Sloth in Marriage: Understanding the Challenges of Acedia (Sloth) through the Lens of Early Christian Monasticism

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ABSTRACT

In Christianity’s early years, monks experienced a phenomenon known as “acedia,” which caused them to see their commitment to the monastic life as requiring *too much effort*. This study seeks to answer several questions: Does acedia affect people today as it affected the ancient monks? Does it affect individuals living in non-monastic contexts? Does it affect relationships between persons as well as a person’s relationship with God? Specifically, the purpose of this thesis is to demonstrate how the ancient teachings on acedia from the Christian tradition have relevance today for understanding some of the challenges faced within the context of Christian marriage. In Part One, I create a “phenomenology” of acedia by identifying several of its key characteristics that recur in the works of Christian writers over the centuries. In Part Two, as a prerequisite to considering its role in a marriage, I argue that acedia can manifest in both an individual and community. In Part Three, I present a narrative and analysis of a hypothetical present-day marriage. Finally, in Part Four, I delineate some of the most common therapeutic suggestions from historical Christian sources in response to acedia.
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INTRODUCTION

A Phenomenon of Many Names

When people hear the word "sloth" within the context of Christianity, they may vaguely remember it as being on a list—one of the "Seven Deadly Sins." In popular culture, there is a tendency to equate sloth with mere laziness; however, there is so much more to this "deadly sin." Sloth, or “acedia,” as I will now refer to it for the rest of this study, was a phenomenon experienced by monks in Christianity's early years. The Greek word, ακηδία, transliterated as acedia, literally means a "lack of care." When referring to acedia, the fourth-century desert fathers would call it a "spirit" or the "noonday demon," believing that this phenomenon is what "the destruction that wastes at noonday" is referring to in Psalm 91:6. The monks plagued by this "demon" would, often for seemingly no good reason, stop caring about their commitments to the life of monasticism. They would see praying, reading, and other things that were expected of them as requiring too much effort. Some even seemed to regret their decision to enter this ascetic way of life. As I read the works of these monastic writers, several questions arose: Does this same vice affect people today as it affected the ancient monks? Does it affect individuals living in non-monastic contexts? Does it affect relationships between persons as well as a person’s relationship with God? My initial sense was to answer each of these questions with “yes.” In fact, it seemed like the experiences of these monks in Christianity's early years are not so different from some of the struggles Christians face today within marriage, and the insights expressed by the monks might constructively illuminate the spiritual challenges of married life.
The Challenges of Marriage

Marriage is hard. Getting married is easy, but staying married—being married—is difficult. Once married, a couple will begin to develop a routine. Perhaps for a while, it looks something like this: wake up, eat breakfast, go to work, eat lunch, come home, eat dinner, do chores, sleep, and repeat. The couple may not mind this because being and living together might still seem exciting and new. After some time, though, the couple will get used to each other. This is not a bad thing in and of itself; however, it becomes easy for the couple to get into a false mindset that their marriage will automatically continue; they may act as if the other will always be there; they may take their spouse for granted. Because of this, the couple may unconsciously begin to make other things in their lives take priority over their marriage. For example, they might gladly take on more hours at work each week, believing it will pay off in the long run. However, if staying later and later at the office becomes routine, perhaps the couple might not notice that the time they would spend nurturing their relationship is gradually diminishing, along with the quality of their marriage.

Years go by, and that same couple who found joy waking up next to each other each day may suddenly become horrified at their routine. Waking up, going to work, coming home, sleeping...the same thing day after day. Doing something along these lines for the rest of their lives might make them feel stuck. They may question if there is a point to all of the repetition. They may question why they even married each other in the first place...Was it a mistake? Perhaps they start dwelling on the past and how good their lives were before they married each other, wishing that they could go back to those seemingly better days. Because of this the couple may be more irritable around each other without knowing why. Perhaps there is an unconscious
resentment for the other contributing to what now seems like *meaninglessness*. The couple may argue more or, possibly worse, stay silent about things in their marriage that are troubling them.

Marriage takes a lot of effort. When things get difficult, it would be easier to not communicate. It would be easier to spend less time together. It would be easier to not want to try anymore. It would be easier to resist all of the hard work that love requires. Arguably, it might be easier to just end the relationship, liberating both spouses from this miserable state of affairs.

**The Scope of this Study**

The purpose of this thesis is to demonstrate that the concepts involving the phenomenon of acedia, as they have been understood historically within the Christian tradition, have an illuminative potential for contemporary Christian life—specifically, within Christian marriage in the 21st century. This study is not an exhaustive account of the characteristics of acedia, as it is described by historical voices within the Christian tradition. Nor is it an attempt to apply every aspect of acedia and its remedies to every possible experience in the 21st century, or within marriage. Rather, this is a synthesis of historical and contemporary sources within the Christian tradition which, first, gives an account of acedia and, second, uses this account as an interpretive lens. This thesis will progress through four parts. In Part One, I will highlight several key characteristics of acedia that emerge from Christian writers over the centuries, creating a “phenomenology” of the vice. In Part Two, I will consider and defend the possibility for the manifestation of acedia in not only an individual, but in a community—a prerequisite to considering its role in a marriage. Part Three will depict a narrative and analysis of several scenarios in a hypothetical present-day marriage. Finally, Part Four will highlight some of the most common suggestions from historical Christian sources to remedy acedia, which can serve
as a starting point for future research on Christian-based marriage therapies that offer fresh insights and promise for struggling couples.
PART ONE: WHAT IS THE MEANING OF ACEDIA?

In “A Review Essay in the Form of Personal Reflection,” John Chryssavgis (1958–) explains that ακηδία, the Greek word that acedia comes from, is “‘...so pregnant with meaning that it frustrates every attempt to translate it.’”¹ Holding a similar opinion, in “Fighting the Noonday Devil,” Russell R. Reno (1959–) writes that “...acedia or sloth is a complex spiritual state that defies simple definition.”² After reading the works of other scholars and theologians across the centuries, one would agree with Chryssavgis and Reno that it is difficult to come up with one set definition of sloth (from here on, sloth will be referred to as acedia). Indeed, from the fourth-century Desert Fathers to the contemporary scholar Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung, there is a plethora of different descriptions of acedia. Even so, after reading all these works, some common themes emerge: a resistance to that which is good, doing everything BUT that which is required, a connection to sleep, a hatred of the place, a connection to depression, a disunion from God, and an issue of identity.

Resisting the Good

Acedia is a resistance to work that is difficult, yet worthwhile because it is good. In Acedia & Me by Kathleen Norris (1947–), there is an excerpt from the Summa theologica in which Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274) reflects on this very notion: “We might say that all the sins which are due to ignorance can be reduced to sloth, which pertains to the negligence by which a


man refuses to acquire spiritual goods because of attendant labor.” Norris also provides an excerpt from “The Formation of Conscience: The Sin of Sloth and the Significance of Spirituality” by Kenneth R. Himes (1950–) that echoes of the perspective of Aquinas: “...when used in the moral sense, the person seized by acedia is the affect-less individual, the one incapable of investment or commitment, a person who cannot get deeply involved in any cause or relationship....Sloth as a moral apathy is what hinders a person from pursuing that which is good. It is a refusal to seek the good because it is difficult and demanding.” (326). This last sentence is of particular importance and should be kept in mind in the analysis that follows because it is at the heart—the cause, even—of many of the rest of the subsequent characteristics. For example, when one with acedia does everything but that which is required and good, it is because that person sees the normative behavior as too difficult.

Everything But

A popular notion of acedia is that it is synonymous with laziness. However, this is a simplistic understanding of the vice. If suffering from acedia simply meant being lazy or inactive, there would be an implication that always being on the go automatically makes someone exempt from the attacks of this “noonday demon.” This, however, is not the case. As Rebecca DeYoung exposes in Glittering Vices, “...busyness and workaholism [are] not virtuous, but rather sloth’s classic symptoms....the apathetic inertia of the lazy person and the perpetual

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4 Ibid., 326.

5 Here, the “noonday demon” is a reference to acedia. The fourth-century desert fathers believed that “the destruction that wastes at noonday” in Psalm 91:6 (New Revised Standard Version) is referring to this phenomenon of acedia as the “noonday demon.”
motion of the busy person [can] both reveal a heart afflicted by [acedia].”⁶ A common image of this is of monks who busy themselves with anything and everything but the task at hand. In “On the Eight Thoughts,” Evagrius Ponticus (d. 399) depicts this “everything but” characteristic in a monk: “The eye of the person afflicted with acedia stares at the doors continuously, and his intellect imagines people coming to visit. [1160B] The door creaks and he jumps up; he hears a sound, and he leans out the window and does not leave until he gets stiff from sitting there.”⁷ This description mirrors the one that Evagrius provides in another one of his works, The Praktikos: “Then [acedia] constrains the monk to look constantly out the windows, to walk outside the cell, to gaze carefully at the sun to determine how far it stands from the ninth hour, to look now this way and now that to see if perhaps [one of the brethren appears from his cell].”⁸ Centuries later, in the thirteenth step of his Ladder of Divine Ascent, John Climacus (d. 649) explains this behavior as a “paralysis of the soul, a slackness of the mind, a neglect of religious exercises...”⁹ He provides his own example of this “neglect of religious exercises” when he writes that “Tedium reminds those at prayer of some job to be done, and in her brutish way she searches out any plausible excuse to drag us from prayer, as though with some kind of halter.”¹⁰ Also, painting another picture of a monk resisting the demands of his lifestyle, John Climacus echoes Evagrius before him: “...tedium hits you when you are standing, and if you sit down, it

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⁶ Rebecca Konyndyk Deyoung, Glittering Vices: A New Look at the Seven Deadly Sins and their Remedies (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2009), 82.


⁸ Evagrius Ponticus, The Praktikos & Chapters on Prayer, Translated by John Bamberger OSCO (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2009). This excerpt is from the twelfth chapter.


¹⁰ Ibid., 163.
suggests that it would be a good thing to lean back. It suggests that you prop yourself up against the walls of your cell. It produces noise and footsteps—and there you go peeping out of the window.”¹¹ These descriptions that Evagrius and John Climacus provide suggest that acedia tempts the monk to find an excuse—any excuse—to not engage in prayer...or, for that matter, in any hard work involved in living a committed monastic life. Above, this has taken on the form of being busy with everything but that hard work, rather than inactivity. However, another form of resistance to this difficult, but worthwhile work involves a connection to sleep.

**Connection to Sleep**

Similar to the “everything but” characteristic of acedia, the connection to the sleep characteristic involves a resistance to the demands of monastic life. In “On the Eight Thoughts,” Evagrius Ponticus depicts this connection:

> When he reads, the one afflicted with acedia yawns a lot and readily drifts off into sleep; he rubs his eyes and stretches his arms; turning his eyes away from the book, he stares at the wall and again goes back to reading for awhile; leafing through the pages, he looks curiously for the end of texts, he counts the folios and calculates the number of gatherings. Later, he closes the book and puts it under his head and falls asleep, but not a very deep sleep, for hunger then rouses his soul and has him show concern for its needs.¹²

John Climacus, again seemingly influenced by Evagrius, provides another example of this: the monk “begins his prayers, but tedium makes him sleepy and the verses of the psalms are snatched from his mouth by untimely yawns.”¹³ In a similar way, John Cassian (d. 435) makes this connection to sleep, warning that “…the most wicked spirit of acedia…” can cause one “…to

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¹¹ See note 10.


be cut down by the sword of sleep and collapse...”14 Evagrius illuminates this behavior of the sleepy monk when he writes that acedia involves a “relaxation of the soul which is not [1157D] in accord with nature [and] does not resist temptations nobly.”15 To put it another way, when the monk, who is alone in the desert, experiences acedia, he will be tempted to discontinue whichever fruitful monastic practice he is currently doing; this is a temptation for the monk to resist the demands that his lifestyle requires. In the descriptions above, this means sleeping rather than being engaged in prayerful reading.

**Hatred for the Place**

Another theme that comes up frequently in the literature on acedia involves a “hatred for the place.” Evagrius Ponticus provides the following description in *The Praktikos*:

> Then too he instills in the heart of the monk a hatred for the place, a hatred for his very life itself, a hatred for manual labor. He leads him to reflect that charity has departed from among the brethren, that there is no one to give encouragement. Should there be someone at this period who happens to offend him in some way or other, this too the demon uses to contribute further to his hatred.16

Within the theme of a “hatred for the place” are several subthemes: a strong desire to leave the place due to [1] the idea that one can find fulfillment somewhere else; [2] the perception that one is wasting time in that place; and/or [3] a sense of painful nostalgia in regard to one’s life prior to commitment.

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Finding fulfillment somewhere else

People afflicted with acedia might have a “hatred for the place” and a strong desire to leave it because they believe they are being held back from true spiritual growth and can find fulfillment elsewhere. Evagrius explains the reasoning that goes along with this belief: “This demon [of acedia] drives [a monk] along to desire other sites where he can more easily procure life’s necessities, more readily find work and make a real success of himself. He goes on to suggest that, after all, it is not the place that is the basis of pleasing the Lord. God is to be adored everywhere.”

Here, Evagrius exposes acedia: the monk wants to leave his current place so that he might be able to “…more easily procure life’s necessities, more readily find work…” This goes back to the overarching theme of resisting that which is too difficult. John Cassian reflects these ideas, explaining that acedia “…makes a person horrified at where he is, disgusted with his cell…and [believe] that he will possess no spiritual fruit for as long as he is attached to that group of people [at his current monastery].”

This is because the monk believes that other monasteries would be much better for him to be a part of for they are “…more suited to progress and more conducive to salvation…” while the “necessities of life” cannot be “obtained” at his current monastery “without a huge effort.” The monk that Cassian describes is apparently of the same mindset of the monk Evagrius describes. Kathleen Norris explains the role of acedia in this mindset when she writes, “Acedia will always take the path of least resistance and attempt to go around, rather than through, the demands that life makes of us.”

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17 Ibid.
18 Ibid, emphasis added.
20 Ibid.
21 Kathleen Norris, Acedia & Me, 150.
[2] Wasting time

In *The Praktikos*, Evagrius writes that acedia “...makes it seem that the sun barely moves, if at all, and that the day is fifty hours long.”\(^{22}\) The monk that John Cassian describes, because of acedia, has a strong desire to leave his current monastery, believing that “...spending such a long time there is of no profit to him...”\(^{23}\) The monk who is afflicted with acedia might have a “hatred for the place” and a desire to leave it because he perceives he is wasting his time. Kathleen Norris suggests that this could be because of the repetition involved in the daily life of a monk: A temptation of acedia involves perceiving repetition as “meaningless...or too much bother.”\(^{24}\)

With its roots in early Christian monasticism, a lifestyle that required a daily intense struggle, Norris explains that “Acedia was, and remains, the monk's most dangerous temptation, as it makes the life he has vowed to undertake seem foolish, if not completely futile.”\(^{25}\) Indeed, even for Evagrius, the “demon” of acedia “[taunted] him with the thought that his efforts at prayer and contemplation are futile. Life then looms like a prison sentence, day after day of nothingness.”\(^{26}\) This could be especially troubling for a monk since repetition is of great importance in his life of commitment: “The early Christian monks staked their survival on their willingness to be as God had made them, creatures of the day-to-day. They regarded repetition as

\(^{22}\) Evagrius Ponticus, *The Praktikos*, Chapter 12.

\(^{23}\) John Cassian, “Tenth Book: The Spirit of Acedia,” Chapter II.


\(^{25}\) Ibid., 43.

\(^{26}\) Ibid., 4.
essential to their salvation, and valued perseverance in prayer and manual labor as the core of their spiritual discipline.”

Although acedia originally referred to experiences within the monastic community, Norris reveals that “…acedia can strike anyone whose work requires self-motivation and solitude, anyone who remains married 'for better for worse,' anyone who is determined to stay true to a commitment that is sorely tested in everyday life.” People suffering from acedia in these circumstances might also disdain repetition: "How does repetition turn relationships stale and lifeless, so that a once beloved face becomes an object of scorn? What is it about repetitive acts that makes us feel that we are wasting our time? Although it is easy to dismiss our daily routines as trivial, these are not trivial questions, any more than sloth is mere laziness without spiritual consequence.” Day after day of drudgery, people suffering from acedia who perceive that they are wasting their time are in danger of becoming nostalgic to the point of actually abandoning their current “place.”

[3] Nostalgia and regret

Those afflicted with acedia might have a “hatred for the place” and a strong desire to leave it if they are overcome with nostalgia in regard to the life they had prior to their current one of commitment and difficulty. The monk that Evagrius depicts in The Praktikos remembers “…his dear ones and…his former way of life. He depicts life stretching out for a long period of time, and brings before the mind’s eye the toil of the ascetic struggle and, as the saying has it,

\[27\] Ibid., 86.
\[28\] Ibid., 6.
\[29\] Ibid., 186.
leaves no leaf unturned to induce the monk to forsake his cell and drop out of the fight.”

John Climacus actually includes the phrase “a hostility to vows taken” in his definition of acedia, which is inherently part of the “hatred for the place” theme. When a monk falls into this sort of dangerous nostalgia—one that makes the monk remember his life before he committed to asceticism; the monk might doubt that becoming a monk was the right decision. This could lead to the monk wanting to leave—whether that is his cell, or monasticism completely. Hence, a “hostility to vows taken.”

Kathleen Norris adds some insight to this by providing an account from Joseph Hazzaya, a monk from the 8th century:

I lay on the ground for a week under the massive weight pressing down upon me, in such a way that the remembrance of God could no longer well up within my heart. ...Being stuck all this time in this distressing situation, I began to despair of my life, saying to myself: 'It would be better for me to leave for the world rather than to wear the monastic habit; I am doing nothing at all, save being lazy and thinking vain things.'

In this description, there appears to be a hint of regret or longing for the way life used to be before Hazzaya became a monk. Norris refers to this longing when she writes that acedia “...sends us backward, prettying the past with the gloss of nostalgia.” Similarly, this statement seems to echo the thoughts of Seneca (d. 65) who, in “On Tranquility of Mind,” states that “...those who are afflicted with fickleness and ennui and continual shifting of aim...are always fondest of what they have given up...” So, a monk afflicted with acedia develops such a “hatred...

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30 Evagrius Ponticus, The Praktikos, Chapter 12.
32 Kathleen Norris, Acedia & Me, 282.
33 Ibid., 130.
34 Ibid., 287.
of the place” that he remembers the way things used to be before his commitment to monasticism and wishes to leave. The act of leaving and having a hatred of the place need not be limited to an actual physical location, however. On the contrary, as Norris has made it clear in her memoir, acedia can strike anyone. Acedia can make a person detest their situation—a hatred of their place in life. With honesty, Norris admits:

I know that when I am tempted to run from an onerous task in the present, I am likely to picture past times that I now imagine to be better than they were, or to project myself into future events of which I can, in fact, know nothing. I am unable to see the grace that is available to me now, in this place and time. Acedia can flatten any place into a stark desert landscape and make hope a mirage.35

When a monk exclaims, “I can’t bear to live this way for the next forty years of my life,”36 a direct parallel can be made when Norris writes that acedia “...prompts us to see obligations to family, friends, and colleagues as impediments to...freedom...” and that “...often it is acedia that urges us, for no good reason, to fantasize and brood over circumstances in which we will be affirmed and admired by more stimulating companions. Whatever the place of our commitment—a monastic cell, a faith community, a job, a marriage—well, we are better off just walking away.”37

John Climacus summarizes the above three aspects of the “hatred for the place” when he utilizes the literary device of personification to have tedium say that it is "Too Heavy a Burden of Troubles" and that its children include "Changing from Place to Place" and "Abandonment of One's Vocation."38 The “Too Heavy a Burden of Troubles” encompasses all three of them: [1]


36 Ibid., 145.

37 Ibid., 25.

the idea that one can find fulfillment somewhere else; [2] the perception that one is wasting time in that place; and/or [3] a sense of painful nostalgia in regard to one’s life prior to commitment. It is intertwined with the overarching theme of resisting things that are too difficult. “Changing from Place to Place” is related to the idea that [2] one is wasting time in one’s current place. Again, this is when a monk accepts the thought that he would be better off at some other monastery—*any other* monastery—since his current location is inhibiting him from growing spiritually. "Abandonment of One's Vocation" is tied to [3] being nostalgic about life prior to commitment. Again, this “hatred for the place,” like other characteristics of acedia, comes from a resistance to do the difficult work that goes hand-in-hand with the good. Above, this mainly takes on the form of a resistance to the demands of monastic life. However, Rebecca DeYoung takes this a step further and claims that ultimately, acedia is a resistance to the demands of *love*.

**Lack of Love**

In *Glittering Vices*, DeYoung challenges the popular notion of acedia equating to laziness; for her, there is much more to the vice. To clarify, DeYoung *does* associate laziness with acedia; however, what is important is to know where that laziness is coming from:

[Acedia] is opposed to the great Christian virtue of diligence—that powerful sense of responsibility, dedication to hard work, and conscientious completion of one’s duties. And what is hard work and dedication at its best, after all, but an expression of love and devotion? The telltale root of our word *diligence* is the Latin *diligere*, which means “to love.” [Acedia], on this view, is apathy—comfortable indifference to duty and neglect of other human beings’ needs. If you won’t work hard, you don’t care enough. [Acedia] becomes a sin not merely because it makes us lazy, but because of the lack of love that lies behind that laziness.39

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39 Rebecca DeYoung, *Glittering Vices*, 81.
DeYoung recognizes the original context of acedia as a phenomenon experienced by early Christian monks; she notes that etymologically the Greek word “acedia” means “lack of care.” For DeYoung, the laziness that accompanies acedia stems from a “lack of love,” a “lack of care.” Describing acedia as a resistance to the demands of love, she explains that “... being committed to any love relationship takes daily nurturing, daily effort, and daily practices that build up....The slothful person...is the one who resists the effort of doing day after day after day whatever it takes to keep the bonds of love strong and living and healthy, whether he or she feels particularly inspired about it or not.”

Connection to Depression

Perhaps depression is not 100% synonymous with acedia, but the two experiences are very close. Indeed, Norris is correct when she writes that “The boundaries between depression and acedia are notoriously fluid.” For example, one thing the two have in common is a symptom of the conditions: “…the inability to address the body’s basic needs” and a “refusal of repetition”. Here, Norris means that the person suffering from depression falls out of the daily routine of things; this can include caring for oneself as reflected in personal hygiene. For example, one with depression may fall out of the routine of showering daily, brushing one’s hair, etc. In “Before Depression: The Medieval Vice of Acedia,” Robert Daly also acknowledges the resemblance between depression and acedia. He writes that “Contemporary depression is

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40 Ibid., 83.
41 Ibid., 86-87.
42 Kathleen Norris, Acedia & Me, 3.
43 Ibid., 14.
characterized by the continuing presence of a depressed (pressed down) mood, diminished interest or pleasure in most or any activities, fatigue or loss of energy, feelings of worthlessness or inappropriate guilt, diminished ability to think or concentrate, and suicidal ideation.”

Drawing from the works of Gamel and Wenzel, Daly lists the following ways acedia can manifest itself: “... depression, loss of sources of gratification and emotional attachments, loss of motivation, hopelessness, sadness, low self-esteem, negative interpretations of events,... diminished span of concentration, an orientation to the past,... cognitive and perceptual distortions,... increased irritability, anxiety, social isolation,... apathy... despair and suicide.”

Indeed, acedia and depression share many characteristics. However, neither Daly nor Norris would conclude that the two experiences are really the same phenomenon: “Any thesis that simply identifies acedia with melancholia or depression is not credible.” Norris pays especially close attention to the differences between acedia and depression: “... at the risk of oversimplifying, I would suggest that while depression is an illness treatable by counseling and medication, acedia is a vice that is best countered by spiritual practice and the discipline of prayer.” Additionally, depression “... implies a certain level of anguish over one’s condition...” while acedia “... remains a matter of indifference.” Norris also explains that “... depression is amenable to treatment in ways that acedia is not.”

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45 Ibid., 32.

46 Ibid., 45.

47 Kathleen Norris, Acedia & Me, 3.

48 Ibid., 150.

49 Ibid., 147.
Merton (d. 1968) to expand on this idea: "'the sadness caused by adversity and trial in social life' generally comes from 'a lack of peace with others.' But acedia is far more insidious: it is 'the sadness, the disgust with life, which comes from a much deeper source—our inability to get along with ourselves, our disunion with God.'" 50

Because there is a lot of overlap between depression and acedia, a question that often comes up is whether acedia is a sin or a physiological ailment. To answer this question, Daly finds that it is beneficial to distinguish whether or not one’s own agency plays a role in acedia. According to Daly, a person can have agency when it comes to the development of a vice:

The medieval world inherited from Greek and Roman thought the principle that a person’s voluntary actions (as well as his education) form his or her character even if such actions are not knowingly authored with the aim of forming character in a particular way. A person could be responsible, in part and in complex and subtle ways, for the origins of both his vices and his virtues. 51

In a similar manner, Norris acknowledges how temptation can turn into voluntary action. According to Norris, it would be better to understand acedia as “the eighth bad thought” rather than “one of the seven deadly sins.” 52 This, she notes, is the way acedia has been understood in monasticism. For the monks, “temptation” was understood “…as thoughts that the individual may identify and resist before they turn into harmful actions…” However, because “acedia was not easily defined as an act…it was soon subsumed within the sin of sloth.” 53

Additionally, for Daly, what is more definitive as sin when it comes to acedia involves whether or not one tries to rectify the vice when one gives in to temptation:

50 Ibid., 148.
51 Robert Daly, “Before Depression,” 42.
52 Kathleen Norris, Acedia & Me, 34.
53 Ibid., 30.
[In medieval Europe], the penitent [who is suffering from acedia] was assured that God’s grace and love, as well as the church, would assist him in his struggles, as long as that grace and love and those ministries were not willfully refused...But if these gifts of assistance were deliberately and knowingly refused by a person who exhibited the vice and was otherwise generally competent, a refusal that could easily be equated with refusing the church’s healing ministries, then, indeed, acedia was, in this tradition, a capital vice, a vice for which one was clearly responsible and blameworthy.54

Norris, on the other hand, is not as explicit about categories of “sin or physiological ailment” when it comes to acedia. However, perhaps this is the point. Norris explains:

When I am in a spiritual desert, whether or not it is depression or acedia that has led me there, the last thing I need is the false assurance of either/or thinking. I would be foolish to reject out of hand new and scientifically based understandings of the human brain. But I also believe that both science and religion have a legitimate place in the conversation...I may be more willing than most to employ the language of religious discourse, but it helps to have more than one language at hand. It humbles me to recognize that even words considered archaic can still reach us at the deepest level. 55

A similar idea is expressed by William McDonough, who argues that Alcoholics Anonymous serves as a bridge between the “either/or thinking” of using theological vs. therapeutic language in discourse on addiction.56 Like McDonough, it is clear that Norris is not afraid to use “sin-talk” when writing about acedia:

We are right to distrust the idea of sin as it is often presented, but are foolish indeed if we throw out the living baby with the old church bathwater. The concept of sin does not exist so that people who may need therapy more than theology can be convinced that they are evil and beyond hope. It is meant to encourage people to believe that they are made in the image of God and to act accordingly. Hope is the heart of it, and the ever-present possibility of transformation. The doctrine would not have remained a living tradition for such a long time if it had not been, as the theologian Linda Mercadante describes in her book Victims and Sinners, ‘a rich, holistic way of conceptualizing the human dilemma—one that function to steady and inform thousands of generations.’ Were I to deny this, and discount the wisdom of my ancestors, I would grow not wise but overconfident in my estimation of myself and in what passes for progress.57

54 Robert Daly, “Before Depression,” 42.
55 Kathleen Norris, Acedia & Me, 268.
57 Kathleen Norris, Acedia & Me, 114.
So, when it comes to whether acedia is a sin or a physiological ailment, there is no easy answer. According to Norris, a “recurring theme in the history of acedia” is that it has been considered “both a sin and an ailment.” This is the view for Cassian and Aquinas as well; they both “recognized that acedia operates on the border between the physical and the spiritual life.”

**Disunion from God**

Another common theme of acedia involves a disunion from God. This is related to a feeling of despair when it comes to the grace of God; people with acedia may feel that the unconditional love God has for His creation does not apply to them. Nil Sorsky (d. 1508) gives an insightful look into the mindset of someone who feels this way: “When those cruel waves rise against the soul, a man does not reckon at that hour that he will ever obtain deliverance from them...Rather, the Enemy so attacks him with urges...and suggests to him...that he is forsaken by God, and He has no care for him...”

In addition to feeling that God no longer cares about them, Nil Sorsky explains that people suffering from acedia believe that salvation is no longer something God is willing to offer them: “…the Enemy impresses upon him that it is impossible for him to be pitied by God, and receive forgiveness for sins, and be delivered from eternal torments and saved.”

Kathleen Norris explains this perception of feeling rejected by a God who seems so “distant and uncaring” further by writing that “When we are convinced that we are

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58 Ibid., 35.


60 Ibid., Statement 73.
beyond the reach of grace, acedia has done its work”\textsuperscript{61} She then provides the perspectives some other well-known saints and theologians:

John Cassian states that acedia’s whole purpose is to “sever [us] from thoughts of God.” John Climacus speaks of it as “a voice claiming that God has no mercy and no love for [us].” Thomas Aquinas describes acedia as a “wanton, willful self-distressing that numbs all love and zeal for love” and makes us unable “to rest in God.” Even worse, it divides us against ourselves and our better instincts, “[setting] itself in irreconcilable antagonism to that love which is inseparably linked with the divine indwelling.”\textsuperscript{62}

Again, Thomas Merton sums it up nicely in \textit{Cassian and the Fathers} when he writes that “Acedia is...the sadness, the disgust with life, which comes from a much deeper source—our inability to get along with ourselves, and our disunion with God.”\textsuperscript{63} This “inability to get along with ourselves” is closely related to another characteristic of acedia: an issue with one’s identity.

\textbf{Issue of Identity}

It has already been established that acedia can cause a monk to detest his cell so much that he might not only leave that location, but the monastic life altogether. Rebecca DeYoung connects this aspect of acedia to a deeper problem: a conflict with one’s identity. She explains that acedia “…is a vice that threatens one’s fundamental commitment to one’s religious identity and vocation. It is a serious vice because the entire commitment of one’s life to God is at stake. It is a spiritual vice, for Evagrius, because it involves inner resistance and coldness toward one’s spiritual calling or identity and its attendant practices.”\textsuperscript{64} This identity issue does not apply solely to monks, but any Christian suffering from acedia. For DeYoung, becoming a Christian

\textsuperscript{61} Kathleen Norris, \textit{Acedia & Me}, 205.

\textsuperscript{62} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{63} Ibid., 314.

\textsuperscript{64} Rebecca DeYoung, \textit{Glittering Vices}, 83.
necessarily involves a transformation in identity and behavior via the Holy Spirit; the resistance of this transformation is what DeYoung understands as acedia.\textsuperscript{65} She explains that “In sloth, we are literally divided against ourselves. We were made for relationship with God. If we are slothful, we have chosen to reject that relationship as the way to find fulfillment and chosen to try to make something else do its work instead. We are trying to make ourselves content with being less than we really are.” \textsuperscript{66} However, DeYoung clarifies that this transformation does not happen all at once:

For Christians, God is present in our hearts by his Holy Spirit, empowering us to become new people. The key, however, is that our new identity in Christ is both ‘now’ and ‘not yet,’ a promise and a beginning, a new self born but not yet perfected. Why not yet? Because the Holy Spirit doesn’t jump in and create a new self in us overnight or wave a magic wand to conjure up perfection. The project of growing into our new identity takes a lifetime, and a lifetime of cooperation on our part. It’s called sanctification. In one sense, we are Christians, and in another sense, we are still becoming Christians. God is both ‘already’ and ‘not yet fully’ present in us. Our love for him has the character for Paul to encourage Christians to grow in faith and become more and more like Christ. We can’t just say, ‘I’m saved! Praise the Lord!’ and then sit back and assume God is done with us.\textsuperscript{67}

Going back to her original critique of the simplistic view of acedia as mere laziness, DeYoung summarizes: “We are right to think of [acedia] as resistance to effort—but not only, or even primarily, in the sense of being physically lazy or lazy about work. Rather, it is resistance to the discipline and transformation demanded by our new identity as God’s beloved children, created and redeemed to be like him.”\textsuperscript{68}

\textsuperscript{65} Ibid., 87-89.

\textsuperscript{66} Ibid., 89.

\textsuperscript{67} Ibid., 87.

\textsuperscript{68} Ibid., 92.
PART TWO: CAN ACEDIA BE MANIFESTED IN A COMMUNITY OR INSTITUTION?

Up until this point, acedia has been described as a phenomenon experienced by individuals. In early Christian monasticism, the monk as an individual would be overcome with acedia. Generally, the monk would be alone in his cell in the desert; he would be living just far enough away from other monks that it would take some effort to visit their cells, but just close enough to be able to worship together on the Sabbath. So, when the “noonday demon” would strike, the monk would suffer alone; he would jump up whenever he heard a sound, get up to look out the window, daydream about his brothers coming to visit him, fall asleep, and/or actually leave his cell—resisting what was required of him in his life of commitment as a monk. Recently, however, there has been an implication that acedia not only has an individual dimension to it, but is able to manifest itself in a community or institution.

Harold Senkbeil suggests this very thing. In “Engaging our Culture Faithfully,” Senkbeil notes that in general, church attendance is in decline. For Senkbeil, this is not a problem in and of itself...the issue for him involves the question of why. In his article, Senkbeil seems to link this phenomenon of the decline of church attendance with secularization. However, he clarifies that the issue “...is not so much the secularization of society as it is the secularization of the church.” 69 Some symptoms of this secularization that Senkbeil identifies in the church include a “loss of virtue,” 70 a “flight from reason,” 71 “expressive individualism,” 72 and a focus on being


70 Ibid., 294.

71 Ibid., 294-5.

72 Ibid., 295-6.
“Christian” rather than on Christ. After exploring these symptoms in more depth, Senkbeil then makes a bold diagnosis: the church is suffering from acedia. The way Senkbeil sees it, the church is becoming lax by accommodating secular, popular culture. According to Senkbeil:

The ancients saw much more in acedia than mere laziness. They saw beneath sloth to its underlying cause: disappointment with and spiritual disaffection from God’s divinely ordained gifts, be they in the realm of creation or redemption. Acedia’s deadening and deadly effect can be easily inferred; when numb to Christ’s saving work and the Father’s gracious gifts by which he makes us and preserves us, Christians sink into boredom, apathy, and then, despair.

He relates this phenomenon in the description above to the contemporary Christian church when he writes, “The prevailing boredom with holy things... is the telltale sign of acedia.” Whether or not one actually agrees with Senkbeil that the church is marrying popular culture is a matter that should be evaluated using one’s own Christian ethical framework. For the purposes of this study, the key takeaway from Senkbeil is the implication that acedia is not just a phenomenon limited to the experiences of an individual—acedia is something that can afflict a collective.

One example that might help depict this collective relationship is the acedia reflected in the fear and lack of trust in God exhibited by the community of ancient Israelites after they were freed from captivity in Egypt. There are many passages that depict this, but I have chosen three to analyze. One passage depicts the ancient Israelites right before the parting of the Red Sea:

As Pharaoh drew near, the Israelites looked back, and there were the Egyptians advancing on them. In great fear the Israelites cried out to the Lord. They said to Moses, “Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, bringing us out of Egypt? Is this not the very

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73 Ibid., 296.
74 Ibid., 304.
75 Ibid.
76 Ibid.
thing we told you in Egypt, ‘Let us alone and let us serve the Egyptians’? For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness.’”

Another passage is when the ancient Israelites remember the food they ate in Egypt:

The rabble among them had a strong craving; and the Israelites wept again, and said, “If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt for nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic; but now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at.”

Finally, there is the passage in which Moses recounts the refusal of the ancient Israelites to enter the land that God promised to them:

But you were unwilling to go up. You rebelled against the command of the LORD your God; you grumbled in your tents and said, “It is because the LORD hates us that he has brought us out of the land of Egypt, to hand us over to the Amorites to destroy us. Where are we headed? Our kindred have made our hearts melt by report, ‘The people are stronger and taller than we; the cities are large and fortified up to heaven! We actually saw there the offspring of the Anakim!’” I said to you, “Have no dread or fear of them. The LORD your God, who goes before you, is the one who will fight for you, just as he did for you in Egypt before your very eyes, and in the wilderness, where you saw how the LORD your God carried you, just as one carries a child, all the way that you traveled until you reached this place. But in spite of this, you have no trust in the LORD your God, who goes before you on the way to seek out a place for you to camp, in fire by night, and in the cloud by day, to show you the route you should take.”

After closely reading these three passages, some characteristics of acedia emerge. One is the characteristic that involves being sent “… backward, prettying the past with the gloss of nostalgia.” It is clear in Exodus that the ancient Israelites were greatly oppressed while they were in Egypt. While they were still in Egypt, they witnessed the power of God through the plagues; the Egyptians suffered, and the ancient Israelites and their children were spared. Yet, when faced with some perceived obstacle, suddenly they remembered and actually longed for

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77 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), Exodus 14:10-12
78 NRSV, Numbers 11:4-6.
79 NRSV, Deuteronomy 1:26-33.
80 See note 33.
their past life of oppression: “...it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness”,”81 “...We remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt for nothing...but now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at.””82

The other characteristic of acedia in these passages is the one involving a disunion from God. Again, the ancient Israelites should be more than acquainted with the power of God is all of these passages, yet, when they are faced with some difficulty, they adopt the mindset described by Nil Sorsky: they believed that they were “forsaken by God” and that “He [had] no care for [them].”83 This is seen in Exodus 14 when the ancient Israelites state that Moses led them out of Egypt not to live in liberation, but to die.84 In a parallel way, in Deuteronomy 1, Moses reveals that the ancient Israelites actually believed that God hated them and only let them out of Egypt to be destroyed.85

In these examples from the Hebrew Bible, while it would not be incorrect to conclude that each ancient Israelite had a personal struggle with acedia while out in the wilderness, it would be more accurate to say that as a people, they suffered from acedia. After all, as a people, they all (except for Caleb) shared the same punishment for doubting God—denial into the land promised by God to their ancestors.86 From the examples above, it would seem that acedia can manifest itself interpersonally, in a community. So, if it is indeed possible for acedia to be

81 NRSV, Exod. 14:13.
82 NRSV, Num. 11:5-6.
83 See note 59.
84 NRSV, v. 11
85 NRSV, v. 27.
86 NRSV, Deut. 1:34-35.
manifested in the individual *and* the interpersonal, it is possible to conclude that a marriage can also be marked by acedia.
PART THREE: A NARRATIVE AND ANALYSIS

Part One endeavored to answer the question, “what is acedia?” Drawing from historical and contemporary sources, common characteristics of the vice were listed and described in depth. Part Two explored whether or not acedia, in addition to being present in the individual, could also be manifested in a relationship between multiple human persons. After concluding that acedia can be experienced in both contexts, Part Three will now explore how acedia might present itself within and impact a marriage. Part Three will be divided into two sections. First, there will be a narrative depicting different scenes of the relationship of a hypothetical married couple: Mr. and Mrs. Doe, a pharmacist and sales manager respectively. The second section will be an analysis of the marriage of the Doe Family, applying to it the common characteristics of acedia delineated in Part One above.

Narrative

Scene 1

It is a rare occasion in which John and Jane Doe find that they can both eat a meal together since their work schedules do not usually allow it. Today, however, is Sunday; John and Jane have just finished worshiping at their church and decide to go out to eat. On the way to the restaurant, they get into an argument. Inside the restaurant, the two are still upset each other and refuse to talk with each other until the other apologizes. The silence breaks only for a moment—only to inform their server what they would like to eat. While waiting for the food to come out, Jane scans the room, noticing that the people who do not have their food yet are engaging in lively conversation. Jane turns back to her table.
Perhaps I should say something..., she thinks, but I shouldn’t HAVE to. HE’S the one at fault. HE’S the one who should initiate the conversation with an apology. Wait...what were we arguing about again?...I don’t remember, but STILL—I won’t say anything until he apologizes.

John stares down at the table and thinks,

This is weird. We are the only ones in this room not talking. I want to say something, but...why should I need to? SHE was the one who said...what did she say? Hmm, oh well...but I STILL won’t say anything. She made me mad, and that’s all I need to remember. I will say something when SHE decides to apologize...but this feels awkward.

John and Jane both feel awkward sitting in silence, so, rather than talk to each other, they turn to their smartphones for comfort. John checks to see how the big game is going; once he checks the score, he switches to Facebook, finding himself not really reading what other people have to say, but just sort of passively scrolling through his News Feed. Similarly, Jane checks to see how the company’s stocks are doing and opens up Instagram afterward. She sighs as she sees how much better her friends’ marriages seem. She looks at pictures of couples smiling, traveling, laughing—living.

The food arrives. John and Jane choose to eat their meal in silence. Actually, rather than talk and eat, they fall into a cycle: After every couple of bites, one or both of them check their phones to see if they received a notification—many of the times they check, it turns out they did not. Even so, they unlock their phones, open some apps, check to see if someone “liked” something they posted or shared on social media, close the apps, lock the phone, and repeat.
Scene 2

It is a Saturday morning and another rare situation presents itself: John and Jane find that they both have the day off, which means that they are both at home at the same time. The two have been busy with work as of late—more so than usual. Their schedules have not aligned for a long time, so once they find out they will both be home, they decide to spend the day together; they start with a nice sit-down breakfast. John comments that it has been a really long time since they actually ate together. Jane agrees, saying that today is a nice surprise.

Jane: So, how are things going at work?

John: Well, as you know, I have been on-call all week. My daily schedule has been so irregular and hectic. Actually—this is really funny—the other day, I had to leave the house in the middle of the night and—

*BUZZ* Jane’s phone vibrates. Instinctively, she picks it up, sees she received a text, responds to it, and puts her phone back on the table.

Jane: Sorry about that. Go on. You were saying?

John: *chuckles* You’re gonna love this. The other night when we were in bed together, around 2:00 a.m., I needed to leave the house. Get this: I almost—

*BUZZ* Instinctively, Jane picks her phone up again. She sends a text, puts the phone down, and gestures for her husband to continue.

John: *sighs*...Well, I almost left the house without—
*BUZZ* Jane looks annoyed. She sends a texts and then puts her phone on the table face down. John is starting to get frustrated.

**John:** Listen, Jane, I don’t want to continue with this story if I am going to keep getting interrupted and losing your attention.

**Jane:** I’m sorry, John. It won’t happen again.

**John:**...

**Jane:** Go ahead. What happened that was so funny?

**John:** Well, on one of the nights I was on call, I had to go into work. BUT I was still a bit groggy—you know, it being 2:00 a.m. and all—and...

**Jane:**...Yes?

**John:**...I almost left the house without any pants on.

**Jane:** *cackles* OH MY GOD! THAT IS AMAZING!

**John:** *chuckles* Isn’t it though? Wouldn’t THAT have been something, Jane? You know, I was running a little late...What if I had gotten pulled over for speeding and the officer saw that I wasn’t wearing—

*BUZZ...BUZZ...BUZZ...* Jane looks at her phone. A facial expression that reflections genuine shock emerges.

**Jane:** OH MY GOD! I am SO sorry, but I HAVE to take this. The Senior VP is calling and—
Jane’s voice trails off as she leaves the kitchen. She reappears a few minutes later and explains she has to leave.

**John:** I thought today was your day off... We hardly see each other anymore.

**Jane:** I know, I know... I’m sorry. It’s a state of emergency. I have to go into the office.

**Ten minutes later, John watches Jane pull out of the driveway and disappear.**

**John:**... What if our marriage is in a state of emergency?

**Scene 3**

The couple is in bed. They barely saw each other that day. John asks how Jane’s day went. Jane starts to recount the events of the day and really gets into it. She goes into detail about some things that upset her that day like how people kept cutting her off in traffic. She also tells about some nice surprises; for example, she tells about how her boss publicly recognized her at the office today and how the weather was beautiful. After a while, though, Jane stops talking because she realizes that her husband has fallen asleep. Conceptually, she knows that her husband’s job requires him to be on-call, sometimes requiring him to leave the house at odd times in the night—he is out helping people so often, so he must be tired. Still, she can’t help but notice that this isn’t the first time he has fallen asleep on her.

She questions,
Does he even CARE about what I have to say? HE is the one who asked about my
day...you would think that in asking that, he actually CARED enough to hear the answer.
Does his sleeping actually imply that he DOESN’T care?

Scene 4

The couple is in bed. John remarks that it has been awhile since they were physically
intimate and asks his wife if she would like to do anything tonight. Jane, however, is feeling
really tired—or she remembers that she has a meeting earlier than usual the next morning, or she
just isn’t in the mood—so she asks her husband if it is okay if she just goes to bed. John really
wants to express the concerns he has been having about their marriage, but instead of making
things more difficult for him and his wife (perhaps they both need to get up early in the
morning), he says it is okay if they just go to sleep. The two turn away from each other and try to
fall asleep. Somewhere in the back of their minds, they remember that they both have enjoyed
sex with each other in the past and acknowledge that it adds a dimension of intimacy and helps
nurture/maintain their relationship. However, they are both tired—physically and emotionally.
So, they welcome the sleep.

Scene 5

These days, both John and Jane seem more irritable. They do not really enjoy each
other’s company anymore; because of this, they no longer attend church together—or at all.
Now, John and Jane are in the habit of keeping track of how the other has wronged them. In fact,
both only really notice what things are wrong in their relationship, and this makes the
relationships of the people around them—friends, neighbors, co-workers, etc.—seem better than
they actually are. John and Jane start to grow tired of each other, perhaps even wishing that they were not married to each other, but to someone else...or no one at all. An outsider might interpret what they are going through as a rough patch, but it is hard for Jane and John to imagine that things could ever get better. In fact, both spouses start to see the other as a hindrance to their growth as individuals.

For example, John wants to explore and discover who he is, but he feels tied down because of his marriage:

*If I wasn’t married to Jane, he reasons, I could do whatever I wanted.*

Jane’s mind reflects similar thinking patterns:

*If it was just me, I could really excel and climb the ladder of success in my company. If I didn’t have John, I could spend more hours at the office, demonstrating to my superiors that I really want to win in life.*

**Scene 6**

To the couple, it is the same thing every day—ALWAYS. There is a quarrel. Jane complains that her husband ALWAYS leaves his clothes on the floor, to which John retorts,

**John:** Well, maybe I wouldn’t need to put my clothes on the floor if the hampers weren’t overflowing with the laundry you haven't DONE YET. You’ve been slacking on a lot of things around the house.

**Jane:** You KNOW I have been working later to try and meet this month’s quota. By the time I get home, I’m too tired to do laundry.

**John:** That’s not the ONLY thing you are too tired to do.
Jane: EXCUSE ME, what about you? I thought we both agreed that since I do the cooking EVERY DAY, you would wash the dishes...our kitchen sink is FILLED. And another thing...have you even SEEN our front lawn? I have been telling you to mow the grass every day for the past WEEK, and you haven’t done that yet. I’m really getting tired of saying the same things OVER and OVER. It feels like I am wasting my time.

John: Oh, so now I am a waste of time?

Jane: I didn’t—

John: Is our MARRIAGE a waste of time?

Jane: Wait, I was only—

John: You’re always DOING this, Jane—

Jane: What are you—

John: The fact that you don’t understand my feelings means that you don’t care about them...and that means you don’t care about ME!

Jane: ...You are jumping to conclusions and putting words in my mouth. I never said you were a waste of time and I never said that our marriage was a waste of time...but now that you mention it...

John: ...What?

Jane: Nevermind.

John: WHAT?

Jane: I don’t want to talk about it. I have to go.

Similar questions are running through the minds of John and Jane.

It feels like we deal with the same issues every day: working, cooking, cleaning...what is the point of all this anyway? Is all this really worth it or am I just wasting my time? I
don’t want to try anymore...Was getting married a mistake? I certainly didn’t have to deal with this B.S. before...If I could go back in time, I would make sure I don’t make this mistake again...getting married to this person...Perhaps it would have been better if I married someone else—I bet THEY would appreciate me. I bet THEY would listen to what I have to say. I don’t know if I can do this every day until “death do us part.” We spoke those words before God, but where is God in all this anyway? Why would God put this person in my life? Maybe it would be better to just walk away from all this.

Analysis

Resisting the Good

A common theme of acedia that appears in the narrative of John and Jane Doe is that of “resisting the good,” which was first described in Part One. Again, this is the overarching theme in which people suffering from acedia resist what is good for them because not resisting would mean putting in too much effort—pursuing the good is too difficult. In the narrative described above, the “good” that is resisted is the hard work involved in maintaining and nurturing a healthy marriage. For example, in Scene 1, it is difficult for John and Jane to embrace humility and forgiveness. While it is true that each spouse forgets why they are mad at the other in the first place, they are still too proud to break the silence when they are in the restaurant. It would be helpful to distinguish between two different types of silence: healthy and unhealthy. A close relationship with God can be marked by a healthy silence that reflects a stillness and awareness of God: “‘Be still and know that I am God...’”87 In contrast, the silence that John and Jane opt for is an unhealthy one. It is a silence that reflects a refusal to connect, a refusal to love; John and

87 NRSV, Psalm 46:10
Jane are so adamant that the other person is at fault. This is also an indication of resisting the goodness of forgiveness.

In this scene, as well as in Scenes 4 and 6, there is also a resistance to the hard work of communication. In Scene 1, the lack of communication is obvious—the couple refuses to talk to each other; for John and Jane, talking to the other is too difficult, so instead, they just remain silent. This is an illustration of what John Gottman would call “stonewalling,” one of the biggest predictors of divorce. According to Ellie Lisitsa from The Gottman Institute:

Stonewalling occurs when the listener withdraws from the interaction, shutting down and closing themselves off from the speaker because they are feeling overwhelmed or physiologically flooded. Rather than confronting the issue, someone who is stonewalling will be totally unresponsive, making evasive maneuvers such as tuning out, turning away, acting busy, or engaging in obsessive behaviors.⁸⁸

In Scene 4, John has some concerns about his marriage with Jane, but instead of talking about them with her, he keeps them to himself; he figures that it would be too much of a bother to bring them up and that it is more convenient to just go to sleep. In Scene 6, the dialogue between John and Jane implies a lack of communication on two levels. First, there is a lack of understanding between Jane and John that implies a lack of communication. John accuses Jane of “always DOING this,” to which Jane responds in confusion; she has no idea what John is talking about. In fact, she is surprised that John thinks she does not understand—or care about—his feelings. This implies that this is probably the first time that John has ever brought claims like this up in conversation; in other words, if Jane truly does not understand his hurt feelings, perhaps John has never communicated them to her before. Also in this scene, Jane fails to

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communicate her own feelings; rather than have a difficult conversation, Jane informs John that she doesn’t “want to talk about” whatever it is that has been troubling her and chooses to leave the conversation.

**Everything But**

Another common theme of acedia that is present in this narrative is that of doing everything *but* that which is required. It has already been established that both John and Jane are resisting the demands that are required for maintaining and nurturing their marriage; they resist the good by resisting humility, forgiveness and communication. At first glance, one might think that John and Jane resist these by being inactive—not talking in Scene 1, for example. While this in not incorrect—they are indeed inactive in the sense that they are *not doing* that which would benefit their relationship—if one takes a closer look at their behavior, it becomes clear that John and Jane also *busy* themselves with other things to resist the difficult work of humility, forgiveness, and communication. In Scene 1, John and Jane do everything *but* talk to each other by turning to their phones. Their behavior resembles that of the monk from Part One who, rather than tending to his monastic duties, chooses to look out of his window constantly, check to see if any of his brothers are coming to visit, and/or investigate every sound he hears. Rather than do the difficult work of communicating, forgiving, and being humble, John and Jane *busy* themselves by constantly checking to see if they have received any notifications; even if they *only thought* they heard a notification sound and later find out it was just their imaginations, they go through a cycle of opening and closing different apps.

This everything *but* aspect of acedia is reflected in Scene 2. The monk suffering from acedia in Part One, rather than tend to the demands of monastic life, becomes distracted
whenever he hears a sound; John Climacus would consider this a “neglect of religious exercises.” In a similar way, Jane allows herself to become distracted from her husband’s story whenever she hears her phone vibrate. In the narrative, it is clear that the schedules of John and Jane do not align very often; the fact that they are both so busy should indicate to both of them that the little time they do spend together is precious—perhaps even regarded as sacred. When Jane is distracted by her phone, and also later when she actually leaves the house after both she and her husband agreed to spend the day together, she is neglecting her husband and the sacred time they have set aside together. In addition, there is a glimpse of “workaholism” in this scene, which DeYoung reveals as “not virtuous,” but instead, is actually one of acedia’s “classic symptoms.” Here, Jane feels that she cannot spend time with John because she has to work.

Connection to Sleep

A third theme of acedia that appears in this narrative is its connection to sleep. In Part One, this connection is depicted in the monk who resists the demands of monastic life by yawning, becoming sleepy, and actually falling asleep. This aspect of acedia appears in Scenes 3 and 4 of the narrative. Again, the little time that John and Jane do spend together should be regarded as sacred and cherished by them. However, in Scene 3, although John is the one who asks Jane about her day, rather than actually listen to what she has to say, he falls asleep. In a similar way, in Scene 4, rather than nurture their relationship with more physical intimacy, John and Jane find an excuse to not tend to the demands of married life, but instead, sleep.

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90 Rebecca DeYoung, Glittering Vices, 82.
Hatred for the Place

A fourth theme of acedia that appears in this narrative is the “hatred for the place.”

Again, this hatred of the place leads to a strong desire to leave the place due to [1] the idea that fulfillment can be found elsewhere; [2] the perception of wasting time in that place; and/or [3] a sense of painful nostalgia in regard to a life prior to commitment.

[1] The idea that fulfillment can be found elsewhere than one’s current place in life is expressed in Scenes 5 and 6. The monk that Evagrius writes about “[desires] other sites where he can more easily procure life’s necessities, more readily find work and make a real success of himself.” Similarly, in Scene 5, it is revealed that Jane and John both see their current place in life (i.e., being married to each other) as a hindrance to their growth as individuals; John feels like he can do more self-exploration if he were not married, and Jane feels like she can better advance in her career if she were not married. An alternative to being single, in Scene 6, Jane and John entertain the idea of what it would be like being married to people other than each other—they conclude that they would be more appreciated by this different person.

[2] The perception that one is wasting time is found in Scene 6 as well. Again, according to Kathleen Norris, this perception is related to repetition. In the dialogue between the two spouses, Jane reveals that the repetition of telling John to mow the lawn over and over makes her feel like she is wasting her time. John interprets this to mean that Jane thinks their marriage is a waste of time...and she does not necessarily deny that she thinks that—she just denies saying that. Not only is there a feeling of wasting one’s time in the repetition of saying the same things over and over, but also in doing the same things everyday: “...working, cooking, cleaning...what

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91 See note 17.
92 See note 24.
is the point of all this anyway?” Because it is a lifestyle that requires an intense struggle every day, Norris names acedia “the monk’s most dangerous temptation, as it makes the life he has vowed to undertake seem foolish, if not completely futile.”93 In a similar way, acedia is also a spouse’s “most dangerous temptation.” John and Jane recognize that they struggle with each and the duties that come with married life daily and question the “point of all this.” They seriously question if this daily struggle is “worth it.”

[3] Scene 6 also reveals a sense of nostalgia about how things were prior to the life of commitment. Evagrius writes of a monk who remembers “…his dear ones and…his former way of time, and brings before the mind’s eye the toil of the ascetic struggle and, as the saying has it, leaves no leaf unturned to induce the monk to forsake his cell and drop out of the fight.”94 In his description of acedia, John Climacus uses the phrase “a hostility to vows taken.”95 In these two instances, there is a sense of nostalgia and regret in the monk; remembering his life before asceticism, he may seriously doubt that he made the right decision when he chose to become a monk. In a similar way, in Scene 6, John and Jane question whether they made the right decision when they chose a life of commitment to each other. “Prettying the past with the gloss of nostalgia,”96 Jane and John remember their lives prior to being married to each as lacking in “B.S.” to “deal with” (i.e., they see life before being married to each other as much better than it actually was). Very much like the monk who is tempted to “forsake his cell and drop out of the fight,” so too do John and Jane think it would be better to “just walk away from all this.”

93 See note 25.
94 See note 30.
95 See note 31.
96 See note 33.
Disunion from God

A fifth common theme of acedia present in the narrative is the disunion from God. This theme is reflected in the loss of intimacy between John and Jane in Scene 4. Genesis 2:24 states that “...a man...clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.” Jesus clarifies this in his teaching: “…So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.” In Christianity, marriage is seen as one of the sacraments and is a covenant between two people before God. When two people commit to a marriage, it necessarily means that they are committing to living out that sacrament and covenant. In other words, being faithful to each other and honoring their marriage is being faithful and honoring God. In Scene 4, however, John asks if Jane would like to spend some time being physically intimate together, but Jane—even though she may provide legitimate reasons—asks if it is alright if both she and John just go to sleep. Since this is a common scenario for Jane and John, it suggests that there has been a loss of intimacy in their marriage, which also indicates a loss of intimacy with God. Again, John and Jane both know that sex has added another dimension of intimacy and was a way to nurture their marriage in the past, however, the withdrawal from intimate time together is a withdrawal from the unity that they should have as husband and wife. Additionally, in the Bible, physical intimacy is understood to be actually part of marriage. So, in this scene, John and Jane are essentially not taking the time to nurture their relationship, which means they are not taking the time to live out and be faithful to that sacrament and covenant of marriage. In a

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97 NRSV.

98 NRSV, Matthew 19:6; Mark 10:8-9.

99 Ibid.

100 NRSV, 1 Corinthians 7:3.
way, they are not showing a faithfulness to each other which translates to not showing a faithfulness to God. Here, there has been a withdrawal from the unity John and Jane have with each other and a withdrawal from the unity they have with God, an essential part of Christian marriage.

This disunion from God is also reflected in Scene 5. First, one finds out that John and Jane no longer attend church at all. The disconnect in their own relationship as husband and wife has led to a disconnect from the community they would experience in their home church. Additionally, not coming to the house of God anymore—which they both considered an important part of their relationship with God—directly shows their disunion from God. Another way a disunion from God can manifest is revealed by Nil Sorsky: “When those cruel waves rise against the soul, a man does not reckon at that hour that he will ever obtain deliverance from them...Rather, the Enemy so attacks him with urges...and suggests to him...that he is forsaken by God, and He has no care for him...”\(^{101}\) Here, people affected by acedia feel as if their suffering will never end and feel abandoned by God. These ideas from Nil Sorsky are both reflected in Scenes 5 and 6. In Scene 5, John and Jane do not enjoy being around each other anymore; they only see what is wrong in their relationship and cannot “imagine that things could ever get better”—they cannot “reckon at that hour that [they] will ever obtain deliverance from...” the hard times in their marriage. This, as well as Scene 6, reflects a feeling of despair. In Scene 6, Jane and John question why God would “put this person in [each of their lives],” implying a distrust from a God who seems “distant and uncaring.” They cannot see where God is in their

\(^{101}\) See note 59.
present situation; as Norris would put it, John and Jane are “…unable to see the grace that is available to [them] now, in this place and time.”

**Issue of Identity**

Closely related to the disunion from God theme is another characteristic of acedia: an issue of identity. Again, when Thomas Merton writes that “Acedia is... the sadness, the disgust with life, which comes from a much deeper source—our inability to get along with ourselves, and our disunion with God,” this “inability to get along with ourselves” is the issue one has with identity. While John and Jane are technically married, they do not see their identity as that of a married couple which, according to Jesus, would mean that “...they are no longer two, but one flesh.” While individuality is not a problem per se, John and Jane have taken it to such a level in which they allow their identities as individuals get in the way of the marriage. In Scene 5, it is revealed that for John and Jane, it is their connection to each other that is keeping them from fully realizing their identities. “…John wants to explore and discover who he is, but he feels tied down because of his marriage.” For Jane, it seems that her identity is more aligned with her career. She reasons: “If it was just me, I could really excel and climb the ladder of success in my company. If I didn’t have John, I could spend more hours at the office, demonstrating to my superiors that I really want to win in life.” Actually, both John and Jane seem really connected to their jobs. While there is nothing inherently wrong with wanting to do well in the workplace, it seems that John and Jane have allowed their schedules to get in the way of their marriage. In all

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102 See note 35.

103 See notes 50 and 63.

104 See note 99.
of the scenes, it is clear that John and Jane do not see each other very often, but when it comes to the time they do share together, they do not value it as something sacred. In Scene 2, Jane goes into work even though she said she would spend the day with John, and in Scene 4, the couple does not make time for physical intimacy. Thus, though “...God has joined [John and Jane] together...,” they have separated *themselves* from each other.

The Communal Dimension of Acedia

In Part Two, it was demonstrated that acedia can, in addition to afflicting an individual, be manifested in a relationship between multiple human persons. This interpersonal or communal dimension of acedia is reflected in the example of the ancient Israelites. Again, they have witnessed the power of God and the love that God has for them on many occasions, yet, out in the wilderness, the ancient Israelites still come to believe from time to time that God has abandoned them. The acedia of some ancient Israelites feeds into the acedia of others, thus marking the *community* by acedia. In Deuteronomy 1, Moses recounts that God promised them the land of the Amorites, yet instead of trusting in God, the ancient Israelites felt that God had forsaken them and that they did not stand a chance against the Amorites. Again, this is because of the interplay of acedia between the different members of the ancient Israelite community:

105 Deut. 1:26-28, emphasis added.
In a way similar to how the acedia of the ancient Israelite community manifested itself by individual members feeding into each other, so too does the communal dimension of acedia present itself in the narrative of John and Jane.

In Scene 1, while both John and Jane know that it would be healthy to talk to each other after getting into an argument, they instead opt for an unhealthy silence. This is the result of a refusal to take initiative and do the hard work of communication. Their thoughts reveal that they will speak only when the other spouse speaks first. Thus, acedia manifests itself in their lack of communication since the unhealthy silence of one spouse necessarily depends on that of the other. This communal dimension of acedia also appears in Scene 4. The response that Jane gives John after he asks whether she would like to be physically intimate that night causes John to defer to Jane’s request without bringing up the concerns he has been having about the state of their marriage. One spouse’s acedia pushes the other toward acedia, and the result is an atmosphere in which “expressing care” is more the exception than the rule.
PART FOUR: REMEDIES, THERAPIES, AND CURES

While there is not one agreed upon definition of acedia among the authors here considered, their writings do reveal common characteristics of the vice. In a similar way, while there is not a one-size-fits-all remedy for acedia that the historical monastic writers prescribe, there are some common suggestions they and other Christian writers offer regarding how to combat the vice, including: a change in mindset, manual labor, prayer, and perseverance.

Change in Mindset

One remedy for acedia that has been suggested by several Christian writers involves a change in mindset. However, the recommended way, or means, by which one’s mindset should shift varies. According to Evagrius, the monk who is afflicted by acedia should have the mindset that he could die tomorrow, but at the same time, “…treat his body as if he were to live on with it for many years to come. For, he said, by the first attitude he will be able to cut off every thought that comes from acedia and thus become more fervent in his monastic practices, by the second device he will preserve his body in good health and maintain its continence intact.”106 This is probably what John Chryssavgis is referring to when he suggests a “…remembrance of one’s frailty or mortality…”107 as a remedy for acedia. John Climacus similarly recommends a mindset which focuses on a “remembrance of past sins,”108 and Nil Sorsky writes normatively about being self-aware and “…firmly [arming] against the spirit of ingratitude and also [fearing]

106 Evagrius Ponticus, The Praktikos, Chapter 29.


The idea here is that the monk should become aware of and remember that judgment from God awaits him after death. If he does this, the monk can mindfully and humbly acknowledge that he is not guaranteed a tomorrow, which means the body and life he has today is a gift: the monk has the opportunity to become right with God and repent of past sins now. Acedia presents the monk with the false assurance that he has the time to procrastinate when it comes to drawing nearer to God—that he need not care about it right now; but remembering “one’s frailty or mortality” prevents this way of thinking. Additionally, if a monk believes that he might die tomorrow, but also takes care of his health, he is able to better focus on what today requires of him, rather than feel so overwhelmed by what all of the tomorrows ahead of him require. In this way, the weight of acedia cannot immobilize him: “For contemporary monks suffering from acedia, the cure is much the same as in the fourth-century desert. When a monk says, ‘I can’t bear to live this way for the next forty years of my life,’ the answer is still that he need be concerned only with today,” but to engage today as if it is his last day.

**Perseverance**

A second way to combat acedia as suggested by writers across the centuries is through perseverance. Evagrius writes: “Perseverance is the cure for acedia, along with the execution of all tasks with great attention...” He notes that although a monk experience acedia may have an intense desire to leave his cell, it is of the utmost importance that the monk perseveres and not leave the cell:

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The time of temptation is not the time to leave one’s cell, devising plausible pretexts. Rather, stand there firmly and be patient. Bravely take all that the demon brings upon you, but above all face up to the demon of acedia who is the most grievous of all and who on this account will effect the greatest purification of soul. Indeed to flee and to shun such conflicts schools the spirit in awkwardness, cowardice and fear.  

John Cassian holds the same opinion. In his writings, he draws from his own experiences to explicitly inform his readers of the remedy for acedia:

When I was starting to dwell in the desert and had told Abba Moses, the highest of all the holy ones, that the previous day I had been very seriously troubled by the malady of acedia and that I had been unable to free myself from it except by running at once to Abba Paul, he said: “You did not free yourself from it; instead you surrendered and subjected yourself to all the more. For the adversary will fight you even more strenuously as soon as he sees that you are a deserter and a fugitive and that you have fled defeated from conflict, unless you join in the fray instead of choosing to dissipate its passions, when they assail you, by deserting your cell or by torpid sleep.” Hence experience proves that an onslaught of acedia must not be avoided by flight but overcome through resistance.

Indeed, other writers who are in agreement that perseverance is necessary in the face of acedia include Nil Sorsky, Kathleen Norris, and William McDonough, who argues that perseverance is essential in curing not only alcoholics, but all of humanity: the “‘cure’” for alcoholics “...turns out to be exactly what cures all human beings, namely, God’s grace...many of us would do well to take up the ‘dramatic ethical focus’ of AA’s second step, to gather with other sinners, and to ‘standing the presence of God, patiently knocking on God’s door, not refraining until the things asked for follow.’”

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113 John Cassian, “Tenth Book: The Spirit of Acedia,” Chapter XXV.
115 Kathleen Norris, *Acedia & Me*, 100.
Manual Labor

A third remedy for acedia found in multiple sources is manual labor. Evagrius instructs his readers to “Set a measure for yourself in every work and do not let up until you have completed it.” John Cassian emphasizes how the Apostle Paul understood manual labor to be instrumental in daily life, noting how Paul himself did manual labor to serve as an example for the new Christians. For Paul—and John Cassian—physical work is an effective remedy for many of the vices in general. Similarly, John Climacus highlights the importance of being “...battered by hard manual labor...” in order to “overcome” acedia, as does Nil Sorsky. Referring to a monk focusing on that which is required of him today, Kathleen Norris goes into more depth about the reasoning behind this suggestion for labor: “‘I recommend physical labor,’ one abbot has said, ‘woodworking, gardening, even mopping the halls, anything to get them out of that closed circle of self...’”

This recommendation for hard, manual labor reflects an important way the fourth-century desert fathers understood the human being: as a psychosomatic unity. The fathers understood that one’s spiritual state cannot be sharply separated from one’s physical state. In other words, there is a connection between the body and spirit; what a person does with one’s body affects one’s spiritual condition. This is why ritualistic actions such as fasting and kneeling are meaningful in

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119 Ibid., 228.
122 Kathleen Norris, Acedia & Me, 145.
the practice of Christianity. Again, what people do with their bodies impacts their soul. Thus, when a monk performs physical labor, not only does it exercise the monk’s body, getting him out of his ‘thoughts,’ but such activity also has a spiritual aspect to it. Work becomes a form of prayer.

**Prayer**

Perhaps the most important way Christian writers recommend remedying acedia is through prayer. Providing reassurance for his readers, Evagrius writes: “Pray with understanding and intensity, and the spirit of acedia will flee from you.”

In more depth, he explains: “Reading, vigils, and prayer—these are the things that lend stability to the wandering mind...But all these practices are to be engaged in according to due measure and at the appropriate times. What is untimely done, or done without measure, endures but a short time. And what is short-lived is more harmful than profitable.”

Here, one sees the need for discernment in order to avoid counterproductive extremes. Evagrius also suggests prayer because it “…makes the spirit strong and pure for combat since by its very nature the spirit is made to pray. Moreover, prayer even fights without the aid of the body on behalf of the other powers of the soul.”

Echoing the fact that a spirit’s nature is “to pray,” Senkbeil explains:

> When God speaks to us, there is nothing more natural than to speak back. In that sense prayer is as natural as respiration; first we breathe in and then we exhale. God always takes the initiative. He addresses us in his word and then we speak as we are spoken to. In this sense prayer—or the lack thereof—is indicative of the relationship between God and

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125 Ibid., Chapter 49.
his people. As respiration is a sign of biological life, so prayer is a sign of spiritual life. Lungs without breath are dead lungs.\textsuperscript{126}

The above passages connect the practice of prayer to the theme of “identity” discussed earlier. Prayer, in other words, is a remedy because it is what human persons are naturally designed to do. Prayer counteracts acedia’s tendency toward inauthenticity, or toward a denial of one’s identity, since, according to these authors, it is the most natural and most authentic act of the human person.

In his works, Nil Sorsky gives specific examples of what these prayers can sound like. One example is from Barsanuphius the Great: “‘Lord, see my grief and have mercy on me, God, help me, a sinner.’”\textsuperscript{127} Another example he provides is from Saint Symeon the New Theologian: “‘Do not allow me, Master, beyond my power, trials, or grief or sickness, but grant me release and strength, in which to endure this with gratitude.’”\textsuperscript{128} Kathleen Norris goes more in depth about the importance of prayer and psalmody by explaining:

“‘The psalter is not merely a collection of prayers; it is meant to be a song that resonates in the monk’s soul, accompanying him on life’s journey and illuminating his path. Even more, it is a particularly effective weapon against the bad thought of acedia...Evagrius writes that ‘if, weary from our toil, a certain acedia overtakes us, we should climb up a little onto a rock of knowledge and converse with the psalter’ (emphasis mine).’”\textsuperscript{129}

The practice of prayer, whether through short refrains like those provided by Barsanuphius and St. Symeon or through extended reading the Book of Psalms, pulls together various therapeutic responses to acedia. Persevering in prayer most directly counteracts acedia’s deleterious effects, an insight that seems just as important for today’s married couples as it was for the monks of old.

\textsuperscript{126} Harold Senkbeil, “Engaging our Culture Faithfully,” 310.


\textsuperscript{128} Ibid., Statement 75.

\textsuperscript{129} Kathleen Norris, \textit{Acedia & Me}, 277.
CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The purpose of this thesis has been to demonstrate how ancient teachings on acedia from the Christian tradition have relevance today for understanding some of the challenges faced within the context of Christian marriage. In Part One, I created a “phenomenology” of acedia by identifying and describing several of its key characteristics that recur in the works of Christian writers over the centuries. Again, my aim was not to provide an exhaustive report on how acedia has been understood by every Christian voice over the centuries, but rather to provide an overview synthesis of historical and contemporary sources, which I could later use as an interpretive lens. In Part Two, I argued that acedia can, in fact, manifest in both an individual and a community. This served as a prerequisite to considering its role in a marriage since if it can manifest in a community, it can manifest in the relationship of multiple human persons. In Part Three, I presented both a narrative and an analysis of a hypothetical present-day marriage, drawing upon the phenomenology of acedia I developed in Part One. Finally, in Part Four, I delineated some of the most common therapeutic suggestions from historical Christian sources in response to acedia. These “treatment” suggestions are, I believe, also relevant in response to acedia manifested in a marriage; however, a detailed prescription of what Christian spouses should do if acedia is affecting their marriage goes beyond the scope of this study. My hope is that the work offered here can, however, serve as a starting point for future research on promising Christian-based marriage therapies.
Bibliography


