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A table of contents for *The Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php

Pastoral Psychology of the Primitive Church

by J. Peter Burnyeat

Mr. Burnyeat, a graduate in History and Political Science of the University of British Columbia, who has had considerable journalistic experience, wrote the paper which is summarized in the following pages in connexion with a course in cross-disciplinary studies which he attended at Regent College, Vancouver. When he comes into the post-apostolic period, the reader may observe how the pastoral role in the church came to be bound up with the institution of penance—an institution arising out of concern about post-baptismal sin and not displaced by a more evangelical way until Luther's time.

PASTORAL psychology may be defined as the theory of personal adjustment: pastoral counselling is then seen strictly as advice¹ and this is the meaning given it in the Old Testament. *'Etsah* is a frequently used word there and is to be understood as counsel formed to execute a plan and also as counsel given or received. An illustration of the first type of counsel is Jethro's plan of referral (Exodus 18: 21) which links with Proverbs 11: 14: "where there is no vision the people perish but where there are many counsellors there is safety".

The counsellor-counselee relationship, with its stress on the sacredness of the Law as the guide to action, did not always prevail in Judaism. The moral responsibility of the individual is expressed in Proverbs (20: 27): "the conscience of a man is the lamp of the LORD, searching the innermost chambers of the being". God was the guide of the soul—"Thou shalt guide me with thy counsel" (Psalm 73: 24)—and one of the Wisdom writers affirmed that God "is the guide even of wisdom and the director of the wise" (Wisdom 7: 15). The nature of wisdom was the awareness of the inherent structure of things as they are and this gives a disciplined rather than romantic view of life.

Counsellors were available for consultation and there is weighty advice in Ecclesiasticus (37: 12): "Be continually with a godly man whom thou knowest to keep the commandments of the Lord, whose mind is according to thy mind, and will sorrow with thee if thou shalt miscarry". Some men were disqualified by the Psalmist

¹ "Theory, theology is the first need, but personal guidance also demands personal skill, interpretation . . ." (M. Thornton, *English Spirituality*, SPCK, London, 1963, p. 28).

from giving advice in self-interest or prejudice. Counsel could then be broken up: "The LORD bringeth counsel . . . to nought; he maketh people of none effect" (Psalm 33: 10). Ezekiel spoke of it another way when he said there were foolish prophets—men who had seen nothing in following their own spirit.² Yet, later, there were men competent to exhort groups and make congregations aware of right relationships.³ The Christian idea of the nature of mind was similar to the Jewish concept of wisdom in its lack of romanticism, as when Paul undertook counselling for crisis intervention: "Be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind . . . Be of the same mind one toward another . . . I would not . . . that ye should be ignorant . . . lest ye should be wise in your own conceits . . . blindness in part is happened to Israel . . . as concerning the gospel they are enemies for your sakes . . . (but) through your mercy they may also obtain mercy . . ." (Romans 12: 2, 16; 11: 25, 28, 31). "In the primitive church", we are told, "people were keenly aware of their relationships to others . . . the liturgy . . . followed the settling of differences . . . This was no ceremonial action".⁴

There might indeed have been neglect of the obligations involved through man's social nature. In cases of private conflict and injury there remained opportunity as in Matthew 18: 15, of repentance and reconciliation without official action. Undoubtedly a continual play of mutual exhortation helped keep individuals morally alert (1 Thess. 5: 11; Romans 14: 19; James 5: 16) but expanding numbers made problems of discipline more complicated (Revelation 2 and 3). Of seven churches to whom letters of admonition are sent, five are urgently required to "repent" of some grave lapse into carelessness or some scandalous offence that has gone unchecked. The *Didache* later (circulated around A.D. 150) said: "At the church meeting you must confess your sins and . . . not approach . . . prayer with a bad conscience . . . on the Lord's day . . . give thanks first confessing your sins . . ."⁵

Settling of differences was in fact a counter impulse leading toward *metanoia*—change of mind—for it was recognized as psychosomatic impulse when a man "flattereth himself in his own

² Ezekiel 13: 3. In his time Eusebius spoke of them thus: "the false prophet begins with voluntary ignorance (and) ends with involuntary madness of soul . . ." (J. Stevenson, ed., *A New Eusebius*, SPCK, London, 1968, p. 112).

³ Care of individual souls was not unstressed. The prophetic inspiration of Ignatius shines in a letter: "It was the spirit that kept preaching . . . keep your flesh as a shrine of God" (J. Stevenson, *op. cit.*, pp. 47, 48).

⁴ K. Terry, *The Eucharist Is An Action: Its Meaning and Implications* (Holy Cross Publications, West Park N.Y., 1965), pp. 26, 12.

⁵ C. C. Richardson, ed., *Early Christian Fathers* (Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1953), pp. 173, 178. See also K. Lake, trans., *The Apostolic Fathers* (The Macmillan Co, New York, 1914), volume 1, pp. 317, 331.

eyes, until his iniquity be found to be hateful" (Psalm 36: 2). Hermas in one passage has the Angel of Repentance say: "Go and tell all men to repent, and they shall live to God".⁶ The attitude that should be sought was that "The good man must be true to his work . . ." ⁷ Once *metanoia* had been reached there was the joyful antiphon "Rejoice the soul of thy servant: for unto thee, O Lord, do I lift up my soul" (Psalm 86: 4). Liturgy had become thanksgiving for the "wine that maketh glad the heart of man . . . and bread which strengtheneth man's heart" (Psalm 104: 15), called by Origen "living bread . . . for the mind and . . . soul".⁸

Such Old Testament and New Testament attitudes are spoken of by Tertullian in *De Anima* as ". . . simple as true, commonplace as simple, universal as commonplace, natural as universal, divine as natural . . . everything has come from God: . . . what the soul may know . . . thou canst judge from that which is within thee".⁹ The apologist referred also to Saint Matthew (12: 30, 33 and 15: 16-20). God-consciousness was derived through the Son and a sense of responsibility was arrived at by means of the Holy Spirit. There is a maturity of soul as well as of the body.¹⁰ "Flesh", said Tertullian, "is blamed in Scriptures because nothing is done by soul without the flesh . . ." ¹¹ As Eusebius said, "the soul is spread through all the members of the body".¹² Origen referred to the somatic and pneumatic evidences of physical and spiritual sense-perceptors with special reference to the latter in both Old and New Testament.¹³

Tertullian connects the apostolic description of charity in 1 Corinthians 13 with patience as he refers to Gospels and Epistles.¹⁴ Christ's patience introduced faith; hope is what men's patience waits for; and charity is accompanied by patience with God as master. In the last event patience can be seen as long-suffering¹⁵

⁶ J. T. McNeill, *A History of the Cure of Souls* (SCM Press, London, 1952), pp. 90. See Origen: "Resolve to learn that in you is the capacity to be transformed" (H. Chadwick and J. E. L. Oulton, *Alexandrian Christianity*, Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1954, p. 446).

⁷ J. Stevenson, *op. cit.*, p. 200.

⁸ H. Chadwick and J. E. L. Oulton, *op. cit.*, 299. See also John 6: 51.

⁹ A. Roberts and J. Donaldson, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Buffalo, N.Y., 1887), volume 3, p. 178.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 218.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 220.

¹² J. Stevenson, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

¹³ "Incorporeal things are given the same name as all the corporeal things" (H. Chadwick and J. E. L. Oulton, *op. cit.*, p. 445). See Psalm 34: 8; Jeremiah 5: 21; Genesis 8: 21; Matthew 13: 13; Philipians 4: 18; Matthew 5: 8; Acts 17: 27.

¹⁴ A. Roberts and J. Donaldson, *op. cit.*, p. 715. Also see Matthew 5: 23-25; Luke 6: 37; Ephesians 4: 26.

¹⁵ Acts 27: 22, 25, 36.

while the power of patience is revealed on other occasions.¹⁶ Educative counselling Tertullian knew as giving advice and listening with guidance as the function of pastoral care. He would have recognized the historical expression of confrontational counselling as disciplining, so at least two seminal ideas help to shape Tertullian's work: concepts of unconscious motivation that occasionally surface¹⁷ and insight as the central goal of counselling.

For such insight Tertullian is indebted to Ben Sirach who in a remarkable passage (Ecclesiasticus 38: 1, 15) praises the devout physician. Ben Sirach urges the sick man after prayer, repentance, and offering,¹⁸ to "give place to the physician, for the Lord has created him. Let him not go from thee, for thou hast need of him . . . For they shall also pray unto the Lord that he would also prosper that which they give for ease and remedy to prolong life". Paul had occasion to remember Ben Sirach's counsel when he wrote from Rome to Timothy, "Only Luke is with me" (2 Timothy 4: 11). There is Paul's own statement that his bodily presence is weak¹⁹ to account for a feeling of temporary discouragement at a time he would have liked to have been more active. The apostle would have blessed Luke's efforts in his gospel material, some of which tradition states could only have come from Mary herself²⁰, material which would have made its impression at Iconium.²¹ Luke was a doctor but he was also an evangelist; he would recognize the relevance of the statement: "Learn theories as well as you can, but put them aside when you touch the miracle of the living soul. Not theories . . . but creative individuality alone must decide".²²

The tree of the pastoral psychology of the Primitive Church, then, is grounded in the soil of emphasis of Christian life which is not moral legalism but liturgy from which flows personal devotion and also in the Judaic and Christian traditions. Justin Martyr said to Trypho: "If . . . they who are of your race say they believe on this Christ of ours, and . . . follow their advice, and live under the law as well as well as keep their profession in . . . Christ, they will, I suppose, be saved".²³ Justin probably thought Trypho would accept the Christian version of a Day of Atonement. Both men could pray: "As to sins . . . committed purge them away in Thine abounding compassion . . . deliver me from mishap, from . . . evil

¹⁶ Acts 7: 59-60; Job, Chapters 1 and 2.

¹⁷ See note 9 above.

¹⁸ A. Cohen, *Everyman's Talmud* (E. P. Dutton and Co Inc., New York, 1961), p. 108. Also see notes 6 and 7.

¹⁹ 2 Corinthians 10: 10; Galatians 4: 13; Acts 20: 18-20; 2 Corinthians 1: 8, 11.

²⁰ See Luke, Chapters 1 and 2.

²¹ G. Parrish, *Dear Saint Paul* (Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1966), p. 32.

²² C. Jung, *Psychological Reflections* (Pantheon Books, New York, 1953), p. 73.

²³ J. Stevenson, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

impulse".²⁴ Other men after Trypho would have been familiar with Origen's homily on Psalm 37. There Origen suggests following the counsel of one "who knows the discipline of compassion and sympathy, . . . a learned and merciful physician".²⁵

Such men would have been clergy and the healing, and therefore growth, Origen implies could equally have been from reconciliation (as has been seen in the *Didache*²⁶) as it could have been from remedy, as stressed by Origen: "if you take heed to yourselves and receive the word that rids you perfectly of every kind of mishap, you may . . . , having come to hate (what) you (desired), be able to retrace the path . . . you once despised . . ." ²⁷ "Yes", says Tertullian "the soul . . . , when it recovers its senses, . . . as after some illness, . . . recovers its proper health, . . . and . . . turns its gaze . . . to heaven".²⁸ While Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian's contemporary, wrote: "We must not endure . . . things that are evil but . . . reserve endurance . . .".²⁹

The traditional practice of reconciliation was successfully defended by Cyprian against rigorism at Rome. In a letter to Bishop Antonianus he says: "nobody can be constrained . . . to repentance if the fruit of penance be taken away . . . we certainly think no one is to be restrained from the fruit of satisfaction and the hope of peace".³⁰ It would be mockery and deception of poor brethren to exhort them to the act of atonement and take away its logical outcome, the healing, to say to them: "Whatsoever things are necessary to peace you shall do but none of that peace which you seek shall you receive."³¹

Cyprian could speak freely because of the popularity of Hippolytus of Rome's *Apostolic Tradition*. This positively recognizes the Church's authority to absolve from sin after penance.³² Like Ben Sirach, Cyprian says public penance comprises three distinct acts: confession, satisfaction according to the gravity of the sin, and reconciliation after penance.³³ Although according to Cyprian the subjective personal element of doing penance effects the forgiveness of sins, the objective ecclesiastical component of reconciliation is the pledge of life because it presupposes the divine pardon.³⁴

²⁴ A. Cohen, *op. cit.*, p. 86.

²⁵ J. T. McNeill, *op. cit.*, p. 95.

²⁶ See note 5 above.

²⁷ H. Chadwick and J. E. L. Oulton, *op. cit.*, p. 317.

²⁸ J. Stevenson, *op. cit.*, pp. 170, 171.

²⁹ H. Chadwick and J. E. L. Oulton, *op. cit.*, p. 103.

³⁰ J. Quasten, *Patrology* (The Newman Press, Westminster Md., 1953), volume 2, p. 380.

³¹ *Loc. cit.*

³² *Ibid.*, 206.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 381.

³⁴ *Loc. cit.*

Cyprian stresses the healing power and sacramental character of the act of reconciliation more than all his predecessors. He seems to echo Clement of Alexandria's work *On Spiritual Perfection*: "the foundation of insight . . . lies in having no doubt about God, but trusting him implicitly . . . Knowledge therefore is swift to purify, and suitable for welcome change".³⁵

Such knowledge Cyprian would not hold back from his people "for the knowledge of insight is . . . a kind of perfection of man as man, harmonious and consistent with itself . . ." ³⁶ Man has the potentiality of restoration to health or wholeness. He has been established in a right relationship with himself and with others.³⁷ He can be brought to accept this fact. Indeed, the Church rightly seeks to identify itself with the whole life of the world and to serve it—instead of remaining aloof or apart. The true Church refuses to respond to the admonition to come out of the accursed city and be a community as separate as possible from the world.³⁸

When Tertullian said, ". . . what the soul may know thou canst judge from that which is within thee",³⁹ he anticipated Augustine of Hippo who stated that self-knowledge was the starting point of all knowledge. Augustine was a devoted bishop who believed a sufferer should understand himself and correct his behaviour. In *De Civitate Dei* the metaphor he uses to express what life would be like without inner turmoil is that of a city of God ruled by truly religious men whose souls are free of all destructive impulses. Its appearance as a community supposes change in inner values, that is, alteration to implicit conceptions that are "characteristic of a group, of that which is desirable, which influences . . . selection from available modes, means and ends of action".⁴⁰ We can understand this of Augustine's Hippo because the influence of values in Christian social life was an interactive effect between commitment and episcopal authority and because Augustine's sincere concern makes *De Civitate Dei* so pertinent.

Just as Augustine has a connection with the Primitive Church through Tertullian, he also connects with it through Paul, for Augustine was also able to correlate 'wisdom' and 'mind' through his pastoral office. His concept of 'value' was linked through the

35 H. Chadwick and J. E. L. Oulton, *op. cit.*, pp. 128, 129.

36 *Ibid.*, page 128.

37 W. N. Pittenger, *The Christian Understanding of Human Nature* (The Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1964), pp. 106-125.

38 A. R. Vidler, *Essays in Liberty* (SCM Press, London, 1957), p. 106, quoted by N. A. Scott in *Conflicting Images of Man*, ed., W. Nicholls, (Seabury Press, New York, 1966), p. 28.

39 See note 9 above.

40 T. Parsons and E. Shils, eds., *Towards A General Theory of Action* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., reprint, 1962), p. 395.

psychology of perception. Paul's statement, "he that searcheth hearts . . . knoweth what is the mind of the Spirit because he maketh intercession for the saints according to the will of God" (Romans 8: 27), would have been familiar. How else should membership in the Christian community at Hippo be relevant to its purpose and activities unless institutionalization of values occurs when commitment and authority exert continuous pressure in favour of purpose and activity? Augustine was constructing social theory when he wrote *De Civitate Dei*⁴¹ and encouraging commitment when he wrote on discipline. Augustine was convinced men needed firm handling. His attitude is summed up in the word *disciplina*: an essentially active process of corrective punishment, a softening up process, a teaching by inconveniences. His average man was a frail creature in need of "authority".⁴² Emotions that affect Christians are inducements to virtue: they are *eupathiae*—rational states—and *constantiae*—stable emotions. Mental disturbances in the lives of the good are turned into right feelings.⁴³

The community visualized by Augustine was a psychic or moral one, where the sense of membership rests on a spiritual bond involving values and belief. Such a community would be relevant to a social order and valid as a system coordinating behaviour of its carrying society, the secular state.⁴⁴ A problem from contiguity, such as penance or discipline, would rest in a larger scale society than that of Origen because of the ordering of relationships among constituent groups. Augustine's visualized disciplined community was latent and active at the same time with a potential for common action and with a membership interacting regularly and intensively for the pursuit of wholeness which will be completed only in heaven. The complete teaching on penance, discipline, and ecclesiology was to become more systematic in the Middle Ages with the *Summa Theologica* of Thomas Aquinas and the work of Alexander of Hales, Raymond of Penafort, Bonaventura, Albertus Magnus and Aquinas on the *summae confessorum* with their definitions of the parts of penance: attrition, contrition, confession, and satisfaction.

Vancouver, B.C.

⁴¹ Religion has important social functions. Casual force of membership is usually conceived of as exposure to the group culture or embedding in a set of social relations with people who reward attachment to group values. The relation between institutions and the preservation of historical patterns can be seen in religious patterns. A Stinchcombe, *Constructing Social Theories* (Harcourt Brace and World, New York, 1968), pp. 105, 205, 108.

⁴² P. Brown, *Augustine of Hippo* (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1967), pp. 236-237.

⁴³ Saint Augustine, *City of God*, trans., J. W. C. Wand (Oxford University Press, New York, 1963), IX: 5-p. 150; XIV: 8, 9-p. 227.

⁴⁴ G. Combès, *La Doctrine Politique de Saint Augustin* (Librairie Plon, Paris, 1928), p. 301.