

The Cure of Souls:
good for what ails you
By Harold L. Senkbeil

Mention “healing” and most people think of physicians, the medical arts, and pharmacology. Yet increasingly medical personnel are broadening their horizons to think holistically about human health. They have come to see that the physical health of a human being is connected to mental/emotional health. Some health professionals have even begun to see that these two components of human well-being are incomplete without a third: spiritual health.

People who take the scriptures seriously are not surprised. Humans exist in three distinct, yet overlapping dimensions: body, soul, and spirit.

Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name! Bless the Lord, O my soul and forget not all his benefits, who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy, who satisfies you with good so that your youth is renewed like the eagle’s. (Psalm 103:1-5)

Notice here how the healing God provides embraces all three dimensions of human existence: the forgiveness of sins, the healing of disease, and the redemption of life from despair.

Classical Christianity takes this biblical view of humanity seriously. In fact, the earliest designation for what it is that pastors do for people was called the *cura animarum* – the cure of souls. Clergy were viewed as “physicians of the soul” precisely because they were engaged in a healing art. Their work included both diagnosis and treatment, just like physicians of the body. But the work of pastors as spiritual physicians focused on the diagnosis and treatment of ailing souls.

In the Lutheran tradition we find the same understanding of pastoral ministry: *Seelsorge*, or the care of souls. A word about that little word “care:” Certainly empathy and emotional care for people are just as important in pastoral work as they are in medical work. But the “care” involved in pastoral care is far deeper than mere empathetic concern for the wellbeing of people. It means addressing the spiritual health of people using the tools that Christ has given to His church on earth: the living Word of the Gospel and the healing ministrations of the Sacraments.

Thus, the classical understanding of pastoral work includes two distinct, but overlapping activities: the *care* of souls and the *cure* of souls. Common experience with medical care helps us to understand the distinction and connection. To maintain their health, people go to their physicians for care – that is, regular checkups, monitoring, and early detection of possible ailments. When people experience illness, they go to their physicians for cure – that is, diagnosis, prescription, and treatment designed to eradicate the disease, or at least minimize its effects. When people are chronically ill, they need care. When people are acutely ill, they need cure. Both are provided by competent and trained physicians.

The same holds true when it comes to spiritual health. Ever since the rebellion of Adam and Eve, all humanity has been chronically ill – our disease is sin. God sent His Son to earth to treat this disease at its root: “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” (2 Cor 5:21) The essence of the care of souls, therefore, is the forgiveness of sins. And that’s what pastors do for sinners under their care. They apply the forgiveness that Jesus won for all the world on His cross.

In the absolution, pastors announce *the forgiveness of sins* to penitent sinners “in the stead and by the command of (the) Lord Jesus Christ.” In Holy Baptism, pastors baptize penitent sinners “in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” for *the forgiveness of sins*. In the Holy Supper, pastors distribute to penitent sinners the Body and the Blood that Jesus gave once upon His cross for *the forgiveness of sins*. These are the ordinary means of the care of souls; this is what pastors do continually for the souls entrusted to their care in order to maintain their spiritual health. Through the divinely given Word and Sacraments, pastors apply the forgiveness of sins that Jesus purchased for His church by His innocent suffering and death and with His holy, precious blood.

But in this fallen world sinners have special circumstances that call for extraordinary interventions. Because of the impact of their own and others’ sins, people can come under spiritual attack and fall acutely ill spiritually speaking. Luther describes these circumstances as *anfechtungen*, or spiritual assaults. The devil, this fallen world, and our own sinful nature often conspire to deceive or mislead us into false belief, despair, “and other great shame and vice” (Small Catechism, Sixth Petition) When this happens, people need spiritual cure – it’s no longer a question of maintaining spiritual health; now it’s a matter of restoring and guarding spiritual health.

Faithful pastors, like the Good Shepherd in whose Name they serve, care not merely for the whole flock, but for each individual sheep within the flock. “I am the good shepherd,” says Jesus. “I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father, and I lay down my life for the sheep.” (John 10:14-15) The Good Shepherd calls his sheep by name: “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand.” (John 10:27-28)

Like the Good Shepherd, undershepherds know their sheep. The care of souls is tailored to the unique spiritual needs of each person under a pastor’s care. As he gets to know each person, he begins to understand the natural disposition of each personality within the flock – a factor he bears in mind as he seeks to diagnose and treat their spiritual ailments. Distress, fear, and anxiety manifest themselves differently in people who are quiet and reserved, for example, than they do in highly energetic people.

The care of souls is a complex and challenging responsibility for pastors. Like medical care, it involves both a science and an art. Thorough knowledge of the Scriptures as well as a healthy understanding of the human psyche is fundamental to the care of souls. This

is why our church has historically emphasized the necessity of building and maintaining an educated clergy. But knowledge itself doesn't heal people. A good "bedside manner" is vital when applying the means of grace to the needs of people. Diagnostic and treatment skills are developed while practicing the art of spiritual care. There is no substitute for pastoral experience and pastoral practice when it comes to developing competencies in the cure of souls.

Finally, when all is said and done, however, it is not the pastor who cures people of their spiritual ailments. He is only the "best man" by which the heavenly Bridegroom sends gifts to His beloved bride, the church. Christ Himself is the great physician of body, mind, and spirit. By His death and resurrection He has conquered sin, death, and hell. The sacred washing which He has instituted is a link to His saving work at the cross and open tomb; it is a bath of regeneration in the Holy Spirit for all who believe. In His sacred Body and most holy Blood there is health and healing for every wounded soul. In His powerful Word there is life eternal, starting here and now within His church.

These are the sacred means of Grace, the medicine Jesus Christ has given for *the forgiveness of sins* – for the health and wellbeing of His church on earth. And they are good for whatever ails you!

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