

LIFE BETWEEN PRIDE AND DESPAIR:  
FINDING A BALANCE IN PASTORAL MINISTRY

BY

KEITH R. BRASSOW

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PROF. AARON L. CHRISTIE, ADVISOR

WISCONSIN LUTHERAN SEMINARY

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## ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to explore the role of a humble confidence in the pastoral ministry. The research for this paper is based on several books and interviews from experienced pastors, college and seminary professors, and licensed counselors. The goal of this paper is to encourage pastors to avoid thinking too highly or lowly of themselves.

This paper seeks to explore certain triggers and causes that can lead a pastor to pride or despair. There are several instances in the life of a pastor where he is more susceptible to both. These instances are listed and explored for the sake of warning.

Furthermore, this paper seeks to explore the dangers that pride and despair can have on the ministry of a pastor, offering solutions to keep him balanced as he serves God's people. After reading this thesis, the author hopes that the reader will understand that pride and despair in the ministry can cause him serious problems.

More importantly, this paper seeks to point the pastor away from himself for help in the ministry: to his Savior and to his brother pastors. It seeks to encourage the pastor to develop good habits such as carrying the Christian cross, talking to brother pastors, and having a regular devotional life.

## INTRODUCTION

The Apostle Peter is a powerful example of the sins that pastors struggle with. On the night he was betrayed, Jesus said to his disciples, “This very night you will all fall away on account of me” (Matt 26:31, NIV84). Peter was filled with pride as he compared himself to the other disciples, “‘Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will.’ ‘I tell you the truth,’ Jesus answered, ‘this very night, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times’” (Matt 26:33).

That same night, the flame of Peter’s pride was snuffed out by a servant girl, a crowd of inquisitive strangers, and a single disappointing look from the man he denied three times. Peter’s pride was replaced with despair: “Then Peter remembered the word Jesus had spoken: ‘Before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times.’ And he went outside and wept bitterly” (Matt 26:75).

This account is one of many in Scripture that contains not the spotless biographies of saints, but the soiled resumes of sinners.<sup>1</sup> If the Scriptures did not include the dirty laundry of the believers of old, it would send the message that the spiritual life is all about being strong, not weak; victorious, not defeated; standing tall, not humbled low.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Chad Bird, *Night Driving: Notes from a Prodigal Soul* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company; Grand Rapids, MI, 2017), 82-83.

<sup>2</sup> Bird, *Night Driving*, 84.

The account of Peter's denial gives us a humbling reality: that those in the public ministry also fall into both pride and despair. While pride and despair may seem like opposites, they are more like two sides of the same coin.<sup>3</sup> They are two sides of the same coin because of the one thing they have in common: they both cause people to look to, find their confidence in, and trust in themselves. They both come from having the wrong focus.

Finding a balance between pride and despair in the pastoral ministry is about as easy as balancing an egg on the tip of a nail. It is like the swinging of a pendulum. Sometimes it will swing to one side, then it will swing to the other side. As a pastor, you never want to be too far to one side or the other. The problem is, in this pendulum swing, pastors are never without sin.<sup>4</sup>

This paper seeks to explore a balance between pride and despair in the pastor's life. This paper also seeks to explore the effects that pride and despair can have on the pastoral ministry. What are ways that pastors can walk the narrow middle road between pride and despair?

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<sup>3</sup> Brassow, Keith R. Andrew Schultz. Personal, November 5, 2023.

<sup>4</sup> Brassow, Keith R. Doug Tomhave. Personal, November 21, 2023.

## PRIDE IN THE PASTORAL MINISTRY

There are a number of authors who have written on the topic of pride in the life of a Christian and in the life of a pastor. I had the opportunity to both read their work and interview a number of men who serve as Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod pastors, licensed counselors, Martin Luther College professors, and Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary professors.

The following paragraphs will display a review of what authors have written on the topic of pride in general, pride in the pastoral ministry, and the devastating effects that pride can have on one's life.

In his book, *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis opens his chapter titled "The Great Sin" in the following way,

I now come to that part of Christian morals where they differ most sharply from all other morals. There is one vice of which no man in the world is free; which everyone in the world loathes when he sees it in someone else; and of which hardly any people, except Christians, ever imagine that they are guilty themselves. I have heard people admit that they are bad-tempered, or that they cannot keep their heads about girls or drink, or even that they are cowards. I do not think I have ever heard anyone who was not a Christian accuse himself of this vice. And at the same time, I have very seldom met anyone, who was not a Christian, who showed the slightest mercy to it in others. There is no fault which makes a man more unpopular, and no fault which we are more unconscious of in ourselves. And the more we have it ourselves, the more we dislike it in others. The vice I am talking of is Pride or Self-Conceit.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (HarperCollins Publishers; New York, NY, 1952), 121.

Lewis sees pride or self-conceit as “the great sin.” Because it was through pride that the devil became the devil. Pride leads to every other vice. It is the complete anti-God state of mind.<sup>6</sup> Define pride as the sinful desire to advance one’s self. Just as pride led to Satan’s fall from heaven, so it sinks ministries.<sup>7</sup>

The Apostle Paul, when speaking of qualifications for ministry, warned that the pastor “must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil” (1 Tim 3:6).

Paul’s warning against conceit makes it clear that the devil’s great sin in heaven against God was pride.<sup>8</sup> Pride was what led Satan to seek the glory of God for himself.<sup>9</sup> This would also include the evil angels “who did not keep their positions of authority but abandoned their own home” (Jude 6).

Francis Pieper says, “As to the particular sin by which the defection of these angels from God took place, we cannot offer more than a surmise. The majority assume that pride was the original sin.”<sup>10</sup> Quenstedt says, “We may assume that pride was the first sin of the angels. We make this deduction . . . from his [Satan’s] perpetual endeavor to transfer the glory of God to

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<sup>6</sup> Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 122.

<sup>7</sup> Nathan Pope, *Motivation for Ministry: Perspectives for Every Pastor* (Northwestern Publishing House; Milwaukee, WI, 1993), 25.

<sup>8</sup> Pope, *Motivation for ministry*, 49.

<sup>9</sup> Pope, *Motivation for Ministry*, 49.

<sup>10</sup> Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics Vol. I* (Concordia Publishing House; Saint Louis, MO, 1950), 505.

himself.”<sup>11</sup> Satan is the author of pride. Even though Christ has defeated him on the cross, Satan still feels entitled to God’s glory and will stop at nothing to get it for himself.<sup>12</sup>

What better way to get God’s glory for himself than to tempt Adam and Eve with the same prideful entitlement? Nathan Pope elaborates on the temptation of our first parents, “The temptation of Eve demonstrates Satan’s desire to make himself more than he was. ‘You will be like God’ (Gen 3:5), Satan said to Eve, himself the author and first believer of this pernicious and contagious lie.”<sup>13</sup>

It seems logical for Satan to attack pastors, the spiritual leaders of God’s Church on earth, with even more firepower. We most certainly see this when Jesus predicts Peter’s denial. One can almost hear Satan whisper sweet nothings into Peter’s ear, “The Son of God is wrong on this one. These other disciples may deny him, but not *you!* You’re different, you’re *better!*”

This is his oldest trick in the book. It works wonders today just as much as it did back in the Garden of Eden and in the upper room. It is a dangerous thing when a pastor is smitten with pride. Not only for himself, but also for the people who are entrusted to his care. Nathan Pope makes the observation:

While the selfless nature of Christ stands as the hopeful ideal for his undershepherds, they in reality often imitate the devilish pride of the god of the underworld. The ministry, as a profession, exhibits an odd knack for collecting more than its share of pride-filled men. I make this claim on the basis of what I have read and witnessed and experienced. I, for one, have been tempted to advance myself in more sinful ways than I care to tell you about. Yes, the ministry collects egotistical individuals like a porch light does bugs, not because the holy office creates pride, but because proud men have always been attracted to the power-filled possibilities of the office.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics Vol. I*, 505.

<sup>12</sup> Pope, *Motivation for Ministry*, 49-50.

<sup>13</sup> Pope, *Motivation for Ministry*, 49-50.

<sup>14</sup> Pope, *Motivation for Ministry*, 26.



Kurt Brink adds the following elaboration, “When we pastors are smitten with pride, when we want to brag either about our talents or our accomplishments, we need Proverbs to remind us that ‘a person’s pride will humiliate him’ (Prov 29:23). ‘Pride precedes a disaster, and an arrogant attitude precedes a fall’ (Prov 16:18).”<sup>15</sup>

Chad Bird is a living, breathing example of what these Proverbs are talking about. It should be noted that the following information is not included to speak ill of Chad Bird, defame him, or look down upon him. He is very open about the damage that pride can cause not only to one’s ministry, but also to one’s life. It is included in this paper for the sake of warning. The following story is taken from his very own writing.

Chad Bird tells the story about how pride preceded many personal disasters in his book *Night Driving: Notes from a Prodigal Soul*. Chad Bird found his passion as a seminary student. He was surrounded by God’s Word and fruitful classroom discussions with his classmates.<sup>16</sup> These are all wonderful things. His passion left him with the desire to teach God’s Word in a classroom. He wanted to be a seminary professor with all of his heart.<sup>17</sup> But what Bird did not realize was that Satan was turning this wonderful passion into a prideful desire.

As time passed on and on, this prideful desire grew larger. A particular professor wrote this note on one of his papers, “I look forward to you teaching alongside me as a fellow faculty member someday.” These words solidified his desires. He decided his own future. His goal

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<sup>15</sup> Kurt Brink, *Overcoming Pastoral Pitfalls* (Rev. Kurt W. Brink; Albuquerque, NM, 1992), 20.

<sup>16</sup> Bird, *Night Driving*, 2-3.

<sup>17</sup> Bird, *Night Driving*, 3.

elbowed its way past others until it climbed onto the throne of his mind, took its seat, and began to rule.<sup>18</sup>

As Chad Bird began to serve in the ministry, this desire remained on the throne of his mind. God had blessed him with a congregation to serve, a daughter, and a son. But inwardly, he was defined by what he wanted to become: a seminary professor.<sup>19</sup> This is how Bird describes his ministry as a parish pastor, “As I constructed and polished this image of myself, it never dawned on me that those I was called to love and serve had been reduced by me and my daydream to utility: tools to achieve my personal goal.”<sup>20</sup>

Everything that he did, every member he served, and every sermon he wrote was not to the glory of God. It was to the glory of Pastor Bird. The most shocking thing about this story is that he didn’t even realize that Satan was fanning the flames of pride in his heart. This makes C.S. Lewis’ observation all the more profound: that there is no fault which we are more unconscious of in ourselves.<sup>21</sup>

Eventually, Chad Bird’s dream came true. He received a call to fill the spot of a seminary professor who resigned. There was no prayerful consideration, no thought about God’s flock whom he would be leaving, but an immediate acceptance of the job.<sup>22</sup>

As a seminary professor, Chad Bird’s pride grew bigger and bigger. It grew to the point where the teaching position that he once dreamed of, but didn’t feel worthy of, now became the

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<sup>18</sup> Bird, *Night Driving*, 3.

<sup>19</sup> Bird, *Night Driving*, 4.

<sup>20</sup> Bird, *Night Driving*, 5.

<sup>21</sup> Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 121.

<sup>22</sup> Bird, *Night Driving*, 5.

job he felt entitled to. He transformed his gifts into trophies.<sup>23</sup> Chad Bird describes his prideful way of thinking in the following way,

“I had hosted a party, inviting every vice. Pride was there in full regalia, as were contempt and arrogance. And a lack of love for my neighbor. And selfishness in my marriage, vocation, and friendships. And then a new guest showed up. Lust conceived flirtation, fascination, and desire, which, fully grown, became adultery.”<sup>24</sup>

Pride conceived a multitude of other sins in his heart. He describes it as a party to which many other vices were invited. Pride was a fire within him, fanned into flame by Satan. Selfishness and lust were thrown upon the fire as additional fuel. Until finally, adultery was thrown into the mix like gasoline, causing his life to blow up.

His career as a seminary professor did not end with a special retirement service in the chapel. There was no cake congratulating him on several decades of faithful service. There was no praise and adoration from his former students. Instead, his career ended with his wife packing up the car with their two children. She would later file for divorce. It ended with a letter of resignation to the seminary and another to the clergy roster. It ended with him alone, weeping on the floor of his new apartment.<sup>25</sup>

Call pride the big, false motive for ministry.<sup>26</sup> Lack of humility kills ministries; pride sets ministers up for the big crash.<sup>27</sup> Pride didn't just ruin Chad Bird's ministry, it ruined his life. It affected the lives of the members of the congregation he served as well as his students.

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<sup>23</sup> Bird, *Night Driving*, 7.

<sup>24</sup> Bird, *Night Driving*, 9.

<sup>25</sup> Bird, *Night Driving*, 8.

<sup>26</sup> Pope, *Motivation for Ministry*, 27.

<sup>27</sup> Pope, *Motivation for Ministry*, 27.

The devil has a way of inflating our pride by taking good intentions and altering them slightly, so *we* are glorified instead of God. Nathan Pope expounds on this thought, “The gospel, with its requisites for holy living, in a sense sets ministers on a pedestal. Pride, however, in the tradition of Babel, wants to build that pedestal still higher.”<sup>28</sup>

Chad Bird is one of many examples of young pastors succumbing to pride, even though their intentions, at least at first, were good. In his mind, the ministry was a business structure. His work as a pastor was simply climbing the corporate ladder. It was a stepping stone for something more.<sup>29</sup>

Regarding young pastors, Professor Daniel Deutschlander makes the observation:

And so our young pastor arrives at his first parish. After his years of training, he thinks himself ready to answer all the tough questions that his people might put to him. After his experience as a vicar or a parish assistant, he expects that he is ready to go forth to feed the lambs, to strengthen the sheep, and to win the heathen for Christ. After his many years in the classroom at the feet of good and perhaps also some not-so-good teachers, he thinks that he knows what to do and what to avoid in teaching others. He thinks he knows how to teach so that children and adults will hang on his every word and then do just what he has told them that Jesus wants them to do. Our new pastor may be only dimly aware that he has thoughts such as these or that his thinking verges on arrogance.<sup>30</sup>

It makes sense that after eight years of schooling, a young pastor would be excited to finally do what he has been studying for nearly a decade. When someone has been going to school for that long, they get to know their classmates well.

They get to know the gifts, or lack thereof, of their brothers. They know who is intelligent and who needs to work a little harder in his studies. They know who the Latin guy is,

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<sup>28</sup> Pope, *Motivation for Ministry*, 27.

<sup>29</sup> Brassow, Keith R. Matthew Frey. Personal, October 26, 2023.

<sup>30</sup> Daniel Deutschlander, *The Theology of the Cross: Reflections on His Cross and Ours* (Northwestern Publishing House; Milwaukee, WI, 2008), 200.

who the Greek guy is, who the Hebrew guy is. They know the gifted preachers, the musicians, the introverts, and the extroverts. They know who the funny guy is and who is a little awkward.

What they might not realize is that there is a strong desire to be recognized and to find out where their area of expertise is within the class. They not only want to achieve and accomplish something, but they also want to be well-known and admired for it.<sup>31</sup> In a nutshell, they unintentionally compare themselves to their brothers. Pride begins when you compare yourself to others.<sup>32</sup>

The twelve disciples were not immune from this prideful comparison. Recalling the account of Jesus predicting Peter's denial, Peter looked down on his brothers from the high horse of pride on which he was sitting. "Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will" (Matt 26: 33).

At this point, we will review what experienced pastors, counselors, and professors in the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod have to say to encourage pastors regarding the topic of pride. Additional references to literature will also be used.

Pastor Andrew Schultz, who serves as a pastor at St. John's Lutheran Church in Barre Mills, WI, said regarding comparisons: "Elevating the flesh also makes comparisons. You can always find someone who doesn't do as well as you and elevate yourself. You can also always find someone who is a lot better than you and despair of yourself. When you make comparisons, its unhealthy either way."<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup>Richard E. Simmons, *The Power of a Humble Life: Quiet Strength in an Age of Arrogance* (Union Hill Publishing; Birmingham, AL, 2017), 31.

<sup>32</sup> Simmons, *The Power of a Humble Life*, 35.

<sup>33</sup> Brassow, Keith R. Andrew Schultz. Personal, November 5, 2023.

While it is very tempting for seminary students to compare themselves to others, this same temptation to play the comparison game continues for the pastor in the ministry. Whether he compares himself to his brothers in the ministry or even to the people he is serving.

Pastor Roy Hefti, a former parish pastor who currently serves as a religion teacher at Cornerstone Lutheran High School, says,

One of the pitfalls of pride, early on, which can trip a guy up, is when he thinks he's the smartest guy in the room. It is tempting, at times, for a new guy out in the ministry to think that because he went to Martin Luther College and then on to Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, that he might wear that a little bit on his sleeve. And then in various meetings, whether it's a council meeting or it's a voters meeting, he tends to think that he's the smartest guy in the room.<sup>34</sup>

Lutheran theologian C.F.W Walther speaks to this mindset in *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*, “There is no worse delusion than this, to think that one has advanced very far in the acquisition of knowledge and that the knowledge of one who is conceited because of what he knows surely is but very superficial.”<sup>35</sup>

Walther’s point is that people never stop learning. For a young pastor to think that he has advanced very far in the acquisition of knowledge is blatant arrogance. No amount of seminary training can fully equip a pastor for every possible situation he will encounter in the ministry. For example, the proper distinction between law and gospel. That is not something a pastor learns in a book. Rather, “Rightly distinguishing the Law and the Gospel is the most difficult and the highest art of Christians in general and of theologians in particular. It is taught only by the Holy Spirit in the school of experience.”<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Brassow, Keith R. Roy Hefti. Personal, October 19, 2023.

<sup>35</sup> C.F.W. Walther, *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel* (Concordia Publishing House; Saint Louis, MO, 1929), 41.

<sup>36</sup> Walther, *Law and Gospel*, 42.

Professor Daniel Deutschlander was quoted on page twelve of this paper. When describing the younger pastor, he repeatedly used the phrase: *he thinks he knows*. To some extent, he does know certain things regarding what he has studied in the classroom. However, putting it into practice is taught, as Walther said, in the school of experience.<sup>37</sup>

When a pastor's pride leads him to think that he's the smartest person in the room, it is evident to other people. Kurt Brink, in his book *Overcoming Pastoral Pitfalls*, quotes an astute and dedicated layperson: "We have a most wonderful pastor who is accomplishing great things in our congregation, but his shameful pride sticks out like a sore thumb."<sup>38</sup>

Pastor Doug Thomhave, who serves as a pastor at St. Paul Lutheran Church in Lake Mills, WI, would agree that the people in a congregation notice when a pastor is proud. He said, "You're a liar to think that your people don't notice. If you're a pastor and you think that your people don't notice when you're dealing with these issues, it's not true. Everything you do in ministry is laced by where you're at emotionally and spiritually."<sup>39</sup>

Tim Kemnitz, a licensed counselor for Christian Family Solutions has seen firsthand how pride can damage the ministry of a pastor. He says,

There is probably nothing more dangerous in the ministry than a pastor who is prideful. He's going to cause damage to the people, to the sheep that he is supposed to be humbly leading. I've had some situations where I've had to meet with district presidents, and we've had to talk about a guy's ministry. He had done a lot of damage in connection with acting on pride. There's one in particular that comes to mind when I was working with a pastor. He could not stay in the ministry because there was so much pride there.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Walther, *Law and Gospel*, 42.

<sup>38</sup> Brink, *Overcoming Pastoral Pitfalls*, 20.

<sup>39</sup> Brassow, Keith R. Doug Tomhave. Personal, November 21, 2023.

<sup>40</sup> Brassow, Keith R. Tim Kemnitz. Personal, November 17, 2023.

Pride is not only evident to other people, but also harmful to the people that the pastor is called to serve. Professor Daniel Deutschlander said,

They [pastors] should be patterns of submission and humble obedience to the Word, patterns who draw the sheep and lambs ever closer to Christ. Theirs is a great and holy calling. If they instead become patterns of self-service in ambition, in greed, in an unholy doctrine or a disgraceful life, then the sheep more easily stray and fall prey to the wolf because of it.<sup>41</sup>

It is easy for a pastor to look down on the members he is called to serve. He has the Seminary education, they do not. He is the one who is called to be the pastor, they are not. Pastor Hefti makes the observation that in times when a member challenges the authority of the pastor, it can trigger pride:

It leads him feeling, “How dare you challenge my authority!” I think that kind of trigger is something when they meet some sort of blatant disagreement, and not all of your members are going to speak to you sweetly and kindly. Some of them are going to have a rough edge to them, and that may grind your gears. And the result of that is the sinful nature is going to retaliate or get on your high horse and say, “now you listen to me!” This is a way that could trigger pride.<sup>42</sup>

To quote C.S. Lewis again, “everyone in the world loathes [pride or self-conceit] when he sees it in someone else.”<sup>43</sup> Pride begins with comparison. The comparison of knowledge and authority is one of many triggers that can lead a pastor to feel prideful.

Another example of what can trigger pride in a pastor is numbers. Pastor Matthew Frey, currently serving as a mission pastor in Las Vegas, NV, says,

Some of it has to do with numbers. We get out and we have to look at numbers whether it's attendance numbers, prospect numbers, Bible class numbers, or offering numbers. And we measure our success, or not our success, on the projections, if we're reaching them, if it looks good, and you stand up in the pulpit and you look out in the congregation and the seats are filled. That does play a part in you're thinking as far as how successful you are as a pastor and how successful you are as a mission. So numbers do play a big

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<sup>41</sup> Deutschlander, *Theology of the Cross*, 198.

<sup>42</sup> Brassow, Keith R. Roy Hefti. Personal, October 19, 2023.

<sup>43</sup> Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 121.



role in your attitude and a bigger role in how you approach the next steps of your ministry too.<sup>44</sup>

What a blessing it is when the Lord grants successes in the ministry of his church. It brings great joy to a pastor's heart when he preaches to a full church, when the fellowship hall is filled with people for Bible class, and when the numbers are high.

The last thing that Satan wants pastors to believe is that the numbers are good because of the gospel. He wants the pastor to think that it's because of him. Satan wants the pastor to think that the success is because of his gifts, his preaching, and his teaching. There is a strong temptation to be proud when the numbers are good, when God grants success where he sees fit, and when things are going well in ministry. It can be very easy to forget to give credit where credit is due.

Professor Keith Wessel, who teaches Greek, Latin, and Patristic Readings in Context at Martin Luther College in New Ulm, MN, said in an interview, "At times when the Lord blesses your work, when there's growth, when there's solidarity, and when there's unity, the temptation is great to say, 'It's because of me.'"<sup>45</sup>

Pastor Andrew Schultz would agree:

When things are going well, as you would like, you're more susceptible to pride. The devil knows that. He will use it against you. This is a reason why so many pastors, pastors who I know and respect, are uncomfortable with a lot of compliments. Because they know their own weakness: that the compliments might go to their head.<sup>46</sup>

When the seminary student finally begins to preach, he will quickly learn how appreciative that God's people can be. The faithful, lifelong Christian will often express a

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<sup>44</sup> Brassow, Keith R. Matthew Frey. Personal, October 26, 2023.

<sup>45</sup> Brassow, Keith R. Keith Wessel. Personal, October 31, 2023.

<sup>46</sup> Brassow, Keith R. Andrew Schultz. Personal, November 5, 2023.

heartfelt “thank you” to the young man who is learning how to be a pastor. After hours of vigorous text study, work in the original languages, and memorization it feels good to be appreciated for all the hard work. It encourages the preacher and gives him zeal for continuing the work. What a wonderful thing for God’s people to express appreciation to their pastors!

As Satan often does, he takes a wonderful thing and turns it into a temptation to be arrogant. Instead of letting a well-intended compliment remain in the pastor’s heart, Satan will direct it to the pastor’s head. When the successes of ministry go to the pastor’s head, when he sees himself as the one on whom the church stands or falls, that effects every aspect of ministry, including when the pastor receives a divine call.

Professor Joel Russow has served as a parish pastor, is a licensed counselor, and is currently a professor of dogmatics and pastoral theology at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. When he was asked how he has seen pride affect the ministry of pastors he has counseled, he said,

One of them is in deliberating calls. I'll speak to myself. When a call would come, it's very easy to puff up with pride a little bit. Like, “Oh I’m wanted in a couple places!” And you are! The Lord is presenting you options of service. But I've caught myself, and I've heard others say this too, “If I leave, this place is going to fall apart.” Well, Jesus is the one in whom all things hold together, not you. I get it from a human standpoint. You're an integral part of this. But the church isn't dependent on you. The church is dependent on Christ. The opposite is taking a call to a new place. When you hear some of the issues, you think, “Well I could fix that!” or “I could take them to the next level!” And again that may be true. But you have to check what's going on in your heart at the time. Is it a prideful statement? Sometimes it is. So calls were one place where I caught the pride showing up.<sup>47</sup>

The call presents the pastor with the opportunity to serve God and his people in two places. After prayerful consideration, he can either stay where he is currently serving, or he can accept the call to serve in another setting. Satan has a way of taking this wonderful call to serve

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<sup>47</sup> Brassow, Keith R. Joel Russow. Personal, November 9, 2023.

and using it to tempt pastors to be proud. The focus can so easily shift from the Good Shepherd to the undershepherd.

It seems that even schedules can become a source of pride. Whatever call the pastor has, there is always more than enough work to be done. There's a sermon to write, people to visit, meetings to attend, Bible studies to write, the list could go on. For the pastor who serves as a professor or tutor there are lessons to plan, assignments to correct, and deadlines to meet. With only so many hours in the day, it can be easy to get lost in the work of ministry. The sermon needs to be done and memorized before the Thursday service, all the shut-ins need to be visited before the month expires, the young couple needs counsel for their upcoming marriage, along with many other important matters.

It can be easy for him to forget to take a day of rest both spiritually and physically. Professor Emeritus John Brenner, who served as a professor at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, says that forgetting to take a day off can also be a sign of pride,

Refusing to take a day off really is a sign of pride. Even for people who are quite humble. You're not that important. The congregation isn't going to fall apart if you take a day off. As good Americans, we tend to judge everything by the bottom line. Scripture gives a different measure of success: that a man be found faithful. Yeah, laziness in the ministry is absolutely deplorable, but we have to trust that the Good Lord is going to work through the means of grace, often in spite of us. My dad always used to say, "It's amazing what the Good Lord accomplishes in spite of us." That really is true. On the other hand, when I realize what a privilege that God has given me in the ministry, I'm going to work at that with all my heart. There's always that fine balance there.<sup>48</sup>

The Lord did not create human beings to work every second of every day. The Church does not stand or fall because of how gifted, important, and special the pastor is. This sign of pride can manifest itself even the most humble and dedicated of men.

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<sup>48</sup> Brassow, Keith R. John Brenner. Personal, November 7, 2023.

Satan is always looking for opportunity to tempt pastors to be proud for the wrong reasons. He is always looking for opportunities to fan the flame of pride in his heart. Pride manifests itself in many different ways in the life of a pastor. The manifestation of pride researched in this section could also be called arrogance, entitlement, and self-conceit. According to the research, the pastor is more susceptible to arrogance when things are going well in ministry.

However, there is another manifestation of pride; one which is more common to pastors than arrogance. Satan can also use the failures and challenges of ministry to lead the pastor to a sense of worthlessness, helplessness, and despair.

## DESPAIR IN THE PASTORAL MINISTRY<sup>49</sup>

Pride, being the sinful desire to advance one's self,<sup>50</sup> can manifest itself in different ways. As shown in the previous section, it can cause a pastor to be arrogant and say "Woah, look at me!" It can also cause a pastor to despair and say, "Woe is me!"<sup>51</sup>

Peter put himself upon a high pedestal with the bold proclamation that he will never deny his Lord. He talked big, albeit with good intentions; but in doing so he set himself up to fail. Imagine the disappointment Peter must have felt as his Savior looked directly at him after his threefold denial. He not only let his Lord down, but he also let himself down. He did not meet his own expectations that he had set for himself.

Peter is commonly known as a loudmouthed, ignorant disciple who often spoke before he thought. People label Peter in this way without acknowledging that they also struggle with the same things. Nobody can deny that Peter's intentions were good. He truly had no intention of denying Jesus, but fear took hold of him as Jesus was on trial.

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<sup>49</sup> It should be noted that when despair is discussed in this section, clinical depression, anxiety, and other mental health issues are not what was researched for this paper. Nor is this referring to the despair that one feels by thinking they are outside of the grace of God. Despair, here, refers to the discouragement and disappointment that a pastor feels when challenges and personal failures occur in the ministry. If a pastor is struggling with clinical mental health problems, I would encourage him to seek the necessary professional help.

<sup>50</sup> Pope, *Motivation for Ministry*, 25.

<sup>51</sup> Brassow, Keith R. Doug Tomhave. Personal, November 21, 2023.

Imagine the heartbreak he must have felt after putting so much pressure on himself and then failing to meet his own expectations. He promised and insisted that even if he had to die with Jesus, he would never deny him. He didn't just break that promise, he broke it repeatedly.

His pride set him up for the big crash into the depths of despair. Overwhelmed with guilt and sadness, he went outside to weep bitterly. People are hard on Peter for the mistakes he made throughout his ministry even though they have the same sinful nature. This account is included in the pages of Scripture for a reason: because modern day disciples of Jesus all too often fall into despair.

Compared to arrogance, despair is far more common. This claim is made based on what most of the interviewed pastors have humbly acknowledged. To quote a few, Pastor William Brassow said that he has seen more despair than pride.<sup>52</sup> Professor John Brenner said, "Looking back over the years, I've seen pastors despairing more often than I saw them full of pride."<sup>53</sup>

Although despair may be more common than arrogance, it is less dangerous. Acting on pride can end ministries and ruin somebody's life. Despair can lead a pastor to resign, but the danger for despair to ruin one's life is less of a problem.<sup>54</sup>

For the future pastor, it can begin as he sits in the seminary classroom. C.F.W. Walther, quoting a godly theologian of a former age, offers this description of students of theology:

"When they arrive at the university, they know everything. In their second year of study they

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<sup>52</sup> Brassow, Keith R. William Brassow. Personal, November 24, 2023.

<sup>53</sup> Brassow, Keith R. John Brenner. Personal, November 7, 2023.

<sup>54</sup> Again, despair here refers to the discouragement and disappointment that a pastor feels when challenges and personal failures occur in the ministry. This is neither referring to mental health issues nor is this referring to the despair that one feels by thinking they are outside of the grace of God. Obviously, despair that is related to mental health issues can be devastating to one's life. If a pastor is dealing with the despair that comes with depression, anxiety, and mental illness, I would strongly encourage him to seek necessary professional help.

become aware of some things that they do not know. At the close of their last year of study they are convinced that they know nothing at all.”<sup>55</sup>

His point in giving this description is that you can’t learn everything there is to know about distinguishing law and gospel in a seminary classroom. This was stated earlier, but it is worth repeating: rightly distinguishing the Law and the Gospel is the most difficult and the highest art of Christians in general and of theologians in particular. It is taught only by the Holy Spirit in the school of experience.<sup>56</sup>

Professor Keith Wessel expounds on this thought:

By the time you're done at the seminary, you realize that the eight years you spent preparing was really just kind of a boot camp. When it comes to the proper distinction of law and gospel, that's one of the things that people don't always understand. You can make an intellectual distinction, and have this intellectual separation in your mind. But the proper distinction and the handling of the law and gospel is best learned in the school of experience.<sup>57</sup>

This can certainly lead the seminary student to lack confidence or even fear for the future of his own ministry experience. True, he has some experience as a vicar, summer assistant, or in other ministry settings; but he has also never been the pastor at a congregation on whom full responsibility falls.

Nathan Pope says,

Until they actually become settled in parish life, seminarians possess little inkling of just how many priorities they will encounter in the ministry; the inkling, when it comes, is often unsettling. The duties of the typical parish pastor spread before him such an array of possibilities that they are guaranteed to create mixed sensations in him. It's like being in

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<sup>55</sup> Walther, *Law and Gospel*, 41.

<sup>56</sup> Walther, *Law and Gospel*, 35.

<sup>57</sup> Brassow, Keith R. Keith Wessel. Personal, October 31, 2023.

the situation where the waitress hands you a menu so thick with possibilities that you're unable to decide what to order first; you want to eat, but you don't know where to start.<sup>58</sup>

This mixed bag of emotions could include zeal, excitement, passion, or motivation; but also concern, trepidation, doubts about personal ability, and despair. In his excitement and with good intentions, the young pastor sets high expectations for himself. He can so easily fall into the same mistake that Peter did: setting his own expectations too high.

Regarding setting oneself up to fail in ministry, Pastor Andrew Schultz says,

Pastors can set themselves up to fail when they talk about what they're going to do and what they're going to accomplish without a completion, a follow-through, or just a humble working through it. I think everyone needs to be slow to speak about what they're going to get done, and just set forth to doing it and then see what happens. Otherwise, you set up your pride, but you also set yourself up to fail. And then when you fail, you look like a bonehead, and you also make a joke out of the work. You're not doing the work to be watched. You're doing it to serve the Lord.<sup>59</sup>

When reality does not meet the young pastor's expectations, it hits him like a freight train. Professor Daniel Deutschlander, when describing the crosses that young pastors bear, offers the following description:

The cross comes. The pastor shouldn't be surprised, since that is what Christ promised. But he is surprised and taken aback by it. Lo and behold, not everyone listens. They all promised at his ordination to support him when he correctly applied the Word of Truth. But when he refuses to bury someone whose confession is that of an unbeliever, the relatives get angry with him. When he wouldn't marry the couple who insisted on a service that blatantly contradicted the Word of God, some people left the church. When he refuses to give Holy Communion to someone's visiting relative who is not a member of a church in fellowship with us, still more people get upset. Last Sunday he noticed that someone slept through the whole sermon! Two weeks ago children in confirmation class didn't bother to do their homework – yes, and angry mothers called when he rebuked the children for their unfaithfulness. As for his Bible class, well, he is doing the best he can, but interest in it is still slight.

Then there are the evangelism calls and the delinquent calls. That's real mission work. But he is astonished at how many people are in no hurry to get to heaven and at how little

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<sup>58</sup> Pope, *Motivation for Ministry*, 23.

<sup>59</sup> Brassow, Keith R. Andrew Schultz. Personal, November 5, 2023.



they care about their souls' salvation. They promise to come but then do not come. Others are rude in their rejection of the invitation to the banquet of heaven and eternal life. Still others come for a little while but then get upset over one thing and another; they go away more fixed in their rejection of the gospel than they were before.

Then there is the problem of time management; he needs time to prepare, time to get out from behind his desk, time for counseling people, time for evangelism and delinquent calls, time for visiting members and getting to know them and their needs better, time for sick calls and shut-in calls, time for his family, time to think and time to pray. But there are only 24 hours in a day. After six months or a year, our young pastor is already beginning to feel old and certainly overwhelmed.<sup>60</sup>

This kind of overwhelming feeling of inadequacy even happens to the pastor when he properly handles a given situation with good biblical practice. Pastor Roy Hefti offers a similar explanation:

It doesn't take long in the ministry before all of a sudden you hit that roadblock. You feel like you were equipped to handle something and all of a sudden you get thrown a curveball and you say, "Well now how do I handle that?" Or you're dealing with an issue, maybe it's a live-in situation, maybe it's a divorce situation, or it's a wedding where you say, "No, I'm afraid Aunt Harriet the Roman Catholic will not solo the wedding." And all of a sudden you find that everybody in your congregation is related! And all of a sudden there's this behind the scenes "roast pastor for dinner on Sunday." You start to figure out that they don't all salute when you say something. And, as a matter of fact, because of a decision that I had to make pastorally, in good conscience, and in good faith, suddenly I am *persona non grata*. I feel discouraged and I think, "Everybody hates me! Nobody loves me! I'll go in the garden and eat worms."<sup>61</sup>

When the pastor sets unrealistic expectations for what ministry is going to be like, for what he is going to do, for what he is going to accomplish, and for how people will treat him, despair will result if those expectations are not met. He so easily forgets that he and the people he serves are sinners. Because pastors are sinners, and are in the business of serving sinners, ministry isn't always a walk in the park. It leaves him questioning his own worthiness, gifts, and

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<sup>60</sup> Deutschlander, *Theology of the Cross*, 200–201.

<sup>61</sup> Brassow, Keith R. Roy Hefti. Personal, October 19, 2023.

abilities as a pastor. Although it may not be as extreme as Peter's despair during Jesus' trial, he will quickly begin to experience what seasoned pastors often call the lows of ministry.

Pastor Matthew Frey, when asked about the triggers that lead pastors to despair, speaks to this point:

Some guys get really frustrated that it's not going as quickly as they thought it would. Especially for young guys getting out of the Seminary and being in those situations, probably just have an unrealistic expectation of what ministry is going to be like. As if I'm just gonna preach a great sermon and people are going to flock to see me. Or I'm gonna teach a great Bible class and they're gonna fill the chairs. Or I'm going to be really outgoing and strike up a public conversation, and they're immediately going to come to worship the next Sunday. That's just not reality. We could probably talk about managing expectations. It comes to play here with the despair over unrealistic success.<sup>62</sup>

These kinds of roadblocks and curveballs in ministry are not unique to the times when the pastor sets himself up to fail. There are highs of ministry, and there are times where it is just plain difficult. It is during these times, and they happen to all pastors, when he is more susceptible to despair.

Despair, being a manifestation of pride, sees the challenges of ministry as a personal shortcoming or failure. Even though that Jesus himself said that it would be difficult. Jesus said to his disciples, "You will be hated by everyone because of me" (Matt 10:22). In Syrian Antioch, Paul and Barnabas made it clear to the other disciples that "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22).

The driving force behind the pendulum swing to either pride or despair is the work of Satan. He uses the successes and failures of ministry to push the pendulum from one side to the other. He causes the pastor to focus on himself. The devil likes to climb the fence at its lowest

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<sup>62</sup> Brassow, Keith R. Matthew Frey. Personal, October 26, 2023.

point.<sup>63</sup> When the ministry is hard and difficult, Satan will assume his role as a deceitful accuser. He will point out all flaws that the pastor has, the current roadblock he is facing in ministry, and convince the pastor that it's all his fault.

Professor Joel Russow says, "When things don't go well, that's when it's easy to blame yourself. What did I do wrong? Why is this not succeeding when I hear others are doing well? When you have challenges, it's easy to take it personally."<sup>64</sup>

Just like the highs of ministry can lead to pride, the lows of ministry can lead to despair. The realities of ministry often do not match the expectations that the pastor has set up for himself. He feels as if he is worthless, he is a failure, and he is all alone.

Having just come from the seminary, the young pastor is used to having professors always available to ask about ministry. But now they are busy teaching his younger brothers. He is used to talking to his fellow classmates on a daily basis about all things pertaining to ministry. But now they are all busy serving their own congregations. He is used to relying on the safety net of a supervising pastor from his vicar year. But now he is busy with a different vicar. When troubles arrive, when obstacles come, and when times are tough, discouragement and despair are not far behind. God forbid another thought come into the discouraged pastor's mind: resignation from the ministry. In a slough of despond, after Satan has worked him over, he may want to resign. He may want no more of the ministry.<sup>65</sup>

Pastor Jeremiah Gumm serves God's people as pastor at King of Kings Lutheran Church in Maitland, FL. Pastor Gumm has also served the pastors of the Wisconsin Evangelical

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<sup>63</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan and Martin Luther, *Luther's Works Vol. 5: Lectures on Genesis*, American Edition. (Saint Louis, MO; Concordia Publishing House, 1968), 215.

<sup>64</sup> Brassow, Keith R. Joel Russow. Personal, November 9, 2023.

<sup>65</sup> Brink, *Overcoming Pastoral Pitfalls*, 17.

Lutheran Synod on the leadership team of Pastor Partners, a mentorship program for pastors, since 2013. He also speaks of this danger of despair and the resignations that can result from it:

Despair certainly comes easily when there are struggles. One thing that we found in Pastor Partners is that years 1–5 and years 10–15 are the most likely years for a pastor to resign. Some of that is from studies that have been done in the past ten or fifteen years or so. That 10–15–year range is when experienced pastors are starting to deal with burnout.<sup>66</sup>

Regarding the first 3 years of ministry, Pastor Gumm offers the following explanation for the reasons that pastors in that range often resign:

During the first three years of ministry, a young pastor develops the habits for how he carries out his primary callings at home and ministry. These habits will stick with him, for better or for worse, for the rest of his time in ministry. While we hope and pray that every candidate graduating from WLS will form good habits upon entering ministry, we know all too well that as sinful human beings, that's not always the case. For the young pastor, the rubber hits the road when it comes to developing his time management; the media which he consumes; how he develops life in a parsonage--often with a bride and children who may be experiencing life in a parsonage for the first time; how he takes care of himself physically, spiritually, emotionally, and whether or not he develops resiliency in those areas; how does he interact with members, including when they either express concerns or complain about some aspect of ministry or how he's doing ministry; etc.

Into that already deep end of areas of development, the young pastor also brings his habits, personality quirks, personal struggles, etc. from his life before entering the ministry. Does he struggle with pornography, poor eating habits, lack of fitness, minimal to no personal time with Jesus in the Word, poor time management or work ethic, lack of organization, a belief that he is always right or thinks of himself far more highly than he ought, etc.? Does he use his down time/time off in a healthy, constructive, and beneficial way? At the same time, there is also the one-flesh factor. How is his marriage and family life? How is his wife adapting to life in a parsonage as the pastor's wife, which can often be quite isolating? If the ministry situation is challenging, has it impacted his marriage and family life? How supportive is the leadership of the congregation for their rookie pastor? Does he have doubts about the pastoral ministry or his ability to serve in that way going into this? He's going to make mistakes as every rookie pastor does, but does he grow from them or do they confirm his doubts about even serving as a pastor? Are there areas of weakness that he has identified and needs to grow or particular areas of temptation where he will need accountability? And the list goes on.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Brassow, Keith R. Jeremiah Gumm. Personal, December 7, 2023.

<sup>67</sup> Letter to Keith R. Brassow. Interview, December 13, 2023.

Clearly, there are a number of factors that contribute to pastoral resignations within the first five years of ministry. When examining the list that Pastor Gumm provided, there is one thing that they all have in common: they focus on the pastor himself.

While that may seem obvious, consider that truth on a deeper level than face value. The pastor's time management habits, work ethic, personal life, struggles, personality, and wellness can affect his ability to serve in the ministry. If they are not in check, they can pose too great of an obstacle for him to continue serving. The sinful self is the cause for these kinds of resignations.

It's a tremendous comfort to know that the church does not stand or fall because of the pastor. When dealing with issues pertaining to pride and despair, it is crucial for pastors to know that the Church stands on someone else. The Church stands on Jesus Christ, who said, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Matt 16:24). This is appropriately called the Theology of the Cross. The essence of the cross in every stage of life and in every changing circumstance is this: *self-denial*.<sup>68</sup>

Self-denial will always be difficult; it will always be a struggle.<sup>69</sup> Especially in the depths of despair. Especially when Satan succeeds in convincing the pastor that he is worthless. Especially when the pastor feels like he is alone. What the despairing pastor needs is to know that his Savior bore an even heavier cross than the one he is bearing: the cross on which he bore the world's sin – including the sins of pastors. And maybe, just maybe, he might realize that his brothers in the pastoral ministry are walking alongside him, each one carrying his own cross of self-denial.

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<sup>68</sup> Deutschlander, *Theology of the Cross*, 13.

<sup>69</sup> Deutschlander, *Theology of the Cross*, 13.

## FINDING A BALANCE IN THE PASTORAL MINISTRY

Pride and despair both come from having the wrong focus. Pastors are supposed follow the ultimate model for ministry, who displayed a confident humility in everything he did: Jesus Christ. When the pastor puts his trust and confidence in himself and his own abilities, he is bound to fall into pride or despair. It's no wonder that Jesus told his disciples to deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow him.

There are three key things that provide ways for pastors to walk the narrow middle road between pride and despair: the Theology of the Cross, brother pastors in the ministry, and a personal devotion life. To begin, we will examine the Theology of the Cross and the self-denial that Jesus commands of his followers.

### **The Pastor Denies Himself**

“It's not about me” is a lesson that people often credit themselves with learning in their childhood. In reality, it is a lesson that needs to be learned over and over again. The world does not revolve around any particular person. In the same way, the ministry does not revolve around the pastor.

Regarding the crosses that pastors bear, Daniel Deutschlander said,

It's all about Christ, not about me. It's all about pointing to Christ, the sacrifice for sinners of whom I am chief, as that other great model for the ministry put it. Yes, it's all about getting lambs to think more and more about Christ and less and less about me. Even in his death St. John carried out his great theme of “He must become greater; I must

become less.” For no martyr ever died more shamefully; St. John died, not as a great hero making a bold confession like St. Stephen but at the whim of a drunkard following the lead of a bimbo. If every Christian individually must bear the cross, then it would be surprising indeed if the servants of the church did not also have crosses to bear.<sup>70</sup>

The essence of the Theology of the Cross is self-denial.<sup>71</sup> The essence of the pastor’s self-denial is this: *solo deo gloria*. To the degree that the minister consciously and knowingly seeks to glorify God, he will grow in both professional competency and personal happiness.<sup>72</sup>

That being said, the pastor most certainly has an important role to play in the work of the Church. God uses these men to plant gospel seeds and tend to the plants. God is the one who makes the plants grow. Self-denial involves knowing your place and role in God’s plan of salvation.

The causes of salvation can be divided into three categories. The first category is the impulsive or principal cause, which are the things which moved God to act for our benefit. There are inner impulsive causes: the tender heart and fatherly love of God. There are also outward impulsive causes: both the misery of mankind and the merits of Christ.<sup>73</sup>

Another category is the instrumental cause of salvation. This is the Word and Sacraments. These are the tools by which God creates faith and gathers the Church.<sup>74</sup>

The pastor falls into a third, subordinate category: the ministerial cause of salvation. The ministerial cause is the ministers God calls. They become God’s agents, playing a vital role in his

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<sup>70</sup> Deutschlander, *Theology of the Cross*, 197.

<sup>71</sup> Deutschlander, *Theology of the Cross*, 13.

<sup>72</sup> Pope, *Motivation for Ministry*, 30.

<sup>73</sup> Jonathan Hein, *Treasure in Jars of Clay: The Synergy Between the Instrumental and Ministerial Causes in God’s Plan of Salvation*, 3.

<sup>74</sup> Hein, *Jars of Clay*, 3

saving work, by utilizing the Word, i.e. the instrumental cause.<sup>75</sup> Even though a pastor plays an important role within the ministerial cause of salvation, it is rightly subordinate to both the impulsive and instrumental causes. The Apostle Paul makes this clear in the way that he describes pastors:

But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body (2 Cor 4:7-10).

While this is not the most flattering description, Paul describes pastors as clay jars. Pastor Jon Hein explains the significance of being a clay jar:

The Gospel is the treasure. It is what has value. It is what has power. Man is but the vessel in which the Gospel is carried. And yet, while St. Paul puts man in his proper place he also makes it clear – man does have a role in God’s saving work. It is not bare treasure, but treasure in jars of clay.<sup>76</sup>

Paul rightly subordinates the ministerial cause to the principal cause, because he knows the power to convert and save are ultimately not his, but God’s. Yet, he is fully aware he has an important role to play.<sup>77</sup>

What a privilege and honor it is that God chooses to use jars of clay to carry the priceless treasure of the gospel! God does whatever pleases him, and it pleases him to use frail human beings to be the trumpet that announces the tune of the gospel to God’s people. Professor Daniel Deutschlander expounds on this honor:

The pastor is not the means of grace; he is the trumpet, not the tune. It is the sound of the gospel that converts and preserves faith. As important as the trumpet is, it is the tune of the gospel that accomplishes everything. He is not a second messiah either, as though it were his responsibility to save the world by his efforts, his eloquence, his personality, his

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<sup>75</sup> Hein, *Jars of Clay*, 3.

<sup>76</sup> Hein, *Jars of Clay*, 2.

<sup>77</sup> Hein, *Jars of Clay*, 3.



charisma. There is but one Redeemer of the world, one Savior of each individual whom God has elected. Each of the elect will hear the tune played by the Holy Spirit in the gospel; in the Spirit's own good time (not the pastor's!) they will believe it and be saved by it. That we are the trumpet and not the tune, the messengers of salvation and not the Messiah, is both our great comfort and our highest honor.<sup>78</sup>

A great comfort and high honor it is indeed. Comforting, because we are reminded that God is ultimately in control of everything that happens in his church. In spite of the flaws and shortcomings that all pastors have, God assures us that even though the grass withers and the flowers fall, “The Word of our God stands forever” (Isa 40:8).

Pastors are sinners who are going to make mistakes. Because the Word of our God stands forever, God is going to do all the work in bringing that promise about. God is the one who converts. God is the one who makes the seed of faith grow in the hearts of sinners. The fact that God uses jars of clay to bring about a ministerial cause of salvation is a great comfort because he doesn't ask the pastor to do anything that only God himself can do.

The pastor's job is to plant the gospel seed, water it with loving care and hard work, fish for men, and then trust that the Lord will bless the fruits of his labor where and when he sees fit. Pastor William Brassow remembers one piece of advice he received as a young mission pastor from an older brother on the mission board:

When you fish for men, you'll put all of your fishing lines out on one side of the boat, and then the Lord will throw them in on the other side. When you pull all your lines out because you're so frustrated because nothing is working, nothing comes in the other side. Then you put your lines out again and nothing works, and the Lord throws them in on the other side.<sup>79</sup>

Pastor Andrew Schultz would agree:

Often times, the biggest victories happen in areas where we didn't put out effort. Some of the biggest failures happen in the areas we did put out effort. It's the Lord's way of

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<sup>78</sup> Deutschlander, *Theology of the Cross*, 203.

<sup>79</sup> Brassow, Keith R. William Brassow. Personal, November 24, 2023.

bringing growth and bringing opportunities for gospel outreach by reminding us, “Just trust in me, and I’ll bring it about.” So we put in the effort, we work our tails off, as we should. But we do so realizing that the Lord will do so his way. That’s the biggest encouragement. Do the work. Do it enthusiastically, energetically, and don’t stop. But realize that it’s not my effort that’s going to get it done. I’m going to plant the seed, I’m going to talk to as many people as I can, and the Lord will bring it about in his good way. He definitely does a better job than we do.<sup>80</sup>

Looking back over his years in the ministry, Pastor Hefti offers the encouragement, “Often coming out of those difficult times, when you can humbly look back over your shoulder and see how God has worked his wonders despite you, not because of you, but still through you, those are some of the most equipping moments in life.”<sup>81</sup>

Ministry is an honor, because God chooses to give pastors a front-row seat to witness the work that he does in people’s hearts. That is an honor that is not to be taken lightly and is something that the pastor will want to work at with all of his heart.

Regarding the self, which is to be denied, Pastor Doug Tomhave says, “You need to take the ministry seriously, but don’t take yourself too seriously. Because then everything becomes personal; and sometimes it’s not. Jesus even says, ‘He who listens to you listens to me; he who rejects you rejects me; but he who rejects me rejects him who sent me’” (Luke 10:16).<sup>82</sup>

God’s Word should be taken very seriously, for it is through the Word that God works. The ministry should be taken seriously, because that is the work that pastors have the God-given honor of doing in the Kingdom of God. It is good advice for the pastor not to take himself too seriously. He has an important role to play, but it pales in comparison to the gospel; he is a jar of clay. This advice is extremely relevant when dealing with issues of pride and despair. The

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<sup>80</sup> Brassow, Keith R. Andrew Schultz. Personal, November 5, 2023.

<sup>81</sup> Brassow, Keith R. Roy Hefti. Personal, October 19, 2023.

<sup>82</sup> Brassow, Keith R. Doug Tomhave. Personal, November 21, 2023.

Apostle Paul gave this encouragement to the Romans when he said, “Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you” (Rom 12:3). It is also good advice for pastors due to their position as a leader. President Dwight Eisenhower is quoted having learned a great maxim from his role model, Fox Conner: “Always take your job seriously, never yourself.”<sup>83</sup>

In their book, *The Art of Manliness: Classic Skills and Manners for the Modern Man*, Brett and Kate McKay give the same advice to men in leadership positions: “Some men think a leader should never admit mistakes; quite to the contrary, the charismatic leader fesses up to blunders—but he does so with a smile and a bit of humor. By not taking yourself too seriously, you become more approachable and attractive to others.”<sup>84</sup>

Ministry is the business of serving other people with the means of grace. What a privilege it is to baptize the infant child of the young couple whom he took through marriage counseling. What a privilege it is to hold the hand of the 91-year-old veteran, read him Psalm 23, and usher him into eternal glory. What a privilege it is to give the Lord’s Supper to the shut-in who won’t let pastor leave without taking a container filled with homemade cookies.

When marveling at this honor that God gives to pastors, what else is there for him to do but deny himself? It begins with giving credit where credit is due. The self-denial of a pastor entails acknowledging that he is not Jesus, that it is ultimately God’s job to convert, and to rejoice for the privilege of being a jar of clay that contains the treasure of the gospel.

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<sup>83</sup> Simmons, *Power of a Humble Life*, 68.

<sup>84</sup> Brett & Kate McKay, *The Art of Manliness: Classic Skills and Manners for the Modern Man* (Simon & Schuster, Inc.; New York, NY, 2009), 214.

After self-denial comes the cross that God places on our shoulders to carry for his sake. The Christian recognizes three different categories of enemies they will constantly be at odds with: the devil, the world, and the sinful flesh. While these things are certainly crosses that pastors will bear in their lifetimes, the young pastor doesn't realize that some of the most heartbreaking failures and bitter conflicts in ministry will come from his own members.

Members will not always speak kindly to the pastor; they will not always be appreciative of his hard work. Professor Russow describes this situation and a temptation that arises when the pastor is going through this:

When you go through a rough patch in ministry, it's easy to think that you deserve better than this. Why? Maybe this is the ministry the Lord has called you to: one where you do need to go through a lot of heartbreak. Of course, he said that Scripture. You do need to go through a lot of hardships in ministry. The Lord is refining you through that.<sup>85</sup>

Even pastors have to carry their own crosses. They do not get special treatment due to their calling. Daniel Deutschlander describes the cross that a pastor carries:

The pastor's cross is that, for the sake of the gospel, he will endure opposition, not just from the world but most painfully also at times from some of his own members when he is faithful to the Savior. But even more, the pastor's struggle is the struggle against himself; it is the struggle to put Jesus and his Word first, followed by the souls entrusted to his care and those who may yet be entrusted to his care through his faithful proclamation of the gospel.<sup>86</sup>

The pastor will endure opposition; it is his cross to bear. Stuart Briscoe described the qualifications for pastors in a simple, yet profound way: "The qualifications of a pastor are the mind of a scholar, the heart of a child, and the skin of a rhinoceros."<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Brassow, Keith R. Joel Russow. Personal, November 9, 2023.

<sup>86</sup> Deutschlander, *Theology of the Cross*, 207.

<sup>87</sup> "How I got a Rhino Hide," Mark Buchanan, Christianity Today.  
<https://www.christianitytoday.com/pastors/2016/winter/how-i-got-rhino-hide.html>.

With the mind of a scholar, the pastor dives into the Word of God. He studies it with all of his heart. He reads books and tries to understand where people are coming from, even if they don't agree with Scripture. He is always seeking to grow in knowledge and understanding of the Word. With the heart of a child, the pastor joyfully and enthusiastically serves the people entrusted to his care. Even though he is enduring strong opposition from those people. In the midst of bearing his cross, the pastor does so joyfully because it reminds him that Christ bore a cross for him. Through the cross he bears; Christ brings the pastor closer to him.<sup>88</sup>

With the skin of a rhinoceros, the pastor knows from Scripture that ministry will be difficult. Sometimes he has to develop some callouses. It's part of the Theology of the Cross.<sup>89</sup> He knows that if he preaches the message of the cross, the world will consider him foolish. He knows that people will oppose him and even hate him. He knows that is not always his fault; it is what Jesus promised would happen. With thick skin, he continues serving others and serving his Lord.

Despite what the pastor may feel in the depths of despair, he is not alone in carrying the cross. He has the promise that his Savior will be with him. He also has his brothers in the ministry: fellow pastors, young and old, walking alongside him. Each one carrying his own cross.

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<sup>88</sup> Deutschlander, *Theology of the Cross*, 13.

<sup>89</sup> Brassow, Keith R. Doug Tomhave. Personal, November 21, 2023.

### **The Pastor Needs his Brothers**

“If either of them falls down, one can help the other up. But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up” (Eccl 4:10). “As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another” (Prov 27:17). “If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it” (1 Cor 12:26). “Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching” (Heb 10:25).

An integral part of the Christian life is fellowship with other believers. There are countless ways that a group of Christians can enjoy fellowship. From building bonds with other Christians on a church league basketball team, to playing euchre in the church basement on a cold winter’s evening. Members of a church can take a week out of the summer and head up North for a church campout where they worship together around the fire. The list goes on. The value of good fellowship among believers is limitless.

In the same way, pastors need good fellowship with their brothers: fellow pastors in their circuit, conference, and synod as a whole. Much like a soldier learns to depend on his fellow comrades, the pastor should learn to depend on his brothers. For people who have been in combat, only other people who have been in combat can really understand what they are going through. In the same way, there are certain things in ministry that pastors can only talk about with one another.<sup>90</sup>

Professor John Brenner encourages all pastors to seek each other’s counsel: “I would encourage not only the younger pastors, but also the older pastors to seek the counsel of their

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<sup>90</sup> Brassow, Keith R. Jeremiah Gumm. Personal, December 7, 2023.

brothers in the ministry. That's what were there for. We can help each other out a lot by keeping each other balanced in our approaches."<sup>91</sup>

This brotherhood is another crucial part of walking the middle road between pride and despair. A despairing pastor can lean on his brothers for encouragement and guidance on the problems he is struggling with ministry. The unintentionally proud pastor can be humbly reminded that ministry is not about him.

The brotherhood among fellow pastors in the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod has been treasured throughout history. Former Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary president J.P. Meyer (1873–1964) concluded his speech regarding the Protes'tant Controversy<sup>92</sup> by repeating the phrase, "Prize the brotherhood. Prize the brotherhood."<sup>93</sup>

Another former Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary president, Armin Schuetze (1917–2020), saw this kind of brotherhood as an obligation for the pastor:

The pastor should expect to serve and help his brothers in a synod even as he expects their helpful service. Only when pastors are willing to encourage, strengthen, admonish, correct, and reprove one another with the Word of God will a synod remain truly united and spiritually strong. Without becoming officious, each pastor is to be his synodical brother's keeper, but in a spirit of humble helpfulness void of pride and self-righteousness. At the same time, he should be willing to accept brotherly admonition either when it is given informally or by someone who has an official responsibility.

The pastor should feel obliged to attend conferences regularly and participate actively. He should welcome the opportunity for receiving Holy Communion with his brother pastors, for studying God's Word, and for discussing the work of the church.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Brassow, Keith R. John Brenner. Personal, November 7, 2023.

<sup>92</sup> For more information on the Protes'tant Controversy, see *Jars of Clay: A History of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary (1863–2013)*, pg. 104, 127, 134–45, 152, 181, 235.

<sup>93</sup> John M. Brenner, *Jars of Clay: A History of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary (1863–2013)* (Northwestern Publishing House; Milwaukee, WI, 2013), 181.

<sup>94</sup> Armin W. Schuetze and Irwin J. Habeck, *The Shepherd Under Christ: A Textbook for Pastoral Theology* (Northwestern Publishing House; Milwaukee, WI, 1974), 363.

Ever since 2010, the pastors of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod have enjoyed the program Pastor Partners, a mentorship program for young pastors. Pastor Partners provides trained and experienced pastoral mentors for Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary graduates for the first three years of their ministry.<sup>95</sup>

Pastor Jeremiah Gumm has been on the leadership team for Pastor Partners since 2013. In an interview, he reflected on the blessings of the mentor program has had over the years. He said,

Despair is exactly what Satan wants. It's important to have brother pastors in your life who have experience. That's where Pastor Partners comes into all of this. I have been on the leadership team since 2013. It's been neat to see what God has done with Pastor Partners. Almost every year in our exit interviews, after guys have been out for 3-4 years with a mentor walking alongside them, it's not unusual for guys to say, "If not for this program, I would not be in ministry."<sup>96</sup>

Professor John Brenner would agree:

Once the mentor program got up and running, I just thought that it was a stroke of genius. There have been a number of younger pastors who have reported to us that they wouldn't have stayed in the ministry if it hadn't been for their mentor. We try to get mentors who will keep young guys balanced in the first years of their ministry.<sup>97</sup>

One lesson that can be learned from this is that the pastor should learn to rely on his pastoral mentor. This mentorship program has been a tremendous blessing to the ministry and has helped bring the number of resignations down. A pastor putting himself under the care of another pastor is not a sign of weakness; rather, it shows he respects the office that he himself holds.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> <https://www.wisluthsem.org/grow-in-grace/retreats-mentoring/>

<sup>96</sup> Brassow, Keith R. Jeremiah Gumm. Personal, December 7, 2023.

<sup>97</sup> Brassow, Keith R. John Brenner. Personal, November 7, 2023.

<sup>98</sup> Harold L. Senkbeil, *The Care of Souls: Cultivating a Pastor's Heart* (Lexham Press; Bellingham, WA, 2019), 238.



The brotherhood transcends generational lines. This is also true of the sinful nature, the spiritual struggle, and the crosses that pastors bear. Particularly for the young pastor, it is extremely valuable to sit at the feet and learn from an elderly warrior of the Lord. They have experienced the spiritual battle more than most people.

Talking to a retired pastor isn't just good for the young pastor, it's good for the retired pastor too. Professor Brenner says, "Listen to your older brothers in the ministry. When I was a young pastor, I would try to get to conferences a little early. I would try to seek out the retired guys. You can learn so much. Retirees love talking to a young pastor. It invigorates them."

The pastor needs his brothers. He needs fellow pastors to rejoice with him in the good times, giving all the glory to God. He needs the encouragements when he is struggling with despair. Circuit meetings are extremely important for pastors, young and old, to attend.

Based on my extremely limited experience, I would describe circuit meetings in the following way: When the brothers gather for circuit meetings, it begins with a vast array of characters showing up to the place where the meeting is held. Each pastor is different. Some are tall, others are short; some are talkative, others are quiet; some are filled with a youthful vigor, others hold much wisdom that comes with age; some were raised in the Midwest, others were raised out West. In a nutshell, each and every pastor has a different story, different personalities, and gifts.

These very different pastors go through a sermon text study for an upcoming Sunday. Each pastor offers a different perspective on the particular text. One pastor points out a rare vocabulary word, another points out a useful practical application.

Then the questions of casuistry begin. One pastor rejoices, for the Lord has blessed his congregation with an adult baptism. The other pastors rejoice with him. A different pastor is

going through some struggles in his congregation. The other pastors offer encouragement to lift him up.

These vastly different men, who have almost nothing in common, are there for each other, encourage each other, laugh with each other, and enjoy a meal with each other. There is something special that unites these men together. There has to be. How else could these very different men get along so well?

The answer to that question is what comes before the text study. It comes before the fruitful discussion. It comes before the questions of casuistry. Before the pastors do anything, they gather to worship the same God. They confess their sins and are forgiven by a fellow brother. They approach the Lord's table to receive the body of Christ, given into death for their sins. They receive the blood of Christ, shed for them, for the forgiveness of all their sins. They sing hymns, pray, and hear the benediction together. This is the most important thing that a pastor needs to avoid the ditches of pride and despair: to be fed with the gospel.

### **The Pastor Needs a Savior**

There he was: terrified, despairing, and locked behind closed doors. The sting from his denial must have still been fresh on his mind. Elsewhere, at the empty tomb, an angel was telling Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome, "But go, tell his disciples **and Peter**, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you'" (Mark 16:7). Why did the angel single Peter out?

Because Peter singled himself out with his pride. Of course, he realized his failures, but now Jesus singles him out.<sup>99</sup> Peter needed to be reminded that his sin was forgiven. This is true of pastors: they need to be reminded that their sins are forgiven.

While it is very important for the pastor to lean on his brother pastors, the most important thing a pastor can do to find balance between pride and despair, by far, is to cast them both on his Savior. He needs a personal devotional life.

Because pride and despair are a constant struggle for the pastor, the need for personal devotions is also constant. As Martin Luther said: “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, ‘Repent’ [Matt 4:17], he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.”<sup>100</sup> The pastor’s first step is laying all of his pride at the foot of the cross. Because the believer’s entire life is one of repentance, he needs to do this over and over again.

C.S. Lewis describes this as the first step in acquiring humility: “If anyone would like to acquire humility, I can, I think, tell him the first step. The first step is to realize that one is proud. And a biggish step, too. At least, nothing whatever can be done before it. If you think you are not conceited, it means you are very conceited indeed.”<sup>101</sup>

Tim Kemnitz would agree that acknowledging and confessing pride is a very humble thing to do: “As a counselor, I’ve had some guys be very honest about this. They’ll come out and say that they struggle with pride. Good for him! I would say that guy is more humble than he thinks he is.”<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Brassow, Keith R. Joel Russow. Personal, November 9, 2023.

<sup>100</sup> Kurt Aland, *Martin Luther’s 95 Theses*, (Concordia Publishing House; St. Louis, MO, 1967), 50.

<sup>101</sup> Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 128.

<sup>102</sup> Brassow, Keith R. Tim Kemnitz. Personal, November 17, 2023.

This is another area where a brother pastor can help. One pastor acknowledges his pride to his brother, confessing his sins. To which the brother pastor replies: “Therefore, as a called servant of Christ, and by his authority, I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”

Jesus forgives the sins of pastors too, because they desperately need it along with the rest of mankind. Professor Deutschlander said, “Just as Jesus so often in the gospels took the disciples aside to talk to them privately, so Jesus wants to take his pastor aside and speak to him about the temptations unique to his holy office. He wants to call him away from temptations to arrogance when things go well and temptations to despair when they do not.”<sup>103</sup>

Jesus does this in ways other than having a trusted brother to confess one’s sins. He does this for pastors through their personal devotion lives. Pastor Jeremiah Gumm says that the two key things for finding a balance between pride and despair are as follows, “You need is to be in the Word, regular devotional time with Jesus, and you need your brothers in the ministry.”<sup>104</sup>

Pastor Tomhave says,

I cannot stress how important a personal devotional and prayer life is. You have to have one! And it can’t be academic. You have to have one if you want a well that is full, and if you want to keep a good perspective. Even if it doesn’t apply to what you’re doing in ministry. This isn’t about my ministry. That really helps when you’re susceptible to these pitfalls.

In your devotional life, you don’t always see the immediate benefit of it. But that’s the way it is with every meal. I can’t remember what I ate three years ago, but I was fed. That’s the way our devotional life is: we have to be fed.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Deutschlander, *Theology of the Cross*, 204-205.

<sup>104</sup> Brassow, Keith R. Jeremiah Gumm. Personal, December 7, 2023.

<sup>105</sup> Brassow, Keith R. Doug Tomhave. Personal, November 21, 2023.

With all the splendid tasks of ministry that a pastor has to do, there are dangerous temptations for him to cut corners with certain things in his life. Often times, the first corner that the pastor cuts is in the time that he spends alone with Jesus in his private devotions.<sup>106</sup>

There are so many essential benefits to having a personal devotional life. With each passing devotion, the pastor will marvel more and more at the mercy of God, notice the Word working in the lives of his members, appreciate the victories that God grants in the ministry, and he will discover that the means of grace, the gospel, really does work!<sup>107</sup>

Another corner that a pastor is tempted to cut is sermon preparation. These temptations are evidence of Satan trying to take away the most valuable things to the pastor as he serves in the ministry. He does such a good job of convincing pastors to fall away from personal time with Jesus. “You already know this stuff, so why waste precious time on it?” “You preached on this text already; you don’t need to go through the whole sermon writing process again!”

Sermon preparation and a personal devotion life should never replace one another. Pastor William Brassow says, “I’ve heard people say that sermons are not devotional life, and I can understand that. But they are. That sermon work touches your soul every week. It is a joy of the ministry. At the same time, sermon work shouldn’t replace a devotional life.”<sup>108</sup>

Satan wants nothing more than for pastors to abandon their devotional lives and cut corners in sermon preparation. Professor Russow offers a counseling point: “We say it all the time: preach the sermon to yourself first. What a treasure it is to receive the sacrament when the

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<sup>106</sup> Deutschlander, *Theology of the Cross*, 204

<sup>107</sup> Deutschlander, *Theology of the Cross*, 205-207.

<sup>108</sup> Brassow, Keith R. William Brassow. Personal, November 24, 2023.

Lord says, “This is for you.” It truly is! And we need to hear that this is for me, and that my savior does love me!”<sup>109</sup>

Pastor Hefti says,

One of the things that will help both against pride and also against despair is being in the Word for yourself personally, and also in terms of your sermons. To avoid pride, it's very humbling to come up with your own stuff. And to avoid despair, it's amazing to see what the Lord can open up for you in a text and then you feel more excited about opening up that text for your people because you discovered it yourself.<sup>110</sup>

Along with a devotional life and faithful sermon preparation, the pastor also needs a prayer life. Prayer is a direct path to the throne of grace where the pastor may receive mercy and find grace to help him in his time of need (Heb 4:16). Prayer is recognizing that there are certain things that flawed human beings cannot do, and therefore need help from the one who said, “Call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you will honor me” (Ps 50:15).

The pastor’s soul needs to be fed regularly just like any other Christian. If his well is full, he better shares the living water with his people. That is what matters. Even though the pastor has the honor and privilege of getting paid to preach the Word, he needs the means of grace too.

Jesus wants nothing more than to have a one-on-one conversation with the pastors in his Church. He wants to remind them that their sins are forgiven, that they too are saved, and they have a heavenly home. Jesus is the one who keeps pastors balanced in the pastoral ministry. He humbles the pastor when he is prideful. He lifts the pastor when he is despairing. When Satan tries to push the pendulum of pride one way or another, our Savior reminds him in his Word of his precious gospel.

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<sup>109</sup> Brassow, Keith R. Joel Russow. Personal, November 9, 2023.

<sup>110</sup> Brassow, Keith R. Roy Hefti. Personal, October 19, 2023.

## CONCLUSION

Pride and despair will always be a struggle for the pastor. For he too has a sinful nature and is tempted to be prideful when there is success in ministry, and to despair when their labor seems in vain.

When the pendulum of pride is swinging back and forth, the pastor needs the Theology of the Cross; self-denial, taking up his cross and following Jesus. He needs his brother pastors to encourage him in the depths of despair and remind him whose Church this is when he is prideful. He needs to spend time with his Savior who humbles and encourages his people as he does.

There is no better way to end than with a prayer that is often sung at the installation services of pastors. In the third verse of his hymn, *Dear Lord, to Your True Servants Give, W.* Gustave Polack prays along with us:

When all their labor seems in vain,  
 Revive their sinking hopes again;  
 And when success crowns what they do,  
 Oh, keep them humble, Lord, and true  
 Until before Your judgment seat  
 They lay their trophies at Your feet.<sup>111</sup>

## SOLI DEO GLORIA

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<sup>111</sup> Christian Worship 2021, Hymn 896.

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