

## The Politics of Caring: Pastoral Theology in an Age of Conflict and Change

### John Swinton

In his book 'Paid to Care,' Alasdair Campbell states that one of the basic needs which human beings have is to care and to be cared for.

The overall aim of pastoral care is the aim of ministry as a whole, i.e. to increase love between people and between people and God. Pastoral care is, in essence, surprisingly simple. It has one fundamental aim: To help people to know love both as something to be received and as something to give. (Campbell 1985 p. 1)

In other words, pastoral care is an expression of our common humanity: one broken person reaching out to another broken person and together reaching towards healing. Now whilst Campbell might well be correct in suggesting that to care and be cared for is a basic human need, his suggestion that pastoral care is 'surprisingly simple,' if taken too literally, can appear 'surprisingly simplistic.' The enabling of love is always complicated, often messy and rarely simple. Nevertheless, Campbell's basic point is correct. In the midst of the complex therapeutic theories and methods that surround contemporary pastoral care, there is something to be said for reminding carers that their primary task is to love and to enable people to love.

However, human beings are complicated creatures and enabling love and care is a complex task which takes place against a backdrop of contradictory values and oppressive social structures which pull together to form the real experience of those whom we seek to care for. There are a multitude of vital dimensions to the caring task which very often lie hidden from the uncritical eye. One thing that we have gained from listening to the voices of Freud, Jung, Rogers and others is that the human mind is a complex entity that is profoundly influenced by a myriad of interlocking psychological, social and spiritual forces. One thing which we have learned from listening to the voices of feminist and liberation theologians, is the importance of the hidden dynamics of power within each interpersonal encounter and the crucial impact of wider social and political structures which underlie and deeply impact upon our attempts to love and to enable love. Successfully enabling love will necessarily involve pastoral participation in each of these realms: the in-

terpersonal, the spiritual *and* the collective socio-political.

And it is here that we find a major problem with contemporary approaches to pastoral care. Whilst there has been a tremendous focus on the *psychological* and the *spiritual*, the importance of the *social* and *political* dimensions of human beings is sadly under-represented within the pastoral literature and within the training schemes which seek to prepare carers in the art of loving. Yet these 'hidden dimensions' lie at the very heart of the caring task and profoundly impact upon the well being of the individual and the ability of the carer to enable love. With one or two notable exceptions, the vast majority of those who are writing and reflecting on contemporary pastoral care do so from a perspective that is fundamentally acontextual. (Pattison 1994, Lartey 1997, Selby 1983) In other words, the care which is carried out, whilst perhaps successfully meeting the *perceived* interpersonal needs of people, pays little or no attention to the impact which the wider social context has upon individuals and the development and maintenance of their problems.

### Human Beings as Whole Persons

This is a strange situation when one considers the *embodied* nature of human beings, revealed paradigmatically in the incarnation. Whilst the Cartesian tendency to fragment the individual into discrete parts, each of which comprises the domain of particular 'specialists,' still holds much claim on the popular psyche, a Hebraic conception of human beings informs us that we are neither bodies, nor souls nor spirits. Biblically speaking we are all of these things. For a long time we in the West, and the church is very much included in this 'we,' have been dependant on Hellenistic and Cartesian understandings of human beings as comprising of two or perhaps three very different parts: *body*, *mind* and sometimes *soul/spirit*. For the most part within Western culture, it is the mind that has been predominant in our definition of what it means to be human and it is the mind that has been given priority over the other aspects of human beings. However, when we turn to scripture we find a very different picture of what human beings

are. John Robinson sums up a Hebraic picture of human beings thus: the human being

is an animated body, and not an incarnated soul.' ... Man does not have a body, he is a body. He is flesh-animated-by-soul, the whole conceived as a psychospiritual unity: 'The body is the soul in its outward form. There is no suggestion that the soul is the essential personality, or that the soul (nephesh) is immortal, while flesh (basar) is mortal. (Robinson 1957 p. 14)

Although the entities of *body*, *mind* and soul exist, they exist as *aspects* of the person and as such cannot be understood without reference to the other. Body mind and spirit can only truly be understood within the context of a mutually interacting continuum within which *all* aspects of the person interact to bring them to their full humanity. As Glen Whitlock puts it,

The human person is a totality. It is not the body or the mind that acts, but it is the total person. It is the total 'I' who confronts God. It is the total self that is responsible to God. Whitlock 1964 p. 10)

Whatever happens in one realm of the human person can and does have a profound impact on the others. Now, if this analysis of the human condition is correct, then it seriously changes the paradigm within which we understand the practice of caring. If human beings are whole creatures, and if, what happens in one realm of the person does in fact have profound effects on the other areas, then pastoral care cannot simply be private and interpersonal. Pastoral care cannot simply focus on a person's psychological or spiritual processes apart from the wider social and political context within which they experience these things. Human beings are whole creatures who are inextricably bound into history and deeply involved within specific contexts, contexts that can impact greatly on the caring process. Pastoral care must inevitably have a critical awareness of the social and political context into which it seeks to minister in order that it can discern those forces which lie beyond the interpersonal encounter, yet impact deeply upon it. If we are to be effective in the task of loving and enabling others to love, there is a need for an approach to care which views not only the individuals whom one seeks to care for, but also the whole community within which they works out their lives.

Authentic pastoral care necessarily encompasses the structures, values and ideologies that mould and bind that community together.

### 'Looking Within' and 'Looking Around'

In his book 'An Introduction to Pastoral care,' Charles Gerkin suggests that pastoral carers must *look within*, that is, they must explore the inner dynamics of individual persons to enable them to find relief and release from past traumas and difficulties. Interpersonal work is an important and necessary, aspect of the pastoral task. However, looking within is only part of the pastoral task. Gerkin suggests that at the same time as we look within, we must also look *around*. We must ask piercing questions about what is going on within the surrounding social, economic and political situations and explore and expose how these may be impacting upon the situations we are dealing with. 'What in the social situation of the people receiving care may be causing or exacerbating people's distress?' 'Are the social structures that surround the lives of those under our care providing social supports that people need in order for their lives to flourish?' (Gerkin 1997) Questions such as these are fundamental to holistic, prophetic pastoral practice.

### Seeing the World Differently

In Romans 12:2 Paul says 'Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is his good, pleasing and perfect will.' Now there is a deal of debate as to precisely what Paul means by the word 'mind,' but it seems that he is pointing towards an inner change which enables people to, in a sense, 'see the world through the eyes of God.' I would want to suggest to you that this renewing of the mind, or the inner self, is fundamental to the task of authentic pastoral care in a world which is filled with conflict and which is incessantly changing. In order to change the world, we first have to change ourselves. In a very real sense *we need to begin to see the world differently* and in seeing differently, seek to change not only the immediate situation, but also the wider social situations, which forms the context for individual care. Such a ministry of personal, social and cultural transformation will involve not only advocacy on behalf of oppressed and injured individuals, but also as Walter Bruegemann puts it, efforts to 'nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the con-

sciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us.' (Bruegemann in Gerkin p. 92) What is being called for here is the development of a new consciousness that reveals the necessary complexity of the pastoral task as it is worked out in a world of conflict and change. *We need to see the world differently.*

## Hidden Agendas: The Politics of Counselling

As we reflect on contemporary pastoral practice, we have to ask the question: Does our practice *really* indicate that we see things differently? Do we *really* 'look around' at the wider implications of our pastoral practice and the hidden dynamics that lie behind and within the situations of the individuals whom we seek to care for? Just how critical are we of our pastoral practice? One form of caring that has taken priority over others within the recent history of pastoral care is the ministry of counselling. Counselling is so much a part of pastoral care that there is a danger that we forget to ask critical questions of it; that we ignore the possibility that it might look differently, if we look at it *differently*. When we actually reflect critically on counselling, we find that, useful and important as it is as a form of pastoral care, there are a number of serious difficulties with it.

There can be no doubt that counselling is a phenomenally popular form of caring within the Western world. In the United Kingdom there are 460 training courses and some 20,000 people participating in some form of counselling training. (Goodliff 1998 p. 13) Compare that with the amount of emphasis religious communities place on for example, community building courses, or the care of people with severe learning disabilities, or serious mental illness or even training for the ministry, and you can see how we have come to see this particular form of caring as somehow superior to others.

Counselling fits in well with a climate of individualism and a capitalist economy that seeks to commodify everything including personal health. The idea that we can commodify a personal relationship and sell it for profit provides an interesting paradigm of contemporary approaches to health and health care. Whilst the difficulties surrounding the finances of pastoral counselling may be more acute within the American context (Couture and Hunter 1995), the idea of a '50 minute hour' and the professional credibility which accreditation gives to a pastor fits in well with the

medical model of care which has been so influential within western approaches to care. Such 'professional status' also enables ministers to find a strong sense of identity within a cultural context that is rapidly making their role less clear.

But perhaps a more important critical observation is the fact that counselling is an exclusive form of caring. Roger Hurding points out that

Research and simple observation of counselling practice have suggested that many counsellors get trapped into offering most help to what Schofield has described as the YAVIS client - young, attractive, verbal, intelligent and successful. This ... points up a particular temptation in counselling which is, in effect, to offer the most help to those who, perhaps, are in least need. This is not to deny that there are many YAVIS people who are needful but to state that, sadly, older, unattractive, tongue-tied, less intelligent, and unsuccessful people may have less appeal to the counsellor at the human level. (Hurding 1986 p. 36)

Also, whilst the Western world is affluent enough to be able to offer counselling and psychotherapy to all who need it, in reality such things as economics, geography, stigma and social class, work towards the exclusion of many 'ordinary' people from the possibility of receiving this form of intervention.

Quite apart from these serious difficulties, the very process of counselling poses significant problems for many people. Its emphasis on the complex use of language coupled with the quest for insight and self-revelation inevitably excludes many people who are not articulate and who are unable to reflect and develop the type of insight that is necessary for successful therapeutic intervention. For example, many elderly people, persons with learning disabilities and those who suffer from major mental illness can become excluded from a system of pastoral care that focuses primarily on counselling. (Swinton 1999 (a))

Is there a danger that we have drunk just a little too deeply from the spring that pours out the Spirit of the age? Could it be that the modern 'secular' emphasis on counselling and the unremitting quest for psychological balm and freedom from anxiety which marks our age, has blinded us to some vital aspects of pastoral

care both on the interpersonal and on the socio-political levels. In our quest for 'therapeutic excellence,' is there not a real danger that other important gifts are being overlooked, and worse that pastoral care is beginning to be conceived as a specialist enterprise rather than something which is carried out by the whole people of God? Or perhaps worse, has our pastoral ministry simply become an agent for re-socialisation rather than a force for change; a form of care which simply reinforces Marx's criticism of religion as 'the opium of the people?' Have we become so trapped within the liminality of the counselling experience that we no longer desire to return to the world?

Now I wouldn't want people to misunderstand what I am saying here. I am not in any way anti-counselling. Quite the opposite I think counselling is an important form of ministry for the church. Counselling is a useful pastoral tool. But on its own it is *not* sufficient to provide an adequate response to the increasing amount of psychological distress that is found within contemporary western society. When we 'look around,' in the way that Gerkin suggests, we see that the counselling ministry is not value-neutral or value free. It embodies a particular way of seeing the world that privileges particular sections of the community to the exclusion of others. Our approach to counselling, as with our approach to all of our caring, has to be critical, prophetic and culturally aware. If we don't we risk excluding some of the most vulnerable and needy people within our communities. What I am suggesting is that we need to widen our horizons, and look around lest we should miss some things which are vitally important.

### Seeing the World From Another Side

So how can we hold in tension the necessary inward and outward dimensions of pastoral care? How can we explore the wider context of care whilst at the same time holding on to the benefits which we have gained from our use of the therapeutic tradition. In attempting to answer these questions, the first thing that I would want to emphasise strongly is that it is crucial that we do not lose or lessen the importance of the interpersonal dimensions of pastoral care. Our God is a personal and relational God who seeks out the individual in the midst of their pain and offers comfort and solace in suffering and joy. The enabling of people to cope with suffering on a personal level remains at the heart of the pastoral task. Nevertheless,

personal suffering always takes place within specific contexts that may contribute to, or may even be the cause of the person's suffering, and it is simply not good enough for pastoral carers to abrogate responsibility for these wider aspects of care and to retreat into the relative safety of their interpersonal encounters. Freud's work on the unconscious has taught us that what we see is only the tip of the iceberg. Symptoms that manifest themselves in a person, anxiety, depression, misplaced words, are indications of deeper psychological processes that lie behind that which is seen. Psychoanalysis and to a lesser degree counselling, is designed to develop an understanding of the *meanings* of the symptoms and in so doing, get to the 'real' heart of the problem. I would want to suggest that we adopt a similar principle as we seek to discern the nature of individual problems and to deal with them effectively and empathetically. We need to dig a little bit deeper and look a little bit wider if we are to truly love and to enable love. We need to move beyond what is obvious to what is hidden and when we find what is hidden, seek to change it.

In order to do this we need to complement traditional pastoral images and tasks with new one's which suit us for the task of prophetic caring. We need to think about what such images as 'the pastor as liberator' might mean for a person struggling with their sexuality in a context where homosexuality is pathologised and deemed to be incompatible with authentic human living. We need to think what the image of the 'pastor as empowerer' might mean for someone whose life is apparently the property of their employers; there's to do with as they please and to send to wherever they desire. We need to think what it means to be a pastoral prophet. "A Prophets speak new truths to situations that are exhibiting injustice, or systems that have lost their way and are now functioning in a way that is a fundamental distortion of their original intention. The prophet recognises the weakest and most vulnerable within a community and takes a public stance against injustices which are perpetrated against them by unjust individuals and/or systems. Prophets recognise the personhood of the weak and adopt a powerful stance as advocate for the needy." (Swinton 1999(b)) Within a healthcare system that is constantly in danger of exhibiting such injustices, pastoral carers in general and chaplains in particular are called to interpret public policy which may have an agenda quite at odds with the fundamental principles of healthcare work: optimum *physical, psychological, spiritual and social well-being*. We need to discern whether

the structures and value systems which lie behind particular policies and systems are humane and appropriate for the practice of human living? We need to think about what it might mean for our identity to be defined by the relationship of friendship, when we reflect on the subversive and sacrificial nature of the founder of our faith who befriended tax collectors and sinners and ultimately laid down his life for these same friends.

For example, chaplains are potentially well placed to influence the functioning of the wider organisation which may well be having a profound impact upon the individual situations with which we are dealing. Chaplains can contribute to decisions that ensure that the rights and needs of people are respected. For example, within a hospital situation they can speak out against the under staffing which is putting an incredible strain on staff and jeopardising effective care of patients, or specific policies that may be forcing people to return home irrespective of the particular needs of the individual. Similarly community chaplains and ministers can be a powerful prophetic voice within the community speaking out against the injustices of political policies which bring about unemployment, which in turn leads to the type of depression which many have to deal with on a day to day basis. Likewise they are in a perfect position to uncover some of the tyrannies which are inherent within current community care policies by acting as advocates and protectors of some of the most vulnerable people within society.

However, experience informs me that the temptation is for ministers, chaplains and in fact all pastoral carers, to define their work according to its private and interpersonal dimensions. The temptation is to shy away from involvement in the wider, more complex, messier socio-political aspects of care by retreating into the relative safety of the interpersonal encounter. Part of the reason for this is that we are simply not trained to be prophets. We are very often not equipped with the necessary skills, which will enable us critically to reflect upon our own practice and to explore the wider dimensions of our practice. There is an educational deficit for which those who train pastoral carers must take responsibility. But perhaps the main reason for our tentativeness when it comes to wider aspects of care, stems from our uncertainty about our own identity. We are so used to seeing ourselves as interpersonal carers, as shepherds guiding the lost flock, that the idea of pastors as prophets or liberators

breaks into our self image in a way which is challenging and for many of us apparently inappropriate. There is a real need to re-vision our selves; to see ourselves differently in order that we can minister more effectively to the needs of whole people in the whole of their worlds. We need to become prophets as well as pastors; bearers of new images as well as bearers of tradition; instigators as well as reconcilers. We need to see ourselves differently in order that we can see the world differently. And importantly, we have to begin to listen to those other voices which are now beginning to be heard by the church in general, the voices of women, people of colour, the disabled, the mentally ill, those who are very often the victims of oppression and injustice, much of which is so ingrained within our thinking that we don't even notice it! We need to allow these fresh voices to change the shape and dimensions of our caring. Pastoral carers need to begin to see the world through the eyes of *all* of its people and listen to all of the voices through which God is speaking. Pastoral carers can no longer 'innocently' work with models of pastoral care which were designed to deal with the needs of one class, one gender, one idea of what it means to be human. We need to examine our models of care in the light of their impact upon those whom we seek to care for.

We can no longer turn our back on the ideologies and value systems which inflict pain and sadness on those sections of the community who are very often least equipped to deal with it. The transformation and renewal of our minds that Paul calls for must manifest itself in a new way of seeing the world and a new way of *being* in the world; a new way of caring for the world which seeks to transform the world. Above all other things we as pastoral carers are called to embody and live out a new vision of the world. We must develop skills, not only of interpreting the individual 'living human documents' whom we deal with day by day and whom we constantly seek to interpret and understand, but also of critically analysing the wider social dimensions of the personal situations we encounter. We need to learn how to be prophetic interpreters of cultures.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, pastoral care, whilst incorporating the interpersonal dimensions of human existence, is considerably broader and deeper than simply dealing with individual problems. As a process which takes place within history, pastoral care *seeks to reveal the ulti-*

*mate in the penultimate; and to image God in His very being by revealing the ways in which a God of justice, peace and healing works out his care in a world of conflict which desperately needs reconciling.* Importantly, pastoral care is not simply a task of the religious professional or the specialist, but has to do with the whole church community *acting out* the gospel and in acting it out revealing a new way of being human. One of our primary tasks as pastoral carers in whichever context we seek to minister, is to enable others to become pastoral carers. Pastoral care has to do with enabling each member of the community to grow to love and to care not simply for one another but for the whole of God's creation and particularly those creatures within it who are made in His image. Pastoral care is therefore wider than the quest for the solution of problems and the overcoming of difficulties. It has to do with community, community building and enabling the revelation of a new way of living in the world and for the world. To effectively do this it has to be liberating, empowering, prophetic and visionary as well as healing, guiding sustaining and reconciliatory. Only when we approach the caring task from this wider angle can we really actualise and confirm Campbell's suggestion that Pastoral care is, in essence, surprisingly simple: 'To help people to know love both as something to be received and as something to give.'

*John Swinton lectures in Practical Theology at the University of Aberdeen.*

## References

Campbell, Alasdair . *Paid to Care*. SPCK, London. 1985. page 1

- Couture, Pam and Hunter, Rodney. *Pastoral Care and Social Conflict*. Abingdon, 1995
- Hurding, Roger. *Roots and Shoots: A Guide To Counselling and Psychotherapy*. Hodder and Staughton, London. 1986
- Gerkin, Charles. *An Introduction to Pastoral Care*. Abingdon Press, 1997.
- Goodliff, Paul. *Care in a Confused Climate: Pastoral Care in a Postmodern Culture*. Darton, Longman and Todd, 1988
- Lartey, Emmanuel Y. *In Living Colour: An Intercultural Approach to Pastoral Care and Counselling*. Cassel, London. 1997.
- Pattison, Stephen. *Pastoral Care and Liberation Theology* Cambridge University Press, London. 1994
- Robinson John S.T. *The Body*. SCM Press Ltd, London. 1957.
- Selby, Peter. *Liberating God: Private care and Public Struggle*. SPCK, 1983.
- Swinton, John (a) *From Bedlam to Shalom: Towards a Practical Theology of Human Nature, Interpersonal Relationships and Mental Health Care*. Peter Lang Publishers, New York. (In Press)
- Swinton, John (b) 'Reclaiming the Soul: a Spiritual Perspective on Forensic Nursing.' In ) Kettles, a and Robinson, D. (Eds) *Forensic Nursing and Multidisciplinary Care of the Mentally Disordered Offender*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London. (1999)
- Whitlock, Glenn.E. 'The Structure of Personality in Hebrew Psychology.' *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology*: Vol XIV. No 1. January 1960: Pages 3-14