Theology and the Institutional Chaplain

The Pastor Is a Discoverer in Pastoral Care, Not a Mere Imitator of Other Professional Groups

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TO THOSE with a special concern for pastoral care, one of the most significant and encouraging developments of recent years has been the expansion and improvement in chaplaincy work in hospitals and other institutions. More than twice as many Protestant ministers are now giving full-time service in institutions as in the last year before the war. Although the greatest increase is to be found in the hospitals of the Veterans Administration, there have been real gains in Protestant hospitals and in state mental hospitals.

As a group, chaplains are vastly better prepared for their work than was true a few years ago. Not all who go into chaplaincy service have had clinical pastoral training, but this tends to be true of an increasing proportion. In addition, the improvement of theological school courses in pastoral care is laying a better base for chaplaincy work than before.

Without much difficulty, then, we can assert that there are more chaplains and better-trained chaplains than at any previous time ministering to persons in institutions. We can say this even though we know there is still a long distance to go, both in quantity and quality.

When it comes to examining the actual work of chaplains, we can also make some positive statements. The individualized concept of pastoral care and chaplaincy work, meeting the needs of each individual as he is, is increasingly accepted and practiced, thanks especially to such pioneering work and educational efforts as those of Russell L. Dicks. In addition, we can say that more chaplains know why they are doing something with their patients, that is, they have learned how to discover the particular needs of the individual patient. To speak more generally, no one would deny that chaplains are more "psychologically wise" than ever before. All this is very much to the good.

But it is not enough to have more and better trained professional practitioners. The pastor and the chaplains are indeed professional workers, and do require technical training. But they are also, and in fact primarily, representatives. They speak and act not just for themselves or for a body of knowledge and skill, but for the Christian community, the Christian church. An evaluation of what they do can never stop at the point of their technical competence, therefore, but must always go on to ask: How well have they helped people to appropriate for themselves the purposes and common goals of the Christian community? How effectively has their representative function been carried out?

This question may be raised in many
forms. At a social gathering recently an intelligent woman of middle age, clearly trying to be nice to me, said, "You're a psychologist as well as a minister; aren't you?" Since this was a tea-party and not counseling, I replied, "I suppose you could say that in a way, although I'm not a psychologist in any technical sense. I just consider psychological knowledge to be one of the essentials for carrying on the ministry." The fact remained that some demonstration of interest on my part in individuals and their perplexities meant that I was a psychologist, and really more of a psychologist than a theologian because (here the hidden assumptions) a psychologist is interested in people and a theologian in general ideas.

Or the question may be brought to us by non-chaplain pastors. If we have discussed our dealing with a hospital patient, they may say, "Apart from those prayers, what was religious in what you did? Couldn't a psychiatrist have done the same thing?" All of us have had such questions put to us, and know what our answer can be. Still, we are never quite sure we have the real answer. There is a sneaking suspicion in our minds that we have left theology languish in favor of psychology. If so, we want to arrest such a tendency.

MY THESIS is essentially simple, and will be stated at once. It is this. The entire movement for reviving pastoral care, of which the institutional chaplaincy is one aspect, is inherently as much a movement of theological as of psychological discovery; but because of the context in which the movement arose, we are only on the threshold of realizing what has actually happened. In what follows, I propose to document this thesis, and suggest some implications which flow from it.

Every religious movement in Christianity, including early Christianity itself, began with some kind of awakening, some sort of experience of intensity. On the human side this is discovery. In the light of the divine, it is revelation and grace. But every such movement has also, in time, become an orthodoxy, a body of right teaching practice. What began as an eruption becomes grooved, and it is only a step from a groove to a rut.

In the periods of awakening, men assume that theology is given not by the past and by tradition, but by God. There is a strong sense of the contemporaneous in connection with revelation. In some way or other, God is speaking in present experience. It is true revelation, not something man's ingenuity has devised. But the God who speaks now is hardly to be considered as having done all his speaking in the past. History may be very valuable, but the God who guides our lives is not historical but contemporary. Theology is living, and it is now.

In the periods of grooving, there are different assumptions about theology. It is something given. Of course it is given ultimately by God in revelation, but the ages of understanding it have weeded out false interpretations and guided our thinking to the truth. It is true that God is at work now, but we had best be extremely careful at identifying any bit of handiwork as God's especially if it seems to qualify any accepted teaching or practice.

These are very broad and sweeping distinctions, and we all know they are not to be found as white and black as this in actual practice. But they are general trends, and they are significant for our discussion. From the point of view of any well-grooved orthodoxy,