DIMENSIONS OF THEOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION IN THE PRACTICE OF MINISTRY

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I

There have been numerous recent attempts to relate the practice of ministry to the theological enterprise. These have come from theological educators,[1] particularly those working with Field Education and with Doctor of Ministry students, as well as from those attempting to develop skills for ministry.[2] In spite of this growing concern that theology inform ministry and that the minister function more directly as a religious interpreter, there are few specific heuristic tools which may be employed to help the minister do this in practice. This paper is a beginning attempt to sketch some of the dimensions of theological interpretation pertinent to ministry and to illustrate how they may be employed in the minister's actual function. On the basis of pastoral practice, theological study and teaching, clinical supervision, and work with Doctor of Ministry projects, I have identified four interrelated elements comprising theological interpretation pertinent to the practice of ministry. These will be discussed briefly, and illustrated through application to an experience in ministry. Issues for further consideration are raised at the end of the paper.

II

The purpose of theological interpretation is to enable persons to understand their experiences in the light of a religious heritage, an embodied tradition. It is to make cognitively and affectively explicit from the point of view of an historic faith what is implicit or

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[1]For example, see John Cobb, *Theology and Pastoral Care* (Fortress, 1977), Robert Evans and Thomas Parker, *Christian Theology: A Case Study Approach*, (Harper and Row, 1976), Seward Hiltner, "The Minister's Theological Responsibility," *Princeton Seminary Bulletin*, Vol. II, 2, New Series 1979, and Don Browning, *The Moral Context of Pastoral Care* Westminster 1976). The Lilly Foundation has funded several seminars to help theological faculty relate their work to the concerns of ministry.

[2]Paul Pruyser, *The Minister as Diagnostician* (Westminster 1976) is a good example of this. The presidential address by Dr. John Patton at the recent American Association of Pastoral Counselors addressed the need to relate theology to the specialty of pastoral counseling. The main speakers of the last two AAPC conventions have been theologians, or persons who related theology to the theory and practice of pastoral counseling.

unarticulated in the life situation of an individual, couple, family, group, congregation, society, or culture, etc. Theologizing, in the mode I have in mind, is an interactive process occurring in the practice of the church's ministry which not only applies the church's heritage to help illuminate particular situations, but the experience itself contributes to the illumination and clarification of the church's heritage. Theology in the practice of ministry, like all of the church's theology, is a living, creative activity in which old meanings may emerge with new power and by which new understandings and interpretations may result. Theological interpretation in this broad sense therefore takes place in all activities or functions of ministry; it is as relevant for administration processes as it is for preaching, teaching, pastoral care, and the variety of outreach functions of ministry.

Theological interpretation emerging in the functions of ministry consists of four dimensions. It attends to personal construct, biblical theme, ethical principles, and systematic construction. These four dimensions of theological interpretation take account of relative levels of generalization and systemization, moving from particular case-specific and individually-oriented interpretation to broader, more generalized, theoretical interpretation. I have found in my teaching and supervision that most ministers do not have these dimensions clearly in mind when thinking theologically about their pastoral work. They tend to either become trapped in the specifics of the situation or move to global theological concerns which have little recognizable linking with the ministry experience before them.

Further, it seems to me that all of these dimensions assume one another and interelate, though I do not believe that it is *necessary* to apply each of them in every case in ministry. Nor is the practicing minister committed to start with any particular element in responding to persons or interpreting their ministry function. Common sense, the presenting issue, the minister's heritage and the readiness to learn on the part of the parishioner, partially determine at which beginning point theological interpretation takes place, and which direction it moves. Ultimately, however, it seems to me that some attention to all four of these dimensions may be important for the minister to do justice to his/her theological responsibility in the practice of ministry.

Theological interpretation pays attention to *personal construct.* Personal construct refers to an individual's functional internalized theology, either expressed or unexpressed. It may be *ad hoc* and jargon-tinged ("the good Lord loves everyone"), or it may be clearly articulated such as Dag Hammarskjold's *Markings.* By personal con-

struct I mean one's implicit or explicit "credo" or world-view, the lens through which he/she views reality. Paul Pruyser in *The Minister as Diagnostician*[3] offers the minister several criteria for evaluating a person's functional theology, or personal construct (awareness of the holy, a sense of providence, a personal faith, a sense of grace or gratefulness, a sense of repentance and personal accountability, a place in community, and a sense of vocation). Much pastoral work and theological diagnosis and interpretation take place at this level. It relates to one's life story and the interpretation the parishioner gives to his/her own immediate situation. A large part of preaching, teaching and pastoral care attempts to help persons build self understanding and personal creeds which do justice to the religious heritage and to the experiences of the persons themselves.

Secondly, theological interpretation may take place at the level of *biblical theme*, image, myth, story, or theology. The theological analysis of many case reports I have read consists of little more than the application of Bible verses, images, stories, or biblical theologies judged to be relevant to the situation at hand. Many pastors automatically think "Bible" when they hear the word "theologize" or when they are asked to "think theologically." This is not surprising since many religious traditions view the Bible as normative for its theological understanding and for the practice of ministry. Further, many persons seeking pastoral help explicitly ask about biblical teachings on matters which are important to them. It is not uncommon for persons in stress to read the Bible for comfort and direction. Thus, it seems fitting that pastors develop a viable method of utilizing the Bible in understanding and responding to contingencies arising in ministry.[4]

Theological interpretation may take place at the level of *ethical principle* and moral guidance. Many persons seek pastoral counsel relating to moral and ethical issues ("Is divorce wrong?" "Should I let the doctors stop treating my loved one who is terminally ill?" etc.). Questions of sexuality, ecology, church and state, life-styles, justice and distribution of scarce resources, etc., press in upon the pastor continually. There are ethical dimensions to every pastoral situation, calling for development and application of ethical principles to guide toward responsible living in harmony with religiously-informed values. Theological interpretation in the practice of ministry calls for the development of this type of ethical analysis and response.

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[3]See Pruyser reference above.

[4]It seems to me that, with the possible exception of preaching, we have not yet found a viable biblical hermeneutic sufficient for all dimensions of the practice of ministry.

Finally, theological intepretation may take place at the level of *systematic formulation.* At times the minister is called upon to interpret the teaching of his/her tradition in relation to infant baptism, the meaning of sin and evil, life after death, the nature of God, the structure and purposes of nature and human community, the relation of science to religion, etc. Pastoral practice may be guided by insights formulated in the doctrines, creeds, disciplines, confessions, historical positions and systematic theologies of the religious community in which ministry takes place. At times pastoral practice may raise questions which force a reinterpretation of the systematic formulations of the heritage. Whereas the latter is probably the least likely contribution pastoral practice will make in the theological task, it does seem to me that pastors may raise questions of the heritage calling for re-formulation and reinterpretation of the church's self-understanding. I think something of this sort is currently taking place in the area of human sexuality, for example.

In very brief form, these four factors constitute the formal heuristic tools of theological interpretation in the practice of ministry.[5] I have not developed a systematic method of applying these variables to actual cases. At the present time, utilizing these factors seems to involve relative degrees of critical judgment, intuitive plausibility, and contextual requirements. Let me turn to a ministry situation to demonstrate how they may work out in practice.[6]

III

Nancy, a thirty-year-old housewife and mother of two preschool children, approached the pastor for an appointment. In the appointment she reported that she had been arrested for shoplifting the week before. She was feeling very embarrassed as she discussed this with her pastor. She felt guilty and was ashamed of herself for stealing, but was even more perplexed about why she had done so. She said that she had never done anything like that before, nor had she even considered it. She

[5]These formal elements do not rule out other more informal and implicit influences in arriving at theological meanings. Other factors such as role models, mentors, the religious cultus, psychological-social-cultural influences, cognate secular knowledge, and the process of reflection and interpretation itself are all very powerful in shaping angles of vision and the structure of one's theological viewpoints. In my judgment, however, they are essentially pre-theological until there is explicit cognitive and affectual engagement with one's own personal construct, and with the biblical, ethical, and systematic heritage of the church.

[6]The choice of a pastoral care situation in ministry does not mean that the position I am developing is limited to this aspect of ministry. I chose this situation because it represents the area of ministry with which I am most familiar.

had talked it over with her husband and they agreed that she should consult her minister, who knew her relatively well.

The pastor asked for more details. Nancy reported that she put an extra sweater in her shopping bag when she was in the fitting room of a woman's clothing store. She bought one sweater and was arrested when she left the store with the other one hidden in her bag. She said that she knew it was wrong as she was doing it, but did not know how, without detection, to return the sweater to the shelf once she left the fitting room with it in her bag. She couldn't understand why she did it, but in discussing it with her husband several things came to light: (1) she was very unhappy and resentful that they had so many bills for things he wanted such as cars, boats, outdoor items, etc., and there was little money for her to do the things she wanted; (2) she felt isolated and trapped in an exurban community away from her family and friends, and resented being frequently put upon by her husband's sister to babysit her children; (3) she felt that she and her husband were losing touch with each other and the things they used to enjoy doing together; and (4) she was feeling increasingly guilty for having these negative feelings. She said, "I don't want to be like my mother who made my dad's life miserable because she was always complaining and unhappy, no matter what he did to make her happy." Her husband understood her feelings and accepted them when she verbalized them after the shoplifting episode, and expressed regret that she hadn't been able to share her unhappiness before this. After considerable discussion, they agreed to put the house on the market and that he would look for a job back in the community which they had enjoyed before moving to their present environment. Her husband's understanding surprised and pleased her.

Despite her relief at her husband's understanding response, she wondered what would make her do such a thing and how it affected her relationship with God. She had always been faithful in worship and active in church, and now she felt guilty for letting God down. She wondered if she wasn't a terrible person rather than the "good girl" she had always thought of herself as being. She said, "I have never thought of myself as a sinner, but now I am not so sure." The pastor responded by saying that this was not a simple situation, that her failure to act according to her values was probably motivated by a feeling of estrangement and functioned to show how wrong things were for her

in her life right now. In this sense, he pointed out, she was a victim of circumstances and used the stealing to cry for help in getting out. He helped her see that there are more direct and appropriate ways of getting her neds met. He also pointed out that she did make a more or less conscious act to break a commandment and to steal, and was therefore responsible for her behavior. The pastor pointed out that she seemed to be honestly sorrowful and repentant, and open to forgiveness. He asked her if she could accept God's forgiveness, and also to forgive herself. She said that she thought she could, and that Sunday's communion service had meant a great deal to her. The pastor prescribed some penance in this form: "If you wanted that sweater badly enough to steal it, I suggest that you go buy it for yourself; to go through what you have been through and not have the sweater would seem like a terrible waste."

She laughed at the idea and seemed to feel resolved about the issue, at least for the time being. The pastor told her that for Christians sin was real, but never the final word; it functions to show that something is wrong so that repentance may occur and more fitting ways to live may emerge. He wondered if anything positive along these lines had come out of this experience for her. She said that she had learned two things from this event. First, that she needed to speak up about her feelings and her viewpoints; she realized that her husband could understand her and respond to her only if he knew her feelings. Second, she said that some close friends were going through a difficult time because their son committed some serious crimes and she felt like she could understand and support them because of her experience. Shortly after this event, Nancy and her family moved from the community. She wrote the pastor that things were going much better in her marriage and in her life in general, and that her husband had begun to renew an interest in the church after many years of indifference toward it.

The pastor who shared this experience is in the Lutheran tradition. His materials are part of my teaching files, and used with permission. Analysis of his performance in the light of theological criteria outlined above should prove fruitful in illustrating the various levels of theological interpretation as applied to actual ministerial practice, and should provide some guidelines for evaluating some

strengths and limitations of his pastoral work in its theological dimensions.[7]

At the level of *personal construct,* Nancy is shaken in her view of what it means to be a good person. She is puzzled by her behavior, and senses that she is sinful in a specific measurable sense. She has seemed to think of herself as an obedient person as a wife and as a Christian; her view of God seems to be that of a rewarder of goodness, though this is not clearly stated. Overall the pastor helps her to begin to see herself as "forgiven sinner," modifying her view of herself as a "good girl." There seems to be little exploration of her view of God in the light of her experience nor of questions of providence and faith. She has implicitily come to value the importance of a community of support and of the importance of asking that her own needs be considered along with others'. There was not enough explicit attention to this dimension, however. She began to develop a sense of identification and compassion with others who experienced the pain of moral failure and to begin to see her vocation more broadly as a companion with those in need rather than God's good and obedient girl. It is unfortunate that the pastor did not help her to interpret her experience in these more broadly theological and religious themes, and to explore their psychological antecedents in her early family experiences. Perhaps he would have done so in due time had she not moved away.

The pastor does not explore *biblical* themes or images with her, which is surprising given their Lutheran heritage and its emphasis upon the Bible. He might well have asked her if anything she knows or remembers from the Bible sheds any light upon her present experience. It can only be a point of conjecture to imagine what she might have chosen. The pastor himself might have suggested the story of the temptation and the fall and discussed her experience in this light. He may have shared the verses from Paul about being trapped in sin despite every intention not to sin, and John's declaration that confessed sin is forgiven. The pastor may have discussed the meaning of Jesus' words about asking for needs to be met as prelude to having them met, or his story about the weeds and tares growing together. He may also have discussed her ability to feel compassion for others because she had first felt God's compassion toward her.

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[7]The purpose of this case material is to illustrate how *theological* materials may be utilized in the practice of ministry, rather than to explore fully the dynamics of the case. It seems that he did an effective job in responding to Nancy's needs as she expressed them, although in my opinion he did not explore deeply enough the legal, psychological, and marital issues at work here. If we had more data on these issues, the theological interpretation which follows would be modified to some extent.

In utilizing biblical materials in the practice of ministry, the the pastor should be careful neither to proof text and overinterpret, nor to overlook how the biblical story offers primary materials for understanding and reinterpreting human experience.

At the *ethical level,* the pastor helped Nancy see that she was both a victim of sin and an agent of it, sin being understood in this situation as estrangement and transgression rather than hubris or pride. By enabling her to confess her sin and find forgiveness he helped her understand morality in more dyamic and less static terms. He did not help her see that she was sinning by letting people walk over her and for failure to share her feelings. Neither did he help her see that the Christian ethic of love and self-giving is not totally cut off from mutuality, reciprocity, and the open acknowledgement and working through of negative feelings. Finally, he gave no evidence of awareness that her experience contributes to a reinterpretation of marriage which allows for mutuality in partnership rather than passive submission to the will and needs of one's partner, apart from one's own vocation and responsibilities. These interpretations were relevant to her experience; they were not made adequately explicit.

Finally, at the level of *systematic formulation* the pastor helped Nancy understand the classic Christian position of sin and grace and to find personal renewal and comfort in this interpretation. He helped her understand herself from the point of view of her Lutheran heritage which declares that persons are simultaneously sinful and forgiven, that all moral behavior is ambiguous, and that humans are simultaneously victims and responsible. He may have overemphasized the moral and under-emphasized the human and Christian values which came out of the experience. It further seems that he did not put enough emphasis upon the activity of God in using this event to bring new dimensions of relatedness to herself, to her husband, and to her friends. He may also have overlooked some important unresolved issues in moving so quickly to forgiveness. Neither did he adequately explore how her experience of worship and receiving the Lord's Supper had helped her interpret her experience, nor how her experience might have enriched her understanding of the Christian cultus. No attention was paid to issues related to stewardship and to socio-economic values.

Basically this pastor helped Nancy understand and reinterpret her situation from a theological perspective. His theology guided his practice, enabling it to be effective at the point of Nancy's struggle with sin, guilt, forgiveness. He did not follow through in some important areas, for reasons which are not entirely clear. It may be that he did

not have a theological framework sufficiently developed to use to guide his practice, or it may have been that Nancy wasn't ready for any more than she received. In any case, I do believe that the data presented is adequate to illustrate how one format for relating theology to ministry works out in practice.

IV

I believe that what I have sketched is a beginning method for relating theological interpretation to the practice of ministry. I see several dimensions needing further thought and discussion.

First, it seems to me that some principles or guidelines need to be developed for determining how and when one responds at any particular level, and when and how one moves between these levels. Perhaps study of several types of cases or situations over time would help develop guidelines that a single instance cannot provide.

Second, how does this form of theologizing in the practice of ministry lead to new insights for the heritage at large? Again, I do not think that single cases—and this case in particular—provide an adequate base for this large type of reinterpretation. I do know that marriage counseling done by pastors has led many to replace the traditional "orders of creation" view of marriage with a more relationally-oriented view, and that this has subsequently influenced more systematic writing on the subject of human sexuality. How broadly this method can be applied to the larger concerns of theology is yet to be decided.

Finally, how can pastors, theologians, educators, and biblical scholars come together to develop more specific guidelines for relating theology to the practice of ministry? Whose task is this, ultimately? What do we need from one another, and in what format can this be available, to complete an agenda which concerns us all?

Despite these questions, and invitation to further thinking, I do believe that what I have outlined provides a basic starting point and illustration for one discriminating method of relating theology to the practice of ministry.