

THE DANGER OF BURNOUT IN THE YOUTH MINISTRY

The term burnout is almost always perceived in a negative fashion, connoting an unintentional or involuntary extinguishing of a flame. Maybe the flame was used too long, was used improperly, or burned too brightly and was damaged or destroyed. A light bulb is a good example of this. A porch light left on all night, every night, will have to be replaced long before a light that is used for just an hour or two each night. A light bulb's life expectancy will also be cut short if it is constantly being flipped on and off, but the light bulb that has the shortest life span is the one that is connected to too much voltage. It may burn bright, but not for long. Plugging in a 120-volt floodlight to a 220-volt receptacle makes a bright light . . . for about thirty seconds!

Christian workers must learn to conduct their lives and their work for the Lord so that burnout will not occur. With too few in ministry already, we cannot afford to lose any of God's servants through unwise practices, which were not intended by the Manufacturer (Creator-God).

Some ministry workers decide to voluntarily turn off the light and call this desire to alter their lifestyle or leave the ministry burnout. If they have found themselves in full-time ministry without God's call and power, leaving the ministry is understandable and even desirable. If, on the other hand, they are looking for an excuse to not fulfill God's call, they are setting up themselves and their families for chastisement and heartache. They need to honestly face the true reason for their struggles and their decisions.

The world's misconceptions of causes of burnout often create some challenges for the Christian in dealing biblically with burnout. Our society would say that burnout has to do with the type of work we do (e.g., the youth ministry is a high stress occupation) or with one's age (mid-life crisis). Some types of compulsive behavior, such as perfectionism or workaholic lifestyles, are also seen as causes rather than symptoms. These scripturally inaccurate views lead to uses of the light bulb in ways God never intended, thus exacerbating the problem, rather than helping. If we as the ministers of Christ are going to solve this problem as it begins or even before it begins, we must do so scripturally, using the tools and methods given to us by our Creator and Lord. This is often extremely difficult, for we live in this world and its philosophy permeates everything. Our challenge is to learn to "walk by faith and not by sight" (2 Corinthians 5:7).

LESSONS I'VE LEARNED

Having been in the ministry now for almost four decades and still excited about serving Him and others, I've learned a few things about longevity in the ministry that might be helpful to others in the ministry as well. God's Word has a solution for every malady of life. It is one thing to say that; it is quite another to live by it.

1 HAVE ENOUGH FAITH TO LET GOD DO THE HEAVY LIFTING.

Until I learned to take God's Word at face value, believe what it says, and trust God, there was no peace, and there was no rest for my laboring body and mind. It was hard to take Him at His Word when He said in *Matthew 11:28-30*, "Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

The yoke He is speaking of here is an old-fashioned, wooden harness used to connect two beasts of burden so that they can work in tandem. The picture here is God and man yoked together doing the work together. I've watched too many teams of horses pulling a load together to not know that, in reality, the stronger of the two is always doing more of the work than the weaker. The true picture here is that when we voluntarily get

into the yolk with Christ, we must learn to rely upon His strength to pull the load, His direction in which to pull it, and His pace in the effort. In the end, we must come to the conclusion that He meant it when He said in John 15:5, “for without me ye can do nothing.”

2 REALIZE THAT YOU CAN'T DO EVERYTHING, AND GOD NEVER INTENDED FOR YOU TO.

This deals with my priority arrangements in life. What comes first? Family, self, God, work, or church? Everyone who believes he has this all figured out has their reasons, and they all sound good. The book that really helped me on this issue was J. Grant Howard's book *Balancing the Demands of Life*. The author was able to get through my thick skull that the way I put God first in my life is through finding out what He commanded in each area of responsibility in life and then obeying what He said about what I should be doing in each area. Howard did not list priorities in a sequential list with God at the top, but rather illustrated them in a circle with God in the middle. This illustration helped me to see how all my responsibilities fit together and related to one another.

One other helpful thought was that God created me with limitations, never intending me to do it all. Logic would prove this: God created me with the need to sleep, rest, and recuperate. He also created me with a limited lifespan; therefore, my duty is to find out what He wants me to do in each area of responsibility and simply to do what I can, with His help, in each area. If God wanted me to do more, He could have created me with more ability, less need for rest, and a 200-year lifespan. But He didn't, so I must be content to diligently do what I can with what He has given me.

3 APPLY THE SABBATH-DAY PRINCIPLE.

Take your day off; use it and your vacations to recuperate, not to wear yourself out more. The Sabbath-day principle should be applied in spirit, if not in the letter of the law.

4 AVOID THE “COOKIE CUTTER” SYNDROME OF LEADERSHIP.

This is thinking everything has to be done your way or no way. You must get help; you must delegate. But when you do, don't try to control it all to the point that it is all done just like you would have done it. Control-type perfectionists have a tendency toward burnout, because perfection is an impossible goal. God created us to work within a relationship model, in the home, at work, and in the church; don't resist this by believing you have to do things yourself if they are going to be done right. Right relationships will do more than anything else to rejuvenate your emotional energy.

Proper communication, the number-one need in relationships, will replace expended emotional energy. The Bible give us the following guidelines:

1. It will build others up.

Ephesians 4:29 Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that, which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto the hearers.

2. It will add health.

Proverbs 12:18 There is that speaketh like the piercings of a sword: but the tongue of the wise is health.

3. It will make one glad.

Proverbs 12:25 Heaviness in the heart of man maketh it stoop: but a good word maketh it glad.

4. It will renew joy.

Proverbs 15:23 A man hath joy by the answer of his mouth: and a word spoken in due season, how good is it!

5. It will improve attitudes and views of circumstances.

Proverbs 15:30 The light of the eyes rejoiceth the heart: and a good report maketh the bones fat.

6. It will provide life's dessert.

Proverbs 16:24 Pleasant words are as an honeycomb, sweet to the soul, and health to the bones.

7. It will help us put everything in the proper perspective.

Proverbs 25:11 A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in pictures of silver.

8. It will help us have a love for life and a positive attitude.

1 Peter 3:8-10 Finally, be ye all of one mind, having compassion one of another, love as brethren, be pitiful, be courteous: Not rendering evil for evil, or railing for railing: but contrariwise blessing; knowing that ye are thereunto called, that ye should inherit a blessing. For he that will love life, and see good days, let him refrain his tongue from evil, and his lips that they speak no guile.

5 BE CONFIDENT IN YOUR CALL.

Avoid the temptation to quit; that is what is at stake when we start talking about burnout. It is really quit simple once you've gotten over the hurdle of self-absorbed, humanistic doubt.

Philippians 1:6 Being confident of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ:

6 DO NOT NEGLECT YOUR TIME WITH THE LORD.

Spiritual rejuvenation is as important, or more so than physical or emotional rejuvenation; therefore, do not neglect your time with the Lord.

2 Corinthians 4:16-18 For which cause we faint not; but though our outward man perish, yet the inward man is renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory; while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal.

7 RELY CONSTANTLY ON THE SMELLING SALTS OF GOD.

See pages 4-17 through 4-18.

Further Helps and Information on Burnout

We are inserting with permission a copy of Dr. Greg Huffman's second chapter of his doctrinal dissertation. It is otherwise copywrited, so please do not copy it for use beyond this notebook. Please let us know if you would be interested in seeing his whole dissertation in print.

Another source for some biblical, very practical thoughts on how to counsel those struggling with this challenge is a chapter in Debi Pryde's *Women Counseling Women Specifics Nine* from January 2005, entitled "Helping Burned Out Servants of God." The tapes of the two sessions and outlines are available through Uncle Wally's, Ironwood's bookstore.

PRACTICAL IDEAS FOR BEATING BURNOUT IN THE MINISTRY

1. Control the phone.
 - a. Turn off at key times.
 - b. Have answering machine without message capability with weekly details on it. They call it, not you, for questions about events.
 - c. Use a different number for youth and for home
 - d. Don't return thirty calls; maybe discontinue voice mail.
2. Limit involvement by your youth leadership team to one or two extra functions per month. Don't chase off your help.
3. Take your family with you on some youth activities; add fees for you and them to pool fee.
4. Do some things with your family without any youth present.
5. Does the youth ministry fit you now? Is your interest level still high? Consider your changing family needs and make needed adjustments.
6. Avoid the bigger, better, and more syndromes. Just do some things over and over; people will provide their own variety.
7. How old were you when you felt the "call" to the youth ministry? Some have gone into the youth ministry because it was the glory position to them at the time of their call. Be confident in God's call. Fulfilling your call should be enjoyable.
8. Set attention limits—no total attention to youth ministry. There is more to life, even for the single youth leader. Do some "church" without youth motivation.
9. Control the calendar; don't let it get too full. Never plan two big activities that require a lot of your labor and time back to back. (There should a ministry-wide calendar policy established).
10. Learn to say no without guilt.
11. Have a hobby completely unrelated to the youth group; refuse to mingle it with youth group activities.
12. Establish and foster adult friendships apart from the youth group.
13. Refuse to allow yourself to yield to the temptation to become the kids' "Messiah." Christ is their Savior, not you. You can't save, rescue, or determine anyone's destiny. You can help and be God's servant, but salvation is a work of God, not of man—Ephesians 2:8-9.
14. Avoid the "Holy Spirit" complex. You do not know God's specific will for them; you are not the one to "convict them of sin, righteousness, and judgment." They must eventually decide for themselves what their convictions and standards are; help them to look to the Bible and the Lord.
15. Know what you are responsible and accountable for; don't assume duties not given to you or burdens God didn't intend for you to carry.
16. Work within the context of your God-given "body stamp" and pace yourself physically.
17. Don't spin your wheels; spend most of your time on your core group—Christ's example.
18. Follow David's example of encouragement "in the Lord his God"—1 Samuel 30:6.
19. Avoid wrong thinking patterns.
 - a. Nobody likes me; they won't like me if . . .
 - b. Greener pasture.
 - c. No one appreciates me.
 - d. This is a duty.
 - e. I have to be just like the kids.
 - f. If it is going to get done right, I have to do it myself.
 - g. You don't have enough time.
 - h. Time is the enemy.
20. Set your expectations in the Lord, not in methods and others—Psalm 62:5.