

Evangelical Review of Theology

A Global Forum

Volume 44 • Number 2 • April 2020

Published by



WORLD EVANGELICAL ALLIANCE

Department of Theological Concerns

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Don't Give Up Hope: Continuing in Friendship with God amidst Acedia

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Both in my own life and in the lives of others whom I have served as pastor, there have been occasions where the fundamentals of evangelical spirituality have seemed lost for a season. The Bible may fall to one side, increasingly unread, one's once-vibrant prayer life now stuttering. Devotional habits may become an uphill struggle, with social media and reflexive checking of e-mails an easier alternative than sitting before God in the midst of one's heaviness. Passivity then reigns.

For those who wish to avoid any confrontation with the deep significance of this spiritual weariness, passivity is not the only option. Activity works similarly: plunging oneself into work operates as a powerful distraction from this state of affairs. Indeed, where such work is perceived as 'ministry', the illusion is even more powerful, for the escape from God is reframed as service to him.

In this state of spiritual weariness, one does not necessarily stop believing the gospel or give up one's relationship with God entirely. Rather, the task of engaging with God on anything like a personal basis now feels apparently too onerous. There may

be no obvious reason for this change in a long-established pattern of typically evangelical spirituality—no sudden upheaval or loss, no great grief to overwhelm the person's heart. Yet it may nevertheless seem to such people that everyone else is encountering God more deeply than they are and, over time, the hope that this will ever change may begin to ebb.

As a pastor, I had no name for this condition until, in my academic work, I happened upon the concept of acedia, traditionally recognized in Roman Catholicism as one of the seven deadly sins. Although he was not the first to discuss acedia, Thomas Aquinas wrote significantly on this topic in the thirteenth century. He conceived acedia as an attack on our friendship with God, characterizing it as sorrow over our greatest good.¹ That is,

¹ In this discussion, I draw upon Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae* (2nd ed., trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province), www.newadvent.org/summa, and especially upon II-II questions 28 and 35, as well as his *On Evil*, ed. Brian Davies, trans. Richard Regan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), question 11.

when acedia holds sway, what should be joy in our ever-deepening participation in God becomes instead only sadness.²

In presenting acedia in this way, Thomas differentiated between the symptoms of acedia, which he discussed separately, and the thing itself. However, contemporary considerations have typically focused on the symptoms. In particular, Western believers have come to think of acedia as a kind of listlessness. In fact, we have focused on this symptom to such an extent that the language of 'sloth', which describes precisely this listlessness and passivity, has all but obliterated the concept of 'acedia' in the popular understanding of sin.

As a result, when I introduce acedia to first-year undergraduates at a British evangelical theological college, I see a blankness pass across their faces. Though Protestant writers may have published on acedia in academic journals alongside their Catholic counterparts, evangelicalism has not been talking about this concept at the local church level. Thus, my students (and even at least one of my colleagues) have quite literally never heard of the concept—until I mention sloth, at which point it is as if the light has been turned on.

Thomas Aquinas did not confuse acedia's symptoms with acedia itself. He recognized that what we typically mean by 'sloth' is actually only a manifestation of acedia. At its root, he said, acedia is more than this. It is sorrow in relation to what should instead be our deepest joy, namely our

relationship with God. Listlessness, or the deep passivity and laziness which we have dubbed 'sloth', is a symptom of acedia, just as restlessness and hyperactivity are also;³ the latter two of these constitute an attempt to escape acedia's sorrow through busyness, whereas passivity flows from a perception of this sorrow as inescapable.

Yet acedia can be escaped, resulting in the recovery of joy in the ever-deepening participation in friendship with God which is humanity's greatest good. First, however, if this dangerous pattern of sin is to be evaded, those offering pastoral counsel must be clear as to what acedia's sorrow concerns and what its source is. Only then can they begin to offer remedies that lead towards joy.

I. Sorrowing over Friendship with God

In describing acedia as sorrow over spiritual good, Thomas understands this spiritual good as the divine good, the good to which all other spiritual goods are ultimately directed.⁴ Charity, this divine good, should entail rejoicing, and thus acedia is the vice specifically opposed to it.⁵ Accordingly, to understand acedia's sorrow, we also need a clear understanding of charity (the divine good over which acedia sorrows).

Thomas claims that charity can be understood as friendship with

² This sadness is not depression, though there may be some kinship. See Robert W. Daly, 'Before Depression: The Medieval Vice of Acedia', *Psychiatry* 70, no. 1 (2007): 30–51.

³ Thomas, *Summa*, II-II 35.4 names 'sluggishness about the commandments' and 'wandering after unlawful things' as characteristic of the 'daughters' of acedia.

⁴ Thomas, *Summa*, II-II 35.1, 2; Thomas, *On Evil*, 11.2.

⁵ Thomas, *Summa*, II-II 35.2.

God, a gift given by God in Christ by which humanity may share in God's happiness. This is the end, Thomas proposes, for which humanity was created. Such friendship, dependent upon God's self-communication to humanity as its shared ground (the *communicatio*),⁶ is characterized by mutuality of benevolence and affection. The first of these, benevolence, means actively seeking the good of others for their own sake, making the other's good one's own. In the divine-human friendship which is charity, God's benevolence consists in his offer to humanity of participating in his own goodness, a good which is indeed ultimate for humanity. The loving response of mutuality towards God by which humanity completes this benevolence is to receive and co-operate with that gracious offer, a willing of God for ourselves, although not for our own sake but rather that we should be for his sake, belonging to him and obeying him.⁷

Charity's mutuality is characterized, second, by an affection whereby one shares oneself with others to the extent of becoming 'one heart' with them.⁸ This affective union by which each inclines towards the other, without thereby losing their difference, is directed towards an ever-deepening end where the union will be real

(rather than only affective) in the context of the eschatological hope of God and humanity living together. This will issue in the joy of not simply inclining towards the beloved but, finally, of participating fully in God.⁹

This union in charity is intended to be humanity's ultimate end or happiness, its consummation being fulness of joy and the completeness of Sabbath rest.¹⁰ Joy, as the soul's delight in a good presently possessed, is a fruit of charity¹¹ and, in Jean-Charles Nault's words, 'is at the terminus of the movement of love'.¹² Joy's measure in us depends on two things. First, our degree of present joy is determined by our measure of charity; second, to the extent that we do not yet fully participate in charity, joy depends also on hope. That hope refers to the expectation of future divine fellowship, a hope for completion of our participation in the divine-human friendship.¹³ Thus, our joy is both a present delight to the degree that we already participate in friendship with God and also a not-yet enjoyment which we experience now as hope.

Acedia, however, opposes this joy that charity would effect.¹⁴ In its sorrow, acedia perceives as evil the good

⁹ Thomas, *Summa*, I-II 25.2, 28.1.

¹⁰ Thomas, *Summa*, I-II 3.1; II-II 28.3, 35.3.

¹¹ Thomas, *Summa*, I-II 31.3; II-II 28.4.

¹² Jean Charles-Nault, *The Noonday Devil: Acedia, the Unnamed Evil of Our Times*, trans. Michael J. Miller (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2015), 70.

¹³ Thomas, *Summa*, II-II 28.1.

¹⁴ Though charity overflows inevitably in love for neighbour (Thomas, *Summa*, II-II 23.5), acedia's focus is charity's divine good rather than this overflow to the neighbour's good. It is envy which opposes charity's love of neighbour (Thomas, *Summa*, II-II 36.1).

⁶ A shared ground is required by all friendships. On this shared ground, see Joseph Bobik, 'Aquinas on *Communicatio*, the Foundation of Friendship and *Caritas*', *Modern Schoolman* 64 (1988): 13–14.

⁷ The points discussed in this paragraph are drawn from several sections in Thomas' *Summa*: II-II 23.1, 27.1, 31.1.

⁸ Paul J. Wadell, *Friends of God: Virtues and Gifts in Aquinas* (New York: Peter Lang, 1991), 32–33; Thomas, *Summa*, II-II 27.2.

of the divine *communicatio* 'as participated in by us',¹⁵ and thus it cannot delight in the presence of the beloved. Acedia mars the enjoyment of the present measure of one's participation in God, saddened by its inchoate nature and even scorning the good one possesses.¹⁶ It operates against this participation with implications both for the acts of love which constitute one's response to divine grace and for the progressive inclination of one's affections towards God.

How, then, should we understand the nature of the sorrow which grounds acedia? To answer this question, we must first recognize that Thomas appears to identify varying degrees of acedia. Without question, acedia can be a mortal sin which destroys the spiritual life that charity effects. Nevertheless, Thomas also allows that sins which are 'mortal in respect of their genus' actually become mortal only 'when they attain to their perfection'. Accordingly, acedia can be (only) a venial sin when it is 'a mere beginning of sin in the sensuality alone'. It is not mortal sin until it reaches 'the consent of reason', something which occurs only when the flesh has utterly conquered the spirit.¹⁷

In its most serious (mortal) form,

then, acedia constitutes a movement of the will, a sorrow described by Thomas as consenting in the 'dislike, horror and detestation of the Divine good' *as we participate in it* (rather than of the divine good *per se*).¹⁸ In the estimation of Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung, this more serious sorrow, which is an aversion of the will, is the manifestation of sorrow in the intellectual appetite. She contrasts this with the sorrow manifested as a passion in the sensitive appetite, going so far as to deny that sensitive sorrow about the divine good is sinful.¹⁹ It is, however, hard to agree with this last assertion. Although passions are not intrinsically sinful, they are culpable when directed either towards something evil or towards something good but in an immoderate way.²⁰ Since the passion of sorrow with respect to participating in the divine good is disordered, it is surely sinful even if does not yet qualify for Thomas' category of mortal sin. Moreover, acedia as venial sin may indeed flower into mortal sin because although the will, or rational appetite, has 'politic sovereignty', it is not unconquerable; that is, the passions, when wrongly ordered, can operate to direct the will rather than the will disciplining

15 Thomas, *Summa*, II-II 28.1; Thomas, *On Evil*, 11.3.

16 Thomas, *Summa*, II-II 28.1, 35.1. Thomas suggests that acedia is an evil on a second count too: not only is it evil in itself, in its misconstrual of that which is good as though it were evil, but it is also evil in its effect, for it oppresses people in such a way as to draw them away from good deeds, perhaps because they despair of the value of such things.

17 Thomas, *Summa*, II-II 35.3.

18 Thomas, *Summa*, II-II 35.3.

19 Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung, 'Resistance to the Demands of Love: Aquinas on the Vice of Acedia', *The Thomist* 68 (2004): 183. This contrast is made more explicit on p. 185 and in note 41, where DeYoung glosses over Thomas' admission that acedia 'can be prompted by movement of the sensitive appetite' and claims that times of being burdened with suffering, grief, physical weariness and lacking in joy are not acedia.

20 Thomas, *Summa*, II-II 35.1.

the passions.²¹ When this happens, sadness moves from what we might today perceive as emotion or feeling into the realm of a wilful response of dislike or detestation of one's participation in friendship with God.

In any case, both kinds of sorrow should be considered acedia and thus both call out for a remedy. Indeed, the *Summa* makes clear that whereas the willed consent to this detestation is found in domination of the spirit by the flesh, even acedia as *venial* sin—that is, the 'movement ... in the sensuality alone'—is characterized by this flesh-spirit opposition.²²

One aspect of the diagnosis of acedia is not fully clear in the *Summa*. On one hand, the source of acedia's sadness may be that the work of divine-human friendship is perceived as oppressive to the flesh and therefore not pursued. On the other hand, the perceived oppressiveness of this spiritual engagement could be the *result* of acedia, not its source. DeYoung argues strongly for the first position,²³ whereas Laura Lysen contends for the second.²⁴

Thomas' statement in *Summa* II-II 35.1 that acedia 'implies a certain weariness of work' (*taedium operandi*) can be construed as supporting the first position, provided that we understand the specific work against which the flesh is opposed as that

entailed by the divine-human friendship.²⁵ On the other hand, in presenting spiritual torpor, or sluggishness, as a 'daughter' of acedia in II-II 35.4, Thomas could be construed as claiming the second position, that an unwillingness to engage charity's work is acedia's result and not its source.²⁶

To untangle this debate, though important, is not necessary here, for our concern is not to determine acedia's source but to engage acedia's remedies. The flesh-spirit opposition which underpins acedia might first manifest as sorrow over the inchoacy of one's participation in the divine-human friendship (Lysen) or as torpor concerning the acts that constitute that participation (DeYoung). Yet, however this opposition

25 Nault characterizes this as 'the second definition of acedia', concluding that the two definitions 'converge' because 'sadness about what ought to gladden us most: participation in the very life of God' (first definition) is the other side of acedia's second definition as something that 'crushes or paralyzes activity ... [and] affects the deepest motive force of activity, namely, charity, the participation of the Holy Spirit' (Nault, *Noon-day Devil*, 73–81).

26 Lysen contends that the *Summa* (II-II 35.4 ad. 3) supports the second position, saying that sorrow on account of shirking burdensome work is not a vice, for only the sorrow of acedia, a sorrow on account of the divine good, is vicious ('Vicious Sorrow', 337). A counter-argument might be possible here, however, in that the burdensome nature of work is perhaps not the point of the comparison here. Rather, the point may be that sorrow must be in relation to the divine good and that weariness or sorrow over burdensome work, which constitutes a seeking of 'undue rest in so far as it spurns the *Divine good*' (Thomas, *Summa*, II-II 35.4 ad. 3, emphasis mine), can be deemed to be the vice of acedia.

21 Thomas, *Summa*, I-II 9.2.

22 Thomas, *Summa*, II-II 35.3.

23 DeYoung, 'Resistance', 188–203.

24 Laura M. Lysen, 'Vicious Sorrow: The Roots of a "Spiritual" Sin in the *Summa Theologiae*', *Studies in Christian Ethics* 30, no. 3 (2017): 336–41. Indeed, for Lysen, acedia's source is its sorrow and the sorrow is specific: a sorrowing over the inchoate nature of one's participation in God (338–39).

first manifests, each reality leads to the other—i.e. sorrow to weariness or vice versa—and, as spirit gives way increasingly to flesh and the will succumbs to the sensitive appetite, acedia will worsen. Whether unwillingness to do the hard work of participating in the divine-human friendship, as it has already been given to us in Christ, is the original source of acedia's sorrow or simply the subsequent 'daughter' of that sorrow will not matter when a person is caught in the midst of that sin.²⁷ By then, the vicious cycle has already begun. What matters at that point is to remedy the acedia by putting an end to the flesh's resistance to participation in God's friendship.

II. Learning to Continue in Friendship's Loving Gaze

To reverse the natural flow of acedia towards mortal sin, the will must be enabled to move away from its potential wilfully to despise God's friendship. Whereas sorrow can hinder or even prevent the use of reason, such that the capacity to seek rest in the desired good is reduced,²⁸ the situation is not irretrievable. Yes, the passion of sorrow can muddy our perception to

such an extent that eventually our desires and even our will come to accept this muddled perspective as truth. Yet as long as one of acedia's daughters, despair, has not taken root, all is not lost. Until the will confirms its embrace of acedia by ceasing to wrestle against it, thus ratifying its complete surrender to despair, a remedy remains.

That remedy is despair's opposite, the hope on which we have already seen that the joy of charity in part depends. As a passion, hope has the capacity to jolt a person from sorrow into a renewed expectation of the divine good as not only good but also possible. For hope is capable of undoing not only the sorrow over the goodness of one's participation in the divine good (i.e. acedia), but also the conviction that one's attainment of that good is impossible (despair). Hope is, then, the precursor to charity's joy.²⁹ For when one can hope both that one's participation in the divine good is *actually* good and that a fullness of participation is, in time, possible, one can then engage fruitfully in what Thomas presents as the ultimate remedy for acedia: contemplation of spiritual goods in general and of the Incarnate One in particular.³⁰

What, we might ask, is the responsibility of the person suffering from acedia in engaging this remedy? Though Lysen implies that DeYoung frames acedia's remedy in terms of renewed effort in the responsibilities of God's friendship—and Lysen explicitly rejects this proposed remedy as being work and, therefore, diamet-

²⁷ This debate is perhaps most important with regard to the question of agential responsibility in acedia. Daly ('Depression', 41–43) notes that the literature most clearly accords significant agency with regard to acedia's *rectification*, 'church and society generally deem[ing] ... it within the power of the penitent ... to make right his conduct and character'. Whether the person with acedia could be held originally *responsible* for the inception and development of the malaise is less clear.

²⁸ Thomas, *Summa*, I-II 37.4, 39.1.

²⁹ Lysen, 'Vicious Sorrow', 344–45.

³⁰ Thomas, *Summa*, I-II 38.4; II-II 20.4, 35.1.

rically opposed to resting in divine goodness³¹—the two perspectives may not be so far apart in practice. In fact, DeYoung's emphasis on attending to the responsibilities of the divine-human friendship could be read as a form of the same contemplation, or resting in divine goodness, which Thomas identifies and which Lysen holds up as *acedia's* true remedy. Of course, any kind of effort or work by the person suffering from *acedia* can take on the frenzied restlessness which is in fact a daughter of *acedia* rather than its remedy. Yet work is perhaps not always diametrically opposed to rest. More particularly, resting in divine goodness surely does not preclude a work that is responsive. Without a doubt, the divine-human friendship is indeed a gift and no amount of work can earn our participation in it. Nevertheless, work which is directed towards love, rather than towards a restlessness which is an escape from that love—a work which knows its nature not as initiating but as a response to the one who first loved—is not contrary to the rest in divine goodness which is charity's joy.

The kind of work which consists of responsive human participation in the unparalleled mutuality of friendship with God is itself an aspect of contemplation for, as we look upon him in all his goodness, we desire increasing participation in him and deeper relationship with him. It is true that the gaze upon him in which we see his love for us comes first but, inevitably, contemplation then also invites us to participate in that love with our own acts of loving response. This pattern of response, which un-

avoidably involves the vulnerability that characterizes mutuality and the transformation that attends life lived with another, is, I think, what DeYoung intends by the 'work' of divine-human friendship.³²

Those who gaze on Jesus yet choose not to respond in the vulnerable work of transformative reorientation of life—as well as those who do not gaze at all—risk giving primacy to flesh over spirit. In light of this, one might perceive works of responsive love as sowing to the spirit and thus as protecting against the advance towards a willed *acedia*, and possibly even as reversing that movement. In that sense only, perhaps we could describe effort as a kind of remedy for *acedia*—as long as we recognize that the remedy is a contemplation of the already-given love to which our works of love can be only a response.

Works alone do not suffice in remedying *acedia*. Thomas himself appears to indicate that even the most committed friends of God may find themselves subject to *acedia* in the movement of the sensitive appetite, notwithstanding any effort they might have been making to participate in friendship with God.³³ What matters, above all, is first an unimpeded gaze upon Love himself and second, where that gaze is interrupted, maintaining the capacity to continue an active waiting in hope for the darkness to be made light again.

32 Moreover, technically DeYoung does not present this response as *acedia's* remedy. Instead, she describes its absence as true of those with *acedia* ('Resistance', 197–200); implicitly, its presence characterizes the one who makes that response as participating in charity and overflowing in joy.

33 Thomas, *Summa*, II-II 35.1, 35.3.

31 Lysen, 'Vicious Sorrow', 343.

III. Practising Friendship's Delight

James Smith writes helpfully on the subject of directing persons towards love. Describing humanity as 'beings who first and foremost (and ultimately) intend the world in the mode of love',³⁴ he suggests that this love is structured as desire, specifically desire for a particular vision of the good that is human flourishing. Further, since we are fundamentally affective beings before we are cognitive beings, our desire draws us towards that good.³⁵ In the Thomistic model that I am following in this paper, humanity's ultimate good is presented as friendship with God. Acedia, however, represents sorrow in relation to that good, an affective response by which a person begins to turn from that good and to call it 'not good'. In seeking remedies to acedia, then, we are seeking to understand how a person might more deeply receive God's friendship, responding to it wholeheartedly in joy rather than turning away from it in sorrow. What, then, does it take to redirect one's desire, or gaze, towards our greatest good, namely the ever-deepening participation in friendship with God in Christ?

Smith proposes that to direct desire towards a particular telos, we need particular dispositions or habits. Habits 'constitute the *fulcrum* of our desire' by predisposing us towards a certain end, he says. Whilst not denying reflexivity as a human possibility, Smith presents conscious self-reflection as secondary and spo-

radic. Fundamentally, it is 'precognitive dispositions that orient [our] ... being-in-the-world'.³⁶ These dispositions towards a particular good become embedded in two ways. First, that particular vision of the good is pictured in concrete ways which exceed simple cognitive processes: images, narratives, icons and myths frame the human imagination, offering patterns of meaning by which the world might make sense. Second, habits are embedded through embodied practices. Just as there is a way of knowing which is affective and embodied before it is cognitive, one which can train the body to engage in certain responses that do not require involvement of the conscious mind in acts of cognition, so also it is with training the desire. Because practices are not value-free but carry within them a particular telos or vision of the good, their embodiment as habits will, over time, direct a practitioner into deepened participation in the good they symbolize.³⁷

One example of such a practice comes from the Carmelite tradition. Teresa of Avila advocates a practice of prayer called active recollection, involving a habit of exterior silence in which a person withdraws his or her awareness of the external world for a period in order to become present to Christ, who is within the person by the Holy Spirit.³⁸ This prayer

³⁴ James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 50.

³⁵ Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 52–55.

³⁶ Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 56–57 and note 34.

³⁷ Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 57–68.

³⁸ Teresa of Avila, *The Way of Perfection*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 2000), 4.9; 28.6; 29.5. In adding the descriptor 'active' to 'recollection', I am differentiating the material in *Way* from that in Teresa's

practice does not necessarily involve reading texts or even speaking any words of prayer, though such tools can be useful as a preliminary to aid in turning one's heart towards the intended awareness of Christ.³⁹ Instead, the practice of recollection consists in the representation of Christ to one's own heart, whether through an internal image of him or in a non-visual way (i.e. through faith); it is not about thinking much but about loving much.⁴⁰

Over time, Teresa insists, this practice directs its practitioners into a habitual capacity for awareness of Christ.⁴¹ My own experience of practising active recollection has confirmed this: over the last year or so, a daily habit of twenty minutes of waiting upon God in silence has, in conjunction with other devotional practices more typical of an evangelical spirituality, served progressively to deepen my awareness of Christ and my responsiveness to him in the rest

of my daily life.

What we practise not only predisposes us to the end which those practices carry within them; it also leads us to desire that same end at a cognitive level. Admittedly, life is rarely as simple as being captured by one overarching vision of the good. Smith notes that very often we hear instead a number of 'competing stories' and can find ourselves 'quite taken with stories that cognitively we might criticize'.⁴² However, for our purposes, his basic point holds: when we are distracted from the good that is friendship with God, an engagement in practices which carry this vision of humanity's good can be pursued as the route back from sorrow towards joy. Furthermore, because practices are always communal,⁴³ to commit (or remain committed) to those communities or institutions which pursue that same good will strengthen the acedic person's own efforts to redirect his or her desire. Accordingly, the reordering of love towards the telos of friendship with God requires participation in the community of his friends.

Practices and the narratives which frame them, then, are fundamental in combatting acedia. Yet, first, the person must own—i.e. recognize and take responsibility for—the sorrow of acedia as sin. Though sorrowing over the incomplete nature of one's friendship with God might sound like a godly sorrow, its sin consists in the underlying perception that what God has given is too little. Until this sorrow is recognized as sin, repen-

The Interior Castle, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (New York: Paulist, 1979). The former text presents recollection as a practice we can initiate (hence 'active'), whereas the latter emphasizes the supernatural aspect of recollection, in which the Spirit infuses our prayer such that God is the one initiating the 'gentle drawing inward' when he chooses (*Interior Castle*, 4.3). Whilst recollection in the latter sense is a divine gift, there is a sense in which practising recollection in the former sense predisposes a person towards an active receptivity to the infused recollection that God initiates. That is, practice directs the practitioner into deepened participation in the good symbolized by this form of silent prayer.

39 Teresa, *Way*, 26.9–10.

40 Teresa, *Way*, 26.1–3; 28.4; *Interior Castle*, 4.1.7.

41 Teresa, *Way*, 29.8.

42 Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 55 note 30.

43 Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 3rd ed. (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2007), 218.

tance, which is the only way to restoration, cannot occur. It is perhaps for this reason that the Eastern tradition perceives tears as one of the key remedies for acedia. Evagrius claims, 'Sadness is burdensome and acedia is irresistible, but tears shed before God are stronger than both.'⁴⁴ Thomas also recognizes the role of tears in the assuaging of sorrow, calling them a way of dispersing one's focus from the sorrow and thereby releasing and lessening it.⁴⁵

Accordingly, before the will can be turned back to joy, those with acedia must repent of the sorrow as a sinful disordering of their desire that has caused them to cease to pursue friendship with God. In connection with this repentance, there is (provided that hope remains) likely to be some motivation to throw off the sadness concerning one's participation in the good. This motivation will drive active engagement in the practices by which the community of God's friends directs their hearts towards deepened friendship with him.

Therefore, in one's wrestling to practise delight in God, what matters initially is the cultivation of hope. For hope alone counters the despair born of acedia. It strengthens the soul to gaze again upon Jesus and to practise joy in his friendship. Such hope is, in Paul Wadell's view, 'a shared virtue; one connected to friendship and community and ... impossible without them.'⁴⁶ The gathered church is the

community that remembers for us the things we have forgotten and believes with us the things we can barely believe. Hope is found centrally amongst friends of the Friend, those who can recast for us the images and narratives by which we know our future good and the goodness of our present share in it. These friends are the ones who, through their own practices of hope, both tether us to that confident expectation of God's goodness that we are struggling to hold on to and also hope us into hopefulness.

I have seen this process first-hand. During seasons of my own acedia, a dear Christian lady has, by making time to meet with me monthly, repeatedly held me to the encounter with Jesus from which I would rather have run. In holding that space for me, and in sitting with me in the silences of a soul that could not remember how to continue in friendship with God, she has remembered for me the things I had forgotten and believed for me the things I could barely believe. Quite simply, in the consistency of her friendship with God and with me, she has hoped me into hopefulness until I have again been able to remember, believe and rejoice.

Hope is costly, however, for it constitutes a willingness to wait, a willingness not to give up on the divine good despite the difficulty of living in the tension between what is and what is not yet. It means not becoming 'overwhelmed by the ... waiting', not coming 'to abhor ... [the good] on account of the apparent slowness of its coming'.⁴⁷ Yet costly though it is, such

⁴⁴ Evagrius of Pontus, *Exhortation to a Virgin*, 39, in Robert E. Sinkewicz (ed.), *Evagrius of Pontus: The Greek Ascetic Corpus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 134.

⁴⁵ Thomas, *Summa*, I-II 38.2.

⁴⁶ Paul Wadell, *Becoming Friends: Worship, Justice, and the Practice of Christian Friend-*

ship (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2002), 136.

⁴⁷ Jeffrey A. Vogel, 'The Speed of Sloth: Reconsidering the Sin of Acedia', *Pro Eccle-*

waiting in hope gives God the space to be God. For friendship presumes the freedom of agency, that each party may act or not act without being subsumed by the will of the other. An unwillingness to wait for God, allowing him to fulfil his promise in his way and his time, would constitute an attempt to collapse our relationship with him in such a way that God becomes simply an extension of our own selves.⁴⁸ This would be an act of true God-lessness, for it makes us the centre of our own reality and treats the reality of God as existing only in relation to us.

Hope, then, must wait, 'expos[ing] ... itself to the action of the beloved'⁴⁹ and trusting that the eschatological tension exerted upon the present experience of friendship with God will, one day, be resolved. There is no passivity in this kind of contemplative waiting, though. For, as we have seen, the assault against acedia's sorrow means actively directing our hearts to the good in the ways that Smith has indicated for us. First, there must be a deliberate and oft-repeated return to the images and narratives by

which we can retell to ourselves the story of the God who offers us friendship in his Son. We must intentionally cultivate joy over a consistent period of time, searching for the wonder that precipitates delight. For where doubt and despair have prevailed, what matters is that the imagination becomes captivated again—that wonder and delight are cultivated as both the hermeneutic by which people suffering from acedia experience life⁵⁰ and the necessary epistemological dislocation⁵¹ by which they may be jolted from despair to hope.

The picturing of the good by which we might finally see enough to shock us from acedia's sadness must ultimately occur in the context of worship as an *image*-ining of the narratives of the gospel along the lines already suggested. As we repeatedly engage the imagination with the narratives of the gospel offer of friendship with God, we make room for wonder to take root and for delight to be rekindled. Our preachers unpack the biblical text, enunciating again the invitation by a God who first loves us. We are reminded that this love's beginning never depended on us

sia 18, no. 1 (2009): 66. Stanford M. Lyman notes that acedia involves a suffering of 'the inconveniences of time', the question of '[w]hat to do while the chain of being is still becoming'. Lyman, *The Seven Deadly Sins: Society and Evil*, rev. ed. (Lanham: General Hall, 1989), 10. Once again, the challenge is to wait.

48 Often it may be 'one's neediness, possessiveness or desire to control [that] influences a friend to collapse the distance comprised in ... difference'. Chloe Lynch, *Ecclesial Leadership as Friendship* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019), 166. Neediness and desire to control God have certainly been prevalent in my own experiences of acedia.

49 Vogel, 'Speed of Sloth', 68.

50 Darin H. Davis and Paul J. Wadell, 'Educating Lives for Christian Wisdom', *International Journal of Christianity and Education* 20, no. 2 (2016): 98–99.

51 The capacity for wonder is, Josef Pieper declares, 'among man's greatest gifts' because it 'acts upon man like a shock', bringing epistemological dislocation. 'It does not end in doubt', though it brings an awareness that one does 'not ... know fully, [and does] not ... conceive absolutely', because this not-knowing is framed by the search to know more deeply rather than by resignation. Josef Pieper, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*, trans. Alexander Dru (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1998), 101–8.

and are encouraged to trust that the God who gives it says also that what we have received is very good. At the Lord's Table, similarly, as the minister holds bread and cup high and prays that they might be to us the body and blood of Jesus, we see narratives of divine friendship made concrete in the tangible stuff of grain and grape. As we hold out our hands, empty and with nothing to give, we see powerfully the grace of this story, a grace by which another fills our emptiness with bread and cup in an echo of all that Jesus gave and gives.

In worship, we experience the narratives of divine friendship made concrete in the friends of God alongside whom we worship. For in them in whom the Spirit dwells, we encounter the living Christ who is made present to us in a special way in the midst of the church. Our worship shapes our desire in accordance with the first of Smith's factors mentioned above, the reframing of our imagination by narratives and images. But it does more than that. Smith's second factor—the power of habitual practices to direct us towards the good—is also in play. For worship involves not only the one who reveals his own worth but, importantly, the one who delights in that worth in wonder-filled response. The practices of this wonder-filled delighting are equally foundational to the church's life of worship. Specifically, worship is not only about the gospel as given to us but also about the gospel received by us, a receiving expressed in the practices of response.

In discussing liturgy as ecclesial practice, Simon Chan warns against misunderstanding the effect of our active participation in worship. Whilst we must engage intentionally

in the church's liturgical practice, we must not think that our formation towards the good is 'because of our active participation'. Rather, worship is 'something we do "pathically"... [and] we do not grasp the mystery but are grasped by it.'⁵² This is exactly the point I am making here. Our practices of worship are always responsive in the context of a graced receiving, and their part in forming us to the good of the gospel operates dialectically with divine grace, by the enabling power of the Spirit.

Not all evangelicals warmly embrace the practice of liturgy. Yet its formative gift is to guide the articulation of our prayers and to offer a defined space for divine encounter in the context of its symbols and rituals. It also draws our attention to the *ek-static* nature of life in God—that we are called to relate in love towards others in the church and in the world.⁵³ In its enactment of the gospel, the liturgy thus draws us into the mystery of God (liturgy's objective pole) while, in its invitation to a particular set of responses, it draws us into a personal appropriation of participation in the divine life (liturgy's subjective pole).⁵⁴

Together with God's friends, then, in worship we respond to him in acts of prayer and song. When they are offered, we eat the bread and drink the cup, receiving these gifts into ourselves. When we hear the Word preached, worship means responding

52 Simon Chan, *Liturgical Theology: The Church as Worshiping Community* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2006), 97.

53 Susan J. White, *The Spirit of Worship: The Liturgical Tradition* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1999), 21–28.

54 Chan, *Liturgical*, 149.

in a communal wrestling to see our lives reoriented around truth. As we gather, our Spirit-enabled practices of sacrament and song, of prayer and teaching, re-enact Jesus' life and ministry⁵⁵ and form our desire towards him. Particularly, as we practise love towards one another in that place, we thereby offer the response which constitutes the return of God's friendship.⁵⁶ In this way, we are drawn deeper into our participation in his life and directed towards a wondering delight in the face of the God who offers the ultimate happiness of friendship with him.

By these practices, we willingly habituate ourselves towards finding our happiness in God. Even though delight and joy may feel like distant memories, we engage in the practices of delight *as if* we delighted, and we trust that, though we cannot know how or when, the 'as if' will make room for the birth in us, again, of the wonder by which desire may be reoriented to the good.

The ancient monastics knew the power of such practices of worship. They knew, too, that the key was perseverance in the 'as if', a daily return to the practices that lead to joy and a commitment to continue in

the friendship of the community of joy. Those who suffered from acedia were instructed to stay in their cells to pray and meditate on Scripture in silence, rather than running to other monasteries for distraction.⁵⁷ Work, also, had its place,⁵⁸ countering the extreme diligence in prayer which could prove, in some cases, to be not acedia's remedy but a manifestation of restlessness or hyperactivity, one of its daughters. Such disciplines of stability were seen as significant,⁵⁹ because the perseverance necessary in the battle against acedia was viewed as grounded in 'the mundane routine of the daily office, fulfilling the quotidian tasks of everyday existence ... returning day after day to the same place ... and community'.⁶⁰ For the challenge of those who would resist acedia is to wait and then to wait

55 Ray S. Anderson, *On Being Human: Essays in Theological Anthropology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 183.

56 'God's friendship is only properly returned when returned for God's sake. However, charity as the return of this friendship implicates the neighbour.' Hans S. Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship: Profound Disability, Theological Anthropology, and Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 321–22. For my own fuller discussion of this point in Thomas Aquinas, see Lynch, *Ecclesial Leadership*.

57 Cassian did not discourage those suffering from acedia from interacting with the community. Rather, the instruction to stay in one's cell was to combat the tendency to succumb to flight and, specifically, the monk's fear that 'he will never be well while he stays in that place, unless he leaves his cell (in which he is sure to die if he stops in it any longer)'! John Cassian, *The Institutes*, ed. Kevin Knight, www.newadvent.org/fathers/3507.htm, 10:3. For further discussion of other early treatments of acedia, see Andrew Crislip, 'The Sin of Sloth or the Illness of the Demons? The Demon of Acedia in Early Christian Monasticism', *Harvard Theological Review* 98, no. 2 (2005): 155–57.

58 Nault, *Noonday Devil*, 40.

59 Evagrius of Pontus, *Praktikos*, 8, in Sinkewicz, *Evagrius*, 102; Evagrius of Pontus, *On the Eight Thoughts*, 6:5, 6:17–18 in Sinkewicz, *Evagrius*, 84.

60 Dennis Okholm, *Dangerous Passions, Deadly Sins: Learning from the Psychology of Ancient Monks* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2014), 152.

some more, even as they faithfully engage in worship practices by which they hope again to provoke their soul to the wonder which will shock them from sadness to joy and remove the interruption of their contemplation of God.

In the context of a life of worship which, offered in the privacy of one's cell and in the community of believers, perseveres and waits in the times and places which have been given, those with acedia thus seek to open their heart to becoming directed towards God. Though ultimately it is God who initiates this movement, yet we must acquiesce in order to participate in the happiness of God. For this acquiescence to take form, however, there must remain, as we have said, a spark of hope that this is still an end worth rejoicing over. Without that spark, these practices of worship will not represent an *intentional* attempt to cultivate joy through the provoking of one's soul to wonder; and without such an intention, there can be no possibility of acedia's cycle being broken.

For hope, as Evagrius observes, is what enables the soul actively to overcome its own resistance. He suggests that just as in Psalm 42, where the soul enters into a dialogue with itself, so also people suffering from acedia can imagine their soul as divided in two. Along with the part that is experiencing sadness, Evagrius imagines a second part of the soul which stands alongside the first part and, in speaking encouragement, can draw the first part of the soul into the dialogue of wrestling before God, which is itself prayer.⁶¹ Though one part of the soul

may tell of the sadness, the other part tells of the joy and doggedly works to provoke the wonder which, though it is a divine gift, must nevertheless be actively received. In this wrestling, those with acedia can habituate themselves towards the good that is God and practise the hard work of calling the soul back to the discipline of delight.

IV. Hopeful Perseverance amongst Friends

The remedy for acedia is, when seen from one perspective, a circular one. For it demands that the acedic do what the acedic cannot do: delight in his or her inclusion and friendship with God. Whereas in giving pastoral counsel I might once have glossed over this complication, my own experience of acedia means that I now cannot. For I realize that although joy may be acedia's true remedy, neither hollow warnings about trying harder not to surrender to listlessness or restlessness nor exhortations to delight instead of sorrow will have any long-lasting effect. Whether such well-intended instructions are embraced for a time only or perhaps rejected out of hand, words by themselves, flung at the suffering person from a safe distance, will not suffice.

Instead, those with acedia need pastoral support from others who can, through genuine friendship, represent to them the love of the Friend and strengthen them for the difficult work of friendship with that Friend. For the practices directed towards delight are overwhelmingly difficult for a soul that struggles to practise

61 Evagrius, *Praktikos*, 27, in Sinkewicz,

Evagrius, 102.

them 'as if'. To return one's gaze in worship again and again upon Christ, in pursuit of the continuity of contemplation that Thomas prescribes in the reclaiming of friendship's joy, is no simple task in the face of near-constant failures to abide and enticing temptations to distraction by other, easier ends. It takes perseverance and it takes whole communities of friends who will hold up for us the vision of our future good and our present share in it, inviting us again and again to its practice.

Yet, notwithstanding the difficulty or the cost, there is, as long as hope remains susceptible to being stirred up, the possibility of a soul's return. For hope sparks the potential for the soul to stand actively against its own resistance. It enables willingness, however minimal, to wait actively for God, permitting him the freedom intrinsic to friendship, a freedom in which he is neither contained nor directed by

us and our frustrations. Hope waits even when the fig tree does not blossom and the fruit is not on the vines. Stirring up the soul one last time, it prods towards the disciplines of delight, trusting that one day practices will become dispositions and desire will be directed again to its proper end. Hope keeps the acedic person amongst the friends of Christ, knowing that the call to respond with joy to God is one undergirded and made possible in the community where God and humanity meet. And, though it be flickering and fragile, hope brings the suffering person to gaze upon Christ just one more time, in the expectation that the soul will eventually respond wholeheartedly and in joy to the offer of friendship which God faithfully holds out in Christ. Hope perseveres because, cast down and in turmoil as the soul may be, Psalm 42 is right: 'I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God.'