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# Clergy Mental Health and the Doctrine of Justification

Robert Preus

The purpose of this study is to find and describe the connection between clergy stress and burnout and the doctrine of justification, often called in Lutheran circles the chief doctrine (“*praecipuus locus*,” Apology of the Augsburg Confession, IV, 5) of our religion. It will address these questions:

- Does the gospel of justification help pastors to cope with the tensions of their office?

- Does it alleviate clergy stress?

- Does it mitigate burnout and help the pastor to transcend the causes of it?

I am using the term “gospel” as the “doctrine of the gospel”; that is, as the cognitive and true message of God’s grace and forgiveness of the sinner for Christ’s sake. I am using the term “justification” as I believe St. Paul and our Lutheran confessions employ it—as an event; a real, divine action; a verdict of acquittal which has happened and is happening vis-a-vis the world of concrete sinners. The terms “stress,” “burnout” and “mental health” are meant here as they are uniformly described and defined by the many psychologists and clergy who have studied the subject.

Burnout is found most often among those in helping or people-related professions, among those who bear heavy responsibilities—therefore often among pastors. The causes cited for burnout are role overload, role confusion, inability to shed continual responsibility and inability to get time off. Christian psychologists, pastors and therapists suggest that burnout can be headed off or overcome by prayer, Scripture reading, physical therapy and exercise, spiritual development, free time and having a support system.

Charles Rassieur in “Stress Management for Ministers” suggests that “the issue” for the church as it copes with pastoral burnout is how to keep it at a manageable level so that the pastor does not conclude that the only viable option is to leave the ministry.<sup>1</sup> If he is correct, the issue of this paper might be this: What role does theology or the gospel—more specifically, the fact of the sinner’s justification before God—play in a

pastor's reaction to stress and incipient burnout? Does it help the pastor to handle stress, and if so, how?

Rassieur offers some statistics to show that ministers, despite periods of career-related stress, generally do not leave their calling due to burnout or nervous exhaustion as do other professionals. But his statistics do not tell us whether more pastors leave the ministry today than in former years due to inability to cope with stress, nor do they inform us about Lutherans. I suspect that many more Lutheran pastors are quitting their ministries today than sixty or even thirty years ago, due in large part to the inability to cope with stress. Figures on this subject would be most helpful.

Even if few pastors are leaving the professional ministry, how many pastors just "cave in," as one old Norwegian Lutheran pastor used to put it, for lack of another job or profession to enter? Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod statistics, and no doubt those of other church bodies, indicate that thousands of our congregations do not gain members throughout a given year. Certainly that does not mean merely that there is no mission work to be done or that thousands of pastors (and congregations) are just lazy. It could indicate that many pastors have just "gone to seed," in the words of that same Norwegian pastor, in that they just endure the ministry. A valid relationship between the purely secular concept of burnout and the theological concept of justification can be found in an almost parenthetical statement in Cary Cherniss' "Staff Burnout": "When a worker burns out, what was once a 'calling' becomes merely a job."<sup>2</sup>

As Christians we believe that the gospel of justification impacts the total life of the Christian, including bodily and mental functions. As Christians we would agree with stress analysts on the basis of Scripture and experience that stress in itself is neutral and may be either beneficial or detrimental to one's physical, mental and spiritual health. Pressure, along with prayer and Scripture study, makes on a theologian and therefore can be a blessing to a pastor. Just as, according to a secular understanding, two people in the same job or profession respond in utterly different ways—one experiencing frustration, discouragement and demoralization (symptoms of burnout), the other enthusiasm for work, fulfillment and happiness—so two pastors under stress, believing the gospel and trying to apply it to themselves and their flocks, may well react in totally different ways. We cannot guarantee that a Christian

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pastor will attain a higher degree of mental health under extreme stress than a social worker or some similarly highly motivated person in a helping profession.

Clergy burnout's symptoms include not only fatigue, tension and exhaustion but also anxiety, worry, insecurity and even guilt. Therefore the biblical doctrine of justification by faith and of the monergism of grace bears directly on the matter, for it is calculated to remove anxiety, worry, insecurity and guilt. Burnout can be construed as indicative of failure, lack of vocation and even the breakdown of faith in God's providence and of communion with Him as well as with the staff structure within which the pastor labors. Here too the doctrine of free justification for Christ's sake alone can be applied to help immeasurably the victim of burnout.

Perhaps the gospel of justification has not been comforting, therapeutic or encouraging to the pastor under stress because it is misunderstood, distorted or manipulated. I believe this must be the case. So I propose to review justification in its broad scope with the hope that it might be better understood and applied to the broad subject of clergy mental health.

### **The Centrality of Justification**

Following Martin Luther the church of the Augsburg Confession has consistently treated its article on justification as the "articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae" (article on which the church stands and falls). This phrase is not a hermeneutical cipher but a principle of theology and religion which affects and permeates the life of the church and the faith and life of the Christian. Luther says: "This is the highest article of our faith, and if one should abandon it as the Jews do or pervert it like the Papists, the church cannot stand nor can God maintain His glory which consists in this, that He might be merciful and that He desires to pardon sins for His Son's sake and to save."<sup>3</sup> Again he says: "This doctrine can never be urged and taught enough. If this doctrine is overthrown or disappears, then all knowledge of the truth is lost at the same time. If this doctrine flourishes, then all good things flourish—religion, true worship, the glory of God and the right understanding of all conditions of life and of all things."<sup>4</sup>

This article alone makes one wise for salvation, forgives and comforts sinners and affords them the spiritual equipment to endure, although imperfectly, crosses—such as stress—of God's

sending. Luther asserts that "...he who does not hold to this article and this basic truth, to wit, true faith and trust in Christ, is no theologian. All the other articles flow into and out of this one, and without it the others are nothing....Those who are disturbed and afflicted, those who are troubled and tempted relish this article; they are the ones who understand the gospel."<sup>5</sup>

When Luther speaks of the justification article, he is referring not primarily to a doctrine but to a real, objective event, a divine action which we experience and which controls dynamically the life of a Christian. In this the article is like no other article of faith or divine work. "The other articles are rather far from us and do not enter into our experience; nor do they touch us...," Luther observes. "But the article on the forgiveness of sins comes into continual experience with us, and in daily exercise, and it touches you and me without ceasing."<sup>6</sup>

One's justification for Christ's sake, the fact of one's righteousness before God, often becomes obscured and slips away in times of tension and stress, temptation and testing. In his commentary on Galatians Luther speaks with great sensitivity on this point: "...the question of justification is an elusive thing—not in itself, for in itself it is firm and sure, but so far as we are concerned. I myself have had considerable experience of this, for I know how I sometimes struggle in the hours of darkness....But when in a struggle we should use the Gospel, which is the Word of grace, consolation and life, there the Law, the Word of wrath, sadness and death, precedes the Gospel and begins to raise a tumult. The terrors it arouses in the conscience are no smaller than was the tremendous and horrible spectacle on Mount Sinai (Exodus 19:18)."<sup>7</sup> This central article which alone offers consolation (Apology IV, 5) therefore must be well taught and understood. It must be seen and applied in the context of a right understanding of sin and grace.

### **Presuppositions of Justification: Sin and Guilt, Divine Wrath and Grace**

God's justification of the sinner is a response to two realities: on the one hand, human sin and guilt before God and God's wrath against the sinner; on the other hand, God's grace by which He justifies the ungodly. It is highly significant that throughout the Lutheran Confessions sin is portrayed as what

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humanity is rather than what it does. Original sin, the corruption of human nature, is the source of all evil affections and actions. This "Erbsuende" or inherited corruption is not a mere term, weakness, lack or doctrine. It is "vere peccatum" (Augsburg Confession, II, 2), as our Augustana puts it, an actual "morbus" (vice) which is an active force and power toward evil.

Philip Melanchthon says: "Original sin is a sort of living power [*vivax quaedam energia*], in no way and at no time bringing forth any other fruit than vice. . . but the most noble affections few people feel. True, there are those who live honorable lives outwardly. . . But such persons have no reason to glory, for their souls are subject to the most base and miserable affections while they are not even aware of it."<sup>8</sup>

This sin brings damnation to everyone who is not regenerated through the means of grace (AC II, 2). Hardly a mention is made of actual sins as our confessions relentlessly describe man's terrible predicament, his status before God: he is guilty. What people are renders them guilty before God more than what they do, proceeding from what they are (Mark 7:21). "As the proverb of the ancients says, 'Out of the wicked comes forth wickedness...'" (1 Samuel 24:13). The exemplary prayer of the publican asks God to be propitiated to him, "the sinner." He repents of what he is by nature. He confesses not his actual sins but his sin or condition.

If sin is a reality which must be repented of, so guilt is a reality. It is not a subjective reality—merely an experience, a feeling of guilt or estrangement. Scripture seems never to speak of guilt as a subjective emotion or affection resulting from sin or anything else. The terms for guilt always refer to the fact that the sinner or offender is under judgment (Romans 3:19; Matthew 26:66), even though the sinner may feel no repentance nor even awareness of his or her status (Leviticus 5:17).

God's wrath and grace are the presuppositions for any presentation of the sinner's justification. As Rudolph Bultmann points out, in Paul's theology they are not emotions of God primarily but actions of God's truthfulness and justice.<sup>9</sup> Therefore to be justified and to stand in a state of grace (Romans 5:1-2) means not that God is not angry with sin and the sinner nor that there is no divine judgment but that we have been rescued from His wrath (Romans 5:9). God's grace is the grace of the living God who acts, gave His son (Romans 3:24) and justifies sinners. God works and gives and determines the

life of the individual believer (1 Corinthians 15:10; 2 Corinthians 12:9). Grace and power are linked in Scripture. In Lutheran theology God's wrath and His grace that removes His wrath (law and gospel) must be preached and applied to both Christian and unbeliever alike and certainly also to the stress-ridden pastor. These two themes which pervade the entire Scriptures must be portrayed and applied not as mere ideas, gimmicks or metaphors for something else, but as realities which, if they do not always affect the greatly troubled pastor, are the only real spiritual therapeutics he has.

### **The Basis of Justification**

The basis of the sinner's justification is Christ's righteousness, the obedience of His doing and suffering, as our Formula of Concord puts it (Solid Declaration III, 30, 58). Luther emphasized the reality of Christ's atoning work as he continually counseled people who were depressed, fearful, discouraged and ready to quit the ministry. This is what must be done for those who, because they make too little of the sin that has caused their depression, fear and discouragement, cannot apply the gospel of justification to themselves.

To stress his point, Luther makes seemingly outrageous statements at times. But in effect these statements are profoundly comforting. To the troubled Melancthon he said: "If you are a preacher of God's grace, then preach not an invented but a real grace. If it be real grace, then you dare not bring up any invented sin. God does not justify imaginary sinners. Be a sinner and sin boldly [pecca fortiter], but believe more boldly and rejoice in Christ, the Victor over sin, death and the world. We must sin as long as we are here; life is no house of righteousness. It is enough to confess the Lamb who carries the sin of the world. From Him no sin can separate us, even if we whored and murdered a thousand times a day. Do you think the redemption and price is so small which such a Lamb paid for our sins? Pray boldly for you are a bold sinner."<sup>10</sup> Luther never tired of preaching the cost of our redemption: the innocent life and death of God's own Son.

### **The Nature of Justification**

What does it mean to be justified? According to the Formula of Concord, the word "justify" means "to declare righteous

and free from sins and from eternal punishment of these sins on account of the righteousness of Christ which God reckons to faith" (Philippians 3:9; FC SD III, 17; cf. Apology IV, 305). I believe pastors under severe stress can be benefited greatly by recognizing this objective, forensic, "extra nos" nature of their personal justification. They need to know that justification before God, strictly speaking, is not a subjective experience any more than my acquittal of a charge for speeding, although concomitant with God's gracious verdict of forgiveness are regeneration and the gift of faith (Apology XIV, 72; FC SD III, 19).

The troubled sinner who perceives the objective and forensic nature of justification will not look inwardly to feelings, experiences or quality of faith to gain assurance that he or she is right with God. Rather, such a person looks to Christ crucified and risen "for our justification" (Romans 4:25) and to the Word which proclaims and confers this justification. Of course, justified sinners feel joy and at peace with God, but these emotions are the results, not the criteria, of their justification, God's acceptance of them for Christ's sake.

### **The Nature and Function of Faith in Justification**

What is the nature of justifying faith ("fides justificans" or "fides specialis") in Christ in contrast to "fides generalis," or faith in doctrine? We all know the pat answer: faith is trust. But what is trust? This question may be answered best by a study of the Hebrew word *batach*, the term in the Old Testament which most nearly approximates the *pistis* of Paul and John when they speak of justification or salvation through faith. The term means to lean on another (Proverbs 3:5), to prostrate one's self and fall on one's face in utter dependence upon another, to trust another for everything. The object of our trust is always the Lord throughout the Old Testament, no one and nothing else. In the New Testament the object of our trust is the same: Christ the Lord and His Word of gospel and pardon (John 1:11-19; Luke 8:13; Acts 8:14; 2:41; 1 Timothy 1:14).

In the Apology of the Augsburg Confession Melanchthon beautifully portrays the nature of this trust as it pertains to the sinner's justification. He describes this "justifying faith" as confidence or trust in Christ's promises of mercy ("fiducia promissae misericordiae propter Christum," Apology IV, 79). In



essence, the faith through which we are justified is receptivity, whether it be called trust or knowledge of Christ. As Theodore Mueller says in a very perceptive article,<sup>11</sup> faith is not an action verb but a stative verb. The faith through which we are justified is not to be considered “the act of faith,”<sup>12</sup> but an “*actio passiva*” or, better, an *organon leptikon*—that is, a receiving instrument.

Pastors who suffer stress and affliction, like any Christian in similar circumstances, may be tempted to look to their faith as a reason for self-esteem and assurance rather than to the only object of faith, Christ and His pardoning Word. They conclude that failure and inability to cope are due to weak faith or the lack of faith altogether. They are viewing faith as their act rather than as their reception of God’s mercy.

### **Mental and Spiritual Health**

Pastoral burnout or nervous exhaustion is not necessarily a sign of weak faith, works righteousness, spiritual malaise or a particular guilt. Poor mental health does not necessarily denote poor spiritual health. Too many factors pertain to both to allow for any sure correlation.

Luther had periods of deep depression owing largely but not entirely to physical ailments. He was often given to anger and impatience, the inability or unwillingness to cope and to suffer adversities and afflictions and wrongs with calmness and love and without complaint. But he understood what it meant to be right with God. Certainly no legalist, he had experienced the forgiveness of sins. So too had the Apostle Paul, with all his failures and complaining—or rather boasting—of his infirmities, persecutions and frustrations (Romans 7; 2 Corinthians 11:18ff.; 7:5). Pastors who become dependent or aggressive in response to stress are not necessarily so because they are living with a guilt template over their lives. It is perfectly possible for pastors who know they are forgiven, are certain of their salvation and live in the grace of God to suffer burnout and mental exhaustion.

Perhaps an old theologian who knew nothing of psychology or mental health in the modern sense has something helpful to say at this point. C.F.W. Walther offers as his seventeenth thesis in his well-known book, *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*, the following: “The Word of God is not rightly divided when a description is given of faith, both as regards its

strength and the consciousness and productiveness of it, that does not fit all believers at all times.”<sup>13</sup> Pastors like any Christian may in their own minds be under-achieving, guilt-ridden, uncertain even of their salvation, lazy, despondent and unhappy—and still be believers.

Walther was speaking to young pastors about their preaching, warning them not to paint a false picture of a Christian lest Christians confused and weak in faith conclude that they are not under grace—a terrible tragedy. But I think that today his principle might apply well to pastors or counselors treating victims of nervous exhaustion. They must be cautious in drawing conclusions concerning another’s spiritual life in Christ and the inability to cope with the stress and strains of a calling.

While justification before God surely has a profound effect of eternal significance upon a life, nevertheless it cannot be said to be a prevention or cure for nervous exhaustion in any given case. In many cases justification before God, properly applied, will prevent burnout or alleviate it. There is no iron curtain separating the realms of nature and grace, the psychosomatic and the spiritual. But if we pastors are to “use” the gospel of justification at all in reference to mental health, we ought to do so pastorally, not as the medical doctor or psychologist might treat a patient.

In speaking about the psychological and physical effects of the gospel, we must be very cautious as we try to judge empirically what it does or does not do. Even as we trust in providence without seeing its ways, we believe firmly in the gospel’s power to heal. We see its effects, but we dare not dogmatize about these effects in given cases.

### **Justification, Election, and Providence**

One pericope from Scripture has been brought to bear on the subject of mental health remarkably often: Romans 8:28–39. It brings together three great theological themes: justification, which Paul has been speaking of throughout the preceding chapters; election, which he introduces with this verse; and providence, which he so beautifully illustrates throughout and especially in verse 32. God’s providence serves His grace. His kingdom of power is in the service of His kingdom of grace. Those who are made elect by God likely will suffer stress and strain and cross and affliction in this life, but all of these ultimately are blessings in God’s gracious economy. The

justified sinner is reminded that Christ's atonement has removed totally and forever the guilt and punishment and burden of sin; that the sins of the flesh, which still remain, are continually forgiven for Christ's sake; but that sickness and pain, the results of sin, are nevertheless the predicted and expected portion of every child of God. Among these chastenings God sends His chosen people may be nervous breakdown and clergy burnout.

If the justification of the sinner is not a prevention or cure for pastoral burnout or mental breakdown, what is its purpose? First, the sinner is justified in order to be saved eternally and to live forever with God, to praise Him in this life and in the life to come. Paul and all of Scripture continually link justification and the forgiveness of sins, together with all the soteriological themes such as redemption and reconciliation, with eternal life, an eschatological reality.

Secondly, God justifies the sinner in order to sanctify him or her (1 Peter 2:9), in order that the justified sinner might love and serve God and neighbor. Melanchthon puts this matter eloquently in the Apology: "We are justified for this very purpose, that, being righteous, we might begin to do good works and obey God's Law. For this purpose we are reborn and receive the Holy Spirit, that this new life might have new works and new impulses, the fear and love of God, hatred of lust, etc." (Apology IV, 348-349).

But what of those pastors who feel unable to cope even in the light of or because of what Melanchthon has said? What of those who see themselves as failures, suffer guilt and have a low self-esteem? They should give heed to Melanchthon's assertion that all the works of a Christian are pleasing to God even though in themselves they are quite neutral and seemingly unimportant. "The incipient keeping of the Law does not please God for its own sake but for the sake of faith in Christ," he says (Apology IV, 166; cf. 177, 172). If this is true, then surely we should be able to carry out our calling with great joy, even with all the tensions and failures, knowing that however things turn out God is using us, and we are the apple of His eye. My self-esteem is in Christ, not in myself. In Christ all my works and activities are pleasing to God.

Can and ought a pastor view mental breakdown or nervous exhaustion as a chastening from a loving God calculated only to bless and bring the pastor (and the congregation) closer to Him? The answer must be a resounding "yes." Yes, if the pastor believes in a loving God who sent His Son to be our Savior. Yes,

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if the pastor believes in a faithful God who has promised again and again, "I will never leave you." Yes, if the pastor believes in an almighty and providential God who through His Apostle Paul has assured us, "He who did not spare His own Son but gave Him up for us all, will He not also give us all things with Him?" (Romans 8:32). Yes, even if the pastor has difficulty believing all these things or in confusion rejects them for a time. This is not a theology of failure but a theology of victory in failure. God's divine calling and providence allows us to believe and practice this theology of the cross.

## FOOTNOTES

1. Charles L. Rassieur, *Stress Management for Ministers* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1982), p. 20.
2. Cary Cherniss, *Staff Burnout* (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1980), p. 25.
3. *Luther's Works*, Erlangen edition, 10, p. 137.
4. *Ibid.*, 21, p. 12.
5. *Luther's Works*, Weimar edition, Table Talk, no. 1583.
6. *Ibid.*, 28, pp. 271-272.
7. *Luther's Works*, American edition, 26, pp. 63-64.
8. *Loci Communes (Melancthon's Werke)*, herausgegeben von Hans Engelland [Gutersloh: Bertelsmann Verlag] II, 1) p. 21.
9. Rudolph Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, trans. Cedrick Grobel (London: SCM Press, 1952), p.288-289.
10. *Luther's Works*, Weimar edition, Briefe 2, p.372.
11. Theodore Mueller, "Repentance and Faith: Who Does the Turning?" *Concordia Theological Monthly*, 44, numbers 1-2, January-April 1981, p. 29.
12. Collin Brown, ed., *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing Company, 1978), I, p. 358.
13. C. F. W. Walther, *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*, trans. W. H. T. Dau (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1929), p. 308.