

WHO WILL HELP THE HEALER?

by Jim Binney, D.Min.

“The dark night of the soul ” is a phrase used by Kent and Barbara Hughes in their article describing a low point of discouragement in their ministry. They write, “But to our astonishment and resounding disappointment, we didn’t grow. In fact, by the middle of our second year, we typically counted fewer than half the regular attenders we had in the beginning. Our church was shrinking, and the prospects looked bad. *This can’t be, I thought. I’m not living up to my expectations. I’m failing!*”¹

In the grips of such difficulties, how can they possibly help others when they need help themselves. Many pastors face the same question. Stephen Harris writes, “All pastors, at some point in their ministries, have to perform while in pain ...emotional, physical, or spiritual.”²

Granted, it is expected of any worker to bear up under difficulties; but in the midst of the ongoing and intense spiritual conflicts of the gospel ministry, a horrible toll is exacted. The spiritual leader can “fight the good fight,” “endure hardness,” and “wrestle with spiritual wickedness” only so long before he begins to hurt. As Harris asks, “How do hurting pastors minister when in need of ministry themselves?”³

Consider some of the “hurts” borne by servants of God through which they must struggle to minister to others.

MORAL FAILURE

As any aggressive opponent, Satan looks for a weakness he can exploit – a breach in an otherwise impenetrable wall. And when he finds it, without hesitation, he attacks. And even the casual observer of contemporary Christianity can see the gaping moral breach in our wall. As David Seamonds, an experienced counselor of pastors, accurately observes, “ministerial infidelity is indeed becoming more frequent.”⁴

This conclusion would appear to be an understatement! The demise of men such as Bakker and Swaggert are well-known, having been permanently branded on to the public memory, but this is only the tip of the iceberg!

I have personal acquaintances with over a dozen preacher friends who have fallen morally over the last few years. And I am not alone! In a recent nationwide survey of pastors by Christianity Today magazine, it was revealed that “Fully seventy-nine percent of the pastors said they personally know at least one other minister who has had an extramarital sexual relationship while pastoring a church.”⁵

In a surprisingly candid revelation, “twenty-three percent admitted to having done something they consider sexually inappropriate since entering local church ministry. Most of the time it’s been with someone in the church.”⁶

To the uninformed, this news may be shocking to say the least! We feel that somehow, the office of pastor is sacrosanct, immune to such “otherworldly” temptations. But J. Allan Peterson sets the record straight. “Ministers are

no less susceptible to the surging drive of sex and passion than anyone else. If anything, they're more susceptible. Those who come for help are reaching out for love and empathy. Someone to care. Any minister with just a touch of compassion cannot help but identify and feel with his people who hurt.”⁷ His tenderness and sensitivity make him vulnerable to such needs.

These revelations should not be surprising to the knowledgeable reader. Consider this: statistics abound which indicate “that as many as two out of three husbands and close to one out of two wives have been unfaithful at some time during their marriage. Of the 100,000 women respondents to the Redbook survey of 1974, thirty of each 100 – almost one-third – had had affairs with other men ... Among wives thirty-five to thirty-nine years old, thirty-eight percent had been unfaithful. For wage-earning wives, the percentage jumped to forty-seven percent – almost half.”⁸

These shameful figures reflect the moral condition of the general public, but even our national leaders are affected, “Dr. Sam Janus, professor at New York Medical College, said, ‘A safe bet would be that nearly half of the members of Congress were involved in affairs outside of marriage.’”⁹

This is a sad commentary on the state of America's morals, and even sadder to admit that the rise in pastoral immorality proportionately parallels that of the world. But these shocking facts certainly serve to underscore the issue facing the church today! The spiritual leadership of our churches and ministries are falling by the scores before a devastating salvo of enemy fire! They seem almost defenseless against the wicked one! The situation is critical!

My intent in sharing this information is not to attack the sanctity of the ministry or to erode the credibility of spiritual leadership. We need to be reminded that the vast majority of God's servants walk in purity and holiness before God. But at the same time, we must face squarely a serious problem within the church. The disease does not vanish with the insipid medication of naïve disbelief, or stubborn denial, but must be treated with powerful doses of lovingly-dispensed biblical correctives!

To whom does the morally weakened leader turn for this needed help? The pervasive sentiment seems to be “*Physician, heal thyself*” more than “*bear ye one another's burdens!*” Through ignorance, calloused unconcern, or even smug satisfaction in another's fall, God's people seem more inclined to “*pass by on the other side*” than to follow the example of the Samaritan who “*...went to him, and bound up his wounds, pouring in oil and wine, and set him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn, and took care of him.*” (Luke 10:34).

I can't help but believe that if these pastors who fell had been reached early with the spirit of the Samaritan, their failure could have been avoided.

In our counseling ministry at the Moorehead Manor, we have been privileged to reach many before a fall. We are thankful for this, but our joy is tempered by the knowledge that there are many who struggle with no knowledge that such help exists.

MARRIAGE AND FAMILY PROBLEMS

The Word of God demands a good marriage as a basis and foundation of a man's ministry. Without it there is not ministry. As Morrill says: "Marriage gives rise to ministry. It is ministry's foundation, out of our service to our wives, we build a super-structure of ministry to the rest of the congregation."¹⁰ For this reason, Satan aims his most damaging darts at the marriage relationship of the leader. Paul's observation is clear on this point: "*Defraud ye not one the other ... that Satan tempt you not for your incontinency.*" (1 Corinthians 7:5). This scripture is significant because of the rarity of scriptural references to the direct attack of Satan on the individual. But in this case, Paul makes it clear that Satan's interest is more than casual.

When he senses a breakdown in the marriage of the leader with the result of an accompanying lack of control ("incontinency"), Satan brings his heaviest artillery to bear on the family.

A reminder is needful at this point. As Jay Kesler frankly admits, "...sexual problems are LIFE problems..."¹¹ In other words, these sexual failures are not spontaneous but rather gradual in their development. They begin with small, even insignificant disappointments in the marriage relationship. (In the above quoted scripture, Paul uses the example of "defrauding.") If not resolved, and another disappointment sets in, the process has begun; and unless it is stopped, the result is often and sadly inevitable.

A recent national publication carried the report that the fastest growing divorce rate among evangelicals is among the pastors! One survey, in fact, revealed that "clergy had twice as many divorces as laymen."¹² These shocking situations prompted one denominational district superintendent to say in despair, "Don't even talk to me about pastoral marriages! I've heard so much the past few months, I can't take anymore!"¹³

Christian leaders, considered by most to be master communicators, short circuit when it comes to communicating with their families. They often fail to apply the same counsel they give to others. One authority writes, "the biggest problem with pastors in this country is that they have no interpersonal skills. That's a harsh statement, I realize, but ... not completely wrong. Pastors, if they are not careful, can relate to books and theological ideas far better than they relate to people. And the hardest place to relate to people is at home."¹⁴ As a result, their marriage suffers; and when their marriage suffers, their ministry suffers.

But the marriage is not the only thing to suffer. Many times the ministers' children grow up with painful and permanent scars. Denials notwithstanding, PKs are expected to "toe the line" as shining examples of Christian youth. What about those who finally rebel against pressure? They often make a statement to their parents and to the church by their waywardness to the embarrassment of the family. "[T]he more pressure a child feels to conform, the more intense the rebellion will be. One minister's kid we heard about would get high on pot, then open a parsonage window and yell, 'The pastor's wife is a whore!' Well, that gets people's attention!"¹⁵ Cecil Paul tells the tragic story of one ministry couple who watched three of their four children leave the church in early adulthood. "The choices of the children were significantly related to their perceptions of the treatment of the family by the church communities in which the behavior of the parsonage kids was often unfairly critiqued."¹⁶

In his probing article entitled, *“I Woke Up Crying,”* Jack Metzler sums it up well: “An old joke says the reason the pastor’s children misbehave is because they play with the deacon’s children. But joking aside, most churches expect their pastor to have the best behaved children in the community. This kind of expectation forces parsonage parents to be exceptionally strict with their children as well as themselves.”¹⁷

A “GLASS HOUSE” EXISTENCE

When these marriage and family crises arise, they could heal much more readily if they were not exposed to the unrealistic gaze of the public. Like wounds never bandaged and covered, they suffer recurring infection. I know one pastor who experienced the unsettling experience of his church members walking into his house unannounced! How does the poor wife handle all this? “More than one wife has found her behavior suddenly subjected to a new and unfamiliar grid: How will this (my actions) reflect on the ministry? She has not been accustomed to evaluating every move, every word, for its public relations impact.”¹⁸

Such hapless couples dare not raise their voice, frown at their children, or leave the kitchen table cluttered for fear of a “bad example.” “While the pressure to succeed is great, the stress of parsonage life is greater. Privacy doesn’t exist in the parsonage; it’s truly ‘life in a glass house.’ Nothing in my seminary training came close to preparing me for such stress” wrote one frustrated pastor.¹⁹

AN OVERWHELMINGLY FRUSTRATED PASTOR

When the youthful, idealistic pastor enters the ministry, he takes a vision with him which serves to sustain him in his infant work. As the years pass and he realizes that there is more to this than just “preachin’ and prayin’,” his vision begins to fade. “He may have approached the ministry thinking that preaching and care ministries would comprise the majority of his work. Now he finds he is expected to be an administrator, coordinator, educator, and public relations expert. Therefore, it is no wonder that his vision is frequently lost in a maze of complexities.”²⁰ Instead of seeing himself as the gift of God to the world and the church, he begins to have second doubts about his abilities. “A gradual change of focus sets in ... from a vantage point of ‘power,’ he begins to see ‘problems’ and the chief problem is himself, his failure, his sin, his lack of talent and gifts, which he compares to the mountainous task before him. Doubt about oneself can be one of the most significant weaknesses in the minister’s coping capacity.”²¹

STRESS

Despite the pressures confronting him on every side, “[t]he pastor is expected to have his life together and to be untouched by the human element in his personal life.”²² Because of the constant pressure to succeed, the public nature of the pastor’s life, the unending demands to minister to the needs of others, and his vulnerability as a favorite target of Satan, the leader finds himself under tremendous stress. “[T]he pastor experiences two types of stress in the

process of caring for others. The first type of stress is the chronic overextension pattern leading to physical wear and tear and emotional exhaustion. The second type of stress involves the neglect of needs, tasks, and crises.”²³ In other words, the extremes in ministerial reaction to stress assume two types: obsessive workaholism on the one hand, and a spirit of defeated resignation on the other.

Years ago people would commonly take a month or two off, or even the entire summer to recuperate, but not today. National leaders boast publicly about never taking a day off or taking time for vacation. They are too busy saving America and the world.

As a result of these and other pressures which come to bear heavily upon the man of God, a tragic thing occurs. It is called burn-out and is now being openly recognized by church leaders. Dr. Paul admits “the incidence of physical burn-outs in the middle years of the ministry is not that uncommon. The incidence of heart disorders also is high for the clergy. The intangible nature of much work of the ministry invites the pastor to overextend himself, physically and emotionally, while trying to validate his ministry to his congregation and to himself.”²⁴ Jack Metzler reveals, “Each year the number of pastors who burn out exceeds that of the previous year. Denominational leaders say it’s reaching epidemic proportions. Many victims never return to the pastorate.”²⁵

These, then, are a few, and only a few, of the pains and hurts borne in silence by faithful leaders everywhere. The need is great.

But if the need of these leaders is so great, what is being done to help them? Who is reaching out to them? Where do they go for needed rejuvenation during discouragement, and restoration after defeat? As Dr. Paul puts it, “Who will minister to this servant of God and man? When he has touched others until his strength goes out from him, who will touch him?”²⁶ In other words, *Who Will Help The Healer?*

The church cannot long ignore this dilemma, except to its own hurt. The Apostle Paul recognized the need and faced it squarely with these encouraging words, “*And let us not be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not.*” (*Galatians 6:9*). In these few words given by inspiration, Paul reveals much about human nature:

1. We do grow weary in the best of endeavors.
2. Even he grew weary as he includes himself in the usage of “us” and “we.”
3. The reward for faithful labour is “*in due season*” or in God’s time, which may be after our death.

Certainly the Apostle Paul has not realized all the fruit of his labors as thousands are still being saved daily through his writing.

4. The final reward of blessing is missed if we faint before the time.
5. Growing “weary,” an attitude of heart, always precedes “fainting,” an action of life. First comes discouragement, then comes the quitting.

Herein is the danger when the overburdened spiritual leader receives no help. There is a departure from the “heavenly vision,” and the church loses its leadership. Sociologist John Koval reports that one in eight Protestant

clergymen are thinking about resigning. He says, “the major reasons are the need for more money and the seeming ineffectiveness of the work of the church.”²⁷ There are currently approximately 350,000 Protestant clergymen in America. If one in eight is currently on the verge of resigning, that means that as you read these words, over 43,000 ministers are ready to quit, even as you read these words! Could your minister be one of them?

What is the reason for this widespread discouragement in the ministry? “Bob Dale, pastoral-ministries consultant for the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board, sees the dropout problem as an inability to meet certain crises that occur at various periods of the pastor’s life. Dale says the first crisis comes three to five years after seminary when a healthy dose of reality shatters many seminary days ideals. The second occurs at age forty when the pastor realizes he has not reached the goals he set for himself. The third crisis comes when he looks ahead to the insecurity of retirement years.”²⁸

If the reason for the high attrition rate is the failure of “an ability to meet certain crises that occur at various periods of the pastor’s life” as Dale says, then the obvious first step toward a solution is to help the pastors during these crisis periods. But what help is available? Who will help the healer?

The shocking truth is that there is virtually no one to help, no one to whom the leader can turn.

The problem has reached such a magnitude that pastors surveyed declared the inability to find a confidant “the most serious problem” of the ministry.²⁹ So serious that “with few exceptions, ministers who seek out professional counseling ... suffer from loneliness. Nearly half of the pastors’ wives surveyed bemoaned the fact they were cut-off from deep sharing with other couples.”³⁰

On several occasions over the years, Sandra (my wife) and I have wanted to get some help with our needs. But invariably we would look at one another and say “But who can we talk to?” The church people? One pastor in a similar dilemma said, “I can’t share my doubts ... because, like it or not, many people in the congregation are hanging onto MY faith.”³¹ Pastors have been taught that good leadership is strong and invincible. What would people think if we looked normal and human? Sandra and I could identify with the “many couples in the ministry with marital tensions, they fear the loss of face that they assume to be involved in seeking help.”³² And so we, like so many other ministry couples, retreated into our loneliness, often sharing privately our desire to have a friend with which we could talk, without fear of being misunderstood. As Cecil Paul records, “[R]esearch on stress in the ministry identifies loneliness as a key problem reported by both clergy and their wives.”³³

This same attitude of being “strong” has kept me from sharing my burdens with my wife. For one reason, I don’t want to worry her, but at the same time, I don’t want to appear weak and wimpish. I was relieved to read the thoughts of another pastor on this subject: “...I had thought, my goodness – if I tell her what’s bugging me about the church ... that it’s getting to the lonely, scared boy inside of me – we’ll both go down the tube together. I don’t dare tell her. I felt I had to play the strong role.”³⁴

So we, like countless other ministry couples, have learned over the years that it’s best to hold it all inside us. “Just pray about it and the Lord will take care of it,” is glib, but it is all-too-frequent advice given to the unfortunate

pastor in pain. But it is dangerous to the extreme! However, holding these feelings inside, "...sometimes comes out in psychosomatic illnesses, and sometimes it explodes."³⁵

The feelings are locked inside, like a wild animal growing more desperate from hunger every waking day, until the door is opened the least little bit. Then there is an explosion of anger, frustration, and bitterness, and the wide-eyed church member wonders in awe at this sudden transformation of their mild-mannered leader into a raging inferno of boiling emotions!

We have touched upon the reasons for this phenomenon: fear, loneliness, image, etc., but maybe there is a larger root to be uncovered ... the gnawing fear that there is actually no one out there who really cares. As David said, *"I looked on my right hand, and beheld, but there was no man that would know me: refuge failed me; no man cared for my soul."* (Psalm 142:4).

As one pastor sadly lamented, "I am available to listen to and help so many people, but there is not one who cares enough about me personally to be there for me."³⁶ How sad to hear from the healer, "there is no one who cares enough."

David had no man to help him in his hour of need, nor did he have a place to which he could retreat for refuge. These two needs of man have been evident since the times of the kings and prophets. It is precisely these two needs we seek to meet in our ministry here at the Moorehead Manor.

Consider the condition of the exhausted prophet Jeremiah. *"When I would comfort myself against sorrow, my heart is faint in me."* (Jeremiah 8:18). Many is the time the man of God attempts in vain to comfort himself only to find that his spiritual "virtue hath departed" from him. He has no resources to call upon. What does he need now? *"Oh that I had in the wilderness a lodging place of wayfaring men; that I might leave my people, and go from them!..."* (Jeremiah 9:2). This reveals the need of Jeremiah and many ministers to "... escape from the stress of ministry. Whether to escape for a day or two or to flee the ministry altogether becomes the issue for the hurting helper."³⁷

Even Jesus needed solitude and urged his disciples to *"...Come ye yourselves apart into a desert place, and rest a while: for there were many coming and going, and they had no leisure so much as to eat."* (Mark 6:31). As someone wisely observed, "Either we come apart for a while, or we will simply come apart."

I admire the decisive action of the woman in the Old Testament who observed the needs of the prophet Elijah. For no other reason than respect for the calling of Elijah (*"... I perceive that this is an holy man of God ..."* 2 Kings 4:9), the Shunammite woman provided him a chamber in her home, a place for his rest and refreshment. He knew that any time he needed to get away from the pressures for his ministry, he could enjoy the kind hospitality of this family.

Do the men of God of our generation deserve any less? Do they not have the same needs of Elijah? Of Jeremiah? Of David? Of Christ? Unless he has a place for retreat and some help with his burdens, he will "come apart."

I have good news for you! There **IS** such a place! God has provided the Moorehead Manor and the counseling ministry there to encourage those in ministry. If you are in Christian service, or know of someone who is, and help is needed, we are here for you.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ HUGHES, Kent and Barbara, "Feelings of Failure" Leadership Journal, Spring, 1987, p.24.
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- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ MERRILL, Dean, "Clergy Couples in Crisis," Waco: Word Books, 1985, p. 182.
- ⁵ KESLER, Jay, "Being Holy, Being Human," Waco: Word Books, 1988, p. 141.
- ⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷ PETERSEN, J. Allan, "The Myth of the Greener Grass," Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, 1985, p. 156.
- ⁸ Ibid., p. 14-15.
- ⁹ Ibid.
- ¹⁰ Merrill, p. 56.
- ¹¹ Kesler, p. 142.
- ¹² NEWSWEEK, August 1989, p. 49.
- ¹³ Merrill, p. 10.
- ¹⁴ Ibid., p. 26.
- ¹⁵ Ibid., p. 116.
- ¹⁶ PAUL, Cecil R., "Passages of a Pastor," Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 1981, p. 70.
- ¹⁷ METZLER, Jack, "I Woke Up Crying," Moody Monthly, June 1988, p. 36.
- ¹⁸ Merrill, p. 16.
- ¹⁹ Metzler, p. 36.
- ²⁰ Paul, p. 35.
- ²¹ Ibid, p. 27.
- ²² Paul, p. 12.
- ²³ Ibid., p. 17.
- ²⁴ Ibid., p. 13.
- ²⁵ Metzler, p. 34.
- ²⁶ Paul, p. 101.
- ²⁷ TAN, Paul Lee, "Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustration," Rockville: Assurance Publishers, 1979, p. 965.
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- ³² Paul, p. 72.
- ³³ Ibid., p. 73.
- ³⁴ Merrill, p. 144.
- ³⁵ Ibid., p. 25.
- ³⁶ Kesler, p. 167.
- ³⁷ Paul, p. 11.