on his back, and dandled me as an infant on his knee.

We are His grace-adopted children, and as children, we are heirs to the promises and privileges of Sonship, which include: *Intimacy of relationship, close affectionate nearness and habitual access to Him, security in His irrevocable love, and a guaranteed eternal inheritance.*

When you realize that God has taken you from the gutter, so to speak, and made you a son in His own house—you, a miraculously pardoned offender, guilty, ungrateful, defiant,

⁴³ II Corinthians 1:8-11; Acts 27:19-20.

⁴⁴ Thomas Wilcox, Honey From the Rock, Chapel Library, Pensacola, FL, pg. 10.

⁴⁵ Jerry Bridges, The Discipline of Grace, NavPress, Colorado Springs, CO, 1995, pg. 222.

perverse as you were—then your sense of God’s “love beyond degree” is more than words can express... God receives us as sons, and loves us with the same steadfast affection with which He loves His beloved only-begotten. There are no distinctions of affection in the divine family. We are all loved just as fully as Jesus is loved... This and nothing less than this is what adoption means.⁴⁶

Unless we remember this constantly, and call it to mind continually when we undergo the afflictions that come from His hand, we will struggle against the prevailing sin of resentment and murmuring against God.

3.) The Love of God:

Samuel Bolton once wrote: “*God has thoughts of love in all He does to His people. The ground of His dealings with us is love (though the occasion may be sin). The manner of His dealings is love, and the purpose of His dealings is love. He has regard, in all, to our good here to make us partakers of His holiness, and to our glory hereafter, to make us partakers of His glory.*”⁴⁷ It will do us much good in the fight against sinful murmuring to remember that nothing can happen to us as believers that does not first pass through the filter of God’s love for us. All needless afflictions are strained out, and only the ones determined by His perfect parental love, to be for our good, are allowed to pass through.

Though God has reserved to Himself the liberty of afflicting His people, yet He has tied up His own hands by promising never to take away His loving-kindness from them... ‘I shall be his father, and he will be my son; if he commit iniquity, I will chasten him with the rod of men, and with the stripes of the children of men. Nevertheless, My mercy shall not depart away from him (II Samuel 7:14-15).’⁴⁸

4.) The Sovereign, Loving and Unchangeable Purpose of God:

Jerry Bridges once penned a statement I have used often: “*There is no such thing as pain without purpose in the life of a believer.*”⁴⁹ The Scriptures continually remind us that God’s unchangeable purpose in electing, calling, justifying and adopting us was to conform us to the likeness of His Son.⁵⁰ For the believer *that* is the “good” He works toward in “*all things*”—even the unpleasant and excruciatingly painful things. In fact, if affliction comes our way *we needed it*, whether or not we can see how it is so. F. F. Bruce points this out in his commentary on Hebrews:

The person who accepts discipline at the hand of God as something designed by his heavenly Father for his good will cease to feel resentful and rebellious; he has ‘calmed and quieted’ his soul (Psalm 131:1-2), which thus provides fertile soil for the cultivation of a righteous life, responsive to the will of God.⁵¹

Flavel offers a vivid picture of God’s sovereign intentions in affliction:

We see mariners in a storm throwing rich bales of silk and precious things overboard to preserve the vessel and their lives with it, and everyone says they act prudently. We know

⁴⁶ J. I. Packer, Knowing God, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL, 1993, pp. 215-216.

⁴⁷ Samuel Bolton, The True Bounds of Christian Freedom, Banner of Truth Trust, Carlisle, PA, pg. 25.

⁴⁸ John Flavel, Keeping the Heart, pg. 30

⁴⁹ Jerry Bridges, The Discipline of Grace, NavPress, Colorado Springs, CO, 1994, pg. 222.

⁵⁰ Rom. 8:28-30; Eph. 1:4; Heb. 12:10-11.

⁵¹ F. F. Bruce, The Epistle to the Hebrews, New International Commentary of the New Testament, Grand Rapids, MI, 1990, pg. 346.

it is usual for soldiers in a besieged city to batter down or burn the fairest buildings outside the walls, in which the enemy may find shelter in the siege; and no man doubts but it is wisely done. Such as have gangrened legs or arms can willingly stretch them out to be cut off, and not only thank, but pay the surgeon for his pains. And must God be repined at for casting over what will sink you in a storm? For pulling down that which would give advantage to your enemy in the siege of temptation? For cutting off what would endanger your everlasting life? Oh, inconsiderate and ungrateful man!...What Christ does in this you may not know, but hereafter you may.⁵²

Hard as it is (and it is often indescribably hard as Job has shown us!) we must resist the deceptions of the Evil one, and stop being suspicious of God's good intentions toward us even in the midst of the most difficult of circumstances. We must see Him as our loving Father who "*disciplines us for our good*" (loving us "*with the same steadfast affection with which He loves His beloved only-begotten*"), seek the grace He gives to believe all His promises and Gospel-declarations, and then purpose to trust Him even when He sovereignly chooses that the pain which wracks our body, and the sorrow that fills our souls, should continue until it has accomplished its intended purpose in our lives—and *only until it has accomplished its intended purpose*.

***You fearful saints, fresh courage take, the threat'ning clouds you so much dread;
Are big with mercy and shall break, in countless blessings on your head.***

⁵² John Flavel, Keeping the Heart, pg. 32-33.