

Chapter 5
Excerpt from
5 Ministry Killers and How to Defeat Them
(help for frustrated pastors)
by Charles Stone

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Punch ‘em out, tell the teacher, or skip lunch?
(How we respond)

I don't think pastors "burn out" because they work too hard. People who work hard often do so because they're good at what they're doing and they enjoy doing it. I think burnout comes from working with no relational gratification.

—Eugene H. Peterson¹

Pastor John had just finished his final message as the second service concluded. With a weary “pastor’s grin” on his face, he chatted with those who lingered. He was exhausted, ready to go home for a well-deserved nap. Just as he grabbed his Bible to leave, two women approached; one he knew was never happy and the other a supportive member who looked rather sheepish. The latter began the conversation with, “Pastor, Ann here wants to tell you something that happened this past week.”

He thought to himself, *Wonderful, just what I need, another disgruntled member.* With a disingenuous caring tone he asked, “What happened?” As the veins in Ann’s neck swelled she blurted, “I want you to know that I left three voicemails with the youth

¹ In David Wood, “Committed to Mutuality, Congregations,” May/June 2002, Number 3. <http://www.alban.org/conversation.aspx?q=printme&id=3280>, 4.

minister to talk to him about a problem I'm having with my son. And he never called me back. That so-called *youth minister* of yours is not doing his job. My son needed help and he didn't even care to call me."

As John's face flushed, he slowly said, "Ann, I'm sure Pastor Jimmy tried to call you back and wasn't able to reach you. I will check with him and have him call you again tomorrow. I'm very sorry the two of you didn't connect."

She retorted, "Well. I've decided I'm going to another church where the pastors care about people." To punctuate her statement she crossed her arms and stood up straight with a *what do you think about that* stare.

Masking his desire to karate chop her larynx, he cleared his throat and answered, "Okay, Ann, I understand your concern, and you must do what you feel is best for your family. But I will get to the bottom of this."

She then spun around and stormed off; her friend grimaced and followed like a whipped puppy. John's nap that afternoon wasn't so restful. For several days he mulled over this encounter and kept his pain to himself, even after discovering that his youth pastor had attempted to make contact.

The worst part was yet to come. Two weeks later he received a call from a woman with whom he'd often faced conflict. She had shown herself to be quite the drama queen, and her family was the biggest giver in the church. She requested a meeting to "discuss an issue."

She and her husband arrived at his office, and after a few pleasantries she explained that Ann had called her about the recent conversation. Ann was "very upset" because he "hadn't been responsive to her need." John tried to explain what happened from his perspective, but her mind was made up. Then, with dramatic flair, she swept her arms outward, and her voice quivered as she said, "Why didn't you just reach out your arms and give her a big hug?" As John's puke level rose to Orange he didn't know what to say except, "I'm sorry she felt the way she did." This ended the conversation. (A few months later that couple also felt "led by the Holy Spirit" to look for a new church home.)

As John sat in his office chair that night his emotions roiled. After he breathed a short prayer he went home. His wife asked how his day went, and he replied with a less-than-forthright, "Okay, nothing much out of the ordinary." He didn't want to burden

her—she too had often endured the ire of the drama queen. He wished he knew someone with whom to process his pain. For the next two weeks he spent the bulk of his quiet time praying about this disappointment.



John’s story illustrates what the research discovered to be one of the two most common ways pastors handle these issues—by ourselves and in prayer. We all unconsciously turn to our default responses when we face ministry bullies. However, often those instincts alone aren’t healthy or at best are one-sided. Harboring pain privately can become a ministry killer.

I can trace my typical response to ministry frustration to the way I reacted to bullies. The high school I attended in Georgia began with the eighth grade. One day during my first year a buddy and I were in the bathroom just before our next class began. I carried my books in a Samsonite-sized briefcase. Two upperclassmen, looking for trouble, walked in and noticed the case.

I hoped they were going to think it belonged to my friend, but my pocket protector must have given me away. They began to chide me; it looked like they were going to rough me up. As they began their move, I feigned madness, literally. I began to talk like a cartoon character (Daffy Duck, I think) and bugged out my eyes like I was insane. I guess I subconsciously remembered a VBS lesson about King David doing something similar (see 1 Samuel 21). Well, it worked! The bullies looked at each other and mumbled, “This guy is nuts. Let’s get out of here.” I avoided a bloody nose that day.

My default response to bullies and conflict? *Avoidance*. I’d do anything to sidestep a bully’s ire, by any means from running to pretending. Some pastors tend to handle their issues in the same way.

The Barna research probed what we do in response to our frustrations and disappointments with this question: *Think back to the last time you felt disappointed or frustrated with people in your congregation. What did you do—if anything—to address the challenges you faced?* The 615 pastors could mention anything that came to mind. Here are the top ten responses.²

² Because multiple responses were permitted, the total equals more than 100%.

Response	%
pray about the issue	37
confront the issue immediately	34
have someone on ministry team/board/staff deal with the issue	15
look for Scripture to address, solve the problem	14
sought counsel from someone I trusted	10
talked with the person	9
confront the issue eventually	9
addressed it from the pulpit/in a sermon	4
had a council meeting/board meeting	2
self-examination	2

Survey research in general shows how people want to be perceived and may not always reflect an objective reality. Nevertheless, this provides a snapshot of *how pastors perceive themselves responding to issues*.

The first two choices, prayer and immediate confrontation, were mentioned almost equally. These and the other responses raised interesting observations. I've used animal characteristics below to highlight them (but please don't press the metaphors too far).

THE SLOTH: STAY DETACHED

Several years ago I took our family to Georgia's Callaway Gardens to visit the Day Butterfly Center. In a large, temperature-controlled glass building visitors can walk along paths inside to enjoy butterflies that fly around freely and even land on people. I enjoyed our excursion, but what interested me most was the challenge given by one of the guides: "Look up in the trees and see if you can find the sloth." After half an hour, I finally spotted him clinging to a branch about twenty feet above my head. A placard explained that sloths rarely move and only come down to poop. "Passive, detached, and unaware" best describes them.

Some pastors respond similarly to ministry frustration. In the survey, when added together, the categories “did nothing,” “no problems/disappointments,” and “not sure” equaled 13%. Over one in ten pastors defaults to an unhealthy disregard for, or detachment, from a potential ministry killer. If you’re in this group, I hope you’ll carefully read chapter 8 (where I suggest that we all must own up to our responses to frustrations, even if we deny we have any).

THE SKUNK: LEAVE THE MESS TO OTHERS

Our offices are located in a corner of our church building. A side door allows us to enter to bypass the main entrance. One morning, arriving around 8:00, I parked my Nissan truck about fifty feet from the door and began walking. About ten feet from the building I peripherally noticed movement to my left and at first thought it was a cat. I stopped dead in my tracks when I saw it actually was a full-grown skunk that noticed me too.

He also froze in his tracks and slowly lifted his tail as our eyes locked. As I edged away I claimed the promise of Psalm 91:10—“There shall no evil befall thee, neither shall any plague come nigh thy dwelling.” Maybe I didn’t exactly quote that, but I sure was namin’, claimin’, and prayin’ like I hadn’t done in quite a while. After the skunk saw I was giving him his space, he sauntered off without incident.

Had God not answered my prayer (or had I not simply moved back), sprayed skunk stink would have made me a very unpopular pastor for a few days. Again, don’t press the image too far, but some pastors respond to their frustrations by handing off their stinky issues to somebody else (see the third largest category, above, at 15%). Certainly in some cases we *should* delegate problems to others. But I wonder if sometimes we delegate to avoid uncomfortable conflict we rightfully should face ourselves. When we do, we truly are missing opportunities God is giving us to grow.

THE HAWK: LOOK THROUGH A WINDOW, NOT IN A MIRROR

On my way to the gym each day I drive by a large open field. Often I see a hawk perched on a telephone pole, staring out into that field. I’m no ornithologist, but I know

hawks have keen eyesight and love mice for snacks. They constantly look for unsuspecting prey.

One tiny statistic revealed a most disconcerting discovery. Down the list of responses to ministry frustrations, at number ten, was “self-examination.” Only two out of a hundred pastors responded to their frustrations by looking at themselves as contributing to the problem. Like the hawk, many of us keenly look outward toward others but don’t peer inward to see how we may be complicit in our struggles.

David Kinnaman observed in his written comments on the research that

leaders exhibit very limited capacity or willingness to self-examine. This is not entirely unexpected; it’s human nature. Yet pastors rarely suggested that they look inward as part of their solution to challenges. Virtually none of the 615 leaders we interviewed said that their frustration or disappointment is that they can’t lead their people better—or considered that the commitment vacuum displayed by their congregants might somehow be a reflection of inadequate leadership.

This reminded me of an insight taught by Jim Collins, who uses a mirror and a window as metaphors to teach a quality great leaders exhibit. Superb leaders don’t look out the window to blame others. They look in a mirror to take ownership when things don’t go well and look out a window to praise others when things do go well.

The rarity and paucity of self-examination should cause us to take inventory of our responsibility in church friction. Ignoring this could easily become a ministry killer as others begin to see us either as blamers or as shirkers.

THE TURTLE: HIDE BEHIND SPIRITUALITY

I love turtles, especially box turtles. I’ve probably saved half a dozen from getting pancaked when I’ve pulled over and jumped out of my car to rescue one ambling across a road. I even kept a pet box turtle in my back yard when I was forty years old. I used the excuse that it was my son’s.

Any kid who's ever had a box turtle knows what it does when you pick it up: instantly pull its head and legs into its shell to hide. In similar fashion, sometimes we pastors duck our frustration by retreating into our spiritual shells. At first blush, the 37% who prayed about their frustrations looks quite spiritual. But I wonder how often prayer becomes an excuse to avoid dealing with issues at hand. When "pray about the issue" is combined with "look for Scripture to address/solve the problem," the percentage jumps to over 50% who choose private spiritual means as their default response.

I laud pastors who do this. However, a deeper look reveals something else. The Barna Group's written analysis of the data noted,

The clear picture that emerges from this is that pastors generally solve problems with one extreme or another—either through "human" effort to confront the problem, or through "super-spiritualizing" the issue—but rarely through both. Many pastors 'hide' behind prayer....

THE LION: I'M QUITE COMFORTABLE IN MY OWN SKIN

We give lions the honored position "king of the jungle." I understand why; I've had a lot of experience with the behavior of lions. Well, I watch Discovery Channel, and I saw *Lion King* twice. Although I've never personally encountered one, I know lions roar a lot, exude self-confidence, lie around a bunch, and usually get their way. As a leader I hope I exude appropriate self-confidence. And I do like getting my way (though I hope I don't roar too much).

Over a third of the pastors indicated that when faced with frustration they immediately confront the issue. Although some issues warrant a quick, self-confident response, many should lead to a more thoughtful and deliberate approach. Unfortunately, we may rely too much on our strength, as the researcher's written analysis noted. "Many pastors ... are a little too comfortable in their skin, without relying on prayer and self-examination to give spiritual context to their confrontations."

Although I tend to be a turtle by handling my hurt in private and in prayer, I've also roared too quickly at someone who ticked me off. Too often I've verbally fired back in

defensiveness at someone who criticized me, or shot back an instant e-mail only to regret it later. Moses, reacting in anger to the mistreatment of his people, murdered an Egyptian and looked over his shoulder for the next forty years.

HEALTHY BALANCE BETWEEN LION AND TURTLE?

Since the research indicates most of us respond to frustration with one of two extremes, can we achieve a healthy balance? Can we avoid allowing our responses to become ministry killers? Granted, it's tough to appropriately respond in the moment. Sometimes we should just pull away, pray, and believe 1 Peter 4.8 that love will cover a multitude of sins. But prayer should never become an excuse to shirk conflict, and sometimes we must quickly confront an issue before it gets out of control. But if we're *too* quick we may miss the gentle voice of God's Spirit tempering our response.

The Barna Group's written analysis also observed that

a surprisingly small [percentage] said they both prayed and confronted the problem right away—a dual-pronged approach that was identified by just 11% of pastors. Even if we are generous in our definition and include any pastor who confronted the problem eventually or “talked with the person,” only 14% of all pastors said they did both this type of face-to-face interaction along with prayer.

David Kinnaman summarized well this tension between the lion- and turtle-response.

Prayer is great, but is it a means to hear from the Holy Spirit or a way to delay a decision or a confrontation? I think it's interesting that many pastors are likely to suggest passive or even passive aggressive methods of dealing with interpersonal problems. And many of those who say they confront something immediately, do so without prayer, Scripture guidance, or input from advisors. In other words, few pastors follow a biblical process of dealing with conflict.

I don't want to unduly criticize pastors. I hope this book will encourage pastors. Probably no other vocation places a greater expectation on a leader to balance confrontation and self-confidence with spiritual restraint and humility. We're under constant scrutiny. Intentionally or unintentionally, people place higher standards on us than they do for themselves. Often they expect us to be faultless, yet we know we can never perfectly handle our disappointment and frustration.

Ministry tension comes with the territory and will never go away this side of heaven. What bothers us and how we respond should clue us in to what saps our joy and energy. If we want to stay healthy and productive for the long haul, we must pay close attention to how we respond, take full responsibility when we err, and seek to honor Christ always.

I take great comfort that God has filled Scripture with men and women who made a great impact for Him yet were jars of clay, cracked pots with imperfections, often poorly responding to life's stresses. Both Paul and Moses murdered. Peter was a coward. David was an adulterer. Rahab was a prostitute. Matthew was a treacherous tax collector. The apostles were "little faiths."

The Bible does not conceal their character cracks, yet all of these ultimately evidenced humble, teachable, and repentant hearts. Despite their failures and disappointments, they grew in their walk with God. I hope that as we pastors become more aware of how we each respond to ministry frustration and lean more and more into Christ, we will stay strong in Him and finish well.

The week I wrote this chapter, we were visiting Sherryl's dad and sister. Our vacation crossed over into Sunday, and my sister-in-law's church asked me to speak in their service. Beforehand I chatted with the associate pastor, who told me about his ministry journey; he'd come to this church after serving seventeen years in his previous one.

The next thing he mentioned stirred me deeply. He said his previous church's current pastor was now eighty and had served there for forty years. For days I couldn't shake the image of this faithful man who had so long persevered. I hope we not only will aspire to serve God for the long haul but also will emulate those who do. Healthy

frustration management is crucial to that longevity, and it will help us defeat potential ministry killers.



In this chapter we examined common pastoral responses to ministry frustration, noting two extremes and several other common reactions. In chapter 9, we'll self-evaluate and develop a plan to respond in the healthiest way. Next, in chapter 6, we'll consider research that uncovered what we'd specifically like different from our church to make ministry more joy-filled.

QUESTIONS TO PONDER

1. The last time someone confronted you after a service, how did you respond? Do you believe God was pleased with that response? Why or why not?
2. Did you see yourself in any of the animal descriptions I gave? Which one comes closest to describing you, and why?