



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Staying Put to Get Somewhere
(*Acedia*, pp. 19-25)

Suggested Article:

📖 *Acedia* in the Workplace
(*Acedia*, pp. 77-81)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

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Staying Put to Get Somewhere

We may believe the “grass is greener” in another marriage or church or vocation or place, but often it is the same hue. What is worse, we remain the same. Conversion and growth happen when we remain, not when we run (which is precisely what the ancients associated with *acedia*—a cowardly running away).

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Psalm 106:1-8, 24-25, 43-45, 48

Meditation†

Once when Anthony was living in the desert his soul was troubled by *acedia* and irritation. He said to God, “Lord, I want to be made whole and my thoughts do not let me. What am I to do about this trouble, how shall I be cured?” After a while he got up and went outside. He saw someone like himself sitting down and working, then standing up to pray; then sitting down again to make a plait of palm leaves, and standing up again to pray. It was an angel of the Lord sent to correct Anthony and make him vigilant. He heard the voice of the angel saying, “Do this and you will be cured.” When he heard it he was very glad and recovered his confidence. He did what the angel had done, and found the salvation he was seeking.

Reflection

“The vice of *acedia* is paradoxical,” Dennis Ockholm admits. We call it “sloth” since it is “a weariness of the soul, indifference, a listlessness, an inability to concentrate on the task at hand.” But *acedia*’s resistance to the demands of love can mask itself in what Solomon Schimmel calls “fervid but misdirected activity.”

Psalm 106 diagnoses both symptoms of *acedia*—despairing laziness and desperate busyness—in the recalcitrant children of Israel. First, they angered God by their grumbling and foot-dragging across the wilderness; then, instead of welcoming the land of rest with God (cf. Deuteronomy 12:8-12; Joshua 1:13), they “despised the pleasant land” (Psalm 106:24) and turned again to restless wandering.

In the sixth century Benedict of Nursia even created a name for the wandering monks who would not be satisfied in any community, embrace the demands of mutual love there, and just be at rest: he called them *gyrovagues*, from Latin for “circle” and Greek for “wander.” As contemporary *gyrovagues* we wander unsatisfied from one marriage, job, place, or church to another.

Certainly there are times, places, and continuing relationships of abuse that we should flee. But too often our wanderlust is not caused by any external evil of that sort, but by our own internal distractions. In the latter case, Ockholm suggests, the best remedy today (as it was in Benedict’s day) is to practice stability of place. Thus, he explores the wisdom in the monastic advice to “stay in your cell, and your cell will teach you everything.”

- ▶ *Stability is more than staying in one place.* It requires paying close attention to and offering ourselves to the people who share that place—a family, workplace, church, or community—with us. “Stability is premised on the conviction that God places us in *particular* constellations of people so that we can speak to and



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hear from each other what is needed for our mutual growth into Christlikeness," Ockholm explains.

- ▶ *Stability resists diversions.* Often our goals and actions are flighty when we have no inner spiritual direction. "We do not act from within ourselves but accept as our life a life which is actually fed in from outside," Anthony Bloom notes; "we are used to things happening which compel us to do other things." Chasing the latest fads, bowing to every request, and following the crowd will "distract us from our full participation in the context and community into which God has placed us," Ockholm warns. These behaviors "leave us untethered, uncentered, disoriented, and confused."
- ▶ *The practice of stability slowly transforms us.* We cultivate the virtue that the ancients called *hypomone*, which Ockholm describes as a "patient endurance motivated by a charitable disposition." We also increase in love for God and others, and develop the courage required to not flee the difficulties of a place. As other people come to know us better, we come to know and love ourselves—enough to grow when we need to. "It is only when we persevere in relationships that we can be known in such a way that we are confronted with the reality of our real selves and challenged to change."
"If we believe that by divine providence we have been placed in a community for the nurturing of our souls, then not to persevere but to flee that 'cell' in a fit of restless *acedia* is also to flee God," Ockholm concludes. "And that is the problem with *acedia*: it is opposed to love, the queen of the virtues, which is life-altering friendship with God and those who are in communion with God."

Study Questions

1. What features of contemporary culture distract us from forming close and loving relationships with God and others, and thereby tempt us to be *gyrovagues*?
2. The Christian tradition warns us that a common symptom of *acedia* is desperate busyness with "pious" activities. According to Dennis Ockholm, how is this pattern apparent in pastors and religious leaders today? Consider how you are tempted to pious busyness in your own life.
3. What is the Christian practice of "stability of place"? How, according to Ockholm, is it a remedy to *acedia*?
4. Stressed by a demanding job he thought God wanted him to do, Alvin Ung writes: "My desire to quit was so overwhelming that all I could do was to go to work, one day at a time, and pray for help. Unwittingly I was cultivating a rhythm of work and prayer. By not quitting, I was becoming a Christian mystic in the marketplace." Discuss how Ung's actions were a modern instance of practicing "stability of place."

Departing Hymn: 'I Lift My Prayer to Thee' (verses 1, 3, and 5)

† Apothegm 7.1 in *The Desert Fathers: Sayings of the Early Christian Monks*, translated by Benedicta Ward (Penguin Classics, 2003), 60.

Staying Put to Get Somewhere

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To understand how the vice of *acedia* leads to desperate busyness, even in “pious” activities.
2. To consider how our culture tempts us to desperate busyness.
3. To explore why the Christian tradition commends stability of place as a remedy to the busyness of *acedia*.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 6-7 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Acedia (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting.

Begin with a Story

John Cassian (c. 360-c. 435) depicts the restlessness of *acedia* in this vignette of a monk who is resentful of the community in which he lives.

...the same malady [*acedia*] suggests that he should dutifully pay his respects to the brothers and visit the sick, whether at a slight distance or *further away*. It also prescribes certain pious and religious tasks: Those relatives male and female should be looked after, and he should hasten to bring his greetings to them more often; it would be a great and pious work to make frequent visits to that religious woman who is vowed to God and who, in particular, is totally deprived of her relatives' support, and a very holy thing to bring whatever might be necessary to one who was abandoned and disdained by her own relatives. On such things it behooves him to expend his pious efforts rather than to remain, barren and having made no progress, in his cell.

Perhaps you can identify with this monk in whom the vice of *acedia* disguises itself as virtuous activism. In this study we will review the primary remedy for such distracting busyness that Cassian and other desert Christians commend.

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God to give members discernment and peace about their work in God's kingdom.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Psalm 106:1-8, 24-25, 43-45, and 48 from a modern translation.

Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

Reflection

This study and the next, “Remedies to *Acedia* in the Rhythm of Daily Life,” survey the remedies to the vice of *acedia* in the Christian tradition. An earlier study, “Resistance to the Demands of Love,” introduces the central

features this of destructive vice and its manifestation through two opposing symptoms, despairing laziness and distracting busyness.

Dennis Ockholm commends the practice of stability of place as a remedy of *acedia*. If members would like to learn more about and develop this practice, encourage them to read Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove's *The Wisdom of Stability: Rooting Faith in a Mobile Culture* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2010, 163 pp., \$14.99), which is reviewed by Jonathan Sands-Wise in *Diagnosing ACEDIA and Its Spiritual Neighbors* (in *Acedia*, pp. 88-93).

Study Questions

1. "We are captives of a technologically-enabled, consumer-driven, efficiency-minded, instant-results-oriented culture," Dennis Ockholm complains. We have so many "distracting and numbing" options in many areas of life. (He briefly summarizes "a study of Chicago area communities that evolved from few choices and deep community life in the 1950s to a plethora of choices and a paucity of community life in the 1980s.") Invite members to discuss how their own relationships with family members, friends, colleagues, fellow church members, and others have changed over the years. How have these changes been influenced by such things as expanding choices in popular culture, increased mobility, the prevalence of information technologies, more demands in the workplace (working harder to be more productive, changing jobs to advance or maintain a career, etc.), or growing polarization of political, social, and theological views. Can they think of other cultural factors that might encourage the restlessness of *acedia*?
2. Ockholm reviews a study of pastors in 2010 which found "that while 65% of the pastors surveyed said they worked fifty or more hours a week, 52% indicated that they spent only one to six hours in prayer each week and 5% reported they spent no time at all in prayer. As one researcher put it, 'These people tend to be driven by a sense of a duty to God to answer every call for help from anybody, and they are virtually called upon all the time, 24/7.' ... The toll that *acedia's* commitment to tasks takes on a pastor's prayer life is devastating, not only for the pastor, but also for the congregation."

Give members a few minutes of silence to list the temptations to pious busyness in their lives. How can these good activities get in the way of a deepening friendship with God?

3. "'Stability of place' is much like a marriage vow," Ockholm says. It is the commitment and ongoing practice of staying put in a relationship, congregation, workplace, or community. It's not a naïve commitment to an abusive situation. Rather, "Stability is premised on the conviction that God places us in *particular* constellations of people so that we can speak to and hear from each other what is needed for our mutual growth into Christlikeness."

Recall that the vice of *acedia* is resistance to the demands of God's love. Persons with *acedia* do not really care enough for that relationship: they want the benefits of friendship with God and others, but without the commitment and work and willingness to change that these relationships require. The practice of stability is acting like we love God and others more than we really do, because we want to grow in our love for God and others. This practice of staying put and paying closer attention to others gradually counteracts *acedia* in several ways. We begin to notice and resist the distractions that threaten to divert us from the relationship. As we come to know and be known by God and others, we trust them more to correct us and help us grow in Christlikeness. Finally, we develop perseverance in the relationship, zeal (love) for God and others, and courage to not run away from problems.

4. "Each time I stepped through the glass doors of the Petronas Twin Towers in Kuala Lumpur, I had the uncanny feeling that I was stepping into a monk's cell," Alvin Ung writes. "I began to see that everyone I worked with, including my ornery boss, was made in the image of God. I forged allies. I found friends. Angels appeared. Three angels, a Malay man, an Australian woman, and a Chinese man, embedded themselves in my team and together we achieved things beyond belief. ... All these lessons – of spirituality, resilience, friendship, and teamwork – would never have emerged if I had not remained. (There is a time for us to move on. I did quit that job later on. As a principle, a good time to move on is when we are free from the desperate urge to run away.)"

Departing Hymn

'I Lift My Prayer to Thee' is on pp. 67-69 of *Acedia*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.