

Lead Us Not into Temptation: Acedia, the Pastoral Pandemic

Harold L. Senkbeil, 3 March 2013

“Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honour,” St Paul wrote, “especially those who labour in preaching and teaching” (I Tim 5:17). Each succeeding generation of pastors is blessed with outstanding mentors whose preaching and teaching reaches far beyond their own circle to inspire countless colleagues in office by their example, insight, and wisdom. John Kleinig, though small in stature, stands as such a giant in our generation, and it is my privilege to offer a small contribution toward this collection of essays compiled in his tribute.

More than twenty years have passed since someone passed along to me a cassette tape containing a remarkable set of lectures from the pastors’ conference held 20 – 23 June 1989 in Cambridge, England. In unmistakably Australian tones, with the sound of birds and occasional bells from the towers of that storied medieval city wafting through the open windows of Westfield House, an obscure teacher from “Down Under” painted a remarkably captivating picture of the worship life of ancient Israel. I was to learn later that the seeds of those transformational insights were planted by John’s godly parents and their family worship in the humble sanctuary of their church in rural South Australia. By God’s grace those seeds have grown and produced an abundant harvest, not only through John’s postgraduate studies at the University of Cambridge (M.Phil., 1983 and Ph.D., 1991) but in his monumental *Leviticus Commentary* (CPH, 2003), his many widely sought and eagerly anticipated essays, as well as his instructive and enlightening book on applied biblical spirituality, *Grace Upon Grace* (CPH, 2008). As a seminary lecturer, Dr Kleinig has left his mark on every student who sat at his feet – not only as a gifted teacher and biblical scholar, but as a father in Christ.

I have seen this influence first hand. DOXOLOGY: The Lutheran Center for Spiritual Care and Counsel, the non-profit organisation devoted to continuing education and encouragement for pastors which I currently serve,

has been blessed beyond measure with his involvement since its inception. Dr. Kleinig not only graciously lent us his advice and insight in shaping our curriculum, but has continued to enrich us by his frequent appearances as both lecturer and mentor. Finally, I am pleased and humbled to acknowledge the personal bond of friendship and love that John and Claire have freely extended to my wife Jane and me over the years. Their affection and compassion in both joy and sorrow have brought us the consolation of Christ's love and the fellowship of His Spirit. (Philippians 2:1) God is indeed surpassingly rich in His Grace.

Among his many contributions to the life and ministry of pastors around the globe, perhaps central to them all is John Kleinig's work on Holiness. The whole realm of sanctification is unfortunately often neglected among Lutherans, leaving laity vulnerable to sectarian teaching that elevates man's work over God's work, confuses law and gospel, and obscures the cross of Christ. Yet the Lutheran theological heritage is rich in sanctification simply because it is a biblical theology, and the Person and work of the Holy Spirit is vital to God's saving work as revealed in Holy Scripture. All that the Father planned for our salvation from eternity was earned by the Son in history and is now continually delivered by the Spirit through His appointed means.

The Scriptures call the third Person of the Trinity the "Holy" Spirit not because the other two Persons are less holy, but because the Holy Spirit is the sanctifying Spirit. That is, He is not merely holy in Himself, but He actively makes holy by giving His own holiness to forgiven sinners. (Heb 12:10) He does this first in calling us by the gospel, enlightening us with His divine gifts (forgiveness, life, and salvation) then sanctifying us and keeping us with Jesus Christ in the one true faith, as we confess in the explanation to the Third Article.¹

¹ *An Explanation to the Small Catechism*, (St. Louis: CPH, 1991), 15.

Still devil, world and flesh conspire against God and His anointed. This means that for as long as we are in this world, Christians are destined for a life of combat with the forces of evil both inside and outside themselves. This is not merely a moral struggle, this is a question of inner rebellion and subsequent spiritual defilement. Our Lord teaches us that morality is more than skin-deep; depravity of life flows from a defiled and contaminated heart (Mt 15:18) Such is the scope of the battle that engulfs every Christian. Yet we are not alone in this battle. One mightier than we fights for us. The very reason the eternal Son of God was made flesh, suffered in our place and was raised from the dead is that He might destroy the works of the Evil One. (I Jn 3:8) Immediately after receiving the anointing of the Holy Spirit and the affirmation of His heavenly Father at his baptism by John in the Jordan, Jesus was led by the same Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil. (Mt 4:1) A close reading of the gospels shows that all through His ministry, Jesus was under attack by the Devil and his minions, right up to the very brink of His sacrificial death. But He remained undeterred. Christ won the ultimate victory precisely in His baptism, fasting, and temptation, in His agony and bloody sweat, in His cross and passion, in His precious death and burial.² Now there is nothing in all creation – not even the demonic horde – that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:38-39)

However, the Christian life remains a life of struggle. One of Martin Luther's most repeated maxims was that wherever God builds his church, there the devil builds a chapel. Thus spiritual assault was for Luther not the exception, but the rule. In fact, he viewed such temptation as proof of genuine faith and the inevitable consequence of the work of God's Holy Spirit. In the introduction to the edition of his German writings that appeared during his lifetime, he described his personal experience with the attacks of Satan: "For as soon as God's Word takes root and grows in you,

² The Historic Litany, *LSB*, 288.

the devil will harry you, and will make a real doctor of you, and by his assaults [*Anfechtungen*] will teach you to seek and love God's Word."³

Thus everyone who takes up the cause of the gospel had better be prepared to contend against temptation. This is especially true for pastors, since they are charged with the public proclamation of the gospel by which the Holy Spirit does His gracious work: calling, gathering, enlightening and sanctifying for Himself a holy assembly here on earth.

It is impossible of course to summarise everything that pastors need to know about temptation in one brief essay. However my goal in the lines that remain is to focus on two areas: First, why temptation deserves greater attention and vigilance among pastors. Second, why *acedia* merits special caution as a temptation especially chronic and seductive among contemporary clergy in the west, with some concluding thoughts on how it can be most effectively addressed.

Jaded postmoderns are prone to dismiss the whole concept of temptation as an outmoded relic of the past. In our age of tolerance and acceptance, it would appear that the very idea of temptation to sin is irrelevant. The consequences of such permissiveness are, of course, all around us. The world grows ever more chaotic, it seems. No matter where we look, whether in households, neighbourhoods, cities or nations, whenever and wherever people do whatever seems best to them, humanity grows more and more inhuman. Addiction, perversion, and abuse of all sorts become ever more compulsive, depraved, and destructive. Legalised abortion devolves into infanticide and assisted suicide. Where immorality and adultery are condoned, the marriage bed is first defiled, and marriage itself is eventually redefined and inexorably debased. (Heb 13:4) Far from being simple moral questions, these private sins first breed spiritual toxicity and contamination, then coalesce into pressing matters of public safety and security. Wherever

³ AE 34:286 (*Preface to the Wittenberg Edition of Luther's German Writings*, 1539).

hearts are defiled, lives are disrupted in chaos, households come unglued and the fabric of society begins to unravel.

What was true for first-century believers in a pre-Christian world remains true for twenty-first century believers in our post-Christian world. The baptized are both salt and light for the world, our Lord teaches. (Mt 5:13-14) Where there is no salt, there is putrefaction and decay. Where there is no light, there is increasing darkness and encroaching death – all too evident in the world we live in. But we have come to the kingdom for such a time as this. (Esther 4:14) It is essential that we pay careful attention to temptation if we are to maintain spiritual health and vitality amid these rising challenges.

This is not, however, a theoretical need or abstract idea. Ultimately we must acknowledge that alertness to temptation is thrust upon us by our Lord Himself. In the prayer He gave to the baptised as both model and instruction, He reinforces its importance by the climactic final petitions of the prayer: **kai. mh. eivsene, gkhlj h`ma/j eivj peirasmo,n(avlla. r`u/sai h`ma/j avpo. tou/ ponhrou/Å** “And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the Evil One” (Mt 6:13) Here the Son of God, Himself both veteran and victor over Satan’s assaults, boldly exposes the devil’s ploy while teaching His servants the only effective defence: prayer for the Father’s protection and rescue.

The constant barrage of spiritual attack from devil, world, and our own sinful nature is so severe, writes Luther in the Large Catechism, that it calls for a continual life of prayer:

As long as we remain in this vile life, where we are attacked, hunted, and harried on all sides, we are constrained to cry out and pray every hour that God may not allow us to become faint and weary and to fall back into sin, shame, and unbelief. Otherwise it is impossible to overcome even the smallest attack.

This, then, is what ‘leading us not into temptation’ means: when God gives us power and strength to resist, even though the attack is not removed or ended. For no one can escape temptations and allurements as long as we live in the flesh and have the devil prowling around us. We cannot help but

suffer attacks, and even be mired in them, but we pray here that we may not fall into them and be drowned by them.⁴

Temptation, then, is the common lot of every Christian and calls for constant vigilance in prayer. If this is true for each Christian, it is doubly so for pastors. In His high priestly prayer, Jesus expressly prays for His disciples' protection from the Evil One (Jn 17:15) Because they were entrusted with the public proclamation of the Word He had received from His Father in heaven, they were special targets for the devil, who seeks at every turn to undermine and destroy the kingdom of God. Thus pastors today who neglect the care of their own souls put themselves and those they serve in great danger. In point of fact, St. Paul urges those who tend the flock to first tend themselves (Ac 20:28) and warns Timothy that he must take heed to himself first, and only then the doctrine he proclaims. (I Tim 4:16)

There are many grave temptations that threaten pastors, but perhaps none so subtle as the temptation the ancients identified as *acedia*. Classically, the church has identified seven cardinal, or deadly, sins. They were called deadly and “cardinal,” or chief, not because these were especially grievous, but because all other sins seemed to flow in one way or another from these sources. Over a period of several centuries these sins were variously identified, but by the end of the sixth century they were commonly listed as:

1. *luxuria* (lechery/[lust](#))
2. *gula* ([gluttony](#))
3. *avaritia* ([avarice/greed](#))
4. *acedia* ([sloth](#)/discouragement)
5. *ira* ([wrath](#))
6. *invidia* ([envy](#))

⁴ LC III, 105-106; KW, 454.

7. *superbia* (pride)⁵

Of these seven categories, perhaps the fourth seems most antiquated and obscure to modern ears. Translated most commonly as “sloth,” *acedia* seems more like a bad habit than a sin. No one likes a slacker, of course, and laziness – whether on the job or in personal responsibilities – certainly leads to waste and unproductive behaviour. But the ancients saw much more in *acedia* than mere laziness. One could say they saw beneath mere sloth/laziness to its underlying cause: disappointment with and spiritual disaffection from God’s divinely ordained gifts, be they in the realm of creation or redemption. Its deadening and deadly effect can be easily inferred, for when Christians are numb to Christ’s saving work and the Father’s gracious gifts by which He makes us and preserves us, they sink deeper and deeper into boredom, apathy and subsequent despair. More than sixty years ago the British playwright and Christian humanist Dorothy Sayers powerfully evoked the spiritual emptiness of *acedia* and its often tragic end:

The sixth⁶ Deadly Sin is named by the Church Acedia or Sloth. In the world it calls itself Tolerance, but in hell it is called Despair. It is the accomplice of the other sins and their worst punishment. It is the sin which believes in nothing, cares for nothing, seeks to know nothing, interferes with nothing, enjoys nothing, loves nothing, hates nothing, finds purpose in nothing, lives for nothing, and only remains alive because there is nothing it would die for.⁷

⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seven_deadly_sins Accessed 3/2/2013.

⁶ Sayers’ reference here reflects an alternate numeration of classic cardinal sins, which fluctuated over the centuries.

⁷ DOROTHY SAYERS, “The Other Six Deadly Sins,” *Creed or Chaos?* (Harcourt, Brace:1949/1974), 108.

More recently the Christian writer Kathleen Norris has done much to open up the semantic domain of this ancient term for modern scrutiny. In the biographical journal of her struggle, *Acedia & Me: A Marriage, Monks, and a Writer's Life*, she tells the extraordinary story of her life-long strife with what she readily acknowledges as clinical depression, yet has come to recognize as something far more pernicious: the persistent temptation of acedia.

I believe that such standard dictionary definitions of *acedia* as “apathy,” “boredom,” or “torpor” do not begin to cover it, and while we may find it convenient to regard it as a more primitive word for what we now term depression, the truth is much more complex. Having experienced both conditions, I think it likely that much of the restless boredom, frantic escapism, commitment phobia, and enervating despair that plagues us today is the ancient demon of acedia in modern dress. The boundaries between depression and acedia are notoriously fluid; at the risk of oversimplifying, I would suggest that while depression is an illness treatable by counselling and medication, acedia is a vice that is best countered by spiritual practice and the discipline of prayer.⁸

The complex demands placed on pastors in our time call for extraordinary management and leadership skills. Yet the all too common phenomenon of the “ineffective” pastor is not always a problem in time management or administrative skills. Research has proven that disproportionate numbers of clergy suffer from emotional dysfunction of various sorts. Pastors who suffer from emotional “burnout” are frequent casualties of what is now commonly identified as Compassion Fatigue - the consequence of constant immersion in the emotional rollercoasters of the people to whom they minister. Likewise, clinical depression among pastors occurs in numbers surpassing depression diagnoses in the general

⁸ KATHLEEN NORRIS, *Acedia & Me* (The Penguin Group, 2008), 1.

population.⁹ Emotional dysfunctions of various sorts as well as clinical depression thankfully respond very well to treatment by licensed clinicians, yet sadly many pastors don't seek care, while far too many church leaders and ecclesiastical supervisors remain uninformed about the extent of these illnesses and available treatment.

Yet the whole spectrum of what plagues contemporary pastors is not well served if the focus remains exclusively clinical. In reality, most disorders involving the mind and emotions have clear spiritual dimensions as well. If it's tragic that too many pastors remain undiagnosed emotionally speaking, it is doubly tragic when those who preach the gospel to others themselves become spiritual casualties. (I Cor 9:25) Here again the implication is clear; those who take up the Saviour's calling to tend the souls of others need to tend their own soul first. Watchfulness and prayerful vigilance are crucial when it comes to *acedia*, which I have come to believe is pandemic in its spiritual impact on clergy today. What are some of its warning signals? Norris provides extremely helpful insight for diagnosing *acedia*.

At its Greek root, the word *acedia* means the absence of care. The person afflicted by *acedia* refuses to care or is incapable of doing so. When life becomes too challenging and engagement with others too demanding, *acedia* offers a kind of spiritual morphine: you know the pain is there, yet can't rouse yourself to give a damn. That it hurts to care is borne out in etymology, for *care* derives from an Indo-European word meaning 'to cry out,' as in a lament. Caring is not passive, but an assertion that no matter how strained and messy our relationships can be, it is worth something to be present, with others, doing our small part. Care is also required for the daily routines that *acedia* would have us suppress or deny as meaningless repetition or too much bother.¹⁰

⁹ Reliable research suggests that up to 70% of clergy experience depressive symptoms regularly. Cf. <http://www.intothyword.org/apps/articles/?articleid=36562&columnid=> (accessed 3 March 2013)

¹⁰ NORRIS, 3.

The narcotic effect of acedia that Norris pinpoints is, for me, quite telling. Whenever and wherever pastors are no longer willing or able to rouse themselves to tend to the spiritual needs of the people entrusted to their care, it's a sure sign that something sinister is going on. The souls of those for whom Christ died are all precious in His sight; and when the pastor loses interest in their spiritual welfare, this likely indicates he's under spiritual attack. Frequently he doesn't notice what's happening, or if he does notice, he doesn't care. But this is the very nature of acedia; it functions as "spiritual morphine," as Ms Norris notes. This is a case of self-medication. For example, habitual porn indulgence among clergy many times begins as a means of treating their own unbearable emotional and psychic pain. The rush of hormones and endorphins it releases jolts them out of acedia – briefly. Tragically, they need ever more frequent and intense experiences to achieve the same result, and soon they face a fullblown addiction to behaviour that degrades them morally, defiles them spiritually, and ultimately destroys them vocationally.

Poor work habits among pastors could clearly be regarded as insubordination to the Lord who commissions His ministers to tend His sheep and lambs in His place and stead, e.g.:

I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: ² preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching (II Tim 4:1-2)

However, I'm convinced there's more going on here than meets the eye. To write this behaviour off as mere procrastination or laziness is misdiagnosis. The actual cause of most clergy malaise and malfeasance involves far more than poor work habits or lack of personal motivation; at its heart this is a spiritual disease. In its most intimate dimension it is a genuine case of acedia – devaluing that which God values most, sensing no concern for that for which God cares most profoundly, unwilling and/or unable to begin to accomplish what God has given His servants to do in His name.

To be sure, no pastor can always be one hundred per cent "on" at all times. Good and effective pastors have always had episodic experiences of

greater or less productivity. But when spiritual apathy and malaise become chronic and unrelenting, acedia creeps into even the most routine aspects of personal and pastoral life. Norris describes how boredom with holy things leads inexorably through restlessness to despair and finally culminates in hopeless emptiness.

...I first encountered the word *acedia* in *The Praktikos*, a book by the fourth-century Christian monk Evagrius Ponticus. Across a distance of sixteen hundred years he spoke clearly of the inner devastation caused by the demon of acedia when it '[made] it seem that the sun barely moves, if at all, and that the day is fifty hours long.' Boredom tempts him 'to look constantly out the windows, to walk outside the cell, to gaze carefully at the sun to determine [the lunch hour].' But Evagrius soon discovers that this seemingly innocuous activity has an alarming and ugly effect, for having stirred up a restlessness that he is unable to shake, the demon taunts him with the thought that his efforts at prayer and contemplation are futile. Life then looms like a prison sentence, day after day of nothingness.¹¹

I noted above how the whole realm of spiritual attack and temptation is best understood under the category of holiness. Wherever God the Holy Spirit goes about building Christ's church- calling, gathering, enlightening and sanctifying a holy people by the gospel - there the devil builds his chapel, to borrow Luther's maxim. It should come as no surprise to pastors, then, when the very Word they preach draws the attacks and assaults of the devil. His constant strategy and goal is to defile what God has made holy and to make common and ordinary what God declares sacred. No Christian, or for that matter, no pastor either, can make anything holy. God's Holy Spirit does that by means of His sanctifying Word. We are not called, therefore, to make anything holy, but to keep and maintain the holiness that God provides.

This precept is clearly taught in the third commandment: "Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy." (Ex 20:8) Thus our God-given privilege

¹¹ NORRIS, 4.

as both preachers and hearers in Christ's church is to not despise preaching and His Word, but hold it sacred and gladly hear and learn it.¹² How tragic it is when, in serious bouts with acedia, pastors themselves become so disillusioned and disaffected that they begin to despise the very Word they preach.

How can spiritual equilibrium and health be restored; how can that which has been defiled be cleansed and made holy? All things are sanctified by Word and by prayer. (I Tim 4:4-5) Preachers of the Word themselves need to hear the Word. Since its inception, the DOXOLOGY programme has emphasised the importance of the pastor's personal life of meditation and prayer. Likewise, we have stressed the fact that every pastor himself needs a pastor. By the aid and consolation of God's Spirit working through His Word, broken hearts are mended, sins forgiven, and lives restored.

How then can pastors best address all temptation in general, and acedia in particular? Luther's provocative and practical exposition of the Lord's Prayer underscores the best treatment and cure for all such spiritual disease: prayer framed and guided by the effectual Word of God:

The Sixth Petition: And lead us not into temptation.

What does this mean? God tempts no one. We pray in this petition that God would guard and keep us so that the devil, the world, and our sinful nature may not deceive us or mislead us into false belief, despair, and other great shame and vice. Although we are attacked by these things, we pray that we may finally overcome them and win the victory.¹³

God never promised us a rose garden. Here in this fallen world His chosen people will be under constant attack. Pastors in particular are targets for the assaults of devil, world, and flesh. Yet we are not alone. Along with temptation He also provides the way of escape. (I Cor 10:13) We have an

¹² *Explanation*, 10.

¹³ *Explanation*, 19

advocate with the Father: Jesus Christ the righteous one. (I Jn 2:1) And the very trials we undergo serve only to refine and strengthen the faith by which we cling to Him (I Pet 1:6-7)

Building on Luther's exposition of *Anfechtungen* (spiritual attack),¹⁴ John Kleinig directs the attention of twenty-first century Christians (and their pastors) to the wonderful way that God in His grace is able to use even the temptations and assaults of Satan to preserve and protect His saints.

When Satan attacks us, we experience the righteousness and truth of God's Word with our whole being, rather than just with the intellect; we experience the sweetness and loveliness of God's Word with our whole being, rather than just with the emotions; we experience the power and strength of God's Word with our whole being, rather than just with the body. Temptation is therefore the touchstone that God uses to assess our spirituality. Temptation reveals what is otherwise hidden from us. Just as a pawnbroker uses a touchstone to test the presence and purity of gold in a coin or a piece of jewellery, temptation also tests the authenticity of our faith and proves our spiritual health.¹⁵

So it is that after a period of spiritual assault one can look back to see how God used even this evil to drive the consolation of His gracious Word deeper into heart and mind. Yet in the midst of acedia's onslaught, pastors should not be left to their own devices. Because they frequently live isolated and lonely lives, pastors are especially vulnerable to spiritual attack. "He who is alone with his sin is utterly alone," Bonhoeffer wrote.¹⁶ That's why pastors themselves need pastoral care. I have observed first-hand the devastating impact of isolation and loneliness on pastors who battle bravely to maintain emotional and professional composure, all the while progressively becoming emotionally exhausted and spiritually depleted.

¹⁴ See footnotes # & 4 above.

¹⁵ JOHN KLEINIG, *Grace Upon Grace*, (St. Louis: CPH, 2008), 21.

¹⁶ DIETRICH BONHOEFFER, *Life Together*, (Harper & Row, 1954), 110.

One pastor, for example, wrestled to contain an inexplicable simmering rage while quietly becoming more and more detached from all that he knew was good and holy and true. Ministry became first a chore, then a burden. He no longer had the emotional energy to connect with his wife and children as he wanted to, though he knew he was robbing them of the husband and father they loved. The holy things of God began to lose their lustre; he found himself less and less inclined toward prayer and God's Word. He grew impatient in his ministry, and It became harder and harder for him to listen to the troubled hearts and souls of his parishioners. Eventually he and I began to recognize in these symptoms acedia's tell-tale signs. Besides the medical help he was already receiving for his anxiety, I advised him to change his work habits, take more time out for his family, etc. But here's what I wrote him in the midst of some of his darkest days:

You also need to take on yourself the full armament that Christ supplies (Ephesians 6): take up the sword of the Spirit, and pray at all times in the Spirit (which for me simply means to pray to the Father through the Son by the power of the Spirit). Acedia regarding holy things: no desire to care/pray, no ability to hear, no sense of peace...all are symptomatic of demonic attack. There's no reason to fear, however. (This is) the normal result of what happens when a man takes up the mantle of the ministry and begins to do real work in service of Christ and His Kingdom. Like moths to a flame, the forces of darkness are drawn to the Light; demonic influences can't help but be drawn to such a man doing quality work in the Kingdom in order to undermine his work, drive him to desperation, get him to sin in any possible way (pride is of course a favourite) and to break his bonds of love with others closest and dearest.

But he's a defeated enemy. He can harm you none. The One who fights for you is stronger than he. In fact, the devil is God's devil: He inadvertently does God's work; attempting to separate you from Christ, Satan drives you closer to Him. Go to Jesus; He has the words of eternal life, as you preached so well last Sunday. Take those words as your own even when you don't

feel anything; embrace them and revel in the promises He brings you. What you have taught and embodied so well for others believe for yourself.¹⁷

Any pastor who takes up service to Christ and His church can expect tough going. However, he can be certain his chief problems will not be social or administrative. Whether it be the ancient temptation of acedia or something else, he can be certain that devil, world and flesh will always seek to subvert Christ's kingdom and attempt to seduce him to misbelief, despair, or other great shame and vice. But he wrestles not alone, for, as Luther famously puts it, "Though devils all the world should fill, all eager to devour us, we tremble not, we fear no ill, they shall not overpower us. But for us fights the valiant One, whom God Himself elected. He's by our side upon the plain with His good gifts and Spirit."¹⁸

¹⁷ Personal email correspondence, used by permission.

¹⁸ Selected lines from MARTIN LUTHER, "A Mighty Fortress is our God," *Lutheran Service Book*- (CPH, 2006), 656.