Theories of Human Nature and their Implications for Christian Ministry

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Our topic in this workshop is 'theories of divine transformation'. How is it that God changes lives? An uncontroversial answer to this question would be to say that God changes lives by divine grace through the Holy Spirit. But to give this answer is not yet to answer the question in a way that is actionable for Christian ministry. It does not yet tell us how divine grace operates, or through what means and under what circumstances the Spirit transforms us, or why the Spirit needs to transform us in the first place. Both historically and today, Christians have long emphasized different dimensions of divine grace, often based on different views of what it is that has fundamentally gone wrong with humanity such that we stand in need of God's grace. And this has resulted in very different approaches to ministry.

The question of how God transforms us through the Spirit is one in which I have been interested for a long time, and was a key theme in my last book, *The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience*.[1] Shortly after that book was published, I wrote an article, that was aimed at a non-academic audience and sought to draw out the practical implications for Christian ministry of the approach to grace that I advocated in the book.[2] In this paper, I will reprise, deepen, and extend the argument I made in that article, focusing once again on the question of how a good theology of divine transformation plays out in practical Christian ministry, especially in light of the fallenness of human nature.

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[1] Simeon Zahl, *The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

[2] 'How Do People Actually Change? The Cure of Souls and Theory of Change in Christian Ministry'. The online version was published by Mockingbird Ministries and can be found here: https://mbird.com/the-magazine/the-cure-of-souls/ (accessed 14 April 2025). The print version appeared in *The Mockingbird* 22 (2023).

In order to get to grips with the relationship between theological convictions about the Holy Spirit and the divine work of grace, on the one hand, and day-to-day Christian ministry, on the other, the first and vital step is to recognize that every approach to Christian ministry works with an *operative theory of grace*, and an *operative theory of human nature*. What I mean by this is that every ministry makes basic theological assumptions about what human beings are like and about how God works in people's lives. In theological terms, you could say that every form of ministry has an implicit theological anthropology and an implicit theology of grace. These assumptions are not always conscious or clearly articulated, but they have huge effects on pastoral practice as well as on Christian experience. Indeed, I am convinced that few things have a greater effect on the success or failure of a ministry than these theological assumptions.

To illustrate what I mean about operative theological assumptions, I find it helpful to draw on a concept that has its origins in the world of philanthropy and development: *theory of change*. What this term refers to is the strategy that an organization uses when it wants to make some change in the world through its activities. Asking an organization about its theory of change is a way of getting it to articulate more explicitly (a) what outcome it wants to achieve in the world, (b) what strategy it is going to use to accomplish that outcome, and (c) what assumptions it is making that lead it to think that strategy X will result in outcome Y. The concept of 'theory of change' first emerged as a term out of the recognition that human beings are usually quite poor at doing this. We do X in hopes that Y will happen, but amazingly often we do not really think through how strategy X will actually plausibly lead to outcome Y. Having a 'theory of change' forces you to think through the steps and to realize where you are making erroneous or implausible assumptions, so you can then alter your strategy to make it more effective.

Theory of Change in Christian Ministry

Christian ministries are very clearly organizations that have 'theories of change' (whether explicitly or implicitly). At the heart of these theories of change, I argue, are the operative theologies of grace and of human nature referred to earlier. Several examples will illustrate the point.

One common approach to 'theory of change' in Christian ministry is what I call the 'sacramental participation' approach. Many Christian ministries, especially those

that lean in a more Catholic direction, view the sacraments and especially the Eucharist as in many ways the heart of their ministry.

The main outcome or goal of ministry in the 'sacramental participation' approach is to create sanctified human beings. Growing in sanctification will allow human beings to love God and serve the world, and ultimately will fit their souls for their true purpose of dwelling with God in eternity. The strategy used to achieve this goal is focused on the sacraments. By being baptized, Christians are gifted with new moral powers by the Holy Spirit – what in traditional Thomist theology are called 'infused theological virtues' – that enable them to engage in sanctified behavior and develop more virtuous habits over the course of their lives.[3] In Christian moral life, these infused virtues, nourished by regular participation in the Eucharist, function as what are called 'operative habits', which means they serve as a kind of moral tailwind that energizes and facilitates sanctified action in the human agent, making it easier for us to engage in sanctified behavior and to pursue virtue.[4] From this perspective, God's grace is infused in the hearts of Christians through participation in the sacraments such that they have new capabilities of working out their salvation and participating with God in the healing of their sinful souls.

Behind the 'sacramental' theory of change lie two fundamental theological assumptions. The first is that human beings are fallen creatures, subject to original sin, who on their own powers are entirely incapable of the sort of sanctification that is required of them. They need God's grace to change them first. The second assumption is that the sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist really do change us in our souls, granting and then continuing to nourish these new moral powers to enable a life of love, service, and worship.

Analyzing the implied 'theory of change' in sacrament-focused ministries allows us to see how this approach is grounded in a particular vision of Christian life and of how God works to transform us. It also helps us to see how important certain

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[3] The Dominican theologians Jordan Aumann and Romanus Cessario describe how this works in more technical terms: 'Baptism bestows on the recipient the life of sanctifying grace [and] the infused theological and moral virtues' (Jordan Aumann, *Spiritual Theology* (London: Continuum, 2006), p. 212); in turn, the 'theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity', bestowed through Baptism, 'constitute the supernatural capacities given to the Christian that enable him or her to adhere personally to the triune God' (Romanus Cessario, *Christian Faith and the Theological Life* (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1996), p. 5). For further discussion and analysis, see Zahl, *The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience*, pp. 108-116.

[4] As Cessario puts it, infused virtue 'shapes and energizes our human operative capacities, intellect, will, and sense appetites, so that a human person can act promptly, joyfully, and easily in those ares of human conduct that are governed by the Gospel precepts' (Cessario, *Christian Faith*, p. 5).

specifically theological assumptions are at work here, assumptions about human nature and about how divine grace works.

Other ministries use different theories of change. Another common one, especially in Protestant circles, is what I think of as the 'Christian information' approach. Here the working assumption is that the most important factor in determining whether Christians thrive and flourish comes down to how much contact they get with the Bible. As one representative of this approach asserts, the key to 'the healthy life and growth of the individual [Christian] and the congregation as a whole' is 'exposure to biblical truth'.[5] As God's revelation, the Bible contains a great deal of information about what God is like, about how Christians should live and should view the world, and about the good news of salvation. From this perspective, the primary purpose of a sermon is to exposit a scriptural text in such a way that principles for Christian living, latent in the text, are extracted and made explicit; the assumption is that once this is done in the proper way, the Holy Spirit will bring these principles to bear on the lives of the congregation in an efficacious way.

As in the case of the 'sacramental participation' approach, the 'Christian information' theory of ministry is built on several theological assumptions that are not always explicitly articulated. First, it assumes, in good Protestant fashion, that the Bible, as God's inspired Word, is the primary instrument through which God works in Christian lives.[6] This is a key dimension of its operative theory of grace. Second, and I think more controversially, this approach assumes that human hearts and wills are shaped above all by contact with Christian knowledge or information. In an influential guide to preaching, Haddon Robinson defines one popular approach to preaching ministry in just this way:

> Expository preaching is the communication of a biblical concept, derived from and transmitted through a historical, grammatical, and literary study of a passage in its context, which the Holy Spirit first applies to the personality and experience of the preacher, then through him to his hearers.[7]

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[5] Graeme Goldsworthy, *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture: The Application of Biblical Theology to Expository Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), Chapter 9.

[6] For Goldsworthy, an important qualification is that the Bible must be interpreted Christologically for this to be the case. See Goldsworthy, *Preaching the Whole Bible*, Chapters 4 and 9.

[7] Haddon Robinson, *Expository Preaching* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1986), p. 20.

Here Christian transformation is understood primarily as a cognitive affair – 'the communication of a biblical concept'. Robinson does make the important proviso that only the Holy Spirit can bridge the gap between the interpretation and application of a text by the preacher, on the one hand, and the hearts of the congregation, on the other. But the assumption is that the main instrument through which the Spirit will do this is the successful communication of biblically derived and interpreted information via the sermon. Theologically speaking, we can say that this position entails an operative theological anthropology in which human beings are transformed above all by the acquisition of new knowledge, provided it is the right sort of knowledge (i.e., it has the right source – the Bible – and is rightly interpreted – Christologically and in terms of the Gospel).[8]

There are a number of other common 'theories of change' in Christian ministry that we could explore if there were space. For example, there are theories based around spiritual practices, which usually depend on theological anthropological assumptions about the efficacy of practice and habit for transforming Christian hearts, wills, and minds, and which often go hand in hand with a sacramental participation approach. Another example would be the approach, common in charismatic and Pentecostal churches, that focuses ministry on stirring the congregation to a kind emotionally charged personal encounter with God in the form of the altar call or some form of prayer ministry. Here the operative anthropology is one that foregrounds emotion and feeling, as well as certain kinds of participatory worship practices, in God's work of transforming human beings.[9]

For present purposes, the key point in this section has been to show that different approaches of ministry are grounded in specific theological assumptions about human nature and about divine grace. A key benefit of recognizing the importance of operative theologies in ministry is that by surfacing and identifying these theologies, our theories of change can, in turn, be subjected to theological analysis and assessment. What theological reasons do we have to suppose that divine grace tends to operate in the way a given approach assumes? And is a particular

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[8] Robinson and Goldsworthy provide particularly clear and worked out versions of this approach to divine transformation, under the heading of what they variously call 'biblical preaching' and 'expository preaching'. But the Christian information approach is by no means limited to this particular school of thought, and is often recognizable in approaches to preaching that are not as strictly 'expository' but which still focus on the communication and application of biblical principles to the conregation's lives.

[9] Of course, many ministries operate with more than one theory of change at once, though they might tend to see one particular approach as the most fundamental.

approach's operative theological anthropology actually accurate – what reasons do we have to think that human beings really work that way? Viewing approaches to ministry from this perspective, we soon see that the quality of our theory of divine transformation will depend to a significant degree on the quality of the theological assumptions out of which it is built.

In the next part of the paper, I will argue that in order to assess a given theory's assumptions about human nature, we need to begin by examining why it is that Christians need to be transformed in the first place. And this leads us very rapidly to Christian belief in the 'fallenness' of human nature – what is traditionally known in theology as original sin. As we will see, how we conceive of humanity's fallen state has very significant implications for how we are to understand the divine work of transformation.

A Malady of the Will

For the purposes of this paper, I define *original sin* as a wrongness or disorder that has become intrinsic to human nature, leading to alienation from God as well as to death, which cannot be put right without the intervention of God. This relatively broad definition captures the core convictions about the Fall that are widely shared by pre-modern and early modern Christian theologians, in both the West and the East.[10] The doctrine of original sin is often associated with Augustine and his legacy in the Latin church. However, it is best understood in a more general sense, equivalent to 'the condition of fallenness', that need not entail all aspects of Augustine's position,[11] and which also encompasses what Eastern theologians like Athanasius and Maximus call 'corruption' (*phthora*) as it relates to human beings. Original sin, 'fallenness', and corruption all name a condition of innate conflictedness or damage in human beings that we are not able to escape on our own powers. It is traditionally understood to have come into existence as the consequence of a particular sin act – Adam's transgression in the Garden – but is now a condition of the soul that lies behind all the specific sins that human beings commit.[12]

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[10] For an historical and theological overview of the doctrine of original sin, see Simeon Zahl, 'Sin and the Fall', in Michael Burdett et al (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Theological Anthropology* (in press, 2025).
[11] What I have in mind are some of the more controversial aspects of Augustine's account, for example Augustine's 'physical' account of humanity's co-implication in Adam's transgression through presence in his 'seed', and the close association in Augustine's thought between original sin and sexual procreation.
[12] Despite what is sometimes argued today, in the broad form outlined here original sin is a highly ecumenical doctrine, with wide agreement on the main features of the doctrine across Catholic,

The main features of the theology of human fallenness are consistent across many classical accounts. Augustine's description in *City of God* is typical:

> Human nature was so vitiated and changed in [Adam], however, that he suffered in his members a rebellion of desire, and became bound by the necessity of dying. And what he himself had become as a result of his fault and punishment – that is, subject to sin and death – he reproduced in his offspring.[13]

Athanasius of Alexandria expresses the same set of ideas in terms of 'corruption': 'when human beings despised and overturned the comprehension of God … they received the previously threatened condemnation of death, and thereafter no longer remained as they had been created, but were corrupted [*diephtheironto*] as they had contrived; and, seizing them, death reigned.'[14] The Eastern theologian Maximus the Confessor's description is similar: 'the condemnation of Adam's deliberate sin' resulted in 'a mutation of human nature over to passibility, corruption, and death'.[15] The Anglican Thirty-Nine Articles, written almost a thousand years after Maximus and deeply Protestant in their theology, nevertheless concur on the main points: 'original sin … is the fault and corruption of the Nature of every man, that naturally is ingendered of the offspring of Adam, whereby man is very far gone from original Righteousness, and is of his own Nature inclined to evil'. If what theology traditionally calls 'actual sin' is about individual actions and behaviors (deeds, words, desires, trangressions), original sin is about a change to human nature ('vitiation', 'corruption', 'mutation', 'fault') that precedes and preconditions such action for all human beings after the Fall.

We now ask: what, more precisely, is the nature of the 'vitiation' and 'corruption' that has taken hold in human nature under the condition of original sin? What does

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Protestant, and Orthodox theologians prior to the 17th century. There is a perception in contemporary theology that the Eastern churches are substantially less interested in or concerned with the theology of original sin than Catholics and Protestants traditionally have been. As Khaled Anatolios has shown, this is an argument that does not withstand scrutiny either from Greek patristic sources or from the Byzantine liturgical tradition (Khaled Anatolios, *Deification through the Cross: An Eastern Christian Theology of Salvation* (Eerdmans, 2020), especially pp. 50-52, 286). For representative evidence of the centrality of the Fall from classical Orthodox sources, see Athanasius, *On the Incarnation of the Word*; Maximus, *Ad Thalassium*; and the Byzantine Lenten liturgy (the *Lenten Triodion*).

[13] Augustine, *City of God* 13.3. Translation adapted, with alterations, from Dyson's Cambridge University Press translation, p. 544.

[14] Athanasius, *On the Incarnation of the Word* 4 (English Translation (ET): Popular Patristics edition, p. 59).

[15] Maximus, *Ad Thalassium* 42 (ET: Popular Patristics edition, p. 121).

it involve and what forms does it take? This question is important because it has significant implications for our theory of divine transformation. Traditionally, original sin has several dimensions: effects on our will, effects on our minds, effects on our relationships (with God, with each other, and with the rest of creation), and effects on our body (classically, original sin results in physical mortality).

The first of these – the belief that our fallen condition entails a disruption and disordering of human capacities to will and desire the good – is usually considered the most fundamental. In classical theology, original sin is above all a malady of the will. In the description above, Augustine calls this 'a rebellion of desire'[16] that has become intrinsic to human experience. Maximus, similarly, describes it as a 'bond' and 'enslavement' by which 'man's will inclines toward wicked pleasure and against his own best interest', such that he is 'unable … to free himself from his slavery to pleasure',[17] while the Cappadocian theologian Gregory of Nyssa characterizes it as 'a strong innate affinity toward evil [that] has come about in the soul'.[18] For the influential medieval theologian Peter Lombard, the effect of original sin on our will is so foundational that the whole doctrine can be defined in terms of it: 'Original sin is called the incentive to sin, namely concupiscence or concupiscibility, which is called the law of the members, or the weakness of nature, or the tyrant who is in our members, or the law of the flesh.'[19] The Lutheran Reformer Philip Melanchthon, similarly, calls original sin 'a native propensity and an innate force and energy by which we are drawn to sinning', whose root is 'a depraved affection, a depraved motion of the heart against the law of God'.[20]

What all of these views share is the conviction that the human capacity to desire, will, and choose the good has become disordered as well as strongly resistant to human control without the grace of God. Classically, belief that after the Fall the human will has become intrinsically corrupted is one of the most fundamental and distinctive Christian beliefs about human nature.[21] It follows from this – and here we

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[16] *inoboedientiam concupiscendi*.

[17] Maximus, *Ad Thalassium* 21 (ET: p. 112). It is important to note that Maximus is referring here to wrong or 'wicked' pleasure, not positive affect or pleasure as such. His vision of humanity's *telos* is a deeply affective one in which 'the whole of rational creation … will be filled with spiritual pleasure and joy.' (Maximus, *Ambigua* 7 (Costas translation, Harvard University Press, p. 111))

[18] Gregory of Nyssa, *Catechetical Discourse* 8.12 (ET: Popular patristics edition, p. 87).

[19] Peter Lombard, *Sentences* 2.30.8.

[20] Melanchthon, *Loci communes* 1555.

[21] Others might include the inherent metaphysical goodness of all creatures, including human beings, due to their having been created by God *ex nihilo*; and the belief that human beings were made to love and worship God.

have arrived at the core argument of this paper – that *any theologically and pastorally persuasive theory of divine transformation will have to begin by addressing the problem of the fallen will*. If our operative theological anthropology and our theory of change does not take adequate account of this particular aspect of human nature, it will find itself at odds with long-standing Christian tradition, ineffective at fostering real change, and blind to the operation of God's grace in real human lives.

Divine Transformation Starts with the Heart

In the remainder of this paper, I will draw out a few implications for ministry that follow from recognizing that the will itself is the main obstacle to Christian transformation. In order to do this, it will help to turn to the most influential discussion of these matters in the history of the Western churches: the debate between Augustine of Hippo and the followers of Pelagius in the early 5th century. As we will see, the heart of Augustine's critique of the Pelagians was his conviction that they were naïve about the corruption of the will after the Fall.

The Pelagians, in Augustine's eyes, had a bad theory of change – a bad theory of divine transformation. They had a mistaken view of human nature, and as a result they had a deficient view of divine grace. They thought that God worked in Christians through two means. First, He had created all human beings with a powerful capacity for moral willing, such that to be a good person the main thing you had to do was deploy this capacity. Second, God had given humanity a blueprint for his vision of human life in the Bible, so that they would know what he wanted them to use their will for. Their theory of change, then, was to read the Bible and then use their will to try very hard to do what it says.

Augustine found this view both pastorally naïve and at odds with what Scripture seems to say about human nature. Drawing especially on Paul's statements about the inability of divine law to produce the righteousness it calls for, as well as the Sermon on the Mount, Augustine argued that the core engine of human behavior is not a neutral power of moral choice, but the heart and its desires. For the mature Augustine, our will is really just our heart's desire – whatever we desire the most, whatever we love the most, is what we will.[22] (This is in notable contrast to

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[22] 'For what is desire and joy but an act of will in agreement with what we wish for? And what is fear and grief but an act of will in disagreement with what we do not wish for? … A righteous will, then, is a good love; and a perverted will is an evil love' (Augustine, *City of God*. 14.6, 14.7; ET: pp. 590, 592). For further discussion of Augustine's affective anthropology and theology of grace, see Zahl, *The Holy*

contemporary concepts of the will in the popular imagination as a neutral power of choice that stands above both reason and desire and is capable of over-riding both.[23])

As Augustine points out over and over again in his writings on Pelagianism, it is extremely difficult to change fallen hearts – so hard in fact, that only God can do it, through the Holy Spirit. Here is what is perhaps Augustine's most classic description, from his great treatise *On the Spirit and the Letter*:

> [In contrast to the Pelagians,] we, on the other hand, say that the human will is helped to achieve righteousness in this way: [human beings] receive the Holy Spirit so that there arises in their minds a delight in and a love for [*delectatio dilectioque*] that highest and immutable good that is God, even now while they walk by faith, not yet by sight. By this [love] given to them like the pledge of a gratuitous gift, they are set afire with the desire to cling to the creator.[24]

The key word here is 'delight' – in Latin, *delectatio*. In Augustine's view, the way you change a person is not by appealing to their reason or to their capacity for choice, but to their heart. And precisely this is the work of the Holy Spirit: to fill us with new desires for the things of God, and to make us hate and flee from our bad, self-destructive desires.

Perhaps the most important point to note here for present purposes is that in Augustine's view the will is primarily the *object* of divine grace (i.e., the thing in us that needs healing), rather than the *instrument* of divine grace (i.e., the thing in us that gets used to do the healing). For Pelagius, the will is the tool God has given us to perform a necessary operation; for Augustine, by contrast, the will is the patient on the operating table. And this means that other tools are needed to bring about our healing. Augustine puts the point like this:

> Grace not only makes us know what we should do, but also makes us do what we know; it not only makes us believe what we should love, but makes us love what we believe.[25]

Spirit and Christian Experience, pp. 189-97; and Han-Luen Kantzer Komline, *Augustine on the Will: A Theological Account* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), pp. 251-54.

[23] The latter 'libertarian' or 'voluntarist' understanding of the will, as usually understood today, is a modern conception of willing whose primary roots are in Enlightenment-era ideas about human nature, though a form of it is present historically in Pelagian thought.

[24] Augustine, *On the Spirit and the Letter* 3.5.

[25] Augustine, *On the Grace of Christ and Original Sin* 1.12.13.

The function of divine grace, in other words, is not to reveal to us what to love, but to implant in us love for what we already know we should love.

Implications for Christian Ministry

This Augustinian view of our fallen condition has significant implications for what theory of change we should be bringing to Christian ministry. When our operative theory of human nature is one in which we are creatures of desire whose faculty for desiring has become broken and damaged, then the way we approach ministry – the way we look for the Holy Spirit to work to transform us – will have a number of specific characteristics.

In order to see what some of these characteristics might be, it will first be helpful to distill this Augustinian theory of change into a few basic theological assumptions. First, human beings are primarily driven not by reason and knowledge or by a neutral capacity for choice (what we think of today as 'willpower'), but by desire. We are creatures of the heart, creatures of love. In our unfallen state, our knowledge and our desires were in harmony, and we were be able straightforwardly and efficaciously to love whatever we knew was good, whatever we knew we should love. But in the fallen state, our love has become disordered and resistant to reason.

Second, the human heart is very hard to change, and strongly resists direct efforts to change it. The empirical truth of this point is not difficult to demonstrate. To observe the resistance of the heart to reason as well as other forms of external coercion, we need only try to change someone's mind about politics through rational argument, or try to talk someone out of loving a person they have fallen in love with.

Third, after the Fall, human beings are wired in such a way that judgment kills love. When we feel judged, our instinct is to hide, to put up walls, to resist, regardless of whether the judgment is accurate or not. The reason is that it is in the nature of the corrupted will to flee God and to resist divine truth – this after all was the nature of Adam and Eve's primal sin in the Garden. In *On the Grace of Christ and Original Sin*, Augustine explains the consequences of this fact for our relation to divine law: '[The law] commands, after all, rather than helps; it teaches us that there is a disease without healing it. In fact, it increases what it does not heal' (i.e., sin and resistance to divine law).[26]

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[26] Augustine, *On the Grace of Christ and Original Sin* 1.8.9.

The implications of these three points for theory of change in Christian ministry are significant. Above all, they mean that effective ministry needs to engage with the will itself, rather than assuming, as Christians too often do, that the will is already basically functional provided it has the right information about what to do. The reason we need divine transformation is that we are fallen creatures. But the form that our fallenness has taken is specific: it is a malady that is located above all in our will and our desires.

But how do we do ministry from this perspective? What does ministry look like that sees the disorder and intransigence of our loves as the foundational problem? In the remainder of the paper I will make several suggestions.

First, it means that *the heart of Christian ministry is the facilitation of an emotionally salient encounter with the God revealed in Jesus*. I say this without condition or reservation. If you are not successfully engaging with people's feelings and desires, with their anxieties, their loves, and their pain, then you are just playing a game with Christian words; you are not doing ministry. The intransigence of the human heart is the fundamental problem of Christian ministry. The Spirit of God traffics in emotion and desire.[27]

There are of course many different ways to engage with the heart and to facilitate life-altering emotional encounter with God, and they do not just take the form of overwhelming charismatic experiences.[28] We will turn to some of these more complex dynamics in a moment. At the same time, often overwhelming emotional experience is exactly the form such encounter takes. Indeed, this is why it is no accident that charismatic and Pentecostal ministries are so very effective across a wide range of global contexts. Whatever problems Pentecostal theologies may have in other domains, they understand that the experience of being helped by God in your place of felt need lies at the heart of the religion of Jesus.

Second, an Augustinian approach to divine transformation assumes that *effective ministry always has to deal with the fact of human resistance to judgment and law*. In part, this is about the right configuring of expectations. For example, ministry from an Augustinian perspective is not surprised when a congregation is left cold by a

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[27] See Zahl, *The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience*, Chapter 2.

[28] For an account of the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer* as a liturgy designed to shape affective encounter in long-term and subtle ways over a life-time, as well as through specific moments of encounter with the Christian Gospel, see my lecture, '*The Book of Common Prayer*: Thomas Cranmer's Technology of the Heart' (https://youtu.be/6lvkSOZraG8?si=KtjH1A9FLHvqX_CE).

sermon that is unimpeachably accurate from a biblical and theological point of view, or when attempts to call out a person's sin lead not to their transformation but to their leaving the church. It understands that the problem is such cases is not the quality of the information being conveyed, or the sincerity of the communicator, but a failure to successfully navigate the minefield of the fallen will with its in-built resistance to judgment. Ministry from this perspective recognizes that you will never get through with truth unless you have successfully gotten through to the heart first.

One of the finest and most penetrating illustration of these dynamics in literature can be found in George Eliot's novella *Janet's Repentance*, which is about the successful ministry of an evangelical curate, Mr Tryan, to a suffering parishioner, Janet Dempster. The novella is a case study in effective ministry to a suffering and damaged person who has learned to be suspicious of Christian authority figures (not least because she has been badly mistreated by men). The breakthrough moment comes when Mr Tryan realizes he needs to tell Janet the story of his own sin:

> Mr Tryan hesitated again. He saw that the first thing Janet needed was to be assured of sympathy. She must be made to feel that her anguish was not strange to him; that he entered into the only half-expressed secrets of her spiritual weakness, before any other message of consolation could find its way to her heart. The tale of the Divine Pity was never yet believed from lips that were not felt to be moved by human pity. And Janet's anguish was not strange to Mr Tryan. He had never been in the presence of a sorrow and a self-despair that had sent so strong a thrill through all the recesses of his saddest experience ; and it is because sympathy is but a living again through our own past in a new form, that confession often prompts a response of confession. Mr Tryan felt this prompting, and his judgment, too, told him that in obeying it he would be taking the best means of administering comfort to Janet.[29]

Eliot is particularly interested in the psychological subtleties at work in this encounter – the way Tryan truly listens to Janet first rather than talking at her; the way that subtleties of tone and body language convey his sincerity; the way his genuine humility, brought about by deep moral failures in his past, helps foster an environment in which Janet feels free to let down her walls. As she comes to feel truly loved and not judged by Tryan, Janet finds herself able to genuinely believe

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[29] George Eliot, *Janet's Repentance*, in Scenes from Clerical Life. Vol. II (Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons, 1878), p. 227.

what he says about God's love for her and the divine forgiveness that is on offer – and she is transformed.

This perspective is also helpful for thinking about spiritual practices. It is certainly the case that activities like habitual prayer, service, contemplative practice, justice work, regular liturgical practices and rhythms, and Bible reading, can have powerful shaping effects on people, including on their emotional experience. But – and this is a really important *but* – the Augustinian perspective tells us that we can do all this only once our hearts have already changed enough that we actually *desire* to engage in the practice. The will has to be drawn in first, and in a deep and durable way, or else the person trying to engage in such practices will be like someone trying to drive a car without an engine. No one will develop a transformative and lasting new practice of prayer unless they fundamentally *want to*, and want to enough to carry them through life's inevitable obstacles. Augustine decribes this in terms of a general principle about spiritual activity:

> Whoever then have turned to the Lord their God … with the whole heart
> and their whole soul will not find God's commandment heavy. After all,
> how can it be heavy when it commands love? For either one does not
> love, and then it is heavy, or one loves, and it cannot be heavy.[30]

Applying this to the domain of spiritual practice, either such practice will feel ultimately delightful, empowering, and lastingly attractive, and we will do it; or else it will feel impossible, and we will not persist with it, perhaps not even begin. From this perspective, the one thing spiritual practice cannot be is merely difficult. Here Augustine is reflecting not least on Jesus' teaching on trees and fruit: you have to change the tree first, then the fruit will follow (Matt. 12:33-35). Focus on the heart, and the practices will follow; focus on the practices alone, and you will find yourself frustrated by the intransigence of the fallen will.[31]

Technologies of the Heart

We have been encouraged in this workshop to focus on the practical implications of theologies of divine transformation; in that spirit, I hazard now to be even more specific about what recognition of the malady of the will in ministry contexts looks like in practice. I suggest that ministry that takes as its operating assumption the fallenness of the will recognize the great importance of *technologies of the heart* in the

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[30] Augustine, *On Nature and Grace* 69.83. ET: *Works of St Augustine* (New City Press) I/23: 260.

[31] For further discussion, see Zahl, *The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience*, pp. 208-215.

work of divine transformation. By 'technologies of the heart', I mean tools that we can make use of to help shape desires and facilitate the kind of emotionally significant encounter with the grace of God I talked about earlier.[32]

The first technology of the heart to draw attention to are the tools of *story, imagination, and the arts*. Novels, stories, movies, illustrations—these are powerful technologies of the heart, much more effective at moving the will than concepts and assertions. The reason we love stories, the reason we love art and music, and the reason such things can be so transformative when we draw on them in ministry is that they know how to speak the strange electric language of the heart. To put this more technically, such 'technologies' are so powerful because they give us a way of drawing in the will obliquely and indirectly rather than head on. Because the will tends to resist direct instruction – especially moral and religious instruction – it needs to be addressed orthogonally, from the side. We see this technology of the heart at work in Jesus' use of parables; in Nathan's use of an illustration to get through David's otherwise stubborn heart in 2 Samuel 12:1-13; in the long history of Christian theological instruction taking place as much through symbol and story as through didactic teaching; and so on.

A second technology of the heart that can do its work despite the fallen character of the will is *music*. Few tools are more capable of getting through to our hearts than music. Indeed, I suspect that lot of ministries that actually have quite bad theories of change are still doing a lot of good in the world, are still helping people, because their worship ministries are doing the heavy lifting. A very average worship leader or music director can get through to a congregation more easily than the most brilliant preacher if the preacher is naïve about the resistance of the will to rational instruction and persuasion. Music has always been central to Christian ministry, and this is for good reason

A third technology of the heart is what we might call *creating spaces for emotional encounter with God*. Perhaps the most common form of this in the contemporary church is the one honed over many years in charismatic and Pentecostal worship practice: a period of emotionally engaging music and preaching followed by an open-ended liturgical space that allows for individuals to engage in contemplation of their lives, or of the content of a sermon, or of some specific situation of deep

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[32] Theologically speaking, the fact that we can conciously make use of 'technologies' or techniques for effective Christian transformation does not mean that the Holy Spirit is not still the true agent of any transformation that actually occurs. But this is a topic for a different essay.

existential concern, as well as to seek prayer from other members of the congregation. One does not have to be a charismatic to see the essential emotional wisdom of such practices from an Augustinian perspective. The heart has its own timings and rhythms, and contemplation benefits from not being rushed or forced. At the same time, it is also possible to create such spaces in more formal liturgical contexts – indeed the best liturgies have always included various kinds of contemplative space for the work of the Holy Spirit. For example, as I have argued elsewhere, the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer* is a powerful tool for facilitating emotionally meaningful encounter with God and with the Good News, though in a substantially more subtle and understated form than we might find in a contemporary service's 'ministry time'.[33]

A fourth technology of the heart for engaging with fallen wills is more general, but no less important: *fostering sociality and community*. As creatures of love, beloved of God and commanded above all things to love one another, we are made to be with one another, and this is why God's grace is much more likely to be experienced in a community than alone. It is also why, like Janet Dempster, stubborn and intransigent hearts only begin to be open to divine truth when they experience God's love for them through the intermediary of a loving human being. Describing the dynamics of Mr Tryan's successful ministry to Janet Dempster, George Eliot makes the point as eloquently as it has ever been made:

> Blessed influence of one true loving human soul on another! Not calculable by algebra, not deducible by logic, but mysterious, effectual, mighty as the hidden process by which the tiny seed is quickened, and bursts forth into tall stem and broad leaf, and glowing tasselled flower. Ideas are often poor ghosts; our sun-filled eyes cannot discern them; they pass athwart us in thin vapour, and cannot make themselves felt. But sometimes they are made flesh; they breathe upon us with warm breath, they touch us with soft responsive hands, they look at us with sad sincere eyes, and speak to us in appealing tones; they are clothed in a living human soul, with all its conflicts, its faith, and its love. Then their presence is a power, then they shake us like a passion, and we are drawn after them with gentle compulsion, as flame is drawn to flame.[34]

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[33] See note 28 above.

[34] Eliot, *Janet's Repentance,* p. 236. The same principle is at work paradigmatically in the Incarnation. See e.g., Athanasius, *On the Incarnation of the Word* 13.

Communal life in which a person feels seen, loved, and no longer alone is perhaps the most powerful technology of the heart of all.

Conclusion

At the start of this paper I described two common 'theories of change' in Christian ministry, which I called the 'sacramental approach' and the 'Christian information approach'. I then made the case that any good theory of change needs to take account of the fallen character of the will, and described what it might look like to do this. How does this 'Augustinian' perspective relate to the other approaches? I believe it can be incorporated into a number of different styles of ministry, though it does perhaps have more immediate affinities with some than with others. In relation to the sacramental approach, we might point out that this method is in many ways consistent with the Augustinian outlook, in that it assumes that the will itself needs help from divine grace (above all, the infusion of grace in the soul in the form of what is traditionally called 'the habit of charity') before any transformation can happen. What the sacramental approach perhaps need to be on guard for, however, is any assumption that the will for the Christian is as a result *fully* healed – that as far as divine grace is concerned it ever ceases to be 'the patient on the operating table'. Technologies of the heart remain vital for ministry after baptism.[35]

The 'Christian information' approach is perhaps less immediately consistent with traditional Christian belief in the fallen character will. At best, it assumes a robust account of 'regenerate reason' – the belief that our rational faculties have been healed following receipt of the Holy Spirit to such a degree that the primary method of ongoing healing and sanctification does indeed become the conveying of information to the will – that Augustine himself never assumed, and would have found pastorally naïve. At worst, it can function as a kind of baptized Pelagianism – not in the general sense of affirming justification by works, but in the specific historical sense of assuming that knowledge of God's law is enough to bring about the sanctification of the soul.

But it would be wrong to say that an Augustinian understanding of divine transformation is one in which knowledge of God and God's Word plays no role. As Augustine himself pointed out many times, even if love and desire are the central engine of human behavior – for Augustine, sin is nothing more than love gone wrong, and righteousness is simply rightly ordered love – knowledge is still

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[35] See Zahl, *The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience*, pp. 112-16 and 225-31.

necessary for the Christian, because we cannot love things about which we have no knowledge. As Augustine famously puts it in *de Trinitate*, 'But who can one love what one does not know?'[36] This is why although classical accounts of divine transformation do not deny the importance of knowledge, they always view any knowledge that is of value as significant only insofar as it is ordered to love. In other words, knowledge can be the handmaiden of will in its task of loving God, but never its master or its primary engine.[37]

Indeed, from one perspective, the power of technologies of the heart lies precisely in their ability to foster circumstances and environments in which knowledge of God can be successfully communicated to a fallen will. What the Augustinian perspective does is to help us avoid operative theological anthropologies that are naïve or that do not take adequate account of original sin and its effects on the will. Divine transformation is the transformation by grace, through the Holy Spirit, of fallen creatures whose wills no longer function the way they were created to. Ministries that take this longstanding theological insight seriously will understand that the challenges a Christian faces before God's call to be transformed are deep and formidable, and cannot be solved either through knowledge transfer or direct appeal to willpower. What is needed is a transformation of the heart.

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[36] Augustine, *de Trin.* 8.6 (ET: WSA I/5, p. 246). In *de Trinitate*, the case in question is love for a God who is not known.

[37] As Anselm puts it, 'it is certain that the rational nature was made for the purpose of loving and choosing the supreme Good above all things' (Anselm, *Cur Deus Homo* II.1 (ET: Anselm, *Basic Writings*, ed. and trans. Thomas Williams (Indianapolis, IN : Hackett Publishing Company, 2007), p. 290). The same idea is at work in Aquinas' claim that 'loving God … is a higher activity than knowing him' (Aquinas *Summa Theologiae* 2a2ae.27.4; ET: St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, vol. 34: *Charity* (2a2ae.23-33), trans. R.J. Batten (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 173). On this theme, see Simeon Zahl, 'Love, Knowledge, and Intellectual Disability: On the Catholicity of the *Imago Dei*' (from a forthcoming Mohr Siebeck volume on *Creation and Catholicity*).