

A Theological Perspective on Missionary Care

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Overview: Member care approaches must proceed from a solid theological foundation. It is thoroughly Biblical and not a secular idea to be rejected. Member care is first of all rooted in the truth that God is the source of all care. It seeks to “incarnate the relevance of God” in our daily lives. This truth must lead to “action toward each other” and shows how God cares through the community of believers. The biblical command for mutual care provides the second theological pillar for member care. The mutual care of “each other, one another” in the church extends to cross-cultural workers as well. So cross-cultural workers, be they Chinese or otherwise, also have the responsibility to look out for and support each other.

The care of missionaries must be imbedded in a theological perspective. It is incumbent upon us to articulate care within the Christian theological perspective so we can respond appropriately to people involved in ministry from a Christian orientation. A Biblical theology of care can inform and infuse the other dimensions of care that are so necessary in a comprehensive approach.

An understanding of traditional systematic theology is important, but we must go beyond that to a theology dealing with the realities of life. If we engage in the practice of psychology, particularly counseling psychology that encounters people in the raw experiences of life, we need a theology that does more than present doctrine or dogmatics. We must move from a theoretical understanding of the Christian faith to a practical application in the stresses and strains of interfacing a world of need and the opposition encountered in that world.

Let me suggest we define theology as *an expression of our encounter with God in the realities of life*. Propositional truth, doctrinal exposition and statements may be important to clarify our understanding of God’s revelation to us, but these must not be substituted for our encounter with God in the issues of life. God longs to be incarnated into the harsh realities of our flesh and blood.

Theology is discovering the relevance of God—His grace and revelation—in the context of life’s pain, uncertainty, frustration, joys, celebrations and decisions. When God meets us in our deepest struggles with sin in our lives or in the lives of others, we are doing theology. Out of the pit of despair and dependency, if we meet God there (and surely he is there), a theology emerges for life that is full of grace and freedom.

The Source of a Theology of Care

A theology of care reflects the relationship between the members of the Trinity, the care of God for us, and the expectation that we will care for one another.

God is at the source of all care. Paul brought this to our attention when he described God (2 Corinthians 1:3) as *the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort*. Additionally, he adds (7:6) that when he was in the depths of depression that *God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus*. Thus, God as the source of care is seen to use others as the means of his action toward us. An added dimension is given to us later (7:13) when it is pointed out that the community of faith in Corinth,

finding Titus burnt out, *refreshed* him. God is the source but individuals or faith communities may be the means by which care is offered.

Some focus on the ministry of the Holy Spirit in comforting believers and transforming them into maturity. The danger is that we let ourselves off the hook by doing so. God is the source of care, but in almost all circumstances, we are the means of such ministry to one another. We have a dramatic and crucial role in each other's lives, as God not only works directly through the Holy Spirit in us, but indirectly through our being touched by the lives of others. As Luther put it, we are priests to each other in our growth toward Christlikeness. The experience of Paul and of Titus mentioned above illustrates that clearly.

Paul elaborates this in Colossians (3:10-17) where he urges us to be *renewed in knowledge in the image of the Creator* which is accomplished as we fulfill the exhortation, *Clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity... Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another.*

Indeed, in our care of one another we put a face on God for each other as Titus did for Paul. That is what Paul so carefully outlined (2 Corinthians 1:3-7) as he spoke of *...the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves received from God...*

Mutuality of Care in New Testament Communities

The culture of Christianity has as its central pillar the mutual nurturing of its members through gifts distributed by the Holy Spirit and freely shared. Thus, we are *built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit...that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ* (Ephesians 2:22; 4:12-13).

Community, where all stand on equal ground before the cross of Christ, is the essence of Christianity. We have differing roles as defined by the gifts sovereignly distributed by the Spirit of God. But, differing roles do not speak of differing value, and there is no room for elitism.

Individualism, with its interest in rights, privileges, egoism and self-actualization, conflicts with the selfless pursuit of others' interests which is modeled by Jesus Christ and intended to be replicated in the lives of His followers. Only individualism that exists in tension with interdependence is compatible with Christianity.

We live the life of Christ in our mortal bodies as we do the theology of care. In 2 Corinthians 4, Paul indicates that although we are but *jars of clay*, we bear a *treasure* showing that the *all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed... the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body... so that his life may be revealed in our mortal body.... Therefore we do not lose*

heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day.

It is this reality and this hope that a theology of care must bring as we minister to one another and to those who serve in the hard places of the world. Our theology must enable us to discover God in the raw experiences of life and enable those to whom we minister to find the reality of our God of compassion at the crossroads of their life's experiences. Neither an intellectual understanding of propositional truth nor a head knowledge of the attributes of God is adequate to incarnate the reality of His presence with us in the streets and highways of life.

Patterns of Care in the New Testament

If the intention of ministry in the New Testament was to *bring people from immaturity to maturity in Christ*, to convert people from “instruments of wickedness” to “instruments of righteousness,” then we may ask, “How did the disciples of Christ seek to accomplish this?” New Testament believers encountered not only the challenge of their paganism but the stressors which came from evangelizing in a hostile environment. Many of the challenges they faced were similar to issues faced today by those for whom we provide care.

If one begins in the Acts of the Apostles and continues through the Epistles in chronological order, one can see a development in the patterns of ministry the apostles carried out. There is a movement from apostle-centered ministry to ministry focused in the mutual relationship of believers as well as the ministry of pastor-teachers and cross-cultural workers. The apostles came to grips with their finitude and knew they would not be around forever, so they transitioned from a single person focused ministry to a focus on the mutual ministry of believers.

Space does not allow me to take you through the Acts and the Epistles in detail, but I will present a summary and focus on a few terms which they used to describe their ministry. The terminology used to describe the ministry of the apostles in earlier writing is rather general and not clearly focused. They speak of teaching, preaching, exhorting to continue in the faith or of establishing the souls of the disciples. In the Epistles the process is more carefully defined as encouraging, comforting, strengthening, edifying and confronting, and there is a distinct shift to the mutual responsibility of believers to exercise this ministry in relation to each other.

There is also clearer definition of different approaches in ministry as being indicated by different situations. For example, *“Therefore, encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing. Now we ask you, brothers, to respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you... And we urge you, brothers, **warn** those who are idle, **encourage** the timid, **help** the weak, **be patient** with everyone.”* (1 Thessalonians 5:11-14) By the time we get to Ephesians, there is a very strong emphasis upon the responsibility of the believers to build each other up as interdependent members of the body. Ministry is diffused among the believers. This is perhaps best summarized by the “one another” passages in the New Testament.

A Spiritual House Built for “One Another” (VanVonderen, 1995)

I. How not to treat our spiritual brothers and sisters:

- Don't bite and devour one another (Galatians 5:15)
- Don't lie to one another (Colossians 3:9)
- Don't speak evil of one another (James 4:11)
- Don't grumble against one another (James 5:9)
- Don't judge one another (Romans 14:3)

If I go against these “one anothers,” someone inevitably gets hurt.

II. Where we can count on help when we need it:

- Accept one another (Romans 15:7)
- Bear one another's burdens (Galatians 6:2)
- Bear with one another, with all humility, gentleness, patience (Eph. 4:2)
- Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another (Eph. 4:32)
- Confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another (James 5:16)

If I actively do these “one anothers”, someone will always be helped.

III. Interactions with other Christians that build us up:

- Pursue what makes for peace, building up one another (Romans 14:19)
- Have the same kind of care for one another (1Corinthians 12:25)
- Admonish (gently warn) one another (Romans 15:14)
- Be devoted to one another, prefer one another, giving credit (Rom. 12:10)
- Serve one another (Galatians 5:13)
- Submit to one another (Ephesians 5:21)
- Regard one another as more important than yourself (Philippians 2:3)
- Be hospitable to one another (1 Peter 4:9)

The Greek word translated “one another” is a part of speech called a “reciprocal pronoun,” which means that both parties will experience the action being done. If the action is positive—love, support, comfort—*both parties will benefit*. And in the case of negative actions—speaking evil, consuming—*both parties lose*.

Fellowship

One of the most foundational ideas is expressed by the word “fellowship” in its various uses. In Hebrews 2:14-18, because the children of men were “fellowshippers” in flesh and blood, Christ came to participate in the same that he might redeem mankind. In Galatians 2:6-10, the right hand of partnership is extended between Paul and the Jerusalem leaders. Fellowship reaches across all racial and cultural boundaries in Ephesians 3:1-12 and Romans 11:11-18. It describes the offering taken by Gentiles to meet the need of poor saints in Jerusalem in Romans 15:26. It describes our participation in the efficacy of Christ's shed blood in 1 Corinthians 10:16.

Let me offer a definition: *Fellowship is entering into another's circumstance or condition in such a manner that your resources in Christ become theirs.*

Edification

The outcome of edification is the controlling standard for relationships and the expression of gifts. In 1 Corinthians 14:5, 12, and 26, gifts are to be exercised to this end and, indeed, the principle is, *Let all things be done for edification*. The image is that of building. I would change the image slightly by suggesting that we are to invite each

other to live rather than to die. *Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.*

The way believers speak to one another is important. Proverbs 18:20 says, *Death and Life are in the power of the tongue.* The Psalmist speaks of those *who have sharpened their tongues like a sword, they aim bitter speech as an arrow* (64:3). Proverbs 12:18 adds, *There is one who speaks rashly like thrusts of a sword.* It is so easy for us to invite each other to die, but edifying is inviting each other to live. *The tongue of the wise brings healing. A soothing tongue is a tree of life. Pleasant words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing to the bones.* (Proverbs 12:18; 15:4; 16:24)

My definition: ***Edification is being to another person what that person needs for their good and resultant growth.***

Encourage/Comfort

The word translated comfort or encourage may be used more frequently than any other word to describe the growth-facilitating relationship we are to have with each other. It can be traced to a word in the Old Testament which means *to cause to breathe again.* The word is often translated “rest” as in Ruth 1:9; Deuteronomy 12:9; Psalm 119:49-50, 76 and Isaiah 51:12; Ps. 23:4; 71:19-21. In the New Testament it is used of the Holy Spirit’s ministry in John (14-17), of Christ’s present ministry in 1 John (2:1), and of God the Father’s ministry to us in 2 Corinthians (1:3ff). It is the most common word used to describe our responsibility to come alongside each other. A related idea is that of bearing one another’s burdens (Romans. 15:10; Gal. 6:2; Rev. 2:20).

There are five different terms in the Old Testament for the word comfort. These words mean to brighten or encourage; to refresh (as with food); to support; to rest in quietness; or to comfort as to give vent to one’s sighs or to sigh with another. The image is what we call resuscitation, which in our context means to restore breathing. This word is used in a variety of contexts such as Genesis 5:29; 37:35; 50:21; Ruth 1:13; 1 Chronicles 7:22; 19:2; Job 2:11; 7:13; 29:25; Psalm 13:4; 71:21; 86:15-17; Ezekiel 31:1-13; and Isaiah 40:1; 49:23; 52:9; 66:12-13. The word is used both of God’s response to people and peoples’ response to each other. The rich imagery of “causing to breathe again” is an apt description of the care we are to provide for each other.

Comfort is coming alongside another to bear him or her and their need that they might be encouraged and strengthened or resuscitated.

Strengthen/Cleave/Endure With

Another group of words captures the imagery of supporting another by coming alongside so that the weaker may lean on, be supported by or be strengthened by the other. (1 Peter 1:12; Luke 9:15; 16:26; Romans 1:11; Acts 3:7, 16; 16:5) Another word may be translated, *to keep oneself directly opposite to any one, to hold to him firmly, or to cleave to him paying him heed.* (Luke 16:13; 1 Thessalonians 5:14; Titus 1:9). Another means *to be slow in developing anger or passion toward another* or to put it positively, *to be long suffering, enduring or patient with another* (Mt. 18:26,29; 1 Corinthians. 13:4; 1 Thessalonians. 5:14; Hebrews. 6:15; James 5:7,8; 2 Peter 3:9).

To strengthen another is to hold tightly and enduringly to another in support in times of stress or testing.

Confrontation

Another group of words brings into focus our responsibility to confront one another with a view to bringing our lives into line with God's revealed will. The word "*nouthesis*" is often translated "admonish" and was used by Jay Adams as descriptive of his understanding of counseling. Other words such as "rebuke" or "reprove" fit into this group.

Confrontation is to kindly, but firmly, bring one another to the awareness of discrepancies or incongruity between our lives and the will of God.

Compassion and Good Will

There is a whole group of words that focus on issues of attitude and quality of relationship and relating. These include kindheartedness, brotherliness, sympathy, harmony, loving affection and being knit together in our relationships. (1 Peter 3:8; Romans 12:10, 16; Philippians 2:2; 4:2; 1 Corinthians 12:25f; Romans 12:15; Hebrews 4:15, 10:32-34; Romans 8:17; Ephesians 4:32; Philemon 12; Matthew 9:36)

We are to foster tender, compassionate, kind and sympathetic emotions toward one another.

The Relevance of a Theology of Care among Mission Personnel

As Christian care givers responding to the needs of missionary personnel, we need a theology of care. The ability to respond with psychometric, diagnostic, clinical and counseling skills is not enough. When our approach is perceived as secular it is frequently rejected in the missions community.

It is important for us to be able to articulate what we do within the cultural and linguistic milieu of the missions community. For someone thoroughly trained in the culture of psychology, counseling within the missions community involves crossing cultural barriers in a manner similar to the experience of missionaries.

My training and ministry experience have provided me with opportunities to work in several cultures, including church, correctional, psychiatric, educational, seminary, medical and mission cultures. These are quite diverse and require an understanding and ability to function within each culture with all its unique aspects of language, expectations, values and patterns of relationship.

How effectively do we cross cultures as we enter a missions environment? Do we insist they learn to communicate in our language or are we prepared to learn their language? The negative reaction of missionaries toward psychologists may have much to do with the different language with which we understand and communicate.

Some may see my suggestion as inviting role conflict. Am I functioning as psychologist or a person delivering pastoral care? Will this confuse the client and/or the counselor? Is it possible to function as a professional counselor in a manner that befits a Christian delivering services in a Christian context? I would argue that we must honor the culture and the belief systems of those to whom we offer services. If we share the same belief system, it is to their advantage and to ours. This might profitably be discussed in terms of our philosophy of integration.

Concluding Comments

If we would speak with maximum relevance in our care for mission personnel, we must develop a theology of care which brings the grace of God into the hard experience of those who serve in harsh circumstances. An intellectual, propositional expression of truth is not enough. We must incarnate the relevance of God in our lives and find him in the pain and pleasure of the lives of others.

In the words of Paul, *The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort [that is 'coming alongside'], comes alongside us in all our tribulation, so that we may come alongside others in any trouble with the same coming alongside by which he came alongside us...* To do so is to invite others to breath again, to live in the grace of God. This alone is sufficient to assist those who choose the hard road of cross-cultural ministry.

The ministry of those such as Paul, who cared with a burdened heart for those he served, models patterns of relationship and ministry that may be emulated by mental health professionals without in any way minimizing the use of their professional skills.

Biblical Relationships For Growth (G.C. Taylor, November, 1995)

Fellowship (Koinonia): entering into another's condition in such a manner that your resources in Christ becomes theirs.

Edification: being to another person what that person needs you to be for his good and resultant growth.

Comfort: coming alongside others to bear them and their needs that they might be encouraged and strengthened.

Confrontation: kindly, but firmly, bringing one another to the awareness of discrepancies or incongruity between our lives and the will of God.

Strengthen/cleave/endure with: to strengthen another and to hold tightly and enduringly to another in support in times of stress or testing.

Compassion and good will: to foster tender, compassionate, kind and sympathetic emotions toward one another.

Leadership: the right to serve others through identifying and exercising stewardship over the gifts and talents they have by grace for the accomplishment of mutual goals.

Authority: authority is for building, not controlling - 2 Corinthians 10:8; 13:10

Authority is for serving, not commanding - 2 Corinthians 12:14-16

Authority is exercised as power in the face of conflict - 1 Corinthians. 5:4f

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