

Shepherding Goats: The Paradox of the U.S. Army Chaplain Corps

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Preface

I have written and published this document for the sole purpose of making chaplains think about how they carry out their ministry. I have in mind here Christian chaplains because that is what I am. I do not write to condemn any one individual chaplain, but to perhaps reform the chaplain corps as a system, for somewhere along the way, we have lost our calling and replaced it with a career. We have decided that success, as defined by the military, is more important than faithfulness as defined by our God, His Word, and His church. This is the main point of this entire document (fleshed out in the pages that follow): The Army chaplain corps was initially created in order to provide for the free exercise of religion of our soldiers. To help meet that need, ordained clergy were brought into the service to minister to soldiers according to the doctrines of their – the chaplain's – church (perform) and to allow others to worship according theirs (or provide). The Army chain of command, however, has grown to see the chaplain as a means toward better accomplishment of the mission. The chaplain corps realized that they might begin to be marginalized unless they could show that they are somehow relevant to the Army's mission. So, instead of resisting, the chaplain corps acquiesced and decided to make itself relevant in the eyes of the chain of command. In so doing, the chaplain corps has become a tool of a religiously pluralistic society bent on not offending anyone and making everyone feel better about themselves.

Before continuing, perhaps I ought to tell you a little about myself. I grew up in a Christian home in a Christian church. My parents were missionaries and my father a pastor. I have been a Christian from a very young age. I have spent my entire adult life in the Army (about 14 years now). I enlisted in the Army Reserves at the age of seventeen, fresh out of high school. I was on active Army Reserve status as a Carpentry/Masonry Specialist (51B) for the four years which followed during college. Simultaneously, I participated in R.O.T.C. Upon graduation from college and completion of R.O.T.C., I was commissioned a Regular Army Officer in the Infantry. I was part of the branch-detail program, so I spent 2 ½ years as an infantry officer and then 2 years as a quartermaster officer. At this point, I resigned my commission and attended seminary. For those three years in seminary, I was in the Inactive Ready Reserve as a Chaplain Candidate and spent my summers training or serving in that capacity. Upon graduation from seminary, I spent a year as an associate pastor of a non-denominational church. After one year in the pastorate, I was commissioned a chaplain, back on Active Duty again. This was in November 2000.

My reason for telling you this is to say that I am not new to the Church or the Army. I love both. Yes, they have their problems, but as organizations go, they have their purposes. One is God's divine purpose of furthering His kingdom. The other is the government's purpose of furthering

the freedoms of its people. God may ordain both, but only one was instituted by Christ and has eternal purposes. In seeking to be a hybrid of these two organizations, the Army chaplain corps has not found the benefits of heterosis (the whole is greater than the sum of the parts), but rather has taken the worst of both (the whole is less than the sum of the parts).

Introduction

I grew up on a farm. It was a small family farm with just about every kind of animal that you could imagine (or might not even imagine, but is useful for food). Because of our limited space, we would pasture the sheep and the goats in the same field. It worked out OK, but there were some very interesting things that occurred due to the commingling of two very different species. I learned that there is definitely a difference between sheep and goats.

Sheep are placid animals, they flock together for security, they come when you call them; they don't try to break out of the fences. Yes, they are not too bright, but they are good creatures, and pretty easy to take care of. Goats, however, are another deal altogether. I can remember throwing the grain down in the trough for the nightly feeding. The sheep would push in side by side and begin to eat. The goats would jump on top of the sheep, walk on their backs, and steal food from between the sheep's heads. If you turned your back on sheep, they would come up and nuzzle at your knees. Goats would rear up on their hind legs and try to implant their horns on your backside. Goats were always doing dumb things, getting themselves in trouble. Often, at feeding time it was not uncommon to hear a braying from one of the fences. Sure enough, there would be a goat with his head stuck between the wire mesh. He had pushed his head through, but he couldn't get it back. We had one goat, a buck, which continually jumped the fence or found a way through. He'd be out on the road dodging cars, trying to implant his horns into their grill. So, we thought we might try to slow him down, keep him from jumping fences, so we tied a cinder block to an eight foot chain, and tied the other end around his neck thinking that this would at least slow him down. That night, we heard bleating from the fence, and there he was outside the fence with the cinder block still inside the fence (apparently the buck had learned the art of the standing vertical jump).

Why do I mention all this? Well, as pastors, ordained ministers, we are called to shepherd sheep. I learned at a young age, that it is impossible to shepherd goats. It can't be done. Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd, and I know My own and My own know Me" (John 10:14). There is an established bond between the shepherd and the sheep; no bond exists between the shepherd and the goats. In fact, the goats like to do their own thing and in the end, they will be separated from the sheep and "go away into eternal punishment" (Matthew 25:46). Therefore, as pastors, or shepherds, we serve one Shepherd, seeking to care for sheep that are of the same fold. Furthermore, as shepherds commissioned by the Good Shepherd, pastors are called to tend and shepherd His sheep (John 21:15-17), to protect them, guarding the true doctrines of the Church, exhorting our sheep and refuting the goats (Titus 1:9).

I submit that the Army chaplain corps in all its pluralistic glory is the antithesis to this calling. It contradicts every Christian ordinate's vow. Pastors are ordained to guard objective truth and protect their people from heresy; chaplains are commissioned to guard pluralism and protect people from objective truth. The chaplain is to plan, implement, and execute his commander's

religious support plan. In order to do this, the chaplain is bound by regulation to promote and encourage each individual in his own belief system. The fold is not defined by the shepherd, but by the sheep, or rather in most instances, by the goats. For that is exactly what the military chaplain corps is all about, seeking to do that which is impossible: shepherding goats. As I already stated, you can't shepherd goats. God can change the goats into sheep, and then you can shepherd them, but you can only shepherd sheep.

This idea of God changing goats into sheep is a good one: our part in it is called evangelism or missionary work. The souls of men are converted through the preaching of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This is a good thing, a noble calling. Some might even say, "Well, a chaplain may not be pastor, but he is definitely a missionary." A Christian missionary is one who, like Philip, preaches the good news about the Kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ (Acts 8:12). In the military, the chaplain's role is two-fold: minister to the personnel of the unit and facilitate the 'free-exercise' rights of all personnel, regardless of religious affiliation of either the chaplain or the unit member (AR 165-1, 4-4, b). In addition (and less formally enforced), the chaplain is not encouraged to be the best minister of his particular faith group, as would be the case in a true pluralistic society. Rather, he is encouraged to 'be generic' in the public forum, and only speak the specific tenets of his faith to people of his own faith. That's not being a pastor or a missionary; that's being schizophrenic.

Also, the Great Commission of any missionary is to make disciples, by baptizing and teaching (Matthew 28:19-20), thereby growing Christ's Church. The chaplain may baptize and he may aid in the growth of the chapel ministry on a post, but this does not make him a missionary fulfilling the Great Commission. The Army chapel is the not 'the', or even 'a' Church. The chaplain operates in a work place as a lone ranger for the gospel. Even if he gets away with faithfully proclaiming the Gospel, he certainly won't be planting or growing any churches, any more than any other Christian in the military might.

Rather than doing the work of the pastor (or missionary) that his church has called him to do in a military environment, the nature of the chaplain's role, in practice, is to boost morale and provide diversions for soldiers so they feel good about themselves. The highest good of the chaplain is for his soldiers to feel good about themselves. Goats aren't supposed to feel good about themselves; goats are supposed to envy the sheep who have a Good Shepherd. This is a topic that I will take up later under counseling in the military environment, but for now, suffice it to say that because the highest good that a chaplain is expected to do is to increase morale in his soldiers, then his time is consumed with innovating, planning, and executing events which ought to be the function of the Morale, Welfare, and Recreations (MWR) department. Trips to amusement parks or climbing walls may be good for morale or even good training, but they are not the calling of a minister, no matter how you dress it up in religious language.

One last note concerning the military chaplain corps as the antithesis to the work of the pastor: because a chaplain's usefulness is measured by success, rather than by his faithfulness (and that by his military chain of command), he must continually try to find ways to justify his existence in ways that his superiors will understand. In other words, if the chaplain's accomplishments do not aid in the accomplishment of the military mission, then they are dismissed. What's a chaplain to do? In order to maintain his viability in the eyes of his commander, he has to show that what

he is doing makes the soldier feel better about himself and thus is more effective at completing his mission. And we are right back to the problem of trying to make goats feel good about themselves.

Some may think that I am making this stuff up (the stuff about how the chaplain must operate in a military environment). However, I continue to hear from my chaplain peers that they dare not speak about Christ in a public format (in fact, I have been given this direct order myself by a senior chaplain). The idea is proposed that chaplains must learn to view themselves in two ways: minister and chaplain. The trick is to know when to wear which hat. Bologna! That's how an abused child learns to cope with circumstances he cannot control, he creates one personality that receives the abuse, and lives the rest of his life through another [Over here, I will be a chaplain and only talk about faith, spirituality, god, the spirit, and the lord; but, over here, I will be a Christian and talk about sin, forgiveness, the Gospel, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit].

According to the Westminster Larger Catechism, question #159 asks, "How is the word of God to be preached by those that are called thereunto? Answer: They that are called to labour in the ministry of the word, are to preach sound doctrine, diligently, in season and out of season; plainly, not in the enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit, and of power; faithfully, making known the whole counsel of God; wisely, applying themselves to the necessities and capacities of the hearers; zealously, with fervent love to God and the souls of his people; sincerely, aiming at his glory, and their conversion, edification, and salvation."

The Ministry of the Army Chaplain

Still, you might say, there are a lot of good things that a chaplain may do, and still remain faithful to his ordination vows. While this may be true on paper – and I am not willing to admit that it is – it is definitely not true in practice. With that in mind, I would like to proceed with a discussion on a number of different aspects of what an Army chaplain does, and how the chaplain corps system actually works against the work of the chaplain as minister.

Counseling

When I re-entered the Army as a chaplain, I assumed that I would be doing more counseling than preaching or teaching. In fact, I looked forward to learning and growing in the role of a counselor. So, as soon as it was made available, I received the training through the Family Life Center on Fort Bragg for counseling called the Family Ministry Training Program. I looked forward to learning the art of counseling from other chaplains with experience and knowledge.

What I was exposed to was disheartening to say the least. It seems that the Army Family Life chaplains have swallowed a certain program – hook, line, and sinker. This program of counseling is called Solution-Focused Brief Therapy. It operates under the assumption that the counselee (or client) is the expert. My teachers proclaimed with a proud lilt in their collective voices, "Gone are the days when the counselor is the expert. You must learn the art of not knowing. You must learn to allow the client to figure out the behavioral modifications that worked in the past, and encourage them to do that again."

In fact, we were told not even to discuss the presenting problem: that just makes things worse. We should only focus on solutions, hence the name. In addition, the Solution-Focused Brief Therapy's 'success' is defined by the client through 'scaling questions,' "On a scale of one to ten, how are things right now?" Then, the counselor proceeds with complimenting the client no matter what the number and follows up with, "How can we raise that number." When the client returns, having tried some form of behavior modification of his own choosing, he is asked the same question. Inevitably, the number is higher and success is achieved. I submit that there is nothing therapeutic going on here, it is known as the Hawthorne Effect: those who are being studied tend to perform better because they know that they are being studied. This form of client self-evaluation serves as a microcosmic example of what occurs in the Army chaplain's work in general. The role of the military chaplain is to defend and support each individual's right to worship and believe what he wishes. That is, except the chaplain's right. He is not allowed to be an 'expert' or an 'authority,' both dirty words in the corps.

Finally, in the realm of Solution-Focused Brief Therapy, there is the 'Miracle Question.' It goes something like this, "If you were to go to bed tonight and while you were sleeping, a miracle happened so that your problem was fixed – gone. When you woke up in the morning, how would you know? How would you act differently? How would others act?" Then, the client is encouraged to take one day during the coming week and pretend that the miracle has occurred, acting as if the problem were cured. The idea is that if the client begins to act like the problem is gone, others will begin to follow, and soon the problem will be gone – solution found! The problem is with this approach is: the reality of sin? Why do we as counselors feel the need to gloss over problems, learn the art of not knowing the answers, and hope for the best? As if the answer to everyone's problems can be found within themselves. That's not therapy, that's humanism. That's applying a band-aide to a sucking chest wound!

While attending a two-day training course at the Family Life Center designed to help chaplains deal with suicidal people, the senior instructor made a surprising statement. We had been discussing the necessity of taking a counselee to a psychiatrist, once we had determined that they were suicidal. This is required as a chaplain, to protect your career. I raised the point that as a pastor, this would not necessarily be a requirement. The trainer, a lieutenant colonel chaplain, responded, "Pastors who are in the preaching ministry, who preach the Gospel from the pulpit, should not and cannot do therapy. They can do pastoral counseling, but they must get the help of a professional expert for therapy." My jaw almost fell on the ground. In other words, the preaching of the Gospel (the announcement of the good news of salvation in the death, resurrection, ascension, and session of Jesus Christ) is irrelevant for people with real problems.

Money (Budgets)

There are two types of budgets upon which an Army chaplain may draw to aid in his ministry. Appropriated Funds (AF) are those moneys which are set apart by congress to be used for 'spiritual ministry' for soldiers. Non-Appropriated Funds (NAF) are those moneys which come from chapel offerings and are denominationally specific. I mention this only to say that the chaplain gets money both from the federal government (tax-payers' money) and from chapel attendees. The really interesting thing is that chaplains typically use this money for what some of us affectionately call 'Barney' programs. These are programs that, like the big purple dinosaur,

distract soldiers from their worries, maybe teach them a good lesson about how to be nice to others, and make them feel good about the big happy family called the Army.

Also, it is a cardinal sin for a chaplain to not spend money that he has sitting in his account. I don't know how many times I've heard, "You have \$2,000 left in your budget that you must use by the first of next month. If you don't spend it, you're going to lose it." So, chaplains scramble to put together a program that will exhaust their budget. Why not let that the money be given to someone else, or returned from whence it came? The budget drives the ministry in the worst of ways, and the chaplain dare not leave money unspent. Otherwise, it might look like he is unnecessary, and the money will go to some training program, or back to the taxpayer. The tail is wagging the dog.

Chaplain Officer Evaluation Reports

As I have noted in Preface above, I have been a commissioned officer in three branches now (Infantry, Quartermaster, and the Chaplain Corps). In no other branch have I seen such an infatuation with the Officer Evaluation Report (OER) system. How many times do we really need someone from the Personnel Office in the Chief's Office to come and give us a briefing about how to get promoted? In other branches, there was (and usually still is) an unwritten rule that you don't talk about your OER with your peers. One of the marks of a professional officer or leader is that he is not 'in it' for self gain. Through training and mentoring, this tradition of selfless service is encouraged and honed.

If any branch in the Army ought to esteem the virtue of selfless service, it should be the Chaplain Corps. Jesus teaches that we should humble ourselves and not seek places of honor (Luke 14:7-11). Yet, it is the chaplains who shamelessly extol their own work so as to esteem themselves in the eyes of their commanders. Chaplains are constantly encouraged to prove their worth to the Army and the chain of command. Programs and quantifiable attendance have become nothing more than means towards creating 'dash-one' comments. ['Dash-one' refers to the OER Support Form, DA Form 67-9-1]. The goal of bringing glory to God and conversion, edification, and salvation to men has been replaced by bringing glory to self and a one-block to the chaplain's OER.

Suicide Awareness

According to AR 165-1 (4-3.e.), "Commanders will detail or assign chaplains only to duties related to their profession. Chaplains may perform unrelated duties in a temporary military emergency. Chaplains may volunteer to participate or cooperate in nonreligious functions that contribute to the welfare of the command. Commanders will not...detail a chaplain as...suicide prevention, or survivor assistance officer." Even though the regulations explicitly states that commanders will not detail or assign chaplains as suicide prevention officers, chaplains continually volunteer for this duty. While this is their right according to the regulation, chaplains would be better served to let the local mental health office do its job by providing the suicide prevention classes for the units.

Chaplains should be trained and experienced in the realm of suicide awareness. They should know how to react and help those struggling with suicide and depression. However, conducting suicide awareness and prevention training for the unit does not fit into the realm of performing or providing for the religious needs of soldiers. Here is the perfect of example of chaplains seeking to make themselves an integral part of the unit by doing something that they were never meant to do. Yes, chaplains may volunteer for and perform this task, should they so desire, but it has become an accepted norm that this is the role of the chaplain. It is not. In the words of AR 165-1, it is not a duty related to the profession of the chaplain. This applies to many other roles that are explicitly listed in paragraph 4-3 of this regulation. It's time for chaplains to read their own regulations.

Social Work

There are a lot of agencies in the Army that do social work: Army Community Service, Social Services, etc. It is interesting to me that the chaplain is always lumped in with these organizations. As a minister of God's Word, I am called to preach and teach His Word. And, yes, as a chaplain, I have accepted the fact that I must also provide for the free exercise of religion for people of other faiths. I don't agree with the other faiths, but this is America, and I don't think any religion ought to be forced on people. What I can't understand is why a lot, if not a majority, of the chaplain's time is spent in doing social work. I mention to my pastor friends some of the things that a chaplain does for soldiers and their families, and they call us 'overpaid social workers.'

Don't get me wrong, I am all for helping people. I think that we should have organizations and people in place to help people – financially and physically. I'm just not convinced that it is the role of the chaplain. It certainly is not the role according to regulation. But, again, in order to justify our existence because you can't quantify Kingdom values on an Officer Evaluation Report (OER), the chaplain corps has taken on the role of social worker. For example, chaplains provide food vouchers at the commissary for soldiers and their families who can't make ends meet. We are the first stop for financial counseling and loan approval from the Army Emergency Relief (AER). We provide a food locker for those who have fallen on hard times. While these are viable services that truly help soldiers, again, I question whether they are truly supposed to be the role of the chaplain.

Chapels

The chapel ministry is not the church. The church is defined as consisting of three elements: (1) The right preaching of the Gospel, (2) The right administration of the sacraments (Baptism and the Lord's Supper), (3) The right administration of church discipline. I borrow this distinction from the Reformers. Let me just say up front that it is my contention that the Army and the Chaplain Corps would be best served by shutting down all of the chapels on post, save one or two that would be for those who are in transition or not able to get off post to the local churches in the community.

Why do we continue a program that is poorly attended and try to make it something that it is not? Because it justifies the existence of the chapel ministry and the chaplain in general. The senior

chaplains want to be equitable in their distribution of responsibilities; therefore they rotate chaplains through a 'preaching schedule' in the chapels. Thus, the attendees (for there is no such thing as membership in a chapel) never know what they are in for from one week to the next. One week you're hearing from a Baptist chaplain, the next from a Methodist chaplain, the next from a Church of God chaplain, Presbyterian chaplain, Church of Christ chaplain, Disciples of Christ chaplain, non-denominational chaplain, etc., etc., etc.

If we were to close down the chapels and send the chaplains downtown to their respective denominational churches a number of benefits would occur. We would not be fooling people into thinking that if they go to chapel, then they are members of a Christian church. The chaplains would maintain their distinctiveness and gain experience and continued development in their own denominations. And, the chaplains would better serve the greater Army and civilian community. It would help to put an end to the syncretism that occurs in the Army chaplain corps between the Christian faith and the Army values.

Syncretism

One of the main reasons that Christians could not join the Roman Army in the early church was not because Christians were pacifists, but because Roman soldiers were expected to adopt the belief system of the Roman religion. Emperor worship was par for the course. Oh, you could be a Christian, but you also had to bow to Caesar. The same thing has occurred today – maybe not in the rank and file, but it is evident in the chaplain corps.

(1) A Religion of the Lowest Common Denominator

Whether it is official doctrine or not, I have been explicitly told that when preaching in a 'General Protestant' (GP) service on post that I should not and could not be denominationally-specific. I could only say those things that are common to all Christian denominations. Also, when speaking or preaching at a Memorial Ceremony, I was commanded by a senior chaplain (a lieutenant colonel) to change my message because it was too 'Christian'. These are two separate events and issues, but they serve as evidence that the chaplain corps is not trying to maintain a freedom 'of' religion, but a freedom 'from' religion. It is not allowed for the chaplain to say anything that someone in the congregation or attending a service would disagree with because they come from a different religious background. However, the constitution gives us freedom to practice religion, not freedom to not be offended.

I have attended prayer breakfasts where chaplains prayed and read Scripture, however the only person to preach the Gospel or even mention Jesus Christ was the guest speaker who happened to be a Korean War veteran who earned the Congressional Medal of Honor. He concluded every vignette from his life with, "Praise and thanks be to God our Father and Jesus Christ our Lord who saved me from my sin." It was a powerful testimony presented by a veteran, encased in chaplain corps pluralistic relativism.

Other chaplains have told me that when they preach in a chapel, they make sure that their message would be one that they would preach in the motor pool to their soldiers. I submit that this kind of thinking has the wrong frame of reference. We should preach in the chapels and in

the motor pool as we would preach in our churches. The chaplain's ministry ought to be defined by His role as shepherd, acting on behalf of the Great Shepherd.

2) The characteristics, roles, and work of Christ are subsumed as military leadership ideals.

This is evident in messages that portray Christ as a man on a mission. He accomplished His mission by dying on the cross for you, now go and be like Christ pushing and striving to accomplish yours. As anecdotal evidence, devotional talks by chaplains usually focus on 'Leadership Principles of Jesus' or how following Biblical principles will make you a more successful soldier. Rarely will you hear a Christian chaplain quote the New Testament. And, if he does, it is devoid of the Gospel. By worldly standards, these are good principles and if applied would serve a leader well. However, as Christians, this ought to cause us to raise our eyebrows – we fail in our mission to proclaim the Gospel, when we give our hearers the wisdom for which they search, rather than the foolishness of Christ crucified (see 1 Corinthians 1:22-31).

3) OT messianic prophecies are viewed as being fulfilled by soldiers.

Old Testament prophecies and the Old Testament in general is applied to the soldiers and to the United States of America. This is evident in the stained-glass windows of the chapels on post. The windows have messianic prophecies concerning the work of Christ and how He sets the captives free. In the window, there are pictures of soldiers in Granada liberating college students. Need I say more?

4) "God helps those who help themselves" has become the theology of the soldier.

Bootstrap theology is alive and well in the chaplain corps. I know that it is alive and well in the Church, but it is almost a cliché in the Army chaplain corps. Whether preaching from the Old Testament or the New, the message is always Nietzschean: the Christian life is one of empowerment; God makes you a Superman, so that you can accomplish great things and be successful in this world. You want to be a good husband? Jesus can make you a great husband. You want to be a successful soldier? Jesus is the answer. Trust in Him, follow His principles of leadership, and someday, you too can be a great leader like Him.

Conclusion

If you have made it thus far, I thank you for sticking with the ramblings of a disappointed chaplain. I have said above that I believe we ought to shut down the chapels on post and send our chaplains into the local churches to minister and become involved with their own denominations in order to maintain their own distinctiveness. I also believe that we ought to just do away with the chaplain corps as a branch, for you don't need an ordained minister to defend the religious rights of soldiers, do social work, and put together MWR programs. The Army could replace the chaplain corps with another branch: Religious Specialists. These officers would receive their commissions just like any other branch, and at their Officer Basic Course, would learn how to meet the logistical needs of all faiths. They would also learn how to be social workers – specializing in meeting the physical needs of soldiers and their families. Finally, they would be the morale officers of the battalion (kind of like the social coordinators) – planning trips and

retreats, handing out candy, etc. Finally, the Army would have what they want – Religious Specialists / Morale Officers, and what occurs in practice already, would match the new doctrine. You may ask, “Who would meet the spiritual needs of the soldiers then?” Why the local pastors of their own churches, of course. And, when soldiers deploy, the Army could contract with denominations to bring in pastors to minister to soldiers (kind of like the USO). I imagine that there are a number of pastors who would volunteer and it would cost the Army very little to do this.

This document will probably make some people mad and others will just pass it off as the ravings of an uptight, hypersensitive man. However, my hope is that some will read this and consider their calling and become a little more discerning in how they fulfill their ordination vows. Alas, I know that my suggestions about doing away with the chapels or the chaplain corps will never come to pass. But maybe, just maybe, some chaplains will take a stand and perform their duties according to their ordination vows and the Army Regulations. I have begun to do so. I have one more year left on my initial term of commitment as a chaplain and I will be getting out in November 2003. Frankly, I am getting out because I don't believe the chaplain corps is worth saving. The Church is of much greater importance and eternal value than the chaplain corps. She is a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, the people of God who have received mercy (1 Peter 2:9-10). May God bless His Church and His ministers as they seek to shepherd His sheep.