

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Canadian Journal of Theology* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_canadian-journal.php

The Rebirth of Pastoral Theology

J. MERVYN DICKINSON

ONE OF THE MOST SIGNIFICANT TRENDS in contemporary Protestantism is towards what may be called "the rebirth of pastoral theology." For several years and from many quarters evidence has been accumulating that a newly conceived pastoral theology is struggling to be born. Especially within the past decade the labour pains have been felt with increasing regularity. Theologians, uncomfortably aware of pastoral theology's hitherto uncertain structure and ambiguous relationship both to doctrinal theology and to the social sciences, have been striving to clarify and make explicit the nature and function of this discipline. Seminaries, dissatisfied with and sometimes embarrassed by the current status of their pastoral theology departments, have been debating its proper place and content within the theological curriculum. Local pastors too, often uncertain as to the nature of their pastoral role and anxious regarding their ability to meet the manifold demands made upon them, have been looking for help to the behavioural sciences, have frequently thereby confused their pastoral identity still further, and now are searching for a more adequate pastoral theology which will be both functionally relevant and theologically sound.

The clearest evidence of this emergent rebirth is to be seen in the recent upswing in the quantity and quality of literature dealing with the subject. Related journal articles have become increasingly abundant. The tenth anniversary issue of *Pastoral Psychology*,¹ for example, published a number of important contributions, including an article by Paul Tillich ("The Impact of Pastoral Psychology on Theological Thought") and another by Reuel Howe ("The Crucial and Correlative Role of Pastoral Theology"). The overriding emphasis of each was the restructuring of pastoral theology in terms of a correlation or dialogue between theology and the social sciences as each relates to pastoral care. Recent book publications provide another index. Seward Hiltner's *Preface to Pastoral Theology*² is undoubtedly the most creative and significant attempt thus far to set forth the nature and function of pastoral theology. Less successful but written with a similar intention is the still more recent *A Theology of Church and Ministry*³ by Franklin M. Segler. Within the past year alone, there have appeared a number of such publications, each attempting to provide a theological context for the various functions of the pastoral ministry. Daniel Day Williams' *The Minister and*

1. *Pastoral Psychology*, Vol. 11, No. 101 (February, 1960).

2. Seward Hiltner, *Preface to Pastoral Theology* (New York-Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1958).

3. Franklin M. Segler, *A Theology of Church and Ministry* (New York: Broadman Press, 1960).

*the Care of Souls*⁴ is a revision of his 1959 Sprunt Lectures at Union Theological Seminary (Richmond, Virginia) in which he answered the explicit request to deal with the theological foundations of pastoral care. A similar attempt is made by Frederic Greeves in his *Theology and the Cure of Souls*,⁵ and the specific pastoral implications of Reformation theology are formulated by Wayne Oates in *Protestant Pastoral Counseling*.⁶ What for many is the most exciting and controversial work to appear in recent months is the English translation of Eduard Thurneysen's *A Theology of Pastoral Care*,⁷ in which the author, a personal friend and colleague of Karl Barth, seeks to apply Barth's "theology of the Word of God" to the concerns of pastoral care. Such at least are among the many recent publications which provide clear and heartening evidence of the rebirth of pastoral theology.

To speak of a rebirth, however, is to recognize that contemporary pastoral theology has important historical antecedents from which it has sprung and in the light of which it must be understood. What is emerging today is not a new discipline but a restructuring of one which, since the Reformation at least, has always had a place among the various branches of theology. John T. McNeill⁸ has traced the history of the pre-Reformation *cura animarum* and the post-Reformation *Seelsorge* in such a way as to indicate the Church's continuing concern for "the cure of souls." While the pastoral function of "shepherding" has thus always been crucial and has always received practical consideration, however, it appears to have found no systematic theological elaboration until the middle of the eighteenth century. Beginning formally at that time and developing throughout the next 150 years, predominantly on German soil but taking root also in America in the middle of the nineteenth century, pastoral theology became recognized by that name as a legitimate theological discipline.⁹ Heavily theoretical in its emphasis, it attempted to translate theological truths into pastoral practice. The direction of the method, indeed, was almost entirely one-way, i.e., from theory to practice. With the exception of Schleiermacher's formulation of "practical theology,"¹⁰ there was apparently no recognition at this time that the method should involve a two-way movement—that a careful examina-

4. Daniel Day Williams, *The Minister and the Care of Souls* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1961).

5. Frederic Greeves, *Theology and the Cure of Souls* (Manhasset, N.Y.: Channel Press, 1962).

6. Wayne E. Oates, *Protestant Pastoral Counseling* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962).

7. Eduard Thurneysen, *A Theology of Pastoral Care* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1962).

8. John T. McNeill, *A History of the Cure of Souls* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1951).

9. For a more detailed historical account of the development of pastoral theology see Hiltner, *Preface*, pp. 40-51. A comprehensive bibliography of early works in pastoral theology is contained in J. J. Van Oosterzee, *Practical Theology* (New York: Chas. Scribner's Sons, 1878).

10. Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Die praktische Theologie nach den Grundsätzen der evangelischen Kirche* (*Friedrich Schleiermachers sämtliche Werke* [Berlin: G. Reimer, 1835-64], Bd. 13).

tion of pastoral practice may illumine theological truths as well as vice versa.

It was precisely this one-sidedness, indeed, which contributed to the gradual demise of pastoral theology during the declining years of the nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth century. With the reluctance of Continental theologians to enter any truly creative dialogue between theology and the newly emerging behavioural sciences, or to centre such a dialogue around or relate it to the concerns of pastoral care, pastoral theology became increasingly ingrown and functionally irrelevant. As the possibilities of one-way applications of theology to pastoral practice became exhausted, the stream of literature in the area dwindled to a trickle and indeed almost ceased entirely. In America, on the other hand, the recently imported pastoral theology was met with an equally one-sided emphasis of quite the opposite nature. Under the influence of American pragmatism and functionalism it entered almost immediately into what Seward Hiltner has characterized as the "hints and helps" phase,¹¹ marked by a flood of superficial literature dealing with the practice of pastoral care with little or no reference to its theological context or theoretical assumptions. Pastoral theology as a *theological* discipline became virtually extinct and tended instead to assume a position within the theological curriculum which is still regarded by many seminaries, implicitly if not explicitly, as the "curricular waste-basket," including anything from liturgics to etiquette, from how to serve the elements at the Lord's Table to how to fold one's napkin at a parishioner's table. In short, anything "practical" which could not suitably be subsumed under one or other of the more clearly defined disciplines tended to be relegated to the domain of a very untheological pastoral theology. Thus, apparently unable to maintain the difficult but necessary tension between theory and practice, between theology and shepherding, pastoral theology both in Europe and in America had succumbed to the contradictions of its adolescent struggle and had developed a kind of fatal schizophrenia, tending on the one hand towards a functionally irrelevant theology and on the other hand towards a theologically inadequate poimencis.

It was out of this background, then, that there emerged some thirty or more years ago two relatively independent but equally significant movements within the Protestant churches, each of which is only now reaching maturity. The one is what is known as the "theological revival"—the resurgence of theological vitality and scholarship sparked by the leadership of men such as Karl Barth, Emil Brunner, Paul Tillich, and Reinhold Niebuhr. The other is the development of what is known by the somewhat unfortunate name of "pastoral psychology." Of the nature and content of the former nothing need here be said save to emphasize the importance for pastoral theology of the contemporary theological concern about the nature of the relationship between revelation and reason, between the Word of

11. Hiltner, *Preface*, p. 49.

God and the knowledge of man. (Whether that relationship be construed in terms of Barth's emphasis on the autonomy of the Word of God or of Tillich's emphasis on the possibility of correlation is of immense significance for one's conceptualization of the method and structure of pastoral theology.) Concerning the nature and content of pastoral psychology, on the other hand, a further word is necessary.

Pastoral psychology may be defined as the systematic attempt to apply the contributions of psychology in a practical way to the whole range of pastoral responsibilities and opportunities. It owes its genesis and chief impetus on the one hand to depth psychology and its application in psychotherapy, and on the other hand to the clinical pastoral training movement initiated in 1925 by Anton T. Boisen. Keenly aware that responsible shepherding requires not only a Christian context and motivation but also a sufficient understanding of the human situation, pastoral psychology has pursued its course of systematically organizing whatever contributions from the secular sciences have seemed relevant. It has consistently emphasized both theoretical sophistication and clinical competency, and to that end has introduced and refined such tools as the case history record and the verbatim interview report. In all this no one can seriously doubt that pastoral psychology has added greatly to the functional adequacy of the pastoral ministry. At the same time, however, the one serious criticism which has consistently been levelled at pastoral psychology is that it has remained apart from any adequate theological context, has not always been aware even of its own metapsychological assumptions, and in its concern for understanding and dealing technically with the human situation has neglected to understand the meaning of the Word which God has addressed to man in that situation.

Now what we are here considering to be the rebirth of pastoral theology may be seen to have its conception at precisely this point—namely, the point of contact between pastoral psychology's concern to find its proper theological context and doctrinal theology's concern to determine its proper relationship with the human sciences. In this sense, the newly conceived and currently emerging pastoral theology may be regarded as the child of the marriage of pastoral psychology and the theological revival. Lest pastoral theology be considered an illegitimate child, however, the analogy should not be strained, for clearly the marriage has not yet been consummated—indeed, some feel that the courtship has scarcely begun. Nevertheless, the mutual approach of pastoral psychology and theology, of functional and theoretical considerations, of our knowledge of the human situation and our understanding of the Word of God, is issuing in a fresh revitalization of pastoral theology.

What then is the nature and structure of this new pastoral theology? It may be defined as the systematic formulation of theological truths around the focus of pastoral care, viewed in the "shepherding" perspective, as these truths are illumined in a dialogical relationship with whatever insights may

be gained from or related to the actualities of pastoral practice. Within this definition there are four fundamental emphases which should be noted.

The first is that pastoral theology is above all a theological enterprise of no less importance than the other branches—biblical, historical, moral, and so on—of the theological tree. Like every theological discipline it begins with the data of revelation as received by faith and proceeds systematically to organize these data around some central focus according to certain definite organizational criteria. It shares in the over-all purpose of the theological enterprise which is to interpret and safeguard the content of Christian faith.

The second emphasis has to do with the distinguishing feature of pastoral theology—namely, the central focus around which its data are organized. As doctrinal theology is distinguished by its doctrinal focus and by its attempt to organize the content of the faith into specific and interrelated doctrines, or as historical theology seeks to interpret the data of revelation and its changing formulations from a historical perspective, moral theology from a moral perspective, and so on, so pastoral theology is distinguished by its pastoral focus, that is, by its function-centred orientation and its organization of the content of faith in relation to the pastoral functions of the church and ministry. Every branch of theology is of course contingent upon and related to every other branch, but each is nonetheless distinguishable by its peculiar focus and principle of organization.

Since the word "pastoral" may be used, and often has been used, to describe *all* the functions that a pastor performs, however, it is necessary to qualify this focus further by adding a third emphasis—"viewed from the 'shepherding' perspective." This subtle but important qualification is one of the major contributions which Seward Hiltner has made to the development of pastoral theology. In his *Preface to Pastoral Theology*¹² he carefully distinguishes between the "shepherding," the "communicating," and the "organizing" perspectives in which the various pastoral functions may be conducted and interpreted. The focus of pastoral theology, he argues, is upon pastoral functions considered in the shepherding perspective. It is not our intention here to elaborate upon the more precise distinctions which Hiltner makes between these perspectives, but it is important to recognize that on the basis of these distinctions a necessary differentiation may be made between the concerns of pastoral theology and those of homiletics, liturgics, Christian education, Church administration, etc., which more properly belongs to the "communicating" and "organizing" perspectives.

The fourth and final emphasis in our definition relates to the dialogical or correlative method of pastoral theology. Theological truths are to be "illuminated in a dialogical relationship with whatever insights may be gained from or related to the actualities of pastoral practice." The method, in other words, must involve a back-and-forth movement between the theoretical

12. The main body of this work is given to an elaboration of the shepherding perspective in contrast to the cognate perspectives of communicating and organizing.

and functional poles—the formulation of a system of theoretical constructs, a translation of these into the terms of pastoral function, a careful examination and testing of the efficacy of the function, and a reformulation of the theoretical system—in an ongoing, never-finished dialogue. The excesses to be avoided at either pole are respectively theological exclusiveness and pastoral pragmatism. Theology must not be pursued with reference only to its own internal criteria, and pastoral techniques must never be divorced from their theological context. At the one pole there must be a theological concern for the ultimate meaning of the Gospel; at the other pole there must be a pastoral concern for the human situation; between both poles there must be a continuing dialogue in which each is illumined by the other.

It is precisely in the study of those insights gained from and related to the actualities of pastoral practice that pastoral psychology (including clinical pastoral training) and the related social sciences have relevance. Here is the attempt to apply psychological insights to pastoral operations and to test these operations with whatever scientific tools are applicable. A pastor who is attempting to reconcile a couple who are considering divorce, for example, may have a perfectly sound theology of marriage and the very best intentions, but may find nonetheless that both his theology and his intentions have been betrayed by his method. What is needed is not simply a reappraisal of his theology or a fortifying of his intentions but a careful examination of his method, in the light of the best insights available from any source, in terms of which he may find new meaning in his theology and a new appreciation of his own intentions. In other words, any dialogue between the theoretical and functional poles within pastoral theology must necessarily involve a dialogue between theology and the behavioural sciences as well. Furthermore, what has hitherto been known as “pastoral psychology” has no legitimate independent status but finds its *raison d'être* only in so far as it is willing to become an aspect of a larger pastoral theology.

Within the pastoral-theological dialogue, moreover, the movement is *always* in *both* directions—a movement which itself depends upon an acceptance of the possibility of correlation. The data of revelation not only provide answers to questions arising from the human situation but may themselves find new meaning from our understanding of the human situation. It is not that the content of the faith is altered by our knowledge of the social sciences, but rather that the *meaning* of this content is illumined by such knowledge. If we are clear that illumination does not mean explanation and that correlation does not mean equation, then we may discover, for example, that the doctrine of redemption is illumined by correlation with our understanding of the psychotherapeutic process, that the paradoxical doctrine of man's responsible bondage to sin is illumined by correlation with our understanding of intrapsychic conflict, that the theological concept of holiness is illumined by correlation with the psychological concept of health, and so on. The possibilities of such correlations within the sphere of pastoral theology appear almost without limit and give exciting

promise of what may be accomplished, both of theoretical and of functional importance, as we are willing to engage in serious dialogue.

These at least are some of the directions which the current reformulation of pastoral theology appears to be taking. Emerging out of the convergence of theology and pastoral psychology, pastoral theology is attempting to reconcile or at least to hold in polar tension its theological and functional concerns, and in doing so is bringing into focus some stimulating possibilities of correlation between theology and the behavioural sciences as each relates to pastoral care. Just how far we have progressed in bringing pastoral theology to this rebirth it is impossible to say with any accuracy. The far-reaching changes in the theological curricula of many seminaries as well as the current increase in the volume of significant literature in the field would seem to indicate that the present stage of embryogeny is well advanced. The early foetal structures which we have here attempted to describe seem already to be formed, and a period of rapid growth is under way. What character the neonate will eventually assume or with what developmental tasks it will be forced to struggle is more difficult to predict. Much will certainly depend upon the climate into which it is born and the nurture it receives. Seminaries which have refused to be seduced by the fad-like character which pastoral psychology too often has assumed, which have refused at the same time to become theologically ingrown, and which are open to the developmental possibilities on this frontier, would seem most likely to provide the climate and the nurture which are needed. Under such conditions we may hopefully expect this child to achieve responsible maturity and pastoral theology to assume once more its proper place within the total theological enterprise.