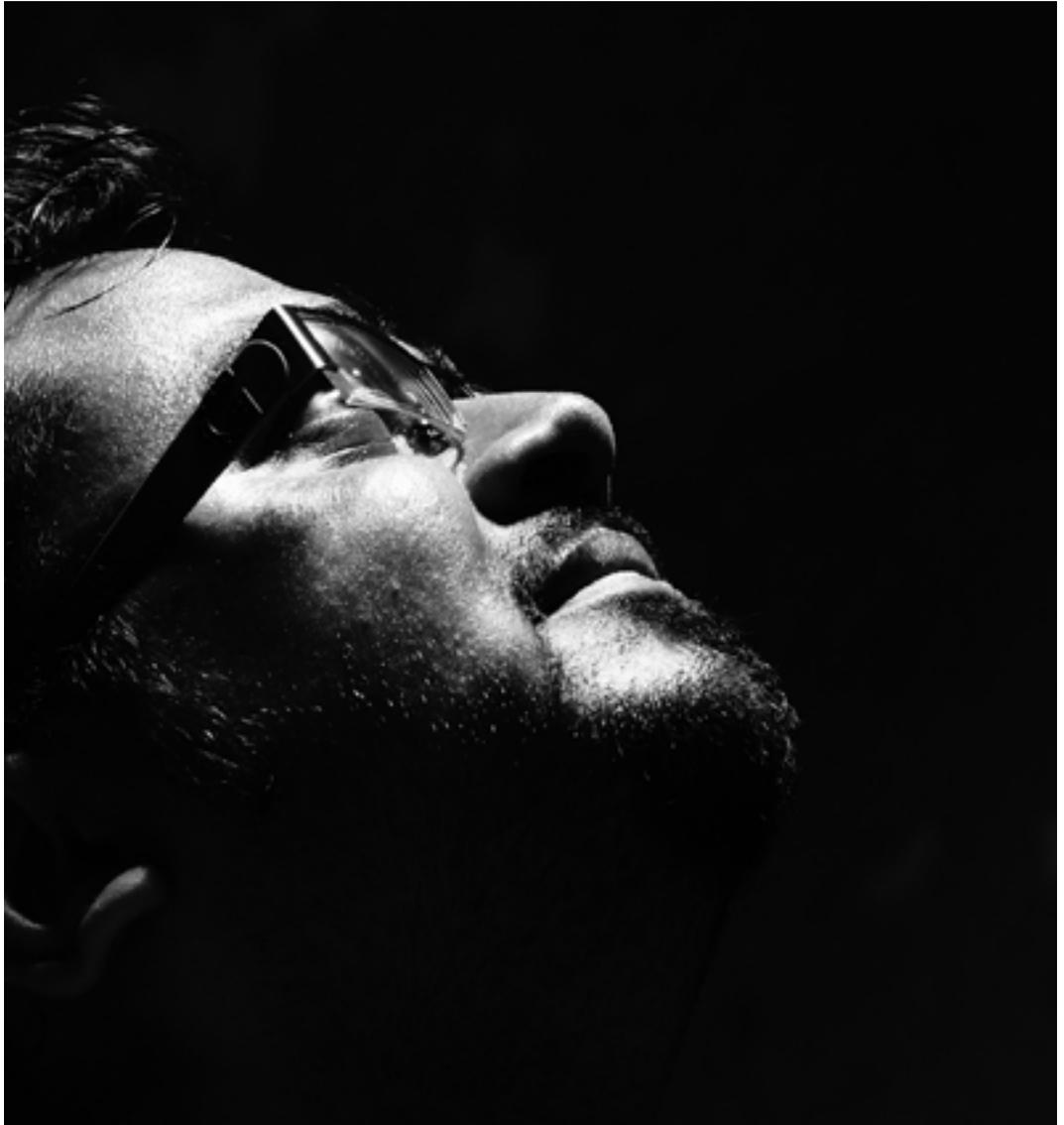


A searching, spiritual confession of the common failings of pastors

SINS OF THE MINISTRY



INTRODUCTION:
MINISTERING IN A
TIME OF MORAL
FAILURE

Why do some ministers fail completely? Certain high-profile pastors (most notably in the United States) have fallen in recent years, badly and publicly. Some observe the numbers of pastors haemorrhaging at an alarming rate. Surveys suggest that the two main reasons are burnout and moral failure. The two are not unconnected. Sometimes moral failure follows on from burnout but they arise from the same causes.

Burnout often occurs due to chasing outward success and the approval of others. Success means focusing on what is visible and attracts attention, even if it means neglecting the inward life and cultivating personal godliness towards others. Moral failure is commonly used to refer to the breach of marriage vows amongst other things. This too begins with the neglect of the inward life.

Spiritual pride goes before a fall. Perhaps ministers begin to believe that they are “perfect” simply because there is an expectation that they must be. Perhaps they become detached from their message and start to think that they are “above the rules”. Certainly, it must stem from failure to keep short accounts with God and confess particular sins regularly and particularly.

Some observe that ministers are often isolated and lack those to whom they can speak frankly and be personally accountable on an informal level. The questions for reflection in this booklet would be a suitable basis for open discussion amongst small groups of ministers.

Yet there is another kind of ministerial failure: going about the spiritual duties of the ministry in an unspiritual way. This has a serious impact not only on the pastor himself but also on those to whom he ministers. How can a minister recognise when spiritual declension has set in and seek to remedy it? This is why this booklet is so necessary.

I am more than ever convinced that unholiness lies at the root of our little success. (Andrew A Bonar)

Personal Holiness

Personal holiness is a gospel issue, since it affects the conviction with which the gospel is declared and also its credibility if the messenger fails to live up to the message. The souls of many are at stake. The conduct of a negligent minister has eternal consequences (1 Timothy 4:16). This is a point forcefully made by Richard Baxter in his classic book *The Reformed Pastor*. Ministers must “take heed” to themselves as well as to the flock (see the preface below for some of Baxter’s points). Baxter gives eight powerful reasons why ministers must take heed to themselves. He therefore avers: “that man shall never have my consent to be entrusted with the care of others, and to oversee them in order to their salvation, who does not take heed to himself”. Others have consistently emphasised this vital issue.

It is not great talents God blesses so much as great likeness to Jesus. A holy minister is an awful weapon in the hand of God. (Robert Murray M’Cheyne)

Ministers are engaged in the most important work there is, but also the most holy. In his essay on ‘The Qualifications of a Minister’, James Durham mentions learning, gifts and

grace. Most of the essay is devoted to grace as a qualification. There is particular emphasis on a minister as a man of evident godliness.

We are persuaded, that whatever profane men think of holiness, people who desire to have their souls saved will be loathe to have a blind guide who (by falling into the ditch) may endanger others. Or one that may heal their wound slightly. Or at best, point out the way to them but join with them in it only a little.

“going about the spiritual duties of the ministry in an unspiritual way...has a serious impact not only on the pastor himself but also on those to whom he ministers.”

Prayer and edifying the congregation are key duties of the ministry – holiness is needed for both. One of Durham’s memorable phrases is: “he that thus carries the Lord’s message...should be holy”.

Spiritual Decline

In his commentary on Revelation, Durham refers to the charge made by Christ to the angel at Sardis that his works had not been found “perfect before God”. This follows the exhortation “Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die” (Revelation 3:2). He notes that the angel (or minister) had “a name to live”. Thus, he observes that while things may go well in public before others, a minister’s works may not be perfect before God.

This is obvious when there is a decay in the liveliness of personal communion with God and prayer. In such a condition the right spirit towards his ministerial duties diminishes. If a minister is just satisfied with doing his duties and not concerned about how they are done, things are not as they should be. He may be exercising his gifts in an effective way but if there is no realisation of his sinful defects, lack of zeal and entire dedication – things are not right. Just as it is not a good sign for any Christian to be indifferent to his own corruptions and sinful infirmities; so it cannot be right with a minister when he is not burdened by his failings in relation to the ministry.

Confession

This booklet is an updated version of a publication called *A Humble Acknowledgement of the Sins of the Ministry*. This confession of the sins of ministers was first drafted in 1651. Horatus Bonar refers to it in his classic book *Words to Winners of Souls* (1859). In fact, Bonar devotes a whole chapter to the subject of confession and uses the document as the foundation for his remarks. Baxter likewise devotes a whole chapter of his valuable book to confessing the sins of the ministry.

Bonar says that *A Humble Acknowledgement* is “perhaps one of the fullest, most faithful and most impartial confessions of ministerial sin ever made”. Any impartial reader of this booklet will surely agree. Bonar goes on to apply these piercing convictions to himself and ministers in his own day. The questions in this booklet aim to do likewise in order to make contemporary application.

Reformation

Confessing the sins of the ministry was a vital aspect of the Second Reformation. The Church was not complacent about its condition. In 1638 the General Assembly renewed an Act from 1596 entitled “Concerning the defections in the ministry”. Revival came during the 1596 General Assembly as they considered their need of confession. In 1646 the General Assembly listed a number of “enormities and corruptions” that were all too evident in the ministers of the land. These were identified both in their manner of life and in relation to the way that they conducted themselves in their office. Remedies were proposed to address these corruptions (see Postscript 1).

In 1648 the General Assembly again focused on particular issues. They referred back to what had been identified in 1596 as a failure to apply the Word faithfully and powerfully. One key observation was that they were not speaking against the sins and offences that were prevailing in public and within their congregations. This was considered to be due to a lack of spiritual zeal as well as a desire to flatter or avoid displeasing others.

It was also agreed that the Solemn League and Covenant should be renewed throughout the nation during December 1648. *A Solemn Acknowledgement of Public Sins and Breaches of the Covenant* was published and approved by the Scottish Parliament in order to assist with this.

The Church was sadly divided in the 1650s. Following the invasion of Oliver Cromwell, the General Assembly was forbidden to meet. In this climate James Guthrie (minister of Stirling) prepared a very searching publication called *The Causes of the Lord’s Wrath Against Scotland* in 1653. *A Humble Acknowledgement* was also attached as an appendix. The whole document was burnt publicly by the hangman after Charles II became king. It was also used in the trial against James Guthrie which resulted in his execution in 1661.

Besides building on earlier similar works, *A Humble Acknowledgement* expands on the general headings agreed by the General Assembly of 1650. The ministers sensed God’s judgment on the country and viewed themselves as no small part of the problem. Further work was supplemented by various ministers and Archibald Johnston of Wariston in 1651. These prompts to confession were used on days of public fasting and prayer.

Conclusion

This is a critical tool to help ministers in their spiritual warfare today. Those preparing for the ministry will also find it useful. Moreover, any who seek to pray intelligently for the spiritual needs of their pastor would benefit from reading it. Horatius Bonar gives the following apt recommendation of the substance of this booklet:

These are solemn confessions - the confessions of men who knew the nature of that ministry on which they had entered, and who were desirous of approving themselves to Him who had called them, that they might give in their account with joy and not with grief...Let us, as they did, deal honestly with ourselves. Our confessions ought to be no less ample and searching.

Personal Life

1. *Neglecting God.* Ignorance of God and lack of nearness to Him. Being too little taken up with God in reading, meditating and speaking about Him.
2. *Selfish Motives.* Exceedingly great selfishness in all that we do, acting from ourselves, for ourselves.
3. *Being Careless about Others.* Not caring how unfaithful and negligent others might be, as long as it contributes a testimony to our own faithfulness and diligence. Being complacent about their faults, if not rejoicing at them.
4. *Neglecting Our Godward Life.* Taking least delight in the things where we should have our nearest communion with God, great inconsistency in our walk with God, and failure to acknowledge Him in all our ways.
5. *Careless about Private Duties.* Being least careful about the duties which are most remote from the eyes of other people.
6. *Neglecting Secret Prayer.* Being seldom in private prayer with God, except to ask for preparation to carry out public responsibilities, and even then much neglected or engaged in very superficially.
7. *Excusing Our Neglect.* Being glad to find excuses for neglecting duties.
8. *Neglecting Scripture.* Neglecting private Scripture reading for our own edification as Christians, only reading them insofar as may fit us for our duty as ministers and often neglecting that also.
9. *Superficiality.* Not being given to reflecting on our own ways, nor allowing conviction to have a thorough work on us, deceiving ourselves by resting on the fact that we abstain from and abhor obvious evils (even though we can do this merely from the light of a natural conscience) and taking this as an evidence of a real change.
10. *Neglecting Self-Examination.* Guarding and watching over the heart in a weak and flawed way. Being careless in self-searching, which results in us being very unacquainted with ourselves and estranged from God.
11. *Failing to Strive against Sin.* Not guarding nor wrestling against seen and known evils, especially our predominant sins.
12. *Making Ourselves Easy Prey for Temptation.* A readiness to be drawn away with the temptations of the time and other particular temptations - according to our inclinations and the people with whom we keep company.
13. *Half-heartedness.* Instability and wavering in the ways of God through fear of persecution, danger or loss of esteem. Declining to carry out duties out of the fear of jealousies and reproaches.
14. *Putting Comfort above Christ.* Not esteeming honourable the cross of Christ and sufferings for His name, but rather shirking sufferings out of self-love.

15. *Remaining Impervious to God's Judgments.* Deadness of spirit after all the sore judgments and strokes of God on the land.
16. *Failing to Take Personal and Corporate Guilt Seriously.* Little conscience made of secret humbling and fasting by ourselves alone and in our families so that we might mourn for our own and the land's guiltiness and great backslidings. Little application to our own hearts of the causes for corporate humbling.
17. *Ignoring God's Calls to Repentance.* Finding our own pleasures, when the Lord calls for humbling ourselves.
18. *Insularity.* Not laying to heart the sad and heavy sufferings of the people of God abroad, and the lack of the kingdom of Jesus Christ thriving among them with the power of godliness.
19. *Hypocrisy.* Refined hypocrisy, desiring to appear what indeed we are not.
20. *Prioritising Externals over Heart Exercise.* Making more effort to learn the language and habits of God's people than their inward, spiritual exercise.
21. *Going through the Motions.* Artificial confession of sin without repentance, professing to declare iniquity, and not resolving to be sorry for sin.
22. *Reluctance to Confess Sins - Even when Convicted.* Great neglect of confessing our sins in private, even in things about which we are convicted.
23. *Failing to Follow through after Confessing Sins.* No reformation after solemn acknowledgments and private vows, thinking ourselves exonerated after confession.
24. *Seeing Motes in Others but not Beams in Ourselves.* Being readier to search out and censure faults in others, than to see or tackle them in ourselves.
25. *Setting Too Great Store by Other People's Opinions.* Assessing our spiritual state and way according to the estimation others have of us.
26. *Being Partisan.* Having a high or low esteem of people depending on how they agree or disagree with us.
27. *Presumption.* Not being afraid to meet with trials, but presuming to go through them unshaken in our own strength.
28. *Lack of Concern When Godly People Sin.* Not learning to fear by the falls of gracious people, nor mourning and praying for them.
29. *Lack of Attention to Specific Providences.* Not observing particular deliverances and rods, nor making use of them for the honour of God, and edify ourselves and others.

"readiness to be drawn away with the temptations of the time and other particular temptations"

30. *Lack of Repentance for Original Sin.* Little or no mourning for the corruption of our nature, and less groaning under, and longing to be delivered from that body of death, the bitter root of all our other evils.

Questions for Reflection

1. The sins confessed here are predominantly neglect, failures and lacks.
 - (a) What are ministers missing out on by persisting in these failures?
 - (b) If ministers are not giving their time and energy to these personal devotions, what are they doing instead?
2. A chef can starve while he feeds other people, and a doctor can be ill while he cures other people. How important is it for a minister to make time to be alone to read Scripture, pray, meditate etc. for the sake of his own Christian life, and not just with a view to having something to say to others? (points 1, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8)
3. Which is more important, fitting in with Christian people's cultural expectations of a godly Christian minister or actually being a godly Christian minister? (points 19, 20)
4. What priority should a minister give to putting his own personal sins to death? (points 9,10,11,12, 16, 2, 22, 23, 24, 30). How do you go about putting sin to death?
5. What effect should other people's sins have on a minister in his personal devotions? (points 3, 24, 28)
6. How should a minister respond in his private devotions to providence, both in his own life and in society more generally? (points 15, 17, 18, 29)
7. What weight should other people's opinions carry with a minister? (points 19, 25, 26)
8. Because of wanting their ministry to be acceptable and successful, ministers can be tempted to preach what people want to hear more than what they need to hear. How can they fortify themselves against this temptation in their private devotions? (points 2, 13, 14)
9. Being motivated by love for souls and the honour of Christ sounds very noble, and being able to preach full-time is a great privilege. Yet in practice it takes a lot of humbling. How low must a minister decrease if Christ is to increase? (points 2, 14, 17, 30)

Pastors often feel isolated and under intense pressure and attack. This booklet does not seek to add to such burdens.

Yet failings are not resolved by hiding them. Perhaps neglecting to face these issues is the greatest hidden burden a minister carries. This is a guide which can help pastors to discuss their common failings openly together.

This is a gospel issue. Lack of personal holiness in ministers creates contempt for their message. There is also help and encouragement here for ministers to shine in the midst of the prevailing darkness.

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