Is There a "Theology" in Seward Hiltner's Pastoral Theology?

Traditionally, pastoral theology has been seen as a "theology of shepherding" or caring for others. My interest here is to inquire about the relationship of pastoral theology to general theology. In Preface to Pastoral Theology, Seward Hiltner argues that pastoral theology is not a simple practical application of each of the various fields of theology taken separately. It is structurally coordinated with all the branches of theology. His essential argument is clear: logic-centered fields and operation-centered areas are interrelated as "theology in general."

Hiltner contends that each branch of theology, whether biblical, pastoral, or whatever, shares its own special focus (i.e., "God, man, sin, and so on—without which it would not be a part of theology at all."). Thus each branch of theology has a special focus and a responsibility to systematize its knowledge with respect to the common faith. Granting the above understanding, Hiltner proceeds to his specific "task" in

Preface, which is articulating the "organizing center" of pastoral theology. He defines this as "shepherding." He sees three basic elements involved, those of healing, sustaining, and guiding. This is the beginning of what could correctly be called a "systematic pastoral theology."

Having defined the "core" of pastoral theology as shepherding, Hiltner systematically weaves the content of pastoral theology around this organizing center or core. In this respect Hiltner accomplishes his goal. Throughout, his main emphasis or "special focus" is shepherding, although our tacit agreement at the beginning was to see pastoral theology in both its specific focus and in the common currency of faith. Or, letting Hiltner say it better:

In relation to the shepherding disciplines which as disciplines are not theologically oriented, its system is focused

1. Seward Hiltner, Preface to Pastoral Theology (New York: Abingdon Press, 1958), hereafter shown as PPT.
2. Ibid., p. 218.
3. Ibid., p. 219.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid., Chapter I, pp. 15-29.
around the common currency of the Christian faith. Thus the system of pastoral theology may be called bifocal, depending on whether it is speaking within the body of divinity or in relation to human knowledge in general.\textsuperscript{7}

As it stands now, Hiltner’s pastoral theology is a system but half grown. This does not mean that he has been remiss in his “task” of seeing pastoral theology in both its individual and communal contexts. The slowness in bringing pastoral theology to “the village green of theological integration,” as Hiltner calls it, may well be that the currently “established” logic-centered fields of theology are not well prepared to integrate, assimilate, or to accept fully the logical implications of pastoral theology with respect to the basic assumptions in their own specialities. Hiltner brings something more to this village green of theological integration than simply a Biblical image of the good shepherd who attempts “to help people help themselves through the process of gaining understanding of their inner conflicts.”\textsuperscript{8}

Certainly Hiltner’s image of shepherding would pass any security check by the gatekeepers of the logic-centered fields of theology as being theologically acceptable. But if we look further into Hiltner’s own work it suggests a general theological framework or context which has not been fully articulated. Pastoral theology, as a system, has not fully matured. This impression emerges because the task of “observing our pastoral experience, [and] generalizing on it theologically”\textsuperscript{9} has not been carried through. Now, what if Hiltner were to generalize theologically in the logic-centered fields as he has done in the practical fields? What could we expect? I think we would see the emergence of a process theology.

HILTNER has pressed for a structurally co-ordinated whole in general theology. In organizing his pastoral theology he also implies more general theology than what he articulates. The general direction of this approach is “process” oriented. To my knowledge neither Hiltner nor anyone else has pointed out any of the detailed specifics in this process perspective. Perhaps the time has not been right. Maybe now, we may be able to begin asking questions about both the specific and the broader implications of pastoral theology for theology in general. Work by John Cobb, Schubert Ogden, James Robinson, Daniel Day Williams, et al. is moving in this direction.\textsuperscript{10} Now, perhaps this task of integrating pastoral theology with general theology may be accomplished more easily with Ogden, Williams, et al. working on process theology at the same time some basic questions about the theology in pastoral counseling and pastoral theology are being raised.

Consider several elements in Preface to Pastoral Theology that suggest a process perspective:

I. The Common Currency of the Christian Faith. Hiltner uses this expression and its equivalent several times. Currency refers to something that is generally accepted as having a certain value as it passes from one hand to an-

\textsuperscript{7} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{8} Seward Hiltner, Pastoral Counseling (New York: Abingdon Press, 1949), hereafter shown as PC.
\textsuperscript{9} PPT, p. 29.
\textsuperscript{10} New Frontiers in Theology, ed. James M. Robinson and John B. Cobb, Jr. (New York: Harper & Row, 1963 —). Volume IV of this series, now in preparation, will attempt to spell out some basic in “Process Theology.”