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Pastoral Theology Today

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I

WE cannot review here the whole history of pastoral theology as the Church has conceived of it through the centuries. We must confine ourselves to modern times and attempt to delineate some of those features which are particularly emphasized in modern pastoral theology and which represent a distinctive change from the pastoral theology of former years. As a beginning I shall make a general statement concerning pastoral theology today, and then proceed to examine it in detail.

Pastoral theology today is concerned with the pastor's distinctive role in his relationship to persons, particularly individual persons. While admittedly all the functions of a minister are part of his pastoral care of his people, not all of those functions involve the minister in a direct personal relationship with his people. Preaching may be done—though ineffectively done—without such direct personal encounter. Likewise teaching may be carried on—though again unsatisfactorily—without the same kind of direct relationship which is the very heart of the concern of pastoral theology. We shall discuss the relation of pastoral theology to these other disciplines later for they are all united in a vital pastoral ministry. For the present let us simply note the fact that pastoral theology regards itself as having to do primarily with those person-to-person encounters between the pastor and his people which make up so large a part of his ministry. These encounters are not limited to that specialized aspect of the ministry so popular today called personal counseling, but include the whole range of the pastor's relationships with his people—as a visitor in their homes, at their bedside in the hospital, in their offices and workshops, even at the church door on a Sunday morning. Wherever and whenever the pastor meets his people as a person in direct personal encounter the concern of pastoral theology comes to the fore. It seeks to understand and interpret what is happening in those relationships. It seeks to understand and define the pastor's role in them. Above all it recognizes that its task is to understand persons in all the complexity of their natures and circumstances, and through this understanding to relate the Christian faith to their experience in such a way that it becomes not merely truth assented to but truth structured into their very being and living. Pastoral theology today is centered upon persons, the understanding and meeting of their needs, and the role of the pastor in ministering to them.

II

It is obvious from this statement that pastoral theology today is marked by certain emphases. Let us examine these emphases more clearly and in some detail.

(i) There is first of all the emphasis upon the pastoral care of individuals. Formerly pastoral theology was regarded as a kind of omnibus course which included all the minister's functions in a congregation. It was, and in some places still is, called practical theology, and it gathered under one roof preaching, teaching, liturgics, and church administration, as well as the pastoral care of individuals and families. Its very name betrayed the fact that it was regarded largely as a kind of technological subject within the theological school, designed to give students practical advice in conducting the affairs of a congregation. Not infrequently the larger portion of the time was given to homiletics, for it was generally assumed that preaching was the primary if not the only mode of the minister's real spiritual ministry to his people. Other matters were not neglected, but it can be safely said that in most theological centres liturgics and Christian education, as well as pastoral work with individuals, suffered at the hands of this underlying conception of the ministry as a preaching ministry. To say this is not for one moment to question the importance of preaching. On the contrary, preaching will and should always remain first in the hierarchy of the minister's duties, and, as we shall see, it is of fundamental significance in the pastoral care of his people. But there is no doubt that pastoral theology as such, as well as other important matters, suffered because of the over-emphasis upon this one of the earthen vessels in which the Lord's treasure is kept and administered to the church. In addition, all the practical disciplines, including homiletics, suffered from lack of recognition of their basic theological character and their potential as contributors to the theology of the church.

The change that has taken place is well illustrated by Charles Kemp in his book, *Physicians of the Soul*. He points out that in 1896 Ian McLaren published a book, *The Cure of Souls*, in which only one chapter was devoted to the pastor's personal ministry to individuals. In 1932 Charles Holman published a book bearing the same title which was entirely concerned with that personal ministry. Holman's book demonstrates the expansion of the concern for and knowledge of this important work of the minister, an expansion which has gone on at almost whirlwind pace in the intervening years. As a consequence pastoral theology, as the study of the pastor's ministry to persons, has become a subject in itself, not divorced from other disciplines, but having its own history, centres of interest and methods, and with its own theological problems and emphases.

(ii) Pastoral theology today is marked in the second place by the emphasis upon understanding persons in all the complexity of human nature and interpersonal relationships. As Seward Hiltner has pointed out, what is new in pastoral theology is not so much the concern for the care of souls, though

that has undoubtedly received fresh impetus in the church, but rather the attitude and methods by which such soul-care is understood and undertaken. The new attitude towards persons and the methods of ministering to them may be described as dynamic (in contrast to formal) in its conception.

In general the pastoral theology of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries came to be dominated by a formal conception of persons and of the pastor's role in ministering to them. This formal conception was shaped according to one's theological tradition. In the Reformed tradition, with which we are concerned, as Charles Kemp observes, "a common pattern and a common remedy were applied to all."¹ The diagnosis of all ills was sin, the need conversion, the goal salvation. Anton Boisen has described the older methods of pastoral care as relying on "a universal specific derived from traditional authority."² In short, people and their needs were interpreted according to a rigid theological dogmatic into whose mould they were thrust. Accordingly their "cure" was to be achieved by the verbal transmission of traditional religious judgments, ideals and beliefs. Sometimes the resulting religious formula was evangelistic in character, requiring the pastor in effect "to preach" from house to house. Sometimes it was even more rigidly formal, designating the pastor's role to be that of reading the scriptures and praying. In time, when neither of these roles seemed acceptable, pastoral care degenerated into mere homespun friendliness.

It is important to realize that today the same basic pattern of sin-salvation holds true in a fundamental way for the pastor's understanding of his role. But we can no longer conceive of either sin or salvation in as simple a manner as formerly seemed possible. Largely through the studies of the modern psychological sciences the complexity of human nature is understood as it has rarely been before. In particular the depth and deviousness of human motivation—that with which religion is especially concerned—has been relentlessly exposed. We cannot now ignore the fact that what was once laid easily at the door of common human depravity may have other roots in the personality, and likewise that what was once accepted as manifest virtue may hide a multitude of spiritual ills and evils. Pastoral theology today is forced to contend with the unconscious depths in human motivation. It recognizes that while the Gospel of Christ is the answer to men's needs, it confronts in men a bewildering variety of psychological, social, mental and spiritual patterns which must be understood if the Gospel is to be related to them relevantly. For pastoral theology the task is no longer one of easy transmission of a given faith to those who should receive it. It involves the harder, more complex effort to understand the persons to whom we minister in their unique individuality, and to relate the faith to them at the most profound spiritual and emotional levels of their being. As Seward Hiltner expresses it in his latest book, *The Christian*

1. *Physicians of the Soul*, p. 227.

2. *The Exploration of the Inner World*, p. 87.

Shepherd: "Testimony to Christian faith is always a compound of the eternal gospel and specific need. Any attempt to wrap the gospel in a cellophane package, as if it could be given in the same way on all occasions, betrays what is required."³ That is to say, pastoral theology gathers into its concern what is more precisely called pastoral psychology. It is attempting to answer what troubled Dr. John McKenzie after his graduation from college, namely, that while he had received excellent training in understanding the Gospel he had to proclaim, he received little or no insight into that element to which he had to proclaim it—the element of human nature, of persons in all the variety of their troubles and needs. He recalls that in his day pastoral theology had been reduced to trivia, and all he could remember of the course he received in it was to be sure to send a thank-you note to his host and hostess of the week-end! Pastoral theology today, reinforced by both Christian anthropology and the results of scientific psychological research, stresses the knowledge of persons, and endeavours as far as possible to remove the pastor's dealing with them from the trial-and-error method of untrained experience.

Surely the basic principle involved here is not really new, but is merely the re-emphasis of something native to Christianity itself. Is it not best exemplified in the ministry of Jesus? How well he understood people in their individuality, and on the basis of that understanding how diverse was his response to them! It is his example that pastoral theology seeks to follow by urging us to centre attention on the person in order to discover his real being and need, and to respond to him in accordance with what we discover in him.

(iii) The third emphasis in pastoral theology today is upon the character of the relationship between pastor and persons. It is this relationship which above all pastoral theology tries to analyse and understand. Here the pastor's own nature and methods come under scrutiny. It is one of the fundamental principles of pastoral theology today that the quality of the relationship established between the pastor and people is the prime factor in pastoral care. The malignancies which warp the lives, not only of the abnormal but equally of normal people, have taken root in faulty personal relationships, if indeed they do not find their source there. In pastoral care it is supremely through the quality of the relationship offered by the pastor that his people discover a new understanding of their relationships to themselves, to others, and to God. It is the pastoral relationship through which healing is effected and persons are enabled to grow in faith and love. Consequently a great deal of stress is now being laid, not only upon the understanding of persons, but also upon the pastor's understanding of himself, and upon the methods by which he relates himself to persons under his care. Efforts are made to help the pastor face his own fears and to realize the depth of his own faith or lack of it. The principles by which he

3. *Op. cit.*, p. 17f.

may relate himself to others are studied and, where clinical training is available, practised.

The principles governing the methods advocated in modern pastoral care are too numerous and varied for profitable discussion here, but a few of the major ones which appear in all writings on the subject may be mentioned by way of illustration. (a) The first may be described as "listening." Listening sensitively to the communications made by persons both provides catharsis—the release of unexpressed problems and conflicts—and enables the pastor to discover the real nature of the person with whom he is dealing. (b) The second principle is "acceptance." Only acceptance of the person as he is, without either condoning or condemning, can relieve the pastor of the legalistic role of the external moral judge and enable the person to face his real self in all its good and evil. The pastor is urged to *respond* rather than to *react* to persons. (c) The third principle is "clarification." People are to be helped to clarify the real issues of their lives and circumstances and to work towards a reorientation of their living. At its most profound level, this process may mean a radical transformation of character.

These principles are aimed at the establishment of a free permissive relationship through which persons may express their real attitudes and feelings, find understanding, be enabled to face their wrongs and needs and discover a new approach to living. The psychological sciences have contributed most of what A. C. Outler calls the "practical wisdom" which is embodied in the methods of modern pastoral care. While in the beginning this wisdom was applied particularly in the counseling of individuals who came to the pastor for help, it is now being expanded and adapted to provide the basic attitude and approach of the pastor in all person-to-person relationships. It endeavours to make the pastor sensitive in a deeper way to the reality of persons as he encounters them in home and hospital, and to guide him in relating to them in such a way that a potentially saving relationship is formed.

These then are the fundamental emphases and developments in modern pastoral theology. They may be described as emphases because, while new stress has been put upon them today, and while new methods have been developed by which to effect them in practice, it would be utterly untrue and grossly unfair even to seem to suggest that they were completely unknown to pastors of former generations. On the contrary the concern for persons, the understanding of them, and the establishment of effective healing relationship with them, have been the marks of the outstanding Protestant pastors down through the centuries. Richard Baxter, Ian McLaren, John Wesley, Phillips Brooks, to mention only a few of the stars in the galaxy of the church's pastoral ministry, prefigured in their persons and writings much that is stressed in pastoral theology today. What is different is that their intuitive insight and skill have now been structured and developed and made available to pastors in knowledge and training. But it

is Ian McLaren who expresses clearly and beautifully the fundamental concern and attitude of pastoral care when he writes of the pastor's role:

It is a hard fight for everyone, and it is not his to judge or condemn; his is to understand, to help, to comfort—for these people are his children, his pupils, his patients; they are sheep Christ has given him, for whom Christ died.

III

The last quotation brings us to the fundamental question of the source of the theory and practice of pastoral theology today, its relation to traditional theology, the concept of the ministry which arises from it, and its relation to other functions of the working pastor. To a discussion of these matters we must now turn, because they are vital to the present content and future development of pastoral theology.

There is no doubt that for Ian McLaren his concept of the pastoral role was a direct expression of his theology. Pastoral theology today has gathered its theory and methods largely from another source. Its concept of pastoral care, its principles of technique, and to some degree its aims and objectives, have been derived from the psychological sciences, in particular from the psychology of personality and the various forms of psychotherapy. In its development this fact works both to the advantage and to the disadvantage of pastoral theology. The advantages are that the psychological sciences have brought a fund of practical wisdom to the aid of the pastor; even more than that, as A. C. Outler suggests, they have rebuked our indifference to the personal aspects of our ministry and our formal and unrealistic treatment of persons, and have awakened us to a whole new perspective on the possibilities of pastoral care. But these gains have not been without their accompanying perils. At least two serious threats should be noted. (a) There is a danger that pastoral theology will be reduced to pastoral psychology, the analyzing of personality according to accepted scientific theories and the training in the latest techniques of dealing with personality problems. (b) There is a still more profound danger that pastoral theology will adopt too unquestioningly the metaphysical assumptions underlying modern psychological science, assumptions which are at their worst naturalistic and at their best humanistic, but which are in any case far from, if not in direct contradiction to, fundamental Christian theology. A. C. Outler, in his book *Psychotherapy and the Christian Message*, has done us a noteworthy service in clarifying the issues between the modern psychological sciences and Christian theology. His work is the more valuable for his forthright recognition of the contribution which these sciences make to our work and his indication of the ways in which this contribution may be accepted without commitment to the unsatisfactory assumptions that go with it. If these assumptions were allowed to govern our thinking, the result would be the perversion of the specifically Christian understanding and aims which belong to a minister of Christ.

H. W. Buchner, in his review of Seward Hiltner's book, *Preface to Pas-*

toral Theology, in a recent number of the *Canadian Journal of Theology*, puts his finger on the issue. "The book," he writes, "stresses beginning with the person where he is. Traditional theology perhaps more often places the stress on God and His demands. Both are needed and I feel a lack here."⁴ In fairness to Hiltner it should be added that he is one of those who are aware of the theological weakness in much modern thinking on pastoral care, and that he is attempting to overcome it. In this regard his book, *The Christian Shepherd*, is an improvement over his *Preface to Pastoral Theology*.

William E. Hulme, himself a trained and experienced counselor, puts the matter even more succinctly. "God, like theology," he declares, "can neither be separated from the dynamics of human experience nor reduced to symbols of psychological phenomena."⁵ Pastoral theology today is striving to relate God and theology to the dynamics of human experience; its peril is that it can reduce both to the symbols of psychological phenomena. What is needed is that for which James Smart pleads in the same issue of the *Canadian Journal of Theology*: "It is surely clear that one of the drastic needs of the present is the recovery by the practical disciplines of their thoroughgoing theological character."⁶ After all, the pastor is first and foremost a minister of Jesus Christ. His foundation is laid, not in the accumulated wisdom of men, but in the Revelation made to the world in Jesus Christ. Grounded on that Revelation he may draw into himself all the wisdom of the world, but there is no doubt as to the criterion to which it is to be brought and by which it is to be tested. The pastor must be above all else a theologian. On the one hand he must continually wrestle with that body of truth that is given to him in the vast depths of the Christian Faith. On the other hand, he must strive with that infinite variable, the person, to whom he is to communicate that faith. He begins with the assumption that at the root of all the malignancies in human life there is a malignant relationship with God. He is prepared to find that malignancy expressing itself in a thousand different forms. He is prepared to deal with the person's need as it presents itself to him. But he has but one aim—a restored relationship with God, fully realized and appropriated in the depths of that person's being, which alone brings wholeness, healing or salvation.

Fortunately theology today provides a basis for the work of unifying the best in traditional Christian theology and the insights drawn from the psychological sciences as applied to pastoral care. For theology today stresses the incarnate redemptive action of God in Christ. It emphasizes God's revelation, not as a deposit of new truths concerning God nor of new moral standards by which we fulfil his will, but as His giving of Himself in suffering love. In Christ God did not simply show His nature to us; He gave Himself

4. *C.J.T.*, 5 (1959), p. 210.

5. *Counseling and Theology*, p. 50.

6. *C.J.T.*, 5 (1959), p. 182.

to us. He entered our life, identified Himself with us in our need, accepted us as we are, and bore in His own pain the cost of our sin and failure. God established with us in Christ a relationship which broke the bonds of guilt and fear by accepting us as we are and by binding Himself to us with costly ties of love from which nothing can separate us.

In this essential message of the Gospel there is embodied a fundamental concept of the pastor which both provides a theological basis for the understanding of his role and incorporates within it the best in the theory and methods of modern pastoral care. It provides a truly pastoral theology. This concept has been called by a friend of mine, without conscious reference to Tillich, the "ministry of being." A number of important ideas are gathered up in this phrase. It means fundamentally that the pastor's role is the giving of himself to persons. He is called to a ministry of identification with another, of getting into where he really lives and sharing the hurt and shame and sin that are there. It is the ministry of discovering the real person, even at the cost of bearing the hostility and hatred he may heap upon you, and "reviling not again." It is the ministry of freedom, permitting the person to struggle to discover his true self even at the cost to himself and to you of the consequences of being wrong. It is a ministry, that is, which embodies the basic concern for persons and our relationship to them stressed in modern pastoral care. But it is more basically the expression of the ministry of God to us in Jesus Christ. It is the ministry, in and through the pastor's actual being, of the love which sought and claimed and accepted us in Christ. The role of pastor is to minister the Divine Grace to people not only by preaching, teaching, worship, but supremely through the quality of the pastor's relationship to them. He himself becomes a means of grace, the vessel of the Lord. His role in the pastoral relationship is not primarily what he has to say, nor what he can do, but what he is *to be*, by God's Grace, to the people he serves. This idea should not be confused with the legalistic concept of "setting a good example." It is rather that through the very nature of his relationship with his people the pastor communicates the Gospel to them, and that they in turn, through their relationship with him, come to realize, to understand, and in fact to experience the true character of the relationship which God offers them in Christ.

It is this theological concept of the ministry which, I believe, lies at the heart of pastoral theology today, and which must be fostered, enlarged, and given concrete expression there. It is such a concept that finds most abundant help towards its realization from all the modern theories and methods of pastoral care. But it places the roots of the pastorate where they belong—in the Gospel. It maintains as the all-inclusive role of the pastor the communication of the revealed Gospel, forbidding the substitution of purely psychological aims and techniques for that Gospel. It thereby ensures a firm ground from which to appropriate all that modern thought can teach us yet remain Christian pastors. Without this firm ground we shall find ourselves becoming nothing more than poor psychologists and therapists.

It is no mean task to which this concept calls us. There are much easier concepts of our ministry. It is much easier to regard ourselves only as proclaimers of a message and to meet others with little homilies on their problems. It is much easier to regard ourselves as the guardians of some sacred moral standard and to pass judgment upon the sins of men and put before them lofty ideals. It is easier still to regard ourselves as administrators of an institution or purveyors of religious rituals which we are able to enact in every situation. It is another matter to have to get down with persons, to find our way tenderly into their hearts, to bear their pain as our own, their sin as our own, to be, in Luther's bold phrase, "a Christ unto men." We shall feel, even as Christ did when the woman touched the hem of his garment, the energy go out of us. But there is little doubt as to which ministry belongs to the Christian pastor.

In discovering its own particular task and methods pastoral theology has become independent of other functions of the pastor. It has become independent but not severed from them. Rather its independence merely allows it to contribute its own particular knowledge and perspective to the total work of pastoral care. It would be a destructive conception of the ministry which attempted to isolate the functions of the pastor. Their relation must rather be one of fruitful interaction. Pastoral care is surely involved in preaching. Pastoral theology contributes to the content of preaching its knowledge of the real issues in the lives of men. It makes preaching no longer an isolated exercise in homiletical technique but an earnest striving to illuminate the life of man in the light of the Word of God. Pastoral theology insists that the preacher must mount the pulpit steps bearing not only the burden of the Word of God but also the burden of men's lives, and that thereby his preaching should become a sacrificial offering in which there is a living encounter between God and the souls of men. The concern of pastoral theology affects even the manner of the preacher's speaking. Given the pastoral sense, it is not possible for the preacher to stand in holy seclusion and to hurl denunciatory thunderbolts at his people's sins. Rather, bearing their burdens as his own, he learns how to stand with them, face with them the searing judgment of God and the boundless mercy which cleanses and gives freedom and new life. Yet preaching too must retain its independence. If it is subservient to the concerns of pastoral care it may, as it has in some quarters, become centered upon people and their problems rather than upon God and His Gospel. It may degenerate into mere psychologizing: "Without a problem spake he not unto them." Preaching too must have a theological understanding of its role and objectives. Pastoral theology, however, keeps it relevant, bringing as it does before the preacher the clear image of men in their sin and sorrow, to whom the Word must speak.

It is significant that the great preachers have been great pastors—Baxter, Wesley, Brooks, Fosdick, to mention but a few. These men readily confessed that it was their relationship with people that gave their preaching effect.

They preached the Gospel. But their preaching was no academic presentation of that Gospel. It was preaching which dealt with the realities of people's lives and which brought those realities into the light of the Faith. It united homiletics and pastoral theology in effective pastoral care.

In similar fashion we might consider the relation of pastoral theology to all the various functions of the minister. For the purpose of this study, however, it may be most useful to dwell briefly on one aspect of the pastor's work which is particularly illuminated by the concerns of pastoral theology as described above. That aspect is the organization and administration of the church. Pastoral theology, as we have seen, is centred upon individual persons and the pastor's relationship to them. But individual problems and needs are most often rooted in malignant interpersonal relationships. Moreover, persons are healed and persons grow only in the context of vital relationships with others. Therefore, pastoral theology today is deeply concerned with the quality of the life within the church. It seeks the establishment of the church as a true community, a family of persons within which the relationships are such that people find real fellowship with God and with one another. From the viewpoint of pastoral theology today the programme of the church must be centred upon the increase of the stature of persons—their increased understanding of the Gospel and appropriation of it in their experience. Pastoral theology aims toward the realization within the church of a group-life in which the acceptance of the love of God is made real and effective. God provides for us in Christ a reconciling saving relationship; but for most people the experience of this relationship is made real only through a relationship with others in which it is incarnate. It is such a relationship which the pastor seeks to provide in the encounter with his people which I have called the ministry of being. But the pastor is one person, limited in time and space. He needs the support and help of the whole church. More than that, should he be successful in bringing one person into a new experience of God and a new orientation of life, he is often hard put to find any place in the church where the new-born life may be nurtured and grow in grace. In its attention to persons, therefore, pastoral theology today gathers into its concern the aims of the organization of the church. On the wide level it includes in its concern the structures of society, as did the social gospel of a former generation, recognizing that these structures vitally affect the mental and spiritual well-being of men and women. One of the dangers inherent in the current emphasis upon personal religion and in the concentration upon individual feelings and psychic conditions is that it may become a way of escape from the momentous economic, political and military issues which terrorize our age. The emphasis upon personal individual needs and salvation can, and in some notable instances does, contribute to the widespread "failure of nerve" which we all feel in confronting those issues. The concern for persons, therefore, and the endeavour to release them from the various bonds that limit their lives must always be related to the larger aim of enabling them to

fulfil their moral responsibility towards others. In particular pastoral theology today must be concerned for the development of that responsibility in the realization of the truer and fuller community which our world so desperately seeks. The pastoral task includes, as we have suggested, the fitting of men and women for their wider responsibility in society, and in this way it is linked to the problems and concerns of Christian ethics. But more especially pastoral theology is called to contribute to the achievement of community among Christian people themselves. It has as its purpose the realization within the church of a true community where people may find the reconciling forgiving love of God in reality and power. From the perspective of pastoral theology, therefore, church administration which aims only at organizational efficiency, multiplicity of groups, or expansion of membership, simply misses the point of the church's existence. The Church exists as the mission of God on earth. Her role, no less than that of the pastor, is *to be* the fellowship of reconciling love in the world. She exists not only in order that the redeeming action of God may be proclaimed from the pulpit, taught in Christian education groups, and expressed in worship; she exists in order that God's redeeming action may be structured into the very living together of her people, into the quality of their relationships within the church. Very little thinking or work has been done on this aspect of pastoral theology today. Perhaps the modern idols of bigness and efficiency still hold too firm a grip on our minds. But the vision of a new order is there, providing a fresh horizon for the work of pastoral care.

Pastoral theology encompasses a wide field today. What matters most in the work of the pastor is the perspective which he has on his work. He must learn all he can, study all he can, of new theories and techniques. But his learning will be to no effect, may indeed be harmful, if it is not undergirded and directed by a fundamental attitude born of the Spirit of Christ—the readiness to give himself without reserve to his people, to identify himself with them by sharing the good and evil, joy and sorrow of their lives, to be by God's Grace a measure of what Christ in His ministry was to those who came to him and to whom He came.