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STRESS IN THE PASTORAL MINISTRY
A STUDY AMONG HUNGARIAN BAPTIST PASTORS

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ABSTRACT: According to Scripture, pastors have an important role in accomplishing the task Jesus Christ entrusted to His body, the Church: making disciples. The degree of pastors' effectiveness can influence the accomplishment of this task. Stress is an important factor in pastors' life and ministry, and it can thwart the realization of the mandate received by Jesus Christ. This study, after presenting a number of concepts related to stress and the definition of it, focuses on internal contributors to stress, then continues with an overview of symptoms and stages of stress. Helpful methods of dealing with, reducing, preventing, and integrating stress are studied, then some theological implications conclude the paper. The study is combined with data drawn from the life and ministry of Hungarian Baptist pastors.

KEY WORDS: Stress, Burnout, Hungarian Baptist pastors

Introduction

There are many sources of stress in a pastor's life. These can be internal or external. They can erode the pastor's soul and eventually produce burnout, if not addressed in time. While stress is inevitable, it can be managed and kept within the borders of functionality.

Hungarian Baptist pastors are not exception when it comes to the challenges of the pastoral ministry, and they face specific sources of stress. After the change in government in the Eastern European countries after 1989, both national evangelical Christians and western missionaries began the ministry of planting churches across Eastern Europe. Just within the Hungarian Baptist Convention of Romania (HBCR),

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a quarter of the churches were planted in the first ten years. Currently, there are 246 churches and 62 pastors. On an average, a pastor serves in four churches at any given time of his ministry. This is rather challenging and comes with a whole package of sources of stress.

The introductory part of this study starts with the presentation of concepts related to stress and the definition of stress. The next section discusses a series of internal causes of and contributors to stress. Among internal sources of stress are characteristics of the workaholic, bitterness, disillusionment, emotional involvement, frustration, inner pressures, overcommitment, overestimation, overfunctioning, overworry, and personality stressors. [Combined words such as *overcommitment*, *overfunctioning*, and *overworry* are generally used and accepted in the field of pastoral care and psychology.]

The following section deals with symptoms and stages or levels of stress, continuing with possible means of managing stress. As opposed to mismanaging stress, helpful methods of dealing with, reducing, preventing, and integrating stress are studied. Finally, the study will conclude with theological implications.

Definitions

Stress is a necessary part of every life. Even happy occasions have been found to produce as much stress reaction as unhappy incidents. While stress can be a positive aspect of the human condition, it is shifting to the negative dimensions of stress that leads to burnout.

There are several definitions for the concept of stress. As Sarah Watstein (Watstein 1986: 110) explains, 'stress occurs when there is a substantial imbalance between environmental demands and the response capability of the individual.' As the gap between these two variables widens, environmental demands increase and response capability decreases, and stress becomes a negative experience, ultimately effecting a burned-out state.

Robert A. Anderson (Anderson 1978: 18) defines stress as any stimulus which 'requires an individual to be or to do anything different from the way he is or the way he behaves at any given moment.' In defining the concept of stress, C. W. Brister (Brister 1985: 87), who was professor of pastoral theology at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, refers to Hans Selye, the founding father of stress research, who described stress as 'the rate of wear and tear in the body.' [See also Selye (1974) and Selye (1978)].

Some definitions, such as the ones expressed by Watstein and Selye, describe stress as something that happens *in* the individual, while other definitions, such as

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the one stated by Anderson, describe it as something that happens *to* the individual. The causes and symptoms of stress discussed in the following sections reveal the dialectic character of these definitions as they complement each other.

Internal Causes of Stress

There are several causes of stress in the life of a pastor. The literature divides these sources and causes of stress based on various points of view. In an article on burnout, Rebecca Hight (Hight 1980: 31) summarizes that professionals who have undergone training in identifying and managing stress list four major sources of stress: (1) attempting to meet the needs of many individuals, (2) tensions within a group, (3) the action of outside forces, and (4) unrealistic self-expectations. [Rebecca Hight was a registered nurse in a hospital-based Hospice Unit, New York].

Another common approach divides the sources of stress into personal, interpersonal, and job-related sources (Maslach 1976 and Maslach 1878). In the life of a minister this approach could bring to the surface much overlapping, because the personal life and the work of a pastor are interconnected to such a degree that job-related stress affects both personal and interpersonal areas. A third approach divides the causes of stress into internal and external ones (Sinopoli 1983: 25ff). This study will limit itself to the internal causes of stress.

Christian psychologist Frank Minirth (Minirth 1992: 19-20) points out that the workaholic is the personality type that is the most likely candidate for stress and burnout. He describes the workaholic as marked by four characteristics: (1) a hectic schedule, (2) a strong achievement orientation, (3) an inability to say no, and (4) a tendency toward frequent cardiac problems. While Minirth does not go deeper to expand on the motivation of the workaholic, the second characteristic mentioned by him could well be the motivation and reason for such a lifestyle.

Bitterness can be an important source of stress. Among the causes of bitterness, Minirth mentions wrong motives of jealousy (e.g. pastors envy the abilities of their colleagues) and wrong response to adversity. Pastors, who voice their hurts to anyone who will listen or just to some fellow pastors, actively participate in growing their bitterness (Minirth 1992: 36). The worst scenario seems to be when a pastor attributes his hurts to another pastor [Hungarian pastors have been working on the issue of unity among themselves, and many are intentional about preserving it despite differences of age and theological orientation that appeared, after 1989, with the new political and religious freedom].

One factor of stress, faced especially by those who go through difficult times, is lack of affirmation and encouragement. Christina Maslach, professor at the Department of Psychology at the University of California at Berkeley, points out that

'caregivers need the same reinforcing strokes as ordinary folk do. However, for them feedback is either nonexistent or is almost exclusively negative. They don't hear much when things are going right, but they sure hear plenty when things are going wrong' (Maslach 1982: 19). Such experiences can lead to disillusionment regarding people, church, and ministry in general. While pastors are trained in affirming others, they also need to be affirmed themselves.

Pastors are caring persons. Care means being 'physically available and emotionally involved' (Arnold 1982: 41). In times of various crises, emotional involvement takes a toll on pastors and caregivers. The larger the number of church members and churches in a pastor's care the greater is the likelihood of increased stress due to a higher level of emotional involvement required.

Frustration is another important cause of stress. Frustration is related to goals. Loren Broadus (Broadus 1971: 39) defines frustration as 'the feeling which results when a goal is not attained or not attainable at the desired time.' Another source of frustration is expectations. Expectations come from two sources--self and others. Goals and expectations are closely related. When conflicting expectations clash frustration engulfs the minister. As Broadus points out, neither ignoring the expectations, nor acquiescing to them will prevent frustration (Broadus 1971: 41). In these circumstances stress seems as certain as frustration.

Inner pressures have their contribution to stress. They can be either conscious or subconscious. They are closely related to personality traits which can make a difference in how much internal stress accumulates in a person. In a study of stress management for pastors James Schierling (Schierling 1986: 34) mentions four major internal contributors to internal perceptions of stress: low self-esteem, perfectionism, Type A personality, and lack of personal identity. Low self-esteem is not identical with humility. True Christian humility does not create stress in the negative sense, while low self-esteem can be an important source of stress. Louis McBurney (McBurney 1980: 109), through extensive psychiatric care of clergy, concludes that pastors commonly suffer from low self-esteem.

Perfectionists are critical of others, set goals too high to attain, and try to do everything themselves (Ellison 1982: 107-109). Pastors need to keep in mind that ministerial work is carried out in the tension between 'moral and professional perfection and our painful incompleteness' (Wiest and Smith 1990: 99). As opposed to this attitude, more stress originates when perfectionism is combined with low self-esteem.

A Type A personality causes stress due to its aggressive, ambitious, and highly competitive attitude. Research suggests that Type A personalities experience more stress than do Type B personalities who are more easygoing and able to enjoy leisure without the feelings of being driven by time (Orpen 1982: B-14).

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When a pastor fails to recognize who he is and how God desires him to serve, he lacks personal identity and is placed under one of the most severe forms of pastoral stress (Schierling 1986: 41). Demands of people, programs, services, and the organization overwhelm him.

While Schierling discusses these contributors to stress, he does not discuss the subject of sin as an internal cause of stress. While character traits are present in each person, and they can be sources of stress, there are times when human nature welcomes the possibility to shift responsibility from man's sinful nature to some 'causes' or 'character traits.'

A lot of stress is involved with overcommitment. Wayne Oates, long-time professor of pastoral theology at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, shares from the experiences of his own life some truths related to overcommitment. He says that some people have periods of life when they are bursting with energy, see little need for rest, and continue on this kind of momentum for years at a time. However, if exhaustion sets in, they become irritable and generally unhappy (Oates 1983: 132-133).

Another driving force of overcommitment is the need to be accepted. In such situations a person works hard, even for years or decades, to prove himself worthy. The need for recognition--the need to be in the limelight--are strong prompters for overcommitment. Such a person is simply unable to say 'no.'

Oates refers to Erich Fromm (Fromm 1966: 43), who relates overcommitment to idolatry. Oates adds to Fromm's list the worship of a given religious denomination or a professional role. 'The overcommitted are jarred by reality when our basic humanity, limitations, and especially helplessness inevitably come rushing in upon us' (Oates 1983: 142). Sinful nature prompts the overcommitted to seek recognition. A person exhibiting true humility experiences less stress and knows how to deal with the temptations of overestimation.

Overestimation produces overwork which can be a source of stress. Overestimation produces the attitude that says: 'I can do it better than anyone else,' or 'if I want it done right, I'll [sic] have to do it myself.' Such attitudes give way to pride which might be followed by spiritual ruin. The story of Samson has a warning lesson on the dangers of overestimating one's abilities (Judges 14-16). The church also contributes to such attitudes when they demand that every type of ministry has to be done by the real pastor, not laypeople. This leads some pastors to overfunctioning. [Within the Hungarian Baptist Union most pastors have several churches. Often the pastor visits each church one Sunday a month. On alternate Sundays the church's layleaders preach and teach. This system lends opportunities for the pastor to allow others to serve.]

Overfunctioning is not unknown as a stressor. Many clergy are burdened with all

the responsibility creating a higher potential for stress. Added to this is the pastor's frustration with not being able to motivate others to greater responsibility. Edwin Friedman, family therapist and writer of the groundbreaking work in family systems theory, *Generation to Generation* (Friedman 1985: 211), rightly says that it is never possible to make others responsible by trying to make them responsible, because the very act of trying to make others responsible is preempting their responsibility.

In discussing several principles of family systems theory, Friedman writes that overfunctioners create underfunctioners around themselves, obstructing ministers' efforts to equip the laity. Overfunctioning promotes anxiety, fusion, and the destruction of 'the spiritual quality of the overfunctioning person' (Friedman 1985: 212).

Another type of overfunctioning is noticed by Edward Wimberly, professor of Pastoral Care and Counseling at the Interdenominational Theological Center, Atlanta, when he says that 'overfunctioning is a role assigned to a family member in which he is only valued if he performs a certain role' (Wimberly 1997: 61). Sometimes a person takes on the responsibility to lessen anxiety in the family. The pastor can take on such responsibility in the church family.

Wimberly adds that overfunctioning is a myth because it makes the person believe that he must play this role in order to be fulfilled in life. 'The narrative says our lives have no meaning unless we are working hard to make sure that others fulfill their lives' (Wimberly 1997: 61). Many pastors are in such a position within the church family system that they think it is their holy calling to work hard on this assignment. Consequently, they become overly worried about the results.

Overworry has an important part in the lives of perfectionists. Perfectionists are hyperconscientious. Hyper-conscientiousness can lead to overwork, neglect of other responsibilities, and to psychological breakdown and withdrawal from ministry (Wiest and Smith 1990: 98).

Joseph Fichter, from Loyola University of the South, presents research data that shows a definite correlation between overwork and overworry. Too much work and too much worry combine to produce a debilitating psychological condition (Fichter 1984: 378). Overwork has its own set of stressors, overworry has another set. If overwork and overworry are combined, the stress can escalate to unbearable levels and drive the person to the verge of burnout.

One specific factor of stress for Hungarian pastors has been the transition in the political and economic situations of Romania and Hungary. During the former regime, the authorities employed many and varied methods of putting pressure on pastors. Some of them were imprisoned and some of their families were denied good jobs or entrance into the universities.

After the changes, the situation is far from void of stress. There is political and reli-

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gious freedom, but the economic struggles of many people, including pastors, is a real source of stress. There are still churches that are not able to pay their pastor's salary.

Areas or Types of Stress

The causes of stress were presented in two main groups: internal and external causes. Earlier it was mentioned that another way of dividing these factors is by listing them under personal, interpersonal, and job-related stresses. In the case of pastors, oftentimes there is overlap between them. The following are some examples of such overlap.

Edward Wimberly presents the myth of pleasing at all costs causing people to sacrifice who they are to assure the happiness of others. The desire to please and be liked becomes a compulsion. 'It is the cognitive belief that our lives will be meaningless and empty if we do not fulfill [everybody's] expectations' (Wimberly 1997: 67). Here the personal stress of sacrificing personal identity is combined with the job-related stress of pleasing others.

One of the clearly defined tasks of pastors in the New Testament is to equip the saints for the ministry and, consequently, delegate authority and share the ministry (Ephesians 4:11-12). However, in many cases this task is not accomplished--sometimes because the pastor is not willing to share the ministry and other times because the saints are not willing to be involved in the ministry.

As churches grow numerically, they reach a point where the pastor cannot connect on a deeper level to all the members. At that point, as Oswald explains, the church can be hindered in its growth by two barriers (Oswald 1992: 9). The first one is the clergy who hold on to a need to be connected in-depth to all the active members and, thus, they become the bottlenecks to growth. 'The second barrier is found in the lay leaders who are unwilling to have many of their spiritual needs met by anyone except their ordained leader' (Oswald 1992: 9). Both barriers place a high stress on the pastor. This is an example of a combination of all three types of stress: the personal stress of overcommitment and the interpersonal and job-related stress of people who stubbornly cling exclusively to the services of the ordained minister. A variety of internal and external causes of stress has been offered in this section. The following section will examine some of the symptoms and stages of stress.

Symptoms and Stages of Stress

Others see many of the warning signs of stress and burnout before the victim sees them. The most insidious aspect of stress and burnout is the way it gradually consumes a person over an extended period of time. The pastor needs to be aware of his body signals and then identify what triggers a stress response.

Earlier it was mentioned that among the internal causes of stress are the characteristics of the workaholic: (1) his hectic schedule, (2) that what he has accomplished is a frequent topic for conversation, (3) the inability to say no, and (4) has been related to being at-risk for impending cardiac or circulatory problems. He cannot rest or relax (Minirth 1981: 29-30).

A high percentage of the population of this study, Hungarian Baptist pastors, fit this description. Rarely can one find a pastor whose schedule is not hectic, especially with so many churches to pastor. The situation is only aggravated by the fact that these churches are not in the same community. Some pastors have to travel a radius of fifty miles to visit up to ten churches that are under their pastoral supervision. There are still pastors who do not own a car; they must travel by bicycle, motorbike, bus, train, or by hitchhiking.

The second sign is also prevalent among pastors: the pastoral work and the ministry are the overall topics of any meeting, family reunion, or family celebration. These pastors do not necessarily talk about their accomplishments; nevertheless, their topic is still their work.

The inability to say no is also common. There are always invitations to do revivals and to preach on various occasions. For these pastors no schedule is so full that they cannot squeeze in another speaking engagement or meeting.

Cardiac problems are often present among pastors. The inability to rest or relax is common. Moreover, some pastors from the older generation consider rest and free time a sinful attitude, especially in light of how much work is still undone. For many pastors, vacation time is different from their usual work time only in the fact that they do not preach in their churches--they preach in other churches.

Stress has its signs as well as its stages. Selye and Sehnert distinguish three stages of stress: alarm, resistance, and exhaustion (Selye 1978; Sehnert 1981). There are plenty of symptoms that give an alarm to the person who has ears to hear. Many times, the only action that one takes is to move to the second stage, resistance. Somehow, the time to slow down and to rearrange schedules is not the appropriate one. The pastor thinks he can resist, and he manages to do that for some time. However, the third stage of exhaustion is not far away.

Often ministers are too caught up in their everyday activities and situations to be aware of the warning signals. That is why the intervention of caring friends and colleagues is important (Pratt 1983: 72).

Management of Stress

Before discussing ideas of stress management, it is necessary to turn attention toward mismanagement of stress. Mismanaged stress can occur when a person who

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is in one of the stages of stress does not make necessary changes but continues to live the same lifestyle. Charles Chandler (Chandler 1977: 23-28) shares his observations on the results of mismanaged stress: (1) deteriorating preaching skills, (2) mechanical function (going through the motions), (3) immobilization (there is nothing to which to look forward, there is nothing about which to get excited, withdrawal etc.), (4) domestic turmoil, (5) change of settings (a move to another church may be treating the symptom rather than the problem), (6) career change, (7) stress-related illness, and (8) professional suicide (any conduct which is not acceptable for ministers).

Stress management involves managing life in such a way that the pastor and the church leaders keep the stress creative--that is, somewhere between 'rustout' and 'threshold' level. A healthy balance is necessary in self-care so that it will not become self-indulgence. Prior understanding of possible stressful conditions increases the ability to cope effectively and to attenuate personal damage. This should start as soon as possible even during seminary years. Others, who are already in very stressful conditions, need to be brought out of isolation.

Confronting the expectations of others in realistic ways can also be an important step for a pastor to take in stress management. Oates says that freedom from the tyranny of overcommitment does not mean the absence of commitment but the refusal to absolutize any loyalty other than that which one gives to God (Oates 1983: 142).

The list of how to manage stress is extensive. Among the suggestions are making a list of things that cause stress and reviewing the list periodically to ascertain if these stressors can be either eliminated or somewhat alleviated (Zucker 1993: 126). Another suggestion is by conscientiously not bringing work home, thereby 'making the life outside of work just as important, if not more important, than work itself' (Mackoff 1992).

The studies of Christina Maslach and Ayala Pines (Maslach and Pines 1977: 110-112) present several factors that could either reduce stress or aid in successfully coping with stress. While they conducted the study in daycare centers, the principles can be applied to pastors as well: (1) amount of direct contact with recipients, (2) social-professional support system, (3) analysis of personal feelings, and (4) training in interpersonal skills. These principles can make integration of stress possible.

Integration of Stress

Gerald Fath (Fath 1982: 12) contends that a support system is essential to a proper integration of stress in the life of ministers. Since stress is oftentimes difficult or impossible to avoid, integration is important; otherwise, burnout might be inevitable. This involves consultation with and feedback from colleagues, developing relation-

ships of mutual support, and participating in an environment where one can express honestly the negative feelings related to stress and not be rejected (Sherrer 1987; Shierling 1986; Chandler 1977: 127-137).

Throughout the literature it is emphasized that pastors need to receive proper preparation to cope with stress (Maslach 1976: 16). Stress arises not only from overwork but also from an inability to cope with the demands of the assignments (Fichter 1984: 376). In a project by C. W. Brister, James Cooper, and David Fite, from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary (Brister et al. 1981:84), pastors were asked five years after an initial retreat about the most helpful resources for coping with stress. 'Trusting God' headed the list, closely followed by 'developing intimate friendships.' The results of such support groups are most helpful in 'detoxifying poisonous emotions, like anger and depression, and enhancing coping skills' (Brister et al. 1981: 85).

Wimberly contends that support systems are important not only to help maintain the pastor's emotional and physical integrity, but also to reinforce one's own capacity to cope with crisis situations (Wimberly 1978: 69).

In many parts of the world specific programs have emerged in recent years to combat stress in ministers. Some examples are the Alban Institute in the United States of America, World Vision of Australia, or Barnabas Ministries which emphasizes 'Healing for Healers' retreats, counseling, and spiritual direction for church leaders and their families who are under pressure (Pryor 1986: 105). Hungarian Baptists are at the beginning of this road, most such endeavors being spontaneous. Lately, they have been more intentional and have organized pastor's conferences on stress, burnout, and mutual support and accountability. After the discussion of these concepts of stress management, the next section will seek to place stress in a theological context.

Theological implications

Workaholism is one of the reasons of stress. The problem of the workaholic is not new. The preacher says, in Ecclesiastes 2:23, 'All his days his task is painful and grievous; even at night his mind does not rest.' Man has always suffered from the delusions resulting from an unhealthy view of work. This is the condition of man apart from God in sin. It is frightening to think about the existence of such potential even for pastors. The preacher of Ecclesiastes tells the pastors and churches of today that it is not the pastors' works or performances, but their relationship to God that pleases him.

Overworry is another cause of stress. Jesus Christ pointed toward worry as being a sinful attitude which doubts the ability of God to care and provide for his creatures (Matthew 6:25-34). These are some areas that prove stress to be rooted in sinful attitudes and actions.

One of the causes of stress mentioned earlier is bitterness. This attitude is not new

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to people--even to the people of God. That is why the apostle Paul warned the church of Ephesus to get rid of all bitterness (Ephesians 4:31). The writer of the epistle to the Hebrews points to the progressive aspect of bitterness that causes trouble (Hebrews 12:15). Since the life of a church is interrelated with the pastoral ministry, if bitterness permeates the life of some church members, it can affect pastors too. Bitterness is sinful, and the stress that it produces is treacherous.

Stress is present among the people of God who serve him all over the world. Many threatening circumstances can cause a high amount of stress to God's people. Such circumstantial stress is not new to the church. Stress is reflected in the life of Paul, the apostle, as he felt the threat of circumstances. However, he knew how to manage stress: 'We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed' (2Corinthians 4:8).

Conclusion

Pastors and churches live in the existential reality of present times. New Testament churches were founded and developed in the midst of their environment just as Jesus Christ mentioned in his prayer for those who would follow him. He did not pray for them to be taken out of this world, but that they would be protected from the evil that surrounds them (John 17:15). Scripture also presents the apostles and pastors as frail human beings in need of God's sustaining power and grace. The Bible does not present superhuman ministers working in abstract churches.

Similarly, today's churches and pastors are surrounded by the world, facing struggles and weaknesses. Churches need to be supportive of their pastor who may be a very dedicated man, full of integrity and compassion, but not a superhuman being. Pastors have to keep in mind and apply Paul's encouragement to Timothy: 'Pay close attention to yourself and to the teaching; persevere in these things, for as you do this you will save both yourself and those who hear you' (1Timothy 4:16).

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