

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.

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

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.¹ 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

for self-actualization and self-realization rather than salvation.² 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.³ 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!⁴ 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.⁵ Contemporary pastoral care is, by and large, uninformed by historical