

Theological Foundations **for The Emergency Services Chaplain**

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Somewhere in this country right now, an emergency services chaplain is on the scene of some critical incident. It may be a barricaded criminal with hostages; the emergency room of a hospital where a police officer or firefighter is fighting for his or her life; it may be a domestic disturbance involving a husband and wife; a serious automobile accident; a would-be suicide; a family who has just lost their home; knocking on the door of a home where he has to tell a family that their only son has just died in an automobile accident. Or it may be trying to console a family of an officer or firefighter killed in the line of duty.

The Theological Foundation of the Chaplaincy Ministry

Theology is the individual’s understanding of God’s purpose and participation in His creation. The theological foundation is making sense of our ministry as a chaplain. Some people question the validity of the Christian chaplaincy in the emergency services, labeling our services only as a social concern (William Lotz, Emergency Service Chaplaincy Training for ministers (D. Min. Project Report, GGBTS,1999).

To be an effective emergency service chaplain he/she must understand a solid theological foundation for his/her ministry. Augustus H. Strong defines theology as “the science of God and of the relations between God and the universe”¹ The source of theology is God himself.² Theology is God making self-revelation of Himself to his universe. We can know God only as far as he has revealed Himself. To understand the theological foundations of the chaplaincy we need to understand some of the nature, decrees and works of God. God reveals his nature, decrees and works through what we call his attributes, his divine essence.

Some of the attributes of his infinity are theological words like self-existence, immutability, omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence, unity, truth, love, holiness, and eternity. At the theological foundation of the chaplaincy, we are going to limit ourselves to some of the attributes of God relating to moral beings – faithfulness, truth, mercy, goodness and love. God’s love is not merely emotional affection. God’s love is a rational affection grounded in perfect reason and deliberate choice in relationship to his creatures. God is benevolent to his creatures. God is concerned about believers, non-believers and enemies. God is concerned for the welfare of those whom he loves. Benevolence is God’s active love. In other words, God shows his love by his actions. Grace is an attribute of God and mercy is an action of God. We follow the attributes of God’s relating to moral beings – human beings. We do His attributes through the priestly office of Christ.

The Calling

Choosing and training of the men to whom Jesus was to entrust his work was extremely important to His work on earth. Jesus called them, trained them and sent them out. Their training was not an easy task; they were being trained for a work that was different from what they thought they were to be trained. They were not just to be preachers of the Word. As these chosen ones walked with him, he modeled what he was training them to do (He used the “show-n-tell” model). They saw him healed Peter’s mother-in-law, they saw him touched loathsome and pitiful lepers, he saw them touch paralytics, they saw him restored eyes to the blind, and saw him

1 Strong, AH, Systematic Theology p. 1

2. ibid p. 25

ministered to the multitudes of sick folk. They saw all these things, but had they never thought that he would “call” them to do all the things that he was doing? Probably not, at the beginning, or maybe even until the moment he “called” and sent them out.

Of the twelve, four were fishermen, one a publican, one a zealot and we do not know what others were, but they were not what you would have thought they would have been – professional religious persons. These “called” persons witnessed seventeen bodily cures by Jesus. Witnessing the cures of Jesus, the cures were by the will of Jesus or by his word or sometimes by his touch or by the laying on of his hands, and occasionally he used his own spit. All this time, they were watching Jesus ministering to hurting people. All this time they were amazed at his love for people and him wanting to see them whole in body, mind and spirit.

The point of his calling and training was to meet the needs of hurting people. He fed 5,000 and again 4,000; he healed of a deaf and dumb man, a blind man, an epileptic boy. His mission and ministry was to help hurting people. Jesus took about a year and a half to complete his choice. Then they were with him for about two more years learning what they were to do.

As it was time for them to be sent out, Jesus gave them some great advice for Christians and for chaplains: “to be wise as serpents and harmless as doves; to expect hardships; to trust in God’s unfailing care, and to keep their eyes on the eternal goal.”³ Then he called his twelve disciples together, and gave them power and authority over all demons, and to cure all diseases. And he sent them to announce and preach the kingdom of God, and to bring healing.”⁴

What is the Calling?

The “calling” of the emergency services chaplain is to respond to crisis” – to people who are hurting, physically, emotionally, mentally and spiritually. Response to God’s call is his daily fare. He is the person who brings to the lost, the least, the lonely to the love of God. The crises he faces is awesome; but the challenge is invigorating! The emergency services chaplain lives in the arena of life; people battered and beaten and questioning the existence of God. Here in the gore and the grime, people crying that God, if he does exist, doesn’t care. This is where the emergency services chaplain lives. This is his calling to be trained for and minister to.

The Priestly Office of Christ

In the Old Testament we learn that the priest was a person divinely appointed to transact with God on man’s behalf. He fulfills his office, first by offering sacrifices, and secondly by making intercession.⁵ The emergency service chaplaincy follows God’s attribute of love, by showing love by actions; showing grace and mercy in ministry. The emergency service chaplain is to model the priestly office of Christ. The emergency service chaplain is there as a representative of God, a priest, making a transaction with God on man’s behalf. The chaplain is a person divinely appointed to care for the flock of the public safety personnel and the constituents in the jurisdiction who are undergoing critical incidents.

The chaplain is like a shepherd tending his flock. In fact, a shepherd is an excellent role model for a chaplain – one who cares for his flocks; defending his flocks from danger and brings them to rest. John says he knows his

³ Matthew 10:1-2 KJV, NIV

⁴ Luke 9:1-2 The Amplified Bible

⁵ Strong, A. H. Systematic Theology p. 713

flock by name.⁶ The emergency service chaplain needs to get to know his flock. He needs to know their names, know about their likes and dislikes, about their family, about their off-time job, and needs to learn about the lingo of the department. The shepherd keeps his sheep from the goats, he keeps them watered; he keeps his flock in the fold, and if one is lost, he goes after him until he finds him and brings him back into the fold. God is like a shepherd to his creatures and He calls under-shepherds to do that. As an emergency service chaplain is a representative of God following the attributes of God relating to moral beings. We are like His under-shepherds. An emergency service chaplain is being most like God when he/she is functioning in his/her ministries. We cannot perform the atonement part of the priestly office of Christ, but we can certainly perform the intercession function of the priestly office of Christ. We can “be there” representing the presence of God, we can be there to hold a hand, to love through actions – getting a place to stay after the fire, getting food, getting medical needs, clothing, help make telephone calls after an incident, to make death messages after a fatal suicide, homicide, accident, devastating fire and to share the love of God to the grieving families.

Emergency service chaplain is an under-shepherd of God

An emergency service chaplain is a minister. Ministry involves a relationship between persons, and sometimes between God and the persons. The public safety chaplain is part of the larger emergency response team. The law enforcement officers, EMS team, firefighters, coroner’s office, fire marshal’s office, investigative team are there to work together to meet the needs of the victim(s) and the families affected by the incident. The chaplain is a vital part of the “care team” in the incident. He/she is there to be a “ministry of presence” bringing hope in an otherwise hopeless situation. The chaplain is to be there, listen and love. That is our theological foundation of chaplaincy- doing what God would do if he would be there right now in the midst of this terrible incident. That’s what He has called us to do.

Emergency service chaplain is an *emergency* chaplain

The emergency services chaplain is an “*emergency*” chaplain. The emergency services chaplain must be like a shepherd during a critical incident. However, the emergency services chaplain is just that, an emergency services shepherd (representing God) in an emergency. As soon as practical, the chaplain should bring the injured person’s pastor/shepherd into the process for long-term ministry and care. The chaplain does everything possible to provide emergency emotional and spiritual support to those involved in the initial stages of the incident, but should back away as soon as practical and allow the support team to move in and care for the crisis victim as long-term ministry.

Every chaplain must have a shepherd’s heart and a genuine concern for people in crisis, regardless of the grime, gruesome, and Godless situations he may be involved in. The chaplain’s ministry is primarily a ministry of presence, being there to represent the awesome attributes of God as he relates to a human being in the critical incidents of life and a willingness to step in, when requested, to do whatever he can possibly do to be of assistance in a critical situation.

The chaplain’s presence on a critical incident reminds officers and firefighters of God’s presence. As God’s presence, the chaplain fulfills a facet of his ministry by just “being there.” The chaplain is not to be an evangelist, not to recruit church membership, not to preach at the victim of the critical incident. The emergency services chaplain is there to minister non-denominational and non-sectarian, without not compromising his own individual convictions. Public safety chaplains are a “presence of ministry.” We are there to represent God and fulfill the appointed priestly office of Christ in intercession.

⁶ John 10:3-5 NIV

The four most important abilities of the emergency services chaplain are:

1. Availability. Be there. Wherever and whenever possible be with the emergency workers. And, if at all possible, go when they call you.
 2. Visibility. Be seen. Emergency workers need to see the chaplain function. Be seen.
 3. Adaptability. Be willing to change. Roll with the punches. Be flexible.
 4. Credibility. Be real. Be genuine. To love those who are hurting.
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