



PASTOR - LOOK AFTER YOURSELF!

Self-care of body, mind and spirit
for Christ's ministers

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Introduction

When we board a plane, we know that it is incumbent upon the airline to prioritize the safety of its passengers.

Just before take-off, the cabin crew demonstrate what we should do in the unlikely event of the plane getting into trouble and having to crash land. There are life jackets under each of the seats and we are shown how to put these on should the plane come down on water. But you will remember that the flight attendant will always give the instruction to 'make sure you put on your own life jacket before you try to help anyone else or put one on your child'. We are only in a position to look after others as we have looked after ourselves first.

As pastors, our great desire is to look after God's people. But just as in the plane, we need to take care of ourselves first or we will not be there for others.

With this in mind, a pastor needs to embrace a certain amount of self-care. Unless we are fit and well ourselves, we will not be able to be among our people to shepherd the flock of God and preach God's word to them.

Living better, serving better

If we want to serve better, then we should surely aim to live in the healthiest way we can, with the motive not just for our own well-being but for the sakes of the churches we serve. Ultimately, it will be that we might finish our course bringing the maximum glory to Christ, our Saviour.

This booklet explores looking after yourself in pastoral life. That doesn't mean shying away from the challenges and sacrifices required in serving the Lord, but it does mean being wise in the way we live. The areas covered are those of body, mind and spirit. Phil Raine was a GP before being called into the ministry so he has written the chapter on physical and mental health. John Benton writes about the mind of the Christian leader and Malcolm MacGregor about the spiritual challenge of guarding our hearts.

We hope this booklet will help every pastor who reads it to have a long and valuable ministry.

1: Body – look after yourself medically

Taking care of our physical and mental health is scriptural. Paul advised Timothy, ‘Stop drinking only water, and use a little wine because of your stomach and your frequent illnesses,’ 1 Timothy 5.23. Paul’s concern was for Timothy to maintain good health in order to continue in usefulness in the Lord’s service.

My aim here is not to give you an overview of medicine and psychiatry. Rather, I want us to consider how, through taking appropriate care of ourselves, we might avoid, limit or remedy a number of physical and mental ailments which would otherwise impede our usefulness. Although we will deal with them in order, there will be some cross-over between physical and mental health since they are very much intertwined. Physical ills will often cause mental anguish and mental ills will have physical effects. Similarly, preventatives and cures are linked also; walking for exercise and to reduce your blood pressure will also provide mental benefit through being in the sunlight. This is nothing new; Jonathan Edwards wrote centuries ago, ‘I rode out into the woods for my health.’

We are not like Gnostics who say the body doesn’t matter. But we find ourselves broken people in a broken world. Some things are not preventable. Illness and decline will happen to us all and mental illness may supervene. Genetic makeup is a factor in this. However, there are areas where we can improve so we will consider the following.

Weight

Having the appropriate weight for your build will affect your usefulness over the long term. We all have different frames and body types. Being overweight or underweight will not only affect your body mechanically in terms of having to carry too much weight for your heart or joints or not having sufficient weight to strengthen muscles and bones, but will affect your body’s metabolism. If you are overweight, physicians will be concerned for the state of your liver and pancreatic fat, which will impede their vital function in your body’s metabolism.

Body Mass Index, BMI, is a good indicator of what is going on with your metabolism. You can easily check this on line using a Google search for BMI. Submitting your height and weight and age, the calculator will tell you what your BMI is, and with that whether you have a problem.

A good rough guide is waist measurement at 2 inches above the navel. This will vary according to your height but a rough overall guide is that if it is above 40

inches, it is likely that you have a serious problem. If above 37 inches, it is concerning and you need to take measures.

- *Why is weight important?*

Gluttony is a sin, Philippians 3.19. But beside the matter of self-discipline, there are also significant health risks through being overweight. It makes one more prone to diabetes (which has become a massive problem in UK), heart disease, hypertension and strokes. Excess weight can wear out our weight-bearing joints prematurely. Scientists are discovering just now much it affects our immune system. The pandemic has demonstrated that those who are obese have not fared so well in coping with COVID.

In addition, obesity has been demonstrated to make one more prone to cancers. The body's immune responses are not just important when it comes to virus infections but have a very important role in preventing cancers, recognizing and dealing with the altered cells.

On a personal note, over the last nearly 8 years, I have gradually lost 3 stone; my health has improved to the extent where I have been able to cut out one of my Hypertensive pills and I have improved sleep and energy. I believe I have been able to serve better as a pastor and fulfil my ministry with greater energy.

The '5:2 diet' was devised by Michael Mosley and involves eating normally for 5 days of a week and choosing 2 separate days to implement an 800 kcal diet spread over that day. It is claimed to be the diet that more men will stick to. One of our difficulties in ministry is that many meetings revolve around food consumption. However, with a 5:2 pattern, which is completely flexible, you can still eat normally on the 5 days and schedule the 2 days for when it is quieter. And, of course, we should take smaller portions; we pastors can be our own worst enemies at buffet functions!

- *What does eating healthily look like?*

Unlike what we were told in the 1970s, Michael Moseley advocates full fat foods, which give one a greater sense of 'fullness', but encourages drastically limiting sugar and fast carbohydrates.

Sugars and fast carbohydrates are rapidly absorbed from the gut into the blood stream, and in response the body produces a fast surge of insulin release. This has the effect of long-term damage to the liver and pancreas. So, omit not just burgers, but such foods as white bread, white rice and potatoes. Carbohydrates

which are absorbed more slowly will not result in such rapid release insulin and so prove better for us. A more Mediterranean diet will reap dividends in health, using olive oil, nuts and oily fish which are rich in omega 3 oils, tomatoes, salads and vegetables which are said to be better for you and studies have borne this out. For protein use hard cheddar cheese and chicken.

It is also good to cut down on processed meats, especially bacon and sausages, which are associated with a higher incidence of bowel cancers and generally eat less red meat. Use whole grain bread and whole grain rice instead of white bread and white rice, unsweetened porridge instead of most breakfast cereals. And rather than potatoes, chips or pastas, try spiralized courgette, courgette pasta, mashed cauliflower or mashed squash which are much healthier.

Health benefits increase when consuming foods which are rich in antioxidants, which will boost the body's immunity. Select foods that have purple, red or green colouration such as tomatoes, red cabbage, spinach, broccoli, beetroot, blueberries, and purple or red grapes. Most vegetables, tea, coffee, dark chocolate and red wine contain antioxidants. So, 'eat your greens' and your 'reds and purples'!

Snacks are where we probably fail most frequently. The old maxim, 'Don't eat between meals' promoted a healthier lifestyle. Try to cease eating by 7pm.

- *Exercise*

Paul doesn't dismiss but encourages exercise. 'Physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things...' 1 Timothy 4.8.

Attending a local gym or engaging in some other group exercise can be a way of making contact with folk in the community as well as giving attention to your health. But a word of caution: be careful not to overdo it. Running on pavements can wear your knee and hip joints. A cardiologist told me that he found that MAMILs (Middle Aged Men in Lycra) can develop Atrial Fibrillation possibly through overdoing the cycling or running.

- Walking is an excellent exercise. Try increasing your pace to brisk, which will increase the benefits. Walking can also be very good for your mental health and some find prayer-walking good. One health tip is to go for a walk rather than sit for a coffee or lunch break.

- Cycling is excellent as an exercise because it is a non-weight bearing exercise, so less likely to wear out the joints. One pastor I know does all his visitation on a bike.
- Jogging, and swimming are good.
- A standing desk? Some of Churchill's best speeches written at a standing desk!
- Take stairs rather than lifts.

Strength building exercises are found to help reduce blood pressure and can simply be undertaken with press ups, sit ups and step ups and, of course, it takes just a short time with no equipment. Also building core strength by exercising using the 'plank' position is a very simple and short exercise but has good benefits, (details can be found on the internet).

Mental health and well being

The stresses and strains of ministry can take their toll on us. It is estimated that in UK, 10% of the population will suffer from anxiety and depression at some time; we pastors are not immune.

• *Indicators of Depression and Anxiety?*

Everyone has the occasional 'down day' so it is important to distinguish depression from that. In depression, symptoms persist and can't be relieved. Possibly because we pastors tend to be motivated and conscientious, we might be more likely to conceal it and carry on. So how can you spot it and distinguish from just a bad day? If you have significant depression, some of these following symptoms will interfere with your daily functioning and will persist and not be relieved by resting.

- Feeling depressed or very low, low self-esteem, tearfulness, loss of interest in anything and concentration, feeling of hopeless or lacking motivation such that you 'can't be bothered with anything.' There will likely be difficulty in making decisions.
- Disturbed sleep often with early morning waking, the appetite might be lost, (though comfort eating), loss of sex drive, feeling tired, various aches and pains.
- Feeling anxious or worried and anxiety symptoms may accompany these other symptoms. Having suicidal thoughts.

- Symptoms of anxiety will include restlessness, palpitations, nausea, stomach cramps, diarrhea, neurological effects of various sorts.
- Depression is often mixed with anxiety such that the conditions cannot be distinguished, although some, of course, will suffer depression or anxiety alone.

If any or a number of these symptoms persist then seeking medical help is important and the GP will make a diagnosis by assessing the symptoms. More serious depression and mental illnesses will need specialist help.

- *What are the causes of anxiety and depression?*

Sometimes it is in the person's makeup. I know of several pastors who discovered after years in ministry that they suffered cycles of depression and had not identified it as such. For some people, it just comes out of the blue without any apparent cause. For others it may be in response to pressures of life and work.

Stress will often be a factor. Everyone experiences some level of stress, and some stress can be good for you. Some of us need our deadlines to motivate us ! But, being overstressed might lead to depression and anxiety or burnout.

As a pastor you may well be under a considerable level of stress which your GP might not fully appreciate. There are constant demands upon you, such as the relentless sermon preparation. Funerals can weigh heavily with some pastors. Pastoral work can be a huge burden and we can sense that we can never do enough. Then sudden added pressures of conflict or family issues unrelated to work can be a 'final straw.'

- Stress through extra family pressures
- Stress through the pressure to 'perform well'
- Stress through being a perfectionist or over ambitious
- Stress through being a people pleaser.
- Stress through failure or fear of failure
- Stress through conflict in the church or leadership team
- Stress through bereavement or loss of a relationship

If these are the causes, the next thing we must look at is what we should do when we find ourselves suffering from serious anxiety or depression.

- *Dealing with depression and anxiety?*

Firstly, admit it

This is so important because so many of us carry on not realizing how we really are. Being someone who pastors others can make one oblivious to one's own need. We often require someone else (perhaps your wife or a trusted elder) to point out our own state of mind.

Secondly, stop and rest

If you are suffering mentally, this is most important. Carrying on will only exacerbate things and make it more deep-seated. The Lord's remedy for Elijah was to grant him rest and refreshment and a forty-day journey into the wilderness, 1 Kings 19.8. Jesus said to his disciples, 'Come apart and rest awhile', Mark 6.31 and some have added 'come apart or you will come apart!'

Thirdly, tell someone

This may be a caring elder or a pastoral team leader or your wife. Hopefully this supportive person will help you arrange to stop and rest. You need to 'reboot the computer'. If a week or two of stopping doesn't lead to significant improvement, then you need professional help. Your GP is your first port of call. Counselling might be offered through your General Practice. CBT (Cognitive Behavioural Therapy) is also very useful for depression and anxiety. There are Christians who have been trained and can offer Biblical counselling.

If you are improving after a couple of weeks, please assess this alongside another leader to gauge whether you still need further time off. Don't return to full duties until you are much better.

- *Preventing depression and anxiety*

Regular rest is not an option; it is a command; a necessity, Exodus 20.9,10. We were made to tick along on a 6 days of work, 1 day of rest weekly cycle. This God given rhythm is tailor-made for us by our loving all wise God. It teaches us that we are not indispensable and can trust God in taking rest and breaks from work. Rico Tice quotes an evangelist in his book, *Faithful Leaders*, 'I missed my days off. Then I had a breakdown and I took all the days off I'd missed in a row!'

It is vital to take your day off. As a pastor your Sunday is not a Sabbath rest; you need a full day's proper rest. Explain this to Church. One of Rico Tice's ideas is, on your day off, to give your phone to your wife. And take holidays regularly. Book your times off in advance. Get them into the diary.

Sleep is vitally important for our physical and mental health. So, get a decent quality and amount of sleep. Most of us do not have sufficient sleep; we need 7.5 hours per night at a regular time. Without this, there will be long term damage to body, to the immune system (since the body 'repairs itself' during sleep), to the cardiovascular system and also to the nervous system. You will be more likely to suffer anxiety and depression without adequate sleep.

Matthew Walker, Professor of Neuroscience and Director of the Centre for sleep, Berkeley, USA, has given some very good advice from which I have drawn the following helpful hints.

- Regular bed-time and stick to it.
- Set the bedroom temperature a little lower.
- Wind down to sleep and dim the lights in the later evening.
- Avoid blue screens for at least 2 hours before bedtimes.
- Focus on something relaxing and not over stimulating to the mind.
- A good read is helpful.
- Ensure as much darkness in the bedroom as possible
- Make your bedroom a place of rest, not work

Somehow you've got to create at least an hour to wind down. Establishing a good routine is difficult because many of our evenings as pastors are busy with meetings which can go on late. They can also be 'wind up' times, rather than the proposed 'wind down' times. Could we accomplish more in a shorter time with a definite concluding time in view, rather than extending leaders' meetings long into the night? Of course, there are the unavoidable difficult pastoral visits and late journeys home after preaching away. But keep these to a minimum.

Seasonally Affected Disorder (SAD) affects some people. Many find reading in front of a SAD lamp for 20 minutes each morning from September to April helpful. A more recent invention is using a Human Energiser for 12 minutes per morning. This shines light through headphones directly on to the brain surface. It has been found to be useful when clocks change and when adjusting after travelling between time zones - if you visit missionaries or speak internationally.

Generally speaking, cultivating good friendships and a balanced approach to life will be a strong defence against anxiety and depression and enable us to fulfil our ministries.

2: Mind – look after yourself intellectually

The key to Christian transformation is the renewing of our minds, Romans 12.2; Ephesians 4.23.

We learn to think differently from the world and so live differently. Furthermore, we are to love God with all our minds, Mark 12.30 – so when we properly cultivate our minds, we are cultivating a prime faculty for the worship and praise of God.

The American writer Gene Veith begins his book *Loving God With All Your Mind* with these words¹: ‘Christians should use and develop their minds. The mental faculties of the human mind – the power to think, to discover, to wonder and to imagine – are precious gifts of God. The Christian who pursues knowledge, seeks education, and explores even the most ‘secular’ subjects is fulfilling a Christian vocation that is pleasing to God and of great importance to the church. The Bible, by precept and example, affirms this and opens up the whole realm of human knowledge to the Christian.’

Having a mind is part of being made in God’s image. As pastors and teachers, it is incumbent on us to cultivate the mind

A Strong Mind

What will strengthen your mind?

The primary faculties of the mind are verbal comprehension, word fluency, numerical ability, spatial visualization, associative memory, perceptual speed, logical reasoning.

But how do we strengthen our mental abilities or at least keep them up to scratch? Here are 10 things to take on board (you can find most through an internet search). I think the last point on the list may well be the most important.

1. Use your weaknesses: Sometimes do the opposite of what works well for you. If you are a morning person – try a mental task in the evening. If you are a night owl – get up early and try to write. If you are someone who must have total silence to work – try the opposite. Pushing against what you are used to now and then strengthens your mind.

¹ *Loving God with all your Mind*, by Gene Edward Veith, IVP, 1987, page 9

2. *Exercise your memory*: Using your memory will strengthen your memory. Play memory games with your children. All the cards face down and you have to find the matching ones. Or better still try to remember the names and professions of new people in church. And repeat. Or even better, learn Psalm 23 off by heart etc.

3. *Use mnemonics*: Think of ways you can remember things. For example – something like message of Romans summed up as ‘Ruined Rebels Reckoned Righteous’. What can you do with Philippians?

4. *Raise your eyebrows*: When you are drowsy, raise your eyebrows. Your eyes open a little wider and somehow that gives a slight adrenalin rush, which perks you mentally.

5. *Read books which push your boundaries*: Try to get through the whole of Grudem’s *Systematic Theology* or Carl Trueman’s *Triumph of the Modern Self*. Perhaps better still, try to tackle a different genre – some poetry?

6. *Try new hobbies*: This is straightforward. But just to make it a little practical – how about perhaps joining in and getting to know a hobby your children are into? It’s not your thing – but it’s different – and it’s good parenting at the same time.

7. *Eat better*: Aim for a balanced diet – because a brain that isn’t fed properly will not be good at functioning properly. Find out what foods are good for the brain.

8. *Exercise*: Physical exercise improves more or less everything. Not only will you feel better – it improves circulation including getting nutrients to your brain. How often have I, in God’s goodness, cracked open a sermon text while going for a walk!

9. *Get enough sleep*: Like exercise, sleep improves every aspect of your life. One idea is to eat a piece of fruit before bedtime. The natural sugar will keep your brain more active while your body rests – and that will strengthen the brain.

10. *Cultivate being thankful to God*: Not only does that help you to think positively but Scripture links the darkening of the mind with being unthankful, Romans 1.21. So if you want to be bright, be thankful.

A Healthy Mind

What should a Christian mind look like?

What makes the renewed mind different? What do we need to be cultivating in ourselves? Here I'm using Harry Blamires classic book *The Christian Mind*, published in 1963. He gives 6 marks of a Christian mind, to which I'll add a 7th. The Christian mind is characterized by...

- *Its Supernatural Orientation*

We believe in the God who is there, the Maker of Heaven and earth, separate from but intimately involved with the world. We look beyond this life to another one. We see all life and world history as in the hands of God. We are not secular in our thinking, Genesis 1.1; Proverbs 9.10.

- *Its Awareness of Evil*

We believe in God but we also believe in supernatural powers of darkness which have ruined this world and enslaved mankind in sin, Ephesians 6.12. Men and women, made in God's image, are now naturally drawn towards evil. There is a battle with evil which must always be taken into account.

- *Its Conception of Truth*

The existence of God guarantees the reality of truth. Though we do not know all truth, the truth exists and God has given us minds to approach and apprehend it. Truth is objective rather than subjective. We do not swallow relativism – everything is a matter of opinion. Truth is more than propositional, John 14.6, but it is not less.

- *Its Acceptance of Authority*

We believe in God who has revealed himself in Jesus, his living Word, and the Bible, his written word. This word has authority over us and the church and indeed the world. God has set up legitimate authority structures within his world, cf. Romans 13.1; Ephesians 6.1 etc. Secularism makes the individual the only arbiter of truth and cannot tolerate the idea of authority greater than the individual. We submit our thinking to God's authority.

- *Its Concern for the Person*

We believe God became man in Christ for our salvation. Not just creation, but the incarnation means that the Christian has a very high view of humanity. Secular systems tend to subjugate the individual to the system – Communism (the Party), Capitalism (the economy) – internet, people are just customers to be manipulated. But we are different, Luke 15.7; every one is precious.

- *Its Sacramental Cast*

The Christian mind is cast so as to see God behind the world and the world as a gift of God, which should lead us to worship him, Acts 17.27; Romans 1.20. To create beauty or recognize truth or to give and receive love is to come into contact with realities which express the Divine. In many ways, this outlook re-enchants the world, whereas secularism trashes it.

- *Its Christological focus*

How does Paul sum up his outlook on life? 'For me to live is Christ and to die is gain,' Philippians 1.21. We see ourselves as in service to Jesus Christ.

So, when we ask about looking after our minds, as Christians and especially as pastors, this gives us frameworks of the way to think. This is a healthy mind.

A Sound Mind

What is our guide in thinking?

The Bible teaches us that 'the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom,' Proverbs 9.10; Psalm 112.10. It is God's word, the Scriptures, which are the truth, John 17.17, and anchor us in the truth, Psalm 18.30.

It is the truths of Scripture which give us a basis from which to 'think straight' and have a sensible and cogent outlook which fits with the reality of the world. This is because the Bible is the word of the world's Creator and its Redeemer, 2 Timothy 3.14-17. So the doctrines of God, creation, fall and redemption, need to be the staple diet with which we feed our minds.

Further, this staple diet of the mind will tend to our own well-being. Here are Paul's words concerning the most helpful things to think about. 'Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me – put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you', Philippians 4.8,9.

- Notice that Paul's list can be categorized under four sections – what is genuinely true, what is morally good, what is aesthetically beautiful, what deserves admiration, v8.
- Notice that training our minds to consider these things is a recipe for experiencing God and his peace, v9.

- Notice also that Paul can point to himself and his teaching as embodying such things, v9.

But it is also vital to see that the apostle steers us away from mere intellectualism. What is true, good, beautiful, and admirable, must be put into practice. They must lead us to actions of love and grace. Arid intellectualism is the bane of many churches. A merely orthodox mind is not a sound mind. 'Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up,' 1 Corinthians 8.1.

A Big Mind

What is the scope of a Christian mind?

The transforming of our minds takes place under the word of God, by the Holy Spirit. But does that mean that we ought to restrict our intellectual pursuits to Bible Study and perhaps Church History? We should certainly make the prayerful study of Scripture a priority.

But notice again what Gene Veith says: 'The Christian who pursues knowledge, seeks education, and explores even the most 'secular' subjects, is fulfilling a Christian vocation that is pleasing to God...' This is based on the fact that Jesus is Lord of all and that 'all truth is God's truth'. Now I know we have to put a *caveat* with that – we are aware of evil – we are to be infants in understanding when it comes to evil things, 1 Corinthians 14.20.

But the Bible gives many examples of heroes of the faith who were highly educated in the pagan knowledge of their day.

- Moses was 'educated in all the wisdom of the Egyptians', Acts 7.22.
- Solomon possessed wide-ranging knowledge, 1 Kings 4.29-34.
- Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were at the court of Nebuchadnezzar precisely to be instructed in all the knowledge of the Babylonians, Daniel 1. They had to sort out what was true and worthwhile from the idolatry bound up in what was taught.
- Paul was able to quote the Greek philosophers and poets, Acts 17.28; Titus 1.12.
- Apollos, Paul's great co-worker in the gospel, was a man from Alexandria (in Egypt), famed for its world-beating library. Judging by his Greek name, Apollos must have been someone open to classical culture around him, while at the same time being 'mighty in the Scriptures', Acts 18.24. It is highly likely that people found the ministry

of Apollos so helpful because from a deep understanding, he was able to take on the classical culture of the first century and show its deficiencies and how Christ had the answers.

We are to be aware of the dangers of secular learning but not shy away from it. With God's help we are meant to understand it, tackle it, take it on and defeat it, 2 Corinthians 10.5. If we believe that we really have the truth, that ought to be our outlook. God's word makes sense of the world in a way that nothing else can – because it is the truth.

An Enquiring Mind

Why the Christian mind must ask questions.

A common criticism of Christianity is that our belief in Biblical doctrines restricts and inhibits an open-minded search for truth. 'You already know what you believe,' our detractors say. 'You already think you have all the answers. So you don't even bother look at other things. Or if you do, won't you just try to fit them into your predetermined system? Christianity stifles enquiry.'

This is an important criticism but actually turns out to be untrue. A search for truth with no assumptions would be like trying to find a point in space when you have no axes, no starting point from which to fix it. That is actually the situation for secular / atheistic philosophy – and so time and again it has been shown to lead nowhere.

Instead, Christian dogma acts as a framework within which we can understand things – locate things. Furthermore, we find that it is surprisingly flexible and encompassing. It can deal more readily than other systems with the ambiguities of real life. Here are 2 examples.

- *Both/And*

A paradox is a statement which appears to contain contradictory ideas but takes both as true. For example, 'I was so happy, it made me cry.' Or again, 'She was so popular, no-one liked her.' They appear contradictory but everyone knows what you mean by them. Quite a lot of life is like that. Quantum physics tells us that 'Light is both a particle and a wave'. Sensible psychology says, 'We are shaped by our upbringing but we make our own choices'. Such realities don't fit well with simplistic thinking.

But Christianity can cope with this. It says that the world is bigger than our own

capacity to think. Its major doctrines always eventually come down to paradox and mystery. Rationalism is restricted to thinking in terms of either/or. But Christianity makes room for both / and. Think of the identity of Jesus Christ. He is both fully God and fully man. The heretics want to say one or the other. But orthodox Biblical faith says 'both/and'. Think of God's sovereignty and human responsibility – both/and – not either or.

- *Yes/But*

Because Christianity is so comprehensive and open to paradox, it is very flexible intellectually. This does not mean compromising on the absolutes of Biblical doctrine. Rather, by accepting those doctrines, it is able to accommodate a wide range of ideas, evidence and experiences.

It is not like scientific naturalism, which excludes from the start any possibility of miracles because they do not fit with its pre-determined assumptions. It is not like rationalism, which reduces things like 'love' and 'hope' in human beings to just a chemical reaction in the brain with no more significance than eating a cheeseburger.

Christianity can say, 'Yes the neon sign is explained in terms of an electrical discharge through an inert gas. But it's more than that – it actually says something: Burger King!' Christianity doesn't have to try to reduce everything to one thing.

This means that although the Christian mind is a committed mind, it can nevertheless embrace a healthy scepticism. We are set up to ask questions and interrogate reality in a quest for the truth. We want to find out the truth God has put into the world.

A Christian mind is a hopeful mind because God has promised that we can know the truth. There are answers, because God has them. But it is also a humble, not an arrogant mind, because any mental ability and any truth which we may have are the gifts of God by his grace.

3: Spirit – look after the inner man

When you hear of a well-respected pastor, or the elder of a well-attended Reformed congregation who's decided to trade in his wife in exchange for the church pianist; or one who turns into a control freak and a bully, splits the fellowship and refuses to admit his mistakes, then what's up? When such things happen, what's the actual explanation of the loss?

First of all, it's *not* usually, as in chapter 1, to do with a breakdown in their physical or mental health. These men may still be out on their bikes or joining in the park run and reading the up-to-the-minute theological books. Nor is it what we would describe as mental illness in any clinical sense of the term, depression, psychosis, bi-polar, schizophrenia.

There may be an element of the so called 'mid-life crisis' as a man who is 'stuck in a rut' tries in to re-invent himself along more 'youthful' lines. But a mid-life crisis is only a social construct, not a medical diagnosis.

Then, regarding our second chapter, the breakdown will rarely involve a total denial of the intellectual basis of the gospel or a fall into full blown heresy or atheism. Indeed, right up to the moment the scandal breaks, the Sunday morning sermons will be their usual three-point, five-point, making the point, productions which people still admire.

Blissful ignorance in the congregation

As the man takes his place on the platform, the members will sit in blissful ignorance whilst filaments of the rot advance unseen and deep within his soul. The more discerning and observant in the ranks may have sniffed out an aloofness or touchiness if someone asks an innocent question. Technically speaking, the sermons tick all the boxes but the compassion, warmth and love in his voice have evaporated. At the door, the handshakes are not fervent and the eye contact sporadic.

Again, the pastor's visits may have become less frequent as he spends more time in the study or the coffee shops preparing his next homiletic masterpiece or escaping to conferences where he can certainly talk the talk and mingle with the top brass.

So on the whole, the ministry in its *formal* sense continues and the church programme rolls along uninterrupted. The rotas are filled, the loyal and the

faithful are in their Sunday seats. So, when it all implodes what actually *is* the explanation of the madness and the folly?

Well, the root cause of the decline and breakdown can be traced to something we address in our third chapter of our booklet. Pastor look after yourself: 'SPIRIT'. As Paul indicates, the problem lies with the INNER MAN, Ephesians 3.16.

The words of Octavius Winslow come to mind: 'If there is one consideration more humbling than any other, it is that after all the rich displays of grace, the patience and tenderness, the repeated corrections, and all the tokens of divine love there should still exist within us the tendency to perpetual, secret and alarming departure from God.'²

As we proceed, our text in Ephesians reminds us that human identity is not accurately explained by secular, materialist science. The post-enlightenment assumption, that nature operates in a closed system and that metaphysical and religious factors are obsolete, has not served recent history well. And it's at this point that Christians part company with the current secular mind-set. To use John Stott's term, Christianity is necessarily 'counter cultural' and that's because it's essentially supernatural. And on that account, the life of faith places us in a hostile setting which many will resent.

Consequently, if popularity and the love of the world, or love by the world, are dominant factors, those things will take their toll before too long.

Sanctification

It may help us to begin by reminding ourselves that personal and individual sanctification is a 2-stage experience. From a Pauline/Augustinian/ Reformed point of view, stage one is objective, supernatural, externally initiated, decisive and unrepeatable. We are set apart for God once for all time. It is a change of identity, status and standing before God. To use the terminology of J. Murray, conversion is an act of 'Definitive Sanctification'. This is transition in a legitimate sense of the word. It is a passing from death to life and, on this account, justification is not a process but a pronouncement.

Stage two, however, is something quite different, being subjective, ongoing, co-

² *Personal Declension and revival of religion in the soul*, Octavius Winslow, Banner of Truth, page 9

operative, interactive, progressive and extended. It is a journey, an advance, an evolution, a gradual progression towards conformity to Jesus, again represented by the word 'sanctification' but with a distinctly co-operative aspect to it. It could be further broken down as Christian warfare, self-denial, mortification, meditation, discipleship, discipline, fellowship, communion, church membership and prayer. Both categories are teleological as they have in view the ultimate and complete perfection of the individual believer but the two stages are distinctive.

And it's with this second category that we are now engaged here as we think about looking after our inner man – our spirit.

Your main life's business

*FIRST: As a Christian man and pastor, your inner man is your life's main business and consideration. In Ephesians 3.16 we notice here Paul is writing to Christians in general. And this must be our starting point, i.e. the pastor is first and always a sinner saved by grace. We never rise above that definition. We don't transition into a class marked 'clergy' or a sacred priestly cult. Nor is your life sustained by a professional qualification in a frame on the study wall.

And it's when this fundamental, common strand of Christian identity is forgotten and men view themselves as professionals or belonging to a class apart that they can become inflated with their own importance and detached from the rank and file of their church members.

Indeed, at this point we could no doubt have a useful digression into the nature of the so called 'Call to the ministry.' But that apart, here I am emphasizing that the care of your soul falls into the common pot of Christian experience. We are never more or less than debtors to mercy alone!

And it's when we begin to assume some latent superiority to ordinary believers that we may be in the first stages of the breakdown. Furthermore, professional status can become a mask for spiritual compromise, the word 'pastor' is, indeed, more a function than a position. When churches become hierarchical or career ladders are set up beware. (Personally speaking, the term 'senior pastor' gives me the creeps!)

And even as the Apostle to the Gentiles, Paul's self-image was the one which we too should be quick to embrace (Ephesians 3.8 'Less than the least of all' and

Philippians 3.4.) Paul never lost his awareness of the pit from which he'd been rescued, so in 2 Corinthians repudiates the whole tendency to self-glory having previously described his kind as "the scum on the pot." (1 Corinthians 4.13.) In other words, an ongoing sense of our own unworthiness, ordinariness and dependence is essential to authentic leadership. That keeps the spirit. Romantic ideas of the ministry will usually lead to disappointment, and pride generally precedes a fall.

God took a risk

**SECOND: Over and above your external circumstances and your public persona or popularity, it's your inner man which is of primary interest to God. In calling you or me to the ministry God is taking a considerable risk. We may remember how the sins of Old Testament Israel reflected badly on God Himself, Numbers 14.15-16. In calling you and me to the ministry, he's made a questionable investment but nevertheless has every right to a good return.

We are not just subject to our own ambitions or the whims of our congregation but to the landowner who has gone to the faraway country but who is coming back to assess our labours.

Again, it's not the number and titles of the books on your shelves that qualifies you for the ministry, but the quality of the spiritual fruit which you are presenting to the LORD Himself.³ It's also important to remember the difference between gifts and fruit. God gives the gifts; it's *we* who produce the fruit. But that fruit doesn't just comprise what goes onto our laptops in the structured hours in the study, but what that same laptop or smartphone may be downloading into our minds, later that night.

In all too many recent cases, this includes pornography, which later emerges as the back story to a broken marriage, a shattered ministry and a struggle with guilt and shame which drags on for years to come. Pornography is a 'death work,' Proverbs 14.12;25.28.⁴

Positive and negative

So...***THIRD: Let me remind you that your inner man is subject to both Positive and Negative forces within and outside yourself.

³ See Murray McCheyne's poem *The Barren Fig Tree*

⁴ See *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, Carl R. Trueman, Crossway, pages 98-99

As we have already noted, your ministry and spirituality are not guaranteed by your official or professional status, 'Pastor Someone...or The Reverend Other' but it's about the reality of life of God in your soul. Which raises the question of who, or what else, might be in occupation?

As a WWII spy-courier in occupied France, Odette Sansom had to lodge in a house full of Wehrmacht Officers. It was dangerous space to share with the enemy! And it is down to us personally to embrace *or* resist and counter whatever hostile powers may share our space in life as well. There is no inherent principle which will do it apart from your own mind and will. A second blessing, crisis experience is not out there waiting to be claimed, which in Winston Churchill's language will release you from the 'Blood, toil, tears and sweat.'

Hence, we need to constantly monitor our priorities because godliness doesn't depend on a PhD from Oxford, but self-denial and the daily disciplines of reading scripture and prayer that they might increasingly form Christ in us. Our primary interest must never be our status in a public sense but our character in relation to the Lord Himself.

And costly though this may be, it will actually liberate us from ministerial envy or discontent regarding God's providential appointment of us to a modest and unspectacular location. With this in mind, I would recommend the unusual but arresting book *Embracing Obscurity*. (2012. B&H, Nashville, Tennessee.) Indeed, because most of us are never going to be famous anyway (headlining at Word Alive or Keswick), this principle can actually be liberating.

And anyway, because our main business is something internal and personal then, actually, we are in with a shout. In other words, what you and I need is not more recognition, approval or theological education but more time in the presence of the Lord, more of the mind-set of John the Baptist, 'He must increase as we decrease.'

However, this is far from an automatic process and the temptation to serve self is relentless and resistance is viewed in scripture as costly and painful a warfare. Listen to Paul David Tripp: 'Pastoral ministry is always shaped by a war between the kingdom of self and the kingdom of God, fought on the field of your heart.' Yet (ironically) we can build both kingdoms by actually doing ministry. The DNA of sin is selfishness and ministry itself can easily become about *me*, 2 Corinthians 5.15.

The fundamental battle of pastoral ministry is not with the shifting values of the surrounding culture. It is not the struggle with resistant people who don't esteem the gospel. It is not the fight for success of programmes or the constant struggle for resources to accomplish the mission. No, the war is fought on the ground of your own heart and is a fight over values, allegiances and motivations, about secret desires and foundational dreams. It is a war which we foolishly ignore and dismiss at our own and others peril.

Disciplines

So, let us constantly re-evaluate our directions and apply the disciplines which make for lasting usefulness in the best profession on earth.

- Walking humbly with God. Reading the Psalms and seeing yourself in them.
- Keeping short accounts with your conscience. Talking to ourselves along healthy lines, stifling the inner voices which rob us of the joy of our salvation.
- Refusing to go to pity parties, rooting out bitterness, resentment and internalized anger.
- Cultivating generosity of spirit, seeing the best in others, overlooking the irritations of contrary personalities. Developing a servant mentality, getting our hands dirty. Spending time with ordinary, "little" people just as Jesus did. (At this point, I'm reminded of a refined and elegant man who spent a large part of his precious time visiting shut-ins in Soho in the 1980s, cleaning toilets and filling the fridge of those who were lucky enough to possess a fridge!)
- Avoid isolation and the tyranny of the lonely study. (Being alone for hours on end leaves you vulnerable. As the Japanese defenders of Okinawa told their troops "Aim for the man with the pistol, he's the commander.")
- Commitment to the company of good men, who will be straight with you, in a loving, sensitive way. Developing regular and focussed fellowship in pastoral fraternals, yet not coveting other men's positions, gifts or success. Embracing God's providential appointments. (Read the Puritans on providence)

- Constantly improving the connection between your theology and your own character. ('That sermon which preaches itself best to others is the sermon which first preaches itself to the preachers own heart.') The Puritans were good on that. Read their biographies, which express their theology in action.
- Listen to other preachers online, not to mimic but to be challenged. 'Always be reading one or other of the gospels for there we are especially in the presence of Christ,' (Stuart Ollyott).
- Prioritizing private prayer and praying with your wife and, as your best earthly asset, receiving her counsel if she points out a fault. In looking after her interests above all others, she will do you the most good, Proverbs 31). In the recent Clint Eastwood film, *The Mule* he played the part of an aged man who obsessively cultivated prize-winning roses becoming a celebrity on the showing circuit but at the cost of his marriage and family. His public persona, a cover for domestic neglect. Ending up in debt, he took to drug running to pay his way, hence the title.

Lastly: Remember the words of Peter as he focuses on pastors especially; 'Clothe yourselves with humility, for God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble, humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God that he may exalt you in due time,' 1 Peter 5:1-11.