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Pastoral Counseling and Missional Formation: Recovering the Healing Ministry of the Church

DAVID PILLAR

As the missional theology movement gains traction, ministers and their churches are seeking ways to engage their local communities that make the gospel visible and grow in missional identity. Missional practices are many and varied. The ministries of pastoral counseling and care are practices that can help advance these missional aims. My own ministry experience as a pastoral counselor in a congregation for over fifteen years confirms that a biblical theology used to validate these ministries of healing, along with their reciprocal nature, has made significant contributions to the church's missional presence and identity. When they are imagined as an extension of the healing ministry of Jesus, they make visible the gospel announcement of salvation as the restoration of *wholeness* of life that characterizes God's reign. Following the pattern of the incarnation, they provide a powerful avenue of engagement within a local community at the points of pain and disorder so common in the lives of individuals and families in our culture. These points constitute the same relational fractures in which Jesus announced and demonstrated the healing, reconciling power of God's kingdom presence. Because these ministries of care involve face-to-face, empathic engagement, their power to effect healing change is therefore reciprocal. Encounters with the *stranger* (i.e., the person in mental and emotional pain who necessarily experiences alienation) with whom Jesus identified, not only mediate his healing presence to the care-receiver, but this presence is mediated back to the caregiving church. Thus, ministries provide a dynamic growing edge in the formation of a missional identity, both within the community and the church.

DEFINITIONS

A few definitions are in order. First, a *pastoral counselor* is best understood as a ministry specialist in counseling who affiliates with the American Association of Pastoral Counselors (AAPC), an organization that sets professional standards of training and practice for accreditation. This specialist is an ordained minister (or the equivalent ecclesial accountability) who is also a licensed or certified mental health professional with graduate education and clinical training in the behavioral sciences.¹ The AAPC describes pastoral counseling as the "exploration, clarification and guidance in human life, both individual and corporate, at the experiential and behavioral levels through theological perspective."² They must also develop adequate clinical self-awareness as to not inflict their own personal and faith difficulties on those who come to them in distress. A second more obvious definition is simply the counseling that most pastors do as a general function of their ministry with both congregants and neighbors. Church members go to pastors with life problems, specifically seeking emotional and spiritual guidance. Most recognize that there is an increasing hunger for spirituality bubbling up within our culture. A recent study showed that 69 percent of

1. While the AAPC has different levels of affiliation, full *Member*, *Fellow* or *Diplomate* status requires professional certification or licensure in a behavioral science field, as well as ordination to ministry.

2. "The Constitution of the American Association of Pastoral Counselors," *AAPC Handbook*, revised ed. (Fairfax, VA: AAPC, 1986), p. I-1.

Americans recognize the connection between mental health, spiritual faith and religious values, and prefer a mental health provider who can integrate spiritual values in the course of treatment.³ Communities of faith are front line points of contact in their neighborhoods for those suffering emotional and mental distress. As any pastor knows firsthand, life crises often prompt a neighboring person to approach the local church for help. While this is certainly welcomed as an opportunity to open up a spiritual conversation, many ministers don't feel competent enough to deal with emotional, mental and family issues, or they simply feel they don't have time to spend in any ongoing counseling. I have often heard pastors say they could easily spend the majority of their valuable time "just counseling" both congregants and neighbors. Somewhat overwhelmed by the need, many just don't do it. As a result, those who seek help from a church are often referred to outside mental health professionals. This is certainly one level of pastoral care that is ethically sound, if one rightly acknowledges one's lack of competency or time. But from a missional perspective, it is also a lost opportunity for the church to bear witness to God's healing presence. This is especially relevant if one assumes that the more a pastor and church are involved in the lives of their neighbors, the more those neighbors will turn to the church with their life problems. It follows that the last thing a missional-minded church would want is to withdraw from the very points of disorder where Jesus made God's healing presence most visible. When it does so, it unwittingly reinforces the long-standing, rationalistic split between body and spirit; "spiritual" life from "real" life. I began my work as a pastoral counselor through a church that wanted to respond to the counseling and care needs of both the congregation and community. In time we began to refer to these efforts as the "healing ministries." The development of our own missional formation began as an effort to recover a holistic vision of the gospel. A review of how healing functioned within the ministry of Jesus was a solid first step.

JESUS' MINISTRY

The trimmest description of Jesus' ministry is that he went through the countryside preaching and teaching the kingdom of God and healing those who came to him (Matt 4.23). The gospel narratives show Jesus demonstrating the in-breaking of God's kingdom through acts of healing and deliverance. He inaugurates his ministry by connecting his activities of proclamation and healing with the deep hope of a coming messianic age that would bring a time of healing, freedom and justice, when all the present human distress and disorder is finally being set right.⁴ He didn't just talk about God's reign, he made it visible in large part through healing acts. When Jesus sent the disciples to practice what they had seen and learned with him, he sent them to proclaim the kingdom and to heal (Luke 9.1–2). Likewise, the New Testament church is sent by the Spirit of the resurrected Jesus with acts of healing that accompany the proclamation of the gospel. They didn't just talk about God's reign but made it visible in part through healing activity. A common misconception of these signs of healing is that they were just persuasive shows of supernatural power aimed to evoke belief in the listeners. This perspective externalizes, separates and makes superfluous the sign from the proclamation. But a closer look reveals that these signs offered an experience in the reality to which they pointed; namely the healing and restoration that characterizes God's reign. Signs made God's presence visible and they cannot be separated from the gospel that announces his arrival. Just as the ministry of healing was part and parcel of Jesus' kingdom mission, so it should be for the church's mission. If the church is to reclaim this ministry, then we will need to start with a more biblical understanding of healing to move us beyond a thin assumption of supernatural miracle working.

3. Greenberg Quinlan Research, Inc., cited on AAPC website, <https://aapc.org/content/about-pastoral-counseling> (accessed October 30, 2009).

4. Isaiah 61.1–2 inaugurates and foreshadows the messianic mission of Jesus in Luke 4.18–19.

THE BIBLICAL MEANING OF HEALING

Standing behind the gospel vision of salvation under God's reign is the Old Testament concept of *shalom*, most often translated as "peace." It encompasses the holistic vision of life intended by God, characterized by well-being, wholeness, harmony and prosperity, resulting from a reversal of all distortions in human relatedness wrought by sin and injustice. *Shalom* is God's promised blessing for his covenant people Israel, meant not just as their inheritance but for his entire creation (Gen 22.17–18; 26.3–4). *Shalom* is linked with justice and righteousness and thus is an obligation of God's covenant community (e.g., Psalm 34.14). Wherever human relations and conditions are what they should be, *shalom* is present. *Shalom* is clearly God's ultimate will, as reflected in the prophetic vision of the messianic age where all nations seek it (e.g., Isaiah 2.2–4). There is no *shalom* among people without righteousness and justice. Thus all acts intended to restore God's *shalom* to others are acts of justice characteristic of his reign. Painting the biblical drama of redemption in broad strokes, *shalom* is the result of God's renewing initiative in and for the world and is an indicator of his unfolding kingdom.

The New Testament equivalent to *shalom* is *eirene*, also translated "peace." Peace is the blessing with which the risen Christ greets his disciples in their post-resurrection encounters (John 20.21; Luke 24.36). The risen Christ is God's victory over sin and death in all its proximate forms. The resurrection certainly means ultimate physical healing, but also embodies relational healing. This relational peace is not merely the absence of hostility, but emphasizes reconciliation and harmony, which restore *shalom*. Christ's healing presence is so inextricably tied with God's intended relational renewal that he is described as being peace itself (Eph 2.4–22). "The gospel of peace" (Eph 6.15) is accomplished through the death and resurrection of Jesus, who made peace between God and humanity by setting things right between them (Rom 5.1–11). This reconciliation also transforms human relationships, creating peace (Eph 2.14–17; Col 1.20). This social dimension of God's peace is visible in Jesus' healing activities. Beyond restoring physical health, by healing the afflicted, Jesus restored their social well-being as well. By linking the forgiveness of sins with healing (Matt 9.5–6; where Jesus says, "For which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Stand up and walk'?"), he elevates the afflicted beyond social and religious marginalization and restores them as full members in God's covenant community.⁵ Moreover, by claiming to bring God's forgiving, healing presence outside the temple establishment, Jesus also enacts a prophetic protest against the powers that impede and oppose God's *shalom* intended for all.⁶

The healing that accompanies God's new age and brings his peace is also synonymous with salvation extended by the gospel. In an account of the New Testament church's first missional steps, Peter heals the lame man just outside the temple. Here we see how salvation (*sozo*, to save) takes up the concept of *shalom*.⁷ Healing is equated with restored strength (Acts 3.3, 16), well-being or wholeness (Acts 3.10) and God's salvation itself (Acts 4.9–11).

5. Jesus' healing acts defied the crude assumption that affliction was divine retribution for sin. This assumption socially marginalized the afflicted and excluded them from the cult of the temple, which was the source of divine presence and of blessing. In the ancient world "illness is not so much a biomedical matter as it is a social one. It is attributed to social, not physical causes. Thus sin and sickness go together." Bruce Malina and Richard Rohraugh, *Social-Science Commentary of the Synoptic Gospels* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 386.

6. Some sociological commentators see these acts of healing contextualized by the announcement of God's new reign, as prophetic acts that liberate the afflicted from the inequities of marginalized life. They are thereby taught both renewal and resistance by accepting God's reign now outside the official validation of the religious-political establishment. See John Dally's discussion in *Choosing the Kingdom: Missional Preaching for the Household of God I* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2008), 46–49.

7. For a thorough treatment of the interplay between *shalom* and salvation, see Perry Yoder, *Shalom: The Bible's Word for Salvation, Justice & Peace* (Evangel Publishing House, 1987).

MISSIONAL MOVEMENT INSIGHT

One of the contributions of the missional movement is the renewal of a robust biblical theology that is reshaping the way the church understands itself. This includes a return to the gospels as the primary narrative by which ecclesial identity and practice should be formed. By revealing how God is taking new initiative to restore his creation, these sacred texts constitute a countercultural narrative that should implant churches with a distinct “DNA.”⁸ Given the connection between shalom and the gospel announcement of God’s reign, ministries that offer forms of healing and restoration should be part of this DNA character. Ministries of pastoral counseling and care can play a vital role in helping the church reclaim its healing ministry. By providing counseling and care to the community, the church offers a visible presence of God’s will toward shalom. As an example, the healing ministries developed through our church in Phoenix included counseling services for both church and community members, individual supportive care,⁹ numerous “Christ-centered” recovery groups for a variety of issues such as drug and alcohol addiction and codependency, and grief support groups for abortion, divorce and bereavement recovery. Volunteers were trained and supervised by a pastoral counselor to work these ministries, the vast majority of which were provided at low to no fee to the community.¹⁰ These ministries of healing not only made visible the healing presence of Christ, but they constituted a subtle protest against socio-economic forces that exclude those who can’t afford adequate treatment. How appropriate that they could turn for help to a community who offered care in the name of Jesus. Over the years this established a very unique local presence that the community welcomed. Because we hung a large yellow banner that promoted our recovery ministries we became known as the “yellow banner church.” This proved to be very effective source of contact and hospitality with our neighbors. Each week several people would drop in to ask about our group and counseling ministries. This also afforded the pastoral staff ongoing opportunities for serendipitous compassionate encounters with neighbors reaching out to agents of Christ’s peace.

Pastoral counseling and care offered through the church is distinctive foremost because it is a *visible* healing activity of the church, sent by the Spirit to witness to the presence of Jesus Christ. To say they are visible acts of the church, is to also say they are *accountable* to the church’s witness in Word and Sacrament.¹¹ The issue is not whether forms of healing take place “outside” the church. They certainly do, as anyone who has been a patient of a family medical practitioner could attest. Private practitioners of counseling, whether Christian or not, are not “pastoral” because they are not accountable to and an extension of an ordaining community of faith which commissions workers for ministries of the gospel. That Jesus healed was not especially unique. Stories of healers in the ancient world abound. His opponents were more concerned with the *authority* by which he healed (Luke 11.14–15). The power of his healing was that it made the proclamation of God’s gracious reign visible in the fractures of real lives. The truly formative practices of the church are not esoteric or supernatural. Rather, the overarching witness of Word and Sacrament turns ordinary concrete human behavior—eating and drinking, befriending, welcoming,

8. Mark Lau Branson, “Ecclesiology and Leadership for the Missional Church” in *Missional Church in Context*, ed. Craig Van Gelder (Eerdmans Publishing, 2007) 101–102

9. A team of *caregivers* provided one-on-one spiritual and emotional care for church and community members who were in need of ongoing spiritual care due to bereavement and crisis. These spiritually gifted church members were trained and supervised using the ministry resources of *Stephen Ministries* (for more information see www.stephenministries.org).

10. The recovery groups were facilitated mostly by members who themselves had been in the related recovery. In addition to the pastoral counseling I provided directly, my state licensure as a Marriage and Family Therapist afforded the church the opportunity to establish an internship program in which graduate counseling students provided low to no fee services in exchange for supervision hours. The church was thus able to provide hundreds of hours of counseling each year to the community, in addition to the recovery groups and caregivers, with the expense of only one pastoral staff position.

11. For a thorough discussion of how *visibility* and *accountability* to the church make pastoral counseling and care distinctive, see John Patton, *Pastoral Counseling: A Ministry of the Church* (Abington Press, 1983).

caring, helping, playing—into sacred activities.¹² A common experience that validates the visible nature of these ministries was that on any given Sunday many of those who were receiving care and counseling through the church would also worship together with those who were their caregivers. The spiritual impact of this visibility is heightened when, for example, a pastoral counselor or caregiver is also involved in the sacramental activities of worship such as preaching, public prayer, scripture reading, presiding over the communion meal and the like. While many professional counselors provide effective treatment for their clients, pastoral counseling and care offered through the *visible* church is distinctive, as it makes *visible* the healing reign of God, precisely because it is extended within the context of its witness in Word and Sacrament.

The example of caregivers and care receivers (many of whom were nominally church members or “pre-Christian”) worshipping together is also a validation of the reciprocal nature of ministries of healing. The spiritual formation of any congregation is forged in a recursive and reciprocal process between its corporate and personal praxis (including missional engagement), its engagement with scripture and finally with its activities of worship. This hermeneutic process of formation is an ongoing one where the church interprets scripture, its worship and its praxis while at the same time it is being interpreted by scripture, its worship and its praxis. The Holy Spirit, which creates and nurtures faith communities, is present both within and without, sending and shaping. As they are sent out to join the healing presence of the Spirit among their neighbors, disciples themselves are transformed. Changed, they return to worship and grapple with scripture, through which the Spirit illuminates their practice, thereby enabling them to see themselves and their neighbors differently.¹³ The mysterious presence of the living Christ is simultaneously with those sent out and with “the least of these” to whom they are sent. In our church, as “marginal” people began to mix with “churched” people, the impact on spiritual formation became mutual. As the healing activity of the Spirit was more openly acknowledged and shared by those who received the healing ministries, the more its transforming activity was acknowledged in all of us. This created a more open, accepting church culture where life problems and struggles with sin were normalized, gradually eroding walls of shame and silence. It became much easier to address concrete life issues in our spiritual practices, so that prayers, worship, studies, sermons and meditations often addressed the real problems that people struggled with—loss, relationship conflicts, divorce, grief, addiction, temptation, sin, failure and the like.

This hermeneutic loop between our ministries of healing and our congregational life continued over time until it became commonplace to refer to the ministries of healing as “part of our DNA.” One very poignant and spontaneous experience illustrates this process of formation well. To close our worship services we developed the practice of pastoral prayer; a wireless microphone was passed to whoever desired to offer praises or prayer requests. This practice was at times risky but frequently rewarding as it gave an opportunity for the Spirit to move freely. An impoverished and uneducated single mother, who had come to us a year or so earlier addicted to crystal meth, stood to make a request. Over that time she had been an ongoing participant in a recovery group and had received pastoral counseling, as well individual spiritual support from a “care minister.” She confessed her addiction and the pain it caused to those she loved. She gave thanks for her ongoing recovery, her year-plus sobriety and her reconciliation with her adult son, who was also a member. She thanked God for all he was doing for her through the church. A rather dramatic person naturally, she was moved to the point of sobs and had trouble ending her confession. Her passionate display of brokenness and gratitude pushed far past the boundaries of decorum expected in public life outside the fellowship. Sensing unease within the congregation, a longstanding prominent church member, a well educated professional, asked for the microphone and stood up to thank her for her honest confession

12. L. Barrett, I. Dietterich, G. Hunsberger, A. Roxburgh and C. Van Gelder, “Missional Community: Cultivating Communities of the Holy Spirit” in *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Eerdmans Publishing, 1998), 181.

13. For an in-depth discussion of the hermeneutical process of congregational spiritual formation see Branson, “Ecclesiology and Leadership for the Missional Church,” 101–117.

and praise. He then confessed that *he too* was a “recovering sinner.” He shared a specific personal struggle along with a distressful family issue and asked for the congregation’s prayers. In response, an expressive wave of affirmation and praise swelled up from the congregation.

This spontaneous exchange signified a change in the collective imagination of our church, where the healing offered through the gospel had become part of the spiritual experience shared by all. Ministries of pastoral counseling and of care offered through the church are expressions of the Spirit’s healing movement amid concrete suffering in our world. They can help the church reclaim its crucial role as a living, visible sign of the shalom of God’s reign, which is essential to the integrity of its mission and witness, for “without such communities of hospitality, the world would have no way of knowing that all God’s creation is meant to live in peace.”¹⁴

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14. Barrett, Dietterich, Hunsberger, Roxburgh and Van Gelder, “Missional Community: Cultivating Communities of the Holy Spirit,” p.177