



Pastoral Care Part One

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Unit 3. Pastoral Care and the Christian Community

Pastoral care and the community

The corporate dimension of pastoral care is evident at two critical junctures in the book of Hebrews. The recipients of the letter were Jews who had believed in Jesus as the promised Christ. The circumstances faced by this small church were hard and demanding. Pressure was building from those outside the church for them to renounce their newly-found faith and to come back into the fold of Judaism. Throughout the letter the author encourages them to stay true to Christ, “keep the faith” and press on towards glory.

Read Hebrews 3:7-19.

In 3:7 the writer appeals to his readers by quoting Psalm 95 which refers to the experience of the people of Israel in the wilderness. The Psalm challenges its readers not to harden their hearts when they hear God’s voice as their forefathers had done in the desert. These vulnerable believers were facing the same dangers as that ‘wilderness generation’. And the implication is clear: all that was being written to them came to them with the authority of God himself. The truth with which they were being confronted was God’s truth.

The appeal becomes explicit in 3:12. They must guard their hearts against sinful unbelief that “turns away from the living God”. Central to the writer’s appeal is the conviction that the situation faced by this church is the same as that faced by the people in the wilderness. The quotation from verse 7 is prefaced by the words “as the Holy Spirit says” with the verb “says” being in the present tense. The Psalm was written approximately one thousand years earlier yet the writer believes that through the Scripture the Holy Spirit continues to speak with the same force and clarity as when the Psalm was originally written. The circumstances were different, but that was mere detail. The basic temptation facing these people in their current predicament was unbelief (3:12, 19). This unbelief was not simply a passive lack of trust, but an active refusal to believe God for which they were wholly responsible.

‘Unbelief’ in the sense of ‘an active refusal to believe God’ is what we might call a *foundational sin*. The Serpent’s strategy in Genesis 3 is not merely to cast doubt on God’s veracity, but essentially to call into question God’s goodness and love. The subtext to the snake’s innuendo is that God is unworthy of the obedience and worship of his creatures. By listening to the tempter and disobeying their maker, the first couple act in wilful rebellion and seek to secure their own destiny. That is always the nature of unbelief. A hard heart is an unbelieving heart – one that is resolute in its opposition to God and his purposes. Our circumstances — from the mundane to major life events — always present an opportunity for unbelief. It was so with the “wilderness generation”. It was also the case with the church to whom this letter is addressed. It is equally true for contemporary Christians, whatever the details of our lives.

Exercise

1. Read Numbers 14 and Psalm 95.
 - Explain how the Israelites' behaviour in the desert reveals "sin's deceitfulness" (Hebrews 3:13).
 - What seemed reasonable about their complaint? (Numbers 14:1-4)
 - How does God make clear what their real problem was? (Numbers 14:11, 21-23, 27, 35; Psalm 95:7-10)
To what grounds for whole-hearted trust in God could they have pointed one another?
2. Read Hebrews 10:19–25.
 - How does the writer revisit and develop his call to corporate pastoral care in these verses?
 - What are the explicit or implicit risks for believers stated here?
3. How are these risks to be averted?

Again in Hebrews 10 the potential for unbelief is at the forefront of the writer's mind and again the community is central to any strategy for effective discipleship. The context we set at the beginning of Unit 2 gives added weight to this focus. If our primary identity is as individuals-in-community, then ability to thrive will be determined by our involvement in a community. But the Bible seems to be saying more than this. Life as it should be lived *is* life in community. It is not merely an added benefit to me. It is essential to what it means to be human. If this is true, then the Christian community is essential to what it means to be a Christian.

The implications of this for pastoral care are hugely significant. So much formal pastoral engagement takes place outside of the community and a primary cause of the need for this kind of pastoral care is disengagement from the community. While there will remain the need for specific counselling sessions in a more formal environment, healthy engagement with others in committed relationships will deal with so many of the presenting issues and underlying causes of problems. Key to this will be the acceptance of this individual-in-community identity as essential to who and what we are as people. Pastoral care in a Christian community is not merely one 'therapy device' among many. It is the context in which other pastoral care must take place.

Nurturing a culture of communal pastoral care

It is the responsibility of the leaders to nurture a culture of mutual care in which believers learn how to disciple or pastor one another. There are certain key elements involved in such 'culture creation'.

Prayer

Creating a culture of shared identity and mutual responsibility in an otherwise antagonistic cultural context is only possible through the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit. The

transition from seeing ourselves as *mere individuals* towards understanding ourselves as *individuals-in-community* is profoundly counter-cultural. It cannot be achieved by will-power and self-effort. Prayer is the clearest expression of rejecting self-sufficiency and humbly accepting our dependence upon God.

Teaching

The primary means of creating biblical community is through the work of the Holy Spirit as he applies the truth of God's word to God's people. It has been the contention of these last two units that the biblical view of what it means to be human as individuals-in-community is fundamentally opposed to the prevailing view of the wider culture. If the 'majority view' is to be undermined, the Bible needs to be taught faithfully and applied boldly.

It is also important to recognise that this teaching needs to occur not only when the whole church comes together. In an instructive passage in Deuteronomy 6 where Moses is telling the people the importance of teaching the Law so that "you and your son and your grandson might fear the Lord" (verse 2 NASB), he commands them to "impress [these words] on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates." (Verses 6-9 NIV UK) In other words, integrate them into the round of daily activities, embed them into the routines of life, infuse the mundane with them. Teaching which creates a culture takes seriously this model in the life of the church.

Modelling

In 1 Timothy 3 Paul provides Timothy with instructions for the appointment of church leaders. One of the most striking things about the list of 'qualifications' is that *there is nothing striking about them*. Integral to leadership in a local church is modelling godly attitudes and behaviour — living a life that says to others: this is what it means to live as a Christian. In creating a culture of mutual care in which believers learn how to disciple one another, a leader will model what an identity as an individual-in-community means in practice.

Communal pastoral care in practice

We will now take these principles and apply them to two specific life issues.

Marriage

Marriage is an obvious place to start, not least because of its iconic status in Christian theology: marriage is meant to model the relationship between Christ and the Church (Ephesians 5:22-33). We have already seen from Genesis 1:26 and onwards how it is man and woman together who image God.

Around 40% of marriages end in divorce. It would be comforting if that statistic were significantly lower among Christians, but it would seem that the same difficulties faced by those outside of the church are generally faced by those within.

A significant element of the pressure upon marriage is the individualism we referred to in the previous unit. In a culture where the rights and desires of the individual are sacrosanct, bringing two individuals together in a relationship as proximate as marriage is certain to create problems. Genesis 3 provides a penetrating and commentary on the inevitability of marital strife and its causes.

The break-up of the extended family — largely due to increased mobility — has contributed significantly to the strain placed on marriage. The oft-quoted African proverb claims that 'it takes a village to raise a child'. But Western culture is now prepared to leave it almost entirely to a couple (and, in some cases, single people). Many of the support-structures of previous generations have been removed so that marriage is left exposed and vulnerable.

It is helpful to realise that there is a disposable attitude towards relationships generally in our society. Marriage is not different in kind from other relationships, just different in degree. It is the degree to which it is different that creates the pressure that can break a marriage.

Consequently there is no better place for marriages to be nurtured than in a corporate setting for two principal reasons:

1. Christian community provides the context to learn what it means to be individuals-in-community. This is a foundational truth to learn if we are to live successfully with others generally and with a spouse in particular. If the world's prevailing culture reinforces individualism, a different culture is necessary to combat it and to present an alternative.

Church is a great context to learn what it means to live in relationship with others. It is the location in which my self-preoccupation will be confronted. This will happen as I hear the Bible being taught "publicly and from house to house" (Acts 20:20) by faithful teachers of God's word. It will happen as I am encouraged and rebuked by my brothers and sisters as they take responsibility for my godliness. It will happen as I respond to the call of the Lord Jesus to love God with all my heart and my neighbour as myself. It will happen as God's truth, working together with circumstances, shows me that *this is not my world and I am not God*. It will happen when I sin and the church responds to me in love, providing the ideal context for repentance.

On my own I do not possess the 'skills' necessary to live with another person. Everything in both nature and nurture militate against it. Being part of a community where Christians are taking seriously their responsibility for one another is an essential part of what it means to be human.

Exercise

Read Ephesians 5:22-6:9 and Colossians 3:18-4:1.

Why is it significant that instructions to wives and husbands are within wider lists, all of which are addressed to the whole church?

Who then has a responsibility for husbands and wives (and children, slaves, and so on) to be godly?

2. Christian community provides the best context in which marriages can flourish. This is not a pragmatic assertion. It is a theological conviction. The church needs to know what is involved in being a godly wife or husband for the simple reason that the rest of the community has its part to play in helping them to be precisely that. In Ephesians 5 the specific command to the wives to be subject to their husbands (verse 22) immediately follows the general command to “be subject to one another” (verse 21).

In the contemporary context marriage can be little more than ‘plural individualism’. It is being asked to bear a load it was not intended to bear. Setting a marriage within the wider context of a church where relationships matter puts it in its intended environment and within effective support structures. It does this:

- By having people around the couple who will hold them accountable to their vows
- By giving the couple a focus wider than themselves so that their relationship does not become insular and self-serving
- By helping the couple realise that their marriage has an important role to play in modelling the relationship between Christ and his Church, so granting them a vision far larger than their own relationship

If marriages are to be sustained in a hostile environment, we need to see Christian community as the God-ordained context for their support.

Bereavement

One of the most thrilling examples of church-planting in the New Testament is the church in Thessalonica. It seems likely that Paul spent only a few weeks in the city before being forced to leave because of fierce opposition (Acts 17:1-9). Yet a vibrant and model community of God’s people was left behind (1 Thessalonians 1:6-8).

This does not mean that they were perfect. Luke Johnson suggests that the situation with the church in Thessalonica was similar to other churches founded by the apostle: “an enthusiastic reception of his message did not necessarily mean a thorough grasp of it”.¹⁰ So, although there was much about the church to encourage Paul, he had to address

¹⁰ Johnson, T, L; *The Writings of the New Testament: An Interpretation* (SCM Press, 1999), 281

specific practical issues such as sexual conduct (1 Thessalonians 4:1-8) and the nature of the hope set out in the gospel (1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11).

Exercise

Read 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11.

How does Paul answer the Thessalonians' implicit questions about what happens to Christians who have died and when the Lord will return?

What does he tell them?

What does he tell them to do? (4:18; 5:11)

In both 4:18 and 5:11 Paul tells the Christians to care for each other. As a young and vulnerable community of Christians facing real opposition while struggling with painful issues of life and death, Paul reminds them of their responsibility for each other.

Paul is conscious of this pain and so he speaks truth to them. He does not want them "to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep" because he does not want them to "grieve as others do who have no hope." (4:13). Gospel truth is the means of ameliorating their pain. It is all that Paul has to give them and it is all that they need to give to one another. What he then does is leave these truths in their hands so they have the resources to "encourage one another with these words". From Paul's perspective bereavement counselling is a community project.

The particular nature of Paul's directives about mutual encouragement has more force when we read them within the theological framework established in this module that 'what I am' as a human being is an individual-in-community. Intimate natural relationships bear eloquent testimony to that truth. Relationships enrich, shape and define us which is why solitary confinement is considered a severe form of punishment. The pain of bereavement is acute because losing someone close to us is like losing a part of oneself. It leaves us with a 'broken heart'. It brings with it intense feelings of isolation and abandonment. Those left behind often talk about a sense of anger towards the person who has died for leaving them bereft. And there is often anger at God.

Being part of a Christian community in which pastoral care is recognised as a community project is a vital means of alleviating some of that pain. Having people there who genuinely care and truly sympathise is obviously important. We are called to "weep with those who weep" (Romans 12:15). This kind of empathy is an essential part of Spirit-generated fellowship. More significant though, because it is more distinctive, is having people who will "encourage one another and build one another up" (1 Thessalonians 5:11) by speaking truth gently and clearly.

What kind of "truth spoken in love" (Ephesians 4:15) is needed in the midst of the emotional turmoil of bereavement? Truth about God, certainly: truth about his character and commitment are essential. The gospel tells us that he is a good God who is committed

to our good. He is relentless and ruthless in the implementation of his plan to conform us to the image of his Son. Even when bad things happen, he is working out all things in accordance with his will. Sometimes the circumstances of the bereavement will make those assertions seem hard to accept which means that they are all the more indispensable. *Not* to speak those truths about God to one another is not only to abandon the one suffering to 'meaninglessness', it is also to dishonour God and rob him of his glory.

Truth about sin also has to be spoken. Suffering almost always exposes heart issues. In the providence of God, bereavement often reveals what idolatries lie deep within. A particularly close relationship has a capacity like nothing else to assume the status of an idol. We should remember that even very good things can be idols. It is not treasuring something *per se* that is the problem, but valuing it too highly. An intimate relationship with another person is a gift from God, but it is easy to lose sight of the Giver and only see the gift. The way we respond to the loss of that person will show what status they occupied in our affections. Lovingly speaking truth at the appropriate time is the privilege and responsibility of God's people so that we each might "grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ." (2 Peter 3:18)

Truth about life is also relevant. The nature of this present age is that of "creation subjected to futility" (Romans 8:20). So often our expectations are shaped by the surrounding culture more than by the word of God. Disease, death and decay are features of a fallen world. This does not mean that we are nonchalant or apathetic when calamity strikes. Jesus wept when confronted with the death of his friend Lazarus (John 11:35). As Christians we should feel keenly the evils of this world. Yet we ought not to be taken by surprise. We can share the confidence of the apostle Paul when he wrote that "the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us" (Romans 8:18). Every tragedy should cause us to long for the age to come where "death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore" (Revelation 21:4).

These truths are communicated most effectively in a context of on-going mutual care. If the person sees herself as an individual-in-community, they will be more ready to receive this kind of support and more likely to be encouraged by it.