

Pastoral Reflections on Union with Christ: Jesus' Personal, Relational Presence in the World Today

Tom Kimber

Melbourne School of Theology

Introduction

In 2001, The National Study of Youth and Religion was initiated in the United States. Over the course of the study, more than three thousand teenagers in America have been interviewed about religion and spirituality in order to discover their beliefs about faith and practice and the influence of religion in the lives of youth. Based on the findings of this study, Christian Smith, the director of the project, describes the predominant religion among teenagers in America as “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.” There are three components that represent this common expression of belief about God and religion.

First, being a good and moral person is central to living a good and happy life. It emphasizes being nice, kind, pleasant, respectful, and responsible. Moralism in this context focuses on fulfilling one's personal potential through whatever religious path makes you feel good about yourself. Second, the purpose of religion is to feel good, happy, secure, and at peace. Smith notes, “It is about attaining subjective well-being, being able to resolve problems, and getting along amiably with other people.”¹ Concepts like repentance and sin, God's sovereignty and our submission, love and grace, are not common themes. “The faith many of them have in mind effectively helps to achieve a primary life goal: to feel good and happy about oneself and one's life.”²

Third, the participants describe their belief in a God who exists, who created the world, and even defines what it means to be moral. Yet he is distant, impersonal, and does not get involved in our affairs. While using the term “deism” the author notes, “The

¹ Christian Smith, “Summary Interpretation: Moralistic Therapeutic Deism,” in *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* by Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 48.

² Smith, “Moralistic, Therapeutic Deism,” 49.

Deism here is revised from its classical eighteenth century version by the Therapeutic qualifier, making the distant God selectively available for taking care of needs.”³ The God described in this study is “not Trinitarian, he did not speak through the Torah or the prophets of Israel, was never resurrected from the dead, and does not fill and transform his people through his Spirit.”⁴ Not only is he distant, he is also not demanding.

Though the focus of this study is on younger Americans, the research has also found that Moral Therapeutic Deism is a “widespread, popular faith among very many U. S. adults. Our religiously conventional adolescents seem to be merely absorbing and reflecting religiously what the adult world is routinely modelling for and inculcating in its youth.”⁵

In a similar study in Australia, Philip Hughes found these same themes emerging from Australian youth and adults. Participants in the study describe God as “a watcher, not a participant.” God is seen as a “benevolent” being who is not demanding and “can be called on when we have particular needs.” Hughes draws the connection with the U.S. study by noting that “similar themes were identified,” underscoring the descriptor of Moral Therapeutic Deism.⁶

In his analysis of Western postmodernism, David Wells explores our understanding of Jesus Christ in the midst of new spiritualities, growing meaninglessness, and a world that is increasingly decentred. He summarizes that, “In Christ, men and women in all ages and cultures have found that for which the deepest impulses of the nature cry out.” Yet, we live in a culture that says “what God’s story should sound like rather than insisting that theology is not theology if it is not listening to God telling his own story in his own way.”⁷

As a minister, my role is to help others listen to God tell his own story in his own way. Because of that, the term “deist” captures my

³ Smith, 49.

⁴ Smith, 50.

⁵ Smith, 51.

⁶ Philip Hughes, *Putting Life Together: Findings from Australian Youth Spirituality Research* (Fairfield: Fairfield Press, 2007), 142–143.

⁷ David Wells, *Above All Earthly Powers: Christ in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Inter-Varsity, 2005), 7.

attention and my concern. This is the term that makes the strongest statement about the nature of God, both in who he is and in what he does. It describes a God who is distant, uncaring and unconcerned. It mistakes God's patience for apathy, God's restraint for inability, and God's discipline for meanness.

Nothing refutes the idea of a deistic God more than the person of Jesus Christ—God in flesh who came near and lived among us. Eugene Peterson reminds us: “[T]he ways Jesus goes about loving and saving the world are personal: nothing disembodied, nothing abstract, nothing impersonal. Incarnate, flesh and blood, relational, particular, local.”⁸

My calling as a minister is to help others to understand and experience this truth about Jesus as Son of God and Son of Man, who is not only our Saviour, but our brother and our friend. In this regard, I would like to offer three reflections on the person of Jesus Christ in relation to pastoral work and calling. First, we must be reminded about the priority of every pastor, and that is to nurture one's own relationship with Jesus. Second, we will reflect on ministry and suffering. As ministers of the gospel, we are called to share in the sufferings of Jesus, but we are also reminded that Jesus shares in our suffering and ministers to us in our suffering. And third, we will be reminded of the essence of our calling as pastors, to keep others attentive to the presence and the work of Jesus in our midst.

The Priority of Every Pastor: Draw Near to Jesus

In his gospel, Mark offers such a simple yet profound description of the calling of the disciples. He appointed them “so that they might be with him” (3:14). Being with Jesus precedes anything and everything that the disciples would ever accomplish in the name of Jesus. It is this reality of being “with” Jesus that defines the life of the true disciple, but that is true only because it describes the very nature of Jesus himself. Isaiah prophesied that Jesus would be Immanuel, God with us. He is the God who draws near not only to his people but to all of his creation. Jesus reminds us that God does not love from a distance, but he loves up close and personal.

Throughout his ministry, Jesus invited his disciples to get away from the crowds and simply be with him. After the twelve had

⁸ Eugene Peterson, *The Jesus Way* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 1.

returned from a season of ministry, Jesus urged them to “Come away by yourselves to a desolate place and rest for a while” (Mk 6:31). In his greatest hour of agony, just before his arrest, Jesus begs the disciples, “Can you not watch with me one hour?” (Matt 26:40). But even in the face of crucifixion, Jesus promises “I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you” (Jn 14:18). And the ultimate assurance, “I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matt 28:20).

We must note that this nearness and “with-ness” is characteristic not only of Jesus but of his disciples as well. In Acts 4, Peter and John had just healed a crippled man, which created quite a commotion among the people. Yet, there was one overwhelming trait that the people observed about them. “Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived they were uneducated, common men, they were astonished. And they recognized that they had been with Jesus” (Acts 4:13). This is the one indictment brought against Peter on the night Jesus was betrayed and on trial: “This man was with him,” (Matt 26:71) a servant girl declared. Peter denied it, yet it was unmistakable.

Those of us in ministry are beset by every temptation other people face. We are tempted to be spectacular and build a ministry that gains the attention of the watching world. Jesus knows what that temptation feels like. The devil took him to a high pinnacle and taunted him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here” (Lk 4:9). Do something spectacular that will get everyone’s attention. Yet, when we face this temptation, Jesus says to us, “Come away by yourself to a desolate place.” Take my yoke upon you, learn from me and find rest for your soul.

We must understand that the way of Jesus is the way of solitude. But it is not a solitude of aloneness, rather it is a solitude of companionship. We enter with Jesus into the wilderness, the inner place of silence from the onslaught of voices, crowds, and opinions of this world. Solitude with Jesus is the place of transformation. It strips us of the false identities we so carefully construct in our public life. Jesus faced the solitude of the wilderness and encountered the same temptations we face. And he also strengthened and affirmed his true identity. Solitude with Jesus does the same for us. It deepens our true sense of self, created by God and for God. Apart from him we have no true self and no true life.

The way of solitude with Jesus is also the way of preparation for ministry. Our methods and our motives are purified and focused as

we learn the ways of Jesus and gain the heart of Jesus. We discover the familiarity of his voice and learn the ways of his will. We learn as Jesus did that the only true motive for ministry is “to do the will of him who sent me” (Jn 5:30). In solitude, we discover that true ministry is the overflow of what Jesus is teaching me as I spend time alone with him.

In his first epistle, John draws the obvious connection between his personal encounter with Jesus and his ministry for Jesus, which he describes in the fullness of all his senses. “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and have touched with our hands... we proclaim to you” (1 Jn 1:1, 3). Henri Nouwen expresses the opinion that this will be the central question of future leaders and pastors of our time. Do we have “an ardent desire to dwell in God’s presence, to listen to God’s voice, to look at God’s beauty, to touch God’s incarnate Word and to taste fully God’s infinite goodness?”⁹ Our ministry must be deeply rooted and nurtured in such intimacy with Jesus, which takes us beyond the mere call to be a moral leader to being a true spiritual guide. This is where we discover as Mother Teresa observed that ministry can only be fruitful if it grows out of a direct and intimate encounter with Jesus.¹⁰

I have wondered for some time, as I have watched the decline of the church throughout the U.S., Europe and here in Australia, how much of the decline has come from this simple observation: Are we, indeed, abiding in Jesus and allowing Jesus to abide in us? How can we expect others to experience the nearness of Jesus if we are not experiencing and demonstrating it ourselves? To what extent have we abandoned that simple call of Jesus to “be with him,” to “come away with him,” and to “watch and pray with him”? What might it be like if what was said of Peter and John could be said of us, that we would be recognized as men and women who had been with Jesus?

The Experience of Pastoral Ministry: We Share in the Sufferings of Jesus

Dietrich Bonhoeffer articulated the truth that “as we embark upon discipleship we surrender ourselves to Christ in union with his

⁹ Henri Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus* (New York: Crossroads, 1993), 29–30.

¹⁰ Henri Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 31.

death—we give our lives to death... When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.”¹¹ Paul expressed the same truth in Romans 6, stating that we have been united with Christ in his death, burial and resurrection. It is a union of life that comes through a union in death. If we are to share with Jesus in the love of the Father, then we must share as well in the fellowship of his suffering.

The foundations of our life and union with Christ are based in this experience of identifying with him in his death. This is the essence of our Christian identity, replacing the false identities of this world with our true, God-given identity. We must never lose sight of the truth that our identity comes through suffering. As disciples of Jesus, we are called to die daily to ourselves and share in the experience of Jesus. Jesus himself warned his disciples of the reality of this suffering. “If the world hates you, you know that it has hated me before it hated you” (Jn 15:18).

The desert fathers of the fourth and fifth centuries challenge today’s thinking about a gospel of prosperity and ease. They believed that struggle is normal, even necessary and healthy for the Christian life. We cannot escape pain and struggle, neither should we try to. “Rather, we should embrace it as one aspect of our call to discipleship, for the goal of life in this world is not ease, prosperity and success but intimacy with God, maturity of character, and influence in the world. Struggle proves that we are taking the Christian faith seriously.”¹²

The apostle Paul tells us that to embrace our calling as ministers means that we must also share in Jesus’ experience of suffering. Because of that, he says to the Colossians, “I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church” (Col 1:24). Paul’s experience of suffering included imprisonments, beatings, near-death experiences, as well as the toil and hardship of missionary life. Added to the physical difficulty and inconvenience, Paul describes the emotional and relational suffering that comes through “the daily pressure on me of my

¹¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: MacMillan, 1963), 99.

¹² Gerald Sittser, *Water from a Deep Well: Christian Spirituality from Early Martyrs to Modern Missionaries* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2007), 74.

anxiety for all the churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall and I am not indignant?" (2 Cor 11:28–29).

But our sharing in Jesus' suffering is only possible because he took on our suffering. Isaiah prophesied that Jesus would be a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief, stricken, afflicted, abandoned and killed. As a human, Jesus experienced the full realm of suffering known to our race: Physical, emotional, psychological, relational and even spiritual suffering. And so, the writer of Hebrews tells us, Jesus presently ministers to us as a sympathetic high priest who is able to come close, not in judgment and criticism, but in grace and understanding because he feels our pain and our frustration. Only Jesus knows the full extent and power of temptation because he has felt its pull to the very limit without succumbing to sin.

This is foundational to Jesus' role as a mediator, and it is what makes his present ministry so meaningful and personal. Paul tells us in Romans 8:34 that Jesus sits at the right hand of the Father, interceding for us. It is an intercession that feels the groans and the pains of human suffering and confusion. He knows how I feel. And his awareness of my pain informs his intercession on my behalf.

So, Paul confidently declares not only do we share in Jesus' sufferings, "so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too" (2 Cor 1:5). It is in this experience of receiving comfort from Jesus that we are empowered and enabled to minister comfort to others. As Purves observes, "There is a power for ministry in those who are themselves wounded, who have received the comfort of God, and who now minister to others in the strength of healing. The truth for pastoral work is that there is a direct relationship between woundedness, being comforted, and becoming empowered to a ministry of consolation."¹³

It is in our own suffering that we become acutely aware of the depth of our need of God. Yet, ironically, it is also in the suffering that we are tempted to question the presence of God. We have too long been wrongly convinced, as Job's sorry comforters were, that suffering is a sign of God's absence and not his presence. Yet it is in the season of suffering, the journey in the wilderness, that God draws so near we can barely discern his presence. The season in the

¹³ Andrew Purves, *Reconstruction of Pastoral Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 197.

wilderness is not abandonment but intimacy. Nothing enables us to share more deeply in one another's life than the mutual experience of struggle and pain, of consolation and desolation.

The Essential Calling of the Pastor: To Keep Others Attentive to Jesus

The essential calling of the pastor must follow naturally from my first two points. Pastoral ministry must be seen as the natural outflow of my life in Jesus where I learn to hear Jesus' voice and discern his ministry in my own life. As I share in his suffering, so I experience his comfort. It is only because I have experienced Jesus' personal ministry to me that I am able to minister to others.

In the present age, there are multiple demands made on pastors, many of which have little connection with pastoral calling. Indeed, with so many needs before us, how do we begin to address them all or even know which ones we can legitimately meet? Ray Anderson suggests that

the needs of the world did not set the agenda for the ministry of Jesus. It is true that wherever the needs of the world impinged on him, he reached out to heal the sick and feed the hungry. But hunger, sickness and even death did not set the agenda for his ministry.¹⁴

Rather, Jesus' first priority was to serve the Father who sent him into the world. In keeping this important sense of priority, Jesus maintains proper focus on his true calling and purpose. As he says to the disciples, "I do not seek my own will but the will of him who sent me" (Jn 5:30). Even in the face of great need, Jesus' will was to accomplish the works that the Father gave him to accomplish.

In this regard, we learn much from Jesus himself about pastoral calling. Just before he was arrested, tried, and crucified, Jesus comforted his disciples with the truth that after he was gone he would send the Holy Spirit. He would not only comfort the disciples but he would help them to continue Jesus' ministry. Notably, Jesus says that the Spirit would "bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you" (Jn 14:26) and "He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you" (Jn 16:14). Amidst the various ministries of the Holy Spirit is this key focal point: In all he does, the Spirit does not call attention to himself; rather, he points people to Jesus Christ.

¹⁴ Ray Anderson, *The Shape of Practical Theology* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2001), 41.

Eugene Peterson observes that this forms the core of the pastor's calling. Above all else, "the pastor's responsibility is to keep the community attentive to God."¹⁵ It is unfortunate that we live in a day when we draw on Jesus' example as a moral teacher, or we draw on his influence as a historical figure. We ask ourselves questions like, "What would Jesus do if he were here?" The question makes a dangerous assumption in suggesting that Jesus is not here. But if we are to understand the biblical teaching that Jesus is presently alive and that his ministry is still vital, then we must change the question to the present reality that Jesus is here among us through the power of the Holy Spirit. As a minister, one of the most important questions I must ask of myself and of the person or people before me is this: What is Jesus doing here and now? How can I help this person before me to be attentive to the work of Christ in her life?

We live in a culture that is infatuated with celebrity. Sadly, this is true as much in the church as in society. We all face the temptation to be spectacular and make a name for ourselves. Yet, while there may be a veneer of goodness in our ministry success and notoriety, the reality too often is that all the attention is focused squarely on us. Henri Nouwen reminds us,

Far more importantly, it is Jesus who heals, not I; Jesus who is Lord, not I. This is very clearly made visible when we proclaim the redeeming power of God together. Indeed, whenever we minister together, it is easier for people to recognize that we do not come in our own name, but in the name of the Lord Jesus who sent us.¹⁶

This is one of the great challenges of ministry today. Too often our focus is on building organizations that become monuments to our hard work *for* Jesus. The call of our time is to give people a glimpse of Jesus himself, who has drawn near in history and who continues to draw near through the Holy Spirit. Todd Billings reminds us,

As ones united to Christ, we participate in the Spirit's ongoing work of bearing witness to Christ and creating a new humanity in which the dividing walls between cultures are overcome in Christ. Therefore, today's church should replace its talk of 'incarnational

¹⁵ Eugene Peterson, *Working the Angles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 2.

¹⁶ Henri Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus*, 41.

ministry' with the more biblically faithful and theologically dynamic language of ministry as participation in Christ.¹⁷

Conclusion

In our day, there must be a much greater connection between our study of theology and our practice of ministry. The Bible tells us that God is personal and not distant, that we as humans have the capacity for intimacy with God, and that our calling as ministers is to help others to experience this same transforming intimacy. It requires that we become so acquainted with the ministry of Jesus described for us in Scripture and explained in our creeds that we can recognize his ministry here and now. As a minister of Jesus Christ, my calling is to nurture my own intimate life with Jesus and then to help others to experience the reality of Jesus as the healer of their soul, the healer of their relationships, the core of their identity, and the purpose for their existence. We must discover again what it means to share in God's ministry in this world, in and through the person of Jesus Christ.

¹⁷ Todd Billings, *Union with Christ: Reframing Theology and Ministry for the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), 124.