

The Life and Teaching of Ezekiel: A Prophetic Model for Pastoral Theology in the Thai Context

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Abstract

This article is a recommendation for a model for Thai pastoral care that is derived from the study of the watchman model found in Ezekiel 3:16–21. The article is based on the author’s dissertation under the supervision of Dr Bill Domeris. There are three main parts in this article: exploring the current insufficient model for Thai pastoral care, the study of the biblical foundation in the watchman metaphor of Ezekiel, and the pastoral care model from the biblical foundation. Under the exploration of the current insufficient model for pastoral care in Thailand, the section conducts a review of scholarship and provides the interview results from selected Thai members. The next section focuses on Ezekiel’s appointment as a watchman of Israel (Ezek 3:16–21) where the role, identity, and function of the watchman are identified. The last section is an integration of the watchman motif, clinical pastoral education, and the Thai value clusters. As the result, the Thai pastoral care model is recommended in three phases: discovering the role of the carer, exploring the identity of the caregiver, and offering the

care. The model's goal is for an increase of the level of commitment among Thai church members.

Keywords

Thai Christianity, Thai pastoral care model, watchman metaphor, Ezekiel

1. Introduction

A new model of Thai pastoral care is greatly needed. Thai pastors are expected to become superheroes in their ministries. The minister juggles the responsibilities of administrating the church, preaching, performing church ordinances, evangelizing the gospel, converting people, visiting members, as well as giving counselling. This overwhelming number of tasks causes the pastor to provide insufficient care for his/her own sheep (Persons 1995, 71–72). In a survey done by the National Statistical Office of Thailand (NSO) (2015, 30), the commitment of Thai Christians in the past three years has decreased by two percent. The statistical numbers reflect the insufficient pastoral care offered to the members and suggests a need for a new comprehensive role and function for ministers in Thailand.

This article is a recommendation for a model for Thai pastoral care that is derived from the study of the life and teaching of Ezekiel. The study begins with the exploration of the need for a more comprehensive Thai pastoral care model through literature surveys and interviews. This is followed by the biblical foundation of this study. This section focuses on the life and teaching of Ezekiel, and the exegesis of Ezekiel's appointment as a watchman of Israel. The study divides his life and teaching into three dimensions: identity, role, and function. The last section will recommend a new model for Thai pastoral care, based on the life and teaching of Ezekiel,

within clinical pastoral education and Thai culture. The model will involve understanding the pastoral role, self-discovery, and performing the pastoral task.

2. Hearing the Insufficient pastoral care model in Thailand

To determine the degree of insufficiency of the present pastoral care model in Thailand, it is necessary to hear voices from the field. These will include Thai and foreign experts' views on the present theoretical framework in the Thai context and the voice of Thai churches.

2.1 The voice among literary scholars

Since the 1980s, churches in Thailand have put their efforts into establishing the Christian population in Thailand. Thai churches had increased their focus toward targeted evangelism such as church planting and other methods of reaching people (Bowdoin 2013). Additionally, scholars spent their time studying the meaning of different doctrinal teachings of Buddhism and presenting the Christian gospel in the best understanding of the Buddhist mind (Boonyakiat 2009). In terms of discovering more effective communication of the gospel, many Thai missiologists had found Komin's empirical research (1990) helpful toward their understating of Thai values and clusters in order to connect and reach the heart of Thai people (Mejudhon 1997). Some experts who studied the deeper understanding of Thai cultural ritual and social issues, contextualized it for communicating the gospel (Jaisaodee 2013). At the same time, Thai churches tried to provide a comprehensive method of learning as a way of training the ministers and lay leaders with the aim of effectiveness in ministry (Sawngwichai 1998). Their investment paid off when the Christian population in Thailand

reached 1.1 percent of the population (NSO 2015, 4). Despite the success of church growth, there are minimal discussions regarding the role and function of Thai ministers with regard to pastoral care; especially in reflection upon the faithfulness and commitment of Thai Christians.

2.2 The voice among the Thai churches

In addition to the literature review, qualitative interviews were conducted as part of exploring the understanding of the real situation with regard to the role and function of the pastor in Thailand. There were three groups of participants: Thai Christian scholars, Thai Christian ministers, and Thai Christian church members. All thirty participants were randomly selected from the four Protestant Christian organizations officially certified by the Department of Religious Affairs and the Ministry of Culture of Thailand: The Church of Christ in Thailand (CCT), The Evangelical Fellowship in Thailand (EFT), The Thailand Baptist Church Association (TBCA), and the Seventh-day Adventist Church Foundation (SDA). The interview results are integrated into the Thai model of pastoral care.

The interview results suggested nine inputs relating to the need for a comprehensive model of pastoral care in the Thai context: (1) the need for a clearer understanding of the role and function of Thai ministers, (2) the need for a biblical model that provides a comprehensive view of pastoral care in the Thai context, in addition to the shepherd model, (3) the need for a contextual method of care training, (4) the need for an understanding of personal identity among ministers, (5) the need to develop a pastoral care model from the biblical prophet Ezekiel, (6) the need for people skills training, (7) the need for ministers to fulfil the primary task of teaching the Bible, (8) the need for a biblical example that directs pastors to reflect on their understanding of his/her role and function in order to provide effective

pastoral care, and (9) the need for a properly structured program of field training in necessary skills, including building personal relationships with church members.

3. Understanding the Watchman Metaphor in Ezekiel

The watchman metaphor in Ezekiel provides a comprehensive model for Thai pastoral care. The study employs the exegetical method, mainly in Ezekiel 3:16–21, where we discover the role, identity, and function of the watchman.

3.1 The role of the watchman

The best way of understanding the watchman is first to understand his role in the ministry. Who is a watchman and what does he do? Ezekiel's ministry began by receiving a clear commission to be a watchman, mainly recorded in 3:17 (repeated in chapter 33) "Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel. Whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me" (ESV). The general understanding of "watchman" is derived from the Hebrew word, *הַצִּי* which conveys the meaning of "watch out over or pay attention to" (Stein 2003, 431). The figure of a watchman is borrowed from real positions in everyday life. The first watchman picture was taken from a city employee. The city watchman is appointed to look out from some high vantage point to scour the landscape. His responsibility is to give warning to his fellow citizens of an imminent attack or danger. The second watchman figure was from a sentry in the military charged with the defense of the city. Block (1997, 144) explains the sentries on duty as military personnel who were stationed on the lookout and charged with paying careful attention to the enemy movement. With both contexts, the responsibilities were the same: (1) observe the

surrounding area, and (2) give warning of important incidents. There were two descriptions of the biblical watchman's responsibilities which provide the framework for his job, namely, to hear (שמע) the word from God and to warn (זהר) ; people). The watchman was responsible for receiving and delivering God's message in order to warn his audience of the coming divine punishment (Tiemeyer 2005, 381; Wright 2001, 66).

3.2 The identity of the watchman

Reflecting upon the watchman role, Ezekiel received his commission at the age of 30 near the Chebar canal, five years after resettlement in Babylon, as recorded in 1:3, "The word of the Lord came to Ezekiel the priest, the son of Buzi, in the land of Chaldeans by the Chebar canal and the hand of the Lord was upon him there" (ESV). The prophet Ezekiel was a son of Buzi. He was married, and his wife died not long after he was called into a watchman ministry (Ezek 24:15–27). There was no record of him having any children. Blenskinsopp (2012, 16) further explains Ezekiel's life as a part of the Zadokite priest clan, which he was trained in throughout childhood and youth and into his young adult years. Betts (2002, 25–31) makes a distinct note that the education of the priest would include the general responsibilities of overseeing the sanctuary, governing through assisting the leader and judicial duty, and becoming a spokesperson for Yahweh. At the same time, the young priest was trained to carry the teaching responsibility: teaching of the Torah through reading, explaining, and applying the law, and making judgments based upon the law and modelling the law through living (Betts 2002, 32–63).

Growing up in such an elite level of the society, Ezekiel was well known and respected by the community. During the second exile to Babylon, the young priest was part of the deportation with King Jehoiachin

(Ezek 1:1–2). Resettling in the Chebar canal community where he lived, Ezekiel was no longer serving as a priest trainee due to the lack of a temple. However, he was still recognized as a man of God. There were at least three incidents where the elders visited the prophet in his home for consultation (Ezek 8, 14, 20). As a person, Ezekiel was a part of the community, trained as a priest and was married. During a time of hardship, the priest trainee left Jerusalem with the people during the second deportation and lived among the exiled people.

3.3 The function of the watchman

In comprehending the function of a watchman in terms of hearing (שמע) the word from God and warning (זהר) people, Ezekiel was intended to fulfill two responsibilities. The first responsibility was to hear the message from God's mouth (ושמעת מפי דבר). The watchman-prophet would listen to the message, having identified the source, and make sense of the message prior to delivery, being aware of what is happening and especially what is coming in future (Stuart 1989, 47). The biblical text expressed that the source of Ezekiel's message was God's mouth (Ezek 3:17b). There was no involvement of the prophet in terms of producing the message, interpretation of the message, or influencing the possible outcome. Stuart (1989, 47) further elaborates upon the lack of Ezekiel's creative involvement in terms of the authenticity toward the listener as a watchman passes on unchanged what he hears and learns. So that his own hearer can know that his message comes directly from God.

The second responsibility of the watchman was to warn while transmitting the message to them. The detailed explanation of the warning is found in Ezekiel 3:18–21. The passage depicts two groups of people to whom the watchman needed to provide the message, the wicked and the

righteous. In comparison to both terms, Block (1997, 144) notes that the wicked (עשׂר) is a term that is widely used in the OT to denote wicked, criminal and villainous. He further explains that the righteous (צדק) represents judicial court terminology, relating specifically to conformity to established norms, which for Israel were defined in the stipulations of Yahweh's covenant (Block 1997, 145). In terms of fulfilment of the responsibility, the prophet had a great decision to make. Once the watchman hears the message from God and chooses "not to warn," the outcome is similar for both recipients. The message recipients, wicked or righteous, died without hearing the message of warning. The neglect of the watchman's duty, by ignoring his responsibility to deliver the message placed blame on the watchman for the death of the people, making him guilty of murder (Block 1997, 146). Greenberg (1983, 88) describes the outcome as the prophet forfeiting his life. Yet, if the watchman chooses to deliver the message to the audiences, wicked and righteous, then the watchman has fulfilled his responsibility. Zimmerli (1979, 146) adds that the watchman will not be accountable for the iniquities of the recipients and the process is completed.

4. Thai Pastoral Care Model According to the Watchman Metaphor

In this study, a pastoral model has been derived from the foundational work of life and teaching of Ezekiel. The exegetical work in Ezekiel highlights three components that allow for reflection on the role, identity, and function of a minister in Thailand. The model is a process that contains three phases: phase one—discovering the role of the caregiver, phase two—exploring the identity of the caregiver, and phase three—delivering the care. Each phase of the process will interact with the recommendation of Thai Christian scholars with an integration of the understanding of Thai value clusters.

4.1 Discovering the role of the caregiver

Phase one, discovering the role of the caregiver, aims to accomplish the role regarding the presence of a Thai pastor. Role presence means to be able to understand the role for which one is commissioned, what one is called to do. The foundation of this phase is derived from the definition of the role of a watchman. As Ezekiel was commissioned as a watchman to warn the people about God, the pastor is commissioned to offer care to people on behalf of God. Commissioning is seen as an appointment from God, instituted and fully authorized by him for a person to be in a pastoral ministry. The commission of care covers a range of responsibility, from institutional duties (preaching, offering the Eucharist, and so on) to professional specialization (teaching the Bible, pastoral care). It is also understood in a wider sense that the calling is part of commissioning. At the same time, the commission provides a specific sense of the responsibility of a minister.

Some of the interviewees recommended that pastoral care skills be taught to the Thai ministers. Pastoral care is a special set of skills focusing on listening, being present, and journeying with the members. These skills would encourage the clergy better to understand, sympathize, empathize, and identify the needs of their church's members. The Thai ministers would be able to receive such training through the clinical pastoral education. There is currently a great need in Thailand for such training. In addition, the article suggested an adapted program from clinical pastoral education called clinical pastoral care which is the process of using feedback to improve the congruence and authenticity of one's spiritual caregiving relationship, which is to be added into Thai theological seminaries' curriculum. At the same time, it could be offered as part of the ministerial training. However, the contextual adjustment may be applied to people in the community

or students at an education institution. The training would equip pastors to focus on the role of the biblical watchman to provide pastoral care for church members. With such a focus, the percentage of faithfulness of Thai Christians would increase as well.

4.2 Exploring the identity of the caregiver

Phase two, exploring the identity of the caregiver, aims to achieve self-presence for the Thai minister. Self-presence is understood as the process of awareness; the minister is able to become aware of his/her life in the past which shapes their present situation. Learning about self refers to the process of reflection about one's personal life which involves learning about one's historical context; the value cluster of the society one lives in, and one's immediate context; the family values and the education one received, and the operational context; and the core of a person that guides their thoughts process toward action.

The minister's historical context is taught through a questionnaire on the value cluster in society. The questions are to help the minister to get acquainted with who he/she is through personal reflection and interaction with academic research. The minister's immediate context is a questionnaire on the value cluster in the family and training. The questions will help the Thai minister to experience the new perspectives through understanding his/her home, family value, and the driving force of his/her life. The minister's operational context is a questionnaire on the value cluster in decision making. The operational context refers to the core of one's being in terms of thought process as well as action. It is also known as the spiritual dimension. This article has chosen the least complicated source, from Dennis Kenny's *Promise to the Soul* (2002). Kenny (2002, 52) describes the core of human beings as divided into three dynamics. First, we

have the “wanting dynamic” which is the person who carries a life value of success and yearns for recognition. Next, the “giving dynamic” is identified in a person who would feel satisfied when their service is offered to others. And last, the “searching dynamic” is a person who avoids commitment.

4.3 Offering care

The last phase in the process is the offering of care. The offering of care refers to the completion of a watchman’s task in delivering the message to people. With the importance of the task, the methodology aims to accomplish the task under the presence of a Thai pastor, namely, the ability to fulfill the pastoral function by offering verbal and non-verbal care. As part of delivering the message, the minister is required to establish the connection and approach the members at their level of energy and be able to hear and express empathy for the situation they are in. In Thai cultural values, “face” is the first obstacle to connection. The minister should avoid an approach that might bring negative connection with the client including straightforward, negative performance feedback, strong criticism or face-to-face confrontation (Mejudhon 1997, 337). A good establishing of the connection would involve an appropriate tone of voice and choice of words. In addition, the connection could be established as well through action. The objective of the connection may be plainly understood as rewiring the thought from clergy to a family member to create confidence and establish the group in which both are walking. The debt of relationship determines the degree of success, because deep relationship bonding brings about acceptance of both the messenger and the message (Mejudhon 1997, 344).

Once connection is established, the goal of the minister to allow the member to experience God’s grace through the process of providing

structured care planning with information discovered in the journey. The structured care planning is organized into five recommended steps:

1. **The caregiver mindset—the non-fixed motive.** The non-fixed motive means offering an opportunity for the member to receive grace. The clergy cannot fix the recipient of care's situation; his/her job is to offer an opportunity for the member to receive grace.
2. **Learning the story.** It is the conversation where the pastor is listening and journeying through the life of the member in order to understand the life situation, convey empathy, and gather the necessary signs that indicate the need for care. The journey would begin with active listening skills and asking proper questions, utilizing open-ended questions, verification, affirmation, and confrontation.
3. **Identifying the needs.** As the pastor journeys with the members, the recipient of care will give specific information that disturbs his/her well-being; it could range from a common disappointment to complex mental illness or demon possession.
4. **Experiencing the care.** The caregiver discusses a possible path that will lead to an outcome for the recipient of care. The clergy needs to be aware of his/her role as assisting the client to recognize the problem and how he/she could deal with it. The pastor needs to explore the various resources that the member already has and how he/she could discover more resources for the situation which includes referral to the professional.
5. **Experiencing God's grace.** The focus is to affirm the recipient of care through ritual, such as prayer, reciting Bible texts, or any ritual in accordance with the context of the Christian denomination. Through affirming with the ritual, the member will recognize the presence of

God in the care he/she received and witnessed by the minister. The structured plan is blessed and serves as a mean of grace, and finds hope in God's grace.

The outcome may not reach the last step due to the open opportunity for the member to reflect upon the journey of care. The care progress may stop at any time based on the decision of the recipient of care. At least the person will have received an opportunity to reflect upon the situation. The work of the minister is done on such occasion; however, he/she would continue to visit at another time as part of the pastoral duty.

5. Conclusion

This article provided a model for Thai pastoral care from the watchman metaphor in Ezekiel. The investigation began with an exploration of the insufficient Thai pastoral care model via a review of literature and qualitative interviews. Next, the study provided the biblical foundation from the study of the watchman metaphor found in Ezekiel 3:16–21 with regard to the watchman's role, identity, and function. Within the biblical model, the last section suggested a model for Thai pastoral care. The model consisted of three phases: discovering the role of the carer, exploring the identity of the caregiver, and offering of the care. With hope, the model holds for its goal for the incremental increase of the level of faithfulness among Thai church members.

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