

# SAFE AND SECURE: **HOW TO PREVENT PASTORAL BURNOUT**

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I believe that pastors have one of the toughest jobs on the planet. Few jobs require a person to wear more hats than that of being a shepherd of the church. Being a pastor can be extremely fulfilling and rewarding, but it is often draining.

Though the world and parishioners should view all Christians as the living image bearers of Christ, the focal point rests heavily on clergy and their spouses. We ask much of pastors in their time, energy, and devotion, while routinely expecting them to make sacrifices by virtue of their position.

Three of my closest friends are pastors. I have served on my church's elder board, and I also have the privilege of providing care to several pastors a year in my role as a Christian psychologist. Through these roles I have had a front row view of the inner workings, triumphs, and heartaches of pastoral life.

I consider it an honor and privilege to support these pastors in the high calling that God has placed upon their lives. A vital tool that I share with them is my understanding of God's "Attachment" design for their ministries, marriages, and social support. I would like to share several ideas drawn from this design to help clergy in their personal and ministerial lives. It is my hope and prayer that this brochure will encourage and equip many pastors to vibrantly and faithfully carry out their ministries.

## THE UNIQUE NATURE OF BOUNDARIES FOR CLERGY

There are many parallels between the work of a pastor and a Christian psychologist, for we are asked to draw close to



hurting people and show the tangible love of Christ. But the boundaries of a psychologist are more simple and clear cut than those of a pastor. Pastors usher

in life, join lives in holy matrimony, and stand

beside deathbeds as parishioners enter their eternal homes. They are there to pick up the pieces when loved ones fall ill and marriages fall apart. Pastors are also charged with addressing conflicts in the church as people with divergent viewpoints seek to influence the direction of services or church life.

Whereas the boundaries of a psychologist are pretty well defined by office hours and length of therapy sessions, the boundaries for clergy life are much more fluid. This is beautiful, allowing for poignant and personal moments in ministry, but it can also be messy.

In the midst of this, many pastors don't have a safe person they can turn to for support in dealing with all these tugs and pulls. Pastors may even feel ashamed for having struggles, sensing that others would view them as "failing" if they show stress, strain, or doubts in the midst of ministry.



Where can pastors turn in their moments of need, and what should they look for in connecting with

support? I believe that we need a good map to guide us, both in understanding the many needs which arise when caring for parishioners and in understanding essential ways of caring for clergy.

This map is Attachment Theory. It tells us what it takes to build healthy relationships, lets us know what is happening when things go wrong, and points us in the right direction to restore healthy relationships when it is time to do repairs.

## **ATTACHMENT: GOD'S DESIGN FOR HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS**

Our first glimpse of God's Attachment design occurs in Genesis 2:18, where God says, "It is not good that man should be alone" (NKJV). Adam needed more than Divine fellowship on this earth in order to flourish. So God created Eve, marriage, and human attachment to meet this fundamental need. Both males and females need others to support us and let us know that they are backing us up. We must be reassured that we are not alone.

From infancy and throughout our lives we are literally created for connection. God, Himself, is

relational within the triune Godhead of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He desires for us to experience closeness with others. Jesus prayed for all of us as believers, “that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you” (John 17:21; NIV).

Infants are born into this world completely helpless and in need of protection.

God created a loving bond for mothers and fathers to help protect and nurture their youngest children.

This loving bond is called Attachment, and it meets our deeply felt need for tangible connection.<sup>1</sup> Infants who receive the consistent tender gaze of their parents, physical affection, and accurate emotional support will have “Secure Attachment.”<sup>2</sup>



Secure Attachment is the best possible type of bond for a child to have, and it sets up two important foundation points. First, Securely Attached children know that they can turn to their parents in times of need. They reach quickly and vulnerably, confident that someone will be there for them.

Second, they have curiosity to branch out and explore the world, knowing that they are not alone and can always come back home for support when needed.

Bolstered by these supportive bonding experiences, Securely Attached children have a settled



confidence to face life's challenges, without fear of abandonment nor a proclivity to detach and run away. They have this confidence in their closest relationships, which can include their relationship with God the Father, "My God shall supply

all your needs, according to His riches in glory" (Philippians 4:19; NKJV).

Secure Attachment stays with us into our adult lives, because our brains were literally forged during the time period where these bonding experiences took place. Securely Attached adults are capable of being strong and also vulnerable, knowing that His "strength is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9; NKJV). They know they can turn to God and also have trusted loved

ones whom they can turn to, especially in moments of need. Secure adults are able to look at and explore their inner workings and share more openly and intimately with trusted ones, which leads to more personal growth and fewer blind spots.

Finally, Securely Attached adults have deep reserves of compassion for others because of the love they have received. “We can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God” (I Corinthians 1:4, NIV). These are some of the benefits which Secure Attachment provides in equipping pastors to care for the multiple needs of their flocks while also accessing care for themselves.

## **INSECURE ATTACHMENT**

I wish that everyone on the planet had Secure Attachment. The caregiving that pastors and psychologists provide would be much easier and less frequent. Unfortunately, many of the adults in our churches lacked the tender gaze of their parents, the healthy touch, and the consistent emotional support that we mentioned earlier. They did not experience feeling safe, consistently valued, and “not alone” in relationship with their earthly parents, so it is difficult for them to adopt this



awareness of their Heavenly Father.

As a result, they have a lot of anxiety about drawing close to others, anxiety about depending on others, and fear about possible abandonment. It is difficult for them to observe themselves and to explore growth areas or blind spots which arise in the midst of relational strains. These people have “Insecure Attachment,”<sup>3</sup> which we can broadly break down into two groups.<sup>4</sup>

- 1) **Protesters:** Protesters are people who show their struggles on the outside. When they are feeling abandoned or misunderstood in relationships, they protest the lack of face to face connection which they are experiencing. In a way, there is something hope-filled about their earnest desire to be known and understood, even to the point of openly displaying their frustration and stress. But at times they come across as angry, critical, or controlling. This is especially true when they are feeling rejected or afraid of being abandoned. Unfortunately, this sends a mixed signal about their true needs and can push others away.

- 2) **Avoiders:** Avoiders have the same attachment needs as everyone else, needs for belonging, emotional support, and care. But somehow they concluded that the safest approach is to not talk about it. Sometimes they may bury their needs by taking care of others, while others may just disengage from forms of emotional connection altogether. Their self-reliance can make them seem aloof, disinterested in intimacy, and avoidant of conflict. Avoiders' actions can trigger others into protest modes, because when they pull away in relationships the other person is left feeling alone.



## A MOMENT TO REFLECT

Please take a moment to think about your own Attachment style. Are you pretty Secure, or do you trend towards some Insecure traits? As you reflect upon the insecure forms of attachment, it can be a painful experience if you observe these traits in your own ways of handling your relationship needs. I want to give you hope, that even people who have

significant abandonment experiences as children can find healing. Listen to these words of King David:

“Though my father and mother forsake me, the Lord will receive me. I am still confident of this: I will see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living” (Psalms 27:10, 13; NIV).

If you have concluded that you have Secure Attachment, you have a head start. As a leader you are already equipped to invite others into places of vulnerability, because you have experienced this in your life. Use the upcoming Attachment tools to prevent burnout.

If you have a hunch that you have Insecure Attachment, it is important for you to know your growth areas. You may take steps to reprogram your instinctive responses to protest or avoid. All of this begins with humility, transparency, and taking measured risks in trusted relationships.

This includes your relationship with Christ. For all of us to lead and care, we must become more dependent upon Jesus. As we embark on this journey we can be confident in His promise, “I will never leave you nor forsake you” (Hebrews 13:5; NKJV).

## CULTIVATING DEPENDENCE ON CHRIST: BUILDING A SECURELY ATTACHED FAITH

Attachment is the way that humans tangibly experience love from others. It is beautiful to think about the ways that God's love was tangibly manifest in the person of Jesus. He is our Loving Savior and the "friend that sticks closer than a brother" (Proverbs 18:24; NIV).

Jesus' love and presence are the essence of Secure Attachment for us. He left heaven itself to rescue us, die for us, and redeem us unto Himself so that we would never have to be alone again. A deeper revelation of this kind of love is healing for all of us, especially if we have Insecure Attachment needs.

For those who are protesters, who are prone to fears of abandonment and perceived rejections, we can meditate on His constancy. For we know that nothing "will be able



to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:39; NASB). He has promised that He will always be with us, “even to the end of the world” (Matthew 28:20; NLV).

Some of us are avoiders, with a fear of showing our dependency needs and relying on others. We can take comfort that Jesus will not shame us for having needs, for “A bruised reed He will not break” (Isaiah 42:3, NIV). The greatest strength and our salvation itself comes from humbly reaching out to Christ; “unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:3; NIV).

When you think about it, all the insecure things that we do are rooted in fear. We fear rejection, so we don’t open up in the first place. Perhaps we fear abandonment, and so we cling to others, control them, or monopolize conversations. Jesus wants to set us free from all fears, for we know His “perfect love casts out fear” (I John 4:18; NASB).

What are some ways that you can trust the Lord and daily cultivate more dependence on Christ? I believe that we can draw from rich Christian spiritual disciplines to guide us in showing greater dependence on Him. Here are some ways that you

can daily posture yourself to be vulnerable in your relationship with Christ.

**Liturgical:** Kneel, pray, and humble ourselves as an act of trust and faith.

**Contemplative:** Sit and listen, opening our hearts and minds to the “Still Small Voice” of the Holy Spirit.

**Evangelical:** Read and meditate richly on the Word, which convicts, corrects, and transforms our minds.

**Charismatic:** Raise hands in surrender and in an act of reaching up to our Heavenly Father.

All of these postures and disciplines help us to not only grow spiritually, but they are also ways of expressing our needs to our Savior. From an Attachment framework, they help us grow more secure in our walk with Him. The purpose is “that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you may be rooted and grounded in love” (Ephesians 3:17, NKJV).

## BURNOUT

Jesus did not suffer from burnout. He was securely connected to the Father, one with the Father, and was strongly synchronized with what the Father was doing (John 5:19). His ministry was arduous, even exhausting at times. But He often took time to retreat, and He regularly demonstrated each of the four spiritual disciplines listed above. The only time He ever experienced separation from the Father was in His death on the cross. Jesus also had

12 disciples who followed Him and provided human fellowship during their intensive three years of ministry together.



As Christian leaders, we can suffer burnout during phases where we are pouring out more than we are receiving. We may suffer burnout when we are isolated, cut off from sharing our needs with trusted others, and when we try to handle challenges in our own strength. Unfortunately, we may burn out more quickly if we respond to ministry difficulties from an Insecure Attachment framework. Insecure approaches distance us from

those who might help us, and raise our anxiety levels when ministry events trigger threats of abandonment internally.

However, there is good news! Embracing God's Attachment design helps bolster us against burnout. We can more deeply depend on Christ and learn to be vulnerable with trusted others. Understanding our basic Attachment needs helps us craft a plan of ongoing care to keep us from burning out.

Attachment Theory informs us that we need face to face gazing, appropriate touch, vulnerable sharing moments, and to know that someone is backing us up at all times. Here are some ways to meet your Attachment needs in healthy ways in order to bolster your ministry life and prevent burnout.

1. "Turn your eyes upon Jesus, Look full in His wonderful face." Do this daily, but especially in moments of distress in your personal or ministry life.
2. If you are a married person, cultivate Secure Attachment in your marriage as God's gift to you.



3. Confide in supportive friends. Research shows that pastors who had four or more trusted friends had lower rates of burnout in a large national study of pastoral burnout.<sup>5</sup>
4. Select one or two mentors in the faith who have weathered storms and can speak wisdom and strength to you. Like a “Spiritual Father or Mother,” they can watch over you and help you discern God’s will for various seasons of ministry.
5. We all need to receive physical affection. Seek this out from appropriate sources, including your spouse if you are married.
6. Cultivate healthy outlets for being seen and noticed, so that you are not in a regular deficit mode or feeling invisible. This can include preaching, teaching, or writing. In this manner you also may be less apt to insist that any one specific parishioner meets your needs for visibility.
7. When you go through seasons of grief and loss, be intentional about slowing down and turning to trusted others for solace and support.
8. Be mindful of seasons of boredom or transitions in ministry, and receive

accountability from trusted others to safeguard you from acting out in order to feel “alive” again.

The high calling of pastoral ministry is rich, sacred, and fulfilling. It is also draining as you pour into the lives of people who have high need states. As you step into the gap to be the hands and feet of Christ to these dear

ones, remember that your effectiveness comes “Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit says the Lord” (Zechariah

4:6; NKJV). You cannot do it in your own strength, and by embracing God’s Attachment design you will be better equipped to go the distance and flourish in this high calling.

You can learn more about embracing God’s Attachment design for marriage and also for your faith walk by reading *Face to Face: Seven Keys to a Secure Marriage* ([facetofacemarriage.com](http://facetofacemarriage.com)).



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Jesse Gill, Psy.D., is a licensed psychologist who is the Clinic Director for Psychological Health Affiliates in Hershey, Pa. He is passionate about integrating Scripture with Attachment Theory. Dr. Gill applies these truths to Christian marriage in his book, *Face to Face: Seven Keys to a Secure Marriage*. He has been providing trainings on this subject to counselors, couples, and pastors for more than a decade. Dr. Gill has served as an elder at his home church and has a heart for pastors. He has provided training, consultation, and assessment services to independent churches and denominations in this region. Dr. Gill has published articles on building healthy families which are in print in the U.S. and overseas. He speaks regularly for the American Association of Christian Counselors. He has also appeared as a relationship expert for Life, Love, and Family Radio, CBN News, and Family Research Council. Dr. Gill is married to April, and together they build secure attachment in their marriage and with their children.

Founded in 1983, Family Research Council is a nonprofit research and educational organization dedicated to articulating and advancing a family-centered philosophy of public life. In addition to providing policy research and analysis for the legislative, executive, and judicial branches of the federal government, FRC seeks to inform the news media, the academic community, business leaders, and the general public about family issues that affect the nation.

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