Ministers and theologians occasionally criticize each other. It is not uncommon to hear theologians lament the lack of theological depth found in church leaders. Pressed by immediate concerns and unable to devote meaningful time to study in order to run bureaucratic organizations, pastors often fail to engage meaningfully the theological questions before them.

Ministers also have their frustrations with theologians. The theologian seems to sit, if not in an ivory tower, then at least in a quiet, isolated office. The theologian's concern is with books and academia and philosophical issues that, to the minister, seem far removed from the urgencies of human lives and local churches. These criticisms, in themselves, illustrate the sharp divisions that at times exist between practical and theoretical disciplines of theology.

While understandable, these criticisms are unfortunate. Theology can both benefit from and contribute to the practical work of the parish minister. The question might be asked, What is the relationship of theology to pastoral care? But it might be better put this way: How can one exist without the other?

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The term “pastoral care” refers to the practical art of representatives of the Christian church who offer caring ministry to persons in distress. That distress may be spiritual, relational, emotional, or situational. Pastoral care is an interdisciplinary interface between theology and human lives. While theology is only part of that interface (psychology being another), it is an important part. Howard Stone observed that theology is the template that a minister uses as an automatic framework, much as medicine is the template for the doctor.¹

Theology, of course, is understood here in a simple sense as the reflective discipline in which persons seek to think consistently and faithfully about God and the faith. Theology is rational and reflective thinking. Theology is not the faith, but it is reflection on the faith. Individuals can have a wonderful faith without having a well-developed theology. On the other hand, one can have a well-developed theology without necessarily having a mature faith.

At first glance, the work of ministry seems practical and simple. However, even the simplest act of caring can be a complex experience that requires theological work in order to understand the issues and respond properly. Theology is important in a number of ways to the practical work of the church.

Furthermore, those who minister inevitably bring a theological perspective to bear on their pastoral experiences. It may be a naive one or a well-considered one. It may be inconsistent or consistent. The point is that theologizing in the midst of real experience ought to be intentional rather than happenstance. Theology has a role to play and a contribution to make.

Three rather obvious points will serve as guides to thinking more clearly about how theology can play a constructive role in pastoral care. Because ministry arises out of personal theology to meet practical concerns, theology provides a place of intersection between the grace of the gospel and daily life.

One’s Personal Theology Influences Pastoral Care Situations

The first and most obvious truth about theology is that it is personal. A personal theology is one that each minister brings to pastoral care situations. It affects ethical reflections, decisions, and responses.

On the other hand, unless one is completely disconnected from the church, personal theology is not original. One’s theological stance is part of and connected to a larger tradition. Therefore, what makes pastoral work “pastoral” is its connection with the historic Christian faith.

Inevitably, therefore, theological perspective provides the context for pastoral concerns. Whether the problem is that of a young person struggling with vocational direction in life or a wife considering leaving her husband, the assumption is that the minister will approach the situation with a particular theological frame of reference. Pastors should develop a mature, informed, helpful theology that they can “bring” to a person whose own perspective is hindered by the anxiety of the moment.

This function of personal theology may seem indistinguishable from evangelism, discipleship, or systematic theology. But pastoral theology has a different task. To say that one “brings a theology” is not an excuse to be obnoxious or inappropriate in representing Christianity—there is a proper time and place which requires the acknowledgment of the work of the Holy Spirit—but it does mean that the aims of the pastoral counselor are different from those of the secular counselor. As Hunsinger noted, the minister should give up all neutrality about the goal of change, growth, or becoming. It will not encourage people to become whatever they want to be, or hide from them the fact that the counselor has a very definite goal in mind for them. Without manipulating people to attitudes and actions they do not freely choose for themselves, the counselor will openly stand for the Christian
understanding of what fulfilled humanity looks like.²

"Bringing a theology," however, means more than having a frame of reference for thinking about situations. Personal theology is also the unique tool of analysis that ministers can bring to bear on a situation. Psychologist Paul Pruyser once challenged ministers to utilize theological categories for analysis of pastoral situations.³ Theological categories provide a solid basis for understanding persons, their situation, and their resources.

Theology is not only useful as a tool for analysis and guidance, however. It is also a process by which the pastor continues to grow and move to more mature understandings of the experiences of ministry. What is human nature like? A quick answer is, "Made in the image of God and also a sinner." But the complexities and paradoxes of real, lived experiences provoke the need for deeper understanding. What forms does sin take? How do addiction, abuse, and innocence relate to personal responsibility and original sin? Pastoral theology is a theology applied to experiences, but it is also a theology that grows as a result of seeking to make sense of experiences and problems.

**Pastoral Theology Is Shaped by Practical Concerns**

Pastoral theology arises from the practice of pastoral care and conversation with other disciplines. Pastoral theology is theology with a specialized focus. It is reflection that is directed to and inspired by the questions and problems that arise from concrete situations. It is not simply movement from received faith to application, however, for Christian theology also is shaped by the hard questions and concerns that real experience raises.

This phenomenon is not new. Concrete pastoral concerns shaped Scripture—thus Paul’s letters. The theology of the Scriptures was shaped by pastoral and personal issues. In 1 Corinthians, Paul

addresses ethical questions (lawsuits, sexuality, and incest), worship styles (charismatic gifts), the ordinances, Christian marriage, the unity of the church, and the nature of the resurrection. Why this set of issues? Why not something on creation or aesthetics? Because the practical situation Paul faced forced theological reflection that theretofore was unnecessary.

Throughout Christian history, theological and pastoral concerns have been intertwined. The Reformation can be explained in part sociologically, historically, and even theoretically; but its spark is rooted in the anxious quest of Martin Luther for peace with God.

Practical concerns are not distractions from the theological task. Rather, they are an invitation to thinking about the faith as it “becomes flesh and dwells among us.” Pastoral theologizing therefore inevitably centers on how Christian faith can address practical problems and hurts. It is concerned with theodicy due to frequent confrontations with questions from innocent sufferers. Responding to hurting people calls for clear thinking by the pastor so that God may not be represented by Job’s comforters!

Pastoral theology is diagnostic work. It reflects on the use of the Bible and the Christian tradition as guided by the Spirit to find God’s will for the present moment.

It is also personal work. Its interest is persons and their struggles. A pastor thinks about the issues of family not for an abstract principle or a political cause. Pastoral theology is focused on relationships, family ethics, and theology because of concern for the problems and hurts that families in the congregation undergo.

Pastoral theology is especially interested in crisis and the spiritual issues it raises. Carl Michalson once observed that this relevance is what determines which aspect of Christian truth is the arena of our reflection. He called this particular kind of theology poimenical theology, a theology for the proper shepherding of sheep. (The Greek word, poimen, is the word for shepherd). . . . Unlike the traditional forms of theology, such as Biblical, historical and dogmatic theology, it does not need to say everything there is to say about the faith. It says only what is immediately pertinent to the situations at hand. It may even deliberately soft-pedal some elements in the total body of belief which might obstruct the healing process. It has the
aim of relieving rather than intensifying the crisis.  

Therefore, a pastor has the task of discerning among the theological conversations that might take place. A young woman tells of her agonizing pain over a past abortion. This may not be the moment to discuss the moral issue of abortion. The issue is about guilt and forgiveness. Similarly, when a person faces the agony of a sudden death, the pastor might resist answering the question of why until it is clear whether the question is a genuine spiritual problem or merely the instinctive cry of pain. As persons proceed through the experience of sorrow, the timing of reflection with them requires the skill of an artist. There is a time merely to listen, and there is a time to discuss various Christian explanations of unmerited suffering. Knowing when words are appropriate is crucial. The lack of this discernment is one of the most common failings of ministry today.

Pastoral Theology Provides a Place of Intersection

Pastoral theology seeks the faithful integration of the gospel with real human situations. Therefore another obvious truth about pastoral theology is that it is done in the context of relationships. Pastoral theology employs a variety of disciplines, such as psychology. Therefore, the issue of integration is crucial. How can pastoral theology appropriate secular discipline without the loss of Christian truth? It is a theology that seeks to integrate truth into a more consistent and faithful interpretation of reality.

This blending is not as easy as it may appear. Simplistic statements like “just read the Bible” or “all truth is God’s truth” may point to something real, but they may be of little specific help for determining what is theologically adequate and what is not.

Every pastor admits (explicitly or by action) that both psychological knowledge (the broad, practical knowledge of persons) and theological knowledge (the inherited faith, represented in Scripture, doctrine, and tradition) are brought to bear in pastoral

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problems. The problem is this: How are these two fields of knowledge, with different assumptions, methodologies and ends, to be integrated coherently?

Most often ministers, in an effort to be faithful to Christian identity, determine to dispense with psychology. This disregard is dangerous. Theology likewise may become a mask for other motives and agendas—psychological issues. While faith must not be reduced to psychology, psychology can help guard against this tendency.

Another risk is in the opposite direction. Sometimes when ministers first become interested in psychology, they are enamored with it. It is so practical, functional, and problem centered that they begin to apply it uncritically to their practice. However, pastoral care and psychological insight without theology can degenerate into a psychologizing of the faith. This process may be conscious or unconscious.

Pastoral caregivers seek to bring a certain perspective to bear on a problem that can be viewed from many angles, including the psychological. Their unique angle, however, is spiritual and theological. This approach is called “learning to think theologically.”

At first thinking theologically can be quite clumsy, especially if it is perceived as identifying doctrinal issues or scriptural problems that certain situations imply. However, it is more than that. In addition to discerning the theological questions raised in a situation, thinking theologically is the capacity to explore what Christian thought might have to say about a matter. It may lead to further reading or thinking more deeply about what sin means or about Christian hope. For example, witnessing an autopsy in chaplaincy training gave some of the glib statements we new recruits had made about Christian hope a hollow ring. We realized how astounding is the claim that death is overcome by life. Further, we began to struggle and debate about what happens to persons when they die. Spirited conversations followed. This incident exemplifies thinking theologically in concrete situations.

T. W. Jennings, Jr., has offered a number of criteria which express how pastoral care is an occasion of theological reflection. First, in pastoral care, ministers often are called upon to explicate religious meanings by identifying beliefs, intuitions, and assumptions about God, the world, Christian living, and other issues that are not well thought out. They may be inherited beliefs, cultural
assumptions, or merely personal, cherished ideas with little basis in the tradition.¹

Once these beliefs have been identified, however, theological reflection has only begun. The next step, according to Jennings, is evaluating these beliefs. Are they coherent? Some beliefs have inherent contradictions. Are they consistent with other professed beliefs? Many ideas that persons hold do not really fit together at all. Pastoral theology can help someone to think more clearly about them.

Do these beliefs correspond to life experience? That is, do individuals continue to hold to something doggedly which their lives do not validate at all? Finally, what about reliability? How does a particular belief compare with more comprehensive formulations of the faith, such as the Bible, Christian tradition, and the broader consensus of the Christian community?

This process of explication and evaluation can be complicated in ministry. It involves many decisions about what to say and when. For example, suppose one day an older youth blurts out to her mother, “I don’t believe there is a God.” The upset mother drags the youth to the pastor, who can approach this issue a number of ways—offer arguments of the proofs of the existence of God or try to understand what is going on. Shock? Adolescent rebellion? Or something else? What kind of God does the child no longer believe in?

Sometimes the belief that a person is rejecting is not Christian at all. In Mark Twain’s novel Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, a dramatic moment occurs when Huck decides to “go to hell” by helping the slave Jim to escape. He renounces any hope of being saved because the church in his time and cultural context so thoroughly had been captivated by the economic and social pressures that it generally supported slavery.

A pastoral conversation might have raised the possibility for Huck that this was not the only Christian view and therefore opened his eyes to a wider possibility and to the kingdom. That same conversation also might happen with the rebellious adolescent girl.

The pastoral caregiver is a resident theologian of the inner world, going into the depths of another's heart and testing what is there. This requires an enormous investment of time; curiosity and interest in others; patient listening; and resistance to the need to control, react, and correct every deviance until an appropriate time. It may be a work of months or years rather than merely days.

Consider another example. A person who was a childhood victim of abuse may come to the pastor with a vague complaint: "I am having trouble praying. God seems so far away to me." The first order, of course, is the establishment of a trusting relationship with the individual. Perhaps in that ongoing care, discussing the person's beliefs about God could lead to a more substantial exploration of the connection between childhood abuse suffered at the hands of an alcoholic father and difficulty feeling close to God.

Such a problem in prayer often is diagnosed as "a sin problem," which may be true. The problem, however, also may be part of the person's brokenness and violated trust—the reality that safety and security in life were violated by people who should have been trustworthy. The issue is sin, but not necessarily the counselee's own. This individual has a need for healing rather than forgiveness; and the two, while confused, are not identical.

Ministers can help people, first by accepting them and then by reflecting with them, to think more deeply about the variety of influences on their beliefs. To clarify these beliefs is not simply to explain away religion as psychology, but to help the individual move from faith dominated by largely unconscious and unreflective ideas into a more intentional, self-aware set of beliefs.

As beliefs about God's distance or absence are expressed, the pastor can point the person toward the rich tradition of understanding available. Sometimes people are unaware that there is more than one way in the Christian tradition to think about an issue. They may have been raised in a church where a tyrannical pastor yelled and screamed in the pulpit, which only further confirmed the terror of an abused person.

**Conclusion**

Hopefully the reader can see that theology is not merely helpful for pastoral work, but essential to it. The practical tasks of pastoral care seem far removed from the dusty academics of theology, but
nothing could be further from the truth! Theological convictions and theological decisions are involved at nearly every turn in pastoral work.

Therefore it is important that pastors be good theologians. They must learn how to “think theologically,” to see real theological issues embedded in every concrete problem that human beings face and to apply the truths of the faith to life situations. Theology exists to serve the Christian faith and the church by contributing to a deeper and more faithful interpretation of the faith. It can help bring light to misunderstandings that deepen the anguish of suffering people. It can clarify and open up new possibilities.
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