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What's Old Is New Again: The Art of *Seelsorge*

Harold L. Senkbeil

This study looks at the nature of the care of souls and its impact on the church in various eras, including our own. While it is addressed to everyone interested in the church's ministry to people, including laity, it addresses especially and particularly the pastors of the church and their work as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Specifically, I wish to provide perspective on the art of the care of souls—what it is, why it originated, how it was practiced during much of the church's history, and how it flourished for centuries in our Lutheran tradition. I will point out why, in my estimation, it went into hibernation for much of the twentieth century, only to surface again in recent decades and—most importantly—why I am convinced it is essential for the tumultuous times in which we live.¹

When I began my seminary training decades ago, we were instructed not in the care of souls, but what was then called “pastoral counseling.” Not that counseling is a bad thing, mind you; some of my best friends are counselors. But at least as I began my preparation for the ministry as a young seminarian in 1967, my general impression was that biblical studies, homiletical skills, and dogmatic theology lived in one world, while pastoral care lived in another—a world where Rogerian client-centered therapy held sway. So we were assigned to write up verbatims (again, a useful pedagogical technique) and practiced role playing in class where we were judged primarily on our ability to practice non-judgmental empathetic listening.

I want to hasten to add that compassion and empathy are useful skills for every conscientious pastor. And careful listening is indispensable. I consider these to be the very first stage in effective pastoral care. You cannot treat what you have not diagnosed. And you cannot diagnose unless you first listen—and listen well, as I have written²—not just with your ears but with your heart and your whole being: compassionately and empathetically, in other words.

¹ One word of warning: if you are looking for the definitive academic analysis on any of these topics, you will be disappointed. My colleague John Pless has covered that masterfully: John T. Pless, “Pastoral Care in Contemporary Lutheranism,” *Lutheran Synod Quarterly* 63, no. 1 (March 2023): 61–80. This will be a view from the trenches, where I have spent the five decades of my ministry providing care for souls first of all in congregations, then in the classroom, and now primarily for pastors in my work with my DOXOLOGY colleagues.

² Harold Senkbeil, *The Care of Souls: Cultivating a Pastor's Heart* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2019).

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But my point is that all of us seminarians at the time had the impression that pretty much the sum total of pastoral care was identifying with the predicament of the person with whom we were dealing. Sure, if we could throw in a Bible passage or two and close with a prayer, so much the better. But we had the impression that the healing lay in our empathy, not the word of God or its sacramental application. The net effect of this approach is that it erected a kind of firewall between the church's dogma and people's lives.

Seelsorge in the History of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod

It was not always so in the Missouri Synod. C. F. W. Walther himself suffered from some poor pastoral care during his student days in Germany. He speaks of it quite candidly in the extracurricular evening lectures he delivered to his students, which were later transcribed and published in book form as his famous *Gesetz und Evangelium (Law and Gospel)*. As a young Christian with a troubled conscience, he had been pointed not to the cross of Jesus and his saving gospel as the foundation of his relationship to God, but to the complex inner workings of his mind and the pious affections of his heart.

In the course of those lectures at Concordia Seminary, St Louis, he quotes extensively from the writings of theologians of the period of Lutheran Orthodoxy. Many of these sources were steeped in the theology and practice of the ancient art of *Seelsorge*. These theologians play even a larger role in Walther's *Pastorale*, helpfully published by CPH in an unabridged translation³ that is replete with extensive footnotes from these same pastoral theologians.

Likewise, Walther's magisterial *Kirche und Amt (Church and Office)*—which has been officially adopted not once but twice as our church's official position on the church and the office of the public ministry—is full of quotations from generations of pastoral theologians.⁴ The clear implication and application is that sound doctrine leads to healthy souls and, conversely, that false or inadequate theology is detrimental to the spiritual health of people.

The twentieth century has not been kind to pastoral theologians. They have been sidetracked to make room for the heavy traffic generated by the fundamentalist-modernist controversies of the early decades of the 1900s and their suc-

³ Carl Ferdinand Wilhelm Walther, *American-Lutheran Pastoral Theology*, ed. David W. Loy, trans. Christian C. Tiews (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2017).

⁴ C. F. W. Walther, *The Church and the Office of the Ministry, the Voice of Our Church on the Question of Church and Office: A Collection of Testimonies regarding This Question from the Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church and from the Private Writings of Orthodox Teachers of the Same*, ed. Matthew C. Harrison (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2012).

cessor fights—not the least of which was our own “battle for the Bible,” on which some of us cut our teeth as young pastors in the LCMS.

The legacy of these debates has not been helpful for the spiritual life and health of Christ's holy people. Well-intended pastors have assumed the best they have to offer people struggling with a burdened conscience because of their own sin or suffering from the wounds inflicted by the sins of others is to give them a boatload of correct doctrine.

Again, let me hasten to add that the church's dogma is the distillation of the teaching of the living word of God. Instructing people in the rule of faith drawn from the Bible indeed belongs to the pastoral task. However that is only the science that is the foundation of good pastoral care. There is both a science and an art to our work as pastors. Doctrine and theology is the foundation, of course. But the art of the care of souls is the right distinction of law and gospel—bringing to bear the gifts of God in Christ as they need to be applied in this particular instance for this particular wounded soul. To do that correctly and faithfully is the aim of the discerning pastor. Pastoral care is not one-size-fits-all. It is not as simple as tossing a struggling soul one of the articles of faith and hoping for the best. Systematic theology is the root of pastoral theology, but in itself it is not truly pastoral in the fullest sense.

Unfortunately, some have abandoned doctrine entirely for what they consider greener pastures. The net result is that the word “pastoral” has been pitted against “doctrinal,” just as “missional” has been pitted against “confessional,” and “mission” has been pitted against “ministry.” The general implication is that you need to make up your mind: you can be an evangelist and missionary (a mover and a shaker involved in vibrant outreach to the lost), or on the other hand you can be a pastor (pretty much just a custodian or caretaker of souls minding the shop at some church on the verge of closing its doors).

In addition, for many, the adjective “pastoral” has been equated with leniency and laxity. To be pastoral in your work with people is to free them to live their best life now, unencumbered by the restraints of the church's dogma and catechesis. In our era of expressive individualism, people do not take kindly to the limitations imposed by the law of God—and to be quite honest, they are not too impressed with the gospel either. The news that God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself, not counting their trespasses against them, strikes them as old news, not good news. What they are looking for instead is some practical way to live a fulfilling and exciting life of Christian discipleship and to feel good about themselves, and for that they are looking beyond the gospel. And let's face it: the law will always sound like good news in a world in moral and spiritual freefall because it not only provides a buffer against chaos, but offers the tantalizing hope of self-improvement.

But by the works of the law no one is justified in God's sight, since through the law comes the knowledge of sin (Rom 3:20). Though the law of God is indeed good and wise, ever since Eden the law always accuses unbelievers, even as it reveals the sins of believers to bring them to repentance. Though the law can and should guide our ways, especially in this increasingly depraved and darkened world, it can never motivate or impel us toward love and good works; only the gospel of the free grace of God in Jesus Christ our Lord does that. For our sakes God made him who knew no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might be made the righteousness of God (2 Cor 5:21).

This is where dogmatic theology and pastoral theology intersect. Justification is the chief article not only when it comes to preaching and teaching, but also in the care of souls. Jesus Christ alone is our life, and in his gifts alone do we have life and light in this world of darkness and death.

What Is *Seelsorge*?

But pastors provide those gifts to Christ's sheep and lambs only after proper diagnosis, with great care and discernment. This is why I have called the pastoral task a craft. It is the art of arts, you might say, to deliver accurately and compassionately the healing gifts of Christ to suffering souls by means of his word faithfully preached and sacramentally applied.

The church in her mother tongue has called this art the *cura animarum*, or "care/cure of souls." This translates into our German Lutheran terminology as *Seelsorge* from the combination of *Seele* ("soul") and *Sorge* ("care"). This care is provided routinely all life long in corporate worship in the Divine Service as the word is delivered orally in preaching and teaching and applied tangibly in Holy Baptism, which you might call the "watered word" since it is the word of God in and with the water that delivers the goods, and in the Holy Supper, which is the "edible word" since these external elements are the very life-giving flesh and blood of Jesus by virtue of their consecration by his word.

When I was a young pastor attending pastoral conferences, occasionally a veteran of the cross would be introduced as "a real *Seelsorger*." I knew just enough German to be dangerous. I knew the word meant a pastor who cared for souls. I surmised that he was a gentleman who was known as a caring and compassionate pastor. Usually he was, in fact. But as I said earlier, there is no healing in a man's empathy, no matter how compassionate he is. What our forefathers meant by *Seelsorger* was a curate, or a physician of souls—one called to the preaching office who delivered Christ's gifts to his people not merely in the Divine Service, but also in visitation and one-on-one conversation.

At least since the fourth century, pastors have been known as spiritual physicians. That is, they were intent on providing spiritual healing through the Holy Spirit's gifts in word and sacrament. As far as I can determine, many ancients considered these ministrations no less vital than medical care. What physicians of the body, mind, and soul had in common is that they all proceeded from symptom to diagnosis to treatment. They treated each individual individually. They began by carefully discerning the presenting problem. By careful study and long experience in collaboration with other experienced practitioners, they arrived at a working diagnosis. Then and only then did they proceed with treatment specifically designed to treat not the symptoms of distress, but the source of the symptoms.

Diagnosis

So it is with faithful and responsible pastoral care. Seelsorgers do not treat every situation the same; what is sometimes called "pastoral discretion" does not mean an educated guess or personal preference or gut feeling, it means careful and accurate discernment. Faithful *Seelsorge* involves two sides of one coin: (1) attentive diagnosis, and (2) intentional treatment. In other words, paying attention in Jesus' name is the first step. This may take a while, and it also includes the soul's previous experience with God and others.

When I was teaching this approach to future pastors at Concordia Theological Seminary, I had a particularly skilled medical doctor in Fort Wayne. One day during a routine visit, I briefly informed him that I was teaching my students the art of careful diagnosis, joking that it would be wonderful if we pastors had a spiritual CT scan or MRI machine that could give us an accurate picture of the soul's condition before God. He told me something I have never forgotten: "It's a common misconception that we doctors rely on those tests for our diagnoses; they are excellent to tell us what's happening right now at this moment inside a person, but that's only a small percentage of an accurate diagnosis," he said. "To get the full picture I rely on an oral history." What this doctor was telling me is that you have to listen to a soul to be able to find out what is going on internally. But of course, you need to know how to listen, because all listening is not created equal.

This complicates things. As the ancients noted and we still find today, the soul often lies to itself about itself. We pastors are always working in the dark, as it were. We need the light of God's word and the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit to see what otherwise remains hidden. This is why pastors are craftsmen throughout their ministries. They are always honing their skills based on the experience of colleagues in the ministry, some of them long dead, who have paved the way for our craft. The art of proper diagnosis, you might say, is a skill better "caught" than taught. We need

to develop the proper *habitus* for ministry. That is to say, we need a mentality and outlook, a mindset properly honed by long experience and hanging around colleagues in ministry.

That is where casuistry discussion among pastors comes in. We need to discuss difficult cases amongst ourselves as professional colleagues and brothers in office—not in order to mimic woodenly what someone else did in a similar situation. Rather, we need to consider all the complex factors that impact a given soul and its relationship to God. As Eugene Peterson used to say, each person has been in dialog with God for a very long time before you enter into the scene to provide pastoral care. We come late to the conversation, and we need to take time to read the minutes of that conversation—that is, get to know that person as best we can and get a grip on his or her personal experience with God and others before we can accurately assess what has gone wrong and where and how we can help with the precise gifts of God’s word and sacrament needed in that exact situation.

There is thus not just one faithful and confessional response to multiple similar cases. We need to learn from each other just as medical doctors consult with one another during their training and afterward to learn how better to diagnose accurately their patients’ illnesses and treatments. We pastors need all the help we can get. As St. John Chrysostom put it, “the shepherd needs a thousand eyes, to examine the condition of the soul from every angle.”⁵

Treatment

Once we have a working diagnosis, then and only then can we proceed to the treatment phase. It is not as simple as “take these two Bible passages and call me in the morning.” We want to bring the precise words of judgment and grace that will address the complexities of souls suffering from sins both committed and suffered, and that takes not only training in exegesis, systematics, and learning from pastoral care givers throughout church history, but it takes long practice as well. This is what Walther called in his *Pastorale* the *habitus* or disposition of the pastor’s own soul acquired by the external means of God’s Spirit, whom he himself has received as one of the sinner/saints of God ever since his Baptism into Christ.

Faithful spiritual treatment for the soul is intentional and deliberate. It is not haphazard or reckless, based on a hunch or vague impression, but genuinely formed and informed by God the Holy Spirit working through his word. Part of this happens week after week, of course, in the public ministry of the faithful proclamation of God’s word and the reception of Christ’s healing gifts in the Holy Supper of his

⁵ John Chrysostom, *Six Books on the Priesthood* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1964), 58.

cleansing blood and most holy body. This is ordinary pastoral care—not that there is anything “ordinary” or mundane in preaching and the sacrament. But these are what God has ordained or decreed in his church for the care of the flock of God that he purchased with his own blood.

Besides these gifts received every Lord's Day through the ministry of God's servant, every soul is entitled to personal attention as needed. This “extraordinary care,” or what Walther calls the private care of souls, is what my contemporaries and I were trained to think of as “pastoral counseling.” Indeed, there is frequently counsel given in the context of those personal conversations. In these convoluted days in which we live, people need all the godly counsel they can get. Some of that helpful advice and counsel they can get from their brothers and sisters in the faith. In that sense, every baptized Christian provides the care of souls for troubled minds and hearts in need of the Savior's healing. They love their Christian siblings because Jesus first loved them, and so they weep with those who weep and they rejoice with those who rejoice. Besides, remember that the word of God is not the private possession of pastors. Mothers and fathers, friends and co-workers, fellow saints within the Christian congregation, all are given to tell of the hope that is within them and to speak the word that brings life and light to wounded hearts and fearful souls.

In my experience most people these days are not quick to acknowledge how they have grieved God or injured others. I often had people confessing sins to me when I was a parish pastor, but those sins were not their own! They came to tell me how they had been wronged by a spouse, by an employer or acquaintance. They wanted me to help with a problem, but the problem was usually caused by another person. They really wanted advice, not care for their souls, in other words. It is no good in those situations to turn them away because that is not in our job description.

It is perfectly normal for people in difficult situations to ask for help. We do the same with our medical doctors, do we not? We do not merely want his or her treatment for our ailments, we want to know what we can do to help alleviate our situation. And so it is with physicians of the soul as well. Part of the art of the care of souls is to turn these requests for counsel or advice into occasions for attentive diagnosis and intentional treatment. Jesus once had a man come to him with a financial problem and he turned it into a spiritual care dialog. “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me” (Luke 12:13). Jesus used that request as a teaching opportunity about covetousness and spiritual treasures vs. worldly wealth, using the parable of the rich fool who had things sewed up monetarily but was not rich toward God.

The Care of Shepherds

You and I are not Jesus. We do not have divine omniscience and wisdom. You are only a man, just another sinner exactly like the person who is coming to you for help. If there is no healing in our personal warmth and empathy, there certainly is no genuine healing for spiritual wounds anywhere inside us at all. We are only channels of the healing that comes from the Holy Spirit through the gifts Jesus gives in his sanctifying word and holy sacrament. Our motto is like that of John the Baptist: “He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30). When people come to us for help, we have no help to give in and of ourselves. They need us to be Christ’s ambassadors for them, God making his appeal through us (2 Cor 5:20). We are, I like to say, nothing more than “errand boys for Jesus.” All we really need to do is show up and listen with Jesus’ ears and speak with his mouth, and he will do the rest. Christ Jesus is the true pastor. He is the Good Shepherd who laid down his life for his sheep.

That Jesus tends and feeds his lambs and sheep using our mouth and hands is a miracle of God’s grace and part of the real joy that goes with the vocation of pastor, or Seelsorger. As we like to say in DOXOLOGY, pastors are not shepherds, but sheepdogs. A sheepdog takes his direction from the shepherd. No matter how difficult those sheep can be, his tail is always wagging because he knows he is doing the will of the shepherd. The dog most likely has no comprehension of what the shepherd’s larger plan is for any given sheep; he is bonded to the shepherd and therefore gladly and eagerly takes up his duties as he is directed—never mind how depleting and exhausting the task. But he is not always working. So when they are at rest, the shepherd and his dog are found together. As one observer put it, a good sheepdog is always on the go with eagerness, delightedness, and tireless discipline. But that dog “would not have kept that peculiar and intimate relation unless he had sat down and looked at the shepherd a good deal.”⁶

So every pastor needs a pastor. He needs to hear the voice of the great Shepherd for himself. What a terrible thing it is when the shoemaker’s children go without shoes! Perish the thought that a dentist would lose his teeth because he himself has gone without competent dental care. Why then do we assume that the minute we are ordained we can go without hearing the word of God addressed to us by God’s called and ordained servant? Why should we think we are so strong and invincible in our faith that we no longer need forgiveness for our sins? Why might we be so audacious to think that we no longer need to hear the word from the mouth of a brother or father confessor coming to us *extra nos*—external to our own conflicted and confused mind and heart—so that we can believe and take comfort that by that

⁶ Evelyn Underhill quoted in Senkbeil, *The Care of Souls*, 123.

word of holy absolution spoken by human lips our sins are forgiven before God in heaven?

We are not private entrepreneurs in the ministry. Pastoring is a collective enterprise; we need each other. The missionary commands of the New Testament are all given in the plural. What does this mean? This means that all the people of God are in mission together as the body of Christ. And evangelists, pastors, and teachers are working collectively to tend the flock and gather in the sheep not yet of this flock so that there will be one flock and one shepherd. It is dangerous and foolhardy to venture out in this fallen world all on our own. Not only do we need the company, we ourselves need shepherds for our own souls so we might receive the gifts that Jesus died and rose again to bring so we might have hope and light in this dark and despairing world. So if you do not yet have a pastor, get one. You are flirting with disaster if you are a one-man show.

Pastoral Self-Care

The *Seelsorger* also needs to tend his own soul. Despite the fact that a good share of his daily routine is wrapped up in study and teaching of the word of God, he needs to see to it that a significant amount of time is spent sitting perfectly still looking at the Shepherd—that is, being like Mary, who in distinction from her harried and frenzied sister Martha, took the time to sit at the feet of Jesus and listen to him.

Three things make a theologian, Luther said: *oratio*, *meditatio*, and *tentatio* (prayer, meditation, and affliction). As I have often said, in pastoral ministry—as in the Christian life in general—the affliction takes care of itself; it goes with the territory. But prayer and meditation take some discipline. As Luther details it in his masterful little tract⁷ for Master Peter Beskendorf, his barber, prayer and meditation are both rooted in the careful and mindful recitation and repetition of the spoken word of God. Choosing a verse or two from a psalm or elsewhere in the Bible, the idea is to listen carefully to that word as you recite it—not just to commit it to memory, but to glean what the Holy Spirit means to tell you by means of this precise word. You do not want to study it so much as to chew it over in mind and heart—to masticate it and ruminate on it much as a cow chews her cud. Then, as that word takes on greater and greater clarity, you begin to dialog with God regarding what he is telling you there in that specific text. Again, pray out loud. Thus properly understood, Luther sees this oral approach to prayer rooted in God's word as conversation with God. We speak as God has spoken to us. And by means of his word, God the Holy Spirit himself even preaches to us.

⁷ Martin Luther, *A Simple Way to Pray*, trans. Matthew Harrison (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2012).

I once heard the late Kurt Marquart say that the pastor's personal prayer to God begins not with the first person pronoun "I," but the second person "you." That is, the pastor needs to first address God when he opens his mouth to pray. He consciously should conceive himself in dialog with God the almighty, maker of heaven and earth, as his very own beloved father for Jesus' sake, addressing him directly, boldly, and confidently as any dearly loved child addresses his own beloved father. Luther suggests such meditative prayer is a wreath woven of four strands: precept, thanksgiving, confession, and petition. Each of the strands flows directly from the word. First, we simply echo back to God what he has told us. We thank him for what he has there told us or promised us. We confess how we have neglected or despised what he is telling or giving us there, and finally we ask him to grant that his will may be done and his kingdom may come in our lives regarding that word of God.

The multiple assaults and afflictions of devil, world, and flesh that pile up in our lives are not merely hurdles to overcome. As we see in the book of Job, even the devil unwittingly serves God's purposes. By means of Satan's attacks, God desires to draw us ever closer to his loving arms and care. Thus the cycle continues, Pastor Luther suggests, speaking from his own experience of affliction and calamity. The more the devil rages, the more he drives us to God's word where we find our refuge and strength in every time of trouble so that we can all the better pray, praise, and give him thanks. Thus theologians are made and nurtured. I commend this practice of spoken prayer and meditation to you if you have not yet encountered it. Always remember: the soul you save may be your own.

So there in a nutshell you have it. The time-honored heritage of the *cura animarum*, or *Seelsorge*, the care and cure of souls. As our culture grows ever darker and more deluded, losing sight of its God and Savior, do not despair. Of course you do not have what it takes for ministry in such a confused and confusing environment. But then, Christ's servants never have. Our sufficiency is not in ourselves, but in the Lord who bought us with his blood and commissioned us and set us apart by call and ordination to be his emissaries in this foreboding world to speak his word and bring his gifts to all who will hear and receive them. For every hurting, wounded soul, for every burdened, sorrowing sinner, you bring the healing ministrations of Jesus, the great physician. You bring his care and cure to all the casualties of the cosmic battle going on till the end of time when Jesus returns in glory to claim his bride.

You have been given an eternal gospel to proclaim which alone brings light and truth into a world in spiritual and moral freefall. Take heart, find courage. Salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. In this dark world we serve Christ Jesus, who once was dead, but is alive forever and forevermore. He remains the light of the world, the light no darkness can overcome!