It is time for us to take the theological message of pastoral care seriously. The message I have in mind can be drawn out of situations that we deal with every week—a mother mourning the premature loss of her only child, an alcoholic struggling to overcome his addiction, a childless couple being told that they cannot have children, a bread-winner of a large family losing the only job he has known for the last twenty-five years.

If we come to these and other instances of pastoral care with a theological concern, we are inclined to assume that the basic issue at stake is God’s grace and forgiveness. The Protestant Reformation, with its emphasis on the centrality of justification by grace, has taught us well. It has focused our attention on God’s redemptive activity in the world.

The data of pastoral care do not necessarily substantiate our preoccupation. They indicate that while the issue of God’s forgiveness may be a dimension of each of these situations, the actual dynamics involved in them are not comprehended and certainly not exhausted by an exclusive concern with divine grace. There are other and more pressing issues at stake in the existential situation of the parishioner. For instance, consider the mother who has lost a child. Her underlying question is not “Does God forgive?” but “Does God care? Can He really be a just and loving God who rules and sustains life if He allows this kind of thing to happen to my child?” In other words, she is struggling with God’s providential activity in the world, with His guardianship, and not with His redemptive activity. Consider the situation of an alcoholic who is trying to move beyond addiction. Again, the primary question for him is not “Does God forgive?” His question is “Does God re-create? Can He really transform and give new life in the midst of enslavement?” He is struggling with God’s sancti-
fying activity in the world, with what Reinhold Niebuhr calls grace as power and not grace as pardon.

Pastoral care calls us back to a triune God, back to a consideration of God's threefold relation to our human situation. Apparently, Paul Tillich arrived at a similar juncture, as Daniel Day Williams makes clear in the February 1968 issue of Pastoral Psychology. Tillich maintained that "forgiveness is the center of [God's] reconciliation" but not its "exclusive meaning." In part, he arrived at this insight by taking the human situation seriously. He observed that we struggle not only with guilt and condemnation (moral anxiety) but also with fate and death (ontic anxiety) and with emptiness and meaninglessness (spiritual anxiety). Forgiveness is a direct antidote to the first form of anxiety, but it is not necessarily relevant to the last two. Thus God's reconciliation must include more than forgiveness. It must be a relationship that addresses "everything which separates us from the divine," including such things as the fear of death and the sense of meaninglessness.

If God's threefold relation to the world is taken seriously, it contributes at least two things to our pastoral ministry.

First, it makes our caring more relevant. The church has often been accused of being unrelated to life. For a time, we thought that this reaction was a sign of the 1960s and that it would pass as people became more "religious." Unfortunately, this has not happened. Many people today, even churchgoing people, often feel that the Christian faith has little to do with their daily lives.

There may be many reasons for this reaction, but one of them is especially noteworthy. The church often speaks out of its own preoccupation instead of addressing the existential concerns of the parishioner. This fact came home to me several years ago when I was participating in a seminar on death and dying. One of the participants, a theologically astute pastor, insisted that the funeral sermon had only one real purpose—to witness to the reality of God's grace. I objected on two counts: One, the mourners may not be ready to hear about God's gracious will at that point, and, two, there are many other facets of death and bereavement that need to be discussed from a Christian perspective at the time of the funeral. In any case, we must be related to the situation in a more relevant way than simply riding our own theological hobbyhorse, even if we ride it in the name of pastoral caring.

Second, taking God's threefold activity seriously makes our theologizing more inclusive. As I said above, the Reformation established the centrality of God's redemptive activity. At times, this insight has