

Ministry to People Who No Longer Need a God



the
pastor
in a secular age

Andrew Root

MINISTRY IN A SECULAR AGE PREVIOUS TITLES:

*Faith Formation in a Secular Age: Responding
to the Church's Obsession with Youthfulness*

the pastor in a secular age

Ministry to People Who No Longer Need a God



MINISTRY IN A SECULAR AGE,
VOLUME TWO

Andrew Root

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To Mike King,
the best example I know of a leader who seeks
the action of the living God in and through ministry,
with gratitude for your friendship, support, and encouragement



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introduction

Both stories stuck with me. I couldn't shake them. Neither were actually experiences that happened to me, but when I heard them, something moved me. I wasn't learning something new, but like all great stories, they were showing me something I'd sensed (in this case even written about) come into sharper view.

The First Story

It was just an ordinary Sunday at our small church, our sanctuary sparsely filled with the usual fifty or so people. Yet we had a great privilege this ordinary Sunday that most small churches rarely get: a well-known guest preacher was with us. In the middle of his sermon he told this story, which seemed to make the room, and my imagination, glow hot.

The preacher explained that he knew a man born in a small midwestern town not long after the turn of the twentieth century. This man came into the world with great struggle and wore the marks on his body; he suffered significant deformity. On seeing him, his mother and father rejected him, refusing to nurse or even love him. But this cursed baby was nonetheless the couple's responsibility, so they hired a young girl, an immigrant from the old country, to do what they imagined was the terrible task of caring for the cursed child. Lonely and feeling lost in a new world, this young girl embraced this baby who was so rudely met by this world.

For the next five years the young girl, nearly a child herself, raised the baby, showering him with love, looking in his eyes, and touching with tenderness all the supposedly monstrous traits he bore, whispering to him that she saw him, that he was a beautiful person, and that she loved what others said was

broken about him. Since first picking him up, she sang to him, dozens of times each day, the same refrain. As he grew, so did their connection. But tragically, as the early twentieth century produced more cold institutions for the sick, it soon made more financial sense to institutionalize the child than to pay the girl to care for him. As if losing her own child, the girl grieved. Holding the now five-year-old to her chest, she sang her refrain for the last time. Remembering all the times of caring for him, of sharing in the wonders of his person, she said goodbye.

The child grew into a boy and then into a young man in the harsh institutional obsession of early twentieth-century asylums, suffering under the assumption that because his face bore a supposed deformity so too did his mind. At some point, he was told the name of this girl who had loved him. And while the memories of her embrace all but disappeared, buried under days past and suffering endured, he soon could remember only her name; the pressure of being a castoff had pulverized all else.

When his eighteenth birthday came around, he had a plan. No longer could they keep him in the asylum; he was now of age to take his destiny into his own hands. So he checked himself out and walked up the tallest hill he could find, carrying in his pocket the pills he'd been saving up to finally end his misery. As he sat atop the hill, working up the final nerve to swallow the pills and end his hell, he reminded himself that he was unwanted and unlovable. "Why, God?" he shouted like Job. "Why have you hated me so much? Never have you cared! I'll do you the favor and end your disgust of me by ending my misery!"

As the echo of his shouted words died away, he took the pills into his hand and readied himself to throw them into the back of his throat, but suddenly he was stopped, interrupted by singing. Someone was behind him. He stood to find who it was, the voice so clear and near. He heard this person singing, "God's mercy is wide, God's love is deep, and you, dear child, are loved." Wiping the angry tears from his face, his imminent dreadful ending interrupted by this song, he searched for the voice. He saw no one, but he heard it again: "God's mercy is wide, God's love is deep, and you, dear child, are loved." Though the voice was so clear, he realized he was alone on that hill. But hearing it again, he discovered he was anything but alone. Putting the pills back in his pocket, he walked down the mountain like Moses with a revelation. God had seen him and had spoken.

Still broken, but moved to discover what this voice could mean, the boy became a pastor. Over the next five decades, he would lead hundreds into their own contemplative moments of hearing the voice of God. But still, into his seventies he could make no sense of the singing voice that beckoned him back from death into life.

As his life shifted into retirement and his later years, he again prepared himself for death, but this time with deep appreciation for the blessings of life. By chance, he got word that the name he had carried so near his soul, the young girl who had been his only experience of love for nearly the first two decades of his life, was still alive. He had never tried to reconnect with her—after all, he could remember almost nothing about her, and yet he carried her name near his heart like a sacred charm.

So his wife contacted her, making arrangements for her to come and visit. He wasn't sure this was wise; again, he remembered nothing about her. As she arrived, now in her late eighties, she was a stranger—until her eyes met his. The warmth of her face communicated something surpassing time and space; it was as if looking in her eyes awakened parts of him that he'd been accessing but only at a submerged level. Seeing her brought them to the surface, and, as if he were five again, he felt the immediacy of her care, her joy, and her person next to his.

As they sat together and reminisced, she held his hand and told him she had never felt more important, more called into something beyond herself, than to care for him as an infant, to embrace and share in his life. His memories of years of torture were now being washed away by the confession of her love for him. And then, still holding his hand, with her other hand she grabbed his elbow and said, "Do you remember what I used to sing to you?" He shook his head. Quietly, with her beautiful, aged voice, she sang, "God's mercy is wide, God's love is deep, and you, dear child, are loved."

A shiver went through him, as deep as his soul, perhaps as deep as the mystery of being itself, as his mind raced him back to that hilltop when he was eighteen. It was her song that had come to him then, as clear and audible as if she had been standing there singing it to him. The speaking God had come to him singing. He had asked God why he was unloved, and God responded. With those pills of death soaking in the perspiration of his hand, it was through her song, the tender music of a scared, lonely girl who had loved him through the beginning of his life, that God spoke. It was her song that God used to move him from death into new life.

The guest preacher made some important points, but my mind was now elsewhere. I wanted to know: What was this? It appeared to me that this woman's care for this small boy was so profound that it created an event of God's speaking. It was so deeply connected to the movement of resurrection (and exodus) that it reached into death with new possibility. As I thought about what she did for him, about how I would describe it, I could only call it *ministry*. She ministered to this baby, loving him, caring for him, and sharing in his personhood. And her ministry to him seemed to play a song of

resurrection, a song he couldn't shake even years later when his being faced the ultimate act of confirmed worthiness. As he faced his demise, the marks of ministry pressed on his spirit, opening him to the beckoning of the Holy Spirit. The young woman's care for the boy was indeed ministry, because it embraced death by sharing in personhood and, through this, brought forth transformation. Is it possible that ministry is this profound? Is it possible that resurrection itself sings a song of ministry and that we too are called to sing, like a frightened immigrant girl and a frail old woman? I asked myself, sitting in our little church, How seemingly weak, but nevertheless shockingly powerful, is ministry?

Ministry is too often seen as some function or professional action done by clergy; just as a clerk files papers or a programmer writes code, so a pastor ministers. It is the name of the core function of a profession. And as such, it is just a generic description of some *human* action. But this story opened my eyes to something deeper. It asserted that ministry is the very event that unveils *God's* action in the world. This is not because it is the rubbing of some bottle that brings God forth like a genie, but rather because God is a minister, constantly and continually acting in the world to minister new life out of death. God calls human ministers to echo God's own personhood by sharing in the personhood of others as ministers.

This story opened my eyes to see ministry as a spiritual force that stretches deeper than is often imagined, something that needs no ordination credentials or license. This story seemed to show that ministry is, of course, something pastors do, but it is also something much more than that. This woman was no *ordained* pastor, and yet her ministry to this unwanted child was the vehicle that God used to bring forth transformation. And having experienced this ministry, the boy walked down the mountain to become a pastor, spending his life helping others see and experience the song of resurrection, called ministry, using weakness to create a force stronger than a hundred nuclear bombs.

The Second Story

As she placed the book in my hands, she refused to let it go. I held one side, and she held the other, as if our mutual grip swore an oath, and my friend Nancy Lee said with a look of intensity, "You'd better read this!" I promised I would, and promptly placed it on a stack of another fifteen books that needed reading. A few months later, on a beautiful late-summer day, I finally picked it up. Sitting on my porch, as kids on bikes and parents pushing baby strollers passed by, I read it cover to cover, sobbing my way through the last hundred

pages, now clear why the book jacket read “#1 *New York Times* Bestseller.” The book was *When Breath Becomes Air*, the beautifully written memoir of a neurosurgeon. It tells the story of an awakening.

Paul Kalanithi was a brilliant young man, educated at Stanford and Yale, who excelled in his training. As a scientific practitioner, he had been told and had fully embraced that patients are problems and that the surgeon’s job is to eradicate the problem in the best way possible. The patient is not a person but a tumor causing seizures. The goal is to solve the riddle of seizures, keeping the patient alive, never contemplating the life and connections that this person inhabits. But just when Kalanithi was on the brink of being a successful surgeon, he became a patient, struck tragically with brain cancer.

Kalanithi now saw things differently; he was forced to look at disease and illness not from the level of the problem-solving surgeon but from that of the living, yearning, sick *person*. He could no longer see the patient as a movie set, where the doctor plays out the drama of fighting the disease, the surgeon Luke Skywalker and the cancer Darth Vader, crossing light sabers as the unfortunate patient passively hosts the battle in her body. Kalanithi came to realize that what he most longed for as a patient was not the sharp expertise of the surgeon but the ministry of the surgeon’s person. Kalanithi recognized that the only way to truly heal someone is to create the space for them to share their story, to give your person to them, accompanying them in their journey of sickness that too often leads to death. Kalanithi’s job now, as surgeon-patient, was to be a pastor who creates space for the ministry that shares deeply in personhood, inviting the sharing of stories as much as the articulation of diagnoses and procedures. “Had I been more religious in my youth, I might have become a pastor, for it was the pastoral role I’d sought.” It was the pastoral role he discovered through his illness and transformation. He sums this all up in this beautiful story of his pastoral role as pastoral physician:

A thirty-five-year-old sat in her ICU bed, a sheen of terror on her face. She had been shopping for her sister’s birthday when she’d had a seizure. A scan showed that a benign brain tumor was pressing on her right frontal lobe. . . . But I could see that the idea of brain surgery terrified her, more than most. She was lonesome and in a strange place, having been swept out of the familiar hubbub of a shopping mall and into the alien beeps and alarms and antiseptic smells of an ICU. She would likely refuse surgery if I launched into a detached spiel detailing all the risks and possible complications. I could do so, document her refusal in the chart, consider my duty discharged, and move on to the next task. Instead, with her permission, I gathered her family with her, and together we calmly talked through the options. As we talked, I could see the enormity of the choice she faced dwindle into a difficult but understandable decision.

I had met her in a space where she was a person, instead of a problem to be solved. She chose surgery. The operation went smoothly. She went home two days later, and never seized again.¹

I was shocked by the direct description that Kalanithi gave to his awakening, to this new way of being a doctor; he called it *pastoral*. He was transformed by seeing himself as a pastor. He recognized it in his weakness, like Paul in 2 Corinthians, now that his cancer had knocked him to the floor. He could hear the soft song of ministry playing in the universe, a hum of resurrection that had the power to transform even death into life through the sharing of personhood. It had the ability that pure scientific know-how didn't: to provide new possibility.

Kalanithi was transformed into a pastoral physician, finding his destiny. But this book wouldn't end happily ever after. Rather, the cancer in Kalanithi's body soon overtook him, making it impossible for him to continue his work. The pastoral physician who was transformed by cancer was now being overcome by it. As Kalanithi's only child came into the world, profoundly ministering to his frail person with her own, he would leave it. Writing her a letter that she'd read years later, when he was but a foggy memory transfused into her consciousness by the stories of others, he conveyed to her the deepest expressions of gratitude, reminding her to never think of her life as meaningless. Her very existence gave a dying man the deepest joy of shared personhood; her life was a ministry to him, her being the gift a dying man so desperately needed.

I was now sobbing loud enough for dog walkers on the sidewalk to wonder if I was OK. As I moved into our kitchen, I found my wife, Kara, working away at her computer, preparing something for the evening's presbytery meeting, while multitasking to complete the other duties expected of her as pastor of Lake Nokomis Presbyterian Church. My eyes swollen and my mind reverberating at that warm, low frequency that happens when you've been engulfed in something beautiful, I said, "You've got to read this book. It's wonderful, so moving. And what's amazing is that the author has an awakening through having cancer that transforms him into a pastoral physician, freeing him to minister to people by being with them."

Listening, but distracted by her ever-long to-do list, Kara shot back, "Cool. I'm glad a surgeon gets to be pastoral, because I'm not sure anyone cares if a pastor is."

Kara's snarky response was born not only from a pending presbytery meeting and too many things to do as the day was coming to a close but more so from her recent return from leading worship and spiritual direction at a pastors'

1. Paul Kalanithi, *When Breath Becomes Air* (New York: Random House, 2016), 90 (emphasis added).

conference. She explained that so many pastors felt buried under institutional demands that they rarely had time or energy for ministry. And many weren't even sure what to expect or hope for as an outcome of their action. Some had dreams of doubling or quadrupling their church's size, and others fantasized about being a popular blogger or author, but few had a real sense of what it would even look like for God to act. After all, in our secular age, divine action often seems unbelievable. The roads that once seemed to connect us directly to the divine appear either closed or uncomfortably bumpy. The pastor can feel like an odd person, living an embarrassingly outdated vocation. At its worst, it can feel like being a full-time employee of the Renaissance Festival, playing a part from an old world that people at times (e.g., Christmas and Easter) appreciate but most often find unnecessary. And, as Kara discovered, even those who find it necessary seem more concerned with institutional structures (and the anxiety of their failing) than with an experience with God. The pastor either becomes the guardian and custodian of declining religion or needs to reinvent himself or herself as a religious entrepreneur, connecting busy, disinterested people with the programs and products of a church.

What is the purpose of being a pastor if it isn't to build the next megachurch or be the next Rob Bell (or better, be the next Rob Bell by building the next megachurch)? Other than these ambitious (and often unrealistic) longings, there seemed little other purpose driving the practice and identity of pastors, in her humble opinion. The days of managing sacred things and leading revered communities, where people constructed their most primary meaning, were all but gone. And who really had time to think much about all this anyway? Pastors, she explained, live with a sneaking suspicion that all they're good for is managing religious stuff that no one really values.

But, they do! I thought. Kalanithi's book is a *New York Times* bestseller, and the story of the child, the girl, and the song points to something profound that we're all longing for: a sense that there is something binding our experience and the universe itself together. Or maybe Kara was right: for sixteen straight years, nurses, and not clergy, have topped the Gallup poll of the most trusted professions in America. Eighty-two percent of people said that nurses were trustworthy. Only 42 percent trusted clergy or pastors. Police officers, grade school teachers, and pharmacists all ranked higher in trust, honesty, and ethics than pastors.² It is safe to assume that so few Americans trust pastors

2. Megan Brenan, "Nurses Keep Healthy Lead as Most Honest, Ethical Profession," Gallup, December 26, 2017, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/224639/nurses-keep-healthy-lead-honest-ethical-profession.aspx>.

"While pastors are as important as ever in Christ's kingdom, in a society undergoing spiritual reconstruction they seem less significant. In the past, a career in ministry might have appealed

because of self-inflicted wounds brought about by scandal and moral failure. But I also think there is another layer to this decline that affects pastors more directly. Perhaps these numbers are low because in the end many people aren't sure what pastors are good for, other than guilt-tripping people to come to church and drop a twenty in the offering plate.³

So pastors don't rank near the top, but why are nurses so high? Nurses of course do a lot, but they often assist more than lead, lacking (at least in perception) the technical knowledge and extensive training of physicians. But nurses rank number one because, while the surgeon needs an awakening (like Kalanithi) to see you as a person, nurses recognize that you need the ministry of another (a place to share your fears, to be comforted and known) as much as you need your blood pressure taken or your bandage changed. Nurses are the most trusted because nurses do ministry.⁴

This Gallup poll, in a nutshell, points to what this book will seek to explore. We live in a time—call it a secular age—when society has devalued the pastor and yet we nevertheless yearn for ministry. Just look at Pope Francis: he has won over the world, and particularly religiously cynical Western Europeans as well as North American Protestants, because he has chosen to be a minister. He holds nearly the same views as his predecessor, but he is beloved far beyond Benedict because he chooses to move in the world not as a theologian or cleric but as a humble minister, as a nurse who washes feet and hears stories. He refuses to live in an ornate villa; he will live only in a humble flat because he sees himself not as a head of state but as a minister, living not separate from but with people.

This book will sketch a story. Gleaning from the work of Charles Taylor, it will tell how the dawning of our secular age in the West has hollowed out the vocation of the pastor, making core commitments to divine action questionable at best. Unlike Communist China post-revolution, our secular age has

to any leader who sought recognition and respect. Today, however, Christian ministers are as likely to be ignored and insulted as they are to be admired and revered. It's not a job for the thin-skinned or the weak of heart." David Kinnaman in Barna Report, *The State of Pastors: How Today's Faith Leaders Are Navigating Life and Leadership in an Age of Complexity* (Ventura, CA: Barna Group, 2017), 155.

3. *The State of Pastors* report reveals this loss of esteem in a secular age: "Half of all working Americans say church work is 'much more' (28%) or 'a little more' (22%) important than their career choice. One in five says a pastoral vocation is of equal importance with their career (20%), and one in six believes their own vocation is more important than a Christian minister's (18%). Exceptionally inclined to believe their career is more important than pastoring are Millennials (31%) and those who are religiously unaffiliated ('nones,' 47%)." Barna Report, *State of Pastors*, 130.

4. The nurse may also more directly than the pastor stand between life and death, providing practices with consequence (take these pills or stop eating these foods or else damnation will be upon you—in the form of a catheter and hospital bed).

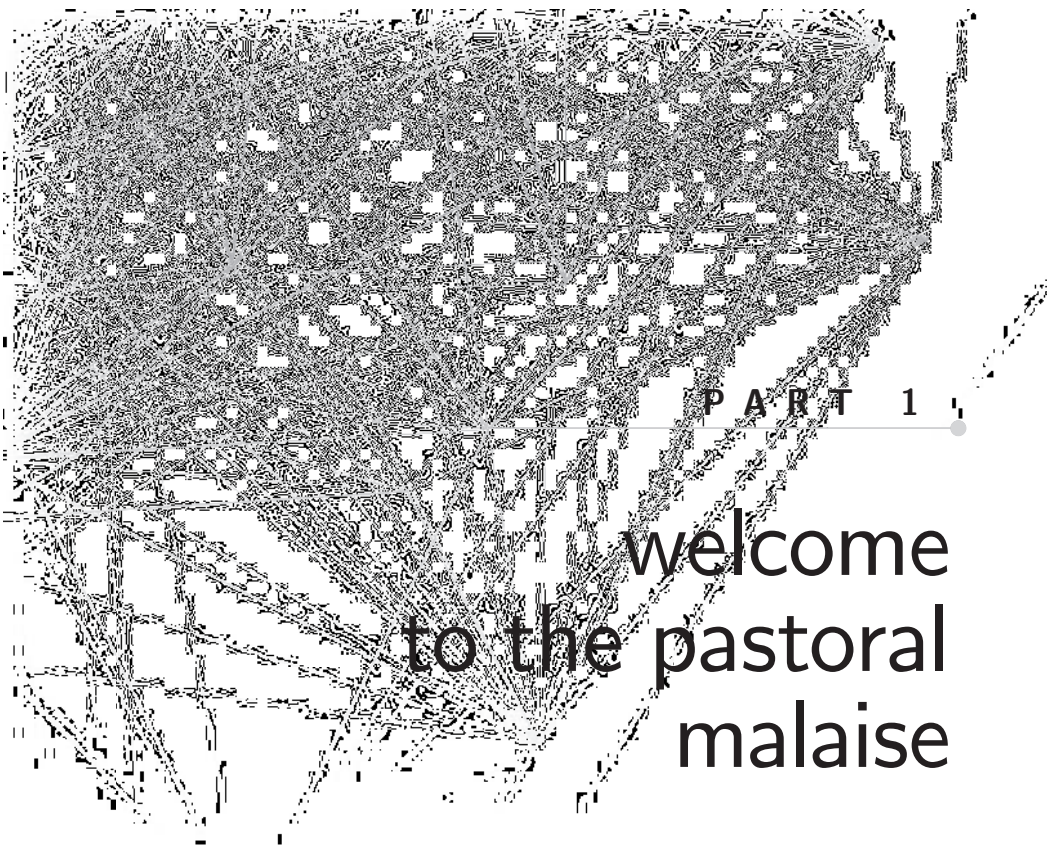
not forcefully eliminated the pastor, but it has slowly erased the transcendent referent that would make the pastor ultimately needed. The pastor is like the manager of a video rental or VCR repair store. Few people are upset they exist, and many are nostalgic about their past importance, but all of their training and know-how is needed only in the rarest of cases, such as when you find your dusty wedding video from 1991 in an old box only to discover the reels on the VHS are stuck. Yet not long ago we simply couldn't get on with life without a pastor. We needed a pastor to assist us in our most important events and experiences, to help protect us from evil and lead us into grace. But this has become obsolete. As our secular age has made divine action unbelievable, the pastor has become a warm, kitschy relic of a passing age, someone people like having around but aren't sure why.

Part 1 tells this story, delving into the history of our secular age and its impact on the pastor, and using Charles Taylor's ideas and other historical examples to articulate the challenges the pastor faces. Using Taylor as my baseline, I'll present a genealogy of pastoral identity. I'll show how Taylor's larger philosophical thesis is connected with the evolving identity of the pastor. To explore this I'll draw from the stories of six pastors—Augustine, Thomas Becket, Jonathan Edwards, Henry Ward Beecher, Harry Emerson Fosdick, and Rick Warren. Each of these men were significant representatives of the role and identity of a pastor in their era. For good or ill, they all reacted to—and even produced—essential elements that would lead to our secular age. They are archetypes, generalizations that reveal something true about the time and culture. In part 1, we are trying to tell the story from the center, where white males were the shapers of the cultural pastoral identity. Part 2 becomes more constructive, drawing from the genius of those on the margins. Here women and people of color will take center stage.

Chapter 9 will serve as a bridge or coda that will prepare us to make a more distinctly theological leap in part 2. This coda will explore Michel Foucault's lectures on pastoral power. Playing some of the same notes as part 1, it will further show why being a pastor is such a challenge in a secular age. But also playing new notes, it will prepare us to explore the depth of God's shepherding nature, spotting how ministry is central to God's own being.

Pushing these ideas further, part 2 seeks to free ministry from being seen as only a professional function and moves into seeing ministry as the very way of imagining divine action in our secular age. It picks up a major thread from volume 1 in this series and describes more deeply the shape and nature of what the boy experienced with the young woman, what Kalanithi discovered, and what nurses do: this thing called ministry. In volume 1, seeking to define what faith is, we named this reality through the experience of the apostle

Paul with Ananias. Here we'll explore more deeply what ministry might be, particularly at the level of God's action, with the goal to articulate ways for pastors to reclaim the identity and meaning of their calling. Ministry is a robust theological category that brings divine action into human experience, helping us recognize God's presence, even in a secular age.



PART 1

welcome
to the pastoral
malaise

1



a historical map of the pastor in our secular age

“I’m not sure what I’m doing,” he said. I’d never met him before, but I’d talked with hundreds of him (and hers) after speaking at pastors’ conferences. The air of fragile confidence was familiar, this sense of being lost in the house you grew up in. “I’ve been a pastor for fifteen years, and most days I have no idea what I’m doing,” he continued.¹

I could only pause and allow the silence to invite him to say more. “I mean, I know what I’m doing, maybe all too well. I have no trouble filling my days

1. Kevin Vanhoozer gives some context to this pastor’s feelings: “Uncertainty about what pastors are good for is not good for a minister’s soul. If the metaphor by which you minister is ‘helping profession,’ then you had better be prepared to say what kind of help you have to give. But this was precisely the problem. What do pastors have to say and do that other people in the helping professions—psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, and so forth—are not already doing, and often doing better? Today there are many ‘experts’ in a variety of helping professions who are offering solutions and strategies for coping with diverse personal problems. Mental and social health services offer up a smorgasbord of theories and therapies for what ails us.” Kevin Vanhoozer and Owen Strachan, *The Pastor as Public Theologian: Reclaiming a Lost Vision* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), 9. Todd Wilson and Gerald Heistand add, “You may know that pastors these days are going through something of an identity crisis. By and large, they don’t know who they are or what they’re supposed to be doing. Behind the benign pastoral smiles and inspiring sermons and multi-million dollar building campaigns and ever-expanding ministry footprints, there lurks in the hearts and minds of many pastors confusion as to what a pastor is and what a pastor does. In the words of Princeton Seminary president Craig Barnes, the hardest thing about being a pastor today is simply ‘confusion about what it means to be the pastor.’” *Becoming a Pastor Theologian: New Possibilities for Church Leadership* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016), 1.

and doing the things that make me a good pastor. I actually think I am a good, even faithful, pastor.”

There was the confidence. When it came to being a pastoral professional, he had it. These had been fifteen years of success. Of course he had stories of failures and mistakes, but like all good professionals, he had learned from them. So in a sense, he had a very good idea of what he was doing and was successful at it.

But then the confidence cracked. “Yet I have this sick feeling, this kind of dull unease in my stomach, that something is wrong. I’m not sure of its origins or why it’s there, but it’s just this discomfort, like I’m missing something.”

“Like something is slipping through your fingers,” I said.²

“Yes,” he returned, “but in a way that gives me a nauseous feeling.”³

Welcome to the Malaise

Canada is known for snow, hockey pucks, and Tim Horton’s coffee. Not surprisingly, the Great White North is less well known for hosting the Massey

2. “Being a pastor is hard enough as it is: the *New York Times* reported in 2010 that 50 percent of pastors feel unable to meet the needs of the job, with 90 percent saying they feel unqualified or poorly prepared for ministry.” Kevin Vanhoozer, “The Pastor Theologian as Public Theologian,” in Wilson and Heistand, *Becoming a Pastor Theologian*, 40. Sondra Wheeler adds more texture to this: “The greatest risk of ministry isn’t burnout, though the burdens and isolation of the role can be dangerous and corrosive. Neither is it moral failure in itself, although we have in recent years seen shocking evidence of how widespread and destructive such failures are. The greatest risk is the one that is behind and beneath both exhaustion and much pastoral misconduct. It is cynicism: loss of faith in the meaningfulness and efficacy of the work that ministers do.” *The Minister as Moral Theologian: Ethical Dimensions of Pastoral Leadership* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 124.

3. I understand that it is a debate on whether the pastoral vocation is in decline. The pastor I was speaking to seemed to be intuitively and existentially echoing E. Brooks Holifield (*God’s Ambassadors: A History of the Christian Clergy in America* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007], 348), who says,

And what about the seeming decline of the profession? More than a few scholarly accounts of ministry have affirmed or implied the narrative of decline. It has become common to say that in the twenty-first century the clergy exercise leadership over a smaller number of domains than they did in previous centuries. They no longer help write the laws of the state, as they did in seventeenth-century New England. They no longer constitute, as they did until the late eighteenth century, the intellectual class of the culture. They seldom lead, as they had in antebellum America, the largest humanitarian and philanthropic institutions, or edit the culture’s leading journals. They rarely become the presidents and trustees, as they once had, of the elite colleges and universities. They have lost exclusive “jurisdiction over personal problems” as a result of competition from psychiatrists and social workers. Clergy typically receive lower salaries than most other professionals. And with 25 percent of Americans now graduating from a college or university, ministers are, in most communities, no longer the most highly educated persons. In more than one cultural realm, the ministry has indeed lost authority. And if this is what decline means, the argument is convincing.

Lectures on politics, culture, and philosophy. Yet these lectures are famous, not only being aired on the CBC (Canadian Broadcast Channel) but also boasting past presenters like Noam Chomsky and Martin Luther King Jr. In 1991, Charles Taylor, the Montreal philosopher whom we met in the first volume of this series, delivered his lectures, called “The Malaise of Modernity.” Taylor articulated something in these lectures that he would continue to explore years later in his book *A Secular Age*, in which he investigates the way that our late modern world strikes us with a general feeling of discomfort, a kind of uneasiness. Taylor describes this as a malaise, a kind of nagging illness, the source of which can’t be identified. He explains that this low-grade cultural stomachache may have its origin in at least three things: “(1) the sense of the fragility of meaning, [and the] search for an over-arching significance; (2) a felt flatness of our attempts to solemnize the crucial moments of passage in our lives; and (3) the utter emptiness of the ordinary.”⁴

It’s no wonder that the pastor I met above felt a dull sense of unease, a vocational nauseousness, like he didn’t know what he was doing. If this cultural malaise has indeed arrived, then it is no surprise that the pastor would feel like patient zero. In *A Secular Age*, Taylor calls this unease “the malaise of immanence.”⁵ It is as though living in a world free of transcendence, enchantment, and an organization around divine action has given us a freedom that leaves us with a discomfort we can’t pinpoint, a dull boredom we can’t shake. As I discussed in volume 1, we have arrived in a secular age not because people no longer see it as necessary to go to church (and are willing to mark “none” on a survey) but rather because the very idea that there could be a personal God who orders and acts in the cosmos has become unbelievable (or at least contested). Or we could say that we now live in a world where it is quite easy to forget, deny, or simply not care that there is a transcendent dimension to reality. Taylor’s point is that the price paid for this freedom is an uneasy boredom, an ailment of felt flatness.

If ministry were only about getting people to join the institutional church, then the pastor could hone her professional skills and battle for market share. And many denominations and seminaries have settled for this understanding of the pastor. But what caused the pastor I was talking with to have a stomachache and overall feeling of malaise was the unexpressed realization that

4. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2007), 309.

5. Taylor adds, “A crucial feature of the malaise of immanence is the sense that all these answers are fragile, or uncertain; that a moment may come, where we no longer feel that our chosen path is compelling, or cannot justify it to ourselves or others. . . . The fragility that I am talking about concerns the significance of it all; the path is still open, possible, supported by circumstances, the doubt concerns its worth.” *Secular Age*, 308.

the very God he preached had become unnecessary. And in turn this led him to feel somewhere deep enough beyond words that in this shrouded void *he was not needed at all*.

He was standing in the line of an old vocational tradition, of course, but he nevertheless felt like he was on new ground. Pastors like Augustine of Hippo, Thomas Becket, and Jonathan Edwards never dealt with the fragility of meaning, the flatness of our moments of passage, and the emptiness of the ordinary. It would be as hard for them to understand the feeling of malaise as it would a smartphone. They ministered in a world where haunting meaning spilled out of every corner in omens and revelations. And not only were baptisms, weddings, and festivals embedded in the thick cosmic drama of worship and absolution (so much so that Becket had to remind King Henry that he too must obey), but the passage from life to death was short and sudden. This was anything but flat, and the ordinary was filled to overflowing. For Augustine and Becket, anything ordinary existed in a chain of being that played its part in sacred reality. For Edwards, ordinariness, particularly of raising children, held such cosmic weight that his primary pastoral task (particularly from the pulpit) was to push his congregants to live upright ordinary lives in order to raise children well enough to keep them from hell. For Edwards's Calvinist Puritanism, ordinary life was the stage where heaven and hell collided.

Not so much for this pastor. He was living in a different time, quite literally. We'll discuss this time transformation more below. But to illustrate, for Augustine, Becket, and, in his own way, Edwards, time wasn't frozen in a linear progression as we now assume. Certain moments cast meaning over all of ordinary life by shifting time. The people to whom Augustine, Becket, and Edwards ministered had a shared imagination (a "social imaginary" as Taylor calls it)⁶ that led them to assume that Good Friday in the year 435, 1138, or 1752 was closer to the original day of the crucifixion than a mid-summer evening in 433, 1130, or 1750. Or to say it more directly, they would say that a "holy day"—say, Good Friday 2018—is closer to the crucifixion than an "ordinary day"—say, July 10, 2015.⁷

6. "The social imaginary, as Taylor conceives it, 'is not a set of ideas' but rather 'what enables, through making sense of, the practices of a society.'" Michael Warner, Jonathan VanAntwerpen, and Craig Calhoun, eds., *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 19.

7. Taylor says, "The Church, in its liturgical year, remembers and re-enacts what happened in *illo tempore* when Christ was on earth. Which is why this year's Good Friday can be closer to the Crucifixion than last year's mid-summer day. And the Crucifixion itself, since Christ's action/passion here participates in God's eternity, is closer to all times than they in secular terms are to each other." *Secular Age*, 58.

The meaning of the crucifixion is so heavy that it bends time, giving us passage into living and participating in the crucifixion's cosmic significance, and transforming our empty ordinary days into a haunting, sacred experience. It was the pastor's job to stand on the boundary of these times, helping people make sense of the flood of meaning as the pastor moved people back and forth between ordinary and sacred time. The ordinary was preparation for the coming extraordinary passage into sacred time. There was no need to find meaning, because all of reality was pocked with time-traveling wormholes, and it was the pastor's job, particularly in Becket's time, to drive people in and out of these time-bending events.

But this time jumping was wearying. Just as an astronaut prepares for zero gravity, it was assumed that no one could jump time without training. The level of constant preparation in the ordinary time for the passages into the extraordinary time was a burden. And it seemed to just keep ramping up—the number of prayers, the need to touch relics, the fasting, and so much more. Nevertheless, it was the pastor's job to, in love, keep prodding and pushing the people to prepare, because one time jump or another was around the corner; celebration of the Eucharist, Good Friday, Pentecost, or some other wormhole was soon to be on the horizon. And if we weren't ready, the meaningfulness was so heavy that it would rip our souls into pieces. And we were all in this together, so if you decided not to pray, or even secretly dabbled in witchcraft, we all could be obliterated when we hit the zero gravity of sacred time—Good Friday was as frightening as it was celebratory.

The pastor had to live under this constant burden while avoiding the temptations to which many succumbed. The pastor had to balance the utter power of driving the vessel (called the church) that not only organized, almost in full, people's lives but also moved people in and out of these wormholes of salvation.

The world of the pastor I was talking with at the conference couldn't be more different. But this radical difference didn't come through a coup d'état. It was not a direct and immediate overthrow that led the open wormholes one day to suddenly be paved over the next. Rather, getting us to this secular age, in which time is frozen in linear progression and ordinary life is freed from the pressure of cosmic significance, has taken many years and many more small changes that have slowly but surely shrunk the once gaping wormholes.

More on the Malaise

It is not that meaning, rites of passages, and the significance of the ordinary have been annihilated; it is just that they have been hollowed out, repurposed