

Christology of the Family

Straight from a Pastor's Heart Series • Volume I

Christology of the Family

A Systematic Theology of Pastoral Care

Michael Lessard



© 2017 by Michael Lessard. All rights reserved.

Published by Redemption Press, PO Box 427, Enumclaw, WA 98022

Toll Free (844) 2REDEEM (273-3336)

Redemption Press is honored to present this title in partnership with the author. The views expressed or implied in this work are those of the author. Redemption Press provides our imprint seal representing design excellence, creative content, and high quality production.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any way by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise—without the prior permission of the copyright holder, except as provided by USA copyright law.

ISBN 13: 978-1-68314-361-1

This book is dedicated to my wife, Dorothy. Her love and support has made this work possible. It is not just my work, but hers. Our life together is God's greatest blessing in my life.

Rev. Michael J. Lessard

July, 2010

.....

Contents

Foreword.....	ix
<i>Sometimes</i>	1
Chapter 1: Prolegomenon (<i>A Theology of Caring</i>)	2
<i>Things Left After the Flood</i>	13
Chapter 2: The Baptized Are the Church	14
<i>At the Garden</i>	27
Chapter 3: The Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist/ The Family Meal	28
<i>The Sentinel</i>	37
Chapter 4: Confirmation in Christ	38
<i>Winter Run Off</i>	47
Chapter 5: Our Life of Prayer/Loving the God Who Cares for Us	48
<i>At the Gate/Jesus Says: I Am the Gate</i>	64

Chapter 6: The Trinity and Unity in the Heart of Christ/
“The Bride and the Bridegroom” 66

Lighthouse 81

Chapter 7: The Call to and Ministry of Pastoral Care. 82

Resolution 95

Chapter 8: Scriptural Leadership that Cares 96

Final Thoughts: Straight from a Pastor’s Heart—
A Systematic Theology of Pastoral Care 108

Endnotes 110

Bibliography for *Straight from a Pastor’s Heart* 116

Bibliography for Christology of the Family, Vol. 1 118

.....

Foreword

THE PURPOSE OF this book is to convey to you the primary ministry of the church. The heart of the gospel is the pastoral care of the people of God. The message of the gospel is centered on the ministry of Jesus—His healing the sick, reconciling people to God, and teaching. I hope to refocus our attention on the central elements of the Christian community.

The renewed awareness of the ministry of Jesus shifts our attitudes and behaviors so that we can mirror the heart of Christ. What I offer is a reflection of someone working in the field. I have had successes and failures. I have worked in the vineyard, and from this toil, I want to share with you what I have learned and experienced. I hope this book will strengthen you in your ministry of caregiving to the body of Christ.

I deeply appreciate the help of those who minister to me and with me. My wife, Dorothy, has encouraged and loved me. I thank God for our chaplains and board of directors of Pastoral Care Associates and all those who have befriended me thorough the years.

I pray that Jesus will bless you in the reading of this book and confirm within you that which is true and helpful.

The Rev. Michael Lessard
Phoenix, Arizona, 2010



SOMETIMES

Sometimes I wish the path were straight
and I could walk or run
at a faster gait.

I wish sometimes that simple footsteps could
accomplish more,
that my soul and body did not get sore.

I sometimes wish that I could breathe,
at a pace, a dash of speed,
without a wheeze.

But then I might have missed the view
that special path
that led to You.

Where do You live, Lord?
Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests;
But the Son of Man has nowhere
To lay his head. (Matt. 8:20 NRSV)

Chapter I

Prolegomenon (A Theology of Caring)

RECENTLY ATTENDED a clergy conference. You know, one of those meetings that causes you to wonder how the church has survived this long. The discussion was about priorities—how much money and attention was to be spent for this or that project and how to invest our human capital to further God’s plans. I have been to many, many meetings like this over the years, but this meeting was very unsettling. Perhaps it’s because I am older, or maybe I am going through midlife transition, but it has caused me to think and sit down and write this book. Writing is not easy for me, so to get me motivated takes some sort of epiphany. Hopefully, the Holy Spirit has had something to do with it.

I have had a lot of ideas running around in my head, and I have given many teachings over the years. Now seems to be the time to share them. I intend to show in a systematic way that caring with the heart of Jesus is the central element permeating everything the church teaches and does. I thank God that I can make this small offering. It has taken countless hours of clergy conferences, vestry meetings, and assorted, painful planning sessions for this moment of liberation and clarity.

A CHRISTOLOGY OF CARING

The primary ministries of Jesus were pastoral care, healing, reconciliation, and teaching. The Gospels are inhabited with the evidence of Jesus' care and love. We experience Him doing the ministry of caring, and we see Him training and sending others out to continue this ministry. For example, when he sent out the seventy-two in Luke 10:1–12, He gave them instructions. He also directed his apostles in the same way. He ordered them not to bring anything with them except the peace they offered at the door.¹

Jesus did not evangelize as we think of evangelizing today. He preached the kingdom of God and invited some to follow. But what really separated Him from the Old Testament prophetic tradition was His tremendous ministry of caring for the sick and healing them. Jesus has experienced our pain. He did not avoid the human condition but entered into the drama of human suffering. He understood it well because He sought it out. He went into the desert and was tempted for forty days and nights.² He openly discussed His death on the cross.³ He was and is a man acquainted with grief, as Isaiah says. It is because of the truth of the humanity and divinity of Jesus that we have a Christology of a Savior who cares for us.⁴

A Christology of caring is incarnational. Jesus began His human journey as we all begin and as creation itself emerged from the womb of God's creative energy. Physicists, beginning with Lamaitre, Friedman, Hubble, and others, have been able to identify that the universe is expanding and moving away from us. They hypothesize that the universe began with a tiny particle of matter that kicked off the process of creation. This seed of matter, this singularity, became an ever-expanding space as gas and planets formed, suns ignited, and the physical laws of nature began to operate.

Every person begins with a tiny moment of creation. God entered our humanity in the same way, through this microscopic door of materiality. He was born just as every person is born. Cells

begin to multiply, and they divide. The heart begins to pump blood and oxygen and cells grow into an embryo.

Jesus is Emmanuel, God with us. God is not distant or detached. He engages us from our most fragile beginnings. He makes our beginnings His own. He is not content to let creation go its own course. He chooses to get inside it and make it sacred. Jesus describes this love of God, this faith in creation, as a mustard seed. He invites us into the world of wonder and trust. He introduces us to the pregnant possibility that makes all things possible.

The kingdom of God is found in the incarnation of Christ. This is the seed that grows the revelation of God's personal care for us and for all things. It recognizes human suffering and our limited mortality—the reality of life and death. (Tillich calls it the polarity in which we all live.⁵) Jesus entered into our human Jerusalem. He experienced the polarities of being adored by the crowd outside the walls of the city, and all the while, the Pharisees were plotting His death inside the walls of Jerusalem. Jesus embraced our humanity and life and death willingly and chose it with all its consequences. Saint Paul tells us in Romans 8:34 that the only reason Jesus would make such a leap is because He loves and cares for us. His choosing the incarnation cements us to Him in love and care. The result of this incarnational leap is that He is not difficult to live with and not caught up in himself. Pain and suffering don't diminish Him. He is a joy to be with because He is so real.

Jesus never hides behind anyone or anything. He does not posture, pretend, or run from conflict. He does not give up. He does not use people or bow to public opinion. If Jesus is on your side, you know where He is going to be—right next to you. The Scriptures say that He intercedes for us before God the Father.⁶ That is the kind of defender I need and want. He has paid the price for you and me, and He has the scars to prove it. He chose and redeemed all of humanity's sin, pain, suffering, and death.

I have been a hospital chaplain for twenty years. The measure of my ministry is not what I have done or accomplished, but what I have witnessed. Christian caregiving is incarnational. It is where I meet the Lord. Jesus is in the patient on the ventilator who cannot

He speaks but raises a hand to me as I walk into the room. He is in the person who is alone or frightened by an upcoming surgery. He is in every patient; in every prayer; and in every doctor, nurse, and family member. Perhaps it is because I see Him so often in each person that I can appreciate how every human encounter is an opportunity for grace to break through and warm our hearts with meaning and truth.

No interaction between people is an accident because each person contains a divine invitation to care for others. Small talk that seems relatively mundane can lead to a moment of vulnerability, and that in turn leads to a moment of God's blessing and love.

One of those ice-breaking questions that people often ask is, "What do you do for a living?" It can be asked on the golf course or at a party or social function. When I tell them that I am a hospital chaplain, the next questions are, "Isn't that depressing? How do you keep from getting depressed?" The questions seem to suggest that hospital chaplaincy should be difficult and a heartache. I usually say that most of the patients at the hospital recover. If they didn't, no one ever would go there. The fact is, I am impressed, not depressed.

As I said, pastoral care is incarnational. I have the privilege of being with people at moments of great sorrow and pain, joy and exaltation. I am aware that I stand on holy ground, where God and human beings meet in the crucible of human suffering or in the exaltation of new life or recovery. It is the sanctuary of the temple. It is the Mount of Olives. It is the open door to paradise. My wife has said, "Eternity is just outside our skin." I have had the experience of being with and praying for those whose journeys to Christ happened in a twinkling of an eye and are just outside the veneer of mortality. The Incarnation ties our journeys to the mantle of Christ's journey of redemption. God is not disengaged from our personal experiences. He is found in them.

Christians hope in an eternal life with God. We need a pioneer who has gone ahead to cut the path and blaze a trail for us to follow. Jesus is that Shepherd who cares to lead the way to our eternal homeland. The biblical image of the Christ, the Good Shepherd,⁸ shows how committed Jesus is to my pastoral care and to yours.

We hear in Psalm 23 that God intends to be entrusted with our care. He will watch over us. He will protect us. He will guide and direct us to good pasture. He will lead us with his rod, an extension of His arm, to keep us together and moving in the right direction.⁹

A Theology of Caring is not permissive. The rod of the Shepherd is to inspect the sheep and keep them in line and in sight, safely within the flock. The Good Shepherd has boundaries. He cares for the sheep and sets limits for their own good. “Your rod and your staff—they comfort me.”¹⁰ I can trust God’s judgment because His holy will is to lead and guide me to the heart of His love.

The cultural pressures of today are so great upon the church that we are tempted to lose sight of the Good Shepherd and like sheep nibble ourselves away until we are lost.

Our culture offers quick fixes and business-style solutions to most problems. The church is being stretched to accommodate modern cultural methods that promote a type of gospel that validates cultural beliefs. We focus our attention on mission goals, media, evangelization, stewardship, buildings, the latest liturgical fad or musical style—whatever the latest church growth gimmick is. We so compartmentalize church programs that we may be losing the bond of caring that keeps us together.

Have we strayed so far away from the gospel that we can’t differentiate the church from the culture? Many have adopted cultural ideas, such as targeting groups by age or financial and social status. Have we marginalized our youth by separating them into groups and cliques? Have we adopted a gospel that accepts things the way they are because we must accept the culture we live in and do business the way it does?

I remember that a newly-elected Bishop said one day at a clergy meeting that he was not a good pastoral care person. We would have to rely on others to meet our needs. You know, that diocese never had a clergy retreat until he retired ten years later. How could that be? How is it possible that someone who promises to shepherd the sheep and lead them to Christ is not a pastoral care person and is not equipped to shepherd the shepherds? He might have other redeeming qualities. For example, he might be a good

storyteller, CEO, organizer, and be personally charming. He did make a point of trying to be “inclusive” in the moral teaching of the church, but what about the heart of the gospel? Perhaps the church has placed too much value on leadership abilities that do not require caring.

It is no surprise that Pope John Paul wrote that the culture of death has taken root and grown in our society.¹¹ When the shepherds give the care of the sheep to a hired man, the sheep run wild, get lost, and suffer death in the jaws of wolves.

Pastoral care ministry is vital for the life of the Body of Christ because it is the heart of the gospel. In my years as a chaplain, I have seen many cardiac resuscitations and code arrests. I believe that the heart is the most important organ in the body. Modern medicine does all kinds of things to keep the heart going. We shock it, we medicate it, and we operate on it because the heart is vital for life to continue. We only can replicate what the heart does for a short time. Without a working heart, the blood fails to circulate to the rest of the organs and they die. When the heart stops, brain death is just minutes away. The patient with no heartbeat and blood pressure is about to experience eternity. The importance of Christian caregiving needs to be recognized as the basis for the heartbeat and life of the Church.

The local church will require more pastoral care resources to meet greater and greater demands as the Baby Boom generation continues to move into retirement. The church, in recent times, has understood pastoral care as a specialized ministry for a few trained professionals. As a result, it is not sufficiently equipped to meet the growing needs of an aging population. Many churches are now on life support, trying to exist with a diminished capacity to give care. It is critical to restore the heart of the church for us to be revived, renewed, and strengthened. We need to train all the people of God to become ministers of care. An incarnational theology of care means that just as Christ has given us His heart of love, we must respond by caring for one another.¹²

CREATION AND GRACE

In the book of Genesis, God gave Adam the job of tending the Garden of Eden.¹³ Adam was created to be a caretaker. God had created the universe and the world and cared for it. God wanted man to know the wonder of the world by caring for it as He does. Grace is the benefit of God's love and care. The promise to Adam, even after his sin, was that God still cared.¹⁴ He made clothes for Adam and Eve,¹⁵ and Paul says (1Cor. 15:20–28) that God has restored creation by giving us a new, perfect Adam.¹⁶ God cares so much for us that He is willing to put on our skin. He will not only clothe us, but also He will put on our clothes. He will put on our humanity. God, who lives in eternity, will become flesh and blood, and He will restore His care to all people for all time.

Sin kills caring. “Am I my brother's keeper?” asked Cain.¹⁷ Selfishness and pride replace caring with self-protection. Lying, cheating, stealing, and being violent reduce caring to irrelevancy and destroy trust, friendship, and intimacy. More importantly, sin treats God's care as a delusion or a myth. It creates a cynical world whose covenant is with death. It says, “Let's live life to get the most pleasure, since tomorrow we will die.” Exploitations, drug addictions, and our compulsive habits anesthetize us against facing ourselves and our pain. Some churches even try to make faith relevant by soft-peddling sin. This idea undermines our need for redemption and conversion.

In my rounds at the hospital, I have encountered some people who have given up on God. They blame Him for their conditions. They are angry and disapproving of any mention of the “G” word. The last thing they want to see is someone who represents Him. Occasionally, I wonder if I have unexpectedly entered HBO's Bill Maher's talk show world of disbelief. These people think that a belief in God is a betrayal of their jealously guarded anger at the difficulties of life. They believe pain and suffering, if there is a God, is a divine trick to force us to accept a drink from the elixir of some semi-benevolent deity. They hold on to a hopeless fantasy of fear. If we deny God's existence, we deny His care for us.

I recently was making rounds in the ICU. I visited a patient who appeared to be about sixty years old. He was lying in his bed. I gave him a big “hello” and introduced myself. His immediate response was, “I am an atheist, and I don’t believe in what you are selling.”

I explained to him that I visited all our patients and that I hoped he was starting to feel better. I asked him, “What was the reason for your hospitalization?”

He said, “I have a bad ticker, and I need to have bypass surgery.”

I said, “When are they going to do the surgery?”

“I am going to have surgery in a few hours, and I am not excited about the idea,” he said.

I looked at him and said as I moved closer, “I hope the surgery goes well for you.” I touched his arm.

He looked back at me and said, “God willing, it will.”

No sooner had the words left his mouth than I could see that he wanted them back. He tried to catch them, but it was too late. Out of his subconscious, he blurted out hope. Someone who had cared for him years ago had put those words in there. Now, when he was under stress and in difficulty and hardship and the wolf of death was at the door, here was the truth. God cares and loves and wills life.

When we care as God does, and in the way He does (as Jesus is now doing), we put skin on God for everyone to see. Christian caregiving mirrors the primary sacrament of God’s work in creation. That is why Jesus gave care all the time, even on the Sabbath. He put skin on the covenant between Israel and God. He invites us to enter into His graceful, caring presence and to delight in His works.

It is no wonder that the first thing that every totalitarian state and every despot tries to eliminate by killing His servants is the love of Jesus Christ. The self-serving, superior egoist, the powerful tyrant, and the immoral hedonist cannot remove or supplant God’s care.

The state cannot serve as a god. Every time man's egos and the state have tried to kill the Christian faith, they have ended up in the ashes of ruin and failure. Every man, woman, and child has a god. But what matters is whether the (God) god they worship is the real one or not.

Patients usually tell me within the first few minutes of a visit what kind of (God) god they believe in. They cannot help it. They have to tell their stories. Our stories center on themes of redemption, meaning, hope, and pain, and they ultimately reflect our personal theology. The caring Christian is one who looks for these personal revelations, listens for them, and lives in the grace of the moment.

I have had many conversations with people who recognize that their god is too small, too identified with self, too cloaked in fear, too distant and unavailable to care. It is because I have cared to listen that there have been *aha!* moments. It is because of His grace in my personal story that I can hear the pain and need in someone else's story.

The grace for the ministry of caring comes from the cross and resurrection of Christ. The Holy Spirit pours grace on us like oil on our heads.¹⁸ The Holy Spirit hands over to us the ministry of our calling to care for one another through the experience of being adopted as God's sons and daughters.¹⁹

THE HOLY SPIRIT—CARING CHARISMS

When Jesus fed the five thousand, it was because He was full of compassion for those with Him who had been listening to His teaching. We are told that he felt for them because, "They were like sheep without a shepherd."²⁰ Jesus was affected by people and events around Him. He went where the Holy Spirit led Him. It was the Spirit that moved and empowered His ministry. It was the Holy Spirit that filled Him with care for others. He understood the nature of His calling and its duties in the Spirit.

The same action of the Holy Spirit came down upon Him at His baptism and it fell upon the apostles at Pentecost. It is the Holy

Spirit who taught and guided them as they planted the church. The Holy Spirit was with them in their fellowship, when they gathered, and when they cared for one another. The Holy Spirit helped them when they needed wisdom to say the right things.²¹

When I was a seminarian, I had the reputation of being the spokesman for the Holy Spirit. (This was not my idea.) I was a card-carrying Charismatic Catholic, and some of my professors used to try to trip me up with theological questions about the Holy Spirit. One day my New Testament professor asked me, "Mr. Lessard, which person of the Trinity raised Christ from the dead?"

At first, I was stymied by his question and its tone, and I felt defensive. At that moment, I remembered a song from our prayer meetings, "It's the same Spirit that raised Christ from the dead that dwells in you."²¹ I said loudly, "The Holy Spirit raised Christ from the dead, and that's found in Romans." You know, he never tried to embarrass me in class again.

The Holy Spirit will bring to mind the things you need to remember. The Holy Spirit is God's personal care for the church. I have wondered why Jesus said that He had to leave for the Spirit to come down to us. Perhaps it was because when Jesus was present in Galilee, we did not need the Spirit. The apostles had the Word of God speaking love and care directly to them. Now we have the same Spirit that raised Christ from the dead dwelling in us through baptism. And it is in the Spirit that we remember the important words of institution that make Christ present in the Eucharist. We ask the Spirit to come upon us and upon the gifts of bread and wine, making them the body and blood of Christ.²²

It is in the gifts of the Holy Spirit that we experience God's personal care for us. All the gifts of the Spirit reveal the same caring that Christ has shown and now is showing. It is in the Spirit that we worship, prophesy, teach, heal the sick, and minister the compassion of Christ Jesus.

There have been times in my ministry when I have been aware that the Holy Spirit's gift of caring was at work. Sometimes as I have listened to a patient, the compassion of Jesus was so abundant that I was taken aback by it. I wondered from where the words had