

The Pastoral Nature of Theology

*An Upholding
Presence*



R. JOHN ELFORD

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Contents

Acknowledgements	vii
Preface	ix
1 The pastoral nature of theology	1
2 Modern human identity	20
3 A cloud of witnesses	46
4 Past and present	80
5 Individual care	105
6 Social care	126
7 Morality and care	145
8 Conclusion	172
Name index	175
Subject index	177

For my wife Anne

Acknowledgements

The dedication of this book to my wife Anne is a small but sincere appreciation for her long support of my ministry and academic work and, in particular, for accepting the demands on my time both have made over the years.

The exercise of a Christian pastoral ministry is one of life's great privileges. It has given me a profound experience of the ordinary ways in which we all encounter the joys, frustrations and sorrows of the human lot. In all this, I value beyond measure the blessings and inspiration I have received from others whilst, ostensibly, ministering to them.

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Liverpool Hope University College
Easter 1999

Preface

In his poem 'Ten types of hospital visitor', the Cornish poet Charles Causley casts an all seeing eye over the identity and behaviour of hospital visitors.¹ The poem shows Causley's remarkable poetic ability to illuminate the commonplace. It is, moreover, an eye which is particularly observant of the pastoral needs and sensitivities of the hospital patient. Only one of the visitors comes close to meeting these; the sixth.

The sixth visitor says little,
Breathes reassurance,
Smiles securely.
Carries no black passport of grapes
And visa of chocolate. Has a clutch
Of clean washing.

Unobtrusively stows it
In the locker; searches out more.
Talks quietly to the Sister
Out of sight, out of earshot, of the patient.
Arrives punctually as a tide.
Does not stay the whole hour.

Even when she has gone
The patient seems to sense her there:
An upholding
Presence.

Of the remaining nine visitors one is chillingly never mentioned. Causley's writing of the sixth visitor provides us with a beautiful and eloquently

concise introduction to the theme of this book. It shows how downright ordinary and practical the really effective care of one person for another often needs to be; an upholding presence. It exposes the pretentiousness, the awkwardness, and the mistaken well-meaningness of so many of the alternatives. Like poetry at its best, once read, this changes one's perceptions forever, and perhaps not only of hospital visiting.

This book explores the way in which the historical and cultural setting of theology has a seminal influence on its nature. More specifically, this will show that the setting is invariably a 'pastoral' one, in the minimal sense of ordinary care for people, as illustrated by Charles Causley. We will see how theology always has and still does arise *out* of pastoral concern. In doing so, we will challenge all those writers on the subject who presume that the reverse is the case; that pastoral care arises out of theology. This, as we shall see mistaken, view has led to the widespread further assumption that pastoral theology is 'applied' theology. Perhaps such a simple mistake has an equally simple provenance. Most writers on pastoral theology and pastoral ministers come to pastoral concerns when they are confronted by them *after* they have studied theology formally. This was certainly my own experience. Soon after I began formal theological study, at pre-theological college and then at a theological college and universities, I came to believe that it was necessary, in the first instance, to focus on what we might call the *ultimate* questions of theology in the expectation that once these became clearer all else would fall into place. Naturally, such questions were about the possibility and manner of God's existence, his relationship to the world and about the nature and purpose of such knowledge as we could have of those things, in the light of the best available philosophical framework one could find. More specifically, my interest was focused on what it meant to say that such knowledge as we could have of these ultimate things was either true or false. After enjoyable and immensely rewarding years of such theological study, the everyday work of ministry properly intruded and this brought with it other concerns which became a new focus of continued theological interest. It was this, in turn, which became the source of a radical rethink about the relationship of pastoral care to theology. This book is one result of that.

To start with, the great debates about the ultimate questions of theology and philosophy seemed remote from and had apparently little to do with the everyday concerns of ordinary folk. The sick and the bereaved, the men's group and the youth group knew nothing of Kant's strictures against the use of 'existence' as a predicate and, even if I had been foolish enough to point

them out to them, they would have cared even less! Here was a different world from the one I briefly had the privilege of studying. The ultimate questions of theology seemed remote from it, important though they were to remain in the background. Life now was concerned with the *penultimate*, with thinking and praying about the joys and sorrows, the sufferings and confusions and often the sheer stupidities of the common lot which are so much a feature of all our lives. Far from being complete, theological enquiries had to begin all over again by paying attention to much more earthy stuff. In circumstances which were to be heightened by his own later tribulations and tragic death to which they led, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote similarly of the relationship of the penultimate and the ultimate theological agendas.

let us ask why it is that precisely in thoroughly grave situations, for instance when I am with someone who has suffered a bereavement, I often decide to adopt a 'penultimate' attitude, particularly when I am dealing with Christians, remaining silent as a sign that I share in the bereaved man's helplessness in the face of such a grievous event, and not speaking of the biblical words of comfort which are, in fact, known to me and available to me.²

The penultimate here, as Bonhoeffer explained, 'embraces the whole domain of Christian social life, and especially the whole range of Christian pastoral activity'.³ Those with any sensitivity to the everyday needs of the human spirit will understand this well. The sheer extent and complexity of those needs, as those in ministry among others are privileged to know, are awesome. Any theology which turns from the ultimate to the penultimate (so understood) to address them has much to do. So much that the task can never be completed.

In the years which followed, all the issues encountered in the everyday work of ministry had one thing in common. A thing which was so obvious and commonplace that it scarcely seemed worthy of attention. That was that the real and pressing, the *penultimate*, questions were all about human well-being both individually and collectively. Unlike ultimate questions, these were ones which arose out of the actual circumstances of people's lives, lives for which as a pastor one had some responsibility to greater or lesser degree. These questions had to be handled differently. They required a total commitment not only of one's intellectual life, but more importantly of one's practical concerns, spirituality and prayer. Here were questions which

had to be lived and wrestled with. They were too many, even in parishes in a remote united country benefice, for one person, or even a team of clergy, to cope with. New ways had to be found of facing and trying to answer them.⁴ Enough of the personal detail, but necessarily enough to illustrate why what follows is like it is, for better or worse.

What sort of questions were these? Could they be categorized? As we have seen, they were all questions about human welfare. Could it, then, be that they were *ethical* questions? Ethical dilemmas were certainly common among them, in the clear sense that they were so often preoccupied with what people should or should not do. But there was more to it than that. These were different questions about what people felt, whether they cried or not, and about how they related to each other, often in the most personal of circumstances. For the spiritually inclined they were also, for these reasons, questions about how they prayed. Ethical questions were partly what they were about, but that was all. There was more to them. The only category which could embrace them all was ‘the pastoral’. They had to do with *care* in every sense. The care of people for each other, in great things and in small, collectively as well as individually. Little wonder then that, in the Christian tradition, the phrase ‘the cure of souls’ has been used persistently to describe this by writers from many different traditions. The definition, or rather the relocation, of the pastoral in the Christian tradition is, therefore, what this book is about. As we shall see, ethical questions permeate pastoral ones but, as such, they are better understood as a sub-set of something wider – the pastoral itself. More radically, as we shall see, the pastoral is not only embracing of the ethical, it is embracing of all theology in the Judaeo-Christian tradition. Only, we shall argue, when it is seen as such can it be understood for what it profoundly is in that tradition, and only then can the other riches of that tradition be put in their proper context. All this will challenge widespread assumptions that the pastoral is something at the periphery of that tradition, or something which only concerns its ‘application’. Chapter 1 will explain why this is the case.

Before we turn to that, however, there is an important caution to be noted by way of introduction. It will have to be referred to throughout, but it is so important that it is deserving of mention here. It concerns the obviously *interdisciplinary* nature of pastoral theology and care. Pastoral issues and problems are so diverse in their content and wide-reaching in their consequences that they of necessity straddle the distinctions between discrete academic disciplines. There might have been a time in the not too distant past when this was thought, by some, to be reason enough to consider any

form of pastoral studies, as such, to be beyond the pale of academic respectability. This was because such studies apparently lacked any foundation in a discipline of their own and were, as a consequence, parasitic on other specialisms. To the contrary, we shall see that Christian pastoral studies do have such a discipline of their own; the Judaeo-Christian tradition itself. But, as we shall see repeatedly, they are also wide ranging in their incursions into and dependence on other disciplines. For these reasons it is timely to recall a few simple guidelines about interdisciplinary studies.

First, we might remember that all interdisciplinary study should have a proper respect for disciplines *qua* disciplines. From the fact that disciplines necessarily have their limitations it does not at all follow that they do not have their valuable purposes. On the contrary, they are the areas where knowledge is identified, accumulated by research and from where it is disseminated. To achieve all this they can only be staffed by specialists who primarily at least are the only people with the ability, time and importantly the necessary political organization to maintain, defend and obtain funding for what they do. Whether we like it or not, and there are plausible reasons for not doing so, specialisms are here and here to stay. As knowledge increases, they are proliferating, and can be expected to continue doing so. Those outside them must respect and value them, live with them, and continually learn how to benefit from them. Specialists, reciprocally, need to be mindful of their obligations to others and, in particular, of how they can help non-specialists to benefit from their knowledge.

All this requires, further, that we should not shun specialisms out of fear that we will not be able to understand them or show ourselves to be foolish if we approach them. The mainstream specialisms which appropriate pastoral study and care which we shall later consider, do not belong entirely to discrete areas of esoteric discourse which can only be understood from within. A few years ago, largely under the widespread influence of the later philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein, it was argued that the whole world of discourse was made up of discrete 'language games' which were proper to and only found meaning in their own terms of reference.⁵ Such a philosophy of language was a convenient bulwark from which to defend the world of closed specialisms. Such a philosophy has long since come under attack.⁶ As a result, there is now a widespread recognition that, notwithstanding the need for the use of technical languages where they are necessary in their own sphere, they ultimately belong to a wider world of discourse.

Even these few introductory considerations about the nature of interdisciplinary studies serve as timely reminders of the issues at stake. As we

stray of necessity into areas which are apart from theology proper, we may do so with more or less accuracy and, accordingly, need more or less specialist help as we do. The awareness of that, alone, will encourage us to treat such specialisms and especially specialists with respect. Indeed, discussion in these areas can be especially enjoyable and rewarding as specialists learn from, and with luck growingly respect, each other. This is invariably what does happen in the proliferating facilities for interdisciplinary study which are now a common feature in universities and elsewhere which were once considered to be the bastions of discrete specialisms. More and more publications now come from interdisciplinary activities and invariably command widespread respect because they do so.

So, in summary, this book will show how central the 'pastoral' is to all biblical and traditional theology. It will also show how all-embracing the concept of the pastoral needs to be. The resulting wide-ranging interdisciplinary references might well make specialists in particular disciplines occasionally wince at oversimplifications, but they are frequently unavoidable and must be tackled in the light of the foregoing brief considerations on the nature of interdisciplinary studies.

If we understand in this way even a little of the centrality of the pastoral in the Bible and Christian tradition, we will be better placed to understand its significance in the present, more able to anticipate its demands and thereby contribute creatively to its understanding in an ongoing tradition.

Notes

- 1 Causley, Charles (1997) *Collected Poems*, pp. 232–7. London: Macmillan.
- 2 Bonhoeffer, Dietrich (1955) *The Cost of Discipleship*, p. 103. London: SCM.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 104.
- 4 Elford, R. John (1981) 'The care of all for the souls of all'. *Expository Times* vol. 92, no. 11, pp. 333–6.
- 5 Wittgenstein, L. (1968) *Philosophical Investigations*, paragraph 43. Oxford: Blackwell.
- 6 Trigg, Roger (1973) *Reason and Commitment*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

The pastoral nature of theology

The pastoral

Pastoral actions, like moral ones, are expressions of human nature which arise spontaneously out of the genuine concerns people have for the well-being of others individually and collectively. In the eighteenth century the philosopher Thomas Hobbes famously challenged this view and claimed generally that our interest in the welfare of others is secondary to our interest in our own. Bishop Butler replied by saying that there was ‘a superior principle of reflection or conscience in every man²¹ which, he argued, restrained people from doing evil and “led” them to do good. This more optimistic view of human nature and of its innate disposition to do good enables us to recognize what we may call a ‘pastoral disposition’ which is possessed by all normal human beings. This, however, need not cause us to overlook the fact that they are also capable of immense brutality towards each other. But no such brutality can totally obscure the tenderness with which human beings relate to and care for each other, often to the point of neglecting their own well-being. This book is about the understanding of such pastoral acts in the Bible, Christian tradition and contemporary Christian life.

My task in this chapter is to introduce the main themes of the book. We will start with a consideration of the precise meaning of the word ‘pastoral’. Sensitive to its many and various meanings, I propose to leave it as open as

possible by linking the concept to 'care' in the widest sense. We will then consider the nature of 'pastoral theology' and note its historic links with practical theology. The chapter will then examine the distinction between 'pure' and 'applied' concepts. I shall then show that it is both historically and conceptually confused to imagine that we can disentangle theology from its social setting. This insight, which is drawn from liberation theology, is then briefly illustrated with reference to biblical theology and three major developments in Western theology.

The precise definition of the term 'pastoral' is open to considerable debate. Some, for example, claim simply that 'Pastoral care is that aspect of the ministry of the Church which is concerned with the well-being of individuals and communities.'² Another definition which has been widely adopted by contemporary writers on the subject is that of Clebsch and Jaekle in *Pastoral Care in Historical Perspective*. According to them pastoral care is 'directed towards the healing, sustaining, guiding, and reconciling of troubled persons whose troubles arise in the context of ultimate meanings and concerns'.³ An excellent critical survey of the meaning of the term in contemporary pastoral writing can be found in Stephen Pattison's *A Critique of Pastoral Care*. His own preference is to leave the term as a vague portmanteau concept.⁴ More recently, Wesley Carr observes that the word 'pastoral' is a word against which little can be said and which should sound warning bells because of its often pejorative use.⁵ It has also been recently observed that the term has suffered from an over emphasis on the narrow meaning of the term for individuals.⁶ Elaine Graham is clear about the fact that pastoral theology is not applied theology. She claims, rather, that 'faithful Christian practice can only be effective and relevant if it takes seriously the challenges of the contemporary world'.⁷ The proper focus of pastoral theology, she continues, 'is not the pastoral agent, or theological ethics, or applied theology, but the pastoral *practice* of the faith-community itself'.⁸ In some sympathy with this it will be argued below that pastoral theology is certainly not 'applied theology', but we will seek its essence less in what is done in any specific act of care, and more in the theological creativity which sustains and directs it. Paul Ballard and John Pritchard do see a connection between the pastoral, or what they call the practical, and theology but acknowledge that its form as an academic theological discipline is still emerging.⁹

Clearly, then, there is widespread difference of opinion about the precise meaning of the term 'pastoral'. In addition, and by way of introduction, it is important to note the importance of the distinction between the sponta-

neous and ordinary exercise of pastoral care by the unlearned and that conducted by those who have received some form of appropriate training for it. It is equally important to understand the relationship between the two.

A death occurs. The bereaved are grief-stricken to silence. A pastorally qualified minister arrives who is fully conversant with the literature on grief analysis and on how to apply it to actual situations.¹⁰ The pastor notices some beautifully and simply arranged wild flowers. They are so fresh that they must have been picked since the death occurred and brought by someone, since the bereaved had not left the house. The flowers are the centre of attention, a real expression of a neighbour's care, possibly more effective than the words in such circumstances which are invariably so difficult. Such simple actions may need to be followed by other things, but nothing can obscure or deny their importance. This is why a great deal of the literature of pastoral studies has been a literature about how to do things. This will always remain an important aspect of pastoral studies. Paying minute attention to the practical detail of simple actions is always necessary if the cared-for are to receive the best of attention.

These introductory remarks serve to remind us at the outset that the 'pastoral' is, at the very least, something of a 'catch all' for a wide range of important human activity. Without wanting to attempt a final definition, I propose, for the purpose of this book, that the 'pastoral' should be linked to care, a care that expresses itself both individually and/or corporately.

Pastoral theology is, then, the study of the nature and purpose of pastoral attitudes and actions under God. It seeks: to identify such actions; to show what it means to call them pastoral; and to explore the theological resources upon which this meaning draws. It asks whether or not there are pastoral attitudes and actions, or aspects of them, which can be described as Christian. An important part of this study, as we shall see throughout, is the examination of ways in which contemporary pastoral attitudes and actions draw on older Christian thought and practice. This is now necessary because secular pastoral insight has become so generally advanced in the twentieth century that some think it supplants all that has gone before. Making this point in an important article, Tom Oden claimed that Christian pastoral care had 'lost its identity'. He writes,

A major effort is needed today to rediscover and re-mine the classical models of Christian pastoral care, and to bring back into availability

the key texts following about fifty years of neglect, a neglect the depths of which are arguably unprecedented in any Christian century.¹¹

We will examine this claim in Chapter 3 and see that there is much to commend it. In Chapter 2 we will consider why pastoral theology raises fundamental questions about our views of human nature.

Another issue which makes pastoral theology, like the pastoral itself, also difficult to define concerns the range of subjects it has to address. This is the reason why pastoral theology is sometimes looked upon with suspicion by specialists in other disciplines. This charge of 'generalism' is a very real one, and the suspicion that there is some truth in it has done much to impede the establishment of pastoral theology as an academic discipline alongside others.

We have already considered what it means to say that pastoral theology, like some other areas of study, may be described as *interdisciplinary*. Such studies are now proliferating in reaction to the increasing specialization of much advanced contemporary study. Specialisms are necessary and with the inexorable increase in human knowledge they will remain so. But they create many obstacles. Language is just one of them. The more specialized a study becomes, the more necessary it invariably is for it to develop its own technical language.

Difficulties such as these are now widely recognized, with the result that many believe that the advancement of their own specialisms will increasingly depend upon an ability to engage with those of others. Actual problems, after all, are seldom so obliging as to organize themselves into specialisms! In this context, 'pastoral theology' may find a more congenial academic atmosphere in which to establish its credentials than it has formerly done. Important new opportunities will begin to emerge and it will be less imperative to ask what pastoral theology is, in the expectation that a definition could be found which would make it a specialism among others. We are likely to make more progress with our understanding of pastoral theology by not seeking such a definition at all beyond the general one given above and concentrate, rather, on exploring this through a broader and interdisciplinary account of its nature.

Pastoral theology and traditional theology

Pastoral theology, in its modern form, is a comparatively new arrival in British universities, although 'practical theology' as it is called in Scottish

universities has a much older pedigree and in the United States much of it is found in writings on psychological and social issues. In Britain, at least, pastoral theologians find themselves working alongside colleagues in the longer established theological disciplines such as biblical studies, ecclesiastical history, doctrine, the philosophy of religion, comparative religion, languages and so on. In some places, at the Universities of Manchester and Edinburgh, for example, pastoral theology is twinned with the study of Christian ethics and some members of staff have been expected to research and teach both subjects.¹² In the light of all this, an obvious way of describing pastoral theology is to say that it is 'applied' theology, in the sense that some sciences, for example, physics and mathematics, exist in 'pure' and 'applied' forms. There are some attractions to such a view. The so-called 'applied' disciplines do not threaten the integrity of their 'pure' antecedents. Moreover, the precedence of the 'pure' disciplines suits an arrangement in which their application is a subsequent and separable enterprise. The use of this pure/applied distinction to explain the relationship of theology to pastoral theology often lies behind the view that it is not possible to undertake the formal study of pastoral theology without first obtaining some grounding in more traditional theological studies, making it, therefore, more suited to postgraduate levels of study.

There may, furthermore, be evidence that the pure/applied distinction in Christian theology is to be found in Christian tradition itself. It is possible to identify in a number of places in the New Testament, for example, separable emphases on the proclamation of the gospel on the one hand and on the working out of its pastoral and practical implications on the other. The writings of St Paul contain numerous examples of this. In the epistle to the Romans, for example, a clear division occurs between the exposition of the gospel in chapters 1–12 and the consideration of its implications throughout the remainder of the epistle. Paul can, indeed, be seen as a preacher *and* a pastor, and one, moreover, who studies pastoral problems in detail by giving them his specific and often sustained attention. We will consider more fully the significance of the writings of St Paul for pastoral theology in Chapter 3.

These and other reasons for supposing pastoral theology to be 'applied' theology make the suggestion so attractive that it might seem possible to proceed without further ado. To do so would, however, be seriously mistaken. To understand why, we first need to consider an important feature of Christian theology.

The view that Christian theology cannot exist in a 'pure' form as though