

## WHY A PASTORAL THEOLOGY OF THE ANGELS?

### IS THERE A BETTER WAY?

THE WAY THAT ANGELS have traditionally been considered hasn't helped us get a balanced or proper understanding of them or what they do. None of the approaches seen in the previous chapter are satisfying because none do justice to how the Bible presents angels. The Bible, instead of wallowing in speculative wonderings, gives us a sober and practical picture of who angels are and what they *do*. This suggests that to view angels rightly, one needs practical and pastoral lenses in our theological glasses. However, the idea of a pastoral theology of angels looks strange, because pastoral theology is conceived in terms in which angels do not fit neatly, but when one steps back, this way of looking at angels makes much more sense of what we see in the Bible.

The aim of pastoral theology is to focus people back to God when they have lost their way, and bring them back into a godly wholeness of life. Pastoral angelology is no different. Just as your vicar or pastor is serving God, and helping you live a better and fuller Christian life, so angels are God's angels, and not autonomous beings who act independently of the Triune Godhead. Just like your minister, all pastoral and ministerial functions of angels should begin with, and return to, God (for his glory and will), with the aim of leading you closer to Jesus.

Clearly the category of *pastoral angelology*, like most theological categories, is not plainly and neatly expounded in the Bible, and so some thinking around verses and passages (especially in the light of traditional readings) is needed. As the last chapter showed us, many historic attempts at understanding angels have been prone to assumption and large leaps of logic, which have been rightly criticised, in, for example, the numerous biting attacks of Reformation and later Enlightenment.

We all know the story of the theologians who debated how many angels could dance on the head of a pin—a classic example of a futile argument. This debate was pointless, so surely the whole subject is pointless. While I honor the wish of others to challenge poor theology, I note that these criticisms not only ignore the fact that behind the debates was an honest desire to understand how the spiritual and physical worlds inter-relate, but the critics usually had nothing to replace what they shot down, and they themselves ended up in an impoverished dead end.

Let's look at the biblical texts for what they say, with as few preconceived ideas as possible.

### PASTORAL THEOLOGY

What is pastoral theology? *A Dictionary of Pastoral Care* gives us a nice simple description.<sup>1</sup> It begins with the idea that one presents a vision of God in order to show:

- Love, care, and concern for the individual.
- Responsibility for groups in society.
- Spiritual direction.

Just from this initial description, you can see how angels can play a part in all of these areas. One can also see that the three broad categories used bear little relation to the models and frameworks described in the last chapter. They are not scholastically influenced categories that invite speculative investigation, but ones that look for a consistently practical application. These categories can be further defined, but how this is done depends on the specific pastoral theology model you use. Of the many possible models, I will use one described in Clebsch & Jaekle's *Pastoral Care in Historical Perspective*,<sup>2</sup> because it is a simple, classic, and foundational model,<sup>3</sup> which is easily applicable. Clebsch & Jaekle define pastoral care as "consisting of helping acts, done by representative Christian persons, directed toward the healing, sustaining, guiding, and reconciling of troubled persons whose troubles arise in the context of ultimate meanings and concerns."<sup>4</sup> Of course, this definition presupposes that the ministers in view are human; but need we make such an as-

1. Campbell, *Pastoral Care*, 188–90, 192–93.

2. Clebsch and Jaekle, *Pastoral*.

3. Lartey, *In Living Color*, 21.

4. Clebsch and Jaekle, *Pastoral*, 4.

sumption? Don't angels also do helping acts, as representatives of God? Don't they also meet troubled people? Don't they, by their angelic presence, give someone a wider context to consider, a context which lifts the person out of earthly present and into the very throne room of God? The answer to these questions must be "Yes." Yet do angels enact a pastoral role which can be investigated as a pastoral theology? Clebsch & Jaekle's give four further areas to consider, which define closely whether something counts as pastoral theology or not:<sup>5</sup>

1. Healing—promoting physical and spiritual wholeness.
2. Sustaining—building a faith that can grow and last.
3. Guiding—recognising and making (moral) decisions.
4. Reconciling—both God and neighbour.

These four areas must be present for a theology to be truly counted as pastoral, since together they provide the holistic approach needed.

### (1) *Healing*

The question of what healing is, is common within churches. It is recognised that healing is a multifaceted thing, which touches people on many levels. Healing (of body, mind, or spirit) is not just restoration, but also aims to lift one up, so that that *the troubled person will become integrated on a higher spiritual level than he had previously experienced*.<sup>6</sup> Healing takes one to a new place, with a tangible change occurring in that journey.

Healing can come in many forms. At one extreme, it may be the miraculous divine intervention which confounds medical science, leading one to open (or reopen) one's spiritual eyes to a God who is alive and active in the here and now. At the other end of the spectrum it might be the circumstance where, for example, one is gravely ill, and forced to look at life afresh. Illness can cause us to reconsider life and wonder about our priorities. What was once important now seems irrelevant. Worrying about money, status, and petty grudges with loved ones suddenly seems so silly. And those things in life once deemed of little importance, such as prayer and praise to God, and quality time for both blood and church

5. Ibid., 32–66.

6. Ibid., 33.

family, now strike home as the central planks of a rounded and healthy life. Illness, or any life shaking event, focuses us on personal mortality and frailty. And when we consider these things, our eyes are turned toward the God of life, the God of both the now and the hereafter. This re-evaluation of life, and the re-ordering of priorities and worldview, speaks of a healing of mind and spirit, away from worldly attitudes and toward more Godly perspectives. This reflection awakens people to (re) dedicate themselves to God, thus bringing renewal to the soul.

## (2) *Sustaining*

The journey of life is long, and has many hills, bumps, corners and pot-holes to negotiate. You need to be sustained on this voyage. It is natural then that God gives us sustenance through life, and does so in many ways through the ministry of the church. Clebsch & Jaekle say that the ministry of sustaining has four aspects to it.

First, pastoral care *preserves* the situation with as little loss as possible. When one is in a hole, one always fears that the bottom will never come, and there is always further to fall. Preservation aims to stop you falling further, and to hold the line against other threats, further loss, or excessive retreat.<sup>7</sup> Second, building on preservation, is the *consolation* that the problem does not negate one's destiny in God, and that you are not alone in your distress. In the midst of suffering comes relief from misery and acknowledgment of the damaging and robbing experience. There might not be a solution as such, but you get the shoulder to cry on, the comforting hug, or the encouraging word to keep you going.<sup>8</sup>

Yet keeping going is difficult when you feel shaky and uncertain, so you need to *consolidate* what you have to build a platform from which to then face life. Even when you stop falling, you think that you don't have what it takes to get out of the hole. With the misery soothed, resources can be marshalled to face the future. Hope is built by seeing that any loss is a partial loss, not a total loss. Hope remains and can be built upon.<sup>9</sup> Consolidation is the renewal of a right perspective on life, and with this foundation laid, a new start can begin—which Clebsch and Jaekle call “redemption.” Obviously this *redemption* is not that which Christ gives.

7. Ibid., 44.

8. Ibid., 47.

9. Ibid., 47.

It is not salvation. Redemption is the new start found by facing, then embracing the loss. The loss is not necessarily restored, since this would be healing, but it is starting the journey, to *begin* to build an ongoing life that once more pursues its fulfilment and destiny on a new basis.<sup>10</sup>

### (3) *Guiding*

Now you have started the next leg of your journey, which direction do you choose? You do not want to walk into another problem or hole, but you want the paths that God wants for you. You want guidance. Guidance has four aspects which define it.

First is *advice-giving*, which includes discipline. It is words given when the thing you most need is true knowledge and insight given by a wise counsellor. It is also the wisdom which seeks to bring a person into a situation which will be conducive to their welfare, especially when it entails leading them out of a negative situation. The first type of wisdom assumes a place to build from exists and can be used. The second type guides one to a place, from which one can then build. It is a wisdom that recognises whether you are standing on the edge of the cliff ready to jump, or have already moved away from the edge and are looking for what to do next. A good example of this is evangelism, since a relationship with Christ is always the best starting point for anybody. However, it can also be the simple word which puts you on the right path into the wisdom or the help you need, which may, many years down the line, have been the seed which was sown and now sprouts unto salvation.<sup>11</sup>

The second is called *devil-craft*, which is the ability to stand against Satan. On your journey you will be opposed, and Satan can do this in many ways. Guidance in *devil-craft* helps you avoid these pit-falls. First, is not be isolated, but to be joined—interlocked in faith—with other believers. Together in the church and under the word (following Scripture), one can resist Satan and his schemes. Isolation is a key tactic of Satan and his cohorts, and one needs to be guided back to Christ's body for sustenance and protection.<sup>12</sup> *Devil-craft* can also include exorcism and removal of demonic oppression, where the hindering of one's

10. Ibid., 48.

11. Ibid., 50–51.

12. Ibid., 51–52.

walk with God is more clearly seen and experienced, and thus more easily removed.

The third part of guidance is, strangely, silence. It is *listening*. You are not able to guide properly unless you know what the problem truly is. And to find that out, you need to stop and listen. Clarifying a situation needs you to listen to the problem being spoken out. Listening can allow a troubled person to unburden themselves, and verbalise the sadness, frustration and anger that may be felt. Allowing people to let off steam in a safe context can be very helpful. Listening can also help you accurately reflect back what was being said, and allow the person to hear and gain understanding of how they feel.<sup>13</sup> Listening lets you to be a mirror for the person to look into, and be challenged by their own words. This is a very powerful skill in pastoral care.

And finally, advice-giving is simple help in decision making, to encourage and promote wise and helpful conclusions and courses of action.<sup>14</sup>

#### (4) *Reconciling*

Now on the journey, and heading in the right direction, one never wants to journey alone, nor travel with people with whom you are in conflict. We all want our journey through life to be as peaceful as possible. Therefore, the fourth area Clebsch and Jaekle speak of is the ministry of reconciliation. Distinct from, and not to be confused with, the ultimate act of reconciliation through God in Christ, this aims to bring people into a position to be reconciled to both God, and others around them. It is the healing of broken relationships. This can take two basic forms. First is forgiveness *which can be a proclamation, or an announcement, or even a very simple gesture indicating that, in spite of walls of pride and hurt which separate and alienate people, something has occurred to re-establish and reunite persons to each other, and, indeed, to God.*<sup>15</sup> How many times have our lives been hampered by us holding grudges which would much better be soothed with the balm of forgiveness and the gift of a restored friendship? How many times has this broken relationship

13. Ibid., 53–54.

14. Ibid., 54.

15. Ibid., 57.

been with our brothers and sisters, as well as with God? Forgiveness restores and heals.

Second is discipline, which includes friendly words of correction, “priestly” admonishments, or even sterner measures directed toward confession, repentance, and amendment of life.<sup>16</sup> Discipline keeps us on the right path, and can either protect or restrain, or even provoke a reaction to make one think seriously about a situation. But however the discipline comes, it aims to keep the Christian within the church and within healthy, godly relationships, protected from temptation and assault.

### *One Plank of Many*

This is a rich understanding of pastoral theology. However, one can imagine that for it to work, a vicar or pastor needs a range of tools. It can be done through Sunday worship and sermons, through one-to-one meetings, through midweek groups, and through prayer groups. One method alone will not make this model work. Similarly, it must be recognized that pastoral angelology cannot be taken as a stand-alone approach, but must be part of a wider integrated theology and practice. If a church does not have a developed understanding of pastoral theology and practice, and/or the supernatural intervention of God to meet people in their need, then this will be of little use. Unconnected and unrelated to a wider vision of God and his ministry, pastoral angelology will struggle to have any effect. Also, if this is applied to the exclusion of other pastoral care, it will also fail. As Ps 91 says, angels are one part of a wider will and system, and must not be detached from that. Therefore, as another plank within an already existing pastoral vision, angels have a positive and inspiring place, making Heb 1:14 a day-to-day reality.

### HOW DO ANGELS MINISTER?

Now we have laid the basic foundations for a pastoral theology, we need to consider “how” angels minister. Clebsch and Jaekle’s book has many examples of how human ministers implement pastoral care, but what about angels? How do angels bring this pastoral ministry to us? The Bible suggests that angels help us in three ways:

16. Ibid.

1. Angels can demonstrate to us (as an exemplar or role-model), or tell us, how we may live.
2. Angels can walk or stand alongside us, acting as an encouraging or battling companion.
3. Angels can work upon, or within, us.

*Demonstrating, Telling, or Promoting to Us,  
What We Should Do and How We Should Be*

The role of angels as *messengers* is perhaps the most obvious and well known. They come with words of encouragement, warning, and guidance, and these are given through physical appearances, appearances in visions and dreams, or by them speaking from heaven.<sup>17</sup> The angels direct what the person to whom they appear should do, and so shape their subsequent actions for the better. Angels can also influence in other ways. For example, we humans are on a stage before them that requires us to be aware of how we live and act, and St Paul also demands proper order in church “because of the angels” (1 Cor 11:10). Similarly, the principle of rebuking sinners so that others will be watchful of their own lives is underpinned by knowing one is before the angels: “I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and his chosen angels, to maintain these principles without bias, doing nothing in a spirit of partiality.” (1 Tim 5:21). We are in front of angels, and their presence alongside Christ (the Son) and God (the Father) means we need to seriously consider how we live our lives.

*Coming to, Walking with, or Standing alongside Us*

The idea of the journeying angel has a long and rich tradition. It is classically shown in the Apocryphal book of Tobit, where the Archangel Raphael guides Tobit through numerous trials and tribulations to ultimate success for the glory of God. This is not unique to the Apocrypha. Hagar, who had run away from Abraham and Sarah, was met on her journey by an angel sent by God, who encouraged her to return (Gen 16:7–12). Similarly, God promised an angel would go before the Israelites to lead them into the Promised Land, and defeat their enemies in front of them (Exod 33:2). 2 Kgs 6:17 is an amazing example of angels

17. E.g., Gen 16:7–12; 21:17; Luke 1:26–38; John 12:28–29; Acts 27:23–24.



standing alongside God's people in times of need and distress. The King of Syria's army was surrounding the city, and Elisha's servant, naturally, was badly panicked by this. However, Elisha was at peace because he saw God's angelic army was there too, and could defeat the Syrians. The servant needed his eyes opened by God to this truth (as a lesson to us all), and only then did he know the scale of God's angelic protection in the time of need. One last example would be Elijah, in the desert, starving and desperate, who had an angel meet him, to give him food and water and encourage him on his journey to God's mountain—where God would meet him (1 Kgs 19:4–8).

### *Working on or within Us*

This is possibly the most difficult of the three areas, especially since, on some levels, it will look similar to how the Holy Spirit may act. However, surface comparisons are soon dissipated when looked at more carefully, and it will be shown that while angels can influence us in that manner, it is in no way synonymous to the depth or quality or profundity of the work of the Spirit within. The Spirit is the one who regenerates, the one who actually works the inner-transformation, the one who changes and makes us sons and daughters of God. Angels cannot do this—this is solely a work of God. But angels can prompt and stir us in our hearts and minds in a way similar to how the Spirit may do so.

Generally, angels are able to speak to us via non-physical means, for example, through dreams, as Joseph experienced (Matt 1:20–21). Angels are also able to entice people, as the story of the angelic spirit in 1 Kgs 22:19–23 demonstrates. God asks which of the angelic spirits would entice King Ahab, enticement being a form of persuasion. The angelic spirit achieved this end by giving the prophets, unbeknown to them, certain words to speak. The spirit enticed one, by directing the words of others. Angels can, quite simply, get in our heads and speak to us, to influence us and our actions, without us necessarily knowing it. Yet this is a little vague and to know what it may mean to be guided by an angel, more detail is needed.

### ANGELIC INFLUENCE (LUKE 8:26–39)

This key question over how much angels can influence what we do and think is not clearly addressed in Scripture, yet has been much discussed over the centuries. However, while the Bible tells us little about what the

good angels can do, it does say what fallen angels are capable of. Therefore one can infer that if demons can negatively influence in certain ways, then holy angels can, under God's direction, motivate in positive ways. Luke 8:26–39 and the man possessed by “Legion” highlights this most clearly (cf. Mark 5:1–20), and it gives us various principles from which we can work.

1. Many angels can influence one human at the same time—Legion was “many” (Luke 8:30)
2. This influence can shape one's life and reaction to circumstances around oneself, and can do so on an ongoing basis. The possessed man would not wear clothes, he would not live with people, he spent his time around corpses, and he would run into the mountains and solitary places (Luke 8:27–29; cf. Mark 5:5). The demons had successfully isolated him (“devil-craft”).
3. The angelic influence can give or promote strength and ability beyond normal human behaviour. The man could break chains and escape from human bonds (Luke 8:29).
4. This influence, however, did not totally override the human will. It is worth noting that while the demons in the man wanted to escape from Jesus, the man actually ran *toward* Jesus and *fell before* him, and the man *remained* there (Luke 8:27–28; cf. Mark 5:6). The possessed man saw Jesus from a distance. If the demons wanted to escape they could have simply run in the opposite direction, but the man did not. The man's will to meet Jesus overrode the demons' wish not to meet Jesus. However, the man's will could not then speak to Jesus as he wanted to, because he was under the influence of the demons. The demons spoke, but could not drive the man away from Christ. The man remained at his feet, in opposition to what the demons spoke and wanted.

This suggests that while angelic influence can be very strong, it is never total. It will never keep one away, or obscure one, from meeting Jesus if that is what the person truly wills. Similarly, the demons could not kill the man, even though it was their destructive intent to do so—look at what happened to the pigs, which could not resist the demons. Their first action was to kill themselves. The man had lived, miserably to be sure,

yet he lived. The (demonic) angelic influence was not sufficient to override God's will or purpose for the man's life. The man would have needed to choose suicide to die—it would not be the will of the demons—and the man chose life. And when he saw Life coming, he ran toward him.

Other stories show a similar pattern. For example, Luke 4:31–37 shows a demon-oppressed man, and yet the demon did not/could not run away from Jesus. The passage even suggests that the man came to hear Jesus preach despite the demon's influence (vv. 31–33)! The demon threw him down, but did no harm (v. 35). The influence, while intense, had clear limits. Again, in Mark 9:14–29, the demon had a huge destructive hold on the boy's life, yet it was not constant (v. 18) and it was not able to kill (destroy) him (v. 22). Elsewhere, Matt 9:32 tells of a demon who could only stop a man from speaking, and in Matt 12:22 a man was blind and mute. While these disabilities are significant, one does not see the torment associated with the previous stories, and they were presented to Christ for healing without battles or resistance.

It would appear, therefore, not unreasonable to wonder if the limits placed upon the activities of the demons were in some way set by the ones oppressed. All demons would want the very worst for the possessed person, so anyone oppressed by a demon would exhibit the severest subjugation imaginable. Yet in these stories there is huge difference in impact. The only real variable in the equation would appear to be the individual themselves. Therefore, if the person consistently resisted the influence, would that minimise the impact upon their life? It would seem so, and one final story supports this idea—Paul's experience of the thorn in the side.

Paul's thorn is called a messenger (Gk, *angellos*) of Satan (2 Cor 12:7–9; cf. Job 2:7). This is the same word used for an angel, indicating that it may well have been a demonic angel attacking him. Paul was being oppressed by demonic activity in order to hinder his gospel mission, the oppression being either physically, mentally, or spiritually shown. God's response to Paul's request for its removal was that his grace was sufficient to overcome the (evil) angelic influence, and that Satan's messenger would not win.

If an evil angel could have such an impact on Paul's life, yet not so much as to override God's grace or Paul's mission, could one then say that an individual's walk with God shapes the impact a demon has on one's life? If so, one might then reflect on what parallel good a holy angel

may have. Just think of what might happen if a holy angelic influence cooperated with the grace and will of God alongside the human will. Consider what a powerful impact that would have on someone's life!

It seems that while angelic influence can be life changing, in the ultimate analysis it is limited. Exactly where those limits are is not clear. However, it appears that angelic influence needs our human will to agree with it to take actions of destiny-shaping proportions, while seemingly needing less cooperation for more life shaping implications.<sup>18</sup> Angels, therefore, are able to influence our lives, but we are still able to ignore or resist their prompts or stirrings.

### APPLYING A PASTORAL UNDERSTANDING OF THE ANGELS TO US

There are two main ways that a pastoral angelology theology can be applied to our lives. People are either touched or impacted by the angels directly, or a human pastor can encourage somebody with the truths about the ministry of angels. Both are valid and can work together.

First is a direct meeting with, or ministry from an angel. Stories of these kinds abound both in Scripture and throughout church history. We see an angel meeting with Gideon, a nervous man with little courage or faith, and he is guided and encouraged in what he should do (Judg 6:11–16). Similarly, Gabriel comes to Mary to prepare her for what was to come (Luke 1:26ff.), and an angel warns Joseph in a dream to leave for Egypt (Matt 2:13). For these people, the encounter was profound, and life changing, both for themselves and others.

Second is the personal encouragement of hearing, or being taught about, angels. One hears many stories of people who are lost or in trouble, with their hope ebbing. Suddenly they find a stranger appears and provides the perfect help, at the right time, in order to solve the apparently insurmountable problem. Some people realise it was an angel at the time, others come to that conclusion later, and others, I am sure, never realise it at all. These powerful testimonies can be a huge encouragement to people. It tells them that God, today, sees their predicaments, and when they need help the most, he will meet them in their time of need.

18. Thomas Aquinas comes to a similar conclusion, but via different route—cf. *ST* 1a:Q 110–11.

Alternatively, somebody maybe frightened by the prospect of death. The panic, fear, and hopelessness induced by this can be paralyzing. Alongside telling them about the love of God and the assurance of salvation in Jesus, you can also tell them of the truth of Luke 16:22, that angels will bear the soul of the believer to the bosom of Abraham.<sup>19</sup> Take heart! Your soul will not get lost on the way!

Finally, one should remember that some areas will overlap, and a neat division of cause and effect is not always possible. One act can impact on a person or situation in many ways. You cannot simply delineate angelic action and ministry into monochrome and singular events. One must recognise the wider, deeper, and more organic spiritual effects which can occur. An example would be angels removing demonic oppression, which will be discussed later. This not only brings freedom to the person, but is also an act of healing, of sustaining and preservation, and it demonstrates ongoing protection and blessing in life. This then allows you to move toward the goal that God has for you. In addition, it encourages others who see the release and freedom, and that God is active and blessing his people. One act; many possible effects.

Now we have a structure by which we can examine pastoral angelology, the rest of the book will explore the four areas of healing, sustaining, guidance, and reconciliation, starting with the place of angels in the life of Jesus himself.

19. The term "Abraham's bosom" is not common, nor is it clear what it exactly means. However, as Morris notes, it clearly suggests "felicity," and is directly contrasted with "Hades" for the rich man (Morris, *Luke*, 276). It also speaks of a place of intimacy, honor, and "paradisal blessing" (Green, *Luke*, 607).