

## Introduction

# The Case for a Classical Tradition in Pastoral Theology

### PASTORAL CARE AS A THEOLOGICAL DISCIPLINE

It was a dark, cold winter night when I was called to the home of a member of my former congregation. Many years earlier I had left the congregation of which she was a member to teach at the seminary. The pastor who followed me had himself recently moved to a new call. Without a pastor, the family asked if I would be willing to make a call on the woman who was thought to be near death. Entering the house I greeted the assembled members of the extended family, all members of the congregation I once served. The gathered hush among this large family indicated that the situation was serious. The oldest daughter led me into her mother's bedroom, said a few quiet words of transition, and quickly left us alone.

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### PASTORAL THEOLOGY IN THE CLASSICAL TRADITION

offers a remedy that leads to healing, blessing, and salvation to eternal life in union with Christ. The strongest possible connection exists between pulpit and counseling room, and between the study of Christian theology and the practice of pastoral care. Competent pastors and theologians have always known about this bond, and have integrated it in such a way that the great pastors were theologians, and the great theologians were pastors. Thus, when students ask me for advice on becoming a faithful pastor, I always tell them to become, first, students of the great theologians of the faith, and to learn from them what being a faithful pastor requires. Being a pastor demands also being a theologian, one who speaks and lives out of the center of the ecumenical, evangelical faith of the church.

In modern times some kind of a rift has opened up between being a pastor and being a theologian, as if a person could be one without the other. While recognizing the danger of generalization, I detect today a lack of confidence among pastors in the efficacy of Word and sacraments to effect healing and blessing, as well as a failure among theologians to present the gospel in a manner that allows pastors to discern directly the pastoral power of the Word of God.<sup>1</sup> Pastoral work is concerned always with the gospel of God's redemption in and through Jesus Christ, no matter the problem that someone presents. Pastoral work by definition connects the gospel story—the truths and realities of God's saving economy—with the actual lives and situations of people. Biblical and theological perspectives guide all pastoral work, and these perspectives, properly rooted in the gospel of salvation, are discovered to be inherently pastoral.

Biblical and theological perspectives, however, no longer shape the practice of much pastoral work. The modern pastoral care movement within the North American Protestant theological academy by and large revolves around psychological categories regarding human experience and symbolic interpretations about God. A relatively comfortable synthesis results in which pastoral theology, and, consequently, pastoral practice in the church, have become concerned largely with questions of meaning rather than truth, acceptable functioning rather than discipleship, and a concern

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The elderly woman before me clearly was very weak, but she clutched my hand with intensity and drew me close. I sensed both her affection and trust and my own deep awareness of pastoral responsibility. With hoarse words between harshly drawn breaths, she wanted assurance of her salvation. She told me that she knew she was dying. Above all else, she said, she needed to hear again the great evangelical affirmations of grace, redemption, and hope; the words are mine, but her intent was unambiguous. Put a different way, my former parishioner wanted a reminder of the reality and truth behind the central doctrines of the Christian faith as they applied to her life at the point of her death. Empathy with her and psychological sensitivity were appropriate, but more was required. The situation demanded a clear affirmation and application of Christian faith. I assured her of her salvation, prayed with her, and, laying my hands on her head, blessed her, committing her into the arms of her Savior.

Competent pastors have always recognized the strongest connection between what Christian faith confesses about God—redemption in and through Jesus Christ, and the life of sanctification—on the one hand, and the care of God's people, on the other. Competent theologians have known, too, that the theology taught and confessed in classroom and sanctuary is rich material for a person-sensitive pastor to mold and shape so that it applies appropriately to the situations of life and death that pastoral work confronts daily. John Calvin used to insist, for example, that pastoral care (or church discipline, as he called it) was not something alongside Word and sacrament, not a third thing. Calvin understood that the content of the gospel given in and through Word and sacrament as the primary means of grace was the working material for Christian pastoral work. No doubt interpersonal skills need to be learned; likewise, the competent pastor knows about human feelings, human development, and the complexities of human relationships.

But none of these factors supplies the basic content that gives pastoral work its specific Christian identity. That grounding comes from the content of faith itself, for the grace of God in Christ for us exposes the depth of the human condition in its separation from God in a way that no human science can. This same grace

for self-actualization and self-realization rather than salvation.<sup>2</sup> In view of these developments, perhaps the most important and provocative conclusion to come from a thoughtful reading of the classical tradition in pastoral theology is the discovery of theological realism. The classical pastoral writers, as we shall see, really did believe that theological statements made truthful reference to God, and that these statements had primary consequences for the understanding of human life and its healing and well-being. The contrast between the classical pastoral writers and much pastoral work today entails at least the awareness then and the loss now of the transcendence, objectivity, and reality of God, especially of a christological and soteriological clarity, and the insistence today that talk of God be assigned to the realm of myth and meaning. The understanding of humanity standing before God today, on this account, is given only in term of expressions of collective experience or states of inner consciousness.<sup>3</sup> A reading of the classical pastoral writers gives us cause for critical thought concerning the purpose of pastoral work as practiced today, including our ways of claiming to know God and to live rightly before God. The classical pastoral writers, in other words, deconstruct our theological subjectivity and its concomitant pastoral anthropology by insisting on the capacity of Christian doctrine to really talk about God truthfully and the need to guide the souls of the people accordingly.

The study of ancient texts in pastoral theology is not an end in itself, except perhaps for the pure historian. For the practical theologian, the focus is theology that is concerned with action, and in this case, the action of pastoral care in the context of today's church and society. While various scholarly conclusions may emerge from the review of ancient texts themselves, the more urgent question for us is to find out what these conclusions may mean for contemporary pastoral work. The task is not to "do pastoral care" the way the classical writers did. That option is hardly realistic or legitimate. The task, rather, is to allow these classical texts to provoke us into critical thinking by disturbing our calm, culture-bound assumptions concerning ministry. Having used these texts with Master of Divinity and Doctor of Ministry students and with groups of clergy, I have discovered that the texts speak for themselves; they raise

issues for pastoral work today, often in direct, disturbing, and dramatic ways. This volume does not include the texts themselves, but readers should seek out these texts. I would hope that the selections would disturb readers in helpful and provocative ways.

The classical writers perceived things differently—for all manner of reasons. Such ways of looking, as far as we are concerned, may be rather odd by present standards, yet their perspectives allow us a curious angle of vision. Our view of the tasks and practices of pastoral care are reframed. Old questions are asked once again. New questions we have perhaps assumed we were not allowed to ask may be put forward for the first time. Discoveries may be made. If nothing else, the review of old texts in pastoral theology may force us to pause, to ponder, and to reflect in a critical way about our actions today as pastors. In this way we follow the counsel of C. S. Lewis, who once noted that the books of the past can help us because they challenge our presuppositions by offering a point of view outside of our cultural and historical framework. For this reason, he adds, we should read one old book for every new book!<sup>4</sup> Perceiving the care of persons before God in the light of Jesus Christ through a study of the great pastors of Christian tradition affords us an angle of insight that at least may force us to question perceptions and assumptions that shape our own pastoral work.

My conviction is that the basic reconstitutive task for pastoral theology today is to establish once again the fundamental connection between the Christian doctrines of God, redemption, and hope, and the pastoral ministry of the church. To my mind, reestablishing this connection is the single most important conclusion that can come from the study of classical texts in pastoral theology. Why does Gregory of Nazianzus insert a section on the doctrine of the Trinity in the middle of his treatise on pastoral care? Why did John Chrysostom go to great lengths to try to avoid ordination? Why is Gregory the Great so concerned with the spirituality of the pastor? Why does Martin Bucer labor over the doctrine of sin and redemption in his understanding of true pastoral care? Why is Richard Baxter a pastoral evangelist? The short answer is that these pastoral theologians understood that pastoral ministry is the lived action in and

through the church by the power of the Holy Spirit of the ministering reality of God in Christ for salvation. For them, pastoral care is lived out doctrine at the points of connection between the Gospel and the lives of God's people.

This book is written in the context of what I perceive to be a general lack of awareness among pastors today of the ecumenical evangelical Christian pastoral practice that was concerned above all with people in their relationship with God. Unlike most twentieth-century pastoral practice, dominated by psychological theory and oriented towards self-realization, classical pastoral care was much more obviously constrained by matters of theology—indeed, by matters of doctrine. The classical pastoral writers believed deeply that the active reality of God in Christ through the Holy Spirit was a present help in time of trouble. Moreover, pastoral care always had in focus the principal concern for the salvation of the sinner. In the classical tradition, then, pastoral theology and the practice of pastoral care give primary attention to God in Jesus Christ as the source of life, meaning, and the church's ministries of care. A central task of pastoral theology, then, is to remind the church that Jesus Christ is the pastor, the one who is the primary pastoral actor—who guides us to streams of living water, who forgives us our sins and saves us, who heals all our hurts, and who brings life out of death. The ministry of the church is, by the Holy Spirit, a sharing in the ministry of Christ. Ministry can have no other basis. A study of the texts of the great pastors of the past puts this front and square.

### PASTORAL THEOLOGY IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Apart from a handful of efforts scattered over the last forty years, from J. T. McNeill, W. A. Clebsch and C. R. Jaekle, Thomas C. Oden, Brooks Holifield, and to a lesser extent Seward Hiltner, “the history of pastoral care is largely unclaimed and unknown” today.<sup>5</sup> Contemporary pastoral care is, by and large, uninformed by historical

#### Discovering Our True Motivation: God's Glory or Our Self-Interest?

To a young missionary couple who is unsure whether they should stay on a mission field



September, 1984

Dear Jim and Anne,

Warm greetings to both of you in the Lord Jesus Christ! You have been much in our prayers over the past two years. Too, you are in our hearts as we have prayed for you during this time of re-examination of your role. . . . I was a bit concerned that you might quickly return without thinking through the issues of your call—or lack of call to that land. But your correspondence to Charles [another pastor who had been mentoring Jim and Anne] has been encouraging to me.

In what way? Mainly in your growth in self-knowledge and honesty. One evidence of the Spirit's presence in our lives is our seeing where we really are and admitting it to others. One cannot make progress in life or ministry without being a forthright and forthcoming person. Probably each one of us has tons of kinky motives and loads of self-deception—or at least we do until we begin to ask the Holy Spirit to search us out. So, I am really pleased at your openness with Charles and encourage you to continue in it. That is of the Holy Spirit, I do believe. I was pleased as I reflected upon it that you made your innermost thoughts known to him. Believe me, we don't love you the less for that. We accept you just as you are, just as we want you to accept us just as we are.

I am in accord with what Charles has written to you. He is a wise brother, and I have full confidence in him. Would I add anything to his advice? Perhaps a thought or two along the lines mentioned above. It's vital that you not stay to please Charles, or me, or anyone else. That would please us, but the crucial thing to get hold of is your own identity and call. You can make decisions only out of that kind of grip on reality. So don't stay just to please us, but only because you believe the Lord of the church wants you there to do something for him.

Now I do not think such a disclosure of His will is gained on the cheap. It requires prayer and fasting and some earnest and painful heart-searching. When I do this, I ask the Holy Spirit

to search out my innermost heart motives. Guess what I often discover? That my motives are usually mixed. Especially I am likely to discover I am not doing things for God's glory and out of delight and fellowship with Him, but out of half-concealed self-interest and self-glorifying. I do not mean that no heavenly motives go into the mix of my inward thoughts, but often because I can detect some good motives in myself, I feel that this is the last and only word. Don't believe it about me or Charles or yourselves. The scriptural emphasis on our encounter with the flesh needs to be taken seriously. I am thinking of some of the underscoring of things like “ambitions” in Galatians 5. It's there in all of us and cannot be ignored.

So especially ask yourself: what is my concern for the glory of God in my life? How much am I led by concern for my own comfort and feeling of well-being? Do I witness out of enjoyment of God? Do I love people—not just on the mission field, but people? Am I willing to imitate the Good Shepherd and die for them? Do I really know the power of the Holy Spirit as I daringly witness? Do I really confront the lost with heaven and hell? Am I repenting regularly?

Once you wrestle over a period of time with these questions, you can much more easily decide whether you should be [on this field] for a longer period of time. Take great care not to be hasty. “He that is hasty in spirit exalts folly.” But it just may not be God's will for you to be there as long as we might like. But the reason must be related to His purpose for your life. You might decide that your calling is not to be there because of a revelation of Christ's will to you. This is not to say at all that I am encouraging you to come home sooner, but to get you to put the matter of your whole personal relationship to the Father before God and to decide based upon a clear dependence upon Him in the light of your careful evaluation of your gifts, calling, motives, etc. In other words, to quote my dear wife Rose Marie, “It's important not to decide hastily like an orphan in flight, but like a son who knows the Father's unconditional love.”

I think I also need to apologize to you both for my failure to help you more. Actually, here at New Life we see that we have been far too casual in some of our training and preparation for ministry. I don't say this to run ourselves down or because I am guilt-ridden about it. I am not at all, but I think the “flesh” in me kept me back from giving better leadership to you and your ministry. So forgive me please.

Let me assure you how much more seriously we are beginning to take this whole enterprise. All of us here are seeing it as a much more demanding undertaking than hitherto. We also see how much we needed to have much more prayer behind it. Let me counsel you, too, to pray much more. Pray and keep praying and then pray some more.

126 You are in our hearts. Very much so.

Most warmly in Christ,  
Jack

## Knowing the Gospel Means We Can Face Our Sins

To a young woman who struggles with alcoholism and sexual sins.



April, 1989

Dear Sharon,

Most cordial greetings to you in Christ! I am writing from Kenya. Here we have been ministering, preaching, and writing. Rose Marie is just back from Uganda, where she spoke several times and met with the missionary women in Ft. Portal. I am working on a book for non-Christians; she is working on an autobiography.

It has taken me a long time, but at last I am getting off a long overdue letter to you. My apologies for the long delay. I could think of a number of excuses, but I think the main reason is my not being sure what to say. Now I realize that may sound strange. Usually I have much to say! But my heart burden has been to help you, and my mind has not been clear as to how. Now I think it is clearer to me what the Lord wants me to share with you. I think it came to me as I was helping Rose Marie work on her book.

In it she makes the point that it is important to know your family roots and the sin patterns you have inherited. Actually the book could help you more than I can. But anyway she says that sin patterns get repeated from generation to generation, taking different forms but always reflecting inherited attitudes of pride, independence, self-deception, lust, love of control, etc.

Her next point is that people really can't stand to look closely at themselves and these patterns unless they understand justification by faith and union with Christ. According to her, it's pretty easy to say, "God, be merciful to me, the sinner," and be thinking only of external actions while ignoring the darkness of the human heart. But if you want to look more deeply, begin by studying the gospel of the cross, know the meaning of Christ's atonement for you personally, and you will be able to take the deeper look.

This deeper look can then lead to a more thoroughgoing repentance and a hearty confidence through the Spirit that I am not an orphan, but a living son of the heavenly Father through faith.

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At least that was my impression. I believe I said that you did not know yourself very well. I tried to do it in love. Maybe it was done with some frustration too. Well, the reason I knew what your inner life was like came from a knowledge of my own desperately evil heart!

Let me be even more forthright. I think it is a lifelong process getting to know yourself. Paul said that when you get to know yourself you confess that you and every man are liars (Rom. 3). Now I am ashamed to confess how many deep lies there are in my heart. How is it now with you? Have you brought your innermost deceptions into the light? Are there still secrets in your heart?

Think once again of your visit to our home. As I sat on the couch with you I thought that lying was as natural to you as breathing. Do you remember how many times I asked you if you really meant what you were saying?

Now I understand that you believe that God has worked in your life, and the church has accepted your repentance. Praise God for that! I rejoice in it. But have you taken that close inner look at the roots of it all—the proud, independent unbelieving heart, a deceiving heart?

That's scary for me. To do that.

When I do that I know the engine does not need just a tuneup but a complete reworking.

I think such an inward look is possible if you know the power in the blood of Christ. It is the sole basis of God's justification of the ungodly. What a wonderful thing for God to do for us! Complete forgiveness.

Such a teaching cuts the root of our sin. Self-centered pride is the root, and to rest on free justification kills our pride. Why? because in our justification we must accept that nothing of righteousness comes from us, could come from us, and we are forced to acknowledge the shame of our sin. Only mercy and love can save us, and these come from God to the ungodly (Rom. 5:5-6).

But there is even more. We are always properly concerned to get sin out of ourselves. At least we should be. But we need something more foundational. We need to have the Lord transfer us out of sin. To bring us into a kingdom of righteousness, to kill us and resurrect us under a new lordship. We are not justified in our sin. No, justification carries along with it a death to sin and

What do you have to do to get this? Nothing. Just come undone and rest on what Jesus has done! Look, the gospel is a mighty power. See the Lamb. One look at Him takes away a universe of sin from the human heart. [The last page of this letter is lost.]

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In Christ,  
Jack Miller

Take a specific sin like anger. You and I know its visible consequences. Everyone is shamed by how our anger has harmed others. But then take the deeper look. Why am I angry? What fuels it? Why do I forgive people, but later on end up taking it all back?

These are burning questions.

They also have a wonderfully simple answer in Scripture. In James 3 and 4, God says that we are angry because we are proud. We have pride in our own sinful nature, but we also have had models of pride in our family background. We have deeply ingrained attitudes of superiority inherited from a dark past. Our sinful nature responds to these inherited attitudes with enthusiasm. We have seen in our models attitudes of superiority, contempt for others, and patterns of pride coming to expression in bitterness or rage.

How do we overcome the pride? Our ancestors probably did not; how then can we expect to do so? Actually it's impossible. But that's where grace begins. When the Spirit works a healthy self-disgust, a hatred of my sins in my heart, then I pray honestly without a secret intention to remain unchanged.

Honesty, humble integrity, that's what moves God to run to our cry.

You see, we often pray and see little fruit because we are praying one thing but in our heart we have other plans.

Take the person addicted to drugs. He cannot get off them for the simple reason he does not want to get off them. The day he wants to get off them he does. But until he really wants to be changed he always has a secret intention in the heart not to go off the drugs. The rest is all talk.

So my suggestion is that you study James 3 and 4 closely and take a close look at your inner life, and at the same time study Galatians 2 and 3 to see the beauty of the love of God in the gospel.

Put it together by faith. Or better, let the Holy Spirit put it together for you as you cry out for divine intervention to work deeply in your life.

Please don't think I am speaking to you as an outsider. As a nonsinner. No, the reason I understand you is that God has given me some understanding of my own vile heart.

Do you remember the time you came to my home for prayer meeting several years ago and you and I sat on the couch? I questioned you about your inner life—but you were not listening.

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## Chapter 16

## GRAPPLING WITH BOWEN THEORY IN MINISTRY

### An Interview with Simon Flinders and Paul Grimmond

Lauren Errington

*I had the privilege of meeting with two seasoned ministers to reflect on how they have found grappling with Bowen theory and its application to their ministries a challenging and enriching endeavour over the years. This conversation gives a flavour of their careful scriptural critique, personal reflections and the usefulness of their continued meeting together to understand and apply Bowen theory in their relationships and ministries. I am grateful for the generosity of Simon Flinders, Senior Minister at Northbridge Anglican Church in Sydney, and Paul Grimmond, Dean of Students at Moore College in Sydney, for their participation in this interview.*

Lauren Errington (Interviewer): Thanks for being willing to participate in this conversation today. To begin with, I was wondering how you both first encountered Bowen theory?

Paul Grimmond: I have spent most of the last 16 years in university ministry with students, and I was two years out of [Moore] College when I took over as the senior person in charge of a large university ministry at the University of New South Wales. I did this for the next five and a half years until I got completely burnt out. As I got to this point, one of the things that became apparent was that I needed to do some work on my marriage. At the time, Jenny Brown introduced me to Bowen theory as a conceptual framework to think about my personal engagement with burnout. In particular, it was a framework for thinking through relationships and pastoral work. I then started to use it in the team I was responsible for, and I helped trainees think about it in their university ministry. It has also been extremely useful in thinking about my new role at Moore College which is a different organisation and system to where I have been before.

Simon Flinders: I came to Bowen theory in the reverse order to Paul. I first encountered Bowen theory in the context of ministry, then personally. I have spent 17 years as a minister in different parishes, the last eight at Northbridge, and now as the Senior Minister. I first came

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