

Where Has the Soul Gone in Pastoral Care? The Case and Cure of Pastoral Counseling

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Abstract

In this contribution, we first explore the situation we find in our century in the field of pastoral theology. It turns out that there is a constant back and forth between “theology” on the one hand and “therapy” on the other. One of the main causes of this problem seems to be that we have decoupled God from man, Christology from pneumatology. We need a theological anthropology in which the soul regains its central place: pastoral care is care for the soul, or it is not pastoral care at all.

Keywords

Kerygma, therapy, hermeneutics, soul, theological anthropology

Practices that owe more to managerial, therapeutic, consumerist, and entertainment cultures increasingly characterize Evangelical churches, so much so that they are in danger of becoming the *de facto*, if not *de jure*, authority for the Evangelical way of life.

— Kevin J. Vanhoozer¹

¹ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 26. Cf. J. Todd Billings, *Union with Christ: Reframing Theology and Ministry for the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 21–25,

Introduction

What is the leading, decisive principle in pastoral care—theology or therapy?² In his famous disputation *Spiritual Desertion*, Gisbertus Voetius (1589–1676), appears to be aware of some psychological aspects of *depression*. In this specimen of what pastoral care is about, however, he does not make any use of specific psychological or therapeutic methods as a guide to curing the deserted soul. What he actually did was show the differences between desertion as a spiritual phenomenon and depression as a mental health challenge and what it means to be a “doctor of the soul”; he clarified what desertion is and the goals God has for desertion, as well as its causes, characteristics, and means of cure.³ This is just one example, not to muddy the waters, of describing what soul care is about using psychological categories.⁴ Desertion is definitely not depression in itself.

On the other side of the spectrum, the Scottish practical theologian John Swinton of Aberdeen University in his study *Finding Jesus in the Storm* signals in psychology an overemphasis on diagnosis based solely on so-called evidence-based methods in mental health care (as in the notorious DSM-V handbook), which leaves too little place for the significance of Christian faith in this kind of health care and in any case shows too little theology in dealing with mental health challenges such as depression, hearing voices, and bipolar disorder.⁵ But he warns that if some theology is allowed to play

on what is called a “moralistic therapeutic deism.” What is the real problem? “Because on a deeper level, they think we have no need for a mediator—our sin has not alienated us from God. Instead of forgiveness and communion with God, the purpose of religion is therapeutic: religion should help us to be happy and feel good about ourselves” (22).

² In this article “therapy” is used as an umbrella term to refer to all methods and perspectives from the social sciences, especially psychology, psychiatry, and psychotherapy.

³ Gisbertus Voetius and Johannes Hoornbeeck, *Spiritual Desertion* (first published at Utrecht, 1646), trans. John Vriend and Harry Boonstra, ed. M. Eugene Osterhaven (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003; repr., Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2012). Cf. Joseph Symonds, *The Case and Cure of a Deserted Soul or A Treatise Concerning the Nature, Kinds, Degrees, Symptoms, Causes, Cures of, and Mistakes about Spiritual Desertion* (1671; repr., Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1996).

⁴ I acknowledge that psychology has been a science since the nineteenth century, but that does not make this example less instructive. One could also argue the opposite—namely, that psychology as a science has too much influence on our pastoral practices. If many pastors complain that they are seen as social workers or psychological counselors, one of the reasons might be the pastor’s view of the nature of pastoral care.

⁵ John Swinton, *Finding Jesus in the Storm: The Spiritual Lives of Christians with Mental Health Challenges* (London: SCM, 2020). His plea for a so-called “thick spirituality” seems to be his life’s work, as seen from John Swinton, *Spirituality and Mental Health Care: Rediscovering*

its role, a psychiatrist should not use what he calls lazy theodicy: “Lazy theodicy is a form of thinking in which Christians ascribe sinful distance from God, sin, or the demonic to explain the presence of unexplainable (in their view) psychological distress.”⁶ Depression is not spiritual desertion, the awareness of the absence of God, a spiritual alienation as such.

These two examples illustrate the small way over the deep divide between soul care and mental health care, between theology and therapy. In speaking of pastoral care *and* counseling without further explanation, the pastor risks falling into the trap of using therapeutic methods—which are supposedly based on evidence—from the secular sciences such as psychology and psychiatry to deal with spiritual distress and problems.

The question, therefore, is what has happened in pastoral theology during the twentieth century, which saw all sorts of scientific methods replace the pastoral conversation, the pastoral encounter that is principally colored by the reading of Scripture and prayer. First, therefore, we explore the case of twenty-first-century pastoral care to see which types have been used up until now and to discover some traps in them as a danger for too much counseling (therapy) and too little soul care (theology) within pastoral theology and practices. The second part will make a case for the necessity of a theological anthropology to get the soul back in pastoral care as the meeting point between God and man.

I. *The Case—Types and Traps*

When we take note of different visions of pastoral care that have emerged over the course of the twentieth century into our time, it always seems to be a particular choice between “theology” and “therapy”—in other words, between “God-centeredness” and “man-centeredness.” A few movements do try to establish a relationship between these two poles, but then the question is how that connection is made and how it fits into a Reformed vision of pastoral care.

1. *Kerygmatic without Therapeutic*

First, in the wake of Karl Barth’s dialectical theology, a movement known as *kerygmatic* pastoral care presented itself. This current revolves around a theological vision, a thinking from God as subject and not as an object.

^a “*Forgotten*” *Dimension* (London: Jessica Kingsley, 2001). Too many understandings of spirituality turn out to be just self-actualization.

⁶ Swinton, *Finding Jesus in the Storm*, 67.

Historically, this includes Eduard Thurneysen (1888–1974), a theologian who was a practitioner of the so-called dialectical theology associated with Barth, who saw man first and foremost as a sinner dependent on grace. In other words, the sinner's justification is central, eliminating the break between God and man. Facing and confessing sin come into play so that grace can come into full play.

However, in the scholarly literature on pastoral care, the designation “kerygmatic pastoral care” is used in a more generalizing sense for forms of pastoral care in which the Bible is opened because of the conviction that God's word has a fixed, indispensable place in pastoral care. The latter is indeed the case in classical Reformed pastoral ministry; on this point, then, it agrees with Thurneysen's pastoral vision. The same can be said of the position of the pastor as servant of the word. Pastoral care is ultimately about the direct relationship with God established and nurtured by his word.

Soteriology is the beating heart of this movement, the justification of the sinner is central to it, and pastoral care is all about “salvation” rather than “healing.” Certainly, Thurneysen's thought has evolved, which led him to see pastoral care as an encounter with great significance in itself. Nevertheless, his main point was “Save your soul”—or, more aptly, “Be ye saved.”

2. Therapeutic as Kerygmatic

Because in the kerygmatic vision pastoral care is determined by “guilt and penance,” there is the danger of discussing man only as a sinner. First, however, man is a creature of God, and as such, he has sides to his life other than the guilt and power of sin and needs other than overcoming them. There is joy and care, gratitude and rebellion, and there is the desire for healing and the search for meaning. In other words, a person's life experiences are wide and deep. In response to this current—and partly due to the influence of the thinking in which the human “self” became increasingly central—so-called therapeutic bonding emerged. Its main representative was Seward Hiltner (1909–1984), who was influenced by the theology of Paul Tillich (1886–1965) and the thinking of psychologist and psychotherapist Carl Rogers (1902–1987). In this movement, humans and their lives are central. They must learn to accept themselves and to know that they are allowed to do so. Moreover, they have inner strength—healing power from God—to achieve growth and self-realization. Pastors who want to be able to guide such a process also need to have insight into their own possibilities and pitfalls, their own feelings and conflicts. This form of pastoral care is about “healing” *as* “salvation.” On this basis, one could say that the biggest

trap is to take as a starting point “the therapeutic *is* the kerygmatic”—or, therapy *is* theology. This is not a “save our soul” but more a “realize self.”

3. *Kerygmatic as Therapeutic*

Another movement came to the fore to pull the pendulum as far as possible to the other side. Most evangelicals (in the broader sense of the word) are quite familiar with the name Jay Adams and his so-called *nouthetic* counseling method, which could be described as a radical opposition to the therapeutic strategies that exerted great influence within pastoral settings. Adams rejected all secular psychology as a means of solving spiritual problems. In 1970, he published his *magnum opus*, *Competent to Counsel*⁷ at the same time as the opening of the Christian Counseling and Education Center (now known as the CCEF), and later on in 1976, the National Association of Nouthetic Counselors (NANC) was founded. He is quite polemical with those whom he considers “integrationists,” whom he believes have sold their birthright for a bowl of pottage by trying to blend theological truth and therapeutic theories. Christians are convinced that knowing Jesus Christ is the original and abiding cure of the soul. However, it turned out that mental health professionals were seen as the experts, and churches were increasingly handing responsibility for pastoral care to them. According to Adams, worried and disturbed people in churches do not need such “experts”; rather, they need pastors because what they stand in need of is found not in secular psychology or psychiatry but in the Bible. People should go to doctors for their bodily problems but should not seek any secular help for mental problems and diseases. Adams criticized his opponents sharply. They in turn accused him of prooftexting without context, of not making room for the effects of suffering or being sinned against, and of basing his approach on moralism and legalism rather than grace. To put it under one heading: theology *is* therapy, and outside it there was no salvation or healing from psychological diseases.⁸

4. *Hermeneutic as Correlation*

A movement emerged during the 1990s that sought a connection between the two poles, theology and therapy, understanding Scripture on the one

⁷ Jay E. Adams, *Competent to Counsel: Introduction to Nouthetic Counseling* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970), which has been reprinted over thirty times.

⁸ For a nuanced evaluation of Adams and the biblical counseling movement, see David Powlison, *The Biblical Counseling Movement: History and Context* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth, 2010).

hand and understanding human experiences on the other.⁹ The bipolarity is the decisive principle within the hermeneutical view: faith and life, revelation and experience, God's story and one's life story relate to each other in a mutual—albeit sometimes tense—relationship. The pastor functions more or less as an interpreter. On the one hand, they interpret the congregants' life stories—where human beings are living human documents—and, on the other, they incorporate or merge that story with the “story of God.”¹⁰ One of the biggest traps in this narrative-hermeneutical approach turns out to be that the history of salvation takes a back seat to the congregants' stories. It emphasizes heavily the human and within it discusses the work of the Spirit. Furthermore, Christology often disappears into the background. The essential notion that there is no salvation apart from Jesus Christ (see, e.g., Acts 4:12) fades into a general Christian religiosity. Ultimately, therapy eclipses theology.

5. *Reformed Alternative*

After this short exploration of the case of pastoral counseling in the twenty-first century, it is time to ask the following question: Is another connection possible between the two poles, theology and therapy? We should not seek it in a self apart from God; when we do that, we arrive at the cardinal concept of theological anthropology. From a Reformed perspective we cannot speak of man apart from God, because every single human being is a creature of our Creator and therefore has a relationship with God, even one who does not want to accept that relationship. So, then, in biblical theology there is not a “self” as a synonym for a “soul,” unless we understand that the self is *coram Deo* (before God). In summary, theology determines every anthropology, so it follows from this position that we need a theological anthropology. In taking that framework on, we will see that within it the soul is a central theme; that is, the soul in the duality of body and soul, thus the human being as a whole.

⁹ I do not dwell on the philosophical background of this approach, which is partly based on Paul Ricoeur's philosophy of language and human beings as *narrative* beings. In practical theology, Charles Gerkin is the “founding father” of hermeneutic pastoral care. See Charles V. Gerkin, *Introduction to Pastoral Care* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997), and earlier, *The Living Human Document: Re-Visioning Pastoral Care in a Hermeneutical Mode* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984). In The Netherlands, Gerben Heitink, practical theology professor at the Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, was one of the leading figures of this movement.

¹⁰ Later CCEF authors also relate the counselee's story with God's story; see, e.g., Edward T. Welch, *When People Are Big and God Is Small: Overcoming Peer Pressure, Codependency, and the Fear of Man* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1997), esp. 34–36, 95–134; Paul David Tripp, *Instruments in the Redeemer's Hands: People in Need of Change Helping People in Need of Change* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2002), 26–35, 142–59.

Thinking from within a theological anthropology, I would like to show in what follows that when our soul is the object of pastoral thinking, we do not have to choose between God-centered and man-centered thinking, as such a choice would be a false dichotomy. The kerygmatic movement might be too narrowly focused on Christology. Other perspectives seem to stress the work of the Holy Spirit in man, so pneumatology reigns. A trap in this perspective could be too strong a focus on what the Spirit can do in human beings by means of therapy. When we respect both the Christological and the pneumatological parts of the theological Trinitarian symphony, there is actually no reason to despise therapy as such because of the desire to give theology primacy. Theology as such is not therapy, and therapy as such is not theology. But theology does not exclude therapy, just as therapy should not keep theology out. It is decisive where we start in our thinking: God is not the goal but the source of theologically based pastoral care that is really soul care.

II. *The Cure (1): Using Theological Anthropology*

What is man? That really is a very big question. Those looking for the answer to what man is can consult all kinds of sciences that try to answer this question from within their own disciplines. That we speak of man (in general), however, actually seems to be nonsensical in the context of pastoral care. It is especially important to realize that from this perspective there is no such thing as man. We meet a *particular* man or woman, are dealing with a *concrete* person in a great variety of circumstances, in their state as believer or nonbeliever, in days of decline and of increasing knowledge of the Savior Jesus Christ.

In the context of reflection on pastoral care, various studies from Western contexts have paid attention to different classifications. One can, for example, think from proposed German models of what it means to be human, such as (1) the perspective of psychological-psychotherapeutic concepts;¹¹ (2) a more or less thematic approach, such as man as a single person, in relationship, in development, in crises, and *coram Deo*;¹² (3) the basis of life themes: looking for identity, living in relationship, looking for meaning, living with fear, coping with self-blame, and learning to believe.¹³ *Mutatis mutandis*, these approaches are apparent in other contexts as well.

¹¹ Michael Klessmann, *Theologie und Psychologie im Dialog: Einführung in die Pastoralpsychologie* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2021), 65–108.

¹² Christoph Morgenthaler, *Seelsorge* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2017), 99–222.

¹³ Jürgen Ziemer, *Seelsorgelehre* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015), 235–300.

What about man? From a theologically Reformed perspective we choose to speak first and mainly about man as the image of God (*imago Dei*). By doing so, we see the *theological* interpretation of man from the outset from the perspective of who God is. God and man are uniquely connected. That connection is definitely fundamental to our thinking about the very nature of pastoral care. True wisdom in pastoral care stems from the knowledge of God and the knowledge of ourselves, which are inextricably linked.¹⁴

God created man “in his image” (Gen 1:26–27). This expression “image of God” has been interpreted in different ways. There are structural, functional, and relational approaches:¹⁵

- a. *Structural*. The image of God is expressed in certain faculties of human beings, in particular, the spiritual faculties of the soul and the ability to use reason (*animale rationale*).
- b. *Functional*. The phrase “image of God” points not what man is but what he has to do: man’s vocation is to perceive his management task, often called stewardship, on behalf of God.
- c. *Relational*. The “image of God” is the interpretation of the relationship between God and man, so man cannot be characterized other than as a relational being; he is not an individual but a person.

Without neglecting valuable elements from the structural and functional views, the relational approach seems to do the most justice to the multifaceted aspects of the image-of-God being. This relational view of man has far-reaching implications for our theological reflection on human identity, equality, and responsibility. A human being does not make it alone but is fundamentally dependent on others. Man needs peers. Indeed, we must view our relationship with our fellow human beings and with creation theologically, beginning with the all-important relationship with and to God. Fundamental to our humanity is our attunement to God—the encounter with God. Man is addressed by God and is therefore responsible; he owes an answer, a response. According to David Kelsey, the danger in theological anthropology is that the practitioner runs the risk of viewing

¹⁴ This approach refers to John Calvin’s famous opening paragraphs in his *Institutes*, which ultimately could be seen as a “pastoral dogmatic handbook.” Cf. Arnold Huijgen, ed., *The Spirituality of the Heidelberg Catechism*, Papers of the International Conference on the Heidelberg Catechism Held in Apeldoorn, 2013 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015).

¹⁵ Gijsbert van den Brink and Kees van der Kooi, *Christelijke dogmatiek: Een introductie* (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 2012), 241–47 [cf. *Christian Dogmatics: An Introduction*, trans. Reinder Bruinsma with James D. Bratt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017)].

humans as relatively independent persons with capacities, whereas one must always start with the claim that the relation to God is crucial for understanding human beings and their relationships.¹⁶

Within a theology that has its reference point in Scripture, there is consensus on at least three aspects of our humanity when we reflect on our existence as human beings: it is bestowed, violated, and healed. It is these adjectives that become flesh and blood in pastoral encounters:

Bestowed existence. That people are creatures means that it is good that they exist, regardless of their characteristics; that is, regardless of their physical or mental faculties or capacities.¹⁷ As persons they are wanted and loved by God and therefore worthy of our care and love. Our identity—who we really are—is not determined by capacity. A violated existence is still a gifted existence. Indeed, the relationship that God establishes with people confers value on them regardless of their abilities or capacities.¹⁸ Man, seen as a creature, does not need to prove himself or his existence. Our existence is existential in the deep sense of the word: it is an existence that is available, bestowed by our Creator.

Violated existence. A violated existence demands space to give words to the need and to be silent. After all, besides greatness, there is also the misery of man:¹⁹ loneliness, fear, despair, brokenness, and a whole dictionary of misery. Daniel Louw identifies three basic existential problems in which man is addressed by God: his anxiety (fear of isolation, rejection, and death), his guilt and blame, and the experience of despair and meaninglessness (despair).²⁰ That we share in a violated existence points to the breach that occurred in the relationship between the Creator and creation (the fall). Biblically-theologically, we therefore interpret misery not as a tragic fate in which we can assume a victim role but as a rebellious act in which we as rebels do what God has forbidden. A theological anthropology for pastoral care also deals with man as sinner (e.g., Hans Wolff, Wolfhart Pannenberg, and Christian Möller).

Healed existence. A healed existence is an existence we receive in the promise of the gospel. In other words, it is an existence in the care of hope.

¹⁶ David Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence: A Theological Anthropology*, 2 vols. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 1:281–88, 363–78.

¹⁷ John Swinton, *Dementia: Living in the Memories of God*, 2nd ed. (London: SCM, 2017), 181–85.

¹⁸ Cf. Hans Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship: Profound Disability, Theological Anthropology, and Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).

¹⁹ See, e.g., “Man’s greatness comes from knowing he is wretched”; Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. A. J. Krailsheimer (New York: Penguin Books, 1966), 59 (6.114).

²⁰ Daniel J. Louw, *Cura Vitae: Illness and the Healing of Life in Pastoral Care and Counseling* (Wellington: Lux Verbi, 2008), 2.

Who we may truly be before God, by virtue of our createdness, is not determined by any particular status or condition either of our body or of our spirit. A person's identity is decisively determined by being created "in Christ," being re-created in his image (Col 3:10). This is a matter of faith. It means being offered a different perspective in this world of sin and misery, guilt and shame, in the reality of the future unlocked by him (2 Cor 5:17). So, then, man, as the image of God, has an eschatological element: the new man in Jesus Christ is being re-created in accordance with his image.²¹

The relationship that God establishes with his creatures becomes audible and noticeable in that God communicates. He does so with words, through the Scripture. The effect of God's speaking in his word is life-giving, bringing to life by the breath of God's voice. If his words return "empty" because they do not find a hearing and bounce off, the result is death. Just as rain is life giving, so is the life-giving *verbum externum* (Isa 55:10). Theologically speaking, neither man and religion nor church and society are self-contained realities but are included in the movement of the word of God in promise and contradiction.²² The relationship with God is thus a word relationship. There is a liberating "*Ephphatha*" from Jesus's mouth (cf. Mark 7:34), an opening from the outside inward so that we hear and respond in freedom. Along these lines the conversation, both hearing and speaking, can begin. "I am speaking to you" (*vocativus*!) is the claim and is the beginning of every Christian community. This is how we start hearing, and by means of this hearing, we start to live.

The following three characterizations summarize once more how man comes into the picture from a theological perspective: man as a creature of God, as a sinner before God, and as a believer in God. These theological interpretations of man can be further elaborated Trinitarianly, as it is by J. W. Louw and Hans Van Pelt, who show that the close connection between a Christological and a pneumatological perspective is essential.

A much-quoted statement by Eduard Thurneysen reads, "Tell me what you think of man, and I will tell you what kind of pastor you are!"²³ How we think about human beings is closely related to how we think about

²¹ Theo Pleizier, "Psychology and Narrativity in Pastoral Care: Some Considerations at the Come Back of the Soul," *Kerk en Theologie* 70 (2019): 126.

²² F. Gerrit Immink, *In God geloven: Een praktisch-theologische constructie* (Zoetermeer: Meinema, 2003), 30; cf. F. Gerrit Immink, *Touch of the Sacred: The Practice, Theology, and Tradition of Christian Worship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), esp. chs. 1 and 2.

²³ Eduard Thurneysen, *A Theology of Pastoral Care*, trans. Jack A. Worthington and Thomas Wieser (Richmond, VA: John Knox, 1962), 66; "Sage mir, wie du über den Menschen denkst, und ich will dir sagen, was für ein Seelsorger du bist." Eduard Thurneysen, *Die Lehre von der Seelsorge*, 7th ed. (1946; repr., Zurich: TVZ, 1994), 30.

God. Pastoral care therefore requires an ongoing reflection on theological anthropology.

III. *The Cure (2): Soul Care for the Whole Person*

I am convinced that from a Reformed perspective we are to understand pastoral care as *soul* care. This characterization does, of course, raise the question of what we actually mean by “the soul.” In a general sense, it is often seen as denoting our inner self, or even our consciousness. The beautiful and tricky thing about talking about the soul is that it does not easily allow itself to be mapped, to be objectified. Attempts to do so and to get a grip on the soul caused the soul, and thus the inspiration of life, to sink into a naturalistic worldview. In this, the soul is no more than our mind(set) or a psychic apparatus that can be described in laws and mechanisms using algorithms.

However, the soul is first and foremost a (phenomenological) experiential fact, and awareness of it is based on life experience that touches on the inscrutability of the origin and destiny of life. Nevertheless, its unimaginability is not a strong argument against its existence. Our inability to imagine or explain something need not lead us to deny what experience teaches us exists. Below is a brief exploration to clarify that pastoral care is care for life, because that connection does appear to be decisive: the soul as an indication of life. Where there is a soul, there is life. Soulless is lifeless. Theology primarily speaks about the soul from a pneumatological perspective (cf. Gen 2:7). Christian speaking about the soul is possible only in connection with the life-giving Spirit (cf. 1 Cor 15:45).

The Old Testament shows that the soul (*nephesh*) determines the life of the whole person. The *nephesh* typifies man with his desires, quite often connected with hunger and thirst as expressions of them. We thus use body language to represent something of our inner selves. The word *nephesh* is in the language field of *ruakh*, the breath of life, life, the life force.²⁴

The *nephesh* turns out to be so defining of our humanity that it is even the expression of the whole person, the self, the soul that is “I.” One can render “my soul hopes in God” as “I hope in God with every fiber of my being.” Thus, the animated man can enter into a dialogue with his inner self, with himself. He not only is addressed by God or by fellow creatures but can also address himself and call himself to order (cf. Pss 42; 103). In the Greek translation of the Old Testament, *nephesh* is usually rendered as *psychē*, the word we find in the New Testament to denote the principle of life, the

²⁴ Hans W. Wolff, *Antropologie des Alten Testaments* (Munich: Kaiser, 1970), 25–48.

living-being of human beings. It is also the word with which the core—the deepest inner self, where a person is most deeply touched—of man gets an interpretation. This *psychē* forms one whole with the body so that there is a duality (distinction) without a dichotomy (division). The *psychē* is a gift for which man must also account because in it he is addressed by God. Thus, the important thing about the soul is not that it is an independent substance but that it is a living entity that comes from God and relates to God. The existence of the soul is an indication of a special relationship between the Creator and the creature. Fundamental to a theological interpretation of soul care is understanding the Old and New Testament testimony as the charter of God's soul care for human beings.²⁵

Speaking of “with body and soul” emphasizes the connection between the two, rather than the distinction. We are created by God with a body. Biblically speaking, one cannot speak of a “self” or “person” separate from the body.²⁶ There is no inner self without an outer manifestation (body). This is not to say that our consciousness coincides with our brain, as in the materialist view that there is therefore no survival after death. However, it is our body that God brings to life and sustains by his Spirit (Gen 2:7; Acts 17:25). So the Bible does not have a dichotomy of body and soul or even a trichotomy of soul, spirit, and body as its own biological or psychological characterization of who man is.

A holistic view of man emerges from many places in Scripture. This gets particular expression when the *heart* of man is spoken of as the center of the whole person. The heart is the place where man's most essential being resides, decisions are made, and feelings arise. It is the place where desires and emotions, as well as the triad of reason, intellect, and will, come together. The heart is the home of the soul. What your “soul” is, is yourself; that is, yourself *coram Deo*. When we speak of doing something “with heart and soul,” we are actually speaking tautologically.

Relationship and communication with God take their place in the heart because the heart is the place touched and renewed by the Holy Spirit. The soul comes into existence from hearing the word of the living God, and “all that is in me” (Ps 103:1) starts praising God. A conversation takes place with the soul through the language of the soul, given in words in the Scripture. Thus, alienation is broken, and the soul regains a home, lifted from its introspection (I-centeredness), and the meaning of life is received. As Viktor Frankl famously said, meaning is the soul's homeland.

²⁵ Ziemer, *Seelsorgelehre*, 52.

²⁶ Swinton, *Dementia*, 165–72.

Speaking about the soul is nevertheless returning in the twenty-first century. There is apparently a desire to speak about the inner life, about change and the spiritual dimension of life. In the search for language for this “inside,” “soul” appears to be an important term. Religion, too, has no longer necessarily been viewed with suspicion in the last decade. It is no wonder that questions of meaning are also being allowed to come up for discussion again. Surely, receiving meaning turns out to be more than giving meaning, and created meaning is something essentially different from discovered meaning.

In pastoral care, the question of being, the question “Who *are* you?” exceeds the question of meaning. Certainly, the former question is preferable to the “What are you?” question. Theological reflection on what pastoral care is will also have to account for its relationship with “secular pastoralism,” with bodies of meaning in the broad sense of the word. After all, there is increasingly a certain de-Christianization of religion in the twenty-first century, at least in the Western world.

The above outline about the soul means that soul care is, by its nature, the care of the whole of life. This life is viewed from a spiritual perspective—namely, from the relationship with God, who gives life. Although the pastor is not a physician or therapist, he is there to connect the physical and the psychological from the perspective of living before God. Surely, elements of self-help and spiritual “methods” may be integrated into Christian soul care. As shown in the introduction, in Reformed pastoral care there has always been an awareness of the necessity to acquire some knowledge of basic notions of the psyche as a pastor. Moreover, a counselor must have some elementary knowledge of psychological diseases to recognize in pastoral care when and where another counselor, a psychologist or psychiatrist, has to come into play.

Nevertheless, as Martine Oldhoff convincingly has shown from the pneumatological anthropology of Paul, there are at least three possible important particularities of the soul that should be thought through within pastoral theology:²⁷

1. In a theological context, one has to take sides concerning the norm or frame of reference for change and for what counts as a good life and person: the soul’s *telos* is to be a self *before God*. One’s state of soul may lead to the actual pastoral question concerning one’s relationship to God.

²⁷ Martine C. L. Oldhoff, “Soul Searching with Paul: A Theological Investigation of Cultural, Traditional, and Philosophical Concepts of the Soul” (PhD diss., Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, 2021), ch. 7, summarized on 296–97.

2. The source or agent of change seen from a theological perspective is primarily God. The soul is not changed by one or another practice of a particular philosophy therapy or the application of a method. God is not only the creator of the soul but also its savior and transformer. This leads to the question: Are you willing to be saved by God's grace in Jesus Christ and changed by the Spirit?
3. The fulfillment of the process of change is to be awaited, as seen from a theological and eschatological perspective. This perspective offers space to acknowledge vulnerabilities and deficits that may last as it offers hope for this and the coming life.

Pastoral care is about inspiration: a being touched to the depths of their soul by the sacred—in the encounter with God—and thus truly catching their breath. *Cura animarum* (care of souls) is *cura vitae* (care for life): life must be healed. From the perspective of eternal life received here and now (cf. esp. the Gospel of John and 1 John), we can talk to each other about distress and joy, vulnerability and desires, pitfalls and being retrieved from them, inner fatigue and somatic complaints, and so many more variations on the theme of caring for the soul within the Christian community. Any individualistic approach to the soul as the self is ruled out by Paul, with his emphasis on the common worship of God in which the Spirit works.

Conclusion

Pastoral care as connecting soul and body can also be summarized as care for *vitality*.²⁸ After all, Christian soul care is about encountering Christ as the source of life; otherwise, it should not be called soul care at all, and there will be no cure of the soul without a faith relationship with him. In soul care one has the privilege of stimulating the receptivity of the soul for the voice of the good shepherd (John 10:3, 11) and to point at and perhaps take away the hindrances that caused a buffered self. The pastor is both witness to and addressee of God's word. He is aware that he is at the service of the movement of God toward man in his concrete life. Pastoral care as soul care ultimately is the action of God himself, through his Son and by his Holy Spirit. With a grateful nod to Swinton's book, let me conclude: soul care is about finding Jesus *in* the storm.²⁹

²⁸ Ziemer, *Seelsorgelehre*, 17.

²⁹ As the title of Swinton, *Finding Jesus in the Storm*.