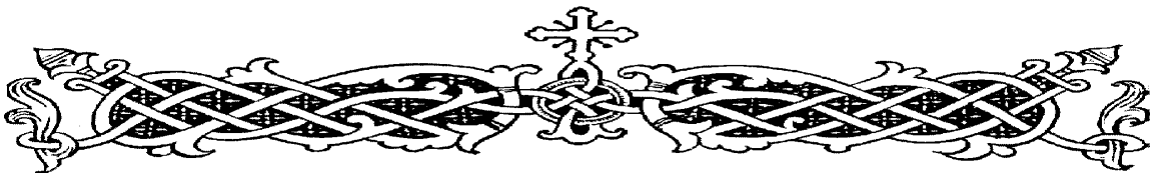

## Prayer Before Studying Ethics:

O heavenly Father, your word is perfect, restoring the soul, making wise the simple and enlightening the eyes of the blind, and a power of salvation for every one that believes. We, however, are by nature blind and incapable of doing anything good, and you will help only those who have a broken and contrite heart and who revere your word. We ask you, therefore, to illuminate our darkened minds with your Holy Spirit and give us a humble heart, free from all haughtiness and carnal wisdom, in order that we, hearing your word, may rightly understand it and may regulate our lives accordingly.

--Dutch Psalter (1566), slightly adapted

**A Short History of Pastoral Ethics as a Discipline and the Literature Pertaining to It**

Courses that introduce a new academic discipline will often begin by briefly describing the history of that academic discipline and the nature of the literature that was produced in that discipline during the different ages of the Church.

One cannot speak of anything like the modern concept of pastoral ethics until the end of the seventeenth century and there is, in any case, not really a continuous body of literature that operates on agreed principles throughout the subsequent centuries. Literature on pastoral ethics has tended to appear only episodically, usually where social change and new movements within the church have created disagreement about the nature, duties and primary tasks of ministry or when a crisis over ecclesiastical or pastoral (mal)practice has occurred that must be rapidly addressed.

I will try to briefly describe the nature of the literature that does exist in the area we now call “pastoral ethics” and to describe the problems that led to its production and what you would find in these works if you were to read through them. (This discussion also sheds some interesting light on the different understandings people have had of the ministry in the modern period and how markedly our conceptions of ministry have changed in the space of only a few centuries.)

Strangely enough, little attention was given to the ethical component of pastoral practice even as recently as the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. This was perhaps linked to the fact that the practice of ministry were not covered in the curriculum of university-based liberal arts or divinity degrees (although the requirement of confessional subscription ensured that some basic beliefs about the office of the ministry and the sacramental life of the church were held by ministers and, at least formally, by their members of their congregations as well).

In the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century, there were periods of rapid change about what constituted the proper practice of the ministry and this led to the production of written discussions of this topic, which increasingly took on a more developed and systematic form.

**Pietism (1680-1720): Renewing the Ministry, Renewing the Church—A New Approach to Ministerial Duties and to the Spiritual and Ethical Requirements of the Pastoral Office**

Philip Jacob Spener and August Herman Francke had helped to launch a renewal movement in the Lutheran churches of Northern Europe which tried to **reform how the goals and practice of ministry were understood and how the training of ministers was conducted**. This led to the production of literature by the Pietists (and later, in response, by their Lutheran Orthodox opponents) of **descriptions of <u>ministerial duties</u> (i.e. discussions of the ethical, spiritual and practical requirements of ministry as a public office)**.

Thus, for example, for the Lutheran Orthodox, the principal tasks of the pastor were to
(1) preach doctrinal sermons whose content was in agreement with the Lutheran confessions;
(2) teach younger people the catechism (the basic Lutheran doctrine presented in a question and answer format that was to be memorized);
(3) hear confessions of persons in one's own parish and pronounce absolution.

The Pietists proposed a different list of ministerial duties:

(1) The pastor should preach in a way that is accessible to the ordinary person, engages the emotions and invites persons to heartfelt repentance and conversion.
(2) The pastor should lead small group Bible studies in which persons who had been converted (born again) could learn to study the Scriptures for themselves and to practically apply the Scriptures to their everyday lives (which served to enable the priesthood of all believers).
(3) The pastor should encourage regenerate members of the laity to engage in spiritual reading and private devotional practices.

Note the different ways in which the minister's role is understood here; **it was only when people came to disagree about what the principal duties of the pastoral office were that these needed to be extensively discussed in print, leading to the development of a new type of pastoral literature that became the basis for pastoral ethics**.

It is also worth noting that the Pietists attempted to reform the ways in which pastors were trained, arguing that **what the pastor is (his person or character as a man of God) is more important than what the pastor does**. Great emphasis was placed upon the **cultivation of a spiritual identity through devotional practices**. This encouraged extensive written discussion of the spiritual and ethical requirements of the pastoral office, which also supported the rise of a distinct body of literature on pastoral ethics.

As a result of these trends, a number of works began to appear in the 1690's that dealt in great detail with

**(1) what the pastor's character should be;**
**(2) what the pastor should do to become such a person;**
(3) **who the proper objects of the minister's care are** and

**(4) how the minister should act toward them and what boundaries ought to be observed in his relations with them.**

Example:

- Johann Andreas Quenstedt, *Ethica pastoralis* (1697)

This type of literature tended to decline after 1740 due to emergence of Enlightenment rationalism and the demand that any ethics worth having was universal in character, i.e. it was based upon what was agreed to be in accordance with human reason and hence was applicable and binding to all persons, regardless of their specific background (religion, profession, etc.).

**Ministry as a Divine Vocation**

What all these early manuals of pastoral ethics shared was a conviction that ministry was not just a job, but was actually something else—a divine vocation.

By "vocation," I mean that being a minister of the Gospel was not something one chose on one's own initiative. Ministry was instead something that one was previously called to by God and one only later discovered this prior call and struggled in responding to it.

Not only did God call people into ministry; God also defined what ministry meant, i.e.

- what kind of life this required,
- what power and authority was given (and not given) to the minister and for what purpose.

To unpack this a bit, the ministry of teaching and caring for a congregation was not a set of tasks, but actually a whole style of life, which was oriented toward God in a certain, specific way.

- Being called to the ministry of the Gospel required a total life commitment which required a regular and deep personal engagement with the Word of God, not merely reading or studying Scripture, but turning Scripture into a prayer that addressed God and listened to God over an extended period of time every day (an hour a day or more) and was completely separate from one's additional study of Scripture for the purposes of preaching or teaching.
    - Intense, extended devotion was done for love alone and was not done for the instrumental purpose of preparing something, completing a task or fulfilling a professional responsibility.
- Because God calls into a ministry that is his own ministry (not ours), he gets to define what ministry means and to establish the limits of how power and authority are structured (what power and authority is given for what specific purposes and with what specific limits).
    - A secular entrepreneur or CEO may aspire to unrestricted power, a power they can shape without limit in a bid to get more of what one wants.
    - A minister of the Gospel is given real authority for some particular, define purposes: to preach the Word of God, to proclaim the forgiveness of sins to the repentant, and to show people that the Lord's promises are present supernatural realities that are now available to them.

        - The minister who goes beyond this to seek an expanded, unrestricted and personally defined vision of power will end by using and destroying the very people he claims to help.
            - For further reading on this critically important but often neglected point, see Henry Vander Goot's introduction to K. Sietsma's classic work *The Idea of Office* (pp. 7-13: "Office as Authority: The Impact of a Biblical Idea").
- Being called to the ministry was also seen to require a simpler, sparer approach to life, an acceptance that one would not attain worldly honor and most likely would experience downward mobility.
    - This was not a mere negative asceticism. From this sparer life, it was believed, a new kind of charity, generosity, and sympathy for what others suffered and struggled with might emerge with God's help.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this very old idea of <u>calling</u> to a certain kind of life and ministry was gradually replaced by the emerging idea of being a <u>professional</u> and hence,

- being a leader in the broader community because of advanced education and
- using this position to serve others by advancing their social, economic and emotional well-being.

**<u>The Minister as a Professional</u>**

The end of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century (particular after 1930), certain groups increasingly organized themselves into professional communities.

The self-run groups aimed to

- set standards for what it meant to be a practicing member of that group;
- include, exclude and discipline members of the group from professional practice based on those standards;
- exert influence over training programs which led up to certification and professional practice (credentialism: the use of school degrees and examinations to determine who advances into licensed practice);
- offer and even require a practitioners to engage in continuing education experiences, so that the practitioner would be current on advances in professional knowledge;
- project a defined picture to the general public of what it meant to be a professional of that particular type.

Professionalization advanced rather slowly and incompletely before 1930, often in ways that seem a bit silly in historical hindsight, but did project a certain mystique that became a foundation for later, more content-driven developments.

**The Nineteenth Century: "Pastoral Etiquette" for the Aspiring Professional**

The nineteenth century was a time of rapidly changing social conditions in America (mobile population, society in flux due to economic changes associated with industrialization and new patterns of transportation and commerce).

At this time there was a rapid shift in the social/educational background of the people applying to become ministers of the Gospel.

- Previously, the clergy had been predominantly drawn from the upper middle class (e.g. schoolteachers) and the minor nobility. The ministry had tended to attract the same kind of people who might end up in the legal profession (i.e. a skilled profession that required the mastery of a corpus of specialized knowledge that allowed one to assume a respected role in community leadership).
- During this period, due to a decline in the status/potential earnings of the clergy, the ministry increasingly tended to recruit persons from humbler and less educated backgrounds (i.e. low income with little formal education), a number of whom had recently come to faith through revivals in smaller towns and rural areas. (This also was the beginning of denominational subsidies for theological education, since persons from less affluent backgrounds would otherwise have been unable to participate in formal education.)
- As the pool of persons recruited to ministry rapidly changed in character, denominations struggled to help students adapt so that they would be able to minister in polite society in more urban areas.
    - There was an attempt to formalize this in the new denominational seminaries that were being established (beginning in the 1830's to 1860's) through a course in **pastoral etiquette** that helped students to "cultivate the character of a Christian gentleman (learning decorum, proper demeanor and etiquette through an acceptance of contemporary cultural standards of propriety, i.e. "A gentleman who chews tobacco should not spit in a lady's presence" [cf. p. 61]).
        - p. 61: The pastor "should never say or do anything which would be offensive to the best bred families in [his] congregation."
        - p. 68: "The very fact that a man is a minister should make him a gentleman."
        - Note the presupposed harmony between religious and cultural ideals here; refined etiquette and a sanctified heart go together.
    - In the second half of the nineteenth century (as denominations began to exercise greater and more centralized control over affiliated educational institutions), this course on **pastoral ethics and etiquette** would also emphasize the **moral formation of the pastor through private devotion**. Students were encouraged or required to
        - engage in prayer, meditation, fasting and spiritual reading;
        - attend prayer groups, chapel services and devotional retreats;
        - meet with faculty members for prayer and spiritual guidance
    - This course would also briefly discuss **the principal virtues and vices**, following the post-Kantian division (typical in undergraduate courses on moral science) into
        - duties owed to oneself;
        - duties owed to others and
        - duties owed to God.

      These were often treated in a fairly brief and formal way, giving a general description, not explicitly dependent upon Holy Scripture, of what

constituted prudence, zeal, honesty, avarice (greed), (excessive) ambition, etc. [cf. p. 60]. It was only in the 1880's and 1890's that an attempt was made to provide a systematic treatment of the biblical basis for such descriptions.

In this kind of literature,

- we see the pastor as professional/community leader because of
  - education and
  - good breeding (the behavior proper to a social leader worthy of trust), but
- we do not yet see an attempt to justify the pastor's professional position in terms of
  - a discrete body of agreed knowledge regarding specific professional practices, as established and overseen by a governing professional body.

**1900-1930: Secularization and the Social Gospel**

The literature of this period reveals

- **a decline in the emphasis placed on the devotional life** and
- **a decline of interest in the previous ideal of the clerical character as having spiritual requirements and being identical with the behavior of a Christian gentleman**.

Instead,

- The ministry is increasingly seen as a self-contained profession that provided specialized services to an increasingly self-selected clientele.
  - Seminary personnel tend to retreat at this time into their own form of professionalization, developing research and publication programs analogous to those of professors at secular universities.
  - Pastoral care of students or involve in the students' spiritual and pastoral formation was no longer seen as a primary task of seminary faculty or administrators.
- The primary center of pastoral care was the individual person who had problems peculiar to him or herself. The pastor was supposed to function as a **diagnostician** and problem-solver and increasingly **adopted the methods of emerging secular psychology as the skilled knowledge base**.
  - The basis of the pastor's professional authority, in other words, lay
    - not in traditional concepts of pastoral vocation (call to office]), ordination, or devotional practice,
    - but rather in having a knowledge of problems and procedures which were pertinent to the specialized services he provided to individuals and were validated and by the broader culture and accredited by a professional organization whose authority was broadly recognized by contemporary society.

- The secondary task of the minister was to participate in the broader community to transform it (e.g. maintaining a presence in increasingly secular institutional settings via CPE and political and social advocacy for social changes that would benefit the local community and especially the disadvantaged).

**These changes led to a**

- **decline after the 1930's in literature that specifically addressed ethical aspects of pastoral work and**
- **refocused ethical discussion upon social issues that concerned the whole civil polity** (poverty, unemployment, social justice, etc.).

Pastoral ethics was thus largely displaced by the emerging emphasis upon a certain approach to social ethics.

By the **1980's**, ministers, due to the advance of secularization, seem to have largely retreated from broader social engagement, i.e. no longer see themselves as moral leaders within a broader (civil) society, but try to reestablish themselves leaders of segmented, compartmentalized religious communities that function as voluntary organizations (lack of agreed public significance, loss of political influence). The pastor is thus no longer conceived primarily as a moral leader for the broader society who is concerned for the latter's transformation. Instead, the minister is encouraged to

(1) set a **moral example for those individuals who consciously self-identify as Christia**n and
(2) have **the professional skills necessary to effect change within the** gathered **church** community.
   (a) This leads to the rise of pastors studying **organizational leadership** and business management techniques. This conception of the pastor as administrator also indirectly contributed to the rise of the megachurch movemeent—an ecclesiastical organization that exists on a scale with secular corporations and, in terms of values and procedures, is to be managed in accordance with similar principles toward some broadly similar goals.) **This tends to lead to ministerial ethics being seen as a subset of secular professional ethics (especially the ethics pertinent to business professionals).**

This has led to a certain **backlash**, particularly noticeable in the last decade, where some writers have advocated a renewed emphasis upon the spiritual and moral formation of the minister as essential to the Church's evangelization, development of sound and healthy forms of pastoral care, and ethical witness to the broader society. This includes

(1) some conservative evangelical, Reformed clergy who lead parachurch movements intended to aid other ministers (John Piper, John Armstrong, etc.) and
(2) mainline denominational clergy who have somewhat traditional theological views and are interested in virtue ethics (e.g. James F. Keenan, Joseph Kotva, Jr., William H. Willimon, etc.).

What these two groups have in common is that they

(1) place a new emphasis upon the recovery of role-based identity (the office of ministry as entailing and requiring a peculiar persona and character that one must adopt). (This is somewhat reminiscent of the descriptions of the duties of the ministerial office that the Pietists and Lutheran Orthodox exchanged between 1690 and 1730.)
(2) are vocal advocates of

a. restoring spiritual and moral formation to a central place within formal training for ministry
b. encouraging denominations (and their training institutions), in assessing a candidate's readiness for ministry, to evaluate whether the candidate has
    i. a personal rule of life and prayer
    ii. an appropriate degree of transparency, humility, patience, etc. in their relationships with others
    iii. an understanding of power dynamics in relationships, the maintenance of appropriate boundaries in relationships, repudiation of manipulative behavior, etc.

These kind of appeals from concerned clergy and denominational officials did not have much effect until after 1982, when courts began to render multimillion dollar judgments against denominations for **clergy sexual misconduct.** This led to a renewed interest in pastoral ethics and produced a large amount of new literature in this area (although at least 90% of this was concerned with practical proposals to limit pastoral sexual misconduct, while the discussion of other areas remained undeveloped or was not even addressed).

- Some mainline denominational seminaries will now include a discussion of pastoral ethics within a pastoral core course or, in a few cases, will even have a separate course that is largely devoted to pastoral ethics.
- By and large, this has not been true of evangelical seminaries, where spiritual, moral and pastoral formation has tended to receive much less substantive attention and focused discussion of pastoral ethics has yet to find a place in the curriculum and in the broadly-agreed competencies for ministry that the seminary aims to develop through formal training.