

A PASTOR'S GUIDE TO PROVIDING CARE FOR HIS CONGREGATION WITHIN THE
FIRST YEAR OF IT BEING TOUCHED BY SUICIDE

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ABSTRACT

Suicide is as important an issue as any for a pastor to be prepared to handle. Over 34,000 people in the United States alone take their own lives each year.¹ Contemporary factors contributing to a rise in mental illness only continue to make the numbers go up. It may seem that this issue does not affect the church, but sadly, Christians can and do take their own lives. The goal of this paper is to equip pastors to be able to respond appropriately when their congregation is inevitably touched by suicide. The thoughts of the paper are divided logically into two schools of theology: systematic and practical theology. Part one deals with the systematics of suicide: understanding the shortcomings of the church's past in this area and examining a better approach based on recent literature written in this area. Part two deals with the practical side of suicide, equipping the pastor to provide appropriate care to those working through grief. This is divided into the immediate care he provides during the first 72 hours of the tragedy and the ongoing care he provides within the first year.

1. H. Norman Wright, *Crisis counseling: what to do during the first 72 hours* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1993), 128.

INTRODUCTION

To say that suicide is a major issue in the world today is an understatement. In 1993 H. Norman Wright recorded the following statistics about suicide:

More than 34,000 people kill themselves in the United States each year. These are just the ones we know about, as so many suicides are not reported or go undetected. Estimates indicate that suicide is the tenth leading cause of death in our country. The death rate from suicide could be as high as 100,000 a year. And there are more than 5 million attempts each year. Between 10 and 20 percent of those who make a suicide attempt eventually kill themselves. About one-half million people commit suicide each year worldwide. In the 15- to 19-year-old group, suicide is surpassed as a cause of death by only 2 other factors—accidents and cancer. On some college campuses it is the leading cause of death.²

These numbers from the nineties were already frighteningly high, and they have only gone up since then: “According to the CDC, 36,909 people in the United States killed themselves in 2009. This makes suicide the tenth leading cause of death across all age groups. For reasons that are unclear, the suicide rate has increased every year from 2000 to 2009.”³ Nor is this upward trend showing any signs of stopping. The adverse effects COVID-19 and social media have had on mental health since then have only made the problem worse. Suicide is a more important issue today than it has ever been before.

Some might think that this is a problem of the world, not something that affects Christians, but as Dr. Stephen M. Saunders points out, “Suicide has, does, and will happen within the Christian faith. Yet suicide seems to present an unsolvable conundrum that, unless it is

2. H. Norman Wright, *Crisis counseling*, 128.

3. Stephen M. Saunders, PH.D., *A Christian Guide to Mental Illness, Volume 1: Recognizing Mental Illness in the Church and School* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 2016), 377.

solved, will actually increase the despair of those in distress and the anguish of those left to cope with a suicide tragedy. Those who work in the church need to be able to respond in a way that is helpful.”⁴ Christians are not immune to suicide; Christians sadly take their own lives too. How then ought the church to respond when the tragedy of suicide occurs? Some might think suicide will never touch their congregation, yet with the numbers being what they are, that seems unlikely. If not a member of the congregation, the odds are good that someone close to a member will be suicide’s next victim. A pastor, being the first spiritual responder in the congregation, must be equipped to do as Saunders says and respond in a way that is helpful.

Part of my research for this paper included considering the church’s past way of dealing with the issue of suicide. While this was not a primary area of focus for my research, it was for Jordan P. Bence, who wrote a senior thesis in 2019 titled “History of Suicidology: Learning from the Past for a Better Future.” This paper summarized the history of the way suicide has been dealt with in the church in the past. As Bence’s paper demonstrates, the church did not always have a very positive approach to the issue. Several of my other sources dealt more briefly with the history of suicidology, but Bence’s paper summarized it more completely. I also looked at several primary sources from the mid-twentieth century to understand how suicide was viewed in the church more recently: papers by Pastor Markus Koepsell, Traugott P. Bradtke, and John F. Brenner.

More modern works have contributed to the discussion of how the church should confront the issue of suicide. Peter Preus’ book, *And she was a Christian: Why Do Believers Commit Suicide?*, has been extremely influential in the past decade in shifting the theological conversation about suicide. In it, Rev. Peter Preus, a suicide survivor, discusses the stigma of

4. Saunders, *A Christian Guide to Mental Illness, Volume 1*, 372.

suicide. Laity and ministers alike are inclined to treat suicide as either an unforgivable sin or a mystery not to be discussed, either way robbing suicide survivors of the comfort they need. Preus says these are attempts to resolve the paradox of suicide: that a person can be a believer, and at the same time commit suicide. If a pastor is to dispel the stigma of suicide, he must resolve this paradox only with “the facts and truths of Scripture.”⁵

Dr. Stephen M. Saunders’ book, *A Christian Guide to Mental Illness, Volume 1: Recognizing Mental Illness in the Church and School*, has been another important work on the theological side of the conversation about suicide. The purpose of the book is not just to address misunderstandings about suicide, yet Saunders certainly addresses the topic adequately. His primary purpose, however, is to help readers better understand mental illness in general and equip them with the knowledge to help people who are struggling with it. The understanding of mental illness has improved significantly in recent years, yet Saunders, like Preus, recognizes the stigma is still there.⁶ The book is written from a Christian perspective with called workers in mind as the primary audience, making it especially pertinent to this paper.

H. Norman Wright has been an influential counselor and author for decades. His book, *Crisis Counseling*, was written as a guide for pastors, counselors, and lay people alike on how to respond to a crisis. Wright focuses his book on what to say and do during what he calls the “impact phase” of a crisis, the first roughly 72 hours during which a person is “aware of the crisis and experiencing the effect of being stunned.”⁷ While the impact of the crisis will certainly last longer than a few days, this time period is when a person is in crisis-mode and is the time

5. Peter Preus, *And she was a Christian: Why Do Believers Commit Suicide?* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 2011), 15.

6. Saunders, *A Christian Guide to Mental Illness, Volume 1*, vi–vii.

7. Wright, *Crisis counseling*, 31.

during which the pastor may have the greatest impact. Wright addresses many different crises in his book, but of primary importance to this paper is what he has to say on responding to the crisis of suicide and death.

In my research, I also conducted two interviews of suicide survivors. The first person I interviewed was Susan Salzmänn. Susan's son, Justin, died by suicide. Justin grew up in a home where going to church regularly and attending a Christian elementary school were part of his life. As a young adult, he struggled intensely with mental health. Several times he attempted suicide, but following those attempts he remained in contact with Susan. While Justin did not remain active in a church as an adult, Susan was still able to share God's word with him regularly. One day Justin even asked for Susan to send him a Bible. Finally, after years of struggle, he took his life. Susan has been open about her story and has been able to share it with many people over the years. Her goal is to help people understand mental illness better and comfort those who are grieving with the comfort of God's Word that has comforted her.⁸

The second person I interviewed was Pastor Kurt Ebert. In 2008, while Pastor Ebert was serving at a congregation in Denver, his son, Nathan, took his own life. Nathan was sixteen years old at the time of his death. While it was known that he had depression, his symptoms were very mild. He would never have been considered suicidal. One night, however, triggered by a conversation he was having through text messages, he ended his life. Nathan never showed any signs of rejecting God, but was always demonstrably a faithful young believer. Since Nathan's passing, Pastor Ebert has been open about his story, sharing it with many people at the

8. Susan Salzmänn, interview by author, phone interview, November 14, 2023.

congregations he has shepherded, at conferences at which he has spoken, and at a suicide support group he and his wife have led in recent years.⁹

9. Pastor Kurt Ebert, interview by author, phone interview, November 16, 2023.

PART 1: SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

The Church's Past and Present Systematic Shortcomings

Before the discussion can be continued about how to care for those touched by suicide, the paradox of suicide, the proverbial elephant in the room, must be resolved: How can a person be a believer, and at the same time commit suicide? To properly resolve the paradox with sound systematics, the flawed systematics of the past must first be understood as well as the systematic shortcomings of the present. The church's way of handling suicide historically has not been ideal, and that has affected the way its leaders handle it in the present. As Preus notes, "Pastors, to a large extent, have handled the issue of suicide in one of two ways. They have asserted that suicide is the one sin no one with faith can possibly commit, or they have kept it a mystery as to whether the church may acknowledge the deceased as having been a believer."¹⁰ Either option does not properly satisfy the paradox suicide presents.

Even before the time of Christ, the Western world was divided in its view of suicide. Greek philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle were not united in their opinion about whether or not suicide was permissible.¹¹ Later, the Roman empire opposed suicide not because it was immoral, but because it hurt the economy.¹² At the same time, many suicides were glorified by the Romans.¹³ In the days of the Early Church when persecution against Christians was heating

10. Preus, *And she was a Christian*, 23.

11. Jordan P. Bence, "History of Suicidology: Learning from the Past for a Better Future" (senior thesis, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, 2019), 9.

12. Bence, "History of Suicidology," 11.

13. Bence, "History of Suicidology," 14.

up, some believers saw suicide as a way of hastening the process of persecution, thus dying a martyr's death. Augustine spoke sternly against such an attitude, shaping the church's way of handling suicide for centuries to come.¹⁴ He emphasized that suicide was a sin in order to deter that kind of attitude among believers. This view of suicided remained in the church into the present. The sin of suicide was emphasized greatly, without much, if any, compassion for what would lead a person to the sin. Even up until the early nineteenth century, suicides in the West were refused a proper burial.¹⁵

This kind of attitude toward suicide persisted into the twentieth century. The church emphasized the sin of suicide in order to deter anyone from committing the sin. This attitude comes out strongly when reading what pastors had to say about funerals and Christian burial. Traugott P. Bradtke, at a Western Wisconsin District Convention in 1962, gave an essay on the topic of Christian burial, in which he said:

Christian Burial is a testimony of Christian fellowship. It expresses the hope that those who here in this world were united in faith shall also be united hereafter in life eternal. Since burial is an expression of fellowship, it clearly follows that those who have nothing to do with our Christian faith and fellowship in life surely should not be forced into such fellowship after death and neither does the false imposition of Christian Burial upon an unbeliever or scoffer, give to this individual who is dead, any right to believe or to expect a life everlasting with God. While the pastor is conducting the burial service, he is to edify the believers by means of the preaching of the Word of God. He is to comfort the bereaved by reminding them of the resurrection of the dead. Such comfort is alone possible at the funeral of a confessed Christian. To bring this comfort to the bereaved at the death of a loved one who during his life never confessed his faith in Christ, the resurrection and life, would be nothing but sheer mockery.¹⁶

14. Bence, "History of Suicidology," 16.

15. Bence, "History of Suicidology," 21–22.

16. Traugott P. Bradtke "Christian Burial." (essay delivered at the West Wisconsin District Convention of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, Watertown, WI, June 11–14, 1962), 7.

Bradtke demonstrates what the Church's attitude was toward funerals in his day. Affording an individual a Christian burial and funeral was seen as an act of fellowship. The church had no reason to perform a funeral for someone who was not in fellowship with them. The point of a funeral is for the pastor to provide comfort to the bereaved. That is not possible if the deceased was not a believer. Markus Koepsell, in a Rhinelander Pastoral Conference paper in 1973, made a similar point about comfort at a Christian funeral:

Comfort can be given, however, only if the deceased was a Christian at death. Therefore an unbeliever cannot be given a Christian funeral. If the survivors of an unbeliever need to be led to contrition, apply the Law by refusing the funeral. If they say, "We know there is no hope for the dear departed, but we feel the need for help and comfort regarding our own souls," then proclaim the Gospel to them in a way other than by taking the funeral.¹⁷

Koepsell emphasizes that since comfort cannot be given to someone who was apparently not a Christian at the time of his death, there is no point in giving a funeral for him. Suicide was certainly seen in the church up until this time to be a demonstration of a lack of faith, yet it must be noted that not all suicides were seen as automatically sent to hell. John F. Brenner wrote:

Every person who has committed suicide has not been insane. Many such cases were a matter of careful premeditation. A person who takes his own life sins against the Fifth Commandment and sins grievously. Such a person has cut himself off from our Christian fellowship and is not entitled to a Christian burial. Yet not every case of suicide is premeditated. There have been poor souls who were insane, irrational, who were not responsible for their actions that have taken their own life. In such a case we certainly must deal differently.¹⁸

Even though the scales were heavily tipped in the direction of assuming all suicides went to hell, some held the door open to the idea that mental unwellness did not necessarily indicate lack of faith.

17. Pastor Markus Koepsell, "Who Can Be Accorded a Christian Burial According to Scripture?" (Rhinelander Pastoral Conference paper of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, Phelps, WI, May 7, 1973), 4.

18. John F. Brenner, "The Lutheran Practice Of Christian Burial In The Light Of Holy Scriptures" (archives of Ev. Lutheran Joint Synod of Wisconsin and Other States, Thiensville, WI, ca. 1973), 4.

Some attention should be given to the concept of despair. Preus says, “In the church, despair has often been associated with suicide. To despair has been understood as giving up on God and falling from grace. Unlike other sins, despair has traditionally been the one sin that cannot be forgiven.... By such a definition, despair is an absolute denial of God’s unending willingness and capacity to forgive.”¹⁹ Even today, many will associate this definition of despair with suicide, automatically assuming a suicide is in hell. This is something of an overstatement for two reasons: 1) despair is not “the unforgiveable sin” of Scripture (Mark 3:28,29), and 2) this definition does not always correctly describe the attitude of a person who is “despairing.”

Susan Salzman talked about this same sort of view toward suicide she continues to see to this day. On the one hand, people are not always good at recognizing the pain a person is in or realizing the impact of mental illness on people. Additionally, people who have lost someone by the tragedy of suicide will say some pretty awful things because of their pain. When a funeral is held for a suicide, the people that do not come are either showing their apathy over the loss, or demonstrating their belief that the person is not in heaven. She has heard people in the church talk about scaling back comfort for suicides in order to prevent others from following suit, and to ensure that nothing is overstated. All of these things are preventing the conversation in the church about suicide from moving forward.²⁰

Better Systematics to Employ

Clearly, there are some issues with the way the church has viewed and continues to view the tragedy of suicide. The stigma surrounding suicide still hangs heavily over God’s people. As

19. Preus, *And she was a Christian*, 67.

20. Salzman, interview by author.

Preus highlights, if there is to be any change, the first person to make a difference in the church will be the pastor. For him to help remove the stigma of suicide, he will need to stress two theological points when talking about it: “First, our sinful nature is such that Christians like others may inherit a predisposition for depression and hopelessness. Second, while we don’t blame suicide exclusively on one’s genes—suicide is a sin—neither do we overlook God’s unconditional love for sinners. We can trust in God’s grace to save even those who commit suicide.”²¹

It may surprise the reader to know that Martin Luther, even in his time in the church, did not automatically assume suicides were in hell. In his “Table Talks,” he said:

“I don’t share the opinion that suicides are certainly to be damned. My reason is that they do not wish to kill themselves but are overcome by the power of the devil. They are like a man who is murdered in the woods by a robber.... They are examples by which our Lord God wishes to show that the devil is powerful and also that we should be diligent in prayer.”²²

Luther, to no surprise, pushed back on the teachings the church by and large accepted. He recognized that to speak with such certainty on all suicides was to say too much. He also recognized the role Satan plays in the life of the believer, leading him into temptation to do things the new man does not want to do.

In order to properly understand the theology of suicide, first an answer is needed to the question, “Why does a person commit suicide?” Playing on the words of Preus, one might give two reasons: 1) mental illness, and 2) sin. While suicide is a sin, often it may be more accurate to point to mental illness as the direct cause of the sin, more so than the sinful nature. As Wright points out, mental illness is not the only cause of suicide. He also lists instability, impulse, relief

21. Preus, *And she was a Christian*, vi.

22. Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works, Volume 54: Table Talk*, trans. Theodore G. Tappert, eds. Theodore G. Tappert and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967), 29.

of pain, revenge, and hopelessness as other causes.²³ That said, none of these describe a person who is making a sound decision in their right mind. In each of these cases, the person's decision is clouded by another factor effecting their mental state.

In suicides among unbelievers and Christians alike, depression is the most common cause. At a 1989 Pastoral Conference, Philip L. Schupmann said, "Unfortunately, a frequent outcome of depression is suicide. Of the estimated 20,000 to 50,000 suicides in the United States each year, as many as three-quarters occur among persons suffering from depression. (Statistics gained through the National Center for Health Statistics, HEW.)"²⁴ The numbers have not improved since that time. A 2021 article in *Verbum et Ecclesia* cites, "The research done on suicide and mental health has found that more than 90% of people who committed suicide suffered from a psychiatric disorder before their death. To affirm this, Bertolote and Fleischmann (2002:83) found that over 90% of individuals who die by suicide have mental disorders."²⁵

It may be surprising to some that a Christian could suffer from depression. Many are of the opinion that since a Christian has joy in Christ, there is no room for depression in his heart. In a brief on depression from a Christian perspective, Alan Siggelkow posits the question, "Can a Christian, a Child of God, suffer from depression and still be a believer in God?" In order to answer this question, he makes several Scriptural points: "Note from the Psalms of David, quoted above, that being depressed does not mean we have lost our faith ... The sinful nature tempts us to feel hopeless, helpless, worthless, ... The Holy Spirit encourages us to lean on God

23. Wright, *Crisis counseling*, 129–130.

24. Philip L. Schupmann, "A General Introduction to the Subject of Depression" (essay delivered at the Chicago Pastoral Conference, September 11–12 1989), 1.

25. H.P. Khosa-Nkatini and W. Buqa, "Suicide as a sin and mental illness: A dialogue between Christianity and psychology," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 42, no. 1 (2021): 2, <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v42i1.2318>.

... The Holy Spirit encourages us to understand ourselves as God understands us.”²⁶ Siggelkow shows from Scripture that Christians can and do suffer from depression and other forms of mental illness. This is one of the many effects of sin that continue to plague this world. Schupmann made that very point well: “Depression, in whatever form it takes, is a result of sin. God created man in his own image so that man would dominate the world. Sin brought the reversal of man’s rule over the earth so that the earth gained dominion over man. Our spiritual enemies, sin, death, and the power of the devil, would destroy us in whatever way they can.”²⁷

While Preus would certainly not say that depression is essentially demonic, throughout his book he emphasizes Satan’s way of attacking the depressed, working alongside their mental illness: “The depressed individual may be the devil’s favorite target. The believer hears the accusations of his disease, ‘You’re lazy, unproductive, a burden to those around you! You’re nothing but a failure, unworthy of God’s love!’ and the devil is more than happy to record the allegations, playing them over and over again in the head of the accused.”²⁸ Depression is an especially painful burden for Christians to suffer under. This is due to the difficulty there is in balancing the paradox in one’s mind that a Christian can at the same time have joy and suffer depression. Satan uses that against many Christians ruthlessly.

Susan Salzmann recalls how diligently Justin tried to “fix” his mental health issues. Justin recognized he had problems, and he wanted desperately to find a way to get better. Sadly, many Christians who suffer from depression and think along similar lines are tempted to escape their mental suffering once and for all by taking their own life. Susan mentioned how Eph 5:29 stands

26. Alan H. Siggelkow, “Depression: The Family And Depression” (accessed in Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary essay file, <http://essays.wisluthsem.org:8080/handle/123456789/3761>), 3.

27. Schupmann, “A General Introduction to the Subject of Depression,” 3.

28. Preus, *And she was a Christian*, 26–27.

out to her as a somewhat paradoxical passage in this context: “After all, no one ever hated their own body” (NIV). No one in their right mind ever hated their own body. That is true. On the other hand, when there is some form of mental illness attacking someone, and Satan working alongside it, many a person has hated his body in the worst way.

The other question that must be answered in order to have a proper systematic understanding of suicide is, “What makes a person a believer,” or better put, “What saves a person?”⁷ Preus has an excellent description of faith: “The nature of faith is that it receives. It receives the benefits of Christ’s redemptive work on the cross. Faith does not look to itself or have faith as its object. Faith looks only to Christ, having Christ alone as its object. ‘Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved’ (Acts 16:31).”²⁹ Preus emphasizes that faith is something *extra nos*. It is entirely objective, a gift from God. It is not a human work. A person is a believer not because he believes hard enough, but because he has been given the free gift of faith by God the Holy Spirit.

Faith is essentially trust. Preus also highlights this point, however, he may take it slightly too far: “Christian faith is nothing more and nothing less than trust—trust in Christ as our Savior, trust in the forgiveness he earned for every sinner.... Such faith consists neither purely nor partially of human emotions or intellect.”³⁰ While it is true that faith consists essentially of trust, it is an overstatement to exclude the other two parts of faith: knowledge and assent. According to Quenstedt, “The *materia ex qua* as it were, are the material parts of faith, of which there are three: knowledge, assent, and confidence.”³¹ Usually, faith will be demonstrated in all three ways

29. Preus, *And she was a Christian*, 34.

30. Preus, *And she was a Christian*, 34.

31. Johannes Andreas Quenstedt, *TDP*, pars IV, cap. VIII, sect. 1, thes. V, 282 (translated in Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, “Dogmatics Notes Vol. II,” unpublished manuscript, Microsoft Word document, 13).

in a person, but that is not always possible. Infants, for example, can have faith (2 Tim 3:15), but are not able to outwardly demonstrate assent to it. A child can have faith, but may not know every truth of Scripture (Heb 5:13,14). Confidence/trust is the essential part of faith. Even when knowledge and assent are not visible, trust can and is still present. This is important when it comes to suicide. A person may not seem to have faith because assent is missing and perhaps knowledge is not evident. Faith, however, is the gift of God that trusts Jesus as Savior even when knowledge and assent are gone.

After establishing what faith is, Preus establishes how it saves: “Faith does not save on account of its nature, its attributes, or its strength. Neither does faith save because it is particularly trusting, exceptionally uncompromising, or especially strong or secure. Faith saves solely because of what it possesses, Christ and his forgiveness. ‘For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law’ (Romans 3:28).”³² This is the most important thing to realize about faith. It does not save a person because what it is, nor is a person saved because of what he does with his faith. Faith saves because it possesses Jesus. Preus goes on to emphasize that faith is not a human work, but that it is instead a gift from God. He believes that the failure to properly understand what faith is, how it saves, and where it comes from has promoted suicide’s stigma. If faith is viewed as a psychological human effort, suicide would indeed imply an absence of faith, and sadly, this *natural theology*—theology predicated on reason—of faith is the lens through which suicide has often been viewed in the Church.³³ The temptation to slip into this natural theology is present even for those who actively try to go

32. Preus, *And she was a Christian*, 34.

33. Preus, *And she was a Christian*, 35–36.

against this way of thinking. In order to undo this natural view, a proper understanding of faith as Scripture presents it is needed. This is also the key to resolving the paradox of suicide.

The Christian is *simul iustus et peccator*. He falls into temptation and sins on a daily basis. Suicide is a sin, but it is not an unforgiveable sin. As Preus says, “It is not the enormity of a sin that causes people to fall from grace and lose their faith, but the attitude that the heart has toward the sin.”³⁴ Preus is highlighting the distinction between mortal and venial sin. The nature of the sin does not determine whether it is mortal or venial; the nature of the heart does. There is no sin that God is unable to forgive because it is too great a sin. At the same time, any sin could be a sin that cuts a person off from grace. It all depends on the person’s heart. Suicide is therefore not categorically a mortal sin, but it could be mortal if the heart is not a believing heart. The attitude of such a heart in a suicide is what the church has commonly referred to as “despair.”

Preus admits that there are certainly despair-based suicides: individuals who give up on God’s grace for them. He cautions, however, that in many cases, “despair is caused by [a person’s] illness rather than a legitimate evaluation of the facts.... It therefore has no bearing on salvation. He despairs not because he has truly abandoned Christ and his forgiveness. Rather, *he* is the one who has been abandoned by his own thoughts, due to his sickness.”³⁵ Despair is a tricky thing to define. If despair is defined as a person of sound mind choosing to abandon God, then certainly despair leads to death. As Preus has indicated, however, despair is often more of an emotional/mental state than a conscious sin. Many things in life can cause a person to feel

34. Preus, *And she was a Christian*, 107.

35. Preus, *And she was a Christian*, 77.

totally hopeless, depression being one of them. That is hardly the same thing as hardening oneself to God's grace.

What, then, can be said about the Christian who takes his own life? Undeniably, the church spoke too strongly in the past on this matter. It is neither correct nor helpful to automatically assume all suicides go to hell. At the same time, it would be unwise to automatically assume all Christians who take their own lives are in heaven. There are two extremes that must be avoided. What can be said is what has been demonstrated above: suicide does not negate faith. The two can exist at the same time in a person. That is what proper systematics shows us, along with a better understanding of mental health than there was in the past.

There is not total unity in how this theology should be applied in a practical way. The second part of this paper will focus on what a pastor ought to do following a suicide in his congregation. Before that can be approached, however, the pastor must know what he can definitively say. Is it wise to definitively say that a suicide is in heaven? This is an area where there is not agreement. Preus prefers to err on the side of more comfort rather than less, even if that means stating something definitively that is not totally certain. Preus writes:

“[Election] is finally why we can be sure a Christian who chose suicide is in heaven. Despite his sin that cost him his life, we can be sure he died a believer. God chose him long before his dear child became ill and long before he lost hope and opted to initiate his escape. Before this Christian was made a believer through the gospel, before he was baptized, before he was born, even before anyone was born, God chose him to enjoy the glories of the next life.”³⁶

Recognizing that the purpose of a funeral is to provide comfort to the bereaved, there is some good sense in what Preus says. Why should a pastor hold back the pure, unadulterated gospel from his people?

36. Preus, *And she was a Christian*, 127.

The scriptural truths Preus points to are important ones to emphasize regardless of what degree of certainty one gives about the person's final destination. Election means that God knew and chose the believer even before he created anything. That election took place long before the individual's internal mental struggle even began. As Christ himself promised, "I shall lose none of all those he has given me, but raise them up at the last day" (John 6:39). Not even mental health, or the resulting sin of suicide can separate God's elect from him. The other important truth Preus emphasizes here and elsewhere is that of Baptism. In Baptism, God makes someone his child, marking him as his own. This sacrament is something, like election, that is totally objective. Whether or not a person is baptized, whether or not they have been elected by God, these are things done to a person that cannot be undone. Granted, a person can fall away from their baptismal grace and lose their status as elect, but as this paper has demonstrated to this point, suicide in a Christian does not equate to such a loss of faith.

Susan Salzmänn made the point that technically speaking, no one can ever say with certainty what the final fate of a person is. Even sitting at the faithful old woman's funeral who died hours after receiving the Lord's Supper, who had never demonstrated a single sign of lack of faith her whole life, even then no one can know with absolute certainty that she is in heaven. Yes, there are outward signs that help human beings see whether or not faith is there, but finally only God can read the heart.³⁷ Such is the human limitation. Even so, if the pastor does not hold back the gospel comfort in that setting, why should he in the setting of a Christian suicide? Comfort ought never to be withheld from the bereaved on account of human limitation. As much comfort as can be given should be given on account of God's mercy.

37. Salzmänn, interview by author.

Saunders agrees with those who choose to emphasize that the suicide is in heaven: “The most important thing to tell those grieving the death of a loved one by suicide is that they can be assured their loved one is in heaven, because he or she died in the faith. At least, they should be told not to assume that suicide meant falling away from the faith.”³⁸ Saunders does curb what he says slightly more than Preus, but in the end he comes to the same conclusion: do not hold back the comfort of the gospel. Based on what can be said about the nature of faith and why it saves, there is no reason to assume a Christian who died by suicide did not have saving faith, especially if there are no other red flags indicating loss of faith. Err on the side of too much gospel rather than too little.

Pastor Ebert approached this issue a bit more cautiously. He said, “Be extremely careful what you definitively say. Don’t send any kind of message to people that the person is in hell. That would obviously be unwise. At the same time, it is not always wise to speak with absolute certainty that the individual is in heaven.”³⁹ This is the dilemma that faces human beings. Since they are not able to know the heart of a person, they can never speak with certainty to the faith of a person. What they can do, however, is speak with certainty to the grace of God. Pastor Ebert made this point: “If a suicide is a member of your church, you have a great opportunity to talk about the status of saint God gives us even in the midst of the struggle with sin.”⁴⁰ It all comes back to that *simul iustus et peccator* understanding of the Christian. To human reason, it seems impossible that a heinous sinner could be forgiven, especially if that sin is the person’s final act. The reality of God’s kingdom, however, is that all Christians are at one and the same time

38. Saunders, *A Christian Guide to Mental Illness, Volume 1*, 402.

39. Ebert, interview by author.

40. Ebert, interview by author.

heinous sinners and forgiven saints. Even if the suicide being in heaven is not stated with absolute certainty, the reality of how God's grace worked in that person's heart can be stated as a fact.

Susan Salzmänn believes that comfort ought never to be withheld from people. At the same time, she personally does not feel the need to tell people with absolute certainty that Justin is in heaven. She realizes that it is more comforting to leave it in God's hands. It is better to rely on God's promises than human words.⁴¹ This is an excellent point. It is both practical and pastoral to share the comfort that a loved one is in heaven with the person who has lost someone to suicide. If the source of comfort is only coming from what the pastor says, however, and not from what God say, the pastor may as well say nothing at all. If comfort is simply obtained through empty platitudes, it makes no difference what the final fate of the suicide is, let the pastor say whatever he wants to make those who are grieving feel better! If, however, true comfort is sought, the pastor can only share the promises of "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).

On the topic of words of comfort, Susan Salzmänn said, "We can't pick and choose who we think is in heaven. What we can do is focus on the promises of God's Word he gives to survivors. The most important passages to stand on are those that emphasize that nothing can separate us from Jesus' love, and nothing can take us from his hand. While absolute certainty cannot be given, God's comfort can be. It is important for survivors that they are not left comfortless. That means pastors and lay people alike must be able to provide God's comfort to survivors. It also shows the importance there is for survivors to share their stories. Not only does

41. Salzmänn, interview by author.

it help educate God's people on a better way to view suicide, it also helps other survivors find their way through their grief."⁴² Giving comfort after suicide is always needed. That does not mean more has to be said than what is certain. Instead, it means sharing the comfort of the promises of God's word.

Suicide is certainly a sin. God does not want human beings to harm or kill anyone, including oneself. That being said, the *sin* of suicide has been emphasized in the church throughout history to an extreme. Mental illness plays an important role in understanding suicide. A Christian may have at the same time saving faith as well as a struggle with mental health. Giving into the temptation of suicide does not presume the Christian has lost that saving faith. Pastors and lay people today must have a better understanding of the systematic theology of suicide so that they do not continue to do harm to either suicide survivors or those who struggle with mental health. No matter what certainty or lack thereof there is to the suicide's final destination, God's comfort can always be given. No matter what the believer is driven to or tormented by, "neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 8:38,39).

42. Salzmänn, interview by author.

PART 2: PRACTICAL THEOLOGY

Immediate Response

Having considered the systematic theology of suicide, the pastor must now shift to applying that theology practically. Following H. Norman's Wright crisis guidelines, this section of the paper will be divided into the immediate response and ongoing response of a pastor to the crisis of suicide. It cannot be emphasized enough how much of an impact suicide has on survivors. David Biebel and Suzanne Foster, in their book, *Finding Your Way after the Suicide of Someone You Love*, say:

For the survivors, the aftermath of suicide is a crisis of devastating and life-changing proportions.... The traumatic nature of a suicide overwhelms the natural human capacity to cope and leaves survivors with intense emotional, psychological, and physical reactions that they are unprepared to deal with adequately. Trauma of this kind can put at risk everything a survivor has previously believed to be real and true about themselves, others, and God.⁴³

Since suicide has such an impact on survivors, it is critical that the initial response of caregivers is one that is beneficial, not harmful. Professional caregivers are trained to speak and act along these lines. Unfortunately, as was demonstrated in the first half of the paper, spiritual caregivers have not always given the best care possible to survivors by what they did and said. Since pastors are the first line of spiritual care for people, it is critical they provide beneficial care, especially during the initial 72-hour crisis window.

Susan Salzmann said that her pastor only visited her once after Justin's passing, during those first 72-hours. She noted that her relationship with her pastor was such that this was

43. David B. Biebel, DMin and Suzanne L. Foster, MA, *Finding Your Way after the Suicide of Someone You Love* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 165.

appropriate. She had not been at the congregation for long. She also had a great spiritual support system outside of her pastor's care. She suggests, however, that in most cases, the pastor should probably have more than one visit with the bereaved.⁴⁴ This is, of course, a good rule of thumb. A single visit will probably not suffice for anyone going through a serious traumatic event. At the same time, there is some wisdom in not overwhelming the family. During the first 72 hours, one visit may be all the family can handle. More visits can come later on.

Pastor Ebert talked about the care he and his family were provided by his circuit pastor after Nathan's passing. His pastor came as soon as he could to be with the family. He did not say much at first, but sat with the family, listened to them and asked questions. He spent hours listening to the family before responding. He did not, however, leave without giving comfort. After he had spent time with the family, he left them with gospel. Pastor Ebert said that everyone appreciated the care his circuit pastor provided.⁴⁵ Listening and being present are some of the most important things for caregivers to do early on, especially spiritual caregivers. The temptation can be there to slap the bandage of the gospel onto the fresh wounds, but this does not demonstrate a pastoral heart or spiritual understanding. Making time to be with the family is the first thing on the pastor's schedule, as though he had nowhere else to be.

As far as what the pastor might say during an initial visit, Biebel and Foster made a good point: "Allow survivors to express their feelings, including their anger toward God or toward the deceased loved one."⁴⁶ Another temptation that faces spiritual caregivers is that they have a strong desire to "fix" the people who are experiencing trauma. Unfortunately, the gospel can be

44. Salzmann, interview by author.

45. Ebert, interview by author.

46. Biebel and Foster, *Finding Your Way after the Suicide of Someone You Love*, 168.

given in a negative way, with the thought, “You really ought to be believing this right now, why aren’t you?” A passage like Rom 8:28 is shared in a way that suggests, “Your pain is unserious or irrelevant.” Biebel and Foster’s point is a good one to keep in mind. People who are experiencing trauma are not always ready to process the gospel right away. There is time during the immediate crisis phase for people to express their anger and frustration, whomever that may be with. Forcing the gospel on the person illegitimately often does more harm than good. Perhaps the desire to do so comes from human beings’ uncomfortableness with grief.

A note on trauma: Scripture is filled with examples of people undergoing trauma expressing their anger and frustration over it, even to God himself. Throughout the Psalms it is said, “How long, LORD, how long?” (Ps 6:3). Throughout the book of Job, Job continues to open his mouth and express his complaints. Even Christ himself on the cross cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matt 27:46). There is a place both psychologically and spiritually for the individual experiencing trauma. That can certainly go too far, but it is usually a healthy part of the grieving process. Those who have lost a loved one to suicide would benefit from being allowed to grieve in a healthy way by their spiritual caregiver. The topic of grief will be addressed in greater detail later in this paper.

The pastor will eventually as spiritual caregiver, of course, want to share the gospel with the bereaved. That gospel is the one seen at the end of part one of this paper: that God is faithful to his promises no matter how unfaithful human beings are; that faith is what saves, and faith is not necessarily removed because of a struggle with mental illness or giving into the temptation of suicide. Saunders has a good summary of the message of comfort to be given: “Reassure the

grieving by preaching Christ crucified. Reassure that their loved one is in heaven, despite what they did, because God chose them as one of his own, and God does not forsake his children.”⁴⁷

There are things a pastor should say to the bereaved following a suicide as well as certain things he should avoid saying. Susan Salzmann mentioned that the phrase “commit suicide” is one that ought to be avoided. While it is often used as a categorical expression of what happened, “commit suicide” places the onus of suicide on the sinner. It emphasizes the “sin” of suicide in a way that is not helpful or beneficial to survivors. Susan prefers to say “died in suicide” or “died by suicide.” This way of speaking attempts to avoid shading the view of suicide in a certain way. Susan also thinks it is important to add a phrase like, “after such-and-such many years of persistent/pervasive mental illness.” This helps give people the background and awareness of what led to suicide, without automatically assuming that it is an unforgiveable sin.⁴⁸

Pastor Ebert agreed with Susan. He said that the phrase “commit suicide” automatically slants the discussion of the suicide toward sin, which is not a great starting point, especially for those who are grieving. He prefers to use the phrase “took his/her own life.” This lets the hearer know what happened without slanting the discussion a certain way. Pastor Ebert noted that suicide is an ugly word. It is one of those words that immediately paints a gruesome picture in a person’s mind. He compared it to using the word “died.” Usually, people find euphemisms to talk about a person’s death, especially if it is fresh in the minds of the bereaved. Why use an ugly word when another softer word can be used? He believes the same ought to be done when

47. Saunders, *A Christian Guide to Mental Illness, Volume 1*, 403.

48. Salzmann, interview by author.

talking about suicide in general, but especially when talking to survivors in that initial crisis stage.⁴⁹

Concerning things that should not be said to the bereaved, Biebel and Foster give a list of “pious platitudes or false assurances”⁵⁰ that should be avoided when talking to suicide survivors:

“Time heals all wounds.” “Everything will be fine in a month or two.” “You have other children.” “You can get married again.” “It’s best if you just stay busy to keep your mind off it.” “I know just how you feel.” “You just have to get over this and get on with your life.” “It’s God’s will. So just accept it.” “God had a purpose in this, so you should be glad in that.” “You have to be strong.”⁵¹

Once again, human beings’ uncomfortableness with trauma and grief can lead them to say things to try to console a person by encouraging them not to go through the grieving process. Ironically, their efforts to remove a person’s grief only prolong the process, doing more harm than good. It is important for pastors not only to avoid these sorts of empty expressions, but also to encourage their people to avoid them.

While the funeral will likely not take place during the first 3 days after the death, the topic of a funeral is an important one to be addressed early on as it is on people’s minds. A better systematic understanding of suicide will lend itself to a better practical application of the funeral. An interesting place in Scripture Preus draws attention to is the end of 1 Samuel and beginning of 2 Samuel: the death and burial of Saul. After Saul took his own life, the Philistines did not give him an appropriate burial. They fastened his body to the wall of Beth Shan (1 Sam 31:10), presumably to bask in their victory against Israel’s king. In response to this act, the final words of 1 Samuel record:

49. Ebert, interview by author.

50. Biebel and Foster, *Finding Your Way after the Suicide of Someone You Love*, 171.

51. Biebel and Foster, *Finding Your Way after the Suicide of Someone You Love*, 171.

When the people of Jabesh Gilead heard what the Philistines had done to Saul, all their valiant men marched through the night to Beth Shan. They took down the bodies of Saul and his sons from the wall of Beth Shan and went to Jabesh, where they burned them. Then they took their bones and buried them under a tamarisk tree at Jabesh, and they fasted seven days, (1 Sam 31:11–13).

Second Samuel begins with David hearing about the death of Saul and what had happened to his body. When speaking to the men of Jabesh Gilead he says, ““The LORD bless you for showing this kindness to Saul your master by burying him. May the LORD now show you kindness and faithfulness, and I too will show you the same favor because you have done this, (2 Sam 2:5,6).”” As Preus points out, David is clearly in favor of a proper burial for Saul. He goes out of his way to praise those who buried him. That does not mean, however, that David is suggesting Saul was a believer when he died. It seems that he was not (1 Sam 16:14). Even so, David was in favor of giving a proper burial to him.

What is the purpose of a funeral, and for that matter, burial in general? Formerly, Christian burial and a funeral were seen by the church as an act of fellowship, a declaration of whether or not the deceased was a believer. As Preus indicates, this is not what the purpose ought to be. Instead,

The primary purpose of holding a funeral is to comfort the grieving believer. It is not to make a statement about the deceased’s transgression. In addition, to hold the same kind of funeral for a suicide as you do for others is not to deny the suicide’s sin. It is to affirm the faith that was treasured by the suicide. What is more, you do not wish to deprive grieving families of the assurance that a Christian loved one is in heaven.⁵²

Fellowship principles are not totally illegitimate to consider when it comes to a pastor’s decision on whether or not to hold a funeral. The Lutheran order of service suggests, and the church and general public’s expectation is that the pastor presiding at a funeral will say that the person is in heaven. There is proper caution in not wanting to give the wrong impression about the certainty

52. Preus, *And she was a Christian*, 30.

of the deceased's fate. That being said, funerals are not the Lord's table. Fellowship is not a requirement for laying someone to rest. Additionally, as Preus emphasizes, the purpose of having a funeral is not to definitively state where the deceased now is; the purpose is to comfort the grieving families.

In the case of a *Christian* who has taken his own life, Preus sees practically no reason to deny a funeral: "You ought never deny a Christian funeral to a member who dies by suicide or issue other judgments, unless perhaps you have confirmed the fact that this person has verbally denied the faith. Even in such circumstances, however, I would be very cautious."⁵³ As he goes on to say, even a verbal denial of the faith may not indicate loss of faith, but severe delusion. Since mental illness is usually suicide's cause, it is quite possible that a person who denies that he is a believer is not saying so in his right mind. This is especially something to consider if a person is talking in a way that seems totally out of the ordinary for them.

Pastor Ebert is in agreement with Preus. He said, "Unless you have a very good reason not to, give a funeral. The funeral is a chance for you the pastor to comfort the family of the suicide. Maybe if you are uncertain whether the person was a believer, you don't say a lot about the individual. Instead, you say a lot about Jesus." Pastor Ebert emphasized that the pastor always lets the gospel predominate. Unfortunately, there will always be doubt about a person's fate. It does not matter how faithful a believer a person outwardly was, there is room for doubt no matter what.⁵⁴ Even if there is a lot of uncertainty around a person's death, the gospel does not change. God's gospel comforts the hearts of the grieving. It does not return to him empty. An

53. Preus, *And she was a Christian*, 29.

54. Ebert, interview by author.

example of a gospel-driven funeral sermon of a Christian suicide is the sermon given at Pastor Ebert's son's funeral by his circuit pastor. This sermon can be found in Appendix A.

Preus believes that since the purpose of the funeral is to comfort those in attendance, the nature of the death does not even need to be mentioned: "Is it not fair to assert that by saying nothing about the sin of suicide during the service you may actually sanction suicide? I do not believe so. Speaking of the sin of the deceased does not deter people from committing suicide. It merely subjects the family to shame while it fuels the stigma of suicide."⁵⁵ Pastor Ebert does not entirely agree. He says the elephant in the room should be addressed. He has been to a funeral where the pastor never mentioned the suicide. He found this meant much of the comfort that could have been given was withheld.⁵⁶ Perhaps this is the best point to ponder. Whatever the pastor's decision regarding a funeral, his goal should be to give the most comfort possible to the bereaved without saying anything with absolute certainty he cannot say.

While the family of the suicide may all be members of a pastor's congregation, it is likely that this will not be the case. Probably there will be family the pastor comes into contact with who are not in the congregation. The pastor should not feel obligated to only provide care for the family who are his members; he can also extend that care to those family members outside of his flock. Pastor Ebert made this point. He said that if the opportunity to visit family outside of the congregation is there, visit them. This is a golden opportunity for a pastor to establish Christ's love with people in the midst of their grief. He recalls being invited to a funeral of a non-Christian family friend and not going because he did not know what he would say. Thinking back, he wishes he would have gone. Even if a Christian does not say anything specifically in

55. Preus, *And she was a Christian*, 30.

56. Ebert, interview by author.

such a situation, he can be present with the family, cry with them, and help them through their grief. Not only does that demonstrate a Christ-like attitude to non-believers, but it also opens the door to sharing the gospel with them down the road.⁵⁷ Since the pastor will likely be in contact with non-member family members following a suicide, he ought to see them as souls with whom he can share the comfort of the gospel, people who at least for a time have come under his care.

In addition to communicating with the family of the suicide, the pastor will also need to address the situation with the rest of the congregation. Pastor Ebert recalls that after the Columbine shooting, he felt it was necessary to get up in front of the congregation and address what had happened. People are looking for comfort after major traumatic events. That is perhaps the reason many of them are in church that day. They would think it strange if you did not address the thing on everyone's mind. Pastor Ebert suggested this would probably best be done immediately before the Invocation in the worship service. After addressing what happened and sharing the gospel, it is a powerful thing to roll right into worship of the Triune God. Additionally, while the pastor may already have his sermon written when the suicide happens, adding a paragraph or making an application about the tragedy could be very powerful in applying the gospel.⁵⁸

Susan Salzmann liked the way her current congregation's pastor addressed a recent suicide. After he heard about the loss, he contacted a handful of individuals who were especially close to the individual in the congregation to let them know what had happened personally. He then sent out an email to the congregation telling them what had happened and sharing the gospel. The email can be found in Appendix B. He also made an announcement with the same

57. Ebert, interview by author.

58. Ebert, interview by author.

contents as the email before the Invocation of the worship service that weekend. He also spent a Bible class going through what God's word has to say on the topic of suicide, sharing much of the material the first half of this paper covered.⁵⁹ While this exact approach need not be followed, this is a good general outline of how a pastor can address the issue to and provide care for the rest of his congregation. They may not be experiencing trauma in the same way as the family, but they will be grieving to some extent and require comfort just the same.

Ongoing Response

One might assume the church would be a safe place for survivors to mourn the loss of a suicide and receive the comfort and support they need. As the history of the church has demonstrated, however, this has not always been the case. Biebel and Foster point this out, as well as what they see as the reason for this:

The church should function as a spiritual MASH unit for survivors, helping them recover so that they can return to the battle. However, within two years of a suicide, at least 80 percent of survivors will either leave the church they were attending and join another or stop attending church altogether. The two most common reasons for this are (1) disappointment due to unmet expectations and (2) criticism or judgmental attitudes and treatment.⁶⁰

While misunderstandings about the theology of faith and misunderstandings about mental health are the main contributors to the church's mistreatment of the victims of suicide, perhaps another reason is that people in the church lack a proper understanding of grief.

H. Norman Wright has a good description of what grief looks like, especially the kind of grief that follows the loss of a loved one: "Grief is tears, an overwhelming sense of loss, a desire to be alone or to have social contacts severed or restricted. During this time, some might even

59. Salzmann, interview by author.

60. Biebel and Foster, *Finding Your Way after the Suicide of Someone You Love*, 169.

question God's wisdom or love. Feelings of guilt are common. Reactions such as 'Why didn't I...' begin to be raised.⁶¹ Grief is not the same as sadness. It is not an emotion that quickly changes. Grief is also not the same as depression. It is not a mental illness of any sort. Grief is the natural response of human beings to trauma, something that can take years to work through.

Many people who have misunderstandings about what grief is can see people who are taking a long time to grieve as being somehow deficient, but as Wright notes, "A person needs to complete his grief work. What does this mean? Grief work means (1) emancipating oneself from the deceased (read 2 Sam. 12:23); (2) adjusting to life without the deceased; and (3) making new relationships and attachments."⁶² Grief must be worked through. It cannot be ignored; eventually it will come out in one way or another. It is important that people are allowed and encouraged to work through their grief. Wright's stages of working through the grief take time. Some of these things may be happening within the first year following a suicide, but the most important thing for the pastor to do during that first year is allow and encourage the bereaved to work through their grief. This means supporting the survivors and cultivating an attitude that encourages the grieving process in the congregation.

Cultivating a proper attitude towards grief starts by encouraging the bereaved in the grieving process. Susan Salzmann noted that the devil works extra hard on those mourning a loss by suicide. He convinces survivors, "You should have done such-and-such, why didn't you do such-and-such." Survivors easily can blame themselves for a loss, especially a suicide. Susan noted that it is important to remind survivors that this is not a fair game question.⁶³ Survivor guilt

61. Wright, *Crisis counseling*, 154.

62. Wright, *Crisis counseling*, 158–159.

63. Salzmann, interview by author.

is not a healthy part of grief. The pastor must discourage harmful guilt while at the same time encouraging helpful grief.

The pastor must also cultivate that attitude in the congregation. Pastor Ebert noted that grief is a long-term process. It is not something a person works through in an orderly way. Every day is different for the person dealing with grief. There is no real timetable. Working through grief and moving on is something that can only happen with personal commitment to the grieving process and with God's help. Pastor Ebert noted how the misunderstandings of relatives and other members of the congregation can come out as cruel attacks on the bereaved as people say things like, "You really need to move on. This isn't how God wants you to feel."⁶⁴ As important as it is for the pastor to encourage the grieving process in survivors, if the pastor does not cultivate a positive grieving culture in his congregation, the bereaved will not be able to work through their grief in a healthy way. Wright notes that when grief is not worked through, it can result in depression and psychosomatic reactions. This only hinders the grieving process from being completed.⁶⁵

Encouraging the bereaved in their grief involves not only encouraging a beneficial grieving culture, but also providing specific encouragements and counsel a pastor may give to survivors to help them work through their grief. Wright gives a short list of what a pastor might encourage:

Grief work is the reviewing by the bereaved of his life together with the deceased. This involves thinking about the person; remembering dates, events, happy occasions and special occasions; looking at photos and fondling trophies or items important to that person. In a sense, all these activities are involved in the process of psychologically burying the dead.⁶⁶

64. Ebert, interview by author.

65. Wright, *Crisis counseling*, 154–159.

66. Wright, *Crisis counseling*, 159.

If suicide survivors require grief counseling from their pastor, these will be beneficial things for him to prescribe as they work through the grieving process; however, even if the survivors are not coming for counseling, a pastor may encourage these things in his ongoing conversations with them.

Wright talks about another aspect of the grieving process he calls surviving and rebuilding: “The three periods involved in surviving and rebuilding are (1) bridging the past; (2) living with the present; and (3) finding a path into the future.”⁶⁷ A pastor’s role in this area is important. Pastors cannot grieve for people, but they can help them through the grieving process. This is especially true in the case of a suicide. The pastor, along with every other person, must not dismiss the grief of the individual touched by suicide. What he can do is help the individual recognize that grief is normal, and encourage that person along the way to go through the grieving process. Perhaps these three steps will take a long time to work through. Whether survivors come in for counseling or not, these will serve as a broad outline for a pastor to try and help his people through their grief.

Cody Hauch, in a senior thesis about training a congregation in grief, encourages pastors to prepare their congregation to properly understand and encourage grief. He emphasizes, “One crucial point to teach is that the grief may never completely come to an end in the lifetime of the bereaved. To establish these realities indeed should be included in the training and may be refreshing and informative to even those experienced with grief. This information will help get rid of the false ideas or opinions individuals have or have been affected by in their life.”⁶⁸ Grief

67. Wright, *Crisis counseling*, 159.

68. Cody Hauch, “Training a Congregation to Support Those Grieving a Loss Caused by Death” (senior thesis, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, 2016), 34.

is something misunderstood by many people. There is no perfect model of what grief will look like in an individual. The pastor, as the first spiritual responder, must encourage proper grief in survivors as well as a proper understanding of grief among his people.

Pastor Ebert gave some specific examples of what a pastor, along with the rest of the congregation, might do to support someone grieving a suicide. He mentioned the great appreciation he has for remembering: remembering what the deceased did and said. He said that those moments he was reminded by someone of a memory they had of Nathan were like gems. He said that the tendency might be to say nothing and let people work through grief on their own, but saying something is beneficial for the grieving process. Saying something as simple as, “I was just thinking of so-and-so today,” can help people greatly as they move through their grief. He encouraged pastors to put the death date of the suicide into their calendar, so that every year he can talk to the survivors and let them know they are praying for them. It may be wise in the first year to build in a reminder every few months to do this. He also noted how helpful it is for those dealing with grief to have their basic needs taken care of by others. A pastor might encourage willing church members to reach out and do simple things like prepare meals and cut grass for the bereaved. These seemingly little things are hugely beneficial for the grieving process.⁶⁹

Biebel and Foster note these same things as being helpful for suicide survivors as they work through grief: “If you knew the deceased, share positive memories. Do not avoid mentioning the person’s name. Allow survivors to say whatever they need to say about the deceased.... Make a special effort to remember holidays and anniversary dates. Send cards, make

69. Ebert, interview by author.

phone calls, or invite them to share a meal.”⁷⁰ Note that anniversaries and holidays are especially difficult for those dealing with loss. This is only compounded when the painful nature of the loss is suicide. A pastor would do well to reach out to survivors on those dates too. Additionally, consciously making the effort to say the name of the deceased helps give assent to people’s grief and move them through the process.

While suicide is the last thing a congregation ever wants to be touched by, it must be noted that if suicide survivors are part of a church, they already have a better support system in place than most to help them through their loss. The church is a great support system, and ought to be the ideal support system following a suicide. Wright encourages that church members carry out many of the things mentioned above, but he even says this might be established as an organized program:

It might be better if the church would develop a program of ministry wherein 12 families would commit themselves for a period of 2 months each to minister to the bereaved over the 2-year period of time and thus help them through the hurt process. Cards, phone calls, including them in family activities, helping them to feel useful and productive, and so on are all part of expressing our concern.⁷¹

It is important for the pastor to be intentional about creating a culture of support for those grieving a suicide. Wright’s suggestion of organizing a group of families to each spend two months supporting the bereaved is a great way to make sure this actually happens. Additionally, the emotional burden that can overwhelm caregivers will be lessened significantly if more caregivers take turns extending care over shorter periods of time.

H.P. Khosa-Nkatini and W. Buqa, in the *Verbum et Ecclesia* article, “Suicide as a sin and mental illness,” make the same point as Wright, taking it a step further: “Christians in their

70. Biebel and Foster, *Finding Your Way after the Suicide of Someone You Love*, 172.

71. Wright, *Crisis counseling*, 154.

spaces should facilitate workshops to teach church members about understanding and reading signs of suicide and how to respond to suicide cases.”⁷² While it is most important for spiritual first responders to be equipped to provide care for suicide survivors, the next lines of spiritual responders, including ordinary members of the congregation, ought to also be prepared to respond. The idea of facilitating workshops to educate the congregation on suicide is a good idea to internationalize this. Bible class may also be a place to equip the laity.

As Saunders notes, “The church is better equipped to deal with the deprivations of mental illness than other institutions. Likewise, the church is optimally ready to deal with suicide. The church has ‘resources’ that others do not, namely, the assurance of the atoning sacrifice and resurrection of Jesus Christ.”⁷³ Let the church be what it is meant to be: a hospital for broken sinners. The church can provide what no other institution can: the gospel message of salvation in Jesus. That being said, the pastor and congregation can only provide so much for an individual. Many people may need additional care that can only be provided through professional counseling. The pastor should not be ashamed about referring such cases. He is not giving up on them, nor will he cease to share the gospel with them. The pastor must recognize professional counseling may be necessary for those dealing with extraordinary grief.

Throughout the ongoing care of a congregation touched by a suicide, the pastor should also be aware that other individuals in the congregation will be dealing with grief, even if they were not particularly close to the suicide or are not showing signs of grief. Susan Salzmann noted that people may be heavily impacted by this loss for one reason or another, or this loss may remind them of a previous loss, reopening old wounds and causing pain. She noted that it is

72. H.P. Khosa-Nkatini and W. Buqa, “Suicide as a sin and mental illness,” 5.

73. Saunders, *A Christian Guide to Mental Illness, Volume 1*, 372.

easy for people who are in that situation to isolate themselves and try to deal with their grief in their own way. Since these people are not necessarily on a pastor's radar following a suicide, they may be left unnoticed.⁷⁴ This is a good point, and it illustrates the importance of the pastor to reach out to delinquent members. Perhaps at times, attempting to contact delinquents can fall to the bottom of the pastor's To-Do list, but recognize that grief may be the cause of the delinquency. After a congregation has been touched by a suicide especially, a pastor ought to internalize reaching out to delinquents to ensure he is providing care to everyone grieving the loss.

Finally, as Bence says,

One of the places where the pastor can have the most profound effect is in the pulpit. As he prepares his sermon he has opportunity to speak to his people about the problems that they face in their everyday life. As he ponders the text he has his people in mind and is constantly asking how the text addresses and provides the solution God's people require. This is no different when it comes to suicide. But how often do we hear sermons address suicide or mental health? If the answer is not often, why is that the case? Is it because God's Word does not address it? Absolutely not. Many times over in his Word God provides comfort to those who struggle to find hope in the difficulties of this world. Many times over God provides strength to the weak of spirit.⁷⁵

One of the most important roles of the pastor is that of preacher. The greatest impact he has on his people may be in no other place than the pulpit. As a pastor seeks to provide care for his congregation touched by suicide, or as he seeks to prepare it for when it is touched by suicide, preaching a proper understanding of mental health and suicide will have a powerful impact. Suicide will sadly touch many, if not all, congregations throughout the world. A proper understanding and teaching of the theology of suicide, together with a proper approach to

74. Salzmann, interview by author.

75. Bence, "History of Suicidology," 31–32.

providing care to survivors and the rest of the congregation, is critical for pastors in today's world. May God's gospel of comfort guide them in this task.

APPENDIX I (SAMPLE FUNERAL SERMON)

Galatians 2:20
Nathan Philip Ebert Christian Victory
May 14, 2008

HE DID WHAT?

“What?” we asked, when told that Nathan had passed from this life on Thursday night. The news just didn’t register. When told that Nathan had died from a self-inflicted wound, that he had shot himself in the chest, we asked in disbelief, “He did what?” We were shocked. We simply didn’t expect it; it didn’t make sense. He seemed to be having a good year at school. He had just celebrated his sixteenth birthday; he was looking forward to getting his driver’s license. Though he had his gloomy, down times, it didn’t seem all that strange for a teenager to have mood swings.

While we know that suicides occur, we just assume that they occur out there, in lives of people that we don’t know all that well. This isn’t supposed to happen in a Christian high school; this isn’t supposed to happen in a Christian family; this simply isn’t supposed to happen, period. When it actually does happen, and we find out that we are not immune, we’re shocked. “He did what?”

We really shouldn’t be shocked. We wouldn’t be shocked if we listened carefully to what God says in his Word. This is what God says about all people, Nathan included, “*Every inclination of his heart is evil from childhood.*” Nathan was, like King David, “*sinful at birth; sinful from the time my mother conceived me.*” There was nothing good in Nathan by nature. He was sinful. He was thoroughly corrupt. What should we expect someone thoroughly corrupt on his own to do? Sin. That’s what sinners do. They reveal the thoughts and attitudes of their heart by acts of rebellion against God’s holy law.

Those who are born in sin view the world only through the lens of the question, “What do I want to do?” Nathan’s sinful nature focused on self. It’s not particularly shocking that someone who was by nature obsessed with doing what he wanted to do would try to take his own life.

Remember, too, where Nathan lived. I don’t mean Centennial or Littleton or Colorado. He lived in this

unbelieving world that insists that human beings are free to take their own life. Going out on your own terms, at your own time, to free yourself from pain and difficulty, is, according to the world, the right of everyone. Though the Lord tells us not to listen to the world, it’s hard to ignore when they are jamming their opinions down our throats. It’s not particularly shocking that a person with a sinful nature would listen to the world and attempt to take his own life.

What about our arch-enemy? St. Peter tells us that “*Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour.*” Satan will not content himself with the ruin of God’s creation. He so hates God that he wants to destroy every one of God’s people. The devil is no weak, witless enemy. The Liar knows how to spin a yarn. He knows how to hook people with his lies. He deceived Nathan into believing the lie that suicide would be a courageous thing to do, that only a young man with great strength could take his own life. He deceived Nathan into believing the lie that the world would be a better place without him. Considering that the devil deceived perfect Adam and Eve, it’s hardly shocking that he deceived Nathan.

When we listen to what God says in his Word about the sinfulness of our nature, the power of the world’s temptations, and the deceit of the devil, it’s not particularly shocking to hear what Nathan did. In some respects, then, we really have no reason to ask, “He did what?”

But today we most certainly do have reason to ask that question. It’s the question that we want to ask for years to come, not in sorrow, but in wonder; not in sadness, but in joy. It’s a question we want to ask, not about Nathan, but about God and what God did last Thursday: “He did what?”

Think of what God did. Nathan had directly disobeyed God’s command not to murder. He had disregarded the

Lord's rule that "our times are in the Lord's hands." He had been selfish and self-centered. And what did the Lord do in response to this rebellion? Hand him over to Satan? Concede that the roaring lion had won that victory? Oh, no. God miraculously intervened. He mercifully granted Nathan sincere sorrow over that sin. He compassionately allowed Nathan time to confess his sin. He graciously worked faith in Nathan's heart to believe that his sin had been forgiven. The Lord gave Pastor the privilege of saying to his son one last time, "Jesus loves you. Jesus forgives you." Though Nathan's death was a result of his sin, the Lord used that sin for the greatest good. He turned evil into blessing as he used Nathan's death to deliver Nathan to his side. He used Nathan's confession to comfort and encourage all those who survive that Nathan will live with the Lord forever. And we say, with jaws dropped, "God did what?" We're shocked at God's grace and awed by his mercy.

Rightly so. There is an explanation for Nathan's action. He was a sinner. He lived in a world that glorifies suicide. He was tempted by the ultimate deceiver. But there is no explanation for the action that God took last Thursday evening. God had nothing to gain by what he did. He who created the heavens and the earth needs no one and nothing to be complete. The Lord would have lived in joy forever with or without Nathan. That the Lord would go to such extremes in this situation is shocking. We love because of what we see in others. The Lord chooses to love for no reason other than that he is love, because he could never find in sinners a reason to love.

That the Lord would directly intervene for Nathan's benefit once would be enough to shock us and lead us to raise our voices to the Lord in praise. But this wasn't even close to being the first time the Lord intervened in Nathan's life. On April 26, 1992, Pastor and Connie brought Nathan to God's house, knowing what they had done. They had passed along their sin to their son. They had placed him under God's condemnation. They brought Nathan to the font that day, knowing that the holy God hates sin and hates sinners. Yet they came because they knew God's mercy, that he had intervened in the lives of others through the Sacrament of Holy Baptism. God did intervene.

The intervention is explained in Galatians 2:20: "*I have been crucified with Christ.*" That's what the Lord does in the water of baptism. He crucifies. He puts to death. That's what he did for Nathan, putting the Old Adam under the water and ending its reign. Nathan did nothing; God did everything. God crucified that old sinful self that separated Nathan from the Lord. He created peace between himself and Nathan. Talk about an unlikely relationship — that would be it. The Lord and Nathan. Nathan had nothing to offer to the Lord. The

Lord had no need for Nathan. Yet the Lord amazingly, shockingly, entered into that relationship by taking care of the sin that would have led Nathan into eternal suffering.

The Spirit of God, through the word connected with the water of Baptism, did even more for Nathan than take away his sin. The Apostle says, "*I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.*" The Lord Jesus, the one who obeyed God's law perfectly, the one who never for a moment doubted God's love, the one who never hurt another, the one who never hurt himself, the one with whom the Father was well-pleased — that Jesus united himself to Nathan. He married Nathan. He said, "What do you have to bring to this relationship, Nathan? Sin? I'll take that." Jesus willingly took upon himself the blame for every last one of Nathan's sins. We can't stand to be blamed for something we hadn't done; the Lord Jesus took the blame for every sin he had not committed. Jesus said, "I have something I want to give you — my righteousness." Jesus was Nathan's righteousness, not just on those days when Nathan lived up to "his end of the deal," but every day. The Lord provided the righteousness that Nathan could never have mustered, no matter how diligently he would have labored. By that righteousness, Nathan lives.

On April 26, 1992, through the washing of rebirth and renewal, the Lord made a promise to Nathan. He promised to be faithful to Nathan, never to leave or forsake him. He promised not to take his Holy Spirit away or to take away the righteousness that he had freely given. In essence, the Lord promised that he would continually intervene in Nathan's life. It was on the basis of the Lord's continual intervention that the Apostle Paul said, "*The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God.*"

So it was with Nathan. He lived by faith in the Son of God. That, too, is shocking! Though born of believing parents, Nathan did not enter the world believing. In fact, Nathan could not come to faith on his own because he was born dead spiritually. What Nathan couldn't do, the Lord could. And did. He brought Nathan to believe that Jesus was the Son of God. He brought Nathan to trust that Jesus was the Way, the Truth, and the Life, the One who had prepared a place for him by his death and resurrection. He confirmed Nathan in the faith through the Word he heard from his father and mother, from his brothers and sister, from his peers, from his teachers at Lord of Life and Rocky Mountain Lutheran High School.

The result of the Lord's continual intervention in Nathan's life? Nathan regularly confessed his faith in Jesus in school and at home, with his friends and his family. The devil's lies and the world's doubts did not take over his heart. He still confessed Jesus as his Righteousness, the only way to stand before the holy

God. By that Spirit-given faith, he had life with God. We can only say with awe and amazement, “The Lord preserved him in faith.”

Then how, if the Lord promised to preserve him, could this happen? Where was God when Nathan was thinking about such a horrible thing as ending his life? He was where he had been since April 26, 1992. He was working in Nathan’s heart. Sadly, the sinful flesh has the horrible power to stand toe-to-toe with God and demand to do what he wants to do. The Lord should have said, “I will not stand for this rebellion.” The Lord could have taken his Spirit away. But instead his Spirit remained.

Why didn’t the Lord turn and run when Nathan turned the gun toward himself? Because the Lord’s relationship with Nathan had never been based on who Nathan was or how he conducted himself. It was never on the basis of Nathan’s righteousness, but rather on the righteousness of the Lord Jesus. As Paul said, *“I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”* Paul didn’t say, “I live by faith in the Son of God, for whom I give myself up and to whom I offer my service.” There was no certainty to be found in himself, for the Apostle knew the sinfulness of his nature and the sins of his life. The only way to be righteous in God’s sight was through faith in the Lord Jesus who loved him.

Nathan was righteous in Christ. That’s why we know that Nathan lives, in spite of his sin. His body does not live, but his soul does. God is faithful.

The same Lord Jesus who loved Nathan and gave himself up for him loves you who are left behind. His love for you is not like your love for him — somewhat up and down and fickle. His love is constant. It is pure. He loves you in spite of your sin and weakness and fear. Rest in that love. Because he loves you, he will do as he promises. He will strengthen you and uphold you. He will see you through your grief; he will be with you every step of the way. What Jesus said to his disciples in John 14, he says to you, *“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give*

to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.”

One of the sad consequences of a suicide is that the survivors are left thinking about what they failed to do. “If only I would have done this and that,” we think, “this might never have happened.” You have to know that the Liar wants you to do that. He wants you to find all of your weaknesses and flaws. He wants you to fixate on your failures. He wants you to cite chapter and verse of your sin. He wants you to beat yourself up. Don’t give him the pleasure! Listen instead to what the Lord says to you in these verses. Your righteousness comes not from what you did for Nathan; nor is your righteousness ruined by what you have done or failed to do for Nathan or anyone else.

You are righteous by faith in Christ. Christ lives in you and has united himself with you. You are righteous. The devil can argue all he wants about that assertion, but it’s the assertion of the One who cannot and will not lie. Jesus rose from the dead as proof of that declaration. You do not, and will not, live by your feelings of guilt. You do not, and will not, live by your promise to do more and better in the future. You live by faith in the Son of God who loved you and gave himself for you.

In the days and weeks to come, as you call to mind Nathan’s life and death, recall with thanksgiving and joy the Lord’s grace to Nathan. The Lord reached out to Nathan in Baptism to put his sinful self to death. He granted Nathan the righteousness of Christ, the only righteousness that avails before the Judge of all mankind. Through Word and Sacrament the Lord remained with Nathan, strengthening and preserving him in faith. And even when Nathan sinned, the Lord did not pack his bags and leave. He stayed, for Nathan’s righteousness came from Christ, not from himself. The Lord even preserved his life to allow him to confess, and more importantly, to hear the word of forgiveness. Shocked by the Lord’s amazing grace, we say in wonder and joy, “God did what?” May the name of the Lord be praised, even today! Especially today!⁷⁶

76. Earle Treptow, “He Did What?” (sermon on Galatians 2:20), unpublished manuscript, PDF file, May 14, 2008.

APPENDIX II (SAMPLE ANNOUNCEMENT TO CONGREGATION)

Dear St. Paul's Family and Friends,

When I thought, "My foot slips," your steadfast love, O Lord, helped me up. When the cares of my heart are many, your consolations cheer my soul. – Psalm 94:18-19 (Karen Silk's confirmation verse)

It is with sadness that I share with you that our sister in Christ, Karen Silk, has passed away. Many knew Karen as someone who was positive, upbeat, and outgoing. Yet, Karen battled severe depression. A combination of circumstances in her life pushed her deeper into depression. We talked about this. She was open with me about her struggles. She accepted my encouragement from God's Word. She fought hard, seeking comfort and strength through the Word, attending worship and Bible Classes regularly. She rejoiced in what her Savior had done for her. Sadly, in a time of weakness, she lost her battle with depression and ended her life.

For those who knew Karen, this news leaves us feeling stunned, saddened, and confused. There are questions that are hard to answer. But **we know this and can be confident of this:** Weakness of faith is not an unforgiveable sin. The Bible says that "**whoever believes and is baptized will be saved**, whoever does not believe will be condemned" (Mark 16:16). Karen was a baptized child of God, bought with the blood of Jesus Christ. In her baptism, God put his mark on her claiming her as his own. In his grace and power, he holds tightly to those who are his even in our times of weakness.

On February 6, 2022, at her confirmation, Karen confessed her faith in the one true God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. She chose Psalm 94:18-19 for her confirmation verse. More than a year later, Karen would still come to the Lord's Supper with tears of joy in her eyes. Even in her struggles, Karen's faith in Jesus was evident in her words and her actions. This, along with God's sure and certain promises give us comfort and hope amidst our sadness and grief.

Please keep her family and friends in your prayers. If anyone would like to meet with me for help and encouragement, please let me know. I stand ready and willing to do that. Funeral arrangements are pending.

Your brother in Christ,

Pastor Gabb⁷⁷

77. Mark Gabb, "+Karen Silk+" (announcement to congregation), unpublished manuscript, email, June 3, 2023.

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