

## COMMENDATIONS

I am delighted to commend this powerful little book. Christopher brings to this important subject not just a personal experience of burnout, but a keen eye to the Bible, and wise pastoral insight into the pressures many of us face in ministry.

*From the foreword by* **ALISTAIR BEGG**

This book is for everyone—not just people in ministry—because we all live very busy lives and are susceptible to burnout. Christopher Ash speaks plainly, wisely and encouragingly. As I read through this book, I found myself evaluating my own life, and found comfort as I recognized my limitations and took to heart his advice.

**TIMOTHY S LANE**

*President of the Institute for Pastoral Care*

With clarity, wisdom and honesty Christopher reminds us that we need sleep, rest, time with friends and daily renewal. But God doesn't need any of these things, which is why we can—indeed we must—turn off our laptops, tablets and work phones and leave the study! Our frailty and weakness is part of what makes us human and should drive us to depend on the Lord who made us.

**CARRIE SANDOM**

*Director of Women's Ministry, The Proclamation Trust*

In this marvellous and much-needed book, Christopher Ash manages to warn, encourage, expose and comfort in equal measure. Every page is humane, penetrating, rich, wise and above all, gospel-saturated. This book came to me as a word in season from a humble brother, and I am sure God will use it to do the same for many, many others.

**GARY MILLAR**

*Principal, Queensland Theological College, Australia*

There are far too many victims of burnout in pastoral ministry. I was very nearly one of them and almost had to pull out after just four years. Christopher Ash's wise counsel, learnt from Scripture and through long, and sometimes bitter, experience, would have helped me enormously in those early years and is still what I need today.

**VAUGHAN ROBERTS**

*Rector of St Ebbe's Church, Oxford and Director of The Proclamation Trust*

It's something we all want—zeal without burnout—and here is a book to help us. Christopher explores the dynamic between a life given to Christ and serving him in a ministry job. The personal stories make it accessible, practical and at times touching. A great read for any team even before you go through busy times.

**NAT SCHLUTER**

*Principal, Johannesburg Bible College*

Christopher's exposition of the simple truth that "God is God and we are dust" liberates, humbles and strengthens with practical and pastoral wisdom. Read this if you are feeling weary, and be refreshed in God's grace. Read this even if you are feeling energetic because prevention is better than cure!

**DENESH DIVYANATHAN**

*Founding Pastor of The Crossing Church, Singapore*

We live moment by moment as frail beings given health and strength by our sovereign Father. May this book help us end the corporate church conspiracy to seem stronger than we are, even omnipotent; and leave us content to keep being wisely weak and daily dependent until Jesus returns.

**DR ANDREW NICHOLLS**

*Medical doctor and church pastor*

ZEAL

*without*

BURNOUT

Seven keys to a lifelong ministry  
of sustainable sacrifice

Christopher Ash

Zeal without burnout

*Seven keys to a lifelong ministry of sustainable sacrifice*

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My deepest human debt is to my wife Carolyn who walks through all these experiences with me, with consistent patient love and wisdom. He who finds such a wife finds a very great blessing!

I am also grateful to our oldest son John, also in pastoral ministry, whose wise comments (many unacknowledged) pepper and spice up this booklet. And to a number of personal friends, both in Christian pastoral ministry and in ‘secular’ work, for their wisdom, prayer, and loving support. To Peter Adam and Alain Palacci in particular I am grateful for kind and wise counsel. Also to my former colleagues at the Proclamation Trust (especially my former PA Beckie Hollands) for their wisdom and loyal support.

Alistair Begg graciously invited me to be part of the team at *The Basics* pastors’ conference at Parkside Church, Cleveland, Ohio, in May 2014, at which I first gave the seminar on which this material is based. I am grateful to him and to the pastors who engaged with the material and encouraged me.

Above all else, I am thankful to the God and Father of the Lord Jesus, whose covenant love is great and whose faithfulness endures for ever, by whose grace and mercy my name is written in heaven.

*Christopher Ash*  
June 2015



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# FOREWORD

by Alistair Begg

*Senior Pastor of Parkside Church, Cleveland*

As a younger minister, I was invited to give a seminar at a conference. I surprised myself by offering to address the matter of “ministerial depression”. While I could not speak about this from personal experience, I had sufficient awareness of what it meant to be “battling the blues” to say something about my encounters with post-Sunday listlessness, irrational fears about health, and a realistic sense of insufficiency.

I was taken aback by the size of the crowd that came to the seminar. They were not there for the speaker. I was a “no-name” at a conference filled with “big names”. So the reason for the standing-room-only crowd was simply the subject matter. I can still recall

how some of the questions asked by lay-leaders displayed an alarming lack of awareness of the nature of pastoral stress. It is fair to say that most congregations are largely unaware of this problem, or do not understand what it means for the pastor and his family to be confronted with burnout. It is no respecter of persons and the challenges are not unique to the 21st century.

Five hundred years ago, Martin Luther knew what it was to be overwhelmed and, although he would have been unfamiliar with the terminology of burnout, his tendency to bouts of melancholy seem to fit the pattern.

Elijah's encounter with the prophets of Baal left him burned out and fearful before the threatenings of Jezebel. He speaks as one who has lost perspective: *I've had enough. take away my life. I might as well be dead.*

Before we critique his reaction, we do well to take stock of those occasions when, after the “success” of ministry, we have found ourselves similarly undone. Returning from a meeting where we were enabled to be of spiritual help to others, we are suddenly and acutely aware of our inability to help ourselves. Through no fault of our own, we may find ourselves isolated and in need of fellowship and encouragement.

If Elijah serves as a warning, Nehemiah provides an encouragement. He understood that there is no “I” in

team. The completion of the wall-building project in record time, was in part a testimony to his ability to delegate. He would have burned out faster than a firework were it not for his well-conceived plan to have a division of labor that made perfect sense to all involved, and which was so effective that it met with severe opposition.

Charles Simeon also faced severe opposition in his early ministry at Holy Trinity Church, Cambridge. Apart from the animosity he encountered, the routine challenges of shepherding the congregation were such that his candle was in danger of burning out. His answer was to delegate: he established a “Visiting Society” and appointed a man and a woman church member to be responsible for the pastoral care of homes in their particular district.

Even so, in 1807, after twenty-five years of exhausting ministry, Simeon was close to being burned out. Following a sermon, he would feel “more dead than alive”. After a long period of weakness, and believing that he had run his course at the age of 60, he records how, on a visit to Scotland, as he crossed the border, he found himself being, “almost as perceptibly revived in strength as the woman was after she had touched the hem of our Lord's garment”. He sensed God redirecting his desire

and doubling, trebling, quadrupling his strength; and as a result, Simeon renewed his commitment to his pulpit and preached vigorously for seventeen more years, until two months before his death. As much as I would like to use this story to underscore the benefits of visiting my homeland, we are better served by acknowledging how God so often allows his ministers to come to an end of themselves in order that they might begin to be more useful in his service.

That is why I am delighted to commend this powerful little book. Christopher brings to this important subject not just a personal experience of burnout, but a keen eye to the Bible, and wise pastoral insight into the pressures many of us face in ministry.

I pray that it would help us both to guard against the dangers of burnout and to heed Paul's exhortation to "Never be lacking in zeal but to keep our spiritual fervor, serving the Lord." (Romans 12 v 11) Or as Eugene Peterson paraphrases it:

*Don't burn out; keep yourselves fueled and aflame.*

## STORIES FROM THE EDGE

He stared vacantly out of the window. So much to do. So little energy. His open Bible glowered, chiding his failure to read, work, wrestle, write. His inbox and in tray ticked up and up, each task whispering, “So much to do. So many people. Such deep needs. So little time. So little energy.” Prayer burdens stacked up, day after day after day.

After these years of effort and pressure, he had nothing left. No resources, no emotional reserves, no intellectual energy, nothing. And so he stared with empty eyes.

How had it come to this? Could he have done things differently? Might it have been avoided? Is there even now a way out?

Burnout is a terrible price to pay for Christian zeal. Sometimes it cannot be avoided. For some, their circumstances mean there is no other way to live sacrificially for Jesus.

But sometimes it can. For many of us there is a different path. One that combines passionate zeal for Jesus with plodding faithfully on year after year. I want to write about this path. This is a very personal book; and I trust it is a biblical book. But it is very far from being a comprehensive or expert treatment of the subject.

I write for all zealous followers of Jesus. Perhaps especially for pastors and Christian leaders ~ to those entrusted with pastoral oversight under God. Some of us have the privilege of being set free from other jobs to devote ourselves to this work; others combine pastoral leadership with “normal” secular work.

But I write also for the many keen Christian men and women who, in addition to “normal” life ~ busy jobs, parenthood, and so on ~ labour sacrificially to serve in their local churches. The young father holding down a pressured job but also teaching the church youth group. The unmarried woman bearing the weight of much responsibility in her workplace, but also heavily involved in pastoral support and care in her church. The older couple whose gifts and skills are in great

demand both at work and in church. And many others like them.

I have a personal interest in the subject. At least twice I have come to the edge of burnout. By the grace of God I have been enabled to step back from the brink.

The first time was in the early days of leading a small church plant in the east of England. I had come from a larger church with a big staff team, but now I was the only paid member of staff, trying to lead a church of a hundred or so adults, with a fair number of children.

After a few months the pressure got to me, and I too found myself staring vacantly out of the window, drained and struggling to keep going. With a supportive church council and a month or so of reduced responsibilities, I recovered.

Another time was much more serious. I had been working for eight busy years leading a Bible training course in central London. In September 2012 I returned from an intense ministry visit to Australia and Singapore to begin an eagerly anticipated sabbatical term. I was looking forward to some weeks of refreshment, holiday, fruitful study, and some writing. My wife, Carolyn, was looking forward to sharing those weeks with me. Instead, I hit the wall. When the adrenalin stopped, I crashed. My energy plummeted;

my mood dipped sharply; my morale went through the floor. And I felt empty, used up, expended.

Although I did return to work in January, I was far from firing on all cylinders; my kind colleagues picked up the extra workload for the next six months, and it was not until September, a full year later, that I had partially recovered my energy and morale. It was a painful and sobering experience. I still feel the scars.

I am not alone. In the USA it is estimated that some 1500 people leave pastoral ministry *each month* due to burn-out, conflict or moral failure. The causes are diverse, but they show the intense pressure that many in Christian ministry find themselves under. A third of pastors say they feel burned out within just five years of starting ministry, and almost a half of pastors *and their wives* say they have experienced depression or burnout to the extent that they needed to take a leave of absence from ministry.<sup>1</sup>

And it is not just those in formal pastoral ministry. Many zealous Christians juggle the responsibilities of pressurized work and busy family lives, with a desire to serve the Lord in the church as Elders, Bible-study leaders, or ministry with children and young people. Those of us who are pastors can be guilty of underes-

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<sup>1</sup> statistics quoted from *Today's Pastors* (2014) by George Barna.



timating the stresses they face as they seek to serve the Lord in ways that are often invisible to us.



One of the pastors and scholars whom I most admire, and from whom I have learned much, is Peter Adam. Peter was senior minister in a large city-centre church in Melbourne, Australia. As a young unmarried man he worked long hours and loved his work. Until, quite without warning, one Monday morning he awoke and began spontaneously to cry, and found himself unable to stop weeping.

His breakdown was very serious indeed. By God's grace he continued in ministry and went on to become principal of a theological college (Ridley College, Melbourne), and the author of a number of scholarly and widely valued books. Nevertheless Peter has continued to live and serve Christ in the shadow of that breakdown. He says he has never since then been able to work more than 50 hours in a week. Through this long experience of frailty, Peter says he has learned to trust God more, and also realised that God can use our weaknesses as well as our strengths.

Peter is senior to me. But let me give another example, from someone much younger.

After working at a church in London while training, my friend is now serving in cross-cultural mission with his wife and young children. He pastors a church plant in Japan. He is one of the most zealous and focused Christian workers I know.

He came back to the UK recently on home assignment (furlough) and just ~ only just, with much help and support ~ recovered enough to make it safe for him to return to his work overseas. Here is what he wrote to me:

*My own personal experience was that leading a church plant, having a young family and particularly the pressures of preaching every week [in Japanese] led to a reservoir of accumulated tiredness and unrelieved stress which led to various symptoms, including digestive problems, increased irritability, reduced ability to focus on prayer and sermon preparation, failure to keep commitments, mild depression, etc. Nothing to force me to stop what I was doing or even claim sick leave, but enough to make me ask questions as to whether it was sustainable ... later on having a debrief with a medic with professional experience in this area, there was a clear case to make that I was well on the road to likely (humanly speaking) irreversible emotional and physi-*

*cal breakdown. In God's mercy we got rest at just the right time.*

I wonder what you make of those stories, and the others that you will encounter throughout this book. I imagine some reading this will find them hard to relate to.

You know about zeal, energy, joy in ministry, loving the work of Christ, working all hours and revelling in it. You know about Christian ambition, seeking to achieve great things for Christ. But when someone talks about breakdowns, burnout, hitting the wall, then ~ if you are honest ~ you find yourself thinking that these are things that people ~ middle-aged people! ~ talk about when they have lost their first love for Jesus.

But there will be others reading these words now who know exactly what I am talking about, whether in your own painful experience or in the stories of pastors, Christian workers, or other keen Christians dear to you. And it is worth remembering that none of us thinks we are on the path to burnout until we are nearly burnt out; it is precisely those of us who are sure we are safe, who are most in danger. We need to heed Paul's warning:

*So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!*

1 CORINTHIANS 10 v 12

I want to share with you in this book a perspective that God has burned into me as I have both experienced burnout in myself, and met with and supported others who have struggled with the same issues as I have. They have, for the most part, been fine, radiant Christians whose zeal for the Lord and his work has led them to overwork and then collapse.

As someone who has spent the last decade training young men and women for Christian service, I have been keen to help them see that the best kinds of ministry are, more often than not, long term and low key. I have tried to prepare them for a marathon, not a short, energetic sprint. In other words, to help them have a lifetime of sustainable sacrifice, rather than an energetic but brief ministry that quickly fades in exhaustion.

I want to focus our minds on a neglected truth from the Bible about ourselves as people, and our loving God; and to consider seven ideas or principles that flow from it.

I want to warn those of us who think this will never happen to us, and encourage those of us who know only too well that it can and has. I have included the stories of men and women who have experienced burnout, but who have subsequently found comfort, help and a new way of sustainable service.

It is my prayer that this book will help many of my brothers and sisters to maintain their zeal without knowing the bitterness of burnout.