

SPIRITUAL BURNOUT

-- or --
Abundant Life?



by Malcolm Smith

We realize that Christianity is not a formula, but the Person of Jesus Himself. We no longer try to live for God...we live from Him who is the source of all life.

changed. However, the emphasis of the Scriptures is not so much on change – but *exchange!*

When a believer burns out, it's his own human resources that have been exhausted. God's infinite *zoe* can never be depleted. If He lives in each of us and is our life, then spiritual burnout is caused by the believer's failure to rest in and receive the continual flow of His life.

When a branch burns, the flames feed on the gases that are locked up in the wood. As these gases are spent, the wood is reduced to ashes and the flames flicker and die. But there was once a bush that burned, and it was not consumed by the flames. As it blazed, the flames were not feeding on the resources of the bush; it was only the vehicle that contained and expressed the fire.

The flame and radiant light that came from the bush was the uncreated life, the *zoe*, of God

who is light. When the presence of God departed from the bush, the leaves were green and the branches as moist as they had been before. It had burned, but none of its resources had been drawn upon.

The Christian life is not living in our own strength and resources, but from the infinite Christ who lives within those who believe. All human strength will come to an end sooner or later, leaving each of us with a charred, burned-out life. But His strength knows no end.

"Whom have I in heaven but Thee? And besides Thee, I desire nothing on earth. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. For, behold, those who are far from Thee will perish... But as for me, the nearness of God is my good; I have made the Lord God my refuge...." (Psalm 73:25-28)

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WISE TRACKS

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We sat in a cafe in the Mayfair area of London. Outside, the fog was settling in on the late November afternoon. The gloom outside matched the dark despair that registered on the face of my friend across the table. I had sat down to talk with Jack about all that had been happening in our recent work in Africa, but I soon backed off when I saw his total disinterest and depression.

Jack had been the pastor of a successful church in Scotland and was a well-known convention speaker. I knew him as a man filled with excitement and vision, always discussing his latest program for church growth or something new he had seen in the Scriptures.

It had taken me off guard when I received his call a few months before. Jack said he had resigned the ministry and was now selling insurance. He said he needed to get out of the pastorate to become the husband and the father he had neglected to be.

Now as I looked across the table at Jack, I saw a tired man, weary with life and at present in deep despair. Quietly, he said, "This is why I quit, Malcolm. I could have rearranged my schedule to give more time to my family. That was just a good excuse. The real reason is...." He stopped and stared moodily at the thickening fog outside.

"The real reason is... it doesn't work. It's all talk and going through religious motions, but no one is changed!"

Falling By The Wayside

Jack is one more who has joined the increasing number of casualties who have fallen exhausted by the wayside, spiritually burned out. Spiritual burnout is not something that only happens to ministers. Today we are seeing an epidemic of dropouts from church membership rolls; not the Easter and Christmas members, but the exemplary, enthusiastic church workers. Why are people burning out, dropping out, or settling down to the boredom of what is called "church" today?

Some say we should pray more. I do not discount prayer, but I have discovered that many of those praying are themselves prime candidates for spiritual exhaustion! Whatever causes spiritual burnout is deeper than lack of prayer.

Others say we suffer from lack of faith. "We must build our faith, feed our spirits with the Word... and we will be invincible." I agree the Church is woefully short on faith and in desperate need to return to the life that is in the Word of God. However, some of the most tragic cases of burnout I have met come from among those who claim to understand faith.

Spiritual burnout runs parallel to what is happening in the secular world. There the term *burnout* has been coined to describe the condition of the person who has become mentally and emotionally exhausted in his reach for success in his field.

Dr. Herbert Freudenberger describes the person who has burned out as, "Someone in a state of fatigue or frustration brought about by devotion to a cause, a way of life, or relationship that failed to produce the expected reward."

Spiritual burnout can only occur where there is either a fundamental misunderstanding of the heart of the Gospel, or a failure to apply it to our lives and ministry. A person who has dropped exhausted does so because he has believed a distortion of the Gospel, or because he has forgotten the heart of the Gospel he once believed and has been led astray.

The Leaven Of The Pharisees

What was the belief system that called forth the strongest and angriest words of Jesus? *It was the message of acceptance by performance.* The Pharisees called people to come to acceptance by God through their own good works. It is this message that is at the heart of all religion, and it is what leaves people exhausted in their efforts to perform acceptably for God.

Jesus exposed the spirit of Pharisaism as antagonistic to His Father's heart and the Gospel. He warned his disciples... "Watch out! Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees...." (Mark 8:15) Then in Luke 15:11-32, Jesus introduced the character of the elder brother in the parable of the Prodigal Son to show the true nature of that Pharisee belief system.

The brother had been working in the fields all day and, as he returned, he heard the sound of loud music and dancing. Annoyed, he asked a servant what was happening. Excitedly, the servant told him that his brother had returned and the party was his welcome-home celebration.

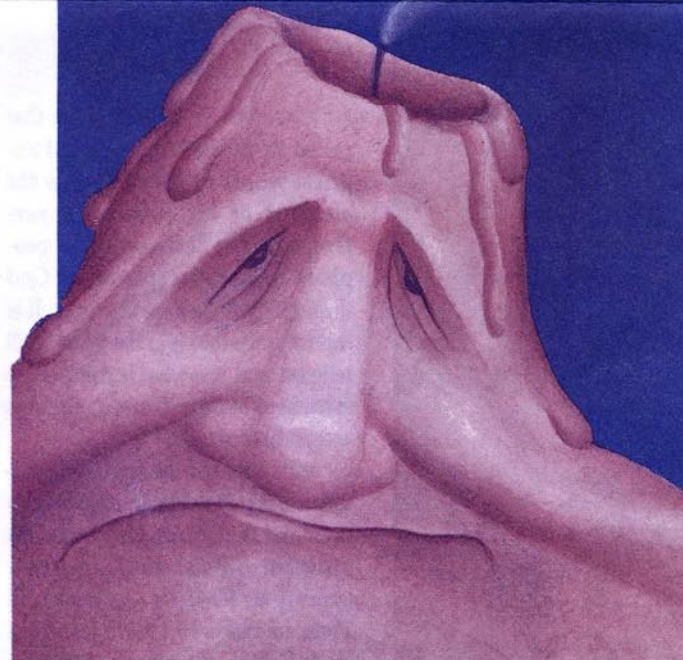
The elder brother's eyes became dark with anger as he turned back to the fields, refusing to go inside. Inwardly, he raged against his father. Hearing that he was not willing to welcome his brother, the father came out to plead with him to come inside. Sullenly, he refused and, then, exploded at his father.

"Look! For so many years I have been serving you, and I have never neglected a command of yours; and yet you have never given me a kid, that I might be merry with my friends; but when this son of yours came, who has devoured your wealth with harlots, you killed the fattened calf for him." (Luke 15:29,30)



In his anger, he showed the nature of his heart all through the years. He said, "I have been serving you, and I have never neglected a command of yours." The Greek word for serve is "to slave." The New English Bible translates it as, "... I have slaved for you all these years..." (verse 29). He had chafed under what he had perceived as rules laid down by his slave-driving father.

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He saw himself as a slave, quick to do all he was commanded. Because of this perverted idea, he perceived his father's words through the ears of a slave. When the father said to him, "The fences need fixing," he was speaking to his son and co-owner of the farm. He was really saying, "It would be a wise investment in our property if we fixed the fences today."

As heard through the ears of the elder brother, it translated, "Fix the fences, boy!"

He had always done as he was told – even though he didn't always enjoy or agree with it. But he had never begun to understand the idea of a love relationship in which, as a son, he was accepted and loved for who he was.

Nor did he know the joy of loving his father or brother with that kind of love. There had never been a day when he had worked for the sheer love of his father. Now the younger brother, who had flagrantly disobeyed and shamed his father, had come home – and father was giving him a party!

There were no words to express the older brother's feelings of rejection. He felt his father was grossly unfair. He raged, "It isn't fair, he

hasn't done what I have! He hasn't slaved and obeyed your every command as I have. When will I do enough to please you?"

What he and the Pharisees whom he represented were blind to was the fact that acceptance had *nothing* to do with actions or behavior. It had *everything* to do with the father's love and, on the part of the younger brother, faith in that incredible love. Acceptance depended on who the father was – not on what the son had done.

Changing The Heart

The belief system of the Pharisee, seeking acceptance with God by changing one's behavior, reduces Christianity to a formula instead of the dynamic relationship with God that Jesus came to bring. The more a person tries to conform to religion, the further away from God he grows. With increased dedication comes an increased sense of emptiness. Keeping all the rules does not satisfy the hunger within.

We once had a dog named Fred. Fred was a cheerful little creature, but he had the annoying habit of playfully biting the legs of anyone who walked down our drive, especially the mailman. So we muzzled him.

To the relief of the mailman, Fred now sat with a muzzle over his mouth. People could now walk our path in safety. However, nothing had changed in Fred. Every day he sat lusting after all the legs that went past. We had changed his behavior, but not his disposition!

Religion changes behavior – but not the heart. Following all of the rules, the believer avoids what is forbidden, but his heart still wants to do it. As he continues to struggle for spiritual maturity within the framework of the codes of his church, he becomes confused, disheartened, and soured. His enthusiasm wanes, and he realizes that he is only going through the motions. Finally, he drops from the scene.

First Joy Of Salvation

What a contrast to the first months of our walk with Christ! Do you remember the day you first saw the grace of God? You rejoiced in Jesus and what He had done in your life! A childlike delight in life gave you such an aura of joy that even cynical friends had to comment.

You were amazed at the way some of the old habits dropped off and a new lifestyle began to emerge from within. Above everything else, you had an insatiable hunger for God. You wanted to know His Truth, and so you read the Scriptures avidly.

It's at this time in their Christian life that many are sidetracked by a believing Pharisee. The reasoning is that, if the person is filled with the Spirit, then everything he says must be right. Therefore, the message of becoming a mature believer by obedience to rules and formulas is accepted.

The message makes sense to the flesh, so freedom in Christ is relinquished for the bondage of Pharisaism. Under the yoke of bondage, the spontaneous life of Christ within becomes a memory and the joy of the Lord disappears.

Jesus Vs. Religion

But *Jesus* has nothing in common with religion, any more than the shepherd has anything in common with the poacher! He did not come to give us strength to keep the Ten Commandments, nor did He give us an updated version of them in the Sermon on the Mount.

Jesus was opposed to *any* system that told man to change his behavior in order to be acceptable to God. He did not come to found a new religion! The Church He died and rose again to bring into existence is not a religion at all. He describes Himself and His mission by saying: "... I came that they might have life, and might have it abundantly." (John 10:10)

We will feel the force of what He is saying here by understanding the

meaning of the word He uses for life. In the Greek language, the word is *zoe*. *Zoe* is the life of God and is, therefore, not understood merely as an extension of days and activities, but as a *quality and intensity* of life.

Two thousand years ago, the *zoe* of God came to live among us in Jesus. From the very beginning of His ministry, it was apparent that He was saying something radically different from anything that had gone before.

Jesus did not come merely to forgive us and send us on our way to do our best to be good. Calling men to participate in God's life and love took the matter beyond *anything* man could do in terms of achievement. No amount of dedication could produce in a man the nature of God! Jesus came to begin a new race of people who shared in His *zoe*.

This was, *and still is*, radical.

The Indwelling Christ

How does the *zoe*, the life of Christ Himself, actually become manifest in our lives? We know that to try and imitate it in our own strength is utter despair. But then, how *does* He live through us?

One day, a number of years ago, I sat in a diner pondering these great truths. I asked myself, "How can Christ, the *zoe-agape* of God, live in me?" Just then the waitress brought me a cup of hot water with a tea bag on the side. I began dipping the tea bag into the water, watching it turn color as it received the strength of the tea.

Suddenly, it dawned on me that I had just "infused" the tea into the water. The strength and taste of the tea had been released from the leaves

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into the colorless, tasteless water. Just laying the tea bag against the cup would have accomplished nothing – there had to be an *infusion*.

I realized then that I was completely incapable of reproducing the life of Christ within myself, even as the water was helpless to turn itself into tea. If I was to live His life, then He must come and live it within me. His life must be *infused* into my spirit.

As the Apostle Paul says: "I have strength for all things in Christ who empowers me – I am ready for anything and equal to anything through Him who infuses inner strength into me..." (Phil. 4:13 AMP)

If the resurrected Jesus is going to be known and tasted by the world today, it is not as a result of man *trying* to be like Him – but of Him being expressed through our weakness! The tea will always be locked up in the bag until *released* through the medium of the water.

The fusion of the tea and water is so complete that we no longer call it water – but tea. Yet the tea is still in the bag! Christ is in us – our life is His life – yet He has not become us and we have not become Him. We are forever distinct, and forever one. This is the miracle that takes place when a person comes to Christ.

Rejecting The Source Of Life

But how do we get that life into our own weak lives?

The answer religion gives to this is always in terms of something we *do*. In my youth, I asked that question of many pastors and always the answer was a variation on the same idea: To have the flow of the life of God, one must set aside time to pray and read the Bible on a regular basis.

To say that the life of Christ flows in and through our lives because we spend a daily hour in devotion is to turn prayer and Bible study into a work of the flesh. It is to make the activity one more rung on the ladder to God. How dedicated must a person be before the life begins to flow? What level of being "sold out to God" must we be at before the first trickle of the *zoe* begins to come?

The Pharisees pored over the Scriptures and said prayers believing they would somehow tap into God's life, but Jesus plainly told them that in so doing they were missing the *only source* of life – Christ Himself.

"You search the Scriptures, because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is these that bear witness of Me; and you are unwilling to come to Me, that you may have life." (John 5:39,40)

The Rest Of Faith

That brings us to the very heart of the Good News – it is faith and not works! In the New Testament, to accept the Gospel was seen to be an obedience of faith. "May Christ through your faith actually dwell – settle down, abide, make His permanent home – in your hearts." (Eph. 3:17 AMP)

It is at this point of understanding that a believer, burning out in his efforts to please God, moves from exhaustion to rest. Tired and wearied with his struggle to perform acceptably for God through the disciplines and dedications of religion, he hears the grace of God and the Holy Spirit makes it alive in his heart.

Like the returning son in Jesus' story, most of us see very little of what God desires to give us. We are perfectly happy

to come home at the level of a hired servant, feeling that the slave position is appropriate for us. It is only after we have come home that we discover the Father's grace is infinitely greater than we had ever dreamed.

We finally realize that Christianity is not a formula, but the Person of Jesus Himself. When we understand who He is, then everything begins to fall in place. We no longer try to live *for* God, we live *from* Him who is the source of all life. The revelation of Christ living within has rescued us from religious ladder climbing.

The Exchanged Life

In the last few years, I have spoken with hundreds of burned-out, disillusioned people who have prayed and looked for their lives to be