

Christian Burn-Out and Christian Hope: The Myth of Self-Sufficiency

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I

It is appropriate that the theme of Christian burn-out and Christian hope be addressed in the Easter octave. For we know and participate in what may be called the “post-Easter” problem. We know it as post-Easter fatigue. We have worked so hard; we have travelled so long; we have engaged in so many projects which are worthwhile spiritually and otherwise, in so many exercises of self-help, self-construction, self-improvement. By the time we get to Easter there is a certain sense of the anticlimax of it all. From Advent onward, we have been in a constant state of preparation, anticipation, and expectation. It has been work, work, work; wait, wait, wait; witness, witness, witness; sing, sing, sing; teach, teach, teach; pray, pray, pray. It has been thoroughly exhausting, debilitating, and fast; and it all comes to its glorious climax, the strategic climax on Easter Day.

Now it is just too much; just too much to bear. Nothing gets initiated after Easter. We just wait for summer. We have expended our resources. We hope we can just slide on to Memorial Day, and to that great sabbath of the church which extends generally from the first of June to the end of November. What sensible church initiates anything in the period between Easter and the Fourth of July? You may confirm a few people, though if you are Episcopalian you will even leave that to the Bishop. We have tired of responding, initiating, and creating. And the proof of the pudding is: what church would ever conceive of holding its every member canvass in the period between Easter and Pentecost? Not a one.

Of course we do not shut the church. We do not stop all the enterprises. We keep the wheels and the cycles going, the expectations up. We even pretend we are living in Easter time, with the glorious news of the resurrection and the post-resurrection experiences of our Lord near and close to hand. But most of us really do not believe it. And the proof of that is the dogged way with which we must contend with the reality as it imposes itself upon us. We must do, but we have nothing with which to do. We must give, but we have very little left to give. We must act, but there is very little upon which to act. Most of us at this stage find ourselves living off of spiritual fumes. We are driving on empty, hoping we will get to where we are going before we run out of gas. We are indeed living beyond our means, kiting our checks. This is an exercise in Christian burn-out. The question for us is: “How do we recover?” Is recovery possible? What new resources, what old resources, are available to help us in this extraordinary and very real season in our lives and in our

churches. Most of us express this problem in terms of the fact that we have seen so much, and have tried to do so much, and are exposed to so much. We are in many ways case-hardened by dealing with all the things for which we have been called upon to deal. And at this stage of the game, by and large, we face a kind of trauma. The demands are so great; the time is so little; the resources so few. Thus, by and large, we end up by simply going through the motions and hoping that it will pass before we pass out; case-hardened case histories.

II

But let us take a closer look at the problem of burn-out. The problem of burn-out is well described as "The Crisis of the Busy Christian." We all know busy Christians. We have all been brought up to be busy Christians. We are beset by the tyranny of activity. It is the Protestant social communicable disease. It is the work ethic we have all been brought up to honor and adore and emulate—the notion that it all depends upon us. The notion that we are in some measure a part of this vital, inescapable chain and that if we are the weak links the whole thing falls down. We have been taught those pieties by our second grade Sunday school teachers. Out of this has come the idea of the busy Christian and the busy church. And the busy church is the product of the busy Christian. And the busy Christian and the busy church, and the busiest Christian and the busiest church, are the most exemplary ones. Those churches believe that they are big wheels because they go around in ever increasing circles. Program; program; the organization of our ambitions; the expressions of our work; the increase of our busy-ness; these are things by which we measure what we do. And since what we are is what we do, our worth is measured in the activities that we perform. We are what we do. We are our work. Hence, to be valuable is to be useful. To be useful is to be busy. And to be busy is to be ever so busy that we never have time to think about any of that.

We define ourselves as doing people, and there is a tremendous sense of guilt that we do not do enough. Somewhere, somewhere in the world there is a starving person; somewhere in the world there is oppression and injustice; somewhere in the world there are griefs, and burdens and cares and concerns. We know we are not doing enough about those, so we seek to do more and more as best we can. And most of us end by taking the laudable and important notion of *doing* as an expression of our Christian faith, of our Christian identity, of our Christian vocation. The end result is an incredible sense of cacophony and fatigue, so frequently illustrated both by our sense of tiredness, and our sense of frustration at what we are called upon to do and at what we are unable to do.

Even our sense of Christian worship is radically affected. There is ceaseless activity, ceaseless sound from the moment we enter until the moment we leave. There is not a moment where there is not something planned to happen. And if something does not happen according to plan, there is not a space if something else can be made to happen. It is an unnatural law of physics that there will be nothing left out in church. Things may not happen as they are

supposed to, but something will always fill in that vacuum. There is no vacuum allowed in Protestant worship. One of the sensibilities we learn is the constant need to be doing something; watching other people doing it, doing it ourselves, or doing it together, do it we must. In Memorial Church, we undertook an experiment a few years ago, which we have long continued, of stated silences in the services—silences in which we confess our own sin. We suggest that we all have sins we might like to confess, then we stop and insist that everyone do so. Many people have said that it is the most disturbing part of the service because for a moment (about a minute, but sixty seconds in liturgical time is a long period of time) people find it is almost impossible to avoid thinking about their sins. That is the point.

Silence provides a different opportunity. It is the opportunity to receive and to be. Doing is activity and activity is ceaseless motion, sound, and action. There is an important, if overworked, distinction between being and doing. It is only helpful if one of these helps to punctuate the other. I would suggest that the active Christian is one who requires and needs the sustenance of the being Christian. And being is not just simply the opposite of action, just as silence is not the opposite of sound. Being is a state of constant reception, constant openness. It is what in classical theology is called sanctification; being open to be filled by holiness. Sanctification is the means by which our being and our doing get rooted and expressed, and it is the recovery of the doctrine of sanctification, in my opinion, that is going to be the means by which the Christian church can once again live beyond its means in the best and freest sense of that phrase.

When we think then about this activity that compels us and this notion that one more committee and one more board and one more petition and one more exercise will pay us out and bail us out, we have to ask ourselves what sustains that effort at effort. What sustains it, what enables it? We find that it is the fear of leisure, the fear of silence, the fear of those intimidating introspective thoughts. And we find that if we do not carry on, as we have always carried on, we will have grave doubts about our worth, grave doubts about our identity, grave doubts about our purpose. So rather than ask those questions, or be confronted by those questions, we continue in that remarkable rat's cage, going around faster and faster, chasing our spiritual tails under the distinct impression that movement is progress. And what is the result of all this? Spiritual numbness—a spiritual numbness of fatigue, that gets expressed so often in the rote routine of our worship; the fatigue of praise and service. How tiring it is just to lift up that book. How difficult it is to make sense of all of this which somehow is beyond sense. Somebody has got to do it. Somebody has got to show up there. Somebody has got to sing those anthems, and preach those sermons, and take up those offerings, and keep the mortgage paid, keep the building going. Somebody has got to do it, but I damn well do not have to enjoy it. And that so often is the spirit that is communicated by the grudging praise we are able to muster up on a Sunday morning. When somebody confronts us in that sense we feel damned if we do, and damned if we don't. If we continue to do what we are doing, we are simply going through the motions. If we do not do what we are doing, we are faithless and irresponsible. How on

earth do we deal with this?

III

There seems to be no way out; no gratitude, no satisfaction, no openness to a new solution. Is there any word from the Lord? Well, yes there is. The word from the Lord is by way of example. It describes a person who fits the bill in some measure just described—one who finds an answer to some of those problems, not because of anything he does, but because of what is done to him, and for him, and with him, and through him. The story is found in the first book of the Kings, an account of that most hyperactive, overachiever of the Old Testament, the prophet Elijah. In chapter 19, matters come to a kind of crisis. Up to this point Elijah the prophet has been doing what he has been trained to do, a hired mouth for God. He has been out on the front lines in every demonstration, engaged in every righteous cause, and has for his pains earned the enmity of King Ahab and his very virile wife, Queen Jezebel. She has promised to take Elijah's life by the next day, and he has withdrawn to the wilderness. We find him at the mouth of the cave. God asks Elijah a straightforward question: "What are you doing here, Elijah?" Elijah answers, "I have been very jealous for the Lord, the God of Hosts; for the people of Israel have forsaken thy covenant, thrown down thy altars, and slain thy prophets with the sword; and I, even I only, am left; and they seek my life, to take it away." Elijah's words have a plaintive sound. I am the only one left. There is nobody left to do it but me, and if I do not do it, it will not get done. They seek even to take my life away.

But God is unmoved. "Go forth, and stand upon the mount before the Lord." And here it comes: "And behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and broke in pieces the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake, a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire, a still small voice." This is where most preachers end this sermon, but this is only where the text begins. "And when Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave, and behold, there came a voice to him that said, 'What are you doing here, Elijah?'" And he says it all again. Still unmoved, the Lord said to him, "Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus; and when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael to be king over Syria; and Jehu the son of Nimshi you shall anoint to be king over Israel; and Elisha the son of Shaphat of Abelmeholah you shall anoint to be prophet in your place." In other words, "O.K., I have heard it all, get on with it. No more sympathy from me." What do we have here in this hyperactive doer of God's word? First, we find that he is, in fact, a hyperactive, super-producer. He does all of the right things and has for his pains only frustration, a sense of being unsuccessful, a sense of being unappreciated, of living on borrowed time; a perfect example of prophetic burn-out. I am no better than my fathers. I have done all of this and I am still the same person, afflicted by diseased ambitions, frustrations, and failure. I have nothing to show for what I have done. Take away my life. Let

me die. Elijah is, in a clinical word, depressed; profoundly depressed. And he came thither into a cave. Now here is a little bit of exegetical legerdemain. Though we think of a cave as a hole in the ground, a cave in this case is a depression in the rock. He was literally in a depression. That is what the Hebrew word says. He was in a depression, an experience well known to most people. The seductive thing about depression is that it feels good in a certain perverse way. In our depression we have at least the illusion of controlling our environment. Out in the world things are active; people are active; things fall apart; we have no control. But in this tiny little world which we have created, in this world of depression, we have a semblance of order and control. However sick and perverse it may be, it is one's own. It may not be a great universe, but it is mine. I own it. I manage it, and I think I am in control. That is what it is like to be in a depression.

The worst thing that happens once we get settled in such depression is that somebody comes along and wants to help us come out of it. Do something. Get involved. What are you doing here? There are things to be done. Come to the movie. See a play. Go see Mary. Take the babies out. And our response to all such prodding is aversion. But in Elijah's case it is God who comes to interrupt his depression, asking "What are you doing here? Why are you here? The world and work is out there. What are you doing here Elijah?" And so Elijah tells him, in great detail.

And God's reaction: No fire, no wind, no earthquake, but the "still, small voice." Now what is this still, small voice? It's not a whisper. It's not a stage call from behind the curtain, a sort of vocal *deus ex machina*—it's not that. And in fact, the still, small voice is quite beside the point of the text though, unfortunately, it has been the pillar upon which most preachers have built their sermons on these verses. The point of the text is that the prophet, who has been a doer all of his life, is at this moment reduced to that point where he is most able to receive. And it is only at that point of silence, the absence of all sound, the absence of all activity, especially his own activity—it is at that point that he is able, perhaps for the first time in his glorious and heroic career, actually to be open to receive what he needs to receive. That's what that still, small voice is about—not whispered instructions, but an opportunity which allows the prophet who gives and does to receive and to be. He who had done now learns to be done unto. He now learns to be a generous receiver.

That is what I think the prophet Elijah learned at the mouth of the cave. It is the essence of being a faithful servant of God to be a generous receiver. Because if you don't receive, you do not have. And if you do not have, you cannot give. If we define ourselves in terms of giving, and cannot give because we do not have, because we have not received—we are in that terrible, terrible phase of burn-out already described. We need to learn how to be generous receivers. We need to be, before we are able to do.

The myth of self-sufficiency is contrary to all this. We understand quite rightly that giving and receiving have more to do with power than they have to do with philanthropy and charity. We know that it is important to give because in giving one is able to demonstrate power. The Bible says, "It is more blessed to give than to receive," and we might change that to say, "It is more

powerful to give than to receive.” It gives us a perverse and wonderful pleasure on those rare occasions when we are able to write out a check for somebody or to something. We feel amazingly good. And we have some sense of what John D. Rockefeller felt like when he gave out dimes, or how his grandchildren feel when they give out millions. There is a tremendous empowerment in giving. Our doctrine of self-sufficiency says it is important for us to give. And that it is weakness to be in the position of receiving. Charity is all right if we are giving, but it is not all right if we are receiving. We think by that same measure that we are self-generated. We have created our own universe, and we are not beholden to anyone or to anything. There is no need to be beholden. We give not because we are generous, but because we dare not admit our own needs. We do, not because we are virtuous, but because we cannot stand ourselves in the silence—when we are not doing. And we want action and application because they justify, in our opinion, who we are by what we do, lest we confront ourselves and find that we are no better than our fellows. Because we all do think that it does truly depend upon us—and we depend upon nothing—we burn out. We are exhausted, frustrated, and fatigued. How can we make it go, when we cannot go?

We need to remember, by way of a clue, that most Reformed churches used to begin their services of divine worship by singing Psalm 100. “Know ye, that the Lord, he is God. It is he that hath made us, and not we ourselves.” Such a simple line, but such is the essence of the enterprise. This Psalm is an invitation to recover dependence, legitimate and honest dependence—to recover dependence that we might renew our independence of the busyness that captures, that seduces, that intimidates us, and that surrounds us with the illusion rather than the substance of our faith. It is a call for quietness. It is a call for receptivity, for openness. It is a call, an invitation, for sanctification, for holiness. It can be summed up perhaps in the aphorism: “Don’t just do something. Stand there!—and see what might very well happen.”