

Nuances in Public Theology

KLC PAPERS | 2.3 | MARCH 2021

A distinctive of good scholarship is that it attends to the nuances of life and our world. As we host public lectures and make them available in written and recorded versions we have thus called this series of lectures and recordings Nuances in Public Theology.

Awakening the Giant: The Doctrine of Creation and Pastoral Ministry

Craig G. Bartholomew

Director of The Kirby Laing Centre for Public Theology in Cambridge

Craig Bartholomew and Bruce Ashford recently published *The Doctrine of Creation: A Constructive Kuyperian Approach* (IVP Academic, 2020). In this paper Craig reflects on the implications of the doctrine of creation for the pastoral ministry. The exquisite artwork by the South African artist Zak Benjamin evokes the extraordinary potential of the church.

INTRODUCTION

The potential of the church for good in the world is staggering. Just reflect on the exquisite description in Paul's writings of the church as *the body of Christ*. Amongst other things this metaphor alerts us to the fact that the ascended Christ desires to continue his ministry in his world through his church. An extraordinary evocation of the potential and vocation of the church! In the Gospel of John comparably we find Jesus saying, "As the Father has sent me so I send you." One could and should spend a long time reflecting on that one word καθὼς (as). This conjunction can be translated as "Just as" and likewise alerts us to the church's ministry as an extension of that of Jesus.

There are many great examples of the potential of the church in history. I think of books like Peter Brown's *Through the Eye of a Needle: Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350-550 AD*. In this tome you see how the church rethought and revolutionized the approach to the poor and to poverty in the ancient world. One thinks naturally of William Wilberforce and the Clapham Sect and their pivotal role in the abolition of slavery. What is less well known but as important is that this same group led the charge against cruelty to animals and founded the (R)SPCA (Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals). More recently I think of the work of one of my heroes, Mother Theresa, wanting to ensure, for example, that no one died alone on the streets of Calcutta.

Truly Christ at work in his world through his church. And so we could continue.

If the sheer potential of the church is to extend the work of Jesus in his world by his Spirit, the shadow side is that an unhealthy church has the potential to do great damage. Writing in 1922 A. G. Sertillanges notes that:

A so-called civilized man of Arkansas eats up a forest in a year to make bad paper on which to print bad books, and he cares nothing about replanting, because he can make his fortune in ten years, and after then, the deluge! The old monks planted and respected the young trees, the hope of the soil and of its sources. It is a parable. All life is thus.¹

In my own beloved South Africa when, during apartheid, white supremacy was legislated in every area of life across the country, white Evangelicals, with some important exceptions, were notable for their silence or active support of the Nationalist government. How, in God's name, was it possible for us proudly to imagine ourselves as continuing Jesus' ministry in his world, when we could not love our neighbour *as ourselves*? And when we witness the recent insurrection at the US Capitol, energised by a great lie that continues to be perpetuated, with banners outside saying things like **JESUS 2020**, I find myself viscerally reacting and saying, "Not in my name." As Sertillanges comments: "Better, in the Church's eyes, the Bedouin, without culture, but loyal and of good morals, than the coarse industrial exploiter or the lettered pirate."²

Pastors are the shepherds of the sheep and a great weight of responsibility rests on our shoulders. What we feed the sheep will shape their lives in God's world for better and for worse. Thus, even as we reflect on the potential of the church in the world I want to focus in this paper on the pastoral ministry in particular.

I served full time in the pastoral ministry for several years and look back on it as some of the best times of my life. When I taught undergraduates in Canada I would tell them that there is nothing quite like the pastoral ministry *when it is healthy*. Of course, "when it is healthy" is an important qualification. Unhealthy pastoral ministry is most unenjoyable and a drain upon one's life and a kind of

¹ A. G. Sertillanges, *The Church: A Comprehensive Study in Ecclesiology*. Translated by A. G. McDougall. (Providence: Cluny, 2020), 314.

² Sertillanges, *The Church*, 306.

death to a congregation. But the pastoral ministry as accompanying the LORD Christ in his shepherding of his sheep, alive with the Spirit to the glory of God, is a truly extraordinary, hallowed vocation.

Alas, it is too often not experienced this way, and if we had time I would love to hear how you are feeling about the pastoral ministry today, if that is your vocation. Today I want to talk about one vital way of restoking the fires of the pastoral ministry, namely through *a retrieval of the doctrine of creation*. We all believe this doctrine – it is enshrined at the beginning of our creeds – but theologies of church life in which the doctrine of creation, and its correlate in the incarnation, are allowed to leaven the whole are not nearly as common as they need to be. Most obviously a deficient doctrine of creation leads to:

A CENTRIPETAL RATHER THAN A CENTRIFUGAL PASTORAL MINISTRY

As you know, centripetal is turned in whereas centrifugal is turned out. Now, of course, there is an entirely appropriate way in which an institutional church is turned in. As church we gather to meet with Christ, to hear his Word and to feast upon him, as well as to fellowship with our brothers and sisters in Christ. In his commentary on the Mary-Martha story with its exhortation to attend to the one thing necessary, Augustine says, I know what Mary was doing: she was eating Jesus. This is, of course, a eucharistic metaphor, but a truly delightful one. And the gathered church is constantly to be inviting us to the messianic feast; through Word and sacrament enabling us to eat and drink Jesus so that we are satiated on him as we go out again into his world to be the body of Christ.

So, yes, there is a healthy inwardness to institutional church life. Where a church becomes unhealthily centripetal is when this activity becomes an end in itself. When our worship – cf. Romans 12:1-2 – ends at the church door on the way out then you know you are amidst a distorted, centripetal church. There are many other signs of such distortion: when church involvement becomes the be-all of the Christian life, when the holiest vocation is defined as serving full time in the institutional church, when as a result numbers become the be-all and end-all of church growth, when the institutional church becomes a local empire that competes with other churches to be the flagship church in an area, etc.

How is it that such distortion has become common across the church landscape of our cultures?

The answer is that so much Western Christianity has maladjusted to modernity's *privatisation of religion*. Many, many good things came with the Enlightenment but its relationship to religion was fraught. In the Marxist Eastern block the answer was straightforward: eliminate religion. The West's response was far more seductive: Ban religion from the great public spheres of life but allow for free, privatised religion, allow for religion as a leisure activity, a personal preference in one's spare time, provided it not seek entry to the public spheres of life. In the latter areas scientific, neutral reason must reign supreme.

Far too much Christianity in the West embraced this newly assigned role. Perhaps Evangelicalism has been particularly vulnerable to this malaise. A strength of Evangelicalism is that it adapts well and quickly to cultural change. A danger is uncritical adaptation which subverts the mission of the church. Such maladjusted Christianity bypasses the doctrine of creation in the race to the cross in order to articulate *individual* salvation and *personal* evangelism and *personal* involvement in the institutional church. Converts are inducted into a church view rather than a world view, involvement in the "sacred" trumps involvement in the "secular." The church sets the rules for church and perhaps family life; the secular sets the rules for all the rest. Listen in to the prayers of such churches and it will sound as though we worship the local deity. Attend to such sermons and Bible studies and all applications will be about personal salvation and church and family life.

Do you see how this yields a church turned in on itself rather than opening out towards the world? You can only achieve this if you let go of a robust doctrine of creation and its correlate in the incarnation. How do we recover from this and inoculate ourselves against it? How do we awaken the giant? First of all we need to do some theological work.

APPROACHING THE PASTORAL MINISTRY THEOLOGICALLY

You may have come across the saying that if you aim for nothing you are bound to hit it! Sometimes it seems to me that that is how we approach the pastoral

ministry. To escape such folly, we need to think hard about the pastoral ministry, we need to ask the right questions that will open it up so that we can know what to aim at. Questions like: what is the pastoral ministry for? What should a good job description for a pastor look like? What activities are absolutely central to the pastoral ministry and which ones are peripheral?

In my view the logic here is not complex. First, the pastoral ministry is an aspect of the institutional or gathered church. This means that we will not understand the pastoral ministry if we do not wrestle with ecclesiology. How should we think ecclesiology?

In a small book, *The Church*, by the late South African theologian Johan Heyns, Heyns argues perceptively that the doctrine of the church must be approached through the lens of *the kingdom of God*, the main theme of Jesus' public ministry. However, early in the 20th century our understanding of the kingdom was distorted when the view took hold that kingdom is about reign and not realm. This is a false dichotomy. Kingdom is about reign, the reign, as Tom Wright puts it, of Israel's God. God is King. But it is also about realm, about *kingdom*. For what is God rightly king over but his creation? Thus the lens of the kingdom backs us into the lens of creation, for, as the NT so eloquently puts it, from him, and to him and through him are all things. Bishop David Atkinson tells me that the late Bishop Roy Williamson, former Bishop of Southwark, was perceptively fond of saying to clergy who maintained a "high" doctrine of Ministry: "You can have as high a doctrine of Ministry as you like, as long as your doctrine of the Church is higher; and you can have as high a doctrine of the Church as you like, as long as your doctrine of the Kingdom is higher."

The next question, logically, is what is the relationship between the church and the kingdom? Lesslie Newbigin evocatively captures the heart of the church as a "sign of the kingdom." The institutional church is where we gather around the LORD Christ to hear his royal word, to feast on him, to be renewed with a vision of the grand *missio Dei* of which we are part, to be equipped for works of service of the LORD Christ as we are scattered when we leave through the church door into every part of his realm. In this way the very centripetal nature of the institutional church delivers a phenomenal centrifugal force. When we exit through the

church doors, another week of worship begins, and healthy church life leaves us renewed and reinvigorated for another week of full-time service of the LORD Christ to whom the world in every aspect rightly belongs. Bishop David Atkinson provided me with a wonderful illustration of this. He recalls the story of a church building, with the main doorway so painted that as the congregation moved out of church and into the wider world at the end of a service, they saw written above the exit door: "You are now entering a place of worship." As a theologian friend once put it to me, when we gather around Christ he stands with his face to his world.



Now, if the institutional church is to generate its phenomenal centrifugal force, it helps to know into what this force is being generated. We all recognize, even if not consciously, that the institutional church is one part of our lives, one aspect of our societies. What then are the other parts and how does the institutional church relate to them?

APPROACHING THE PASTORAL MINISTRY SOCIETALLY

The pastoral ministry *is* a central function of the institutional church. This is its glory! But, as the most basic reflection reveals, the institutional church is only a small part of a society made up of many other spheres, spheres such as family,

schools and universities, banks, health care, leisure and entertainment, food, shops, government, etc.

Church members are embodied humans. They are not just souls but three dimensional humans. They have emotional lives, they have family lives, they work in different sectors of society, they move in and out of the many different parts of our societies. For this reason some such distinction as that between *the institutional church* and *the organic church*³ – the life of God’s people as a whole - is vitally important. Uniquely, the pastoral minister and staff remain to a large extent within the institutional church sphere.

The question thus pushes itself to the fore: *What is the purpose of the institutional church and how does it relate to the life of the people of God as a whole and to other parts of society?* In my experience this question is far too rarely reflected upon, and yet it is absolutely vital. Failure to think through the purpose of the church leaves it flailing amidst the privatisation of religion, not knowing which way to turn.

We have already provided an answer to this question above through Newbigin’s articulation of the church as a sign of the kingdom. Another way to get at this is through the great correlate of the doctrine of creation in the Bible, namely *the incarnation*. A former Oxford theologian, Scott Holland, wrote, “If we believe in the Incarnation then we will certainly believe in the entry of God into the very thick of human affairs. That is just what our faith means. It is, itself, the assertion that God and man cannot be kept apart in separate compartments. God must be concerned with every scrap and detail that is human. There is nothing of ours that Jesus Christ did not make his own. We cannot believe this, and yet leave Him out of account anywhere or in anything. The Incarnation itself, then, is the decisive reason why Jesus Christ has a social and economic significance.”

In the institutional church, we, week in and week out, re-enact the great drama of the Bible, through Word and sacrament we re-centre the lives of God’s people in the Trinitarian God, the God who has come to us in Jesus, *in the flesh*. If Jesus is the incarnate one, then it follows that the church will incarnate itself in all areas

³ Abraham Kuyper’s distinction.

of life, seeking to extend the reputation and aroma of Christ to all of the creation. If this is the Christ we proclaim how could we possibly contain the life of his followers from flowing out into all areas of life? Only by disabling the flow through a false privatisation of religion, a loss of the doctrine of creation, and a consequent reduction of the great vocabulary of the church.

The great and rich vocabulary of the church: salvation, redemption, sanctification, glorification, eschaton, etc., can only be rightly, richly and fully understood against the backdrop of the doctrine of creation. As one author eloquently puts it, creation is the very stuff of redemption. Redemption certainly includes personal salvation, but the *exodus* (cf. Luke's use of this word in his account of the Transfiguration) which Christ came to achieve, is not just from Egypt but the exodus of the whole creation from sin and death. What is salvation and what is sanctification all about? Great questions! Hans Rookmaker, the Dutch art historian, would ask his students "Why (to what end) does God save you?" His glorious answer: to become fully human. And a helpful way to define sanctification is as becoming whole; not in the self-indulgent sense, but in the sense of becoming fully human as God intended us to be. The Danish philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard has a wonderful expression for this: the knight of faith. And in his *Fear and Trembling* he has a marvellous description of what such a person looks like: fully human. And we, and those we pastor, are called now to be signs of this kingdom that has come, of this exodus, and of the coming consummation.

APPROACHING THE PASTORAL MINISTRY VOCATIONALLY

Now how exactly does the pastoral ministry fit amidst all of this?

The doctrine of creation alerts us to the fact that all of life is lived in response to God, either submissively or in rebellion, but always re-sponsively. It also alerts us to the fact that the belief that only those in the pastoral ministry or on the mission field are in the full-time service of God is a heresy, as Romans 12:1-2 makes crystal clear. The only adequate response to the Christ event (Romans 1-11) is to offer our "bodies," the totality of our lives, as a living sacrifice. Note the irony here. One can only be a sacrifice by dying. But it is as we die to the false self and come alive to the true self that we become fully alive, fully human. As Eugene Peterson puts it,

we are all in holy orders. Or, to use Romans 12 imagery, the role of the pastor is to prepare people to be living sacrifices.

Note in this context just how strange is the pastoral ministry. God's sheep work and live in a glorious variety of areas: teachers, homemakers, parents, politicians, entertainers, doctors and nurses, unemployed, etc. *All in holy orders*. But what they do is to identify some sheep who are particularly gifted in announcing Jesus and caring for the sheep to be set aside to devote themselves full time to prayer, word and sacraments. Why? Why do such a strange thing? Because it is not easy following Christ faithfully amidst their vocations in cultures that are often opposed to the great drama of which they are part. Pastoral ministers, says Eugene Peterson, are set aside to *keep God's people attentive to God*, to week in and week out re-embed them in the grand narrative of Scripture until it becomes their default mode and until they are living it out in their diverse vocations. In this way the doctrine of creation will revolutionize our preaching as it sounds the kingdom note in myriad creative ways, calling and enabling God's people to live under his reign in all areas of their lives in their particular context.

The correlate of the doctrine of creation, as we have noted, is the *incarnation*. In his earth- shattering *Mimesis* – which ought to be required reading for every seminarian – Erich Auerbach points out how the incarnation ushers in a revolution in ancient literature, locating world- shaking events amidst the ordinary. Here is where spiritual direction and pastoring the sheep amidst the glories of the ordinary everyday enter in.

APPROACHING THE PASTORAL MINISTRY GRANULARLY

Word and sacrament are grand sweeping terms. In an established church like the Church of England it sometimes seems that pastors spend their time rushing round baptising the culture which does not want to be baptised! Little time remains for the preparation of the sermonette on Saturday afternoon, but then it is only ever aimed at producing Christianettes! Of course, I am being naughty here. But preaching is a phenomenal calling. To preach in such a way that people are ushered into the presence of God (Martyn Lloyd-Jones); or to set the pulpit on fire with truth (JRW Stott), is a huge and demanding calling. I am not arguing

that the longer the sermon the better. Sometimes ten minutes can deliver a knock-out blow, and sometimes – I know from experience – 1.5 hours can warm the backside but not the heart.

Karl Barth notes insightfully that Jesus took on *Jewish* flesh, his particularity. And God's word is always contextual – alluding to JRW Stott,⁴ Evangelicals are renowned for preaching their missiles from the Bible but they aim them nowhere. Liberals fire their missiles right into contemporary life, but one is often unsure where the missile came from! With the doctrine of creation comes history and context, and the plane of the sermon has to be landed in the particular congregation you serve. To do this you need to know the lives of your sheep intimately. If you want to help them become living sacrifices then you will need to visit them where they spend most of their time and find out what the challenges are of their vocations.

Some pastors specialise in preaching and leave pastoral work to others. I understand this but have never felt comfortable with it. One mediates the Word to the large group and to the individual. As the pastor is becoming more whole, and as the sheep are being formed into the image of the incarnate one, a glory of the pastoral ministry is having the sheep bring their wounds into your office, seeking the balm of the word. What glory, what a privilege!

But, yet again, one that can be abused. The doctrine of creation reminds us that God's Written word is integrally related to his Word in the creation. There is special and general revelation. Insight into humans and our healing comes from both and both are indispensable. The doctrine of creation will prevent you from making the fatal mistake of ignoring medicinal and psychological help and insight, or of thinking that once doctors and psychologists are involved, the Word and prayer are no longer needed.

CONCLUSION

There is so much more to be teased out in terms of the doctrine of creation and pastoral ministry. We could discuss creation and counselling in detail, opening

⁴ See John Stott's *I Believe in Preaching*.

up the relationship between pastoral care and psychology/psychiatry, we could talk about pastoral visiting, we could talk about the limits of the pastorate lest you now falsely think that you need to become an expert in all areas of life, we could discuss the pastoral ministry and evangelism, all important topics.

Our liturgies – if we attend to them closely – are awash with a theology of creation, as is the Bible. Our role is to complement their emphasis with preaching, performance of the sacraments and prayer and pastoral care that open up for God's people the sheer enormity of Christ, and the comprehensive scope of God's reign and grace, and invite them to play their part in that great drama of which we are part.



The Kirby Laing Centre for Public Theology in Cambridge
 Charity registered in England and Wales
 Charity Number: 1191741
 Margaret Beaufort Institute
 12-14 Grange Road
 Cambridge
 CB3 9DU