Chapter 2

The Grace of God and a New Humanity:

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The Crisis of Pastoral Ministry

It is not too dramatic to use the word “crisis” in relation to the ministry of pastoral care in congregational life. The “crisis” is two-fold. In the practice of pastoral care there is a growing challenge for congregations to meet the needs within their own communities. Not so long ago, the practice of pastoral care was focussed on the ministry offered by an incumbent ordained minister who commonly worked with a team of publicly recognised local church members. Pastoral care was directed to those in the congregation who were in identifiable need: the sick, the hospitalised, the grieving, the lonely, the aged and so on. Despite the fact that the pastoral care ministry was shared, it was always assumed that the ordained minister was the primary carer. In the most acute cases of need, it was normally the minister who was expected to visit, and success or failure to do so would be noted. The corollary of this commonly held view was that unless such a person had been visited by the minister, then no-one had cared for them pastorally.

While this model of church life was sustained, then the exercise of pastoral ministry seemed to be satisfied, at least in general terms. However, recent changes in the life of the church have led to an emerging problem. Fewer congregations are now able to support their own incumbent minister and, at the same time, the number of church members who are available and able

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1. In the Uniting Church, the congregational Elders have a constitutional responsibility for pastoral care.
A more helpful approach to pastoral ministry, solidly rooted in the Christian gospel, can be suggested. In this essay I give particular attention to the Gospel of Luke, in part because it provides some of the most familiar texts used to justify popular approaches to pastoral care, and in part because this same gospel declares vividly the gospel of the grace of God — “immense, unfathomed, unconfined.” Starting from this gospel of grace, I will then suggest a definition of pastoral care, some revised assumptions about pastoral ministry, and explore what pastoral ministry might look like in a local congregation.

Luke’s Gospel

I will give attention to only four segments in the gospel of Luke. I have chosen them because of their representative significance for the whole of the gospel, because of the breadth of their location within the gospel, and because of the diversity and unity of their content.

The Genealogy (Luke 3:23–37)

Only two of the four gospels contain a detailed genealogy for Jesus: Matthew and Luke. Consistent with the content of each of the gospels, the genealogies are not intended to be historical records which document Jesus’ ancestry. They are primarily theological in content. For Luke, Jesus constitutes the beginning of a new humanity, a new “Adam” (Luke 3:28), reversing the failures of human vocation represented in the Genesis account of the story of the first Adam. Not only is Jesus depicted by Luke as one who, unlike the first Adam, is faithful to his human vocation to obey God, he is also depicted


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as the one in whom a new beginning is made possible for all human life. In Luke's account of Jesus' ministry, the diverse forms of broken humanity, seen as the legacy of a disobedient first Adam, are visited and healed by Jesus in such a way that people are welcomed into a new and hitherto impossible realm of life—a new humanity. This is the thrust of the whole of Luke's gospel. The gracefulness of this commitment of God is represented in the many provocative and controversial stories in which this new humanity is given by Jesus to people who have no claims to it, nor any possibility within themselves of acquiring it. I want to explore this theme a little further, paying further attention to two popular sections of this gospel.


In Mark and Matthew Jesus' public ministry begins with the announcement of the drawing near of the kingdom of God/heaven (Mark 1:15; Matthew 4:17). In Luke, things take a different slant. On a Sabbath day in the synagogue in Nazareth where he had been raised from childhood, Jesus stands up to read from the scriptures. He unrolls the scroll given to him and finds the place where the words of the prophet Isaiah are written: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour" (Luke 4:18-19).

The drama that follows takes us to the heart of Luke's gospel. Jesus rolls up the scroll, gives it back to the attendant and sits down. Luke records: "The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him" (Luke 4:20). This statement is more than simply descriptive; it is theologically symbolic: the people of the synagogue, the chosen people Israel, have their attention drawn to this Jesus of Nazareth, And then Jesus makes an astonishing claim: "Today, this reading has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:21). That is to say, Jesus himself is the one in whom God's promise of a new humanity for a broken world, contained in the words of the prophet Isaiah, is fulfilled. The fact that this event announces the beginning of Jesus' public ministry describes and prescribes the agenda of Jesus' life, culminating in his death and resurrection. Just as "the eyes of all were fixed on him", so, on hearing Jesus' claim, "all spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth" (Luke 4:21). It is notable that Luke describes Jesus' claim as "words of grace", the response of those in the synagogue as "amazement", and states that the response was shared by all, without exception. This says as much about Luke's intentions as it does about the actual event. His gospel is extravagant and suggests a high Christology. Jesus of Nazareth is nothing less than the concrete intervention of God, to bring the gift of new life to a broken world, decisively and finally. It is pure gift, of amazing proportion, and it is for all. We should be careful not to minimise nor dilute the claims of this gospel writer. He is not saying that Jesus is simply one of many prophets who declared the word of God; rather Jesus is the one in whom the prophetic word of God and the promises of the synagogue are finally and fully satisfied.

Equally, Luke is not forecasting that the task of the church is to carry on where Jesus left off, as if Jesus is something of a model for the church to follow as it continues his work. For Luke, the church will be constituted by those broken people whose lives have, to their amazement, been touched by the grace of new humanity, and who celebrate, embody and witness to the ongoing gift and promise of Jesus to them and to all who share in a broken world. This ministry of renewing human life will always be the ministry of Jesus, exercised by the power of the Spirit, upon and through those who, having been touched by the grace of God, are called 'church'. As for the synagogue, so it must be also for the church: the eyes of all are to remain fixed on him, for he alone, uniquely and finally, is the bearer of new humanity.

It would be premature to leave the account of the beginning of Jesus' public ministry at this point. The remarkable turnaround to hostility in 4:28 is provoked by Jesus' accusations that the pattern of prophetic history is such that the very people who have been chosen as God's covenant people have failed constantly to hear the judgement of God, and that God has therefore turned to offer his favour unexpectedly to those who have no status within the covenant (Luke 4:23–27).

Rather than this development in the story providing a contradiction to what has preceded it, it sets out something of the true nature of the grace of God in Jesus of Nazareth, namely, it finds its intended response among those who,
by virtue of themselves, have no claims to make upon it: sinners and outcasts in various guises. Those who, by virtue of privilege, or covenant calling, or human accomplishment, consider that they have reason to make claim on this grace, have failed to comprehend that the grace of God is always given in spite of, and never because of, the merits of human life, even when those merits are religious. For Luke, resistance and hostility in response to God’s grace is part of our old Adam-ic humanity. The themes of hostility towards, and the rejection of, Jesus coincide frequently in this gospel with accounts of Jesus’ graceful gift of new humanity. Those who claim forms of religious privilege are among the most resistant and come under the most frequent judgement. The grace of God, as amazing as it is, as universal as is its scope, invites us to acknowledge that in the presence of God, we have nothing to give and everything to receive. As the gospel story proceeds, we will see that this truth is represented most vividly in Jesus himself who, in order to receive the life of God, is compelled utterly to surrender his own life.

The Good Samaritan, the Blessed Mary and the Chastised Martha (10:25–42)

The parable of the Good Samaritan is surely the exemplary text for the practice of pastoral care. Indeed, it is often identified as the exemplary text for the general human model of care. After telling the parable, Jesus instructs his listeners to “go and do likewise” (Luke 10:37). To be a good Samaritan popularly means to go out of your way to offer help to someone in need which is measurably generous, or sacrificial, and which seeks no reward. Within the church, pastoral care is taken to be the working out of this “doing likewise.” It involves the identifying of those who are most in need and attending to that need.

However, this approach to the story raises some important questions. Is this understanding what Luke had in mind? In what way is this form of care, illustrated by the good Samaritan, uniquely Christian? How does this story constitute a message which can be heard as “good news”? How is it ever possible to satisfy the requirements of this command to “do likewise” when the world is filled with desperate and needy people; surely we will commonly “pass by on the other side” and, when we do stop to attend to a particular need, our efforts will be no more than a drop in an ocean. How does this story contain, not simply a teaching by Jesus, but a teaching about Jesus, given that Jesus’ teaching and Jesus’ own life cohere? And perhaps most puzzlingly, how does this story interconnect with the story which Luke records immediately afterwards, namely the story of Mary and Martha, which seems, on the surface anyway, to be at odds with the message of the good Samaritan - a woman who sits and does nothing is praised while another who busies herself with doing good work is chastised?

If the gospel writer records his material, not simply to document what Jesus said and did, but to declare the significance of who Jesus is as the risen, crucified one, then this must also be true of the parable of the good Samaritan. The story can only be adequately understood by seeing it as part of the whole story of the gospel of St Luke, and the primary purpose of St Luke, as we have seen, is to declare boldly that, in Jesus Christ, God has acted decisively and effectively to intervene in a broken world with the gift and promise of a new humanity.

If this is what is contained within the parable, perhaps we are invited to see in this story the fact that Jesus himself is the good Samaritan, the one who uniquely attends to the healing of broken humanity. Equally we are invited to see ourselves, in the first place, as the person left half-beaten on the roadside to whom Jesus comes, gracefully, compassionately, picking us up and leading us on the journey of a healed human life.

To take the story even further, perhaps we may even see Jesus himself as the one half-beaten on the roadside. As such he is our brother, identifying with the fullness of the broken world to which he has been sent, taking up our common human brokenness upon himself. This identification finds its deepest expression in his own journey of suffering to death on the cross, when he, like the man on the roadside, was literally stripped and beaten; indeed his life was taken utterly away from him. And through this suffering, death and subsequent resurrection, he becomes the source of healing and hope for the world, even, or especially if, that world is utterly without life.
Immense, Unfathomed, Unconfined

Maybe that is the reason why Luke marries this parable with the story of Mary and Martha. The one interprets the other. Mary is depicted as a person who sets aside her every human agenda in order to sit at the feet of Jesus and receive from him. In contrast, Martha is depicted as one who is occupied with the demands of domesticity. Quite reasonably, she complains to Jesus that Mary is doing nothing while she is doing everything. Jesus’ response to this situation is striking. He chastises Martha for her anxious distraction and praises Mary in the most extravagant of terms: “Mary has chosen the one thing which is needful and which shall never be taken away from her” (Luke 10:42). This is extreme language. It is clearly not the case that, as many a popular sermon may suggest, we are meant to live our lives in some sort of balance between Mary and Martha. On the contrary, we are meant to live our whole lives with the posture of Mary, attending to what Jesus would give to us as the one thing which provides for our genuine need, and which nothing else in life or in death can take from us.

In the hands of Luke, the stories of the Good Samaritan and Mary and Martha are consistent, and they constitute good news. We all share in the brokenness of the world. In Jesus Christ, God has come into our midst and taken our brokenness upon himself, and through wounds of death and resurrection we are healed. Mary embodies the posture of the one who has discerned the significance of this Jesus. The “go and do likewise” of the good Samaritan story becomes the command to live our lives in the company of those who know themselves to be broken, and whose brokenness is absorbed and absolved in the crucified and risen Jesus.


In contrast to the previous story, the story of the criminal’s conversation with Jesus during Jesus’ own crucifixion is little known. Yet, in its own way, it is perhaps the most striking of all illustrations of Luke’s declaration of the gracious gift of new humanity in Jesus Christ. It is a story which occurs near the moment of Jesus’ death on the cross, and which illuminates the actual meaning of that death. In other words, what happens in this story is intended to reflect the meaning and purpose of the Easter event.

Two criminals are crucified with Jesus, one on either side (Luke 23:33). As the soldiers cast lots for Jesus’ clothing, and the people mock and deride Jesus, calling on him to show his messianic power by saving himself from crucifixion, one of the criminals lends his own voice to the scoffers, saying, “Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!” (Luke 23:39). This prompts the second criminal to enter the conversation. Chastising his compatriot, he declares that their own sentence of crucifixion is justly deserved, “for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds” (Luke 23:41). In other words, in the estimation of this criminal and in the estimation of the society, the right and proper destiny of both criminals is death on a cross. In comparison, he sees Jesus as an innocent victim who has done nothing wrong. He then turns to Jesus and says, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom”, to which Jesus replies, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:42–43).

With these words, Jesus dramatically redefines the ultimate destiny of the criminal. According to his own estimate, and according to the estimate of the world in which he has lived, his right and proper destiny is death; according to Jesus, his destiny will be new life. This conversation embodies, in a striking way, the very heart of the gospel which Luke wants to declare. In Jesus Christ, God has intervened into condemned human life and radically redefined it, as an act of pure and undeserved grace. The criminal discovers about himself what can only come as gift. Standing over against every judgement which he or the world might reasonably and rightly make, and coming at a point which marks the end of all human possibility for the criminal, a dramatically new word is declared. This same criminal is judged to be worthy of eternal life and not eternal death. This, for St Luke represents the meaning and purpose of Jesus’ death, and embodies the climax of Jesus’ own ministry. In the eyes of the Son of God, the one crucified for all, all human destiny is transformed from death to life, over-riding all dehumanising judgements which we might make of ourselves, or which the world might make of us.¹

¹ Karl Barth, in a sermon on this text, makes the claim that, as a consequence of this conversation, “the two criminals were the first certain Christian community” and that anyone who would see themselves as part of the church community must “get in line behind the two criminals”. The church is the community of
Implications for Pastoral Care and Pastoral Ministry

Arisings from our consideration of these selected texts from Luke, what might we go on to say about pastoral care and pastoral ministry?

The first thing to be said is that pastoral care is essentially Christological. That is to say, it begins with what God has done, and does, to and for all humankind, in Jesus Christ. In Lukan terms, this means that in Jesus Christ, God declares, bestows and promises the utter re-definition of broken and dehumanised life. A new Adam-ic definition is given: the blind are given sight, captives are liberated, the oppressed are freed; human life, beaten and bruised, is looked at compassionately and taken up into a journey of healing. Those whose humanity has been forfeited, condemned to death by themselves and by their world, are dramatically re-humanised and taken up into the glorious liberty of risen life. This re-definition of broken and bruised human life is what breaks into the world in Jesus Christ. This is, for all humankind, “the one thing which is needful which can never be taken away”, because it is located not in human life itself, but in the God who is with us and for us in Jesus Christ. It is simply to be received, on bended knee.

Pastoral care is defined by this good news: by the particular care of the God whose passionate commitment is to bring into being this new humanity, represented in Jesus of Nazareth and resourced in him, for the world. We can only ever use the term pastoral care if it speaks of, or describes in some way, this re-definition of human life. Pastoral care is alternative terminology for “gospel”. Likewise, we can only ever use the term pastoral care of the one in whom this gospel is given. If the term is ascribed to anyone else, it is so only in a secondary or derivative way, as one through whom Jesus, the pastoral carer, chooses to minister.

Secondly, we can now explore the place of pastoral ministry within the life of a Christian community. The church is constituted as the community of people who, sharing in the brokenness and inhumanity of the world, know themselves to be the recipients of Jesus’ pastoral ministry. The calling of the church is to give expression to this new life and to share it with others. At this point, we should note that it is the whole Christian community, and not a select group within it, which, by baptism, is called into this ministry and to give expression to it in the world. The baptised do so as both needy recipients of pastoral care, and as instruments through which this care might come to others. There is never any sense that the focus for pastoral care is confined only to those who are deemed to be in need (e.g. the sick, or the grieving), because all of us share a common need for the life which God alone gives in Jesus Christ.

Thirdly, this means that the church at worship is the focal point of the pastoral ministry of Jesus Christ. At worship the church is in the posture of Mary as one who sits at the feet of Jesus. In worship, the church receives the ministry of Christ through word and sacrament, is renewed in the truth of the gospel, and hears again Christ’s re-defining word of grace over against every dehumanising word which might be spoken, by oneself or by others. In the act of public worship, the gathered community is the recipient of Christ’s compassion and healing, so that sins are forgiven and new life is declared. The worshipping community, in the posture of Mary, sitting at the feet of Jesus, receives from him “the one thing needful which can never be taken away”. In this sense, worship is the context for the primary work of pastoral care in the life of the Christian community. Only if the church ceases to worship, or only as members of the Christian community are deprived of

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Footnote:

5 The fact that all the baptised are called to participate in the ministry of pastoral care, as recipients and instruments of the pastoral ministry of Jesus Christ, does not stand in tension with the notion of the gifts of the Spirit whereby some may have special gifts for pastoral ministry (see e.g. 1 Corinthians 12). The former assertion about the ministry of the baptised is a recognition that the whole people of God are called to ground their lives in the gospel of Jesus Christ and to represent the gospel in their common life. The latter assertion about particular gifts of pastoral ministry represents an aspect of the ordering of the life of a Christian community which might call people to offer a particular expression of pastoral ministry, without this in any way diminishing the common call of the baptised.
word and sacrament, can it be said with validity that the pastoral ministry of the church community is neglected and in crisis?\footnote{For further insight into the ways in which worship serves as a primary context for pastoral ministry, see: R. Green, Only Connect: Worship and Liturgy from the Perspective of Pastoral Care (London: DLT, 1987); W. Willimon, Worship as Pastoral Care (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979); E. Rambshau, Ritual and Pastoral Care (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987).}

However, worship is not the only context for pastoral care. The pastoral ministry of the church finds particular expression in the practices of pastoral conversation, acts of care and visitation, whether this be through incidental interaction of an informal nature, or through deliberate and programmed encounter. In speaking about the practices of pastoral care I am not talking about what the minister does to the people, or what elected carers do for those in need, nor about those who are strong assisting those who are weak. It is Jesus Christ who always remains the pastor, and it is the church community who always remain those who are identified with the weak, and in need of the pastoral ministry of Christ. D. T. Niles’ language about evangelism can be applied to this notion: pastoral care is about one beggar helping another beggar to find food.\footnote{D. T. Niles, That They May Have Life (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1951), 96.} The ministry of pastoral care in a Christian community is about the common search for the life which is in Christ. It should be no surprise to anyone who knows something of the strange dynamics of the gospel that, in practice, it is often the so-called “weak” or the “sick” who themselves are the instruments of the ministry of the gospel for the so-called “strong” or “healthy”. In programmes of pastoral visitation, the pastoral visitor (whether the minister or not), will be in community with the visited as those who are commonly in need. In their encounter the visitor will be as “strong” or “healthy” as the recipient of this new life as they are the means by which this life comes to the other.

The use of prayer and the reading of scripture in pastoral ministry point to the fact that Jesus Christ is theener of both the visitor and the visited. In this way, pastoral conversation takes place in the posture of Mary, or in the context of people half-beaten on the roadside who are confident in the compassion of the crucified and risen good Samaritan.

We turn, finally, to the distinctive role of the one who is ordained. Within the vows of ordination, such a person is asked the question: Will you endeavour to be a faithful pastor of God’s people? Taken in and of itself, this can easily lead to expectations that the ordained minister is the one responsible for the pastoral care of the congregation. This represents a serious distortion of a theological understanding of pastoral care. The role of the ordained person as “pastor” can only be understood if we put alongside this vow those other vows of ordination which precede it, and which identify the ordained person first of all as one who is baptised, for whom Jesus Christ is Lord, Saviour and, we should add, Pastor. The unique role of the ordained person is to represent the ministry of Jesus Christ for the people, and in so doing, to uphold their common calling to ministry. Insofar as the ordained person is set aside to preach the gospel, they are a witness, to the whole Christian community, of the vocation to live by and proclaim the gospel. Insofar as the ordained person is set aside to be pastor to the people, they uphold for the whole Christian community the vocation to share Christ’s pastoral ministry in the world. The ministry of the ordained person is not exercised exclusively, nor as a substitute for, the ministry of the people of God. It upholds the unique and common calling of the whole community.

A Concluding Word

This essay began by identifying two aspects of the contemporary crisis in pastoral ministry. By exploring aspects of the gospel of Luke, I have offered a redefinition of pastoral care and explored some of the implications for the practice of pastoral ministry in the church. This has been done, among other things, with a view to freeing Christian communities from the burden of what they consider to be a failing and failed pastoral ministry.

I hope it is clear that pastoral care is never about what we do, or fail to do, in response to those who are in identifiable need. It is about what God has done, and continues to do, to and for all humankind, in the person of Jesus Christ: touching the lives of all of us with a new and unimagined humanity; compassionately attending to our common need with his gift and promise of healing; bestowing upon our criminal humanity the destiny of eternal life. Our common vocation is to take our place in community with the broken, in
the posture of Mary, in line behind the criminals, and so become participants in the pastoral ministry of Christ for the world. The primary context within which this finds expression is in the worship life of the people of God, for in worship, we receive, celebrate and embody the ministry of this Pastor, and we hope for its completion for us and for all creation.