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Distinguishing Between the Pastor and the Superhero: God on Burnout and Self-care

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ABSTRACT

The risk of burnout in pastoral ministry is more than a myth! A number of empirical studies have concluded that like other helping professionals, Christian ministers in pastoral roles are at risk of burnout. We have consequently seen an intensification of clergy burnout discourse in the last three decades. However, much of the existing literature on clergy burnout is presented through the lens of burnout psychology with little or no reference to Scripture. This article takes a *practical theological* approach and traces pastoral ministry associated stress and risk of burnout to Moses' experiences in Exodus 18:13–27 and Numbers 11:11–17 using a burnout theoretical framework. The author illustrates that Moses was both anointed and human—and was therefore predisposed to the risk of ministry-associated stress and burnout. Drawing from Yahweh's intervention in Moses' situation, the article concludes by demonstrating that Yahweh is the architect of the principle of self-care in pastoral ministry.

KEYWORDS

Pastoral burnout; self-care; delegation; rest; practical theology; theological reflection

Introduction

The issue of ministers becoming overextended by inordinate ministry demands is an ongoing phenomenon, which raises concerns for pastoral ministry. However, much of the discourse on ministry-associated stress and burnout is presented through the lens of psychology – with little or no reference to Scripture. In this article, I take a *practical theological* approach, which is underpinned by Scripture, to explore the issue of burnout in pastoral ministry. I examine two biblical narratives of a key biblical figure, Moses, who was called and commissioned by Yahweh to lead his people from Egypt to Canaan. Moses was distinctively anointed and is furthermore presented in Scripture as 'the archetype of Israel's prophets' (Deut. 5:28 ff. and 34:10). Moreover, YHWH did not speak to him in visions, dreams, or riddles, but clearly, face to face (cf. Nu. 12:6–8). Moses' encounters with YHWH have become a part of the living truth of the Bible.¹ However, in spite of this unique calling, in Numbers 11:11–15 we encounter a Moses who is overwhelmed by 'pastoral' duties and at a point of *cracking up*.² 'While the leadership of Moses is known and widely discussed within Jewish learning'³ and beyond, it has up to now not been explored in relation to burnout and pastoral ministry with greater depth. Moses' ministry and leadership experiences are profoundly unique and worthy of study

because they offer some insights into Yahweh's perspectives on some elements of Moses's ministry approaches in situations, which are relevant for pastoral ministry today. Therefore, Moses' ministry and leadership experiences are a valuable source and basis for reflecting on or modeling contemporary leadership and pastoral ministry.⁴

An in-depth study of this great leader's leadership and ministry approaches should encompass his 'less glorious' leadership and ministry experiences. This allows pastoral and leadership scholarship to critique and draw lessons from Moses' failures and or weaknesses – in order to inform, develop and strengthen contemporary approaches to pastoral ministry. This article offers a theological reflection of Moses' experiences presented in Exodus 18:13-27 and particularly Numbers 11:11-17 where Moses exhibits symptoms that mirror those of the syndrome of burnout. These two narratives are discussed in conjunction with Maslach and Jackson's three dimensions for assessing burnout.⁵ In so doing, I follow an approach of theological reflection, which gives prominence to Scripture, and at the same time uses other sources and or disciplines (psychology in this case) to bring about more theological understanding to a situation or experience (Moses' experiences).⁶

In this article, I present a theological reflection of Moses ministry which, 'despite his deeply spiritual life and his sense of commitment to covenantal ideals, Moses is still a human being.'⁷ Therefore, the pastoral ministry exposed him to situations and experiences that threatened his emotional and psychological wellbeing. Moses' ministry experiences in these two narratives hence offer pastoral ministry practitioners the opportunity to reflect on the fundamental insight that while they may be called and anointed for pastoral ministry, they should not consider themselves or let others consider them to be 'superheroes' and 'superheroines.' The thrust of this treatise is to advance the view that the men and women involved in pastoral ministry should be more conscious of the risk of burnout and employ self-care strategies to mitigate this risk.

A Practical Theological Framework

The disciplines of practical theology and pastoral theology are related yet distinct.⁸ It is widely held that pastoral theology is a sub-discipline of practical theology, which focuses on the care of persons.⁹ However, pastoral theology itself can be an umbrella for other disciplines that do not easily fall within the greater discipline of practical theology.¹⁰ Pastoral theology is primarily concerned with issues of 'pastoral care'; a term which, comes from the 'Latin Pastorem, meaning shep-herd, and includes in its deep etymology the notion of tending to the needs of the vulnerable.'¹¹ Consequently, pastoral theology is broadly defined as an art, which 'explores the rationale, nature and ethos of care, as practiced by and through communities of faith.'¹² Pastoral theology is also described as a 'theological enquiry into the care of persons in an ecclesiastical context or by ecclesiastical representatives outside of that full context.'¹³ Care of persons in the realm of pastoral theology involves care of the deceased person.¹⁴ Like practical theology, pastoral theology involves theological reflection of the experiences and practices of those involved in some form of pastoral ministry in relation to the life of the church.¹⁵ The scope of pastoral theology is broad and not confined to ecclesial ministry. Therefore, pastoral ministry converges with the discipline of public theology as it also encompasses the function of providing 'political-prophetic critique' of the economic order in order to address the survival and flourishing needs of individuals and families.¹⁶

While pastoral theology is largely concerned with issues of pastoral ministry, practical theology generally has a broader focus. Although it involves working within the framework of the life and mission of the church in the contemporary world, practical theology ‘addresses a wider range of contemporary issues, many of which lie beyond the work of the individual pastoral carer.’¹⁷ Practical theology is hermeneutical and aims to examine the experiences and practices of a community in light of its sacred texts.¹⁸ At its core, it takes perspective on and begins with human experience and aims to reflect theologically on such experience.¹⁹ Practical theology is essentially a discipline of theology concerned with theological reflection ‘on the practices of the church and curricular of the theological academy in order to promote and safeguard faithful participation in God’s call to salvation, missions and ministry’. Within practical theology, critical theological reflection often incorporates dialogue between Scripture and other relevant social sciences such as psychology; and may incorporate research.²⁰ This reference to Scripture qualifies such reflection to be ‘theological’. Practical theology is, however, described in a variety of ways. Although there are more recent definitions of practical theology, Miller-McLemore’s definition aligns more with and illuminates the theological reflection approach I have adopted for this study, more clearly. Miller-McLemore defined practical theology as:

an activity of believers seeking to sustain a life of reflective faith in the everyday, a method or way of understanding or analysing theology in practice used by religious leaders and by teachers and students across the theological curriculum, a curricular area in theological education focused on ministerial practice and sub-specialities, and an academic discipline pursued by a smaller subset of scholars to support and sustain these first three enterprises.²¹

From this approach, practical theology is conceptualized as a discipline of theology but also as a framework for exploring or analyzing theological issues. I thus use practical theology as a theological reflection framework, which incorporates burnout theory. I use this approach to highlight that ministry-associated stress and the construct we understand today as burnout – is considered with more theological thought when explored through Scripture. Theological reflection should incorporate Scripture because ‘we are brought into an understanding of God and God’s purposes in and through the text.’²² Correspondingly, Yahweh’s perspective on Moses’ challenges (in Exodus 18:13-27 and Numbers 11:11-15) will emerge in this treatise.

Burnout and Pastoral Ministry

The World Health Organization (WHO) recognize burnout as a health problem.²³ It is acknowledged that pastors are among the helping professionals who are especially prone to burnout.²⁴ Consequently, ‘the experience of burnout has been the focus of much research during the past few decades.’ The nature and demands of pastoral ministry can ‘drain’ ministers’ emotional, cognitive, spiritual, and physical energy reserve, which may affect their overall effectiveness.²⁵ Definitions of burnout vary with each definition giving prominence to an aspect or aspects of the very experience being defined. These include affect, effect or both – and how people respond to these experiences. Consequently, the syndrome has been amongst other definitions defined as a: (1) ‘progressive loss of idealism, energy and purpose experienced’²⁶; (2) state of physical and emotional depletion;²⁷ (3) physical, emotional and mental exhaustion.²⁸ Brill offers a more general description:

An expectationally mediated, job-related, dysphoric and dysfunctional state in an individual without major psychopathology who has (1) functioned for a time at adequate performance and affectual levels in the same job situation and who (2) will not recover to previous levels without outside help or environmental rearrangement.²⁹

It is widely held that the process and experience of burnout take the same form in occupations within and outside of human service professions such as workers who perform physical work and those involved in work such as processing information.³⁰ Burnout is generally conceptualized as a process that begins with excessive and prolonged levels of job stress.³¹ Nevertheless, both Freudenberger³² and Maslach³³ (two of the earliest psychologists and scholars who have immensely contributed to our understanding of burnout today) put forward that burnout is rooted in the caregiving and service occupations where the core of the job is centered on the relationship between provider and recipient i.e. *an individual's relational transactions in the workplace*.³⁴ It is true that the syndrome has over the years been consistently described with uniformity in terms of aetiology and symptoms.³⁵ The definition of burnout has over the years evolved into a more generalized understanding of the phenomenon.³⁶ Consequently, burnout is mainly perceived as a psychological syndrome that emerges as a prolonged response to chronic interpersonal stressors on the job in which an overload of contact with people results in changes in attitudes and behaviors towards them.³⁷

Maslach and Jackson's widely accepted three-dimensional conceptualization defines the phenomenon as a syndrome characterized by Emotional Exhaustion (EE), Depersonalization (DP), and reduced Personal Accomplishment (PA), which can occur among individuals who do *people work* of some kind.³⁸ According to this model, these three components (EE, DP, PA) are interconnected in a sequential order, in that burnout begins with EE; EE leads to DP; and DP leads to (lack of) PA. These components are described as follows: (1) EE is characterized by the experience of drain and being 'worn out' or 'empty'; (2) DP refers to a cynical, negative attitude towards one's work or towards the recipients of one's service, i.e. teachers may make cynical comments about their pupils, physicians about their patients or pastors about their congregants; (3) reduced PA denotes a reduced sense of competency in comparison to one's past functioning.³⁹ Although burnout is largely accepted to be a work-related illness, a number of studies have shown that the individual personality variable influences how different individuals respond to stress and experience burnout.⁴⁰ By way of example, a study involving 155 Catholic priests in Italy found that introverts experienced higher levels burnout than extraverts.⁴¹ There are, however, a number of theories and categorizations of personality types beyond introversion and extraversion that influence individuals' experiences of burnout.⁴²

Burnout Assessment Framework

One of the key challenges of studying burnout empirically is providing an appropriate instrument. While this article is not based on an empirical study, it encounters the same challenge. However, my exploration of Moses experiences in this article is retrospective, as it based on biblical narratives. It is therefore not possible to employ a burnout assessment tool (instrument), which is completed by the 'subject' (Moses). The approach of assessing burnout in ministry without asking the 'subjects' burnout-specific questions or using psychometric tools, as the case with Fichter's⁴³ popular research on clergy

burnout – has been met with criticism.⁴⁴ While it is not possible to involve the ‘subject’ (Moses) and or to use a burnout instrument, I in this paper adopt the principles of an established burnout tool to provide a workable framework for exploring burnout. Moses’ experiences associated with the risk of burnout are thus explored through a burnout theoretical framework rather than an instrument. There are various burnout instruments. However, ‘the best known and best established conceptualization and operationalization of professional burnout is the model proposed by Maslach and assessed by various forms of the Maslach Burnout Inventory.’⁴⁵

The three-dimensional (EE, DP and PA) Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) alluded to earlier in this article has been employed in a plethora of clergy burnout studies in the last few decades. These include but not limited to studies on (1) loneliness, marital adjustment and burnout,⁴⁶ (2) the ‘Religious Problem-Solving Scale’ in the predicting clergy burnout,⁴⁷ (3) Spirituality and burnout,⁴⁸ (4) Pastoral burnout and the impact of personal spiritual renewal, rest-taking, and support,⁴⁹ (5) burnout in Imams,⁵⁰ (6) Professional burnout among Catholic religious sisters,⁵¹ and (7) comparing clergy burnout with other helping professions.⁵² Although the MBI has been utilized in studies with clergy, it is recognized that some of the wording used is not wholly appropriate to capture the experience and working practices of religious professionals.⁵³ Contrary to the MBI approach that interlinks the three dimensions (EE, DP, PA) as explained above; others have argued that positive affect and negative affect are not opposite ends of a single continuum, but two separate continua.⁵⁴ Francis et al.⁵⁵ have demonstrated that it is totally reasonable for individual clergy to simultaneously experience high levels of positive affect and high levels of negative affect. This consequently led to the adaption of the MBI by translating the negative affect scale EE to be measured as Scale of Emotional Exhaustion in Ministry (SEEM) and introducing a positive affect scale: Satisfaction in Ministry Scale (SIMS) (as opposes to the negative affect lack of PA). This, in turn, resulted in the formulation of the Francis Burnout Inventory (FBI).⁵⁶ The FBI is a fairly new tool that has however been used in a number of clergy burnout studies to date.

Nevertheless, while accepting Francis et al.’s insightful critique of the MBI approach highlighted above, it remains that the MBI is the most extensively used measure for professional burnout (including clergy burnout) that has endured decades of tests in the field. Furthermore, the MBI approach is more appropriate for this retrospective text-based three-dimensional exploration of burnout on Moses experiences in the Exodus 18:13-27 and Numbers 11:11-17 biblical narratives. Moses’ experiences will consequently be explored in relation to the MBI’s dimensions (EE, DP, PA) as elaborated below.

Exploring Burnout in View of Moses’ Experience in Exodus 18:13-27

Exodus 18:13-27 offers one of the earliest biblical examples that demonstrates how ministers can become consumed by ‘pastoral’ work – thereby exposing them to the risk of work-related stress and burnout. This passage is usually considered in view of the aspect of delegation of responsibilities. However, the same passage describes Moses’ ‘pastoral’ practice that could potentially lead to burnout as described it in this article, summarized as *excessive and prolonged stress resulting from work that involves helping other people, which is characterized by feelings of EE, DP and lack of PA in the work*. In the passage, Moses plays the pastoral role of single-handedly meditating disputes among the people.

Based on the size of the population, it is likely that Moses carried out this task more regularly. This threatened his emotional and physical wellbeing. His father-in-laws (Jethro) was also concerned about Moses' wellbeing when he observed Moses' practice.

It seems that Moses had not reflected or taken any action to address this threat before Jethro's intervention. Moses comes across as one who is mainly concerned with supporting the people, as reportedly the case with many pastors/priests. Looking at Moses' practice, it is true that 'there may be over-doing even in doing-well.'⁵⁷ The fact that Moses does not personally express concerns about his experience does not negate the fact that he was under pressure. After all, he is human, and not a superhero. It is suggested that there is a presupposition among pastors that a compulsive overextension of time and energy is an affirmation of godliness.⁵⁸ We cannot help but ask if this was Moses' motivation to endure this challenging approach to pastoral care? However, in verse 18, Jethro highlights three points that are pertinent to the depiction of burnout in this discourse. Jethro perceived: (1) the work (of mediation) was *too heavy* for Moses – it would be too heavy for any one person!, (2) Moses could not handle it alone, and (3) Moses would *wear himself out* if he carried on with this practice: Jethro said, 'what you are doing is not good. You will surely wear yourself out' (vs17-18 NIV). According to Black and Rowley⁵⁹ Jethro perceived that 'Moses would soon be worn out if he does not delegate authority'. Notably, the EE dimension of burnout has been described in burnout theory with a phrase that corresponds with Jethro's description: i.e being '*worn out*.'⁶⁰ To Jethro, Moses' practice was exhausting and wearing out. According to Keil and Delitzsch's⁶¹ classic Old Testament commentary, wearing out literally means to *fade away* – as in Psalms 37:2. The sense of *fading away* comes across as an experience beyond mere tiredness.

There is a case here to argue that Jethro may have perceived Moses to be facing the risk of what we understand in contemporary psychology as burnout: a consequence of overload of contact with people for prolonged periods. The risk of *wearing out* can be linked to the EE dimension of burnout, which essentially refers to feelings of being emotionally overextended and drained by one's contact with other people. Brueggemann⁶² identifies Exodus 18:13-27 as a text highlighting the limitation on Moses' absolutism. This may be true. Nonetheless, beyond the issue of absolutism, the text highlights the limitation of Moses as a person. However, as already acknowledged, Exodus 18:13-27 does not offer us Moses' own perspective and expression about his situation. The narrative nonetheless: (1) offer Moses' situation from the perspective of an observer, Jethro – that can be linked to the *emotional exhaustion* dimension of burnout presented in this article, (2) it illuminates the context of Moses' situation and the magnitude of his task, which is beneficial for exploring the next section of his experience (Numbers 11:11-17; 2), and (3) engages the symptoms of burnout more directly.

Exploring Burnout in View of Moses' experience in Numbers 11:11-17

Following from Moses' experience in Exodus 18:13-27, his subsequent experience presented in Numbers 11:11 -17 provides the closest textual support for Moses' experience and risk of burnout, which mirrors Maslach's widely held description of burnout. Although Moses had a key role in Israel's history and performed miracles through Yahweh's spirit, Moses was not immune to physical and emotional exhaustion, as the case with all ministers who provide pastoral care to others. Moses was therefore predisposed to burnout in his role of leading the people of Israel. This was heightened by (1) the number of people he led: 'about six

hundred thousand men on foot, besides women and children' (Exodus 12:37), and (2) his preferred style of leadership i.e. that he had taken on most of the 'pastoral' work prior to Jethro's arrival (who later advised him to share this responsibility with others). Although Moses had managed to put up with the complaining behavior of the Hebrews for a considerable length of time (Exodus: 5:1-22; 14:11-12; 15:22; 16:1-4; 17:1-4) – his protest to Yahweh about the burden of leading and supporting the people depicted in Numbers 11:11-15 demonstrates that he had or was on the verge of *cracking-up*.⁶³ According to Black and Rowley, the complaints became the pinnacle of difficulty that made him realize that his task was more than what he could bear alone.⁶⁴ The text is elaborate on this:

So Moses said to the Lord, "Why have you treated your servant so badly? Why have I not found favor in your sight, that you lay the burden of all this people on me? 12 Did I conceive all this people? Did I give birth to them, that you should say to me, 'Carry them in your bosom, as a nurse carries a sucking child, to the land that you promised on oath to their ancestors'? 13 Where am I to get meat to give to all this people? For they come weeping to me and say, 'Give us meat to eat!' 14 I am not able to carry all this people alone, for they are too heavy for me. 15 If this is the way you are going to treat me, put me to death at once—if I have found favor in your sight—and do not let me see my misery." (Numbers 11:11-15 NRSV)

The questions (rhetoric) Moses presents to Yahweh out of disappointment and frustration of the people's complaints reveal both his humanity and the depth of how emotionally challenged he was. Henry considers this an example of how true and great believers can find it hard to trust in God under discouragements.⁶⁵ Contrary to Henry's view, the fact that Moses takes his concerns to Yahweh is a clear sign of his trust in Him. It was rather a cry for help to the only One who could help him. Nonetheless, in his cry to Yahweh, Moses' expressions emit the sense that he strongly felt that: (1) the congregation was too enormous for him to lead (vs11), (2) overburden (vs11), (3) the people's complaints were persistent (vs 13 - NIV), (4) he needed help in leading the people (vs14). This is contrary to the suggestion that 'Moses does not ask for help in leadership; he requests only the ultimate end of the burden.'⁶⁶ By lamenting that he was not able to carry the burden alone; this was in itself a cry for help, and (5) the burden was so great that if it continued his life was worthless-and preferred to die (vs15). Stubbs⁶⁷ asserts that Moses who usually displays concern for the people and often steps 'in the gap', here fails to intercede, and adds his complaint to that of the people. Without getting embroiled in the redaction criticism debate, it is worth highlighting that what has been perceived as inconsistencies of Moses' character in this passage from the lens of redaction criticism, ironically underlines the extent to which Moses had become overburdened. It is argued that 'A' narrative of verses 11–15 considerably differ from the 'B' (other) narratives of Moses. For instance, Sommer suggested that 'when the people complain that they want meat, he [Moses] doesn't pray for them; instead, he erupts into a long and angry outburst' [*Italics added*].⁶⁸ Sommer further contends that:

While B's Moses speaks rarely, preferring to say little and do much, A's rambles in his verbose complaint. He is not humble but petulant, not beneficent but bitter. Instead of concern for his people, he displays contempt for them and for his unwanted role as their parent.⁶⁹

It appears that Sommer has overlooked two important factors: (1) that Moses is human (not a superhero), and (2) that the challenges presented him by the Israelites were

persistent and long lasting. These two factors are important for understanding both burnout and how to mitigate it as will unfold in this discussion.

The Three-Dimension (EE, DP and PA) of Burnout in Moses Experiences

The biblical narratives of Moses' engagement with the people of Israel generally portray the picture that Moses was overburdened by the responsibility of leading them. Therefore, though Moses was very humble according to Yahweh's standards (Numbers 12:3); it is not surprising that the burden led him to breaking point. Similarly, although Yahweh is slow to anger (Numbers 14:18, Psalms 103:8); the persistent insolence of Israel aroused his anger (Numbers 11:1, Psalms 78:59). The point here is that Moses was indeed humble, but he was human. He, however, had the responsibility for a large number of people whose demands were unrelenting. The depth of Moses' cry to Yahweh in Numbers 11: 11–17 exhibited behaviors symptomatic of burnout as defined in this article.

In regard to the symptoms of EE as feelings of being emotionally overextended and drained by one's contact with other people as defined by Leiter and Maslach,⁷⁰ Moses owns utterances to Yahweh in Numbers 11:1-17 suggest that he was, or at least, on the verge of becoming emotionally strained by his experiences and contact with the congregation of Israel. In addition, Moses presented traits associated with the DP dimension of burnout as characterized by being cynical and having a negative attitude towards the people whom one is helping, irritability, loss of idealism and withdrawal.⁷¹ Moses expressed his revulsion of the congregation's demands of meat (v 13b). Here Moses comes across as one who is no longer concerned about the people. He is perceived as one displaying 'contempt for them and for his unwanted role as their parent.'⁷² Furthermore, Moses' expresses feelings of diminished competence or capacity to meet the challenging demand of his followers and not making progress in leading the people. He cries out to Yahweh stressing that the burden was 'too heavy' for him (vs14). It is highly unlikely that he would feel a strong sense of *personal accomplishment* in his role as particularly evidenced by his utterance that he would rather die than continue in the role (in its present form) (vs5). Moses had reached a low point. Others consider Moses language as that of discontent, despair and 'nothing more than an outpouring of zeal for the office assigned him by Yahweh, under the burden of which his strength would eventually break down, unless he receives support.'⁷³ It is important to note that this is the first time we see Moses in this state. This aligns with Brill's definition of burnout described above that conceptualizes burnout as manifesting in individuals who have functioned for a time at adequate performance and affectual levels in the same job situation, and who will not recover to previous levels without outside help or environmental rearrangement. Clearly, the record of Moses' lament presented in scripture suggests that (1) He had previously functioned in his role for a time at adequate performance and affectual levels in this role – as there is no record of similar protest from him; and (2) he indeed echoed that without assistance, he could not effectively continue in the role (11–14).

On Yahweh's Strategy for Mitigating the Risk Burnout

Following Moses cry to Yahweh concerning in Numbers 11:1-11, Yahweh responded and gave Moses a solution. The solution though practical in nature was divinely inspired. The

text (Numbers 1:1-16), allows us to tap into Yahweh's wisdom on what he determined would relieve Moses' from a situation of *burnout*. Although Yahweh had often miraculously provided for the needs of the people such as food (mana and quail) (Exodus 16) and water (Exodus 17), he does not heal Moses miraculously. Instead, he demonstrates that Moses has a part to play in remedying his own situation. Yahweh thus instructed Moses to appoint seventy of Israel's elders from among leaders and officials (whom Yahweh would anoint) to share the burden of the people. This would alleviate the pressure Moses had that emanated from carrying the people's burden alone (Number 11:16-17). Similarly, in Exodus 18, Jethro's advice for Moses to delegate the mediation responsibilities was also divinely inspired, as it corresponds with Yahweh's direct instruction for Moses to delegate in Numbers 11.

Two key lessons can be drawn from this: (1) Yahweh's care for his servants, his ministers; those who have the responsibilities of leading and caring (pastoring) for others. From this, we can deduce that Yahweh does not desire for his ministers to be overburdened, worn out or *burnt out* while ministering to others, and (2) it is Yahweh's design that his servants take practical measures to reduce the risk of being overburdened by work, which can lead to *burn out*. After Moses exhibited signs of burnout as I have defined it in this article, Yahweh masterminded and validated the practice of delegating pastoral responsibilities to reduce the burden of work. This point goes a long way to support the notion of a *theology of self-care*, drawing from Moses' example.

A Theology of Self-Care

The notion of self-care is a broad subject that can be approached from various perspectives. Self-care is generally defined as 'the active process of recovering, maintaining and improving one's health.'⁷⁴ However, a theological reflection of Yahweh's intervention and solutions to Moses situation particularly in Numbers 11:1-17 provides a valuable foundation for a theologically focused definition of self-care. Theological reflection contributes to 'a wisdom that gains insight into situations of ministry, that creatively interprets the texts and traditions of faith, and that further develops the person and practice of the minister.'⁷⁵ A theological reflection on the Exodus 18 and Numbers 11 narratives is useful for defining a *theology of self-care* for pastoral ministry. Going by the basic definition of theology, a *theology of self-care* essentially refers to insights on (or the study of) God's perspective (not ours) on the notion of self-care as revealed in the Scriptures. Therefore, whereas others have advanced that a theology of self-care begins with reevaluating one's call to ministry as invitation to liberation and wholesomeness⁷⁶; the common definition of theology as the study of God (*theo*) and God's revelation logically points to God's perspective as the starting point rather than ours. Evidently, based on Moses' experiences, Moses' understanding of his call did not have a perspective of self-care. Therefore, a theology of self-care begins by understanding God's perspective on self-care, namely that he is the author of self-care in pastoral ministry as demonstrated in Moses' situations discussed above.

I acknowledge that beyond the narratives of Moses, there exist other theological perspectives of self-care in pastoral ministry. They are usually associated with three broad objectives of self-care, i.e. (1) self-care to bring glory to God⁷⁷, (2) self-care to benefit others (community)⁷⁸, and (3) self-care to benefit one-self (as presented in this treatise)

(Gates 2015). It is clear that the theology of self-care can encompass a variety of dimensions. Looking at the three broad approaches above, we could define self-care as *a process that begins when one considers their life as a precious gift from God and take the God-given responsibility over it, which involves continuously identifying factors that threaten their health and wellbeing and respond to them by taking actions that promote and support optimum health and wellbeing. This does not only bring honor to God, but it also revitalizes the individual to more effectively support others.*

Nevertheless, the notion of self-care in pastoral ministry has been subject of critique, particularly when perceived as an individualistic practice.⁷⁹ The consideration of self-care can also raise internal conflict for ministry practitioners if it is wrongly construed as being in conflict with the principle of self-denial.⁸⁰ However, the basis of self-care as ordained by God in Exodus 18 and Numbers 11 aims to benefit the individual minister and mitigates ministry-associated burnout. Rubin rightly asserts that self-care is an essential Christian Godly principle to uphold as people can unconsciously ‘depreciate, demean, and put themselves down’ without realizing how destructive this is to them.⁸¹ This also applies to pastoral practitioners. Self-care is a form of stewardship over the life that the Lord has given us.⁸² Following Moses’ experiences, it can be resolved that self-care strategies sustain job satisfaction and ‘minimize risk for burnout.’⁸³ Apart from varying theological interpretations, there are other social and practical challenges that hinder the implementation of self-care strategies is different ministry contexts and congregations, and that the subject of self-care can be difficult for pastors themselves to raise with their churches.⁸⁴ Nevertheless, the benefits of self-care have been empirically validated in practice and found to foster resilience, vitality, and well-being.⁸⁵ ‘While Exodus 18 Numbers 11:1-17 specifically focuses on the element of delegation of responsibilities to reduce workload, Moses experiences can be used as foundations for theologically exploring other self-care strategies including rest, sabbaticals, detachment, etc.

Conclusion

This article contributes to addressing the scarcity of theological reflections on the subject of the risk of burnout in pastoral ministry, based on Scripture. The author appropriately presents Moses’ experiences in Exodus 18 and Numbers 11 as biblical foundations for *theologically* exploring the issue of burnout in pastoral ministry and how to mitigate against it. They begin by defining burnout and proceed to describe the psychological framework for retrospectively exploring burnout in Moses’ experiences using the three-dimensional Maslach Burnout Inventory (EE, DP and PA). By appealing to textual (biblical) evidence, the author effectively makes the case that Yahweh authored and validated self-caring strategies, particularly the delegation of pastoral responsibility as a mitigating factor for burnout. He goes further to suggest that a theology of self-care starts from recognizing that the principle of self-care originated with Yahweh. Although the article focuses on self-care in relation to Exodus 18 and Numbers 11, the author demonstrates awareness of other theological perspectives on self-care in pastoral ministry. Through a defined practical theological framework, this article underlines that pastoral practitioners are susceptible to burnout and they should actively consider self-care strategies to mitigate this risk.

Notes

1. Cole, *New American Commentary Volume 3B*.
2. Informal phrase for suffering an emotional breakdown under pressure.
3. Ben-Hur and Jonsen, "Ethical Leadership."
4. Landis, Hill and Harvey, "Synthesis of Leadership Theories and Styles"; Wolak, *Religion and Contemporary Management*.
5. Maslach and Leiter, "Understanding the Burnout Experience."
6. Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*.
7. Harrison, "Moses Definition and Meaning."
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