

Consensus

Volume 21

Issue 1 *Women and Men in Theological Education:
Exploring the Present, Creating the Future*

Article 34

5-1-1995

Pastoral Care and the Means of Grace

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Recommended Citation

VanKatwyk, Peter L. (1995) "Pastoral Care and the Means of Grace," *Consensus*: Vol. 21 : Iss. 1 , Article 34.
Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol21/iss1/34>

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The author is wise enough not to elevate his message as being the only true strategy for churches. He shows balance when he says "the church mustn't become only oral... to be effective in the world we must also be literate" (p. 18). He also agrees that our culture is being shaped by a combination of oral, literate, and electronic communication. His prediction is that in the next century all three will continue to have importance, and so the church must be sensitively indigenous (p. 11).

Sample is to be commended for the style of the book. His theories about proverbs, stories, community relationships, are always backed up with examples and illustrations of what he means. It is to his credit that he practices what he preaches, and to the reader's benefit so we can see what this truth looks like in real life. Interestingly, the book ends with a moving, four page story about how a minister with a Ph.D. learned the importance of traditional orality.

One minor issue is the puzzling subtitle, *Living With Will Rogers, Uncle Remus, And Minnie Pearl*. Sample never does explain who these figures are or their importance to his thesis. It was only after talking with some older colleagues that I deduced they were storytellers who appeal to the oral culture. A more universally identifiable example would be appreciated.

I hesitate to give this book an enthusiastic recommendation. Certainly white, middle-class, polished ministers always need to be reminded that their way is not the only way. The message is true, but I suspect that most pastors with common sense and a few years experience would find this information repetitive and obvious.

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Pastoral Life and Practice in the Early Church

Carl A. Volz

Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1990

240 pp.

Pastoral Care and the Means of Grace

Ralph L. Underwood

Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993

160 pp.

Carl Volz, professor of early church history at Luther Northwestern Theological Seminary, has written an earlier book on *Faith and Practice in the Early Church*. The present book under review focuses specifically upon the development of the office and role of parish pastor in the early church,

spanning a time period up to the fifth century, although the outstanding contributions of Gregory the Great (d. 604) are, fortunately, included in this comprehensive overview.

The practice of pastoral care presently appears to be at a critical stage in its history; a time in which ordained ministry as well as the very meaning of parish ministry itself is being reconsidered. In radical ways, that is in relation to the early church, pastoral ministry is redefining itself. This is evidenced in the redrawing of boundaries both for ordination, in reference to gender and other representational inclusivity, and for what constitutes the parish, in view of the proliferation of specialized ministries and current trends of so-called contextualization and globalization in ministry.

Volz does not presume that the early church has the answers to our contemporary questions. He does say that the early church provides a significant context for our present discussions. He also includes the contribution of Thomas Oden's analysis of Gregory's *Pastoral Rule* as further testimony that the classical tradition is essential to the pastoral identity of the church's ministry. Oden's exposition of Gregory's manual on pastoral care is found in his spirited polemic *Care of Souls in the Classic Tradition* (Fortress, 1984). There Oden presents an outspoken critique against the modern pastoral care movement for its failure to listen to the early church:

What curious fate has befallen the classical tradition of pastoral care in the last five decades? It has been steadily accommodated to a series of psychotherapies. It has fallen deeply into a pervasive amnesia toward its own classical pastoral past, into a vague absent-mindedness about the great figures of this distinguished tradition, and into what can only generously be called a growing ignorance of classical pastoral care (p. 28).

Volz provides an excellent resource to counteract that alleged amnesia. The scope is wide-reaching: within the historical context of the early church the focus is on the pastoral care functions of preaching (prophetic, liturgical, and exegetical), and counselling, guiding, and sustaining the faithful. Although women were not admitted to the pastoral offices, the author includes a final chapter on "The Pastoral Role of Women" in which he highlights the prominence of the ministry of "widows, virgins, and deaconesses" in the early church.

The text is full of historical detail, yet presented in an engaging and relevant format. This is a human and inspiring story. The urgency of the divine call to ministry can be felt in these early pastors, manifest in their grounding in Scripture and commitment to represent the highest standards of dedication in the care of souls, both their own and those entrusted to their ministry. The author quotes freely from primary sources such as pastoral letters, sermons, admonitions and advice, thus enhancing this intimate touch with "the early church".

These feelings of closeness, however, are balanced with those of distance. The book provides a cross-cultural experience. There is often a jarring

awareness of dissonance in political contexts, theological methodologies and hermeneutical principles. The early church arranged its pastoral practices along patriarchal, directive and hierarchical lines. Its pastoral care often optimized the contents of the message and minimized the process of the pastoral relationship.

Chrysostom, generally considered the greatest preacher of antiquity, provides an example of a pastor who never really leaves the pulpit, whatever the pastoral care and counselling situation. What restrained his preaching was not so much the question of the appropriateness of the sermon as its timing. In a "letter to a young widow" he explains why he did not write her earlier: "while the tempest is still severe, a full gale of sorrow is blowing, he who exhorts another to desist from grief would only provoke him to increased lamentation. But when the troubled water has begun to subside, and the fury of the waves is abated, one can spread the sails of conversation" (p. 157).

Luther's noted pastoral grief ministry strategy in which he stressed moderation and control of one's grief (Mitchell & Anderson, 1983) may well be an expression of the classical tradition of pastoral care. This pastoral approach stresses the primacy of the comfort of the gospel, and fears that our own suffering may compete with the sufferings of Christ on our behalf.

But by including the pastoral genius of Gregory, Volz demonstrates that the classical tradition is not merely antithetical to present "clinically correct" sources of caring. In his *Pastoral Rule* Gregory displays his understanding of the human spirit in its ambivalences, and in this way his pastoral wisdom anticipated insights now mainly credited to 20th century dynamic psychology.

My reason for including another book in this review is that Underwood's *Pastoral Care and the Means of Grace* is one of the most recent examples, beyond the voluminous contributions of Thomas Oden and Don S. Browning in the last twenty years, of a movement which seeks to align modern pastoral care more directly with its classical roots. Professor Underwood, teaching Pastoral Care at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, claims that pastoral care not only is religious but requires specifically religious language. In defining the term "religious" he contrasts the two sources of contemporary practice of pastoral care and counselling: the "means of grace" present in the traditional religious practices of the church, and the social sciences which represent the secular knowledge which guides current clinical practice and the psychotherapies.

In a primarily classical context Underwood exegetes the religious meanings and challenges of the means of grace: prayer as the soul of pastoral care, with Scripture as its substance, reconciliation as the evangelical principle, and baptism as the foundation of pastoral care in being the paradigm for all transitions, while the eucharist provides the eschatological horizon to ministry. Within the modest confines of a paperback of some 150 pages, this grand design has made this book an ambitious project to write and, at times, a demanding task to read.

Of special interest is the way that Underwood correlates the so-called "religious" and "secular" texts which inform pastoral care. Rather than a Tillichian correlational method, Underwood adopts more of a Barthian approach in which the two texts are of a different order: the religious text being of a superior and wholly-other nature. The religious text is focused on the contents of the scriptures and liturgical traditions of the church while the secular text is largely determined by the personal experience and relational dynamics of the ministry interaction. In attacking the priority given to the relational in much of today's pastoral care practices Underwood states:

The current emphasis on personal genuineness, then, has been important for many ordained ministers, but it has not resolved the dilemmas and conflicts that they experience. This is because such "ministries of presence" do not open up to the fullness of the transcendent dimension, without which pastoral ministry is not ministry. What many are seeking today is a new image of pastoral ministry, one that incorporates personal authenticity and presence into the kind of encounter with the holy that is not reducible to psychodynamic analysis (p. 1).

While Underwood advocates an explicitly religious model of pastoral care, he seems a bit more accommodating than Oden in his listening to the "living human texts". But he puts a basic restriction to learning from secular disciplines: "learning from them, however, is far different from the tendency in much of contemporary pastoral care to model ministry on the norms and ways of secular healing. The cure of souls is one thing. Psychodynamic finesse, although it can contribute to the cure of souls, is quite another" (p. 5). The result is this book in which the hermeneutical procedure is first to highlight a theological interpretation of the text followed by a "psychological analysis as a way of reconsidering the topic or repositioning the liturgical text being examined so that it speaks clearly to the personal situations encountered in pastoral care ministry" (p. 8).

The clinical model that stands out in his psychological analysis is taken from "object relations" theory, specifically Winnicott's developmental concept of "transitional object" related to human mental representations of God and experiences of the absence and presence of God's reality in terms of the child's early encounters with the mother as the primary caregiver. Underwood does not acknowledge the implicit theology and pastoral implications of God as a "transitional object", even though it is obvious that this concept goes well beyond a merely clinical relevance of "psychological finesse".

If I could add one other book to this review article, I would call attention to one of the most recent introductory texts on pastoral care, *Pastoral Care in Context* (Louisville: Westminster/Knox Press, 1993). There John Patton presents what perhaps can be called a postmodern alternative which distinguishes three major paradigms for the ministry of pastoral care: the

classical, the *clinical pastoral*, and the *communal contextual*. Going beyond the competitive and reactionary dialectics of the classical versus the clinical, Patton seeks to affirm both the new and the old in a multi-perspectival approach, with an emphasis on the communal contextual paradigm which includes both clergy and laity in the caring community, and addresses relational factors such as those present in gender, status, power, and culture which impact both the message and the ministry of care. This approach transcends anxieties about lost identity in current pastoral practices by asserting an inclusive and integrative model of pastoral care in terms of its *message, person, and context*.

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