

THE PERSONALITY OF SIN: ANXIETY, PRIDE, AND SELF-CONTEMPT

by J. Wesley White

Introduction

ANYONE WHO HAS TRIED to change his or her own behavior knows that wrong actions are not easy to eliminate. The question is: why are addictions, angry reactions, bad habits, wrong ways of spending money, and worry so hard to get rid of? The answer of the Bible and modern psychology is that they are rooted deep within our personality. This personality has been shaped from our youth by many forces beyond our control and continues to be shaped by many subconscious forces as well as many conscious decisions. Once we realize that this is the case, we are then moved to ask: what are these forces of sin and hurt that shape me?

As pastors and leaders in the church, we have a different question. We not only have to deal with our own brokenness and sinfulness, we also want to help others. How can we help other people move past those patterns of sin that stick stubbornly around and are so destructive in people's lives?

In his book *Dynamics of Spiritual Life*, Richard Lovelace sets forth a way of renewal for individuals and groups.¹ Lovelace explains that there are various elements of renewal. However, he notes, we must begin by understanding the "preconditions" of renewal. One precondition is recognizing how deeply rooted sin really is in the human personality. Until we understand this, we will "dress the wounds of my people as if they were not serious" (Jer. 6:14).² It is easy to underestimate sin. As Lovelace notes, "the structure of sin in the human personality is something far more complicated than the isolated acts and thoughts of deliberate disobedience commonly designated by the word."³

Lovelace notes that the New Testament describes the fallen human personality as "the flesh." In order to deal with our problem, we must understand what "the flesh is," that is, what is really at the root of the fallen personality. How did it originate, and what is really driving it? Lovelace explains that Augustine thought it was pride and sensuality. Luther pushed it further back and said that it was rooted in unbelief. Lovelace agrees with this point. He believes that pride is at the root of the fallen nature. However, he makes this side comment:

1. Richard F. Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1979).

2. *Ibid.*, 86-94.

3. *Ibid.*, 88.

Kierkegaard, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Tillich are not wrong ... in suggesting that *anxiety* is at the root of much sinful behavior, since the unconscious awareness of our independence from God and unrelieved consciousness of guilt create a profound insecurity in the unbeliever or the Christian who is not walking in the light. This insecurity generates a kind of compensatory egoism, self-oriented but somewhat different than serious pride. Thus much of what is called pride is actually not godlike self-admiration, but masked inferiority, insecurity, and deep self-loathing.⁴

Lovelace then moves on without developing this thought much further. Yet it is worthy of more attention. In what follows, we shall seek to develop what it means that anxiety lies at the root of much sinful behavior. What is the role of anxiety in “the flesh”? Our goal is to develop a fuller understanding of this concept, which Lovelace only mentions in passing, and explore its implications for pastoral care and counseling.

1. Anxiety in Kierkegaard, Niebuhr, and Tillich

Lovelace explains that for Søren Kierkegaard, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Paul Tillich anxiety is at the root of much sin. According to psychologist Rollo May, in his book *Anxiety*, anxiety first came to the fore as an issue in the nineteenth century.⁵ The most prominent person to bring up the issue was Søren Kierkegaard in his work *The Concept of Anxiety* and other writings.⁶ Tillich and Niebuhr were building on Kierkegaard in much of their thought.

The first thing to note about anxiety in these writers is that anxiety itself is not derived from sin but from human finitude. According to Niebuhr, anxiety is derived from two facts. Humans are transcendent and able to look above and beyond the contingency of nature but yet at the same time caught up in the contingency and flux of the world.⁷ We can see this anxiety in Psalm 8. There, the Psalmist asks, “What is man that you are mindful of him?” This question is rooted in the fact that human beings are small, but there is obviously an element in us that has a large enough view of things that we can see that we are small. It is our strength and our weakness combined together that make us anxious. May provides an explanation:

Whenever possibility is visualized by an individual, anxiety is potentially present in the same experience. In everyday experiential terms, this may be illustrated by our recalling that every person has the opportunity and need to move ahead in his development—the child learns to walk, and moves on into school, and the adult moves into marriage and/or new jobs. Such

4. *Ibid.*, 90 (emphasis original).

5. Rollo May, *The Meaning of Anxiety* (New York: W.W. Norton Company, 1977), 33.

6. Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety: A Simple Psychologically Oriented Deliberation in View of the Dogmatic Problem of Hereditary Sin*, trans. Alistair Hannay (New York: Liveright Publishing Company, 2014). See Hannay’s introduction to this book for an explanation of the relationship of *The Concept of Anxiety* to Kierkegaard’s other writings.

7. Niebuhr uses this distinction throughout *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol. 1 (New York: Charles Scribner & Sons, 1964). See, for example, 124–125, 150, 179–183.

possibilities like roads ahead which cannot be known since you have not yet traversed and experienced them, involve anxiety.⁸

It is our involvement in the world, and yet our ability to see beyond it, that constitutes anxiety. Anxiety is the uncertainty that arises from seeing many paths and not knowing which one is right. This involves human greatness and human weakness. We can only take one path, and it may be the wrong one. We cannot foresee all of the difficulties of each path. At the same time, our mental powers are great enough to envision ourselves taking a variety of paths and to see some of their challenges. This is the source of our anxiety. As Kierkegaard says, "... anxiety is freedom's actuality as the possibility of possibility."⁹

It is important to note that this situation itself is not sin or sinfulness. Anxiety arises from our finitude and constitutes the occasion for temptation but is not in itself sinful. As Niebuhr notes: "Anxiety is the internal description of the state of temptation. It must not be identified with sin because there is always the ideal possibility that faith would purge anxiety of the tendency toward sinful self-assertion."¹⁰ In that way, Lovelace's statement about anxiety might be misleading.¹¹ Lovelace refers only to anxiety in the state of sin. Humanity's unconscious guilt and independence from God do cause anxiety, but this is not the origin of humans' anxiety. However, as we shall see, our attempt to escape insecurity by our own efforts often increases our anxiety.

Though it is our finitude and ability to see it that causes anxiety, we can still think of different "objects" of anxiety which become the basis for our internal anxiety. Paul Tillich provides a helpful division of these various "objects" of anxiety into three types.¹² The first is anxiety over *fate and death*. This is the most common and obvious. We will die, and we know not our time. The second type of anxiety is the anxiety of *meaninglessness*. He writes:

8. May, *The Meaning of Anxiety*, 38.

9. Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, 51. Kierkegaard uses dizziness to explain anxiety: "Anxiety can be compared with dizziness. He whose eye happens to look down into the yawning abyss becomes dizzy. But what is the reason? It is just as much his own eye as the abyss, for suppose he had not looked down. It is in this way that anxiety is the dizziness of freedom that emerges when spirit wants to posit the synthesis, and freedom now looks down into its own possibility and then grabs hold of finiteness to support itself. In this dizziness freedom subsides" (75).

10. Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny of Man*, 182–183.

11. Kierkegaard writes in *The Concept of Anxiety*: "Anxiety, then, means two things: the anxiety in which the individual posits sin through the qualitative leap, and the anxiety that comes in and enters with sin, and in that respect also enters quantitatively into the world every time an individual posits sin" (67). The difficulty of understanding this statement illustrates the problem of seeking to make use of Kierkegaard's works. Gordon D. Marino notes, "The Concept of Anxiety is a maddeningly difficult book.... I must confess that there are many passages in *The Concept of Anxiety*, the meaning of which completely escapes me." "Anxiety" in *The Concept of Anxiety* in Alistair Hannay and Gordon D. Marino, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 308.

12. Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), 42–54.

The anxiety of meaninglessness is anxiety about the loss of an ultimate concern, of a meaning which gives meaning to all meanings. This anxiety is aroused by a loss of a spiritual center, of an answer, however symbolic and indirect, to the question of the meaning of existence.¹³

According to Tillich, this has been the most dominant type of anxiety in the modern era.¹⁴ The third and final form of anxiety is anxiety over *guilt and condemnation*. “[L]iterally, [man] is required to answer, if he is asked, what he has made of himself.” Transcending ourselves, we can ask whether or not what we have done is right, and this can produce anxiety.¹⁵ These distinctions help flesh out the problems of anxiety and point us toward the way in which human beings seek to overcome their anxiety.

2. The Pride Solution

Faced with their own finitude yet their ability to see to some extent the big picture, humans have two options: pride or trust.¹⁶ We shall explain how the first option, pride, develops in the life of sinful humanity and return later to the second option, trust.

Niebuhr explains eloquently how pride develops in response to anxiety. He writes:

This ability to stand outside and beyond the world, tempts man to megalomania and persuades him to regard himself as the god around and about whom the universe centers. Yet he is too obviously involved in the flux and finiteness of nature to make such pretensions plausibly.¹⁷

13. *Ibid.*, 47.

14. *Ibid.*, 57–62 and 139–154.

15. Tillich seems to believe that this guilt is basic to our being as such (i.e., ontological not ethical). This could complicate the question of the relation of anxiety to the fall. However, in Kierkegaard and Niebuhr, it is clear that guilt is the result of “the fall,” which, even if not taken in an historical sense, does draw the distinction between human finitude and sin. As Niebuhr notes, “It is not the contradiction of finiteness and freedom from which Biblical religion seeks emancipation. It seeks redemption from sin; and the sin from which it seeks redemption is occasioned, though not caused, by this contradiction in which man stands. Sin is not caused by the contradiction because, according to Biblical faith, there is no absolute necessity that man should be betrayed into sin by the ambiguity of his position, as standing in and yet above nature. But it cannot be denied that this is the occasion for sin” (*Nature and Destiny of Man*, 179).

16. Terry Cooper explains this option well: “While this anxiety is not in itself a bad thing, it is the precondition for sin. It sets us up for two options: (a) trust in God or (b) trust in self. The temptation, when we experience anxiety, is to deny our creatureliness and dependence on God” (*Sin, Pride, & Self-Acceptance: The Problem of Identity in Theology & Psychology* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003], 36).

17. Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny of Man*, 125.

Because human beings can see so much, they are tempted to imagine that everything they can see or conceive moves around them as the center. This is similar to Lovelace's statement that pride is a sort of "compensatory egoism" aimed at overcoming anxiety.

Niebuhr explains that there are three types of pride: pride of power, pride of knowledge, and pride of morality. These three types of pride parallel the three types of anxiety mentioned by Tillich. The pride of power is either believing one is more secure than he really is or seeking to gain security at the expense of others. "The ego does not feel secure and therefore grasps for more power in order to make itself secure. It does not regard itself as sufficiently significant or respected or feared and therefore seeks to enhance its position in nature and society."¹⁸ This can involve either a complacency about one's position or an attempt to make oneself secure emotionally or physically at the expense of other people. As Niebuhr notes, "The truth is that man is tempted by the basic insecurity of human existence to make himself doubly secure and by the insignificance of his place in the total scheme of life to prove his significance."¹⁹ The trouble is that our weakness and finiteness "become the more apparent the more we seek to obscure them, and ... [generate] ultimate perils, the more immediate insecurities are eliminated."²⁰ This is the pride of power.

The pride of knowledge is based on humanity's limited perspective. The temptation is to make our knowledge more "final" than it is. As Niebuhr notes, "This is a very obvious fact but no philosophical system has been great enough to take full account of it. Each great thinker makes the same mistake, in turn, of imagining himself the final thinker."²¹ This is so pervasive that Niebuhr says it is at least an element of all knowledge: "All human knowledge is tainted with an 'ideological' taint. It pretends to be more true than it is. It is finite knowledge, gained from a particular perspective; but it pretends to be final and ultimate knowledge."²² This is our attempt to overcome the anxiety of meaninglessness. As Niebuhr notes, "The pretensions of final truth are always partly an effort to obscure a darkly felt consciousness of the limits of human knowledge. Man is afraid to face the problem of his limited knowledge lest he fall into the abyss of meaninglessness."²³

The third type of pride is moral pride. This occurs when we make our own moral perspective ultimate: "Since the self judges itself by its own standards it finds itself good. It judges others by its own standards and finds them evil, when their standards fail to conform to its own."²⁴ Often, this limited moral perspective claims the sanction of religion, and thus religion becomes the tool of the ego:

The ultimate sin is the religious sin of making the self-deification implied in moral pride explicit. This is done when our partial standards and relative attainments are explicitly related to the unconditioned good, and claim

18. *Ibid.*, 189.

19. *Ibid.*, 192.

20. *Ibid.*, 194.

21. *Ibid.*, 195.

22. *Ibid.*, 194.

23. *Ibid.*, 185.

24. *Ibid.*, 199.

divine sanction. For this reason religion is not simply as is generally supposed an inherently virtuous human quest for God.²⁵

Even the Christian faith can become a tool of our pride. As Niebuhr explains:

The worst form of self-assertion is religious self-assertion in which under the guise of contrition before God, He is claimed as the exclusive ally of our contingent self.... Christianity rightly regards itself as a religion, not so much of man's search for God ... but as a religion of revelation in which a holy and loving God is revealed to man as the source and end of all finite existence against whom the self-will of man is shattered and his pride abased. But as soon as the Christian assumes that he is, by virtue of possessing this revelation, more righteous, because more contrite, than other men, he increases the sin of self-righteousness and makes the forms of a religion of contrition the tool of his pride.²⁶

Thus, even humanity's highest activities can be turned into tools of our pride. As soon as we grasp the basic anxiety of human existence, we must be alert to human pride that seeks to make us bigger than we are in order to overcome our smallness and relative insignificance in the scheme of things.

3. Pride and Self-Contempt

Thus far it may seem that the specific views of Tillich, Kierkegaard, and Niebuhr do not involve "self-loathing" at all, as Lovelace contends. Instead, they see pride as a way of overcoming anxiety. In fact, this emphasis on pride as the way of overcoming anxiety has drawn criticism from several quarters. In particular, feminist theologians have said that Niebuhr's views are true as a critique of male pride but do not describe the common experience of females who often have a greater danger of retreating from being a self rather than seeking to inflate the self.²⁷ Psychologists following Carl Rogers tend to see pride as a mask for a lack of self-acceptance rather than the root problem.²⁸ Lovelace would seem to describe the Kierkegaard, Tillich, and Niebuhr view as being similar to that of Rogers. As Lovelace states it, pride becomes a "mask" for self-loathing. In fact, Rogers himself critiqued Niebuhr as being in opposition to his view.²⁹ So, it would seem that Lovelace's contention that pride is masked self-loathing does not accurately represent the view of Kierkegaard, Tillich, and Niebuhr.

That said, what then is the relationship between the sense of inferiority and self-contempt and pride? Can the two go together? The fact that two major thinkers (Niebuhr and Rogers) could see pride and self-loathing as alternative views of the human problem suggests that there is some truth in both. Terry Cooper discusses this

25. *Ibid.*, 200.

26. *Ibid.*, 201.

27. See Terry Cooper's discussion of this critique in *Sin, Pride, and Self-Acceptance*, 73–86.

28. See *Ibid.*, 87–111.

29. See Cooper, *Sin, Pride, and Self-Acceptance*, 25–27.

issue in his book *Sin, Pride, and Self-Acceptance*. He refers his readers to the work of Karen Horney to explain how anxiety, pride, and self-contempt can be brought together.³⁰

Like Niebuhr and Tillich, Horney agrees that it is anxiety that is at the root of “neurotic” personality traits.³¹ In order to overcome our weakness and smallness, we begin to create what Horney calls an “idealized image.” She writes: “Gradually and unconsciously, [one’s] imagination sets to work and creates in his mind an *idealized image* of himself. In this process he endows himself with unlimited powers and with exalted faculties: he becomes a hero, a genius, a supreme lover, a saint, a god.”³² However, this image runs up against reality. The person one imagines himself to be does not match up with the real self. “What does it do to a person when he recognizes that he cannot measure up to his inner dictates?” Horney, anticipating the answer, observes that he then “starts to hate and despise himself.”³³ In fact, self-contempt and the idealized image are remarkably intertwined—that is, “pride and self-hate are actually one entity,” which leads Horney to call “the sum total of the factors involved by a common name: *the pride system*.”³⁴ The pride system includes both pride and self-hate. They are actually two parts of the same phenomenon of the personality.

What, then, is primary: pride or insecurity? It is difficult to say. They both influence each other. As Terry Cooper writes, “One may be dominant, but the other does not lie far behind. Thus, there is unexpected low self-esteem in pride and unexpected pride in low self-esteem.”³⁵ Cooper, drawing on Horney’s work, shows this connection in some interesting ways. For example, “Some persons allow abuse because their idealized self is demanding that they be the epitome of patience, tolerance, forgiveness, and long-suffering.”³⁶ And: “Beneath the negative view of one’s ‘stupidity,’ there is often a pride that expects omniscience.”³⁷ Sometimes, we may think that someone who is depressed because other people do not like them is suffering from low self-esteem. Cooper points out that, in fact, this may be rooted in the pride of an idealized image:

Perhaps what is overlooked in this “obvious” form of low self-esteem is the underlying pride system that says that everyone *ought* to like me or that I am completely loveable. The constant attempt to win approval and affection is based on a conviction that we can win those things from everyone. There

30. *Ibid.*, 112–142.

31. Karen Horney, *Our Inner Conflicts: A Constructive Theory of Neurosis* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1972), 13, “Compulsive drives are specifically neurotic; they are born of feelings of isolation, helplessness, fear and hostility, and represent ways of coping with the world despite these feelings; they aim primarily not at satisfaction but at safety; their compulsive character is *due to the anxiety lurking behind them*” (emphasis mine).

32. Karen Horney, *Neurosis and Human Growth* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company Inc., 1950), 22 (emphasis original).

33. *Ibid.*, 85.

34. *Ibid.*, 110–111.

35. Cooper, *Sin, Pride, and Self-Acceptance*, 165.

36. *Ibid.*, 138.

37. *Ibid.*, 139.

is a double grandiosity here: (1) that we can control what others think of us and (2) that everyone will like us if we simply work at it. Thus, even here, pride and low self-esteem appear to be mixed together.³⁸

Consequently, it seems right to say that self-hate and pride are related, but the relationship is too complex to make one the mask of the other.

4. Toward a Solution to Anxiety: Trust in God's Goodness

In spite of the fact that pride is the normal response to anxiety, anxiety need not induce pride in us. The alternative to making ourselves big is seeing how big God is and trusting in his goodness. This alternative is clearly set forth by Niebuhr:

Anxiety is the internal description of the state of temptation. It must not be identified with sin because there is always the ideal possibility that faith would purge anxiety of the tendency toward sinful self-assertion. The ideal possibility is that faith in the ultimate security of God's love would overcome all immediate insecurities of nature and history. That is why Christian orthodoxy has consistently defined unbelief as the root of sin, or as the sin which precedes pride. It is significant that Jesus justifies his injunction, "Be not anxious," with the observation, "For your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of these things." The freedom from anxiety which he enjoins is a possibility only if perfect trust in divine security has been achieved.³⁹

When it comes to our security, there are always more issues to think about—which causes anxiety. In response to this, we have a choice. We can trust God with our future, working on those things he has given to us today, or we can dive into our anxiety trying to solve everything ourselves. The former is trust; the latter is pride.

The major problem with trusting God is that our anxiety includes not only insecurity but guilt. Our guilt demands God's judgment. In the context of sin, this demands that we rely on the atonement. Kierkegaard grasped this point and concluded *The Concept of Anxiety* by saying: "Therefore the person who, in respect of guilt, is educated by anxiety will rest only in the Atonement."⁴⁰ Tillich also develops this point at length in *The Courage to Be*: "The acceptance by God, his forgiving or justifying act, is the only and ultimate source of a courage to be which is able to take the anxiety of guilt and condemnation into itself."⁴¹ This is closely connected to the anxiety over fate because the "wages of sin is death." As Tillich notes, it is really "the uneasy conscience which produces innumerable irrational fears in daily life."⁴² Only when the conscience is relieved through God's forgiveness can we let go of our insecurity and anxiety in regard to fate and death.

38. *Ibid.*, 139.

39. Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny of Man*, 182–183.

40. Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, 196.

41. Tillich, *The Courage to Be*, 166.

42. *Ibid.*, 168.

When it comes to anxiety over meaning, we also have to trust God. Niebuhr explains: “The pretensions of final truth are always partly an effort to obscure a darkly felt consciousness of the limits of human knowledge. Humans are afraid to face the problem of their limited knowledge lest they fall into the abyss of meaninglessness.”⁴³ As Niebuhr notes:

In Christianity the unique individual finds the contingent and arbitrary aspects of his existence tolerable because it is related to, judged and redeemed by the eternal God, who transcends both the rational structure and the arbitrary facts of existence in the universe.⁴⁴

Humans can see a very large picture of the world. They can also see that their place in the world is small. It is only by trust in God and his bigness that they can escape the anxiety over meaninglessness and rest in the place in the world that God has given them.

In sum, the alternative to pride is trust in the goodness and greatness of God. However, the anxiety over guilt now plays a huge role in framing our life. In this way, Lovelace is right to say “the unconscious awareness of our independence from God and in unrelieved consciousness of guilt create a profound insecurity in the unbeliever or the Christian who is not walking in the light.”⁴⁵ The result is that we need more than a knowledge of God. We also need the gospel and particularly the gospel of justification if we are to overcome anxiety. Lovelace is right to emphasize this:

“I am accepted”—accepted as though my life displayed the spiritual perfection of the Messiah himself—ought to be the automatic response of our hearts whenever we wake, like the compass needle that always points north. This is a response which is always relevant to our current spiritual condition. We never make such progress in sanctification that we can depend on it for acceptance.⁴⁶

The battle against anxiety will be fought every day and only by preaching the gospel to ourselves every day will we be able to overcome anxiety through trust in God.

5. Application to Pastoral Care and Counseling

The results of this study are highly significant for pastoral care and counseling. The first thing that this teaches us is that cure of souls is a much deeper task than many Christians and pastors may realize. The irony of this is described well by Lovelace:

During the late nineteenth century, while the church’s understanding of the unconscious motivation behind surface actions was vanishing, Sigmund

43. Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny of Man*, 185.

44. *Ibid.*, 86.

45. Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life*, 90.

46. Richard Lovelace, *Renewal as a Way of Life: A Guidebook for Spiritual Growth* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2002), 142.

Freud rediscovered this factor and recast it in an elaborate and profound secular mythology. One of the consequences of this remarkable shift is that in the twentieth century pastors have often been reduced to the status of legalistic moralists, while the deeper aspects of the cure of souls are generally relegated to psychotherapy, even among Evangelical Christians.⁴⁷

Instead of simply asking the “what” of sin, we must ask the “why?”⁴⁸ We must dig below the surface.

One theologian who has emphasized looking deeper into the personality of sin is Tim Keller. Keller explains in his book *Counterfeit Gods*:

Why do we fail to love or keep promises or live unselfishly? Of course, the general answer is “because we are weak and sinful,” but the specific answer in any actual circumstance is that there is something you feel you *must* have to be happy, something that is more important to your heart than God Himself.⁴⁹

Consequently, in his book he suggests that idolatry is an appropriate way for thinking about the sin-complex of the human personality. Because it can be difficult to identify our idols, the source of our pride, or specific anxiety, Keller provides a detailed discussion on how to locate our idols. He suggests that a good place to start, which “works for everyone,” is to “[l]ook at your most uncontrollable emotions.”

Karen Horney identifies our pride system in a similar way. She says that when we have a pride system we begin to make claims. Claims are legitimate wishes or desires that become an *ought* for us. So, for example, we may desire that a plane be on time, but we are not exempt from the common problem of planes being delayed. To think that we are exempt is a claim of pride. Consequently, Horney urges us to think about our reactions:

It is in our real interest ... to examine our own reactions when we become preoccupied with a wrong done to us, or when we begin to ponder the hateful qualities of somebody, or when we feel the impulse to get back at others. We must then scrutinize the question of whether our reaction is in any reasonable proportion to the wrong done. And if with honest scrutiny we find a disproportion, we must search for hidden claims.⁵⁰

In other words, we should not just look at behavior. We need to consider why problem behavior is occurring. We need to look for the pride or idols below the surface. This will help us get at the deeper *sin personality*, the flesh.

The second recommendation in pastoral care is that we must recognize the neediness in pride. This is commonly understood but it is also easy for us to miss.

47. Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life*, 88.

48. See Scott Thomas and Tom Wood, *Gospel Coach: Shepherding Leaders to Glorify God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 83–85.

49. Timothy Keller, *Counterfeit Gods: The Empty Promises of Money, Sex, and Power, and the Only Hope That Matters* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2009), 166.

50. Horney, *Neurosis and Human Growth*, 57.

We hear this often in the complaint that our culture is “narcissistic.” This is no doubt true. But we must remember that self-absorption is often rooted in a deep anxiety about our place in the world. As Karen Horney writes concerning a person with neurotic pride:

Even though godlike in his imagination, he still lacks the earthy self-confidence of a simple shepherd. The great positions to which he may rise, the fame he may acquire, will render him arrogant but will not bring him inner security. He still feels at bottom unwanted, and needs incessant confirmation of his value.⁵¹

Consequently, even as we address pride problems, we must constantly emphasize justification. As Richard Lovelace notes: “The counselor who is attempting to move people further in sanctification should therefore begin with a strong emphasis on justification and reiterate this often in the course of this work.”⁵² The person who states so often what a good husband or manager or pastor they are is in fact often deeply insecure about it. They are seeking affirmation. So, to merely confront the pride without dealing with the insecurity will probably produce more fear and withdrawal than change.

The third recommendation for pastoral care is that we must recognize the pride in neediness. We can easily look at someone who is deeply needy and think that they simply need to be encouraged. This occurred to me recently when someone used the phrase “epic fail” on Facebook. One person told me that he reached out to that person to try to help them feel better. The trouble is that the phrase “epic fail” could betray a certain pride. “Epic fail” could almost mean “the god has fallen!” Our failures actually are not epic. They are just normal failures that we should expect as a part of life.

Take another example. A mother may feel overwhelmed. She may beat herself up that she can’t get more done than she does. She may seem to suffer from poor self-esteem. However, we can also ask whether she is realistic in what she thinks she can get done. Is she viewing herself as super-mom and then getting upset when she fails to live up to that idealized image of herself? One woman I know got home from a trip and was depressed at the end of the day because there were things to do everywhere. But she had just gotten home from a trip! No one could have provided enough attention to the children and accomplished all the things on the list. She’s not super-mom. She’s just a good mom. How often do we beat ourselves up over things that no one could actually do? This is a sign of surprising pride in low self-esteem.

One further example. Many of my friends are pastors. One thing that rips pastors up is a small group of people who oppose them. While this is painful and undesirable, it is not unusual. It would be easy to comfort them and tell them that their value is in Christ. However, this study suggests that it might also be worthwhile to ask, “Who do you think you are that everyone in your congregation will like you all the time?” Once we let go of our idealized image, we will be much better equipped to deal with reality.

51. *Ibid.*, 86.

52. Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life*, 114.

The gospel provides the only real basis for dealing with the anxiety at the root of all human existence. Therefore, we should make the preaching of the gospel a large part of our ministry and counseling, even when we are confronting people with sin. It is only a sense of the goodness of God and his forgiveness that will give us the confidence to entrust our future, our significance, and cares to him and to overcome the anxiety that tempts us to resort to pride.

Conclusion

In this study, we have provided a fuller explanation for anxiety in relationship to sin. In it we have seen that anxiety itself is not sin nor a necessary cause of sin, though it can be an occasion for sin. It becomes the occasion for sin inasmuch as it tempts us to inflate our significance, power, morality, or knowledge beyond our true selves or even beyond what we can possibly be as human beings. This pride then produces further anxiety because it is a false foundation for dealing with anxiety. This false foundation can also produce a certain self-loathing and self-contempt. Because self-hate and pride go together, it is worthwhile to think of them as a pride system. The result of this is to recognize that we need to confront pride. However, we should recognize that much of pride is built on our neediness. At the same time, we should also recognize that our neediness is often built on pride. Thus, repentance and faith go together. The way out of anxiety is to turn from our pride to trust in the goodness of our heavenly Father, especially as he is revealed as the God who justifies in Christ.

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Postscript on Lovelace

Is Lovelace correct in his statement regarding anxiety? In this critique, we recognize that Lovelace only made a passing statement, and given that we have not been able to find any further writings that contain his thought on this topic, our criticisms cannot be “final” but cautionary. That said, we observe the following. First, Lovelace seems to set anxiety over against faith as a different explanation for sin. However, a careful reading of Tillich and Niebuhr in particular indicate that an understanding of “anxiety as an occasion for sin” and “unbelief as the basis of sin” fit well together and actually confirm Luther’s contention that unbelief is the root of sin.

Second, Lovelace speaks of anxiety as if it were caused by sin rather than prior to sin. This misrepresents the view of Kierkegaard, Tillich, and Niebuhr. Our sinful estate aggravates our anxiety but it does not cause it. Third, his statement of the relationship of pride and self-contempt is not in line with the statement of these writers. Instead, it seems more in line with the view of Rogers. In this essay, we have pointed to Terry Cooper’s conclusion that the work of Karen Horney can bring together the differences of Niebuhr and Rogers in a way somewhat different than Lovelace’s claim that “much of what is called pride is actually not godlike self-

admiration, but masked inferiority, insecurity, and deep self-loathing.”⁵³ Even a “compensatory egoism” actually does include much “godlike self-admiration.”⁵⁴

53. Richard Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life*, 90.

54. Karen Horney constantly uses the term “godlike” to describe neurotic pride. For example, she writes about the difference between the idealized image and the actual self this way: “And this actual being is such an embarrassing sight when viewed from the perspective of a godlike perfection that he cannot but despise it” (*Neurosis and Human Growth*, 109). Thus, I think that Lovelace misses something when he says that “compensatory egoism” is not “godlike self-admiration.” Human pride, even that which does not appear to be such, is often an inflation of our status and characteristics to a godlike status.