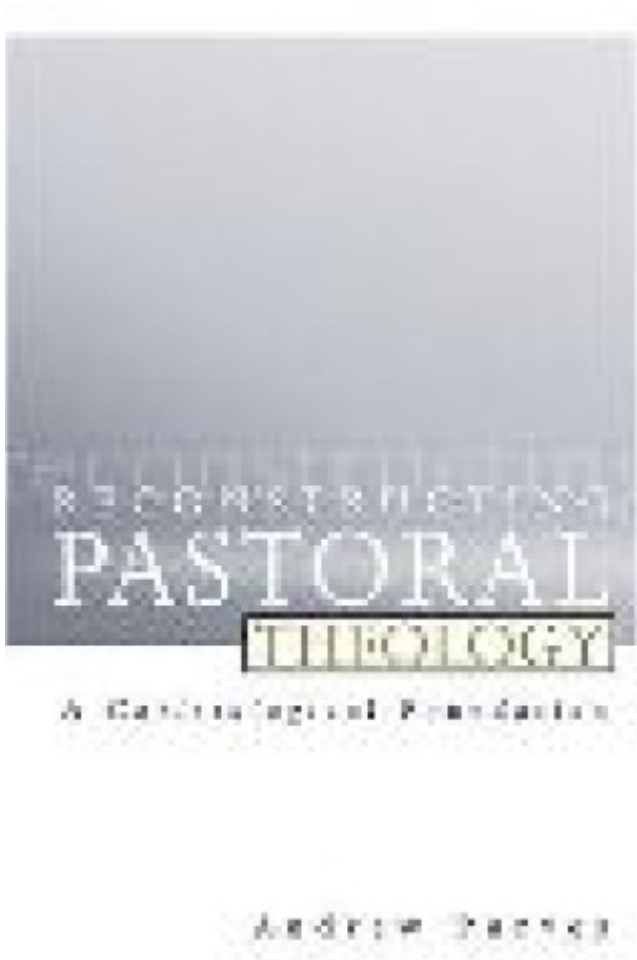


Reconstructing Pastoral Theology

reviewed by [Anthony B. Robinson](#) in the [July 26, 2005](#) issue

In Review



Reconstructing Pastoral Theology: A Christological Foundation

Andrew Purves

Westminster John Knox

This book is radical in a couple of senses of the word, including the original one of “returning to the roots.” Purves, who is the Hugh Thomson Kerr Professor of Pastoral

Theology at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, returns to the theological roots of his discipline, giving particular attention to the work of Athanasius, Calvin, John McLeod Campbell and Thomas Torrance. Barth hovers over the entire project.

The book is radical also because it is a frontal assault on pastoral theology and care since the era of Seward Hiltner. Purves maintains that because pastoral theology and pastoral care have lost their theological moorings in the past 50 years, it is not at all clear what makes contemporary ministry Christian. "Pastoral theology, in my view, has largely abandoned the responsibility to speak concerning God," writes Purves. "My broad concern is the seeming lack of connection between exegesis of scriptures and the central Christian doctrines, on the one hand, and the theology and practice of ministry today, on the other. This seeming lack of connection suggests that something has gone seriously awry."

Thus is the gauntlet thrown down. Pastoral theology and pastoral ministry have drunk too heavily, according to Purves, at the fonts of various atheological disciplines and frameworks. Ministry has become but another helping profession. The result is "a relatively comfortable synthesis . . . in which pastoral theology and, consequently, pastoral practice in the church have become concerned largely with questions of meaning rather than truth, acceptable functioning rather than discipleship, and a concern for self-actualization and self-realization rather than salvation."

If the diagnosis is radical, so also is the remedy. Purves returns to the root and foundation of pastoral theology, and he never tires of stating that there is no foundation other than Jesus Christ. He means that Jesus Christ is not a metaphor, an illustration, a point of reference, or a principle for action for pastoral theology. Rather, he is the center and the content of pastoral theology and consequent pastoral care. It is all about Jesus Christ! Purves draws from Athanasius to contend that Jesus Christ is both the Word and an act of God addressing humanity, and the Word and an act of humanity addressing God. This priestly rendering of Christ's role and ministry is at the heart of Purves's reconstruction. He returns to it and builds on it throughout the book, particularly in the longer first part, titled "Jesus Christ: The Mission of God."

Purves challenges his readers: "We must move away from a pragmatic and needs-assessment perspective of ministry—in which we ask, What should I do in response to the need before me? And How do I do it?—and toward a perspective rooted

entirely in the gospel, in which what we do and how we do it are done in the Spirit through sharing in Christ's own speech and action as the one Word of God and in Christ's own response in filial obedience to the Father."

If the first part reconstructs the foundation for pastoral theology as Jesus Christ, who is both the apostle of God and the high priest of our confession, the second, "Ministry in Union with Christ," moves to consequences. The relationship of the two major parts is not one of theory to practice or application, but one of foundation to implications. The four chapters of part two focus particularly on the meaning of Christ in preaching, in forgiveness of sin, as presence in suffering and in the practice of hope. All four remain theological from beginning to end.

Does it work? Does Purves convincingly make his case against pastoral theology's accommodation to secularity, and does he render a new or renewed theological foundation? To be honest, I am not sure. The diagnosis of the problems is trenchant and on the mark. But the presentation of the prognosis and new foundation, though compelling, is possibly too abstract, at least for widespread appropriation. At the very least, readers will benefit from studying Purves's book in a class or with a group of clergy, where they will have the opportunity of digesting it with other people, and where they can tease out its implications and applications and ask, "What would this look like in practice?" and "What does this mean in this particular situation?" Few pastors will read *Reconstructing Pastoral Theology* in the privacy of their own study and make full sense of it. It is simply too dense and demanding. This may be a confirmation of Purves's concerns, or it may be an indication that further work is required on his part to make it accessible. And perhaps he has that in view, for this is, after all, a foundational work.

Purves favors direct assertions, as well as constructions and usage on the order of "we must insist" and "the Gospel properly understood." I found myself a bit wearied by and wary of the style. Regrettably, his writing is not especially evocative; nor does he offer much by way of illustration or example. What illustrations there are often seem truncated, cited but without the meaning teased out. On the other hand, the theological explications and explorations evidence great depth and care. Purves has laid the foundation, and with others he may redirect the discipline. A subsequent, more accessible work that offers ideas for application would be welcome.