

1: The Early Church: Pastor as Soul Physician

The literature left behind by the church fathers can generally be sorted into two different categories.

First: The Presentation & Clarification of Doctrine

The early church was consistently combating false teaching that compromised the integrity of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Gnosticism, Arianism, the denial of the resurrection, rejection of the divinity of the Holy Spirit, etc. The church meticulously confirmed what constituted true doctrine and also how to talk about it.

We use some early church statements in our worship services today. Creeds like the Apostle's Creed and the Nicene Creed laid forth the essentials of Christianity. To fall outside the boundaries of these was to fall outside of what constituted Christianity. Beyond these, you have a copious amount of books. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*. Athanasius *On the Incarnation*.

Second: Works of Spiritual Devotion

These works focus on an individual's personal interaction with the truth. Some of these are spiritual autobiographies, such as Augustine's *Confessions*. Martyr stories abound, written about as the church commemorated those who gave their life to witness to their savior.

Leave me to be a meal for the beasts, for it is they who can provide my way to God. I am his wheat, ground fine by the lions' teeth to be made purest bread...Fire, cross, beast-fighting, hacking and quartering, splintering of bone and mangling of limb, even the pulverizing of my entire body – let every horrid and diabolical torment come upon me, provided only that I can win my way to Jesus Christ!

- Ignatius of Antioch, *Romans 4.1, 5.3*
Quoted in Haykin, *Rediscovering the Church Fathers*, 41

What is often forgotten is that these men were *pastors*. This doctrinal care and emphasis on personal devotion wasn't an esoteric exercise, but rather were done in service of the Christians in their charge.

The Pastor as Soul Physician

Over time, a metaphor began to be used to describe the role of the pastor in his care for the souls of those in his charge. Just as a medical doctor was responsible of the care of an individual's body, a pastor was a counselor for the health of a person's soul. Gregory Nazianzus did much to popularize this language.

(2.16) For the guiding of man, the most variable and manifold of creatures, seems to me in very deed to be the art of arts and science of sciences. Any one may recognize this, by comparing the work of the physician of souls with the treatment of the body; and noticing that, laborious as the latter is, ours is more laborious, and of more consequence.... The one labours about bodies, and perishable failing matter...

(2.17) The other is concerned with the soul, which comes from God and is divine, and partakes of the heavenly nobility, and presses on to it, even if it be bound to an inferior nature.

(2.18) [The minister's role is the] diagnosis and cure of our habits, passions, lives, wills, and whatever else is within us, by banishing from our compound nature everything brutal and fierce, and introducing and establishing in their stead what is gentle and dear to God, and arbitrating fairly between soul and body...

-Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration 2*

Text available at: <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/310202.htm>

Gregory Nazianzus' diction here has proven to be enduring. Pastoral faithfulness requires being a physician of the soul. To avoid this is to be unfaithful as a pastor because this was part of the pastoral charge.

Gregory the Great (b. 540)

Two hundred years after Gregory of Nazianzus, another churchman named Gregory penned a work that became the standard soul care manual for a millennia. Known as "Gregory the Great," this Gregory took the metaphor of "soul physician" and emphasized the need for *training*.

No one presumes to teach an art till he has first, with intent meditation, learnt it. What rashness is it, then, for the unskillful to assume pastoral authority, since the government of souls is the art of arts! For who can be ignorant that the sores of the thoughts of men are more occult than the sores of the bowels! And yet how often do men who have no knowledge whatever of spiritual precepts fearlessly profess themselves physicians of the heart, though those who are ignorant of the effect of drugs blush to appear as physicians of the flesh!

- Gregory the Great, *The Book of Pastoral Care*, Prologue, Part I
Athena Press, 2016. Trans. James Barmby

Gregory was a keen studier of human beings, and he charged pastors to preach in such a way that helped every member of the congregation. In *The Book of Pastoral Care*, he outlined 72 different categories of individuals that pastors must be mindful of.

Differently to be admonished are the forward and the faint-hearted. For the former, presuming on themselves too much, disdain all others when reproved by them; but the latter, while too conscious of their own infirmity into despondency. Those count all they do to be singularly eminent; these think what they do to be exceedingly despised and are so broken down to despondency.

- Gregory the Great, *Book of Pastoral Care*, Chapter VIII, Part III
Athena Press, 2016. Trans. James Barmby

Gregory uses 1 Cor 5:1-2 to correct those who are puffed up and 2 Thess 1:3-4 for those who are fainthearted.

Church histories are primarily concerned with doctrinal development, with heresies, with theologians, with national politics as it intertwines with the church at large. This makes sense. So goes doctrine, so goes the church. However, focusing on the ideological level can cause the reason for those doctrines and their applications to fade from view. When you look at the early church, their practice was to view the Scriptures as the source of wisdom, counsel, and health for the spiritual maladies of their people.

Key Ideas: The pastor is a “soul physician” who treats maladies of the spirit. He must love his people, know his people individually, and cares for them by connecting theology to their personal experience.

II: The Medieval Church: Ritual as Spiritual Care

Christianity had always had the blood of the martyrs as the external boundary line of the church. And in a time of more active persecution, it was a clear line. Jesus was crucified, Stephen stoned, Ignatius eaten, Blandina gored.

The monks are the heirs to the martyrs, as they treat themselves with extreme afflictions for the sake of developing holiness and protecting the church through their prayers and wrestlings with the devil.

A couple things happen:

- 1) You have a strong two-tiered understanding of the Christian life. You have rank and file Christians, and then you have those who have ascended the spiritual heights in a way that everyone else hasn't. The democratization of soul care is going to be eclipsed as the concept of the pastor as soul physician begins to overwhelm Paul's opinion that the believers are full of all wisdom and able to counsel one another (Rom 15:14).
- 2) A second idea is that struggle and ritual are connected to spiritual maturity. You notice that spiritual maturity is connected with particular performances – sleep deprivation, fighting off the demons, fasting, celibacy, etc. Now this sounds strange to our ears, but they viewed this as critical work on behalf of the church.

Corresponding to the rise of the monks was the rise of penance. The early church became committed to the concept of penance – judgment handed down by a spiritual authority for the purging of the lusts of the flesh in response to sin. Early penance was *not* about paying for sins. That was accomplished through the death of Christ. Rather, penance served to mortify those sinful desires that still waged war in an individual’s soul as well as demonstrating true contrition. This penance was public and restricted to being a one to one correlation between a sin and a mandated response.

The Celtic church in particular wrote extensive penitential manuals, showing what one ought to do if one engaged in a particular sin. Here’s an excerpt:

- (1) If anyone has sinned in the thoughts of his heart and immediately repents, he shall beat his breast and seek pardon from God and make satisfaction, that he may be whole.
- (2) But if he has frequently entertained [evil] thoughts and hesitated to act on them, whether he has mastered them or been mastered by them, he shall seek pardon from God by prayer and fasting day and night until the evil thought departs and he is whole.
- (3) If anyone has thought evil and intended to do it, but opportunity has failed him, it is the same sin but not the same penalty; for example, if he intended fornication or murder, since the deed did not complete the intention he has, to be sure, sinned in his heart, but if he quickly does penance, he can be helped. This penance of his is half a year on an allowance, and he shall abstain from wine and meats for a whole year.

- The Penitential of Finian (c. 525-550)
John T. McNeill and Helena Margaret Gamer, *Medieval Handbooks of Penance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 87-88.

While we may see such things as a little too heavy-handed in the way it hands authority to a spiritual father or mother, there are continued developments in the way sin was dealt with within the church.

- 1) Private...a relationship between the confessor and the soul guide.
- 2) Designed to ameliorate guilt and show devotion.
- 3) In response to *particular* sins.