

QUESTIONS CONCERNING THE CHURCH & Mental Suffering



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Shame & Guilt

1

How do we identify guilt or shame in ourselves? What are some signs that a person is experiencing problematic levels of guilt or shame? What effects can guilt or shame have on our lives physiologically, psychologically, socially, and spiritually?

Anger can be understood as a “secondary emotion” reflecting feelings of guilt and shame (and those of fear and injustice), similar to how alcoholism is often symptomatic of other deeper issues. A continual anger directed towards God, self, or others is often a sign that an individual is struggling with guilt or shame. Our anger needs to “go” somewhere; in the case of suicide, when we do not lay all these feelings at the foot of the cross, it is turned inwards upon oneself.

Although the two are related and affect one another, the difference between guilt and shame is that shame involves embarrassment due to how others now perceive you, whereas guilt is more individualistic involving feelings about how you view yourself. Depression, getting stuck in dark places, a negative and fatalistic outlook on life, and habitually isolating oneself from others (when the person in question isn’t known to behave in such “introverted” social expressions) are some of the signs that a person is suffering the spiritual and psychological repercussions of unresolved guilt and shame. Unresolved emotions often have physical repercussions, which can include eating disorders in severe cases, or, in less severe cases, basic weight fluctuation, a proneness to illness, and general unhealthiness.

When we experience these symptoms, we must investigate the causes. Observant and honest Christians can help keep an eye on each other in this regard. The devil looks for spiritual

and psychological opportunities to get into our hearts, minds, and souls through these various struggles and emotions. He clouds our reasoning abilities and tempts us to look for quick fixes to our problems or convinces us that the pain inside won’t stop unless we, say, turn to drugs and alcohol or other vices.

As a military chaplain I often heard suicidal soldiers who were struggling with mental and spiritual illness such as PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) tell me that they did not want to die; they just wanted the pain to stop but didn’t know how to do it. The devil takes all of our mixed feelings of guilt and shame, whether real, imagined, or distorted, and spins them into something bigger and bigger, which can eventually lead one to suicide, as happened with Judas (e.g. thoughts like “I am worthless. I am unforgivable. Nobody loves me”). The devil is a murderer and a liar, and this is his goal: to drag us to hell with him. He does this especially by encouraging people to believe that they are not precious redeemed creatures of our loving and forgiving Lord and God, Jesus Christ. Suicide is theft, since your life doesn’t belong to you. It belongs to Jesus. He paid the highest of prices to make you His own dear child.

All lies are manipulations of the truth, and that is why they are so powerful. The devil distorts the truth, and our perceptions of reality end up skewed. This is how it often goes: the devil points to a true fact, a sin that we ought to feel guilt or shame over, but then convinces us that God is not loving, compassionate, or forgiving. Sin, flesh, Satan, and we ourselves try to keep us away from going to Jesus with our mental and spiritual baggage. We stay away from church, from the blessed Sacrament of Christ’s body and blood for our forgiveness, and from Private Confession (which is our best help—one-on-one face time with Jesus). We might continue to read the Bible at home for a time, but that soon stops as well. Eventually we slip away entirely from the one true faith. Forgiveness is the solution and yet we avoid it.

Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* is a helpful book on this topic, in tying together the spiritual and psychological dimensions of human experience. It tells the story of a man who murders another man. Because of his guilt, he soon begins to believe that everybody knows about the crime—even though nobody does! Years later, the murderer gives himself up to the police because he thinks they are about to arrest him—not because he is penitent but because he is so troubled and distressed by this internalized obsessive feeling. The police are dumfounded to finally close the case after so many years; they never had an inkling as to who the killer was. That is how sin works in our hearts. When it is unresolved—and Law and Gospel are not rightly received—it overtakes us and either turns us to despair (lack of hope) or pharisaism (ignoring sin as severe).

Pastors & Pressures

2

What kinds of pressures are pastors facing that might be exacerbating feelings of guilt or shame?

Pastors struggle with the reality that the Pastoral Office isn't theirs. It belongs to Christ. Otherwise, how can he say, "In and by the stead and command of my Lord Jesus, I forgive you all your sins..." Some Christian denominations don't believe in the pastoral office as a divine institution or that it is a possession of our Lord. Inevitably, they tend to perpetuate a cult of personality around the pastor, where successes and failures are attributed to his personal charisma, personality, talents, skills, and gifts. Liturgical churches help to control this temptation by hiding pastors behind the church's furniture (pulpits, lecterns, altars, crosses, crucifixes, and so forth), as well as behind Christ's clothing (albs, stoles, cassocks, chasubles, and so forth). The clerical collar is a reminder to pastor and laity that the pastor is an ambassador for Christ and is His messenger.

This helps pastors from becoming egoistically full of themselves when their churches grow and are "successful" from a worldly point of view. More importantly, it helps pastors not take it too personally when they feel like their churches are "doing poorly." Sometimes pastors can despairingly believe they have not done enough to make the church grow or keep it strong. I believe that this is the main pressure that leads pas-

tors to feel like failures—feelings which can often lead to mental health issues, resignation, and the like. They are tempted to believe and feel that their performance doesn't measure up to the congregation's or Lord's expectations. After a few years, this perceived guilt can become too overwhelming to cope. Survivors sometimes just hide or suppress their true thoughts and feelings, resulting in burnout and a general lack of joy in the ministry. Remembering that pastors are God's representatives and mouthpieces on earth can help protect them from this kind of confusion and stress.

The shame element comes in when we remember that pastors are public figures. Many people are watching and following them. As a result, they often feel like they have to pretend that they are going to make things better, that God will keep their church open, and so forth. But sometimes it is God's will that churches close. The doctrine of divine election is a great comfort because it says that the population of heaven is already filled in eternity (Not in time. We haven't gotten there yet!) and the places at the Lord's heavenly table already have a "reserved" sign in front of them for each of His precious believing baptized guests.

Evangelism is not twisting people's arms to believe, pulling on their heart strings, or arguing them into the kingdom. Instead it can be compared to bumping into family members who haven't come to the realization that they are indeed your family. Your job is just to tell them that they are family. The predestined accept that wonderful news. What comfort to know that we just open our mouths and confess the truth and God does the rest! When our pews are empty, we have consolation that things aren't as they appear. Instead, they are "filled" with all the angels, archangels, and saints of heaven who join us saints on earth in Service of the Sacrament. We're tapping into the never-ending worship that is already going on in heaven. In other words, the church is always packed to the max! It's just that we don't see it from our side. We all lack faith, and that is why we get so down on ourselves. This is true of both pastors and laity.

What makes matters worse in the midst of the stresses and pressures that accompany the holy office, and which are made worse by satanic attack, is that many pastors are not practicing private confession and absolution as the place to get the best psychological/spiritual counselling and deliverance ever known to humankind. To be able to lay out all of our trash, hurts, feelings, evils, on the garbage pit of Calvary, without anybody else listening in, and hear God almighty say to you, as if you are the only person alive: "I love you". This is not a "Roman Catholic" thing! It is a Lutheran thing, and it is awesome! It's one-on-one face time with Jesus where He says straight to your guilty face "You are forgiven"—as if you were the only person on earth. It's like He stops time and the universe just for you, to say those words to you alone. Pastors need to make use of this powerful gift.

Mental Illness & Spiritual Warfare

3

Is there any distinction to be made between demon possession and mental illness or suicidal ideation, actions; or related tendencies? Where do we draw the line between demon possession and mental illness? Where is the overlap? How do we approach this topic from a confessional Lutheran worldview?

We are not gnostics who juxtapose body and soul. We don't use "the body is just a cage for the soul" kind of language. That's not Christian but instead pagan. We are body-soul creatures which have been entirely redeemed by Christ—in body and soul. Otherwise a spiritual resurrection would suffice for our salvation (see 1 Corinthians 15).

For this reason, we recognize that there is overlap between psychological and spiritual realities. The Lutheran fathers (including Luther, Chemnitz, Walther, Bugenhagen, and many

others) always said implicitly or explicitly to be sure to eliminate all medical and psychological explanation before alleging spiritual or physical possession. (There are two kinds of possession: the one that we are born with, which is "exorcised" through Holy Baptism; and then the kind that comes primarily, though not exclusively, through occult behaviour. Physical possession has various degrees, the worst being possession in which the possessed is entirely out of control of his or her senses for a period of time).

There is a difference between mental illness and demonic possession. But at the same time, the devil certainly works to take advantage of mental illness. Because of the many grey areas, pastors should ideally seek to work with Christian medical doctors and Christian mental health workers (following the example of the Vatican's trained and designated exorcists, who also work closely in triage with mental health professionals). In Canada this is obviously more difficult. Aftercare in the ministry of Deliverance from demonic presences can often include, as a result, not only spiritual tools (like prayer, Bible study, church attendance, and sacramental life) but also medicine. This is a really tough question, though.

It is my belief that all suicides are influenced by the evil one. Usually suicide has to do with a false identity: not believing who God says we are. God has redeemed us and loves us, and that is why we have worth. Our self-esteem is not about us, or in us, but instead we are "esteemed" by Christ. That is to say, God counts us of great and precious worth due to His love. The lying devil wants us to believe that this is not true and that we have no worth or purpose.

In fact, demon possession itself is a lie. The devil cannot "possess" anything since he is not a creator, but a mere creature. The devil can only steal what doesn't belong to him and pretend it does. He is a squatter in another man's apartment; that apartment belongs to the Holy Spirit. In caregiving of people struggling with demonic possession, I remind them that he or she belongs to Jesus. Even if they are not yet baptized, they still belong to him in that He died for them and has already paid the price for their salvation. I also remind the devil that God is his creator and that he is a thief. The strategy in my view is all about getting people to remember who they are in and by Christ. The sign of the cross is hence a powerful physical gesture for Christians under demonic attack or influence.

Spiritual & Physical

4

To what extent can spiritual counselling console the Christian suffering from mental illness or suicidal thoughts/behaviours? Where is the balance in treating a very real illness with medical intervention in this physical world without removing the reality of beneficial spiritual care?

Chaplains have a much better success rate in preventing suicides than secular mental health workers. After all, what real hope and meaning to live does the secular world offer? Why shouldn't someone kill themselves if they don't believe God exists? [Note from the editor: Dr. Ristau's novella *A Book for Ernest* plays with this idea, set in a futuristic, Orwellian universe].

In fact, by legalizing euthanasia, our culture has embraced suicide as an acceptable option for people who believe life is no longer worth living—people who believe that they are their own possession instead of Christ's, paid for not with gold, silver, or credit cards, but with His Blood. People are even praised for killing themselves as an honourable and even cost-effective decision. Canadian society asks, "Why not let people kill themselves if they are doing it in a somewhat 'right' state of mind? It's their choice after all. It's their body." When people are not religious they have nothing to live for other than materialistic things that moths destroy. Sure, they leave their families behind, we might reason, but aren't their families themselves being selfish by not letting people practice their "right" to control their own lives?

You can see how this devilish logic can make a lot of sense in a godless universe. But the Christian chaplain or pastor or Christian intervener can say to the guy on the bridge thinking

about ending it all: "There is a God, and He made you, and loves you. You aren't an accident. God has a purpose for you. Let's talk." The secular social worker can only say, "Let's think this through a little more." Turning inside to ourselves is always a bad idea since that is where the problem lies. Instead, repentance has us turn outside of ourselves to Jesus, the solution. The inherent principle of psychotherapy that says to look inside yourself for the solution is evil. Instead, we are to look outside to the objective cross. Navel-gazing is what caused the Fall, and it continues to cause Christians to stumble due to the Old Adam in us and chained to us, until we get to heaven.

Intervention and counselling need to happen in a holistic way that draws the person outside of themselves. Although medicine can be a gift of God, it is often abused in our society as the only resort for dealing with problems of various kinds. In terms of psychological and mental challenges, it is often an easy go-to drug to soothe pain temporarily. But because each individual is unique, the prescription of drugs to help address mental and psychological issues can be more difficult than some mental health professionals let on.

Even when the best "recipe" is determined, it often does not address the deeper roots. Even mental health professionals are increasingly recognizing that the most effective long-term strategy to deal with or recover from a struggle like PTSD is getting the person outside of a head space that obsesses over his or her own negative experiences and personal problems, and instead to get them involved in other people's lives in positive ways—by volunteering time in charity work or church work, for example. Getting involved in the community and ceasing to think about yourself and your problems has proven to be a part of the healing process, even though it may need to be coupled with other kinds of therapies.

I remember dealing with a man's haunted house. He was always obsessing over the objects that would move around. I told him to just ignore it and shift his focus on the good in the house. He had a lovely family who weren't as rattled by it all as he was. Certainly, the devil was playing games. But I told him not to let the devil win. Instead, he could learn to recognize every strange occurrence as a chance to pray. It offered opportunities for a richer time of family devotions, an opportunity to play Christian music and hymnody, and to talk to Jesus throughout the day. It also gave him a reason to decorate his home in a way that visually reinforced his faith, such as by hanging up pictures of Jesus, crosses, and crucifixes—not as superstitious talismans but rather as reminders that Christ really owned the house and that He was in charge of our lives. In short, satanic attacks offer the chance to reflect upon the cross! "Fart in the devil's face!" is what Martin Luther once said, and I tell this to my kids whenever they have nightmares. Then I tell them to say the Lord's Prayer. God's kids don't need to be afraid of anything! If only we believed it.

Christians need to stop simply referring everybody with problems to social workers, physicians, and psychologists. Pastors can do much more than they realize with the tools they have already been given. Private Confession and Absolution used to be the "therapy" for Christians. That is where we own up to our mistakes, let God forgive us, and turn from sin seeking to do better. Today's secular therapy doesn't judge you by anything but your own values (and if they are bad values, you are lost!) and thus doesn't really let you take responsibility for your actions and sins or address them properly.

I deal with a lot of people in spiritual oppression. The majority of the times that I send such people to their local churches, the pastors sadly don't want them and simply refer them to a psychologist. This is a neglect of pastoral duty. In Nicaragua, we see the opposite problem. People go to the priests and pastors with all of their ailments and are suspicious of the medical communities. In Canada, they are suspicious of the clergy. This is changing a bit with increased interest in both spirituality by Canadians and demonic activity in North America.

5

Comfort in
Truth

What does the Gospel message have to offer believers suffering from mental distress, and how does it compare with what the world offers in terms of comfort, peace, and truth? How does the Lutheran worldview approach the topic of mental illness and suicidal ideation? Where is the truth in what the world offers those afflicted on this topic, and are there any contradictions therein with the confessional Lutheran worldview?

Jesus has conquered the world. He is in control. We have nothing to fear, yet we lock ourselves behind the doors of our upper-rooms because we are afraid of both man and God, and

are filled with guilt. What a comfort we have though! Many Protestants and Roman Catholics leave a lot of the spiritual warfare in the hands of people—making it about our works. But Lutherans leave it all to God: His works. Even if someone were to remain oppressed or even possessed by a demon their whole life, if the situation draws them back into the Word and the Holy Altar Sunday after Sunday, well, we might call it a blessing in disguise—just as struggling with cancer can turn the hearts of those afflicted into deeper prayer and a deeper relationship with God. Lutheranism teaches and confesses, "It is finished." Christ is the victor! He is risen, indeed! Alleluia! Our problem, as sinners, is that we just don't believe it. That is the case with me, at least. Lord, have mercy on us.

Trouma &
Stress

6

What effects can PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) or CPTSD (complex post-traumatic stress disorder) have on the Christian – both pastors and parishioners – from a distinctly spiritual perspective?

They certainly have a spiritual component because they deal with perceptions and often distorted ones regarding: *Who am I? What is the purpose of life? What do I believe?* Those who recover and even grow from PTSD do so when they have a strong value and belief system. They have a sense of identity and purpose.

7

Vocation

Vocationally, how are parishioners called to support our pastor in his service?

The pastor is supported when the Ministry is supported. So pray for him; for synod; for the congregation; for offerings; and for encouraging words (Think of a good sermon: Jesus gets the credit, but the pastor is still relieved). Support the pastor in difficult and unpopular decisions, as long as he doesn't go against God's Word. Hear the pastor's words and try to actually take them to heart, instead of just putting up with them. Go to church every week, and let him absolve you in private absolution. Believe that the local congregation is only one stone in the grander cathedral of the Kingdom of God.

It really helps a pastor when he stops hearing how he should be doing more of x, y, or z to get the church growing or get the young people back. Certainly, do not tempt him to do things that are against our Lutheran Confessions just because they appear to be "working" at the non-Lutheran church next door. This is sin. We don't make the church grow; God does.

Churches that are always happy and doing well, are probably doing something wrong, since Jesus says that the true Church will always be a suffering, persecuted, and broken one. Our churches ought to be characterized by crucifixion. As St. Paul says, "I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified" (1 Corinthians 2:2). He could have said "resurrected" there but he didn't. The resurrection is the after party but the main event was Good Friday.

We should not trust our eyes; we live by faith, not by sight (2 Corinthians 5:7). We are victorious even though we might look "dead." That is the Lutheran theology of the cross versus the theology of glory of other church bodies who continually say, "Look at us, and how we grow and succeed and how our people are so satisfied." Remember: Jesus cut his congregation down to twelve after teaching that He was the manna from heaven (John 6). We all have "itching ears" and don't want to hear what we need to hear (2 Timothy 4:3). Don't shoot the messenger. The pastor is the messenger.

8

Our Strength is in Christ

We often perceive those who are spiritual leaders in the church as having to be okay for the sake of their flock at all times. How does Scripture speak to this? What burdens do our pastors carry in their distinctive vocation? What consolation can we give to our pastors feeling burdened, especially in times of crisis?

Pastors need to be the first to admit their weakness and sins. That is what is so lovely about a pastor communing himself first before the congregation. He needs it the most, in a way. He is not holier or stronger than the laity. He has a unique office with unique suffering, that is for sure. But when we think we are strong, we fall hard. Our strength is always and only in the ever incarnate and enfleshed Lord Jesus Christ. Pastors need to be reminded to hear their own sermon. I know that I have written a good sermon, when it brings tears to my own eyes while I am writing or practicing it.

At the end of the day, pastors need to be reminded of their identity. They are simply servants. Church growth and survival is not about them. They are called only to be faithful to their vocation. And that vocation isn't about how friendly, good looking, articulate, or youthful they are. It is about delivering the Means of Grace. It is not about their qualities, but about the Lord's gifts. Christians that believe Jesus when He says, "the one who hears you hears Me" (Luke 10:16) are generally supportive of their pastors. Praise God for them. God loves His Church and made it, and promises that it is the only thing that really counts in this world and hereafter. God is generous and gives all that we need to both pastor and laity, as members of one body, to ensure that the Holy Ministry continues. The complete list of gifts and skills and fruits are all present already in our church and synod. Again, our problem is simply believing it. May I decrease so He can increase, to paraphrase John the Baptizer (John 3:30).

Ministering in Abnormal Circumstances

9

Concerning the topic of ministering in abnormal circumstances, what freedom in Christ do we have in this regard? What elements of ministry must remain unchanged, and where can we incorporate our own "strategies" or "innovations" that are specific to the times/places in which we live and serve?

The Word of God is our source. Sacred phraseology and key Bible verses. The liturgy and collects that have been passed to us through our Church are invaluable, because they express the feeling and thoughts of our hearts and minds better than we can ourselves. But that doesn't mean that there is no room for creativity and imagination. All must be done faithfully, doctrinally, deliberately, prayerfully, and reverently. Flexibility is important in abnormal circumstances, but flexibility in the hands of the immature or weak in faith is dangerous.

For example, in terms of the ministry of deliverance and exorcism, I have used different resources in different cases—some Eastern Orthodox, some Roman Catholic, but all "Lutheran" because of the way I use them, and what I select from them. I use them prayerfully, humbly (or I try to do so) and repentantly (in that I don't always know what I am doing, and just feel so inexperienced and lost, empty and weak: which is why fasting makes us weaker and not stronger!) I try to focus everything on Christ as the victor already. Proclaiming His deeds and His Words! I use a lot of New Testament quotes of Him addressing demons (as do the Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholics in their material; the main difference between us and these denominations are that they include prayers to the saints. Even so, most of the Roman Ritual on this topic is just Bible quotes).

Instilling

Hope

10

What sorts of training do our chaplains receive concerning ministering in abnormal circumstances, and how might this training benefit our pastors serving their congregations amid the COVID-19 pandemic, or other abnormal circumstances?

Chaplains are trained on how to adapt and be flexible. However, in the Canadian chaplaincy there is a lot of resistance to boldly using Christian (as opposed to generically spiritual) material. I was slapped on the wrist more than once for using the name of Jesus in public prayer. Lutheran Church-Canada (LCC)'s chaplains continue their pattern of faithfully confessing Christ responsibly and sensitively, obviously, but in spite of the prejudices they may encounter which perpetuate a vision of Canada as "inclusive" to the exclusion of biblical Christians. More positively, all theistic chaplains want to instill hope in people, and get them to see that God is bigger than all of our fears and has a plan. The COVID-19 pandemic shows us all of our false gods, and in the case of the screen, puts them right up to our faces so that we get sick and tired of them. We've all got lots of time to think these days about God and the future. It is a gift, to give people time to repent, before our Lord returns in glory. Come, Lord Jesus. Thy kingdom come.

Final

Thoughts

11

What support options are currently available to our pastors and our church body to address the issues of mental illness and suicide? Where are the disparities, and how can we best address them? In your personal opinion, what can we do to better support our pastors and parishioners as a whole in light of mental anguish and suffering?

When I do speaking engagements on exorcism, I always reiterate this one hope: that our synod (via its president and regional pastors) would gather a cohort of pastors that they know to be familiar with this kind of ministry, so that pastors who suffer with this kind of spiritual attack, or have parishioners who suffer, can go somewhere with their burden, for support, advice, and care. A little like the Vatican who have a group of largely unnamed exorcists as a resource, but who can be contacted through the bishops. Many pastors, especially from The Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod (LCMS), who are ministering to the demon oppressed or possessed call me up since I am familiar with the subject matter.

Hurting clergy often don't want to tell their circuit pastors or District Presidents about their problems because they believe that they are surrounded by skeptics, and, frankly, they often are. They risk being judged or seen as crazy. In our liturgies and care resources, we advise clergy to talk to their bishop and seek their aid before getting involved in the ministry of deliverance. But these leaders often have no experience either nor do they know how to pursue the request. Why not gather those who have experience together so that we can draw from their experience, courage, expertise, and gifts?

Why not do the same with mental health? Have a cohort of people that we can do that with. That is what Doxology has done in the LCMS, and it has worked well. We could do that in Canada also.

The reality is, in our congregationalist model, each congregation often behaves as a church body unto itself, which means a bunch of lone rangers feeling, well, lonely. We need to work together. Pastors need to feel safe reaching out for help. And they need to know who to reach out to. When you have a problem, it is frustrating to tell your story to one person, then to have to go to another one after as a referral. It takes a lot of energy sharing pains and burdens. It is much more helpful to know who to go to right from the start with a problem or concern. Our synod has all the gifts, skills, and tools, but how do you access them? How do you get in touch with those familiar with mental health issues, or demonic issues?

One clergy member, who was also a clinical psychologist, shared with me his pains caring for a patient with Multiple Personality Disorder, whom he suspected was affected by demonic influences. He chose to conduct ministry in this situation in a nonstandard way. He talked to me because he knew I would sympathize, since many of his brothers in the ministry lacked the experience and would only judge him or perhaps even charge him with false practice. I told him that I did not know if his plan was the right thing to do, but that it was safe for him to talk with me. There was lots of prayer. Lots of weeping. It was grey situation and hard to know what to do. There was no Bible proof-text to give a clear answer on that one. But he was relieved to know that he had a place to go to seek advice on some very specific subject matter which wasn't something for all ears to hear.