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#### Part 1

# GOOD THINKING: WESLEYAN PASTORAL THEOLOGY

## THINKING WESLEYAN



To think Wesleyan is to begin with Scripture. John Wesley famously attested to being a man of one book. What he meant by this was clearly a testimony to his conviction about the primacy of canonical Scripture, yet he also recognized other resources in the work of interpreting Scripture and for thinking theologically about the work to which God called him. Wesley's understanding is well known, that while Scripture is foundational and that we should "enjoin nothing that the Bible does not enjoin," still the church receives Scripture through complementary resources like tradition, reason, and experience.

Tradition in this conversation is understood as the church's interpretation of Scripture, particularly the writings of ancient Christian leaders, such as Clement of Rome, Ignatius, and Polycarp. Wesley thought these apostolic fathers to be the most reliable teachers of Scripture mainly because of their proximity to the Christ event—being "nearest the fountain," as he put it. By reason is understood the grace-enabled ability to apply learning and logic to the interpretation of Scripture. Wesley's life and writing demonstrate his own deep appreciation for knowledge through science and argument.<sup>4</sup> However, the idea of reason here is more than rational ability. Reason is connected deeply to experience because the ideas from Scripture represent our relationship with God, who reveals himself to us in the Word (the incarnate Son). Experience as a resource for the interpretation of Scripture has in view the personal experience believers have from knowing Christ and from being assured of a right relationship to God in Christ through the witness of the Spirit. These gifts are not private

but come to us through the life of the church, gathered by the Spirit and nourished by Word and Table. Key to experience as a resource for knowing is also testimony, as God's people bear witness to the assurance, by the witness of the Spirit, of salvation and to the confirmation of sanctifying grace in their lives.

These resources work together to inform our reading of Scripture, enabling us by the help of the Holy Spirit to arrive with confidence at the knowledge of what is necessary for our salvation. This idea of the Bible's clarity "in all necessary points" is from Wesley<sup>5</sup> and also finds contemporary expression in my denomination's Articles of Faith, which affirm the "plenary inspiration" of Scripture and that the Bible reveals God's will to us "in all things necessary to our salvation." The emphasis here is not on casting doubt on the authority of Scripture but simply on recognizing that it does not derive from a perceived ability to read and understand the separate components of Scripture literalistically. Rather, we read the Bible as a whole, affirming that it faithfully points to the story of God's redeeming movement toward humanity, culminating in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The authority of Scripture is the authority of God, made known to us through the testimony of Scripture, in which everything points to the authority of the universal reign of God in Christ.<sup>7</sup>

#### **Biblical Pastoral Theology**

From this foundation, then, I will proceed with the conviction that a Wesleyan way of reading the Bible is a faithful way to read the Bible. By stating this perspective at the outset I do not intend to preclude dialogue with Christians who believe differently but to clarify my commitment to the theological framework from which I am working. A Wesleyan reading of Scripture yields a particular kind of pastoral theology. Preeminently, it must be a pastoral theology that is deeply rooted in the Scriptures themselves<sup>9</sup>; however, drawing a pastoral theology from the Bible must begin more broadly and deeply than simply selecting texts that appear to speak directly to the pastoral office. For example, the Pastoral Epistles (1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, perhaps Philemon) do compose a rich resource for shaping the character and conduct of

pastors. The admonitions of these texts are largely about the character and integrity of a pastor, moving directly to a pastor's core activities, which are to pray, study the Scriptures, and teach. (See the excursus at the end of this chapter for a summary of these admonitions.) But developing a biblical pastoral theology must in no way be limited to a particular biblical genre. The whole of Scripture, the overarching narrative of God's redeeming work, provides the framework for beginning to understand the ministry of pastors.

Eugene Peterson demonstrates this broad biblical basis for pastoral theology in his book Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Work.<sup>10</sup> Here he draws from the Old Testament texts of Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and Esther—known together as the Megilloth. Peterson's project is to draw the pastoral imagination back from a contemporary reliance on psychology and leadership foci to the seminal texts of Israel's annual acts of worship (Passover, Pentecost, Ninth of Ab, Tabernacles, and Purim). The acts of worship connected with these festivals (and a fast) served to re-member the people of God and reorient them to their identity in ways that could, at least potentially, bring life, health, and peace. Similarly, central to faithful pastoral work is resisting the temptations of spectacle or the latest technologies (using the term in the broadest sense) and preferring the work of calling out a biblical community of faith. Doing this requires a firm grip on the ancient texts that help the contemporary church navigate the emerging realities of a post-Christendom world as a people who know that God is always at work, no matter the condition of things. God is working to redeem the world and to gather his people back into a covenant of love.

Thinking of other texts, I am drawn to the pastoral theology that is embedded in Paul's passionate writing to the Corinthian church, particularly in 2 Corinthians. Here we find not only the work of a pastoral leader but also glimpses into the motivational heart of the pastor. For example, we hear Paul say to the community, "We have conducted ourselves in . . . integrity ['holiness' (margin)] and godly sincerity" (1:12); "we have spoken freely . . . and opened wide our hearts to you" (6:11); and "I will very gladly spend for you everything I have and expend

myself as well" (12:15). Many other texts can also help shape a strong pastoral imagination that reaches far beyond the use of simple technologies to the very soul of what God calls pastors to be and then to do. Examples of these texts could include Exodus, Deuteronomy, Ezekiel, Nehemiah, Jeremiah, Acts, Romans, Ephesians, and many others. Obviously, the Gospels and particularly the life and ministry of Jesus are essential components of a biblical pastoral theology, but more on those texts later. The point here is that a balanced and healthy pastoral theology is rooted in the whole story of God in Christ as divinely inspired and communicated to us in the Bible.

#### **Historical Reflections on Pastoral Theology**

Wesleyan pastoral theology also relies heavily on the classical, historical reflections of the church, or the writings of the church fathers. Many of these works are important for informing pastoral theology, but the work of Gregory the Great may represent the watershed for this area of practical theology when it was given to the church in 590. The continued availability and accessibility of *The Book of Pastoral Rule* (commonly known as *Pastoral Care*) provides an important resource for contemporary pastors who wish to add the wisdom of the church to the careful shaping of a pastoral theology. More broadly, Thomas Oden's *Classical Pastoral Care* brings together in a systematic way the reflections of the first eighteen centuries of the church, with particular attention to the patristics.<sup>11</sup> A very fine introduction and summary of key historical works is Andrew Purves' *Pastoral Theology in the Classical Tradition*.<sup>12</sup>

#### **Distinctives in Wesleyan Pastoral Theology**

This foundational location in the Bible and in church history enables Wesleyan theology to achieve one of its most important contributions: the ability to avoid the undisciplined comfort of extremes but instead to strike a via media (middle way) by navigating between the dialectical tensions that are part of doing theology. An important component of this is the embrace of Wesley's idea of a "catholic spirit," meaning in part a humble willingness to recognize that one's view of things should be open for debate and possibly for correction.

A Christian may hold firm views but should also live in sincere fellowship with Christians who hold differing opinions. This is certainly not to suggest a watering down of the gospel or a lack of passionate conviction about essential matters. However, the ability to engage in charitable conversations about potentially divisive subjects should be a mark of any pastor who would bear the character of a Wesleyan pastoral theology. An open mind, warm heart, and gentle spirit are more than personality traits. They are critical strategies for engaging people and cultures that seem to be quickly gravitating toward suspicion and division. This kind of spirit should help to inspire in pastors the patience and mercy needed when working with people who are truly free to respond to the prevenient grace of God.

Additionally, a Wesleyan way of reading Scripture nurtures a distinct pastoral theology significantly because it locates pastoral identity as a particular kind of participation in the story of God, rather than in certain structures or models. One way this works out is through the conviction that the essential work of a pastor is to keep the community of faith focused on God and on what God is doing in the world. However, the ways in which the life and work of pastors has been understood lately seem to move more toward organizational leadership with its attendant measures of success than toward the prophetic work of calling out a people to live as an expression of the in-breaking kingdom of God in the world. These foci do not necessarily need to be mutually exclusive, since leadership is indeed an important component of pastoral work, but there is an order and priority to these things that enables the leadership practices of a pastor to serve the larger vision of announcing the universal reign of God in Christ.

All of this is centered in the affirmation of God as triune. Although this affirmation is obviously not uniquely Wesleyan, it is especially important in Wesleyan theology because the overarching ethos of how life in the church is conceived is the ethos of love. This is rooted in the *perichoretic* love of the Trinity. *Perichoresis* is a word used early in the church (Gregory of Nazianzus) to speak of the intimate oneness of Father, Son, and Spirit—the holy community of persons out of which flows the holy community of God's people, gathered by

the Spirit as the body of Christ, the church. As pastors live and serve as representatives of Christ, this image begins to shape an understanding of pastor as lover—not in any sentimental way—but in an essential way as persons called out from and then back into the church to live and serve first and foremost from the grace of self-sacrificing love. This way of pastoring has many implications but none more basic than the simple idea of a pastor imitating the ministry of Jesus. A robust Christology is critical, not only because of what atonement means and its implications for pastoral work but also because of the importance of perceiving in the life of Jesus of Nazareth the seminal model for pastoral work. Entire books are written on this point alone, but here I would mention three essential movements in the life and ministry of Jesus that give definition to the core traits of good pastors.

#### The Pastoral Example of Jesus

First among these is the complete relational nature of ministry. Jesus began by gathering disciples with the simple call "Follow me." This movement of going everywhere with Jesus is not only in accord with the realities of rabbinic practices in the first century but also organic. That is to say, the essence of pastoring after the pattern of Jesus is intimate engagement with people in the basic structures of life. It is walking with them, eating with them, listening, teaching, correcting, comforting, sending, and more. It is loving people far beyond the sentimentalities of a superficial social exchange; it is loving them as deeply as parents love their children. In fact, pastoring is much like parenting in the way the covenant love of the parent-child relationship utterly rearranges and reprioritizes the life of the parent to the point that every parent knows his or her life is no longer his or her own and never again will be.

A second movement for ministry patterned after Jesus is the constant rhythm of action and contemplation. The flow of gospel narratives is back and forth from the actions of ministry (teaching, healing, comforting) to moments of reflection through prayer and conversation. This kind of rhythm is critical for the emergence of a healthy pastoral ministry. The relentless demands of people who are needy combined

with the weight of carrying spiritual authority and responsibility for a people would be crushing if not for the God-given gifts of rest, reflection, and renewal. The overall structure of this book begins with thinking because so often pastoral work defaults to acting. There are so many things to be done, so many demands to meet and expectations to manage, that protecting space to think (pray and reflect) is a critical pastoral discipline, one that was modeled by our Lord.

Third, there is a sacramental movement to the ministry of Jesus. By this I mean to reflect not so much on the sacraments proper (although these are at the core) but especially on the life-giving relational exchange of call and response. That is, the call of the gospel that is announced by the church and particularly by pastoral ministry calls people to faith responses that are and which become means of grace for the church and for the world. I am talking about the whole life of the church in a way that calls us from the compartmentalizing or fracturing of Christian life. The call is toward a holistic, unified way of living together as the people of God, gathered and also sent by the Spirit, under the guidance of godly pastors. When this kind of gracefilled rhythm characterizes the community of faith, then it becomes a means of grace, a sacramental life enacted especially when the church comes to the Communion table. Keeping this identity in sharp focus can only happen when God's people fix their collective gaze on Jesus, "the pioneer and perfecter of faith" (Heb. 12:2), and this is the central work of pastors.

These ways of thinking about pastoral ministry are biblical ways of thinking. They are also in constant motion from the Scriptures, through prayer, into the life of the church and world, and then back to prayer as the church (particularly the pastor) reflects on what God is doing and what it means to join God in these works.

#### **EXCURSUS**

#### **Biblical Cues for Pastoral Theology**

#### 2 Corinthians

1:4	"we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we
	ourselves receive from God"

- 1:12 "we have conducted ourselves . . . with integrity"
- 1:13 "we do not write you anything you cannot read or understand"
- 2:4 "I wrote you out of great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears"
- 2:17 "we do not peddle the word of God for profit"
- 3:5 "our competence comes from God"
- 3:12 "we are very bold"
- 4:2 "we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God"
- 4:5 "what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord"
- 4:10 "we always carry around in our body the death of Jesus"
- 4:16 "we do not lose heart"
- 4:18 "we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen"
- 5:11 "since . . . we know what it is to fear the Lord, we try to persuade others"
- 5:16 "we regard no one from a worldly point of view"
- 5:20 "we are therefore Christ's ambassadors"
- 6:3 we put no stumbling block in anyone's path
- 6:11 "we have spoken freely . . . and opened wide our hearts to you"
- 10:3 "we do not wage war as the world does"
- 10:5 "we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ"
- 11:28 "I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches"
- 12:10 "when I am weak, then I am strong"
- 12:15 "I will very gladly spend for you everything I have and expend myself as well"

#### 1 Timothy

- 1:3 "stay there"
- 4:7 "train yourself to be godly"
- 4:12 "set an example"
- 4:13 "devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching"
- 4:15 "give yourself wholly"
- 4:16 "watch your life and doctrine closely"
- 5:1 "do not rebuke . . . but exhort"
- 5:3 recognize widows
- 5:17 honor elders
- 5:21 "do nothing out of favoritism"
- 5:22*a* "do not be hasty in the laying on of hands"
- 5:22*c* "keep yourself pure"
- 5:23 manage your physical health
- 6:10 flee from love of money
- 6:11 "pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness"
- 6:17 command the rich to be generous
- 6:20 "guard what has been entrusted to your care"

#### 2 Timothy

- 1:8 "do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord"
- 1:14 "guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you"
- 2:1 "be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus"
- 2:3 "join with me in suffering"
- 2:8 "remember Jesus Christ"
- 2:14 warn the people of false teachers
- 2:15 "correctly handle the word of truth"
- 2:22 "flee the evil desires of youth"
- 2:23 "don't have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments"
- 2:25 gently instruct those who oppose you; don't be resentful
- 3:5 have nothing to do with godless people
- 3:14 "continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of"

#### PART ONE: GOOD THINKING

4:2 "preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction"

#### Titus

1:13	"rebuke [false teachers] sharply"
2:1	"teach what is appropriate to sound doctrine"
2:3	"teach the older women to be reverent"
2:6	"encourage the young men to be self-controlled"
2:7	"set them an example by doing what is good"
2:9	teach submission to authority
2:15	"do not let anyone despise you"
3.10	avoid divisiveness

"By reconsidering pastoral practice from theological and biblical perspectives Rowell challenges us to revision pastoral ministry beyond the cultural patterns that seem to be so profoundly influential."

—Dr. Carl Leth

Dean, School of Theology and Christian Ministry

Olivet Nazarene University

The tyranny of the urgent is a by-product of our fast-paced world.

It affects many people, but when it impacts pastors,
they are often tempted to ignore the critical needs of the
pastoral disciplines that ensure the effectiveness of ministry.

In *Thinking, Listening, Being: A Wesleyan Pastoral Theology,*Jeren Rowell offers theological reflections on what it means to live and work as a pastor. He examines different aspects of pastoral thinking, practice, and work, challenging pastors to continually pursue prayer, the study of Scriptures, and theological reflection.

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