



## Echoes of acedia: introverts and perfectionists in the Church

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*This article continues the series on acedia, which began with the history and development of the term in the last issue of Holiness. Two areas are considered in this article: first, introversion, and second, perfectionism. In both cases, relevant psychological literature is reviewed to develop the understanding of the concept. The impact this can have on leadership and ministry in the life of the Church is then considered, along with some reflective suggestions for embracing the healthy aspects of introversion and perfectionism, while avoiding the unhealthy aspects, which lead to depletion of personal, spiritual and pastoral resilience.*

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## Introverts in the Church

### ***Introvert***

a shy, reticent person.

in psychology, a person predominantly concerned with their own thoughts and feeling rather than with external things.

origins: mid-seventeenth century (as verb in the general sense 'turn one's thoughts inward (in spiritual contemplation)'); from modern Latin *introverso* to turn. Its use as a term in psychology dates from the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup>

Henry David Thoreau noted perceptively that 'What a man thinks of himself, that it is which determines, or rather indicates his fate.'<sup>2</sup> As we have seen, acedia is a multifaceted complex, involving within the term theological, spiritual, geographical and psychological components. The 'acedia complex', as we might term it, could be enlisted as a paradigm for all that depletes clergy in terms of their spiritual well-being and their ability to work effectively as pastors and Christian leaders. One echo of acedia that impacts clergy in the twenty-first century relates to the psychological condition commonly known as 'introversion'.

In her remarkable book *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World that Won't Stop Talking*, Susan Cain explores the challenges that introverts face in society today, personally, socially and corporately. She perceptively and helpfully notes that 'personality' is as powerful a shaping force in our lives and outlook as perhaps gender and race. She writes:

Our lives are shaped as profoundly by personality as by gender or race. And the single most important aspect of personality – 'the north and south of temperament' – is where we fall on the introvert-extrovert spectrum. Our place on this continuum influences our choices of friends and mates, and how we make conversation, resolve differences, and how we show love. It affects the careers we choose and whether or not we succeed in them.<sup>3</sup>

Reading Cain's words one can see immediately that if Cain's premise is even partially correct, being an introvert will have significant effects on modern clergy and their ability to maintain resilience and to be effective in pastoral ministry.

In recent years, there has been significant and exhaustive research into extroversion and introversion within the academic discipline of personality psychology. There has also been much work done on issues relating to introversion, Christian spirituality and ministry, as we will see later.

### *Introverts in an extrovert society*

The reason introversion is an important subject to consider is because we live in a society, and perhaps a church, that is dominated by what Cain calls the 'extrovert ideal'. This is the omnipresent belief that the ideal self is gregarious, alpha and comfortable in the spotlight. 'The archetypal extrovert', Cain notes, 'prefers action to contemplation, risk-taking to heed-taking, and certainty to doubt. He/she favours quick decisions even at the risk of being wrong.' Cain considers introversion, alongside its cousins, sensitivity, seriousness and shyness, to be considered 'second-class personality traits, somewhere between a disappointment and a pathology'.<sup>4</sup>

Introverts do not fit in well with society's dominating models and expectations. According to Cain, they are to be compared to women living in a man's world. Introverts tend to be discounted because of a trait that goes to the core of who they are. As seen in media models and to some extent in popular literature, Western society apparently finds extroversion an extremely appealing personality trait/style.

We should also note that a majority of teachers believe that the ideal student is extrovert. Educators consider that pupil-led learning, discussion and explorative group work are the best models for learning. This approach holds true at both secondary- and at university-level education. When the 'extrovert ideal' drives pedagogy, those who are more introverted can find it extremely difficult to engage with the learning process. This general societal emphasis on the extrovert ideal and bias against 'quiet' causes introverts personal and social discomfort, sometimes in the extreme. Cain notes that being prodded to come out of one's introvert self can cause psychic pain. However, it has become an oppressive standard to which most of us feel we must conform. Interestingly, conformity to this 'extrovert ideal' may well have infiltrated the Church's consciousness in terms of ideal personality types for ministerial work. We shall return to this later.

It has been noted that a great deal of unthinking, or perhaps culturally intuitive, preference is given to those who exhibit an extrovert personality type. For example, society apparently considers extroverts, those who are talkative, to

be more intelligent, better looking, more interesting and more desirable as friends. Apparently, velocity of speech counts as well as volume. Research has shown that in a group setting the voluble are considered smarter than the reticent, and that the group is often swayed by the person who dominates the conversation. Again, this has significant implications for clergy engaged in parish ministry.

The 'extrovert ideal' is viewed positively by society, as we have noted. It is logical then that introversion is not viewed in the same positive light. The word 'introvert' suffers under the burden of being a stigma. The psychologist Laurie Helgoe notes that introverts describe their own physical appearance in vivid language, but when asked to describe generic introverts they drew a bland and distasteful picture ('ungainly', 'neutral colours', 'skin problems').<sup>5</sup>

The terms extrovert and introvert stem from the work of Carl Jung in 1921. In his ground-breaking book *Psychological Types*, Jung popularised the terms *introvert* and *extrovert* as the building blocks of personality. Jung perceptively recognised that introverts are drawn to the inner world of thought and feeling, and extroverts to the external life of people and activities. However, we should be aware that there is no all-purpose definition of introversion or extroversion; these are not unitary categories. In the online publication *Psychology Today*, Todd Kashdan notes:

It is easy to talk about extroverts and introverts as if there is a clear divide between the two groups of people. It is easy to take a test and pigeonhole ourselves as one or the other. In reality, we ignore the power of the situation. When we respond in a similar way to the same situation at different times, we can think of this situation as a trigger for how we behave. In this case, we can view situations as part of our personality.<sup>6</sup>

### *Understanding introversion*

The so called 'Big Five School' of personal psychology (ie, academics who contend that human personality can be boiled down to *five primary traits*) defines introversion not in terms of a rich inner life but as a lack of qualities such as assertiveness and sociability. This appears to be an unnecessarily negative approach to introversion, describing what it is not rather than positively noting the beneficial aspects of being an introvert. However, modern psychologists do agree on the fact that introverts tend to need less external stimulus to 'enjoy life'

than extroverts. Todd Kashdan notes: 'At its core, introversion is about deriving less reward from being the center of social attention.'<sup>7</sup>

The introvert may feel drained (emotionally depleted) by social interaction. The extrovert personality, on the other hand, needs much more external stimulus for an activity or pursuit to be considered worth engaging in. Again, Kashdan notes that the extrovert loves social attention: 'It energizes them, it brings out their best qualities, and it bolsters their stamina, extemporaneous thinking, and productivity.' Extroverts tend to be stimulated by high-octane, risk-taking activities. More cerebral pursuits emotionally replenish introverts. Extroverts tend to tackle tasks quickly and can make fast (rash?) decisions; they can multi-task and enjoy new challenges personally, socially and in terms of career. On the other hand, introverts tend to work more slowly and deliberately. They focus on one task at a time and can have pronounced levels of prolonged concentration.

In a parallel idea to what has been stated above, Hans Eysenck described extroversion–introversion as the degree to which a person is outgoing and interactive with other people.<sup>8</sup> These behavioral differences are presumed to be the result of underlying differences in brain physiology. Extroverts seek excitement and social activity in an effort to heighten their arousal level, whereas introverts tend to avoid social situations in an effort to keep such arousal to a minimum. Eysenck designated extroversion as one of three major traits in his PEN model of personality, which also includes psychoticism and neuroticism.

Building upon the work of Jung, the Myers-Briggs approach to personality testing states that the first pair of psychological preferences is extroversion and introversion. They have a list of characteristics for each personality type, with which a client can compare themselves.

### Extroversion (E)

I like getting my energy from active involvement in events and having a lot of different activities. I'm excited when I'm around people and I like to energise other people. I like moving into action and making things happen. I generally feel at home in the world. I often understand a problem better when I can talk out loud about it and hear what others have to say.

The following statements generally apply to me:

- I am seen as 'outgoing' or as a 'people person'.
- I feel comfortable in groups and like working in them.
- I have a wide range of friends and know lots of people.
- I sometimes jump too quickly into an activity and don't allow enough time to think it over.
- Before I start a project, I sometimes forget to stop and get clear on what I want to do and why.

### Introversion (I)

I like getting my energy from dealing with the ideas, pictures, memories, and reactions that are inside my head, in my inner world. I often prefer doing things alone or with one or two people I feel comfortable with. I take time to reflect so that I have a clear idea of what I'll be doing when I decide to act. Ideas are almost solid things for me. Sometimes I like the idea of something better than the real thing.

The following statements generally apply to me:

- I am seen as 'reflective' or 'reserved'.
- I feel comfortable being alone and like things I can do on my own.
- I prefer to know just a few people well.
- I sometimes spend too much time reflecting and don't move into action quickly enough.
- I sometimes forget to check with the outside world to see if my ideas really fit the experience.<sup>9</sup>

We should note at this point that introversion is not necessarily related to shyness. Louis Schmidt of McMaster University, who studies the biological underpinnings of personality, especially shyness, states: 'Though in popular media they're (i.e. introversion and shyness) often viewed as the same, we know in the scientific community that conceptually or empirically they are unrelated.'<sup>10</sup>

A question to raise at this point is: are we born extroverts or introverts (nature), or do we become introverts or extroverts via socialisation (nurture)? Are we determined biologically to be either one personality type or the other, or is there space for free will and autonomous development? Jerome Kagan's insightful work on the *amygdala responses* is relevant at this point.<sup>11</sup> The amygdala is thought to be the emotional centre of the brain and serves as the brain's emotional switchboard. Kagan's work with children demonstrated that those with an excitable amygdala tend to be 'high responders' to external stimulus, and tend to grow up to be more introverted. He also noted that those children with a less excitable amygdala tended to be 'low responders' to external stimuli and need more external stimulation for them to become excited and fully engaged. These children tended to grow up with extrovert personality traits.

Eysenck also thought that the basis of differing responses to stimulation observed in extroverts and introverts was due to the structure of the individual's brain – in a brain structure called the *Ascending Reticular Activating System* (ARAS). Eysenck posited that the ARAS functioned differently in introverts and extroverts: introverts have wide-open information channels, causing them to be flooded with information and over-aroused, while extroverts have tighter channels making them prone to under-arousal.<sup>12</sup> Cain states:

Over-arousal doesn't produce anxiety so much as the sense that you can't think straight – that you've had enough and want to go home now. Under arousal is something like cabin-fever. Not enough is happening: you feel itchy, restless, and sluggish, like you need to get out of the house already.<sup>13</sup>

Neurological science does indeed point to the shape and function of the brain as having a significant impact on whether we are extroverts or introverts. It is known that the amount of dopamine being produced in the brain has a significant impact on introversion and extroversion. Also, genetic influences play their part: for example, the SERT gene, which is linked to the neurotransmitter serotonin and affects the transport of the serotonin. Biology and genetics do play a fundamental role in forming our personality types, but not necessarily our temperaments. The formation of our temperaments tends to have been in the realm of how we were raised, how we were treated, and how we were shown love and affection. The personality and expectations of our parents are also a significant factor.

As we have previously noted, many find that they do not fit neatly into either category; most of us tend to be to some extent 'ambivert'. Carl Jung stated that 'There is no such thing as a pure extrovert or a pure introvert. Such a man would be in a lunatic asylum.' Whether or not we are genetically biased towards either extroversion or introversion there is something that the author Susan Cain thinks we should understand in all this:

Once we understand introversion and extroversion as preferences for certain levels of stimulation (whether we are 'high reactors' or 'low reactors' to external stimulus), then we can begin consciously trying to situate ourselves in environments favourable to our personality – neither overstimulating nor under stimulating, neither boring nor anxiety-making. We can organise our lives in terms of what personality psychologists call 'optimal levels of arousal' and what I call 'sweet spots' and by doing so feel more energetic and alive than before.<sup>14</sup>

Cain poses what at first seems a slightly facile question, but one that has serious implications for Christians in general and serving clergy in particular: In 'Does God love introverts? An Evangelical Dilemma?' Francis notes that the issue of personality types and clergy needs addressing without delay. He writes, 'Further work, further research is urgent.'<sup>15</sup>

### *Introverts in the Church*

This question has been picked up and addressed by the American Presbyterian Adam McHugh in his book *Introverts in the Church: Finding our Place in an Extroverted Culture*.<sup>16</sup> It is to the subject addressed in McHugh's book that we now turn. We will attempt to show that introversion is an echo of the ancient 'depletion agent' acedia, in that both negatively impact the personal and spiritual well-being and resilience of modern clergy in the performance of their ministerial task.

Recent research has shown that close to 50 per cent of the population could be classified as introverts, an increase from earlier studies that indicated a figure nearer 25 per cent.<sup>17</sup> If this is the case, and there are different views on this, it means that it is likely that 50 per cent of church congregations have introvert personality traits. Following on from this, and recognising that there are psychological variables within the constituency of Christians who enter full-time ministry, we can safely say that introverts are well represented among



modern clergy. Therefore, we need to take an in-depth look at the material that McHugh presents on introverts in the Church.

The origins of the book *Introverts in the Church* lie in a time when McHugh was considering resigning from ordination training because he was under the strong impression that 'ordained ministry required social skills ... and being in social situations which drained and exhausted him'. He realised that the issue was not vocational per se, but primarily about personality and temperament. He writes: 'Even before I began pastoral ministry, I was convinced that my personality (Introvert) excluded me from it. There was no room in ministry for someone of my disposition – or so I thought.' McHugh continues:

In my mind at the time, ideal pastors were gregarious, able to move through crowds effortlessly, able to quickly turn strangers into friends. They could navigate diverse social circles and chat about a number of topics. They thrived in the presence of people and were energised by conversation and social interaction ... they were charismatic and magnetic, capable of drawing people to themselves by the virtue of their likeability and able to persuade people to follow them based on charm alone. I, by contrast, relished times of solitude, reflection, and personal study. Even though I enjoyed spending time with people I liked, I looked forward to moments of privacy. I found crowds draining. I could stand up in front of a large congregation and preach without nervousness, but I often stumbled through the greeting time afterward because my energy reserves were dry.<sup>18</sup>

To combat this sense of alienation and lack of 'ecclesiastical fit', McHugh thought that he should attempt to squeeze himself into the extrovert model of church leadership instead of becoming 'the kind of leader that God had designed him to be'. McHugh is surely representative of many introverted clergy who find that the ethos of the Church is extrovert. Like McHugh, they find particularly that evangelical churches are difficult places for introverts to thrive for both theological and cultural reasons.

McHugh discovered that the North American 'extrovert ideal' had infiltrated the Church and the image and model of church leadership. He notes that there are historical reasons for this. The roots of the extroverted church leadership model go back to the Great Awakening in the USA during the eighteenth century. George Whitefield, whose preaching made a huge impact on both

sides of the Atlantic at that time, had a pronounced extrovert style of preaching to the masses. Church historian Mark Noll comments on Whitefield's extrovert homiletic style: 'In the pulpit he seemed to exude energy; his speech was to the highest degree dramatic; he offered breath-taking impersonations of biblical characters and needy sinners; he fired his listener's imagination; he wept profusely, often and with stunning effect.'<sup>19</sup> McHugh also cites the emotionalism of the Camp Meetings held during the Second Great Awakening in America. The speakers at these meetings emphasised that a conversion had to be sudden and dramatic (emotional) to be truly authentic.

According to McHugh, evangelical churches today still put a great emphasis on the more extrovert and public expressions of faith, piety and passion and particularly speaking about faith. Modern evangelical churches seem to have fallen foul of E. M. Forster's character Mrs Moore's jibe, 'poor little talkative Christianity' in *A Passage to India*. Extroversion can lead to verbosity and this is something with which not all are comfortable. Henri Nouwen, for example, is often concerned that our 'wordiness' might be a mask for a spiritual void.

Extrovert Christianity also appears to evidence a 'performance-based' approach to faith. Perhaps we get an understanding of the origin of this approach from the work of the German sociologist Max Weber and his book *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904–05). The *Encyclopedia Britannica* explains Protestant ethic, in sociological theory, as the value attached to hard work, thrift, and efficiency in one's worldly calling. These things, especially in the Calvinist view, were deemed signs of an individual's election, or eternal salvation.<sup>20</sup> Extrovert Christianity seems to see 'busyness' as next to godliness. For McHugh, an extrovert Christian is a very active Christian in the terms of 'doing'. Eugene Peterson candidly comments that American Christianity is typified by 'its messianically pretentious energy'.<sup>21</sup>

In a church culture that is built upon an extrovert expression of faith, it is easy to see how introverts might feel uncomfortable and excluded. This may be especially true when it comes to church leadership and pastoral ministry. How do introvert clergy fit into an extrovert Church? How will introvert ministerial candidates fair in terms of success at selection committees or conferences? How will introvert clergy fair in terms of being invited to a church to take up a new ministerial role? McHugh notes that our 'action-orientated culture' does not always value people who are (quiet?) thoughtful and reflective. Perhaps the extroverted church is in danger of excluding introverted clergy who may be able to take a community to its reflective and meditative centre. McHugh is

insightful when he writes that, 'The truly healthy church is a combination of introverted and extroverted qualities that fluidly move together.'<sup>22</sup>

### *Contemplative leaders*

J. I. Packer notes that 'The healthy Christian is not necessarily the extrovert, ebullient Christian.'<sup>23</sup> Considering such statements, more thought must be given to ecclesiastical space for a more 'quiet', reflective and even apophatic approach to spirituality. Thought must surely now be given to a recalibration of our understanding of spiritual leadership. McHugh is convinced that the best way to achieve the extrovert/introvert balance within our Christian communities is by calling different kinds of leaders. The introvert pastor will naturally bring a different spirituality to that of the extroverted clergyperson. Introverts, according to McHugh, bring much-needed balance to a leadership team. McHugh suggests that churches work their way through the following questions when they are looking to appoint new pastoral staff or augment an existing clergy team:

1. What are our measures for gauging leadership potential (considering extrovert and introvert expressions of leadership potential)?
2. How do we identify and select our leader's potential (considering extrovert and introvert expressions of leadership potential)?
3. Is our evaluative lens extroverted?
4. Do we exclusively look for charismatic, gregarious pastors?
5. How important is it that our leaders are skilled at listening as well as talking?
6. In selecting lay leaders do we elevate those who attend the most activities and are most popular?
7. Are we open to different kinds of leaders, people who are thoughtful and contemplative and who lead by example?<sup>24</sup>

I would add a couple of additional questions to this list:

8. Are we factoring personality traits into our selection and training for ministry in the Methodist Church in Great Britain, and elsewhere?
9. Are we ensuring that there is a policy and a practical structure that sensitively supports differing personality types in their ministry?

Ian Cowley brings us to a well-balanced conclusion:

Finding the balance between engagement and disengagement will be different for each of us. Some of us are extroverts who gain energy from being with people, while others are introverts

who need time and space on their own to renew their energy and their enthusiasm for being engaged with people and their needs. There must be some disengagement for each of us if we are to have time for prayer, knowing God and listening to Him. In our contemporary culture the overwhelming pressure is to be doing too much, to be overly engaged in doing and not sufficiently invested in being.<sup>25</sup>

## Perfectionists in the Church

### *Perfectionism*

a refusal to accept any standard short of perfection.

in philosophy, a doctrine holding that perfection is attainable, especially the theory that human moral or spiritual perfection should be or has been attained.

Another echo of the ancient 'acedia complex' is what writers on the subject call 'bad perfectionism', the belief that 'unless everything is absolutely right ... it is absolutely wrong'. As we shall see, this 'bad' brand of perfectionism has a detrimental effect on the personal well-being of clergy; it diminishes and depletes their reservoir of resilience and it may well lead to burnout, breakdown or depression. If unchecked, perfectionism can cause a clergyperson to become a victim of *akrasia*, the inability to make decisions (*ataraxia* being the preferred condition, one of 'tranquillity'). Perfectionism can lead to ministerial paralysis and ineffectiveness.

### *Understanding perfectionism*

We now will examine the origins and the consequences of perfectionism. One of our guides, with others, will be the psychiatrist Richard Winter, who has written extensively about perfectionism among Christians and Christian leaders (see his *Perfecting Ourselves to Death*<sup>26</sup>).

The English word 'perfect' derives from the Latin *perficere*, which means 'to make thorough or complete'. *The Oxford English Dictionary* (fourth edition) states that the word 'perfect' means 'complete in all respects; without defect or omission; flawless; in condition of complete excellence; faultless; completely correct or accurate; exact; precise'. The Greek word translated 'perfect' is *telos*, which means end or purpose.

The concept of *telos* is significant in the writing of the fourth-century BCE Greek philosopher Aristotle. Aristotle considered that a thing or a person is 'good' if it achieves the purpose (*telos*) for which it was designed. For example, a good human is one who reaches full physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual maturity – that person has reached their *telos* or perfection. Aristotle believed that by using the *Golden Mean* a balanced and virtuous (*aretaic*) life between the vices of deficiency and excess could be achieved (a perfect life in the sense of *telos*). He also considered that by using *phronesis* (practical wisdom), humans could learn to flourish, achieve *eudaimonia*, a disposition of 'well-being' or 'flourishing'.

Thomas Aquinas (1225–74), Dr Angelicus as he was known, while teaching at the University of Paris and accessing Aristotelian material via Muslim scholars, took the Aristotelian philosophy of *telos* and *eudaimonia* and applied it to Christian theology. Aquinas introduced the element of theological rationality and Christian-based concepts of purpose. The major focus of *telos* (purpose/end/perfection) for Aquinas was to focus on the worship of God.

The issue that now confronts twenty-first-century secular societies is how, without the Aristotelian and Thomist Christian structure of *telos* (purpose/perfection) or any other religious framework for that matter, we know what the 'end' or perfection is towards which we are working. In a society that has disengaged from major metanarratives, the pursuit of perfection becomes one of individual customisation. In a world that rejects any hint of absolute guidelines (secular relativism) it is left to the individual to decide what perfection is and how it will be achieved. We then become vulnerable to what Winter calls 'the seductive sirens of perfectionism'. These sirens can come in the form of media advertising. These media adverts highlight the inadequacy and imperfections in our lives. In the individualised pursuit of this virtual perfection our society has turned to technology in the hope of securing twentieth-century *telos*. This is highlighted in the film *Gattaca* (1997, directed by Andrew Niccol), where embryos are screened for height, sex, IQ and vulnerability to disease; which is in point of fact the ongoing search for the infamous 'designer (perfect) offspring'.

Over the past decade and a half there has been a great interest in 'perfectionism' in professional psychological literature. It was not until 1930 that the word 'perfectionist' was coined. Winter points out that it was then commonly accepted as describing a person who is only satisfied by the highest standards. More recently research has homed in on whether all perfectionism

is harmful and destructive or whether some forms of it can be helpful and constructive. Some psychologists have claimed that there is a normal, healthy adaptive form of perfectionism – the pursuit of high standards and excellence – that can be distinguished from neurotic, unhealthy, maladaptive perfectionism. Other researchers state that perfection is impossible and therefore attempting to reach it is obviously unhealthy.

### *The spectrum of perfectionism*

Flett and Hewitt put forward a positive view of perfectionism – it is the healthy pursuit of excellence.<sup>27</sup> They define perfectionism as ‘the striving for flawlessness’. They note that extreme perfectionists are people who want to be perfect in all aspects of their lives. Simply put, it’s the *tendency* to set extremely high standards; the use of the term *tendency* implies for Flett and Hewitt the possibility of being on some part of a perfectionist continuum, that is, there are degrees of perfectionism. The important point here in terms of emotional, social, mental and spiritual well-being is how *intensely* we strive to reach those standards that we classify as constituting excellence or perfection, and how we respond when we do not come up to expected standards. How much we strive (are we obsessive?) and how much we ‘crash’ emotionally when we ‘fail’ are indicators as to whether we are adaptive in our perfectionism or maladaptive; whether it is a healthy or unhealthy form of perfectionism. Winter notes: ‘The size of the discrepancy between what is possible and what is pursued is a critical factor that makes all the difference between health and sickness – so also is the intensity with which one attempts to overcome the discrepancy.’<sup>28</sup>

There is evidence that high levels of perfectionism are associated with vulnerability to mental health problems, relational and social problems, and career problems. In terms of seeing perfectionism as a spectrum, neurotic perfectionism is at one end of the continuum and non-perfectionism is at the other, and somewhere in the middle (like Aristotle’s *Golden Mean*) we find normal, healthy perfectionism. Healthy perfectionism, for our purposes here, is characterised by high standards, high levels of organisation and striving for excellence. Healthy perfectionists:

- are usually full of energy and enthusiasm
- have positive self-image
- rarely procrastinate over decisions
- are realistic about strengths and weaknesses

- are driven more by positive motivation to achieve than by negative fear of failure.

Psychologist Don Hamachek notes:

Normal perfectionists ... are those who derive a very real sense of pleasure from the labours of painstaking effort and feel free to be less precise as the situation permits ... Normal perfectionists tend to enhance their self-esteem, rejoice in their skills, and appreciate a job well done.<sup>29</sup>

However, perfectionism is often seen as a two-edged sword. A seminar arranged by the University of Southampton was described in this way:

Perfectionism is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, perfectionism motivates people to give their best. On the other, perfectionism makes people despair and doubt themselves. Moreover, perfectionism is associated with various psychological problems such as stress, anxiety, and depression. Perfectionism, however, is a complex characteristic. There are various forms of perfectionism, and some are more harmful than others. In particular, it is important to differentiate perfectionistic strivings (striving for perfection) from perfectionistic concerns (concern over mistakes).<sup>30</sup>

In contrast to healthy perfectionists, neurotic, unhealthy perfectionists set unrealistically high standards. Their sense of self-worth depends almost entirely on performance and production according to the goals they have set themselves. They are continuously self-critical; they find mistakes confirm their feelings of uselessness and they often doubt that they can do anything right. Whatever they do, it is never quite good enough.

This type of unhealthy perfectionism can be seen in James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Scholars note that *A Portrait* acts as a transitional stage between the 'realism' of Joyce's *Dubliners* and the more esoteric symbolism of *Ulysses*. There is little doubt that *Portrait* is a thinly veiled autobiography of Joyce's early life. Stephen, the focus of the novel, is never quite satisfied with his life and with his writing; he struggles with language, wrestling to encapsulate his ideas in words. In the last part of the novel he resorts to using words in a sort of nihilistic stream of consciousness. Stephen (Joyce) cannot find fulfilment in the Catholic Church, in his family, in his writing

or in his relationships. Nothing is quite what he wants it to be. He was like the mythical Icarus: he had times when he flew high, only to find himself crashing to the ground singed by the sun of circumstances. In real life, Joyce, in a fit of frustration, threw an early version of *A Portrait* into the fire. He always saw this novel as incomplete, a work of an inexperienced young author, never perfect in literary terms; hence it is a portrait by a young and developing, yet not complete (imperfect) artist.

The English essayist and author George Orwell also seemed to share some of Joyce's perfectionist angst. He writes:

I knew that I had a facility with words and a power of facing unpleasant facts, and I felt that this created a sort of private world in which I could get my own back on my failure in everyday life.<sup>31</sup>

Neurotic, unhealthy perfectionists tend to set unrealistically high standards and their sense of self-worth depends entirely on their own performance and production according to the goals they have set themselves. Unhealthy perfectionists also tend to 'catastrophise' everything as either completely right or completely wrong. Clergy who 'suffer' from this malady can be wildly over self-critical if they get one word wrong in a sermon, for example. As you will see from the list below, unhealthy perfectionism will adversely impact all those who experience it. However, those engaged in public ministry may find this even more depleting. Unhealthy perfectionists experience the following:

- continuous self-criticism in the form of concern over mistakes and doubts that they are doing the right thing.
- noticing failures more than success; one error or flaw obliterates any satisfaction in their endeavours.
- over-concern with organisation, precision and order.
- thinking in 'black or white', 'all or nothing' categories.
- a desire to excel at any cost, and a tendency to being over-controlling in relationships.
- motivation by fear of negative consequences, failure, rejection or punishment.



It is important to note that some other approaches state that all perfectionism is neurotic and unhealthy and what some label as ‘normal perfectionism’ is not perfectionism at all (normal would be called conscientiousness or an ‘oriented work-style’). Tom Greenspon believes that ‘healthy perfectionism’ is an oxymoron. Greenspon continues: ‘Pursuing excellence, including pushing yourself to do better, constantly improving, setting your goals high, are all fine and are completely different from perfectionism.’<sup>32</sup> This non-spectrum view pushes towards an unequivocal definition of perfection, in an attempt to avoid ambiguity. However, this may not be a subtle enough instrument to discuss the complexity of this personality trait; the *spectrum view* is perhaps a more helpful way forward.

We should note in summary that pursuing excellence, high standards personally and professionally, and having a good work ethic is healthy. However, a minefield of potential problems awaits those persons (especially clergy) who pursue flawless perfection with too much intensity. We need to be able to spot when healthy striving for excellence becomes unhealthy perfectionism in ourselves and others. (See Table 1.)

<b>Unhealthy perfectionism (perfectionist)</b>	<b>Person of excellence (healthy perfectionism)</b>
Idealistic	Realistic
Strives for the impossible	Strives for the doable
Fears failure	Views life as a challenge
Product-minded	Anticipates success
Has to be the best	Process-minded
Views life as a threat	Wants to do their best
Hates criticism	Values criticism
Dwells on mistakes	Learns from mistakes (see Matthew Syed’s book, <i>Black Box Thinking</i> <sup>33</sup> )
Values self for what they do	Values self for who they are

**Table 1:** *Perfectionism, healthy and unhealthy*

We should also note that ‘defeated perfectionists’ often become victims of their own standards. They tend to carry a partially subconscious picture of their ‘ideal self’. This works well when things go well but when they don’t, when a flaw becomes public, their all-or-nothing thinking takes hold. They often perceive themselves as complete disasters, despicable, unreliable, incompetent people.

Defeated perfectionists often suffer from what sociologists call ‘the looking-glass self’. This is where you become what the most important person in your life thinks you are. Derren Brown, in his book *Happy*, also states that we see ourselves in terms of the stories we ‘concoct’ about ourselves and our abilities.<sup>34</sup> Our view of ourselves in these stories often falls short of the perfectionist ideal we believe goes with love and approval by others in our lives. This failure to live up to the standards expected by, for instance, parents’ narratives becomes deeply ingrained and in many ways defines us. Brown writes:

It is hard to think about your past without tidying it up into a kind of story: one in which you are cast as the hero or the victim. Some of these stories are consciously constructed, but others operate without our knowledge, dictated by scripts handed to us by others when we were young. We can carry around a psychological legacy from our parents for our whole lives, whether bad or good. Where they have unfulfilled wishes or regrets, these are commonly passed to us as a template for storytelling. Many of these templates make it hard for us to feel happy: ‘You must achieve impressive things to be happy/loved!’ Or, ‘You must sacrifice your own happiness to make others feel better: that is the measure of your worth.’<sup>35</sup>

Brown continues:

Similar insidious directives can also come from the Church, our peers, classmates and teachers, the cumulative effect of the news media we encounter daily or any number of ideologies in which we find ourselves enmeshed.<sup>36</sup>

‘Defeated perfectionists’ can suffer the double torment of believing the myth of omni-competence and failure.

### *Types of perfectionism*

Perfectionism is, of course, multifaceted, and the following categorisation can be helpful:

#### **1. Performance perfectionism**

- a Sense of value is highly dependent on how they perform.
- b Measurable productivity and achievement is vital to their sense of well-being.

- c If unable to perform at the highest levels, can become anxious and depressed.

## **2. Appearance perfectionism**

- a Must look perfect – on every occasion.
- b Surroundings must look perfect (office and/or home).

## **3. Interpersonal perfectionism**

- a Have set ideas on how things should be done – tends to make relationships difficult. Also, will make delegation to others stressful for the interpersonal perfectionist.
- b With an ‘outward focus’ may be very critical and demanding of others and therefore become socially and professionally isolated.
- c With an ‘inward focus’ may be very self-critical and therefore avoid relationships for fear of being discovered to be ‘less than perfect’.

## **4. Moral perfectionism**

- a Keeps rules meticulously.
- b Sense of identity rests on perfect behaviour.
- c Legalistic and judgemental.

## **5. All-round perfectionism**

- a Tends to be an obsessive personality.
- b Prone to OCD.

### *Academic classifications of personality traits*

In 1991 Hewitt and Flett developed an approach to understanding perfectionism called the *Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale*, which has been highly influential, yet not without its critics. They based their approach not so much on the area of life involved but on the *direction* of the perfectionism. They came up with three types of perfectionism:

1. self-oriented perfectionism
2. socially prescribed perfectionism
3. other-oriented perfectionism.

We should note that there are very few people who would combine all three of these categories. We will briefly look at these three types, beginning with 'self-oriented perfectionism'.

### *Self-oriented perfectionism*

Note in Table 2 below that self-oriented perfectionism has a healthy set of characteristics and a neurotic and unhealthy set of characteristics.

Normal healthy	Neurotic unhealthy
Self-assured	Depressed
Assertive	Impatient
Conscientious	Self-blaming
Organised	Shame and guilt
Disciplined	Irritable
Determined	Angry
Diligent	Fears criticism
Thoughtful	Avoids challenges
Courteous	Suicidal tendencies
Empathetic	
Helpful	
Strong moral standards	
Sensitive conscience	

**Table 2:** *Healthy and unhealthy characteristics of self-oriented perfectionism*

#### Self-oriented perfectionists

- set high and often rigid standards for themselves.
- work hard to attain perfection and avoid failure.
- are self-critical and tend to focus primarily on flaws and failures.
- take responsibility for their lives and don't blame others when they fail.
- are often very successful people, usually described in positive terms by others.
- are usually self-confident, charming and quietly assertive.

There is much about self-oriented perfectionists that is adaptive and healthy. They are very often competent in dealing with difficult and stressful situations.

However, when they move into the realms of unhealthy perfectionism and the neurotic range of this personality trait, things become more negative. For example, problems begin to surface in their relationships. The person who is a self-oriented perfectionist has feelings of inferiority and feels unworthy of friendship. They live in the constant fear that friends will find out what they are 'really like' and will then be rejected. So, to protect themselves, self-oriented perfectionists tend to keep their distance from other people. This inevitably leads to shallow friendships and lack of intimate relationships.

Self-oriented perfectionists might well be friendly on the surface, often anxious to please, though not often very self-revealing. Often they are so focused on organising their lives with 'to do lists', and making a good impression, that they find difficulty in just 'being' in a relationship. Also, because they are so intent on being perfect themselves they can appear aloof, impatient and competitive. Being hypersensitive to any form of rejection, self-oriented perfectionists often react defensively to criticism.

Under certain extremely stressful conditions, this type of perfectionism can be destructive: normal coping mechanisms are overwhelmed, maybe leading to depression, shame and guilt, and sometimes sadly to suicide. It is not difficult to see what self-oriented perfectionism might do to a clergyperson with this personality trait. He or she is very likely to encounter highly stressful situations, distressing experiences, and so on. They are also in a very public profession, having to preach, lead worship and chair meetings. In ministry, there can be a lot of criticism aimed at clergy too. So, if the clergyperson is a self-oriented perfectionist he or she is going to find plenty of opportunities to experience deep feelings of rejection, self-criticism and perhaps guilt and shame.

The next personality trait to be considered is potentially even more depleting and destructive for a clergyperson.

### *Socially prescribed perfectionism*

Socially prescribed perfectionists tend to feel that they must meet *other people's expected standards* – at all costs. They worry to an abnormal degree about what others' expectations of them are, and fear rejection when they don't meet these expectations. These are some of the perils of socially prescribed perfectionism:

- excessive checking and seeking reassurance
- anxiety and worry
- decreasing productivity and performance

- impaired health
- eating disorders
- depression
- suicidal ideas
- obsessive-compulsive symptoms
- scrupulosity
- relationship problems.

Again, it is not difficult to see how destructive this would be in terms of a clergyperson's life and ministry. If you project the following symptoms of socially prescribed perfectionism on to a clergyperson in a parish setting you will see how depleting and debilitating this might be. For example, socially prescribed perfectionists feel that they are under the spotlight all the time; they are being rigorously evaluated by others. This often leads clergy to become workaholics. Their work is Sisyphean – it is never completed. They can never do enough for God. They can never do enough parish or pastoral work to satisfy themselves or to feel that others are satisfied with them. Anne Jackson, in her book *Mad Church Disease*, writes:

The fear of letting people down, especially in spiritual matters, can often cause us to feel obligated or pressured into meeting unrealistic expectations, or worse, spending more time doing things for God instead of being what God wants us to be. That can lead to serious stress.<sup>37</sup>

Clergy particularly need the support of the Christian family, 'the Church'. However, sadly the ministry context for many clergy is often part of the problem. Some parishes are what Winter describes as a poisonous environment of 'un-grace' or 'dis-grace'.<sup>38</sup> David Seamands, in his article 'Perfectionism: Fraught with Fruits of Self-Destruction', in *Christianity Today* writes perceptively:

Many years ago, I was driven to the conclusion that the two major causes of most emotional problems among evangelical Christians are these: the failure to understand, receive, and live out God's unconditional grace and forgiveness; and the failure to give out that unconditional love, forgiveness and grace to other people ... We

read, we hear, we believe a good theology of grace. But that's not the way we live. The good news of the Gospel of grace has not penetrated [to] the level of our emotions.<sup>39</sup>

Philip Yancey cites Paul Tournier's book *Guilt and Grace*, where he writes: 'I cannot study this very serious problem [of guilt related to perfectionism] with you without raising the very obvious and tragic fact that religion – my own as well as that of all believers – can crush instead of liberate.'<sup>40</sup> Ecclesiastical legalism and rigidity linked to expressions of perfectionism are never far below the surface. Leo Tolstoy, who battled legalism all his life, understood the weaknesses of a religion based on externals. As Yancey notes, one of Tolstoy's books, *The Kingdom of God is Within You*, says it well.<sup>41</sup> According to Tolstoy, all religious systems tend to promote external rules, or moralism. In contrast, Jesus refused to define a set of rules that his followers could then fulfil with a sense of satisfaction. One can never 'arrive' in light of such sweeping commands as 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind ... Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.' Tolstoy drew a contrast between Jesus' approach and that of all other religions:

The test of observance of external religious teaching is whether or not our conduct conforms with degrees. [Observe the Sabbath. Get circumcised. Tithe.] Such conformity is indeed possible. The test of observance of Christ's teachings is our consciousness of failure to attain an ideal perfection. The degree to which we draw near this perfection cannot be seen; all we can see is the extent of our deviation.<sup>42</sup>

The German Reformer Martin Luther appears to have suffered from an unhealthy dose of religious perfectionism too. He writes:

Although I lived a blameless life as a monk, I felt that I was a sinner with an uneasy conscience before God. I also could not believe that I had pleased him with my works. Far from loving that righteous God who punished sinners I actually loathed him. I was a good monk, and kept my order so strictly that if ever a monk could get to heaven by monastic discipline, I was that monk. All my companions in the monastery would confirm this ... And yet my conscience would not give me certainty, but I always doubted and said, 'You didn't do that right. You weren't contrite enough. You left that out of your confession.'

Clergy who are socially prescribed perfectionists, like Luther, will also exhaust themselves endlessly checking that they have got things 'right'. This too can lead to anxiety and anxiety disorders. It can also lead clergy who are socially prescribed perfectionists to put off doing something, to procrastinate. This procrastination is a safety net; if one doesn't begin a task one cannot be judged to have failed in the eyes of society or congregation. An article on the Open Culture website entitled 'The Neuroscience and Psychology of Procrastination and How to Overcome It' states:

Chronic procrastination is 'not a time management issue,' says Ferrari, 'it is a maladaptive lifestyle.' Habitual procrastinators, the [Wall Street Journal] writes, 'have higher rates of depression and anxiety and poorer well-being.' We may think, writes Eric Jaffe at the Association for Psychological Science's journal, of procrastination as 'an innocuous habit at worst, and maybe even a helpful one at best,' a strategy Stanford philosophy professor John Perry argued for in *The Art of Procrastination*. Instead, Jaffe says, in a sobering summary of Pychyl's research, 'procrastination is really a self-inflicted wound that gradually chips away at the most valuable resource in the world: time.'<sup>43</sup>

Clergy who are socially prescribed perfectionists can be prone to akrasia, a 'weakness of the will'. They know what is the right thing to do, but because of fear of failure and fear of displeasing others they are frozen into inactivity. In an article by James Clear, 'The Akrasia Effect: Why we don't Follow Through on What we Set Out to do and What to do about it', the author cites Victor Hugo as an interesting example of akrasia or procrastination. In 1830 Hugo was facing an impossible deadline. Twelve months earlier the French author had made an agreement with his publisher that he would write a new book entitled *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. Instead of writing the book, Hugo spent the next year pursuing other projects, entertaining guests, delaying his work on the text.<sup>44</sup> In Matthew Syed's terminology, this is an example of *pre-closed loop behaviour*. He writes: 'You are so worried about messing up that you never even get on the field of play.'<sup>45</sup>

### *Other-oriented perfectionism*

By contrast to the foregoing, other-oriented perfectionists are only disparaging and judgemental about others. Not only do they expect other people to be perfect, but they can also be highly critical of those who fail to meet their



expectations. One can see how those who are operating under other-oriented perfectionism could be judgemental and hypercritical in terms of church life. This could apply to clergy and to members of a congregation.

### *Related problems caused by maladaptive perfectionism*

There are several associated serious problems that can be caused by maladaptive perfectionism ('bad', 'neurotic, 'unhealthy' perfectionism). These problems are:

- depression
- burnout
- suicidalness
- anger
- eating disorders
- shame and guilt.

### *Be perfect?*

Before we leave this section, we must deal with a thorny question that perfectionist clergy and perfectionist lay people must face: didn't Jesus specifically command us to 'be perfect ... as your heavenly Father is perfect' (Matthew 5:48)? It seems to be there in simple black and white: a core essential for the Christian is to be perfect. However, maybe we are being a little hasty in our conclusions here. In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word for perfection is תָּמִים (*tamim*). Strong's online concordance informs us that one way to render the Hebrew term is 'complete', or 'to bring to completion'. It has echoes of Aristotle's use of *teleos*, which for him meant 'goal' or 'purpose'. So, in both the Hebrew and the Greek usage of the word, 'perfect' can be seen as 'bringing something to full completion' or 'something achieving the purpose for which it was made'.

The same idea is found in the New Testament. Someone who fulfils the purpose for which they were made is in that sense 'perfect'. The New Testament concept of perfection is found in the Greek word *teleios*, meaning 'design, end, goal and purpose'. St Paul uses this word to speak of 'maturity', and maturity in our relationship with Christ (see Colossians 1:28; 4:12; Ephesians 4:13–14). St James uses the same word to express similar ideas of maturation among believers (see James 1:4; 1:8).

Lastly, Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount, 'be perfect' (Matthew 5:48), should probably be understood in this manner. The word used is a verbal future indicative, implying that this is our goal; it is not something we have already achieved; perfection (complete maturity) is not something we should expect to achieve right now. We are on a journey to 'perfected maturity'. There will be a time when this is realised (see 1 Corinthians 13:10), but until then we will strive to reach that future goal by taking one (imperfect?) step at a time (see Philippians 3:12).

### *Strategies for overcoming unhealthy perfectionism*

One coping strategy for clergy and those in other intense caring professions is termed 'aiming for average'. This means training ourselves to become more content with less than perfection – even though we may aim high – using the technique of living day by day, with small and specific goals. We can train ourselves to overcome the inertia of procrastination by adopting the attitude that failure is not catastrophic but an opportunity to adapt and learn. We can look for others to help and support us; this may be interaction with family or friends or by engaging with a mentor or counsellor.

Many churches have imbibed society's schemas of perfection and success; many churches give the impression that their first priorities are performance and appearance. Where this is the case, clergy will inevitably suffer; those who are burdened with unhealthy perfectionist personality traits will suffer greatly. Clergy may well experience feelings of isolation from the community they are most meant to feel a part of, the local church. When this happens, as Rachel Rettner notes in her article 'The Dark Side of Perfection Revealed', the individual's (clergyperson's) physical health will invariably suffer. She writes: 'Those who feel others expect them to be perfect might also experience declines in health as a result of distancing themselves from other people.' 'We know', Rettner continues, that 'social support is a huge indicator of physical health. If you tend to have strong bonds with people ... you tend to be healthier.'<sup>46</sup>

Clergy who have perfectionist tendencies need to remember that 'in Christ' they are accepted and loved by God, not based on personal performance but by the salvific work of Christ. It is, as Paul states, 'by grace we are saved' (Ephesians 2:8: 'For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith ... and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God!'). As Yancey says, grace comes from the outside, as a gift and not an achievement. Will van der Hart and Rob

Waller expand on Yancey's statement explaining the impact of grace and self-compassion on our lives and ministries. They write:

When we are loved, that's when we are dangerous. Grace is the knowledge of the love of God for us despite our unworthiness, despite not matching up or deserving a reward. This is why the Christian gospel is good news for perfectionists. The very economy of God's grace inverts the underpinning principle of perfectionism: that you have to achieve to receive. Grace says that, 'While we were sinners, Christ died for us' (Romans 5:8). Self-compassion could be described as agreeing with the compassion of God for you, and what could be more life changing than that?<sup>47</sup>

Clergy do not have to experience what Smedes describes in his book *Shame and Grace* as 'a glob of unworthiness, that I could not tie down to any concrete sins I was guilty of'.<sup>48</sup> We cannot make God love us more by our futile strivings towards an impossible level of Christian or ministerial correctness; and when we inevitably fail, we should remember that in our failure God does not love us less. John Bunyan puts it succinctly in his classic, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*: 'It was not my good frame of heart that made my righteousness better, nor yet my bad frame that made my righteousness worse; for my righteousness was Jesus Christ Himself, the same yesterday, and to-day, and for ever.' Following on from Bunyan, Brennan Manning further reinforces the sufficiency of God's grace in Christ in terms of meeting our needs. As Manning puts it, 'Grace is sufficient even though we huff and puff with all our might to try to find something or someone it cannot cover. Grace is enough. He is enough. Jesus is enough.'<sup>49</sup>

Jung said that the greatest burden a child must bear is the un-lived lives of their parents. However, our identity is not found in what our families have told us about ourselves or the weight of their unfulfilled dreams. Our identities are not found in what society or the Church implies in terms of what constitutes perfection; our identities don't come from other people's stories about us, which are invariably distorted. Our identities come from being a beloved son or daughter of God (1 John 3:2: 'Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is!').

Clergy, and all Christians, are accepted, and will slowly mature (be perfected) throughout their spiritual journey. C. S. Lewis sums it up 'perfectly' when he writes:

He meant what he said. Those who put themselves into His hands will become perfect, as He is perfect – perfect in love, wisdom, joy, beauty, and immortality. The change will not be completed in this life, for death is an important part of the treatment. How far the change will have gone before death in any particular Christian is uncertain.<sup>50</sup>

Recently, I was reading a thesis on 'Freedom and Determinism' which explored the variety of ways Christian theologians have grappled with the issue of divine will and human autonomy. The writer managed the whole piece with just only passing reference to Calvin's view on the matter. A strange omission, I thought. But perhaps I am being equally guilty here in discussing perfection without any reference to John Wesley. However, reflecting on Wesley's *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* is beyond my remit on this occasion. That being said, I can use Charles Wesley's hymnody to continue the theme of C. S. Lewis's thinking – that we are on a journey towards perfection. Wesley writes in 'Love Divine':

Finish then Thy new creation;  
pure and spotless let us be.  
Let us see Thy great salvation  
perfectly restored in Thee.  
Changed from glory into glory,  
till in heav'n we take our place,  
till we cast our crowns before Thee,  
lost in wonder, love, and praise.

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