

MORE THAN A SPIRITUAL PROBLEM: THE PASTOR DEALS WITH ANXIETY

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ABSTRACT

A pastor will encounter many joyful opportunities in his ministry; so also does he encounter many difficulties and challenges. The anxiety he feels in those moments is his body telling him to prepare for those challenges. However, some pastors will struggle to express their anxiety in healthy or normal ways. Their struggle may involve severe delay or avoidance of the situation, shame and guilt, and loss of self-identity. This may lead to anxiety, where the world around them becomes a dangerous and unpredictable place. This thesis will investigate a pastor's identity in light of his biology and his environment and then look at the unique challenges of ministry that are feeding his anxiety. This thesis is interested in asking the question: Is the pastor who deals with constant anxiety morally failing his calling to serve God's people? Is his anxiety a hidden sin that duly disqualifies him from the ministry? As he reaches a more enlightened understanding of his anxiety, the pastor will find that it is not simply driven by an absence of faith but is a real disorder that must be treated as any other physical disorder would be treated.

INTRODUCTION

Any pastor who is currently going through the distresses and difficulties of ministry may read the Apostle Peter's words to the leaders in Asia Minor and find comfort, for God in his Word gives them permission to lay their troubles and worries before him on account of his love:

Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you. Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that the family of believers throughout the world is undergoing the same kind of sufferings. (1 Pet 5:6–9) NIV)

Unfortunately, this comfort is not always easy to realize when the pastor fails to place himself in the truths of what God is saying in these verses. The temptation to do so is easy in the life of a pastor. In the context of ministry, the pastor may be able to teach what "casting cares on God" looks like. In the context of his personal life, however, he takes on the mindset of focusing on his fears, feeling easily frustrated and bitter about the weight of responsibility that is on him. The temptation for him will be to reason out that God cannot use him until he becomes spiritually strong again, or he may simply become detached from the idea of ministry altogether. These thoughts give the impression that the pastor is morally failing his congregation and that he needs to dismiss himself from his calling.

Paul David Tripp calls it a "dangerous and fallacious dichotomy" in which pastors trap themselves into believing the notion that their private and ministry lives are not intimately and causally connected.¹ He writes that pastors often forget how much they need everything they

1. Paul David Tripp, *Dangerous Calling* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 187.

teach, that pastors must always be careful to carry a dual identity with themselves. They must think of themselves “not only as an *instrument* of the work [of the gospel] but also as a *recipient*.”² Tripp asks a humbling question to the pastor: “Are you so busy feeding others that you are neglecting the need to feed yourself?”³

This conversation holds precedent in an age today that is becoming more cognizant of the importance of mental wellness and its direct relation to engaging in healthy/unhealthy self-care behaviors. Thanks to the continued study of mental health⁴ nowadays, it is becoming easier to see that it is something that needs to be monitored, as it does fluctuate on a spectrum of *bad* to *good*.

Benjamin Kohls talks about the need to recognize the static nature of mental health under all aspects and not only our spiritual health: “We apply this concept [of fluidity] to our spiritual wellness frequently. We know that when faith is nourished it will grow, mature, and flourish, even in times of significant pain and hardship. When our spiritual life is neglected, it will fade, weaken, and diminish, even in times of health and prosperity. This fluidity is axiomatic [self-evident] regarding all aspects of our holistic wellness” (brackets added).⁵

2. Tripp, *Dangerous Calling*, 193.

3. Tripp, *Dangerous Calling*, 194.

4. “To be mentally healthy means that a person *feels* much the same way he or she wants, is in control of his or her *actions*, and *thinks* both realistically and optimistically.” (Stephen M. Saunders, *A Christian Guide to Mental Illness: Recognizing Mental Illness in the Church and School*. Volume 1 (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 2016), 17.) The long term feelings (mood), the way we behave (behavior) and our thoughts, memories and plans (cognitions) are what determine and define mental health and mental illness. To dive deeper into the wellness discussion, read Benjamin Kohls’ paper on emotional wellness, as he conceptualizes the essence of wellness and the components that make up one’s “self” (Cf. footnote “5”).

5. Benjamin S. Kohls, “Emotional Wellness: Holistic Care for God’s Workmanship,” 2021, 10, [Emotional-Wellness-Kohls.pdf \(wisluthsem.org\)](#).

Every pastor will want to keep in mind that he is composed of soul, body, *and* mind, that the anxiety that dwells in his head will affect his physical and spiritual health. This thesis explores the oftentimes crippling function that anxiety plays in a person's biology, how it interacts with their environment and how it preys on the sinful nature of the person it affects. It is interested in exploring the question: How should a pastor view his high propensity to anxiety? It aims to give the pastor a more enlightened understanding of his anxiety in the context of ministry and of the adverse ways that he may model forms of self-care. This thesis finds that a person's chronic anxiety is not simply driven by an absence of faith in God's promises but is a real disorder that must be treated like any other physical disorder would be treated.

PART 1: AN INCREASED AWARENESS OF OURSELVES

Anxiety Makes Us Aware of Danger Around Us

Anxiety has had a riddled past, and it has not helped that each culture around the world has invented its own way of understanding the concept of anxiety. From an American cultural perspective,⁶ anxiety⁷ seems to be a biological trait that all humans have which is as old as the human race, designed to protect humans from danger. Not everybody ascribes value to anxiety as a scientific concept, but psychologists are observably able to track the physiological and biological responses of the body when a person is in the “fight-or-flight mode.”

Fight-or-Flight Mode

A woman at an intersection has a green light and starts to push on the acceleration. In the corner of her eye, she notices that the person at the crossing has not stopped their vehicle but has run through a red light. She feels the sensations of fear and dread before her brain can even process

6. “At one point in the 80’s, Western psychotherapists tended to view ‘social phobia’ (a type of anxiety) as “a predominantly “Asian disorder”—a condition that flourished in the “shame-based cultures” of Japan and South Korea, where correct social behavior is highly valued. Japanese researchers took an opposing view, considering Japanese society itself to be “pseudo-sociophobic” because feelings and behaviors that in the West would be considered psychiatric symptoms—excessive shame, avoidance of eye contact, elaborate displays of deference—are cultural norms in Japan. What’s normal, even valorized, in one culture is considered pathological in another.” (Scott Stossel, *My Age of Anxiety: Fear, Hope, Dread, and the Search for Peace of Mind* (New York: Vintage Books, 2013), 104.)

7. “Anxiety” as a word has evolved largely throughout the history of the world. “The Species of unpleasant emotion that twenty-five hundred years ago was associated with *melaina chole* (ancient Greek for “black bile”) has since also been described, in sometimes overlapping succession, as “melancholy,” “angst,” “hypochondria,” “hysteria”...“neurosis,” “depression,” “phobia,” “anxiety,” and “anxiety disorder”—and that’s leaving aside such colloquial terms as “panic,” “worry,” “dread,” “fright,” “apprehension”...“trepidation,” “jitters,” “willies,” “obsession,” “stress,” and plain old “fear” (Stossel, *My Age of Anxiety*, 34–5). The word “anxiety” was employed in standard psychological and medical textbooks starting in the 1930’s. “Anxiety” was a rendering of the German *Angst* (as used in the works of Sigmund Freud)(Stossel, *My Age of Anxiety*, 35).

that she is in danger. Her foot slams on the brakes. Her arm muscles start contracting tightly. Her eyes widen and her pupils dilate. Her heart and breathing rates quicken. She is in a state of heightened arousal—This is the sensation of the fight-or-flight mode.

Catherine Pittman and Elizabeth Karle break down the relationship between the brain and anxiety by studying the two chief areas of the brain involved in controlling the response of anxiety (the *fight-or-flight response*)—the cerebral cortex and the amygdala.

The Cerebral Cortex

The cerebral cortex is the perceiving and thinking part of your brain—in fact, it is the part of your brain that you are using to read and understand this paper. The cortex is divided into different sections, called *lobes*, the most important of which are the *frontal lobes* which process vision, hearing, and other sensory information. The cortex processes all of the information to allow a person to perceive the world around them.⁸ Both the cortex and the amygdala receive their information from the thalamus, the only difference being that the thalamus sends the information over to the cortex for *higher-level* processing and the amygdala for an immediate response.⁹

In addition to processing information, its function is to attach meaning and memories to the sensory input you receive (e.g. You see a dog and recognize it as “Rusty”— the pet dog you own). Along with the ability to understand and interpret situations, “the cortex allows you to use logic and reasoning, produce language, use your imagination, and plan ways of responding to

8. Catherine M. Pittman, PhD and Elizabeth M. Karle, MLIS, *Rewire Your Anxious Brain: how to use the neuroscience of fear to end anxiety, panic & worry* (Oakland: New Harbinger Publications, 2015), 16, 18, kindle edition.

9. See Appendix 2.

situations.”¹⁰ In relation to anxiety, the cortex will help you evaluate the usefulness of various responses to what you perceive as a *dangerous situation* (e.g. the event in which a child has not returned home as it gets later into the night). The original function of the cortex is very beneficial to processing and judging ways of behaving normally in a given situation. However, this process can go wrong since the cortex can also create thoughts and images that anticipate negative outcomes of a situation, and as such provoke a great deal of fear (*Is my child hurt? Lost? Kidnapped?*).¹¹ Worry is often the result of the interpretation of events presented by the cortex. The problem amplifies when a person’s pattern of worrying is serious enough that it interferes with their daily life.

The Amygdala

The cortex takes time to process and interpret information from the thalamus. The amygdala steps in and gets right to the point of protecting a person, creating rapid responses based on the information it is given. It is able to create these fast responses because of its close proximity to the thalamus. Also, its central position in the brain allows for many neural connections to other parts of the brain, including the “sympathetic nervous system” (SNS),¹² which is responsible for inducing the fight-or-flight response.¹³ Associations are key to understanding how the amygdala

10. Pittman and Karle, *Rewire Your Anxious Brain*, 12.

11. Pittman and Karle, *Rewire Your Anxious Brain*, 18.

12. “[The] SNS is made up of neurons in the spinal cord that connect with nearly every organ system in the body, which allows the SNS to influence dozen of responses, from pupil dilation to heart rate” (Pittman and Karle, *Rewire Your Anxious Brain*, 22.).

13. Pittman and Karle, *Rewire Your Anxious Brain*, 22.

thinks—With regards to the fight-or-flight response, the amygdala works hard to identify any sensory input received from the thalamus associated with danger.¹⁴

The way the amygdala is wired can be a blessing, as it can respond quickly enough to save a person’s life before the cortex even knows that a person is in danger. Again, in the case of the driver: Her body was primed and ready for action, with enough energy stored up to run away or *fight* should the situation call for it. This is what may be referred to as the physical experience of anxiety, and it is the amygdala’s fast response of directing the SNS. Though the amygdala itself doesn’t cause the physical symptoms of anxiety, it “controls the release of hormones and activates the areas of the brain that create the physical symptoms.”¹⁵

The amygdala can be a double-edged sword. Though it can save your life in a dangerous life-or-death incident, “it also has the neurological capability *to override* other brain processes.”¹⁶¹⁷ Again, it has neural connections to other parts of the brain, which not only includes the SNS but the cortex itself. When the amygdala is activated, there is little that can stop it in the moment of panic. Pittman and Karle write: “It’s literally true that you can’t think when the amygdala takes control. The thinking processes of the cortex are superseded and you’re under the influence of the amygdala.”¹⁸

14. Not just danger—It also identifies sensory input with positive events. For example, if a person was gifted a necklace, and necklaces have not been associated with negative or traumatic events, the amygdala would control the process of releasing hormones leading to happiness and contentment.

15. Pittman and Karle, *Rewire Your Anxious Brain*, 20.

16. LeDoux, J.E. “The Emotional Brain: The Mysterious Underpinning of Emotional Life,” quoted in Pittman and Karle, *Rewire Your Anxious Brain*, 26.

17. Joseph LeDoux led pioneering research in the 1980’s, helping society figure out the amygdala’s role in how emotions of fear are processed.

18. Pittman and Karle, *Rewire Your Anxious Brain*, 25.

Pittman and Karle’s assessment does help to explain that anxiety is not so much the emotions of worry or fear as it is the anticipatory response to threats of danger that the brain interprets. But to talk of our American cultural context again, we often do not use the word *anxiety* in that way. As an adjective (*anxious*)—yes. But as a noun (*anxiety*) it often carries a negative connotation, as being something bad that someone is suffering from. And for good reason: the response of anxiety can be negatively expressed, in an unhealthy context and with an unhealthy amount of stress, so much as to change how a person views themselves.

Anxiety Teaches Us Consistency with Our Fears

Jesus reassured his disciples: “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?” (Matt 6:25, 27) A normal concern for one’s daily bread is not the problem: Jesus admonishes people to avoid an unreasonable preoccupation over things that are ultimately not in their control but in God’s.

In the case of anxiety, sometimes dangers are present and should concern people. When anxiety is functional, it means that the brain is responding to a situation that has a fairly high probability of happening. It also means that steps can actually be taken which will prevent, correct or significantly decrease the possibility of a negative event (e.g. locking the door at night).¹⁹ At this point, it will help to turn to psychology to find out when anxiety is no longer functioning for a person’s mental well-being.

19. *The Worrying Pastor*, 1–2. William Bixler (Christian counselor), presentation to the author, transcript given on October 25, 2021.

Non-Functional Vs. Functional Anxiety

William Bixler describes what makes for unhealthy anxiety. According to Bixler, this whole process leading to what he calls “catastrophic thinking” is usually learned, as a person’s environment may precipitate triggers of trauma.²⁰ When talking of a person’s trauma, it not only deals with how they experience an event but also how others around them react to that event. In step-stair fashion, a child may grow up seeing the world as a dangerous and unpredictable place. It may be as simple as a parent constantly telling their child to “watch out,” as they attach the various reasons that the child may have for worrying about their safety (*You might slip and fall and crack your head open; You may choke; You’ll get lost; You’ll shoot your eye out*).²¹

Consequently, a child’s brain learns after a while to speak this language.²² When their environment changes as adults, and as stress augments over time and the responsibilities pile up, it is not unlikely that their brain’s intent will be to create consistency with their “fear of the unknown,” as Bixler labels it. The brain, if left by itself, will draw conclusions consistent with the notion that *the world is a dangerous and unpredictable place*, and will look for sensory input to confirm its bias. When it finds a trigger, the amygdala and the cortex will allow for the release of more adrenaline in the body when adrenaline is not needed.²³ The SNS will emit physiological

20. William Bixler, interview by David Young, October 25, 2021. Audio, 1:00:58.

21. “In a recent poll, 70% of adults said they thought the world had become less safe for children since they were children—even though all evidence suggests that children are actually safer now. We protect children from danger, real and imaginary, and are then surprised when they go to college and create safe places designed to repel the world.” Jean Twenge, PhD, *IGen: Why Today’s Super-Connected Kids Are Growing up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy—and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood, and What That Means for the Rest of Us* (New York: Atria Books, 2017), 164.

22. A very loose example of this is the movie *Bubble Boy* (2001), where the main character (Jimmy) is told many times by his mother that he has an auto-immune disease and that he will die if he ever goes outside of his protective bubble dome. That is one way to condition your child to live in a house of fear.

23. William Bixler, interview.

responses of varying types whether the situation is appropriate or not—ranging from dry mouth to the urge to defecate or vomit, but not limited to these responses.²⁴

In an interview conducted with Bixler, he adds: “A person with Generalized Anxiety Disorder²⁵ always has this assumption on their mind [that the world is a dangerous and unpredictable place], which opens the door to catastrophic thinking, to paralyzing fear” [brackets added].²⁶ Bixler also wrote in a presentation: “When anxiety becomes dysfunctional, the mind will create many more imagined catastrophes than ever actually happen.”²⁷

Bixler touches on an important point when he talks of “paralyzing fear.” The key factor in distinguishing between normal anxiety and clinical anxiety is whether a person’s anxiety disrupts them from preparing for real threats. It becomes a clinical issue when it inhibits their ability to function or cope with stress in their day-to-day lives.

Likewise, Stephen Saunders provides a diagnostic look at determining normal anxiety versus abnormal forms. “Healthy anxiety is both natural and necessary. It is also situation-specific, reflecting accurate discernment between truly dangerous situations and merely unpleasant situations. Healthy anxiety is time-limited. When the situation resolves, the anxiety goes away.”²⁸

24. “Expelling waste material allows the [organism’s] internal systems to focus on survival needs more immediate than digestion.” (Stossel, *My Age of Anxiety*, 44.) Most runners will tell you about their urgent need to go to the bathroom before a competitive race—It most likely is the brain perceiving the upcoming race as something more pressing to the runner’s needs than digestion. This is an intriguing response of the body: In the beginning periods of history, a person’s body would have reserved this kind of response for running away from ferocious animals or hostile enemies.

25. The term “General Anxiety Disorder” will be explained further on the next page (p.11).

26. Bixler, interview.

27. Bixler, “The Worrying Pastor,” 2.

28. Stephen M. Saunders, *A Christian Guide to Mental Illness: Recognizing Mental Illness in the Church and School*. Volume 1 (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 2016), 92.

Saunders gives a basic diagnosis for labeling anxiety as a disorder: “For anxiety to be labeled abnormal (i.e. a disorder), it must cause problems.”²⁹ And it often does—abnormal anxiety includes intense distress and disabling due to the feared events and situations that the brain generates. As opposed to healthy anxiety, which motivates people to prepare, abnormal anxiety interferes with preparation for stressful events. “The person may attempt to avoid the stressful situation, or severely delay doing it.”³⁰ And as Saunders points out the question of whether this is an issue that younger children will outgrow, he writes: “Abnormal anxiety is not typically outgrown. Instead, it tends to get worse over time (progressive).”³¹

Generalized Anxiety Disorder

This frequent and pervasive behavior is what sometimes leads to a diagnosis of *Generalized Anxiety Disorder* (GAD), also referred to as *chronic anxiety*. A good working definition for GAD is: “A free-floating anxiety with no specific object of fear, no specific situation, or experience.”³² Scott Stossel writes what his counselor (referred to as “Dr. W”) defines anxiety to be: “Anxiety is apprehension about future suffering—the fearful anticipation of an unbearable catastrophe that one is hopeless to prevent.”³³ His definition fits well under this specific category of anxiety disorder, because GAD is a disorder that really has no cause or experience that

29. Saunders, *A Christian Guide to Mental Illness*, 94.

30. Saunders, *A Christian Guide to Mental Illness*, 94.

31. Saunders, *A Christian Guide to Mental Illness*, 93.

32. Saunders, *A Christian Guide to Mental Illness*, 109.

33. Scott Stossel, *My Age of Anxiety: Fear, Hope, Dread, and the Search for Peace of Mind* (New York: Vintage Books), 56.

necessitates a response. It just seems to be there. GAD is often referred to as *basic anxiety* for that reason.

The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-V) has this diagnosis of GAD:

Excessive anxiety and worry (apprehensive expectation), occurring more days than not for at least 6 months, about a number of events or activities (such as work or school performance). The individual finds it difficult to control the worry. The anxiety and worry are associated with three (or more) of the following six symptoms (with at least some symptoms having been present for more days than not for the past 6 months): Restlessness or feeling keyed up or on edge; Being easily fatigued; Difficulty concentrating or mind going blank; Irritability; Muscle tension; Sleep disturbance.³⁴

Published in 2013, the DSM-V also lists their most recent statistics concerning the prevalence of GAD in the United States:

(Up until 2013) The 12-month prevalence of generalized anxiety disorder is 0.9% among adolescents and 2.9% among adults in the general community of the United States. The 12-month prevalence for the disorder in other countries ranges from 0.4% to 3.6%. The lifetime morbid risk is 9.0%. Females are twice as likely as males to experience generalized anxiety disorder. The prevalence of the diagnosis peaks in middle age and declines across the later years of life. (Parenthesis added)³⁵

While those numbers seem very low, there is little profit in assigning value to the American Psychiatric Association's arbitrary classification and data for GAD. Unhealthy chronic anxiety extends much further than a survey of *officially mentally ill people* diagnosed by an organization, no matter how official the organization is. There are many factors in our environment today that are leading to more people suffering from catastrophic thinking, which will be explored in the following points.

34. American Psychiatric Association and American Psychiatric, eds., *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM-5*, 5th ed. (Washington, D.C: American Psychiatric Association, 2013), 222.

35. American Psychiatric Association and American Psychiatric Association, eds., *DSM-5*, 223.

Today's Environment Interacts With How We Think About Ourselves

With the best estimate of people in the U.S. who are currently diagnosed with an anxiety disorder (approximately forty million, or 18% of the U.S. population),³⁶ a person's first instinct may be that there is a tendency to over-diagnose anxiety disorders in people who aren't really suffering a mental illness. In a conversation with James Hein, a Lutheran pastor with a vested interest in the topic of mental health³⁷, he spoke to the issue and said that the statistics do match what is going on in our country—people generally are suffering more from anxiety in today's environment. From that conversation, along with witnessing what other authors have written on the environmental impacts on anxiety, it would not be shocking if the prevailing opinion of many would be that we are living in an age of anxiety. What are some of the environmental causes that are nurturing responses of anxiety?

New Threats in a Civilized World

Anxiety is a tool that has been hardwired into the brains of human beings. Ever since sin and death had been introduced into the world, humans have had to utilize anxiety as a preparatory response to perceived threats. It has saved many people in life-and-death situations over the millennia. However, researchers have found a significant problem:

The nervous system of the brain produces roughly the same response to physiological fear (which often does not have a probable chance of happening) as to genuine fears (which have a high chance of happening). The amygdala especially, which conducts the overall fear response, does not discriminate between real and non-specific catastrophes. It will cause the glands to pump out adrenaline and cortisol, even if they are not needed.³⁸

36. "National Institute of Mental Health." In Stossel, *My Age of Anxiety*, 300.

37. Hein has dealt with *Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder* (OCD), an anxiety disorder. He will have more to say in this paper.

38. Stossel, *My Age of Anxiety*, 45.

William James had an intriguing idea for this problem. He believed that the causes of severe anxiety were learned and that they could be attributed to modernity itself—specifically, the fact that a person’s fight-or-flight response was not suited to modern civilization. James observed that occasions for “genuine fear,” as he would describe—being chased by a deadly creature or encountering members of an enemy tribe—were relatively rare in a civilized society.³⁹ James of course did not anticipate the realities of deadly diseases, world wars or racially-based violence that would fit his idea of “genuine fear,” but he may have been on to something regarding the issues of modern civilization. Our bodies may or may not have been designed to react against the “threats” that today activate our fight-or-flight response—the disapproving look from an acquaintance, writing an important paper, going to a social event, the crashing of the housing market—yet the emergency response is still there, keeping a person anxious and on edge. The environment very well could be teaching people how to be anxious.

A Culture of Safety and Void of Exposure

Jean Twenge offers insight into today’s culture and how it is affecting teens, and what that means for adults. In her book *iGen*, she discusses the idea that iGen’ers⁴⁰ have been raised to value safety. Though it is a good sign that fewer iGen’ers are risking their lives in stunts the previous generation would have tried to pull off, there is a flip side to their interest in safety from harm and accidents: the idea that they should also be safe from people who disagree with them.⁴¹

39. Stossel, *My Age of Anxiety*, 45.

40. “iGen” is short for “internet generation” and is a term which comprises some 74 million people born between 1995 and 2012.

41. Twenge, *iGen*, 154.

All over the U.S. are campuses that host their ideas of *emotional safety*—places that used to invite people to discuss and challenge ideas but have now become hotspots for *safe places*. Twenge writes: “Safe spaces have broadened to include protecting against anyone with any viewpoint that might offend them.”⁴² The difficulty found in this approach is that it is much harder to protect the mind than it is to protect the body, try as one might. This approach also avoids exposure, something extremely valuable for fighting off the nervous center of the brain. Though many iGen’ers would find it agreeable to avoid exposure to their fears, it creates a world that is an inherently dangerous place, where most people are a threat, and every social interaction carries the risk of being hurt. A college student interviewed by Twenge offered “You never know what someone is going to say, and there’s no way to protect yourself from it.”⁴³

Twenge concludes with the argument that there are no safe spaces in the real world for when anxiety triggers a response of fear. Along with that, a person cannot learn about or understand their emotions if they are too protective of them. Her point is well-taken and challenges the solution of giving in to fear and running away in the name of *emotional safety*. This “solution” that is affecting younger teens these days can be counterproductive for battling anxiety, an issue which adults are well to take notice of.

The Rise of Smartphones

Mass communication and social media are prominent in today’s world. News reports are instant and run on a 24-hour cycle. More drastic for mental health is that it is all available on a small,

42. Twenge, *IGen*, 154. “This has spawned derision from many, including *South Park*, which featured the song “In My Safe Place” (“Everyone likes me and thinks I’m great in my safe space/ We can face almost anything, but reality we can do without.”) (Twenge, *IGen*, 154.)

43. Twenge, *IGen*, 157.

portable screen. Although smartphones can be a blessing, they tend to rob people of their health. “Mental health is ubiquitous with the rise of smartphones and with the plummet with in-person interaction. There’s too much of a coincidence.”⁴⁴

With access to social media and any news outlet on a smartphone, there is a big risk of coming across *misinformation* (wrong or misguided information) and *disinformation* (purposefully wrong information meant to stir up emotions). Though the term *fake news* has been thrown around and laughed at, in a sense it is true that there is a lot of news out there that is providing a false or distorted view of reality, which can affect the processing center of a person’s brain. On top of that, society carries the burden of having immediate access to all the world’s tragedies—to cultural, racial, and ideological wars as well. Paul David Tripp says in an interview with Tony Reinke: “More than ever before, through social media and websites and 24-hour news cycle, we are aware of what is happening around us. And I think for many of us this has raised our fears.”⁴⁵

“Fear of Missing Out”

Tony Reinke follows up with an important study of a phenomenon called “Fear of Missing Out” (FOMO). He views it hand in hand with media and smartphones. The Oxford Dictionary confirms this link between media and fear in its definition of FOMO: “Fear of missing out, anxiety that an exciting or interesting event may be happening elsewhere, often aroused by posts seen on a social media website.”⁴⁶

44. Twenge, *IGen*, 104.

45. Paul David Tripp. Quoted in Tony Reinke, *12 Ways Your Phone Is Changing You* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2017), 154–5.

46. Oxford English Dictionary, “FOMO.” In Reinke, *12 Ways*, 153.

Regarding FOMO and social media, the issue lies in the meaning of information. “The sobering question for [Christians] is whether our attention is being drawn to something worthwhile. Spectacles are ephemeral, which is why those who suffer from FOMO are always on the lookout for ‘The Next Big Thing.’”⁴⁷ A person’s attention is constantly being pulled away from worthwhile things towards things not worthwhile. Yet the victim’s cortex is being trained to say, “I cannot miss out on this information.” (e.g. *I have an “in” with this crowd if I know everything that’s going on with this new Netflix show that just came out.*) It works the same when seeing an acquaintance on social media who has just announced their engagement or marriage. There is a sense of pride and self-esteem that you are up-to-date on the happenings in that person’s life. But the feeling of affirmation is very fleeting and is quickly replaced with catastrophic thoughts, such as: *I am not truly known or seen by others.*

Performance-Based Anxiety

Kevin Vanhoozer boils down our core online fears to two anxieties: “Disconnection anxiety” (*I connect, therefore I am*) and “status anxiety” (*what will people think of me?*).⁴⁸ Disconnection anxiety essentially deals with FOMO—a need to “know” and to “feel affirmed.” Status anxiety deals with fear and shame in disappointing others.⁴⁹

James Hein labels social media as a “portable studio,” describing how hard, if not impossible, it is to view people online as they truly are. With these media apps, everything is viewed through a filtered image of perfection. For example, when a pastor’s peers are posting the

47. Reinke, *12 Ways*, 155.

48. Reinke, *12 Ways*, 157.

49. Reinke, *12 Ways*, 157.

new expansion that they are working on, or any other way in which they have been blessed, the pastor viewing the photo is not seeing all the difficulties, strains, and pressures that his peer is going through. He only views perfection, and thus overanalyzes it and compares it with his brokenness. He may be tempted to say: “I am not leveraging my opportunities to grow my church.”⁵⁰

Enter the pastor’s thoughts of failure and the shame that would result—*This is how people will think of me if I don’t shape up*. To combat that shame of failure, a pastor will do everything he can to manage an impression of collectedness and aptness. Scott Stossel provides a good look at the impression side of anxiety: “Thus the stakes for any given performance become excruciatingly high: success means preserving the perception of value and esteem; failure means exposure of the shameful self one is trying so hard to hide. Impression management is exhausting and stressful—you live in constant fear that the house of cards that is your projected self will come crashing down on you.”⁵¹

An Impression of Vulnerability

Unfortunately, anxiety has a checkered past of being accepted as an organic disease with biological components.⁵² It has led to some biases against it being a real disease.

Stephen Saunders does the hard work of defending against biases when it comes to mental illnesses. In his book *A Christian Guide to Mental Illnesses*, he devotes a whole chapter to the stigma behind mental illnesses. Some biases involve the belief that mental illness is

50. James Hein, phone conversation, October 21, 2021.

51. Stossel, *My Age of Anxiety*, 112.

52. Saunders, *A Christian Guide to Mental Illness*, 91.

voluntary and is embraced purposefully (*A person enjoys having a label to confirm their emotions, or a person is looking for things to upset them*). Another bias believes that mental illness is a sign of weak character (*He isn't getting his life together*), or that mentally ill people are shameful (*A person turns to shameful ways of coping with their problems*).

All the biases lead to a chronically anxious person's impression of vulnerability. They will not want to be truly known for risk of being alienated or shamed; for fear that everyone will think them weak, unreasonable, shameful, incorrigible, the list goes on. In the pastor's case, he may ask the question, "Who would accept or follow someone who has a weakness like mine?" Hand in hand with the jaded impression of vulnerability comes impression management, which is meant to keep people at bay from realizing their weaknesses. The biased thought that no one knows the person as they truly are is a recipe for loneliness.

Looking At Ourselves in Light of God's Word

What this author has found is that despite the biological, environmental, and sociological factors that play into the discussion of anxiety, a big corollary factor is the spiritual ramifications of a person's anxiety. Is his anxiety an expression of a lack of faith in God? As a result of anxiety, is the pastor spiritually well and able to carry out his calling?

A Theology of Glory to Watch Out For

A pastor feels the obligation of ministerial tasks; listening to a variety of voices that comment on his presiding, teaching, and leadership; solving problems he did not create but must solve; facing opposition and criticism. These are things a pastor must concern himself with, but as Tripp warns, the desire to please every member can become a seductive idol. By separating ministry

life from personal life, a pastor runs the risk of viewing his ministry as his righteousness, when “your heart is ruled by something to which you have attached your pastoral identity and inner sense of wellbeing.”⁵³ A pastor’s ministry—his flock—is not his righteousness. Tripp warns pastors about letting a quest for success or affirmation rule their ministry, something known as *ministry idolatry*.

The people in your congregation did not become active participants in your ministry so that collectively they could make you feel better about yourself and more secure with your ministry gifts. God didn’t call you to your particular ministry position so that you could finally cobble together an identity that you could live with. The leadership of the church didn’t call you to be their pastor because they knew that you needed a forum where you could find meaning and purpose...So you will never find in your ministry the rest of heart that every human being seeks. And when you look there, it only ends in anxiety, frustration, hurt, disappointment, anger and bitterness and may ultimately lead you to question the goodness of God.⁵⁴

Tripp’s discussion of “ministry idolatry” sounds like a *theology of glory*, in that a pastor may expect that God will make him better as he puts more work and faith into his ministry. The pastor confuses his kingdom with God’s kingdom, again separating his ministry from his personal need for forgiveness and support from God. This alone argues that “ministry is a war for the gospel in our own hearts.”⁵⁵

The Sinful Nature’s “Fear of Missing Out”

The Apostle Paul writes to the Galatians out of concern for their souls: “For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh....Those who belong to

53. Tripp, *Dangerous Calling*, 202.

54. Tripp, *Dangerous Calling*, 203.

55. Tripp, *Dangerous Calling*, 203–4.

Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other” (Gal 5:17, 24–6).

Similar to the cultural idea of FOMO, the sinful nature that dwells in people creates in them a sense that they are missing out on something and therefore establishes what they are missing as important to them. Often, these valued items are unhealthy. In ministry, it is as simple as wanting to be in God’s place—to have his recognition, admiration, power and glory, especially when those matters are found lacking in one’s personal life.

Human nature has always been vying for these things, and the first instance of this was found in the garden of Eden when the devil stoked fears of missing out on something grand into the hearts of Adam and Eve. What was the thing that was *missing*? It was the opportunity for Adam and Eve to be more than God’s created beings. It was the opportunity to be like gods themselves. This fear of missing out has plagued the hearts of every human being and can only be conquered by the gospel. What a person’s anxiety can do, however, is slowly push that person away from receiving God’s personal promises of “sufficiency through Christ” into their own hearts. A lack of faith in God’s promises is an unfortunate possibility for one that tends to think catastrophic thoughts.

Avoiding Cultural and Spiritual Shame

It is harder for catastrophic thinkers to believe that *they are enough* when their perception of the world is more filtered than ever before, causing them to feel even more unknown and lonely. But knowledge is a powerful tool. Without the knowledge that God sees them as enough through

Jesus, a pastor may tell himself the lie that God cannot use him unless he is spiritually strong again, using his anxiety as an excuse for the lie.

Yet God was able to use *sinners* for his expressed purposes. The Bible tells of broken people whom God was pleased to use. He used Rahab, who was scared of Israel’s God (Josh 2). He used Jonah, who was scared to go to Nineveh for fear of his life. He used Gideon, who was very cautious and concerned about what he had been called to do (Judg 6–8). Jesus loved and guided his disciple Peter, who at points experienced stress and fear to his spiritual harm.

Josh Chen has advice for preachers—not only for the sake of their audience, but also for their own personal benefit: “It is still important that we frame sin in a way that is theologically correct, but also that proactively communicates God’s love for people.... God hates sin because he loves us so much that he can’t stand to see us finding ‘life’ where there is no life.”⁵⁶ Chen’s advice is well-taken, as his words offer a paradigm shift that encourages a new vision of ourselves, one that cautions to avoid a culture of shame. His words also encourage us to rely fully upon God’s message, which says “You are not unwanted ... but see how your desire to find ‘life’ your own way is hurting you. See how God’s love for you is here *now* ... ‘not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy’ (Titus 3:5), and because ‘all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus’ (Rom 3:24).”⁵⁷ This message, which is very in-tune with God’s words in the Bible, shows the anxious person that God wants and chooses to use sinners like them for his wonderful purposes.

God calls us in his Word to present our real selves before him, not a false image of ourselves. The Apostle Paul writes in Romans 12:1 “Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters,

56. Josh Chen, “Good News for New Generations.” In *Reviving Evangelism: Current Realities that Demand a New Vision for Sharing Faith*, 52.

57. Chen, “Good News for New Generations,” 54.

in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship.”

Pastors will always struggle to give God their real selves while on this earth. They will struggle to trust in God’s promises for their daily lives. But by reading up on anxiety, by understanding how their broken and catastrophic thoughts come about, they are starting to recognize them and accept them as part of “an organic disease with biological components.”⁵⁸ The pastor is slowly working toward a healthy view of his calling from God and his worth. He is now ready to look at the particular stressors of his environment—his ministry.

58. Saunders, *A Christian Guide to Mental Illness*, 91.

PART 2: A PASTOR’S ANXIETY IN LIGHT OF HIS MINISTRY

The Unique Context in Which Pastors Find Themselves

In her book *iGen*, Jean Twenge writes about an interview she gave with a 20-year-old Christian from Texas named Mark. About Mark: His faith leads him to be a kind, altruistic person. In describing his life goals, he approaches life with a “hell or high water” attitude. He will get the job done no matter what difficulty arises to meet him. He is the paragon of indestructibility. In the interview, Mark smiles with a toothy grin as he says: “I want to be able to get out of bed, and when my feet hit the floor, the devil goes, ‘Oh, crap, he’s up.’”⁵⁹ Let’s face it: Every pastor wants to be like Mark. And yet, often the pastor finds his vision of who he wants to be directly affected by the reality of ministry after he takes off his rose-tinted glasses.

The pastor desires and inherits a wonderful calling from God to shepherd God’s people. The apostle Paul writes to the Corinthian church: “This, then, is how you ought to regard us: as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the mysteries God has revealed” (1 Cor 4:1). Paul goes on to write how the overseer is no different than those he serves—for all people receive gifts to serve; all become priests by God for the purpose of the ministry of the gospel (1 Pet 2:5, 9). At the same time, God has established pastors, teachers, and other overseers to represent and conduct the public ministry of the gospel. The pastor’s blessed goal is to faithfully foster spiritual growth in the hearts and minds of his congregation, and “to proclaim the truth so as to meet the needs of his people.”⁶⁰

59. Twenge, *iGen*, 129.

60. C.F.W. Walther. “Twentieth Evening Lecture.” In *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*, reproduced from the German by W.H.T. Dau (St. Louis: Concordia, 1986), 208.

Armin Schuetze and Irwin Habeck remind us of the important points to consider in addition with the blessed goal of a pastor:

The fact that he in a special way has been set apart for the Lord's service does not exempt him from testing through trouble. "Because the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and he chastens everyone he accepts as his son" (Heb 12:6).⁶¹ St. Paul grew strong in the inner man through trial: "Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me" (2 Cor 12:9)...How the Lord through testing develops pastors for increased usefulness is indicated by the apostle's words: "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God" (2 Cor 1:3, 4).⁶²

C.F.W. Walther also cautions young ministers eager to enter the ministry:

A pitiful object is the young minister who enters upon his office with the thought that his days of hard labor and toil are over, that he has now entered a haven of rest and peace, which he decides to enjoy, since now he is his own boss and need not take orders from any person in the world. Equally as pitiable ... [the minister resolving] not to make enemies and doing everything to make all his people his friends.⁶³

What are some of the challenges that a pastor will have to face in the context of his ministry? What about being a pastor specifically may make him so anxious? There are a couple of unique challenges to consider.

The Pastor Finds It Hard to Set Boundaries in His Calling

Kevin Wattles, a Lutheran pastor with a doctorate in leadership from Denver Seminary, defines good leadership in the church as "influencing people to do what they otherwise wouldn't do for

61. All three references have been changed from King James Version to New International Version for the purpose of modernity.

62. Armin Schuetze and Irwin Habeck, *The Shepherd Under Christ* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1989), xiv.

63. Walther, "Twentieth Evening Lecture," 209.

the glory of God.”⁶⁴ The pastor will lead broken people like himself to the cross of Christ, to confess their sins before God and to look upon Jesus and live. A pastor will do this with the tools he has been gifted with: the Word of God, the sacraments, absolution, and prayer. As John Schuetze writes: “[God’s Word] is the scalpel that the doctor of souls uses to do spiritual surgery on the sinner. It is the needle and thread that the spiritual physician will use to suture up a wounded heart. It includes the guidance his member-patients need to achieve greater spiritual health.”⁶⁵ The efficaciousness and ability to convert souls to Christ rests on God alone (1 Cor 3:6).

The pastor will also give his time and self in the interest of moving people toward a richer display of faith in God. A faithful pastor is good, no—GREAT— at giving. Every day, he feels that commitment—perhaps need—driving himself to give to others. What is the problem there?

Carey Nieuwhof responds: “Leadership means you’re probably great at giving, but not at receiving.... Devotion with God isn’t actually enough, holistically.... God designed life to flourish in deep relationship with him, people and ourselves. Healthy human relationships are mutual. You give and receive.”⁶⁶

The direction that Nieuwhof takes towards devotional life is fine in the context of emotional health. A pastor knows that God’s Word is a healing balm for the soul and mind, yet he should be aware that he is not a super-hero who is inherently stronger, healthier, and better

64. Kevin Wattles, conversation in-person.

65. John Schuetze, *Doctor of Souls: The Art of Pastoral Theology* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 2017), 29.

66. Carey Nieuwhof, “Suicide, Leadership and the Dark Inner Struggle Few Understand,” *Carey Nieuwhof*, n.d.

put together because of the idea that he has some special promise from God regarding special strength and special immunity.⁶⁷ As human beings, they need to set boundaries for themselves. They too require special attention to their bodies; They too may require leadership at points from a friend, elder, spouse, coworker, or counselor. They may even have to learn to say “No” to their member’s requests and find boundaries that still show value to them.

The greatest leaders in the Bible were bombarded by the slings and arrows of life. We may sometimes picture leaders like David, Moses, Joshua, or Elijah as *rocks of Gibraltar*, but we find their words, thoughts, and behaviors reflective of the stress, pressure, anxiety, and solitude recorded for us on the pages of Scripture. Our Savior himself, when he took on human flesh and blood, recognized that tiredness and fatigue were a real thing. Even as the sinless Son of God, he had pain receptors. He wasn’t immune to these effects on his human body. And what was his course of action at certain points during his ministry? He set boundaries. “He ate healthy foods, got the sleep he needed and even took naps, took time to relax, and did a lot of walking” (Matt 26:18, 20; Mark 1:16; 3:23; 4:38; Luke 7:36; John 10:40; 12:2).⁶⁸

But often a pastor buys into the idea that he must beat his body for the ministry, just like the apostle Paul did (1 Cor 9:27). Paul’s situation is not prescriptive of how we are to treat our bodies. Exceptions are exceptions. In Paul’s case, he was not letting his body have control over him, but vice versa. It sounds right but is a lie because a person will often say these words to put themselves down with a sort of false humility. This often leads to catastrophic thinking, which will be talked about more under the section “The Anxious Pastor Suffers from False Humility.”

67. Robert Michel, “Pastoral Burn-Out: Fact or Fiction,” 1985, 3.

68. Bill Gaultiere, “Jesus Set Boundaries,” *SoulShepherding*, n.d.

The Pastor Can Find Himself in a Lonely Profession

A Pastor can find himself in a lonely profession? This problem sounds weird at first—and may seem to only apply to single men in the ministry—but it includes all pastors. Someone may point out that a pastor is surrounded by people every day. He may also have a supportive wife and kids. How is the pastor in danger of feeling lonely?

This goes back to the idea of leadership. As a leader, a pastor demonstrates authority as the overseer of their church by knowing and taking care of their members. To know their members, a pastor will ask a multitude of questions, memorize their names, understand what challenges they are facing, deal with their concerns or criticisms, counsel them, essentially get to the point where they know more than their fair share about them. Dependent on the culture of the congregation, members may not reciprocate that kind of behavior with the pastor. They do not know his struggles, his trials and fears, or what kind of experiences he had in the last week. Unless the pastor has a status update to share, the members may not truly follow up with his own emotions or thoughts, though they form an important part of his character.

The loneliness continues when pastors realize that their profession brings about a kind of pressure that is hard for others to understand. Pastors may assume that their members understand what they do each week: what they must prepare, what battles they must carefully avoid, the church's marketing plans, delinquent membership, worship styles, and much more. Although the pastor should be partnering with others to help tackle these tasks, he should also be cognizant of all that is going on within the church. To this point, it can be hard to find people who understand the dynamic nature of the responsibilities which a pastor carries as a leader. Nieuwhof, a leader himself, speaks to this issue: "When people can't speak meaningfully into those challenges, I

leave feeling a little unheard and unhelped.... Their inability to comment is 100% not their fault."⁶⁹

Nieuwhof is right in saying that it's not their fault. Most church members are lay members and not pastors. Think of a situation where a person is undergoing rhinoplasty to fix his nose. As he sits down with his plastic surgeon, the surgeon starts to ask the patient his opinion on strategies for how to go about fixing his nose. Unless the patient is a studied rhinoplasty surgeon, what useful insights could he offer?

Nevertheless, there are many things a pastor and his members may recognize and share, and one of those things is the common fear of unknown situations. But a pastor will not know that others share their fears unless the first step is taken towards breaking the silence on mental health.

The Pastor Often Does Not Have the Right Support System He Needs

Consider this example of ambivalence, where a pastor says "They wanted me, they called me, now they don't want me.... I don't care. They can have someone else."⁷⁰ The emotions of weariness, which turn into ambivalence (*I don't care*), which turn into a need to escape, often seem to be evidence for the thoughts that the pastor is having (*They don't want me*). While there can sometimes be external proof for his thoughts (i.e. confrontations or mistreatment from certain members or leaders), often his thoughts come from a warped interpretation of the events at hand. He feels like he knows everything that is going on in the hearts and minds of his members. He becomes paranoid. He "knows" that his members do not appreciate or value him.

69. Nieuwhof, "Suicide, Leadership and the Dark Inner Struggle Few Understand."

70. Michel, "Pastoral Burn-Out: Fact of Fiction," 4.

He starts to question the value of his work if no one appreciates it. He concludes that he has to escape his job.

The above situation is a common example of *burnout*, a term that has been given to many people's exhaustion and emotional collapse. A haunting image of burnout is to picture "a charred shell of a building that has been gutted by fire."⁷¹ In strictly behavioral terms, burnout is what happens "when a person works too hard under too much stress for too long a period of time so that they lose their equilibrium."⁷²⁷³ Herbert Freudenberger, a psychologist who coined the term in the 1970's, is also the one responsible for listing all the qualities of a candidate for burnout, which include paranoia, perceived state of omnipotence, feeling of indispensability, bitterness, or detachment.

Rich Gurgel frames this collapse as the "Elijah Complex," based on the prophet Elijah in the Old Testament. In 1 Kings 19, Elijah showed the symptoms of burnout: weariness, detachment, and paranoia. King David expresses similar signs in some of his psalms (e.g. Ps 12).

The following information is not to say that God's Word isn't sustainable, but God does offer other means of sustaining his people with his grace. He gives us a system of accountability through the people around us.

71. Richard Schleicher, "Clergy Stress and Burnout or All Stressed Up and No Place to Blow," 1985, 2.

72. Schleicher, "Clergy Stress and Burnout or All Stressed Up and No Place to Blow," 2.

73. It is revealing, that if one were to search for "burnout" in the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Essay File, they would find more than a few 'search results' from the 1980's. Pastors were evidently "burning out" at a fast rate by then. Rich Gurgel (former leader of the Grow in Grace program with the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod-WELS) gave a presentation in 2018 that addressed the problem directly. Reportedly, there had been an upward trend of resignations of both pastors and teachers within the synod until the 2010's. For WELS pastors, the total number of resignations in the 1970's was **32**. 1980's: **111**. 1990's: **194**. 2000's: **162**. 2010-2019: **96**. Jan-Sept 2020: **5**. These losses were not recorded as 'retirements'; these were all, more or less, due to the pressures of ministry (Grow in Grace, "Continuing Education for Called Workers: 2018 presentation to the WLS Juniors," October 30, 2018.). Thanks to Barbara Rickaby for the most recent up-to-date information from Grow in Grace.

John Townsend talks about the importance of “relational nutrients,” a term he himself has coined. Townsend offers: “Much like how our bodies need bio-nutrients to survive, we need relational nutrients to survive the mental game of life.”⁷⁴ These relational nutrients will be found in other people. Townsend divides the relational nutrients into four categories. Ideally, someone who will give you relational nutrients is someone who 1) is present and listens to you, 2) encourages you when you are down, 3) provides reality and gives you the facts, and 4) will help you follow through and do the things that are healthy for you.⁷⁵ Each pastor is fortunate to have built friendships by the time they enter the ministry, but it is extremely important that he continues to allow himself to be seen, truly seen, by a core group of people that he can trust. As Brené Brown says in her conversation on the power of vulnerability: “What we know is that connection, the ability to feel connected—neurobiologically that’s how we’re wired. In order for connection to happen, we have to allow ourselves to be seen, really seen.”⁷⁶

Unhealthy Ways of Coping

As pastors view themselves in light of their anxiety, they will also want to understand the power of addiction as an unhealthy means of coping with anxiety and as a corollary result of not having enough relational nutrients. The correlation between addiction and anxiety is revealing. A pastor who is vulnerable to catastrophic thinking will likely tend to be vulnerable to addiction, or—as counselors will often refer to it—self-medicating.

74. John Townsend, “John Townsend on How to Rewire Your Brain to Stop the Negative Voices and the Relationship You Really Need as a Leader, and Probably Don’t Have,” The Carey Nieuwhof Leadership Podcast, n.d., duration: 55:37.

75. John Townsend, “John Townsend on How to Rewire Your Brain to Stop the Negative Voices and the Relationship You Really Need as a Leader, and Probably Don’t Have.”

76. Brené Brown, “The Power of Vulnerability,” TED talk, n.d., duration: 20:00,

The proverb “nature abhors a vacuum”⁷⁷ can be used to explain how pastors may react to relational malnourishment. When it comes to the point where a pastor is not receiving a high enough dosage of relational nutrients in their present environment, naturally his body will seek ways to fill those voids, or simply to numb the pain of the effects. Perhaps it comes down to feeling a lack of attachment with his members or feeling unrest or displeasure from the members. In his catastrophic thinking, he certainly will be prone to viewing the world as a dangerous and unpredictable place. In a world that he thought he knew, he is starting to lose touch with it. But instead of seeing a counselor or a close friend and addressing the issue, he turns to self-medication for a sense of peace, control, and affirmation.⁷⁸ From all the pressure that arises, there has to be a release someplace. “Pastors are often all stressed up with no place to blow—except at home.”⁷⁹

Often the home becomes the place for the anxious person to unload their stress. It is the place to gripe about the insufferable things that have been dealt that day, a place to escape from problems and to forget about the hurt and the fear for a while.⁸⁰ Perhaps the home is the place where the pastor can turn to self-medication to numb the pain.

77. In other words, “If there is a hole, something will fill it.” “[The proverb is] Based on Aristotle’s observation that no true vacuums exist in nature (on Earth) because the difference in pressure results in an immediate force that acts to correct the equilibrium.” (“Nature Abhors a Vacuum,” cited in Thefreedictionary.com)

78. These issues are very similar to the core issues of trauma: issues of safety, hope and control.

79. Schleicher, “Clergy Stress and Burnout or All Stressed Up and No Place to Blow,” 8.

80. Brené Brown continues her talk on vulnerability: “You can’t numb those hard feelings [shame, guilt, grief, vulnerability] without numbing the other affects, our emotions. You cannot selectively numb. So when we numb those, we numb joy, we numb gratitude, we numb happiness. And then, we are miserable, and we are looking for purpose and meaning, and then we feel vulnerable, so then we have a couple of beers and a banana nut muffin. And it becomes this dangerous cycle.” (Brené Brown, “The Power of Vulnerability.”)

As a Christian who is not of the world but lives in the world, a pastor is certainly prone to the uncanny temptations of the devil and may find himself vulnerable to a particular vice. He may create false attachments of affection to certain vices such as alcohol, smoking, masturbation, or sexual fantasies.

Pornography is an especially dangerous vehicle for self-medication.⁸¹ Psychologist Alvin Cooper theorized that internet pornography was alluring for any person because of three primary factors: It is accessible, affordable, and anonymous, what Dr. Cooper calls the “Triple-A Engine.”⁸² For the catastrophic thinker who is just trying to numb the pain he is experiencing, this “Triple-A Engine” train will take him anywhere that he wants to go to numb his anxious brain. The only stress he must face is finding a place where he can be completely hidden. As a Christian counselor who recently changed his practice to sex-addiction therapy, William Bixler has done a lot of work with counseling pastors of a variety of backgrounds. One of the main things he and other sex-addiction therapists will look for when counseling those struggling with addiction is *what the function of the pornography is*.

What Bixler most often finds is that the function of the act is not simply getting excited about naked women. Bixler adds:

It’s what it does for the pastor, meaning, in that experience the pastor is forgetting all about the grumblings of his congregation, the distance from his wife, the fact that he is not producing growth among his church, or the fear of being let go. When he’s in the bubble of viewing pornography, and eventually masturbation, there aren’t any worries or

81. “According to a survey done by the Barna Group in 2016, 1 in 5 youth pastors and 1 in 7 senior pastors use porn on a regular basis and are currently struggling. That’s more than 50,000 U.S. church leaders. 43% of senior pastors and youth pastors say they have struggled with pornography in the past. Only 7% of pastors report their church has a ministry program for those struggling with porn.” Study cited in *Porn Stats: 250+ facts, quotes, and statistics about pornography use* (2018 Edition).

82. Alvin Cooper, *Cybersex: The Dark Side of the Force* (Philadelphia: Brunner-Routledge, 2000), quoted in Luke Gilkerson, “Coming Clean: Overcoming Lust Through Biblical Accountability,” 8.

concerns. He's in his own little world. But eventually he will have to return to reality, to the guilt and shame.⁸³

It is difficult to talk about addiction in a less condemnatory manner for a pastor who has been called “to be above reproach; faithful to his wife, temperate, self-controlled ...” (1 Tim 3:2). These are the terms of the calling that every pastor should be held to, as the ministry is to be regarded as if he were in a holy marriage. The question necessarily is asked: Is the hurt and broken pastor always unworthy to be believed and trusted and therefore incapable of serving his flock while he seeks help from psychiatric/addiction counseling? Or can the situation allow for the congregation to be active in finding help for their pastor as he continues to serve them? After listening to counselors and researchers talk about the topics of addiction, vulnerability, and the sinful nature, these questions become less black and white.⁸⁴

The Anxious Pastor Suffers from False Humility

In the chapter “The Great Sin” of his work *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis reminds his readers of the warning he previously gave—that the center of Christian morals did not lie in sexual morality. Lewis talks about the “one vice of which no man in the world is free ... the centre of Christian morals.”⁸⁵ The sin is pride or self-conceit, which is “the complete anti-God state of mind.”⁸⁶

83. Bixler, interview.

84. Bixler cautions people who don't experience porn addictions to label those who do as morally reprehensible ‘monsters.’ In reference to sex-addicts again, Bixler adds: “Many pastors occasionally view pornography not because they're hyper-sexed or have a demon of lust. It's important to put a focus on all the shame, stress and anxiety that lie underneath the sinful actions, to look at the origin of their fear or shame” [His words can be framed to include any addiction currently faced by the pastor](Bixler, interview.).

85. C.S. Lewis, “The Great Sin.” In *Mere Christianity*. In *The Complete C.S. Lewis Signature Classics* (New York: HarperCollins, 2002), 69.

86. Lewis, “The Great Sin,” 69.

Lewis goes on to talk about the nature, or essence, of pride. Pride does not exist without comparisons or competition. “Once the element of competition has gone, pride has gone.”⁸⁷

Lewis goes on to say that pride infiltrates the heart to the point where the object of the heart is to prove that it is better than someone else. The more pride a person has, the more they dislike it in others. What is hardly recognized is, pride can also infiltrate hearts in a more subtle way, though equally sinister and ugly. In the case of the chronically anxious pastor, the comparison game of pride would be the pleasure of beating himself down to intentionally make himself less than others.

C.S. Lewis’s *The Screwtape Letters* gives a lesson from an unlikely source about the lies told about humility. This lesson is given through the words of a demon named “Screwtape,” who is attempting to guide his nephew “Wormwood” in his attempts to turn a Christian away from the faith.⁸⁸ Screwtape reveals what lies he wants Wormwood to implant in the heart of the Christian, and what opposition he should expect to face in the process. Note that in the following quote, the “Enemy” is a reference to God.

There are profitable ways of fixing his attention on the virtue of Humility.... Let him think of it not as self-forgetfulness but as a certain kind of opinion (namely, a low opinion) of his own talents and character....Fix in his mind the idea that humility consists in trying to believe those talents to be less valuable than he believes them to be....The Enemy wants him, in the end, to be so free from bias in his own favour that he can rejoice in his own talents as frankly and gratefully as in his neighbour’s talents ... I fear, to restore to them a new kind of self-love—a charity and gratitude for all selves, including their own.... [The Enemy] His whole effort, therefore, will be to get the man’s mind off the subject of his own value altogether. He would rather the man thought himself a great architect or a great poet and then forgot about it, than think he should spend much time and pains trying to think himself a bad one. Your efforts to instil [sic] either vainglory or false modesty into the patient will therefore be met from the Enemy’s side with the obvious reminder that a man is not usually called upon to have an opinion of his own

87. Lewis, “The Great Sin,” 69.

88. As C.S. Lewis writes in his preface to *The Screwtape Letters*: “Readers are advised to remember that the devil is a liar. Not everything that Screwtape says should be assumed to be true even from his own angle” (125).

talents at all...to render real in the patient's mind a doctrine which they all profess but find it difficult to bring home to their feelings—the doctrine that they did not create themselves, that their talents were given them, and that they might as well be proud of the colour of their hair.⁸⁹

Some pastors who experience the symptoms of GAD are forced to confront it personally and may therefore change their beliefs and end up with a more enlightened view of their mental illness. Others, however, may dig into the ground and prepare to be hit by the worst, continuing to believe that they do not have a mental illness. They seem to be unable to overcome their negative attitudes, which they then turn upon themselves in a false sense of humility.⁹⁰ They find a certain pride, a certain strength, in not unloading their burdens upon others. They might anticipate the act of seeking help as a self-stigmatizing form of shame. The catastrophic-thinking pastor will figuratively “stop the tape” when he anticipates the shame from family and members when they hear about his mental illness. William Bixler describes what it means to “stop the tape:”

“Stopping the Tape” is a self-stigmatizing function of GAD. For example, in the case of one's fear that a loved one will pass away: Figuratively, you insert a tape into your brain that plays out what would happen if that loved one passed away. On the tape is a memory of a future burial. But the tape isn't finished—It also contains memories of what will happen after that specific event is over. The tape still goes on, and yet, the receiver stops the tape as soon as the memory of the future funeral is over. The person doesn't allow themselves to view their lives after the anticipated catastrophe happens.⁹¹

So often, in any case of GAD, a person will play tape after tape in their heads that contain memories of their greatest fears playing out. And each time, they never run the tape past the anticipated catastrophe. The created memory is enough validation for the person to go on fearing

89. C.S. Lewis, “The Screwtape Letters.” In *The Complete C.S. Lewis Signature Classics* (New York: HarperCollins, 2002), 151–2.

90. Saunders, *A Christian to Mental Illness*, 420.

91. William Bixler, interview by David Young, July 19, 2021. Audio, 1:06:32.

it, to confirm the shame that they anticipate. They may want to fight and defeat the towering dragon that represents their fears, but their anxiety is preventing them from doing anything about it. This can apply to the pastor in his desire to stop worrying and to get back to serving God.

The Anxious Pastor Is in Danger of “Functional Amnesia”

The Apostle Paul realized the importance of how a person thinks about themselves. In Romans 12 he writes:

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will. For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: **Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment**, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you. For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. (Rom 12:1–6)(bold type added)

Paul writes these words in reference to a church full of saints, each one uniquely gifted with a certain set of abilities and each one belonging to the family of believers. He does caution that we display a sense of humility in using the gifts we have been given, but also that we do not think ourselves to be too small among others. In Christ, each person has their own gifts to give and share with the rest of the body.

To the Church in Galatia, Paul also writes: “So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.... It is fine to be zealous, provided the purpose is good, and to be so always, not just when I am with you” (Gal 3:26–27; 4:18).

Humility is when people think of themselves *less*, not thinking *less of themselves*.⁹² With an identity that matches the latter phrase, a pastor may be tempted to say: *Thinking of myself with sober judgment means that I shouldn't open up about my struggles. The ministry must come first. If that means putting myself down, so be it.* This is not a God-pleasing form of self-talk. It is a misapplication of Paul's words and a misshapen form of identity that marks the ministry of the anxious pastor. As James Hein writes: "Sin distorts a man's image of himself. The believer who acknowledges that he is indeed a wretched sinner will undoubtedly be tempted to view himself in a negative light. In modern terms, his 'self-image' and 'self-esteem' will be destroyed until he recognizes his worth as a redeemed child of God."⁹³

Christians may be quick to blame immorality, lack of "God-consciousness" or "spirituality" as base reasons for lots of things; including the prevalence of mental health problems, or the stressors themselves that trigger mental health illnesses.⁹⁴ And in large part they are right. As the anxious pastor's environment interacts with his struggle with his own sinful nature, the devil is working hard to take God out of the picture. What a pastor will often experience in his anxiety is *functional amnesia*—forgetting who he is. Moreover, he forgets to apply God's Word to his situation. All of this makes for a bad experience and only further detaches the pastor from the joys and blessings of his calling.

Paul David Tripp speaks to the heart: "You are one person. The boundaries of life and ministry are not separate and defined. You do not become a different person when you step into

92. "Humility is something we should constantly pray for, yet never thank God that we have." This phrase is often attributed to M.R. DeHaan (1891-1965), a radio broadcaster and pastor.

93. James Hein, "The Past 75 Years of Counseling Methodology in the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod," 2007, 12.

94. Hein, "The Past 75 Years of Counseling Methodology in the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod," 20.

some kind of ministry function. You and I are each in possession of only one heart, so the condition of our heart is a huge issue in our ministry.”⁹⁵

Pastors know the temptation to idealize ministry, with all of its prospective joys of shepherding souls under Christ and prospective opportunities to speak light into the darkness of unbelief. These are real blessings for which a pastor should take notice of and give God thanks. To talk of the external truths of the ministry, the anxious pastor must also understand how unique his position is, and the unique difficulties that are presented to him in the environment of ministry, for his mental health and sense of identity are at stake.

95. Tripp, *Dangerous Calling*, 188.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this thesis was to give a better understanding of anxiety for pastors who suffer from catastrophic thinking, or a general sense of worry. Throughout this study, it was shown that anxiety is not inherently a bad thing; It is the brain's tool to keep us safe from danger. However, as the different instances of the pastor's environment interact with their biology, anxiety can fluctuate into having the adverse effect of its original intended use, creating a general fear of many different situations, interactions, environments, and objects. As Stephen Saunders writes: "In any given year, one in five adults will experience one (form of anxiety), and this prevalence rate is similar around the world. This suggests that the anxiety disorders are an exacerbation of something normal, necessary, and universal" (parenthesis added).⁹⁶

An exacerbation of something normal—the overuse of the amygdala and the false realities created by the cerebral cortex are in essence a result of the fall into sin. They are a tool that the devil utilizes to destroy the pastor's trust in God and his promises. A disorder of fear can lead the pastor down a dangerous path, one which includes many different factors that influence his faith. These factors include seeking validation and righteousness in his ministry, beating himself down under the pretense of humility, not feeding *himself* with God's Word, thinking less of himself, or ultimately forgetting who he is in light of the grace of Jesus Christ.

However, all this is to say: A pastor's anxiety is not black and white. It must not be viewed right away as a moral failing of his calling. Overall, a pastor's chronic anxiety is dynamic

96. Saunders, *A Christian Guide to Mental Illness*, 91.

and includes spiritual, biological, and mental components. Though the spiritual side is an important component, it is not the only one to consider when dealing with anxiety. What is the good news? Anxiety is highly treatable. As long as the pastor is willing to seek treatment, he may still be in a position to serve his flock.

Lessons Still to Learn

A stronger approach to spiritual matters was left to be desired in this paper. The author leaned heavily into the physical response of anxiety and the biology behind it. One thing the author wishes to explore more is literature on opposing views on how to *deal* with anxiety, specifically arguments that view faith as a *panacea*, or *remedy* for this disease of the mind. A word study of anxiety in the Bible would be a discussion to pursue in the future.

APPENDIX 1: MORE ON THE IMPORTANCE OF RELATIONAL NUTRIENTS

This thesis explored the problems of being relationally malnourished. It is intended that the pastor start to understand that being alone is not part of God's design and therefore seek to be nourished relationally again. What are the best ways for a pastor to start seeking out people he can be completely vulnerable with?

William Bixler suggests taking baby steps; starting out slow, going out for coffee with one other person, maybe an elder, maybe another leader.⁹⁷ Perhaps it means seeking a counselor. Anything that the pastor is doing to address the problem is already progress.

Carey Nieuwhof offers: "Who can you share *everything* with?" He suggests that a pastor be intentional about building friendships with a small handful of leaders who do understand what they're experiencing, as they too have led at similar levels. Intentionality is a key component.⁹⁸

Part 1 of this thesis listed John Townsend's "qualities to look for" in someone who can act as relational support. One of the things he does note is that a pastor will want to avoid an "advice monster," i.e. someone who gives them orders couched in "advice" and expects to see results. The stressed-out and anxious pastor is most likely looking for someone to hang with him while he is in the fog, until he figures things out. He will want to draw leaders in who will meet⁹⁹ with him every couple weeks; who will be drawn in by his vulnerability; who will listen.

97. Bixler, interview, October 25, 2021.

98. Nieuwhof, "Suicide, Leadership and the Dark Inner Struggle Few Understand."

99. Whether virtually, in person, or over the phone, any form of meeting will be beneficial.

As Townsend says: “We can actually change the neuron structure of our brains by having healthy, relational conversations.”¹⁰⁰

100. Townsend, “John Townsend on How to Rewire Your Brain to Stop the Negative Voices and the Relationship You Really Need as a Leader, and Probably Don’t Have.”

APPENDIX 2

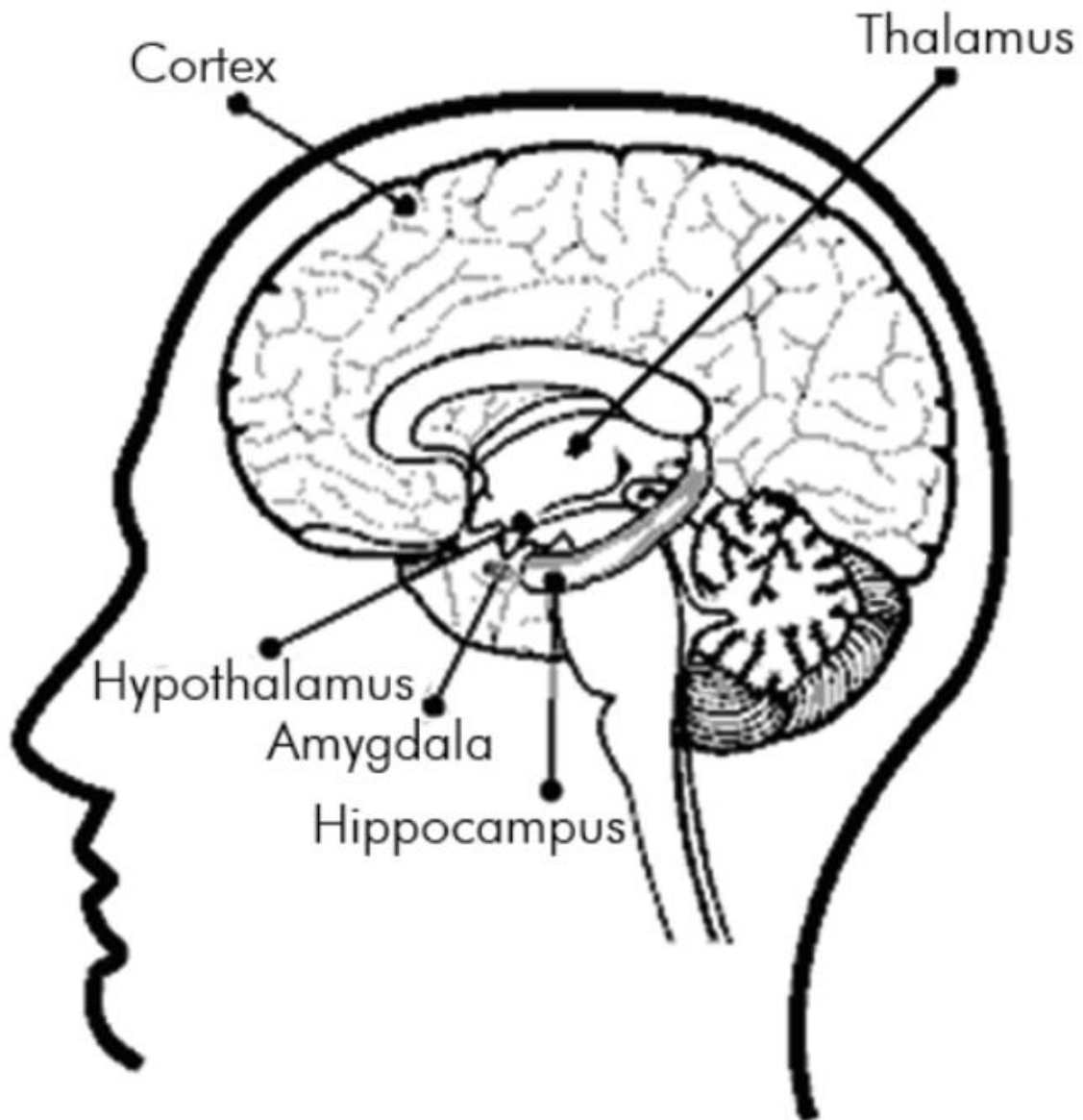


Figure 1. The human brain. Identified are the Cortex, Thalamus, Hypothalamus, Amygdala, and Hippocampus.¹⁰¹

101. Pittman and Karle, *Rewire Your Anxious Brain*, 18.

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