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The interplay between the church's pastoral and prophetic mandates in ministerial praxis: A biblical reflection

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The church has historically shaped the moral and socio-political life of societies through its dual vocation of pastoral care and prophetic witness. Yet, in recent decades, this integrated witness has become increasingly fragmented, as different ecclesial traditions have tended to prioritise one mandate over the other. In contexts marked by political repression, economic instability, and social division, such fragmentation has diminished the coherence and credibility of the church's public engagement. This article contends that the disjunction between pastoral and prophetic functions reflects a deeper theological deficiency: the tendency to treat them as separate or even competing callings, rather than as mutually enriching expressions of the church's participation in God's mission. Employing a biblical narrative analysis, the study traces the interplay between confrontation and consolation across key moments in Scripture: from creation and fall, through the Exodus and the prophetic writings, to the ministry of Jesus and the early church. It argues that the prophetic and pastoral mandates are not merely pragmatic ecclesial responses, but theological imperatives grounded in the character of God, who is both just and merciful. The article concludes by proposing normative biblical principles to guide the church's public ministry.

Contribution: This article employs a biblical-theological and literature-based approach. It contributes to practical theology, particularly in the field of public pastoral care, by proposing a theological framework that integrates the prophetic and pastoral mandates in the church's public engagement.

Keywords: prophetic mandate; pastoral care; public theology; biblical theology; redemptive character of God; integrated ministry; prophetic-pastoral integration.

Introduction

The church has historically played a formative role in shaping the socio-political and moral order of societies through its dual vocation of pastoral care and prophetic witness. At various points in history, it has offered healing and consolation to afflicted communities while also exercising a prophetic role by confronting systems of injustice and calling for repentance. These two dimensions – pastoral and prophetic – have traditionally constituted the pillars of the church's public engagement.

In recent decades, however, this integrated witness has become increasingly fragmented. Different church groups have often specialised in one role at the expense of the other. Some maintain that the church's primary responsibility is to provide care and spiritual guidance while avoiding political involvement. Others adopt a more activist stance, viewing the church primarily as a prophetic voice in public discourse. In societies characterised by economic instability, political repression, and social division, this split has weakened both the coherence and credibility of the church's public witness, resulting in pastoral care and prophetic critique being expressed in isolation rather than in tandem.

This fragmentation signals a deeper theological deficiency: a conceptual tendency to treat the prophetic and pastoral mandates as discrete or even competing callings rather than as mutually enriching expressions of the church's participation in God's mission. Scholarly discourse has often reflected this dichotomy. On the one hand, some theologians emphasise the church's vocation to denounce injustice and confront oppressive structures; on the other hand, others underscore the church's ministry of accompaniment, psychosocial support, and moral restoration. While each stream offers valuable insight, they frequently operate in parallel, leaving the theological and

… biblical foundations, that hold these dimensions together as integral aspects of a single divine calling, unexplored.

This tension is not unique to the pastoral–prophetic debate. Similar questions arise in other fields that wrestle with how the church should engage the world. Mission studies provide a clear example, where long-standing discussions continue regarding the relationship between evangelism and diakonia, or between proclamation (*kerygma*) and service (*diakonia*). In debates on evangelism and social action, Jørgensen (2015:7) notes that these roles are often framed as 'two different mandates, the one spiritual and the other social' – a framing that leads different traditions to emphasise one at the expense of the other. Yet this divide is increasingly challenged within mission scholarship. Jørgensen (2015:8–18, 367) argues from Scripture that proclamation and service are dual mandates arising from the same God who sends the church. Accordingly, Dowsett et al. (2015:1) conclude that evangelism and social justice are 'the two blades on a pair of scissors', both essential to the church's identity and ministry. Situating the pastoral–prophetic tension within this broader conversation, demonstrates that the divide is not merely a practical problem, but a recurring theological pattern. It also highlights that both dimensions flow from a single mission grounded in the character of God, rather than from competing mandates.

This article therefore seeks to address this tension by offering a biblical analysis, demonstrating that the prophetic and pastoral mandates are not merely pragmatic ecclesial strategies but theological imperatives, rooted in the character of God, who is both just and merciful. Throughout Scripture, God's actions consistently hold confrontation and consolation together: he exposes sin, demands justice, and calls for repentance, while at the same time offering comfort, healing, and restoration. Therefore, justice and mercy, and truth and compassion do not stand in opposition but function as inseparable qualities of God's redemptive engagement with humanity.

The central research question guiding this inquiry is as follows: How does the biblical narrative present the prophetic and pastoral mandates as unified expressions of God's just and merciful nature within the economy of redemption? To address this question, the article adopts a biblical narrative analysis approach, tracing the interplay between confrontation and consolation across key moments in the scriptural canon: from creation and fall (Gn 1–3), through the Exodus, Judges, Kings, and the prophetic corpus, to the ministry of Jesus and the early church. These narratives are interpreted not as isolated historical episodes, but as theological loci that disclose the character and continuity of God's redemptive mission.

By examining these patterns, the article seeks to articulate normative biblical principles that should guide the church's public ministry. Such a framework challenges the prevailing dichotomy between prophetic witness and pastoral care, proposing their theological integration as interdependent and mutually reinforcing dimensions of faithful ecclesial praxis.

The interpretive framework for the pastoral-prophetic mandate interplay in the Bible

Defining prophetic and pastoral mandates

Pastoral care mandates

Clarifying the church's pastoral care mandate begins with an understanding of pastoral care itself – its nature, purpose, and theological grounding – because the obligations of care are inseparable from what it means to provide care.

Pastoral care, rooted in the tradition of *cura animarum* [care of the soul], refers to the church's intentional, faith-informed response to human suffering, aimed at promoting human flourishing (Magezi 2019:1, 2024b:145; McClure 2012:275). It is theologically grounded in that its motivation, content, and practice derive from core Christian beliefs, values, and convictions, rather than from general human concern, therapeutic models, or a broadly defined spirituality (Magezi 2024b:145).

Traditionally, pastoral care focused on individual spiritual guidance, typically provided by ordained ministers to those seeking comfort or counsel. Contemporary developments, however, have broadened this focus to include communal needs and societal challenges, reflecting the principles of public theology (Louw 2012:119; Pattison 2000:15). This shift marks a movement away from individualistic, intrapsychic models towards a more public and contextually responsive approach (Leslie 2008; Magezi 2024a, 2024b:3; Miller-McLemore 2018:313). Scholars such as Firet (1986:15) and Louw (2019:97) describe this broader vision as a stewardship of God's praxis, whereby God works through pastoral caregivers to bring healing and promote the flourishing of all people. Such flourishing is not limited to individuals but extends to entire communities and to all bearers of God's image.

Accordingly, pastoral care cannot be confined to church walls or to the sphere of private spirituality. It extends into the public domain, engaging with social realities and contributing to communal well-being (Doehring 2015:23; Graham 2009:14; Magezi & Manzanga 2024:4; Magezi & Nanthambwe 2022:6; McClure 2012:275; Mkandla & Dreyer 2020:3–5; Swinton 2007:58). This public dimension is firmly grounded in Christian convictions, including the *imago Dei*, the redemptive mission of Christ, and the church's calling to embody compassion and justice (Louw 2019; Magezi 2024a, 2024b).

Pastoral caregivers are therefore called to engage comprehensively in their ministry, attending to 'all the psycho-physical and psycho-social dimensions (spiritual wholeness)' (Louw 2014:60; Wimberly 2003:19). Drawing on McClure (2012), caregivers may act prophetically, priestly,

pastorally, or as social participants, integrating these roles in response to the needs of the community. This multidimensional approach enables the church to mediate God's shalom in broken contexts through both compassion and challenge. It fosters a practice of pastoral care that is inclusive and transformative, bridging personal care and public advocacy (Magezi 2019:1; Ramsay 2004:4).

Thus, pastoral care is as much a public act as it is a private one. Magezi (2020) captures this public character comprehensively:

> Caring for people from a Christian spiritual perspective whereby (2) the care is provided to people in different public spaces and contexts (3) to address holistic issues affecting people such as spiritual, social, emotional, cultural, economic, political and others (4) to enable them to cope with life meaningfully. (p. 69)

From this understanding of pastoral care flows the concept of pastoral care mandates: the church's obligations and responsibilities to intervene actively in both private and public spheres, promoting holistic well-being, fostering justice, and embodying God's compassion. These mandates call the church to intentional, context-sensitive, and multidimensional engagement in the lives of individuals, communities, and society at large.

Prophetic mandates

In some contemporary contexts, particularly within Pentecostal, charismatic, and African-initiated churches, prophets often emphasise foretelling (the prediction of future events) and the performance of signs and wonders – a phenomenon analysed by Gunda (2012). As Gunda himself demonstrates, however, biblical prophecy in both the Hebrew Bible and the early Christian tradition is far more multifaceted. It includes not only foretelling, but also forth-telling – moral exhortation, calls to covenant faithfulness, teaching, judgement, and social-ethical critique (Davis & Musser 2023). Prophets confronted injustice, idolatry, and corruption, calling leaders and communities to repentance while offering divine perspectives on social and political realities (Yee, Page & Coomber 2016:14–15).

Although some biblical prophecies pointed towards future events, the core task of the prophet, as understood here, was to interpret God's will in ways that shaped communal life. In the New Testament, prophecy functions to edify, exhort, and encourage the church, providing spiritual insight and guidance for faithful living in a complex world (1 Cor 14:3; Eph 4:11–12; Carson 2018).

Building on this understanding, scholars who have examined the church's role in the public sphere conclude that the church's purpose is to embody and proclaim God's truth and justice, thereby serving as a prophetic witness. It is from this form of witness that the church's prophetic mandate arises. The prophetic mandate refers to the church's God-empowered responsibility to interpret the signs of the times and to proclaim God's truth publicly. It involves challenging systems and behaviours that sustain injustice, advocating for human dignity, and calling society to align with God's will (Brueggemann 2018:13; Masengwe 2024:2; Nyiawung 2010:2). Bentley (2013:7) emphasises that this role 'stems first from its belief in God and what it means for people to live with dignity and wholeness', while also insisting on action: 'not only proclamation, but practising what you preach' (p. 5). In practice, the prophetic mandate positions the church as a visible and courageous presence in public life, demonstrating justice, holding power accountable, and offering alternatives to oppressive systems.

Thus, the prophetic mandate complements the pastoral mandate. Drawing on Dowsett et al. (2015:1), the prophetic and pastoral mandate may be described as 'two blades on a pair of scissors', both indispensable to the church's identity and ministry. Where pastoral care attends to the wounded, prophetic witness confronts the sources of that wounding. Together, they constitute a dual engagement in society – an integrated rhythm of care and challenge that embodies God's redemptive presence, upholds human dignity, and promotes justice in both individual lives and the wider community.

Having established what is meant by pastoral and prophetic mandates, it is important to note that, while these categories are helpful for contemporary theology, they do not appear explicitly in the biblical text. Accordingly, in order to examine faithfully the interplay of these mandates in Scripture, this article adopts a function-based approach, focusing on the roles and effects of divine action rather than imposing later conceptual labels.

At the heart of the biblical narrative lies a profound theological assertion: the God of Scripture is both just and compassionate (Frame 2013:111). These two qualities are not competing forces but essential and inseparable aspects of God's character as Bird (2020) also emphasises. The Old Testament consistently portrays divine action as flowing from this unified character, revealing a coherent pattern in which God engages with creation, upholds the covenant, and pursues redemptive purposes (Frame 2013:147). Central to this pattern is the dynamic relationship between justice and mercy – two attributes that function together rather than in opposition. This relationship undergirds what may be described as the prophetic–pastoral mandate: a rhythm of confrontation and care that originates in God's nature and runs throughout the biblical narrative. This theological pattern is neither temporary nor incidental but covenantal and enduring, revealing the very character of God (Da Silva 2019:30).

Through this dynamic, God shepherds his people, confronts injustice, heals the wounded, and ultimately invites all creation to share in his vision of wholeness and flourishing. Accordingly, this article examines both the Old and New Testament in order to address its central objective. What follows is a detailed discussion of how this pattern of confrontation and consolation unfolds across the biblical narrative.

The pastoral-prophetic mandate interplay in the Old Testament

Creation and the fall

The biblical narrative begins with divine initiative: a God who brings creation into existence solely by his word (Kidner 2015). At the climax of this sacred act of creation, God makes humanity in his own image and commissions them to exercise dominion as his stewards over the rest of creation. As Okoye (2025) argues, humanity was thus appointed as 'viceroys of the creator on earth'. God not only entrusted humanity with his righteous rule but also blessed them and provided abundantly for their needs (Gn 1:26–31). The opening section of the biblical story therefore presents God as a compassionate Creator who delights in sharing life with humanity and who cares for their well-being through generous provision.

God planted a garden in which he caused all kinds of trees to grow that were 'pleasing to the eye and good for food' (Gn 2:9; 3:6). He provided water, gold, and a suitable helper for the man, so that his image-bearers might flourish under his care (Gn 2). All of this testifies to God's love, care, and covenantal commitment to humanity.

Embedded within God's generous care for humanity, however, was also a clear moral boundary: the command not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gn 2:16–17). This command expressed not only God's righteous rule over creation, but also humanity's dignity and freedom to enjoy all that God had made within the covenantal order he established. Tragically, Adam and Eve chose autonomy over obedience, prioritising immediate gratification over trust in God's provision. As Magezi and Manzanga (2024:2) observe, 'man chose their way and pursued instant pleasure and gratification over God's way, failing to obey the command that guaranteed their freedom to enjoy all God's creation'.

In the face of this rebellion, God, who is just, could have unleashed destruction, yet instead responds with both confrontation and care. Rather than abandoning humanity to the consequences of sin, he takes the initiative to seek them out. As Genesis 3:9 records, 'But the Lord God called to the man and said to him, "Where are you?"' This is not a question born of ignorance, but a summons towards confession and restoration. Kidner (2015) reinforces this interpretation, viewing Genesis 3:9 as a gracious display of God's compassion. He observes, 'God's first word to fallen man has all the marks of grace. It is a question, since to help him, he must draw rather than drive him out of hiding'. Magezi and Manzanga (2024) similarly note that:

> When sin marred the image of God between God and man in Gen. 3, God publicly looked out for Adam with a restorative aim … The questions framed by God are designed to induce confession. (p. 2)

Even in the midst of profound disappointment, God's posture remains relational and redemptive – a clear display of his compassionate character.

Nevertheless, just as God reveals his mercy, he also enacts his justice. God's compassion does not negate his justice. Because he is just as well as merciful, God confronts humanity's rebellion with decisive judgement (Gn 3:14–19). Humanity is held accountable and subjected to the consequences of sin. Yet even in this confrontation, God's actions remain deeply consoling. He promises the eventual defeat of the serpent in what has often been described as 'the first glimmer of the gospel' (Gn 3:15; Cheek 2021:235; Kidner 2015; Pettus 2014:4–5). Moreover, God clothes Adam and Eve to cover their shame (Gn 3:21) – a further demonstration of his intentional and holistic care. He is attentive to human needs and addresses both immediate and ultimate concerns (Kidner 2015).

This foundational narrative demonstrates and establishes the pattern for the prophetic–pastoral relationship throughout Scripture. God does not choose between confronting sin and caring for sinners; he does both in perfect harmony. His justice does not negate his compassion, nor does his mercy erase accountability. As Assohoto and Ngewa (2006:65) rightly observe, 'His punishment does not exclude mercy, and His mercy does not exclude judgment'. God holds these together in creative tension, not as opposites but as integral aspects of his redemptive character.

Accordingly, if the church is to mirror God's character in the public square, it must also resist the temptation to separate justice from compassion. From the beginning, the God of Scripture engages his people with both moral clarity and relational pursuit – a pattern of confrontation and care that remains essential for faithful ministry in contexts marked by brokenness and blame.

The Exodus narrative as a demonstration of God's care and confrontation

The Exodus narrative exemplifies God's dual character as compassionate caregiver and confrontational liberator, revealing a redemptive work that holds justice and mercy in dynamic tension. God does not merely deliver Israel from Egyptian bondage; he actively dismantles systems of oppression while restoring his covenant people (Ex 3:19–20; 6:6; Dt 5:15; 7:8). The pastoral dimension of God's character is evident from the outset: he hears the cries of Israel, attends to their suffering, and acts decisively to bring relief (Ex 3:7–8). This care is covenantally grounded in God's remembrance of the promises made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob – a relational act of loyal love (*ḥesed*) that compels divine action (Ex 2:24; Alexander 2017; Cole 2015). God's provision continues in the wilderness through manna, water, and guidance, sustaining his people despite their repeated rebellion (Ex 16:11–15; 17:6; Nm 9:21). His pastoral concern is further mediated through human agency, particularly Moses, who intercedes, guides, and leads the people, demonstrating that divine care often operates through relational leadership (Ex 3:10; 32; Fretheim 2010; Hamilton 2011). The establishment of the tabernacle

(Ex 40:34–38) further signifies God's enduring presence, symbolising covenantal guidance, protection, and companionship (Cole 2015).

The Exodus is equally a prophetic narrative, demonstrating that God's care does not preclude confrontation. God commissions Moses to challenge Pharaoh and to deliver a divine indictment against systemic injustice (Ex 5:1; 6:6; 12:12; Fretheim 2010). The plagues and the judgement pronounced upon Egypt's gods exemplify God's decisive engagement with both political and spiritual oppression. The prophetic mandate also addresses Israel itself: the golden calf incident (Ex 32) reveals God's unwavering commitment to justice, even as Moses intercedes and pleads for mercy. This episode illustrates the prophetic–pastoral dialectic in which confronting sin and advocating restoration are inseparable dimensions of covenantal leadership (Brueggemann 2001:115). In this narrative, justice and mercy are neither sequential nor competing but mutually reinforcing aspects of God's redemptive work.

Exodus therefore offers a further illustration of the integrated nature of ministry grounded in God's own character. God's pastoral care and prophetic confrontation are not parallel activities, but complementary expressions of his character: he observes suffering, acts decisively against oppression, sustains his people, and calls them to covenantal faithfulness. Moses embodies this integrated vocation by confronting Pharaoh while shepherding Israel, modelling a ministry that is both prophetic and pastoral. For the church today, particularly in contexts of socio-political fragility, Exodus provides a guiding paradigm: faithful public ministry must engage both the oppressed and the oppressor, combining compassion with courageous confrontation, and thereby reflecting the holistic nature of God's redemptive mission.

God's compassion and confrontation enacted through Israel's judges in the book of Judges

As the biblical narrative moves into the period of the Judges, this divine pattern of compassion and confrontation continues to unfold in Israel's life. The book of Judges portrays a time of moral and political fragmentation, yet it also reveals God's persistent engagement with his covenant people. God's compassionate care and confrontational challenge once again operate together as complementary facets of his redemptive relationship, flowing from the core of his being as one who is both just and merciful, holy and compassionate (Ex 34:6–7).

When Israel entered the promised land – a land intended for rest, provision, and flourishing – they were meant to experience it as the fulfilment of God's compassionate redemption (Soggin 1981:41). This covenantal blessing was to be enjoyed as long as Israel remained faithful to Yahweh (Dt 6:4–9; Jos 24:14–24). The narrative, however, quickly reveals that Israel fell into a tragic cycle of disobedience. The people abandoned the Lord, embraced idolatry, and adopted the corrupt practices of the surrounding nations (Jdg 2:10–13; 3:5–7; Niditch 2011:49). In response, God's prophetic confrontation is activated: he withdraws his protection and allows foreign powers to oppress Israel as an instrument of judgement (Jdg 2:14, 22). As Evans (2017) rightly observes, the narrator presents divine anger as fully warranted by Israel's covenantal unfaithfulness.

Yet even within this confrontation, divine compassion is not suspended. When the people cry out under oppression, God is 'moved to pity by their groaning' (Jdg 2:18). He raises judges – human agents who embody both his compassionate care and his just confrontation. These judges are more than military deliverers; they function as instruments of divine restoration who guide, protect, and reclaim Israel (Arowo 2022:47–49; Magezi & Manzanga 2024:4). In this way, the recurring cycle of rebellion, oppression, repentance, and deliverance becomes a theological rhythm in which prophetic confrontation leads to pastoral restoration, rooted in the unchanging character of a God who is both just and merciful.

The period of the Judges thus underscores the tension at the heart of divine engagement: a holy God who must confront sin, yet a loving shepherd who refuses to abandon his people. As Gillmayr-Bucher (2009:687–702) observes, the judges, although often flawed and reluctant, serve as tangible expressions of God's presence and care amid political and moral chaos. Through them, God continues to shepherd his people publicly, confronting unfaithfulness while extending compassion. This interplay of justice and mercy offers a theological paradigm for the church's public ministry today. In contexts marked by political instability and moral decline, the church must recover this integrated vision of leadership. Authentic public pastoral care requires both prophetic courage to challenge injustice and pastoral compassion to nurture a wounded people. Without both, the church risks losing either its prophetic voice or its pastoral soul.

Israel's monarchy and prophets as a demonstration of the interplay of God's care and confrontation

Israel's transition to a monarchy marked a defining moment in its political and theological development. Although the monarchy emerged from human desires for stability and conformity to the surrounding nations (1 Sm 8:5, 20; Baldwin 2015), it nonetheless became a divinely sanctioned institution through which God continued to shepherd his covenant people and to hold them accountable (Schellenberg 2021:4). Rooted in God's unchanging character – 'compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness' (Ex 34:6) – the prophetic–pastoral relationship found renewed expression within the parallel offices of king and prophet.

Together, these two institutions functioned as complementary means of divine engagement: the king fulfilled a pastoral role by governing the people under God's authority, while the prophet served as the covenantal conscience, confronting disobedience and calling the nation back to faithfulness.

From judge prophets to royal-prophet synergy

Before the establishment of the monarchy, figures such as Moses, Joshua, and Samuel embodied unified pastoral and prophetic functions. They guided the people with care while confronting them with divine truth, thereby representing Yahweh's shepherding kingship (Hill & Walton 2023:181). Israel's request for a human king 'like all the other nations' (1 Sm 8:5) was therefore not merely political but profoundly theological – a rejection of God's direct theocratic rule (1 Sm 8:7). Yet God's response once again reveals both confrontation and compassion. Through Samuel, he warned the people of the dangers of centralised human power (1 Sm 8:10–18), while nevertheless graciously permitting their request (1 Sm 8:22). This concession was grounded not in divine resignation, but in covenantal faithfulness (Brueggemann 2012:63; Tsumura 2007:253; Wright 2004:232).

Theologically, the monarchy did not replace God's reign but reconfigured the way in which his justice and care were mediated. Kings were to function as stewards under divine authority rather than as sovereign rulers in their own right. As Laniak (2006:22) observes, they were called to lead in the same manner that God led them, reflecting his justice and mercy. This understanding is reinforced in texts such as Ezekiel 34:24, where kings are described as 'princes', underscoring their subordinate and pastoral role. Israel was thus to remain distinct among the nations; its governance was to reflect Yahweh's character rather than human ambition (McConville 2006:86; Nugent 2011). Consequently, kings were expected to uphold the covenant, defend the vulnerable, and promote communal faithfulness (Dt 17:14–20; Ps 72:1–4).

The king as shepherd-ruler

The shepherd metaphor became central to Israel's understanding of leadership. Laniak (2006:21) defines biblical shepherding as comprehensive leadership marked by both authority and compassion. It embodies the same divine tension between justice and mercy, confrontation and care, that runs throughout Scripture (Ex 34:6–7). The king's role was therefore to mediate this tension – to rule justly while nurturing the people's spiritual and social well-being (Jost 2021:26).

David stands as the archetype of the shepherd-king. Chosen from among the shepherds to lead God's people (2 Sm 5:2; Ps 78:70–72), his reign exemplified both decisive leadership and pastoral care. He unified the nation, brought the ark to Jerusalem, and received covenantal promises that reflected God's enduring mercy (2 Sm 7:8–16; 23:5). Even in moments of moral failure, such as his sin involving Bathsheba and Uriah, divine confrontation through Nathan (2 Sm 12) was coupled with restorative compassion. David's repentance and restoration demonstrate that divine discipline operates within the framework of covenantal mercy (Hill & Walton 2023:231).

Other kings also reflected this prophetic–pastoral interplay. Hezekiah led spiritual reform and national repentance (2 Chr 29–30), while Josiah's rediscovery of the law initiated renewal in worship and justice (2 Ki 22–23). Asa's early reforms likewise combined the confrontation of idolatry with compassionate guidance (2 Chr 14–15). In each case, faithful kingship was expressed as public pastoral care – confronting sin, restoring covenantal faithfulness, and leading the nation towards flourishing (Jost 2021:26; Lowery 1991:143–190).

The prophet as covenant conscience and pastoral intercessor

To ensure that royal authority remained anchored in divine justice, God established the prophetic office as a balancing institution. Prophets functioned as Israel's covenantal conscience, confronting unfaithfulness and calling both kings and people to repentance (Matthews 2012:624–25; Redditt 2020:587). Their ministry was inherently dual in nature: prophetic in its confrontation of idolatry and injustice, and pastoral in its mediation of hope, healing, and reconciliation. As Matthews (2012:626) notes, it was precisely the violation of covenantal justice that animated the prophetic vocation.

Prophets such as Nathan, Elijah, Elisha, Isaiah, and Jeremiah exemplified this synergy. Nathan's confrontation of David (2 Sm 12) safeguarded the moral integrity of the monarchy. Elijah challenged Ahab's systemic injustice (1 Ki 18–21), yet also ministered pastorally to the weary prophet and to the faithful remnant (1 Ki 17; 19). Isaiah's ministry moves from judgement to comfort, culminating in the summons, 'Comfort, comfort my people' (Is 40:1). Jeremiah, often referred to as the 'weeping prophet', embodies this dual vocation with particular depth: he proclaimed divine judgement (Jr 2–25), yet also interceded for and lamented over his people (8:18–9:3). As Brueggemann (2019) observes, the prophetic voice holds together lament and hope, confrontation and consolation, thereby revealing the heart of a God whose justice is redemptive rather than merely retributive.

Even when the monarchy collapsed and the nation was driven into exile, God's redemptive care did not cease. The prophets articulated hope amidst judgement: 'I know the plans I have for you … plans to give you hope and a future' (Jr 29:11). This prophetic hope affirms that divine confrontation is always oriented towards restoration rather than destruction. God remains both Shepherd and Sovereign, confronting sin while extending mercy to the repentant.

Within the prophetic–pastoral dynamic of Israel's monarchy and prophetic tradition, we encounter not contradiction but covenantal faithfulness. Kings and prophets embodied the same divine commitment to justice and compassion, functioning as public expressions of God's care and confrontation. For the contemporary church, particularly in fragile contexts such as Zimbabwe, this vision remains deeply instructive. The church's prophetic mandate must never eclipse its pastoral responsibility, nor should its pastoral care silence its prophetic critique. To embody God's redemptive character in public life, the church must hold truth and mercy together, speaking with both courage and compassion to a wounded and divided nation.

The prophetic-pastoral interplay in God's dealings with non-Israelites

A key dimension of the biblical narrative is that the prophetic–pastoral interplay evident in God's dealings with Israel is not confined to the covenant community but extends to individuals and nations beyond it. Scripture consistently presents Yahweh's redemptive concern as transcending ethnic and geographical boundaries (Dt 24:17–24; 1 Ki 8:41–43). As Magezi and Manzanga (2024:4) observe, Yahweh functions not only as Israel's covenantal Shepherd, but also as an 'under-shepherd to the nations', displaying love, compassion, and forgiveness towards foreign peoples as part of his broader public pastoral mission. This outward orientation is not incidental but fundamental, rooted in the Abrahamic covenant in which God promises that 'all peoples on earth will be blessed' through Abraham's descendants (Gn 12:3). Israel was therefore chosen not merely for its own benefit, but as a mediating community through which divine blessing would flow to all nations.

This missional identity is reaffirmed in Deuteronomy 4:5–8, where Israel is urged to observe God's statutes as a public witness to the surrounding nations:

> Observe them carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations … What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the Lord our God is near us? (Dt 4:6–7)

Israel's vocation as 'a kingdom of priests and a holy nation' (Ex 19:6) thus positioned it as an instrument of God's justice and mercy on a global scale. Consequently, the biblical narrative portrays Yahweh as confronting idolatry, injustice, and violence among the nations, while at the same time extending mercy and the opportunity for repentance (Magezi & Manzanga 2024:4). This pattern reveals the universal scope of God's redemptive character – the One who is 'gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love' (Jn 4:2; Ex 34:6), even towards those beyond the covenant community.

Throughout Scripture, this prophetic–pastoral dynamic is evident in God's engagement with the nations. In Egypt, God confronts oppression through the plagues (Ex 7–12), yet he also provides recognition of his power and permits a 'mixed multitude' to join Israel's exodus (Ex 12:38). In the book of Jonah, Nineveh – a violent and idolatrous city – experiences both prophetic warning and pastoral compassion when it repents (Jn 3–4). Babylon functions as an agent of judgement against Israel (Jr 25:9), yet is itself later judged (Jr 50–51), while individuals such as Nebuchadnezzar receive pastoral warning and ultimately acknowledge God's sovereignty (Dn 4:34–37). Even within the oracles against nations such as Edom, Moab, and Tyre, divine judgement is accompanied by glimpses of restoration and inclusion (Is 19:23–25).

Similarly, individuals such as Rahab, Ruth, and Naaman encounter God's compassion and are drawn into his redemptive purposes (Jos 6:17; Rt 1–4; 2 Ki 5). Rahab and Ruth are notably included in the genealogy of Jesus (Mt 1:5), symbolising the widening embrace of divine grace.

The Mosaic law itself institutionalises this inclusive vision by mandating care for foreigners and those marginalised within Israel's borders: 'Do not deprive the foreigner or the fatherless of justice … Remember that you were slaves in Egypt' (Dt 24:17–22). This ethic of compassion finds its ultimate expression in the Great Commission, where the risen Christ commands his disciples to 'make disciples of all nations' (Mt 28:19). The same vision reaches its fulfilment in Revelation, where a great multitude 'from every nation, tribe, people and language' worships before God's throne (Rv 7:9–10). Here, the nations are not merely recipients of God's mercy; they are active participants in his redeemed community.

Thus, the prophetic–pastoral heart of God, woven throughout the entire biblical narrative, reveals a mission as expansive as creation and as personal as the individual. It demonstrates that divine confrontation and compassion are not competing actions but mutually reinforcing expressions of a single redemptive purpose: to restore all peoples into communion with the living God.

Summary of the prophetic–pastoral interplay in the Old Testament

The Old Testament reveals that the prophetic–pastoral dynamic is central to God's dealings with humanity. It flows from God's very character – merciful and just, 'compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness' (Ex 34:6). From creation to the prophetic tradition, God consistently confronts sin and injustice while extending care and restoration to the broken.

Through Israel's judges, kings, and prophets, divine confrontation and compassion operate together as complementary expressions of God's covenantal faithfulness. Judgement always aims at renewal, and mercy never disregards truth. God's justice and care are therefore inseparable dimensions of his redemptive engagement with both Israel and the nations.

Finally, this interplay is participatory: God acts through human agents who embody his justice and mercy within concrete historical contexts. The Old Testament therefore lays the foundation for understanding God's mission as both prophetic and pastoral – a mission that reaches its fullest expression in Jesus Christ.

The prophetic–pastoral mandate in the New Testament

Building on the Old Testament portrayal of God as both just and merciful, the New Testament offers a fuller and embodied vision of the prophetic–pastoral mandate. This dual mission, addressing sin and injustice while extending compassion and healing, finds its ultimate expression in Jesus Christ and continues through his church. In Christ's life, death, and

resurrection, God's righteous judgement and unfailing love meet in perfect harmony. The gospels portray this unity through Jesus's incarnational presence, his public ministry, his sacrificial death, and his victorious resurrection. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, the early church carries this integrated mission forward as a community of truth, grace, justice, and mercy. The prophetic–pastoral mandate thus becomes the defining pattern of God's mission through his people until the final consummation revealed in the book of Revelation.

The incarnation as the ultimate demonstration of the prophetic–pastoral interplay

The incarnation of Jesus Christ – God becoming flesh and dwelling among humanity (Jn 1:14) represents the climax of God's justice and mercy held in perfect harmony (Wellum 2016). In this union of divinity and humanity, the prophetic–pastoral mandate reaches its fullest expression, revealing the depth of God's covenantal commitment to a broken world (Draughon III & Brand 2015:796). The God who declares himself 'compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness' (Ex 34:6) is made manifest in Jesus Christ, whose death breaks the power of sin and death (Frame 2013:884; Heb 2:14–18).

The incarnation is, above all, an act of divine compassion. As Magezi and Manzanga (2024:4) observe, it represents the 'public identification of God with human social conditions'. By assuming human flesh, Jesus fully enters into human pain and limitation (Heb 4:15), embodying the pastoral heart of God who walks with his people in order to heal and restore them. Frame (2013:127) describes the incarnation as 'the very means of our salvation', fulfilling the Old Testament image of the divine shepherd who seeks out and rescues his flock (Ezk 34:11–16).

At the same time, the incarnation is a decisive act of prophetic confrontation. In Christ, God challenges the powers of sin, injustice, and oppression, inaugurating his kingdom of truth, righteousness, and peace. Jesus's call to repentance (Mt 4:17) exposes both religious hypocrisy and political corruption, fulfilling the prophetic hope for a Messiah who would bring salvation and justice (Gn 3:15; Is 7:14; 9:6–7; Mi 5:2). As Athas (2023:814) observes, Jesus's declaration in Luke 4:18–19 was 'a claim to royal prerogative, based not on military might or priestly privilege but on prophetic fulfilment, love, forgiveness, and the work of God's Spirit (cf. Zch 4:6)'.

Thus, the incarnation is not only an act of divine solidarity, but also one of divine confrontation. It both heals and judges, embodying God's mercy and justice in a single redemptive act. In Jesus Christ, the pastoral longing for God's nearness and the prophetic hope for divine intervention converge. As Paul writes, 'all the promises of God find their "Yes" in him' (2 Cor 1:20). The incarnation therefore stands as the perfect expression of the prophetic–pastoral interplay: God with us to heal, and God among us to restore.

Jesus's ministry as both pastoral and prophetic

The earthly ministry of Jesus Christ reveals a profound integration of the prophetic and pastoral mandates. As the visible image of the invisible God (Col 1:15), Jesus embodies God's justice and compassion in action. His words and deeds expose sin and injustice while extending mercy to the broken and marginalised, thereby expressing in concrete form the dynamic interplay between confrontation and care.

Jesus inaugurates his ministry by proclaiming the arrival of God's kingdom – an alternative order that challenges both religious and political systems. As Vos (1958:50) explains, the kingdom exists where God 'supernaturally carries through his supremacy against all opposing powers and brings men to the willing recognition of the same'. By quoting Isaiah 61 in the synagogue at Nazareth (Lk 4:16–30), Jesus identifies his mission as bringing good news to the poor, release to the oppressed, and sight to the blind (Laniak 2006:200). This declaration is simultaneously pastoral, offering hope and restoration, and prophetic, confronting systemic exclusion and injustice (Magezi & Manzanga 2024:6). The violent response of his hearers underscores the disruptive nature of his message. Jesus further rebukes the hypocrisy of the scribes and Pharisees (Mt 23:23), echoing the denunciations of hollow religiosity found in Amos and Isaiah (Am 5:21–24; Is 1:10–17). For Brueggemann (2014:58–60), this prophetic mission is not merely critical but invitational – calling people to imagine a new society grounded in covenantal faithfulness. The cleansing of the temple (Mk 11:15–17) vividly displays this prophetic authority, as Jesus confronts economic exploitation and reclaims sacred space for God's redemptive purposes.

Yet within these confrontations, Jesus consistently embodies deep pastoral compassion. Time and again, he is 'moved with compassion' towards those who suffer (Mt 9:36; Mk 6:34). Laniak (2006:185) connects the image of 'sheep without a shepherd' to the Old Testament lament over failed leadership (Ezk 34), demonstrating that Jesus's compassion arises from his role as the true shepherd-king. His acts of healing further reveal this pastoral heart: touching lepers (Mk 1:40–42), restoring those with disabilities (Mt 12:9–13), comforting the grieving (Lk 7:13), and even weeping at Lazarus's tomb (Jn 11:33–35). As Laniak (2006:188) notes, Jesus not only prioritises mercy over legalism but reveals mercy as 'the heart of the law itself'. His compassion is therefore not sentimental, but redemptive, liberating people from both physical and spiritual bondage.

In Jesus, the prophetic and the pastoral are never separated. His rebukes flow from love, and his compassion carries the weight of truth. Brueggemann (2014) observes that Jesus's prophetic ministry envisions a new social reality, while his pastoral acts embody that reality through healing and restoration. Laniak (2006:184) captures this unity succinctly: 'The ministry of Jesus involves authoritative declarations of God's kingdom and merciful works of healing and liberation'.

In Christ, judgement and mercy, justice and compassion, converge perfectly – the prophetic word made flesh in pastoral action.

The cross and resurrection as the culmination of the prophetic–pastoral mission

The cross stands as the supreme convergence of God's justice and mercy. In Christ's suffering and death, the prophetic and pastoral dimensions of God's mission meet in perfect harmony. Jesus confronts sin, evil, and death – the ultimate expressions of human rebellion – while at the same time offering forgiveness, healing, and reconciliation to those alienated from God. The crucifixion is therefore both an act of judgement and an act of love.

From a prophetic perspective, the cross exposes the full gravity of sin and the corruption of human systems that resist God's reign. It reveals the cost of rebellion and the demands of divine justice (Rm 3:23–26). Yet it also discloses God's pastoral heart: a God who does not remain distant from human suffering but bears it within himself (Is 53:4–6). As Frame (2013:890) observes, 'The cross is God's own judgement borne by God Himself'. In Christ's self-giving, divine love assumes the suffering of humanity, providing not only atonement but also profound identification with human weakness and loss.

The resurrection completes this interplay by vindicating divine justice and fulfilling divine compassion. It stands as God's prophetic declaration that evil and death do not have the final word, and as his pastoral assurance that life and hope are restored. The risen Christ commissions his followers to extend this integrated mission, proclaiming repentance and forgiveness to all nations (Lk 24:46–47). The cross and resurrection together thus reveal that God's redemptive purpose is not to choose between justice and mercy, but to accomplish both perfectly in Christ.

As Paul proclaims, 'God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them' (2 Cor 5:19). The cross and resurrection are therefore not merely historical events, but the theological centre of God's public engagement with the world, where divine confrontation and divine compassion are inseparably united. Through them, the prophetic–pastoral mandate reaches its ultimate expression: truth and mercy meet, and righteousness and peace embrace (Ps 85:10).

The New Testament church as the extension of the prophetic–pastoral mandate

The resurrection of Jesus Christ did not mark the conclusion of God's redemptive work, but rather its decisive turning point, giving rise to a new community – the church. Formed and empowered by the Holy Spirit at Pentecost (Ac 2:1–4), this community became the living continuation of Jesus's mission in the world. The church was never intended to be a private enclave, but a visible embodiment of God's ongoing work of justice and mercy. As Jesus declared, 'You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses … to the ends of the earth' (Ac 1:8). Likewise, in Matthew 28:18–20, the risen Lord commissions his followers to 'make disciples of all nations … teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you'.

This Great Commission is not merely an evangelistic formula, but a theological continuation of God's redemptive movement in Christ. It extends Jesus's own prophetic and pastoral mission, challenging injustice while bringing healing to the broken. The kingdom of God inaugurated by Jesus was both prophetic – confronting oppressive systems and religious hypocrisy – and pastoral, offering forgiveness, freedom, and inclusion to the marginalised (Lk 4:18–19; Mt 23).

In this sense, the church is a resurrection community, called to bear witness through both proclamation and embodied presence. Its mission reflects God's character by extending compassion to the broken while confronting sin and injustice. The prophetic–pastoral interplay that marked Jesus's life thus becomes constitutive of the church's identity and vocation. As Punt (2024:1) observes, justice and reconciliation – divine attributes and ecclesial imperatives – capture this dynamic: justice aligns with the church's prophetic task of naming and resisting sin and all forms of injustice, while reconciliation expresses its pastoral responsibility to heal and restore relationships with God and the neighbour.

The early church embodied this prophetic–pastoral calling both internally and externally. Within the community, truth and correction were held together with care, mercy, and reconciliation, as reflected in shared worship, prayer, and mutual support (Ac 2:42–47; 6:1–7). Externally, believers confronted injustice with boldness while serving the vulnerable (Ac 17:6–7; Ja 1:27). The epistles reinforce this dual identity by combining doctrinal fidelity with pastoral guidance (Rm 1–15; 2 Tm 4:1–2), thereby shaping a church that embodies God's justice and compassion in both word and deed.

Hence, the church becomes a tangible sign of God's reign, bearing witness to his justice by confronting evil, and to his mercy by embodying reconciliation and love. The resurrection not only vindicated Christ's lordship but also inaugurated a Spirit-empowered community that carries forward his prophetic and pastoral mission until the consummation of all things. The church's mission is therefore holistic: confronting sin and injustice while embodying compassion and reconciliation. Bosch (2011:56) describes the church's mission as 'bearing witness to God's kingdom through word and deed, often in tension with the powers of the age'. Kritzinger (2013:36) similarly insists that participation in God's mission entails 'prophetic dialogue', in which the church speaks both God's 'yes' of mercy and God's 'no' of judgement. Thus, God invites the church into his single mission, which finds dual expression in confrontation and care.

The book of Revelation and the interplay of the prophetic-pastoral mandates

Revelation serves as the eschatological climax of the prophetic–pastoral interplay, portraying God's justice and

mercy in their ultimate harmony. Written by John, who identifies himself as a 'brother and partner in the tribulation' (Rv 1:9), the book situates its vision within a context of shared suffering and hope. Through vivid imagery, Revelation denounces the injustice of an empire (Babylon), exposes spiritual compromise, and offers comfort to the persecuted church.

At the centre of the book stands the throne-room vision (Rv 4–5), where the Lion of Judah is revealed as the slain Lamb. This paradox encapsulates the nature of the divine rule: justice exercised through sacrificial love. As Bauckham (1993:61) perceptively observes, 'The slaughtered Lamb is the key symbol of how God rules the world'. The Lion signifies divine authority and judgement, while the Lamb embodies mercy and reconciliation.

Revelation's prophetic voice summons the church to resist idolatry and empire with steadfast faith, while its pastoral tone reassures believers of God's abiding presence and ultimate victory. Christ walks among his churches (Rv 1:12–13), strengthens those who suffer (2:9; 3:10), and promises a future in which 'God will wipe every tear' (21:4). As Wright (2011:10) aptly summarises, 'Revelation is not just a book of future hope; it is a call to present faithfulness rooted in the Lamb's victory'.

Thus, Revelation brings the biblical narrative to its conclusion where it began – in the heart of God, where justice and mercy are held together. In the Lion and the Lamb, the church encounters the One who judges evil and comforts the afflicted. Revelation therefore calls the church to faithful witness: to confront evil with prophetic courage and to comfort the afflicted with pastoral love, until the Lamb reigns for ever.

Summary of the prophetic–pastoral interplay in the New Testament

The New Testament demonstrates that the prophetic–pastoral interplay reaches its fullest expression in Jesus Christ and continues in the life of the church. Jesus embodies God's justice and mercy in action, confronting sin, injustice, and spiritual blindness while extending compassion, healing, and restoration to the broken (Mk 6:34; Lk 4:18–19). His ministry shows that prophetic challenge and pastoral care are inseparable: truth is spoken in love, and mercy is exercised with authority.

Empowered by the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, the early church continues this dual vocation. Internally, it nurtures community, reconciliation, and spiritual formation; externally, it bears public witness, advocates for justice, and serves the vulnerable (Ac 2:42–47; Ja 1:27). The New Testament letters further reinforce this integration, combining theological correction with pastoral exhortation in order to shape both individual lives and communal practice (2 Tm 4:1–2).

Finally, Revelation presents the eschatological fulfilment of the prophetic–pastoral mandate and its integrated dynamic. Christ, as both Lion and Lamb, embodies divine judgement and mercy, offering comfort to the afflicted while confronting evil (Rv 5; 21:4). The New Testament therefore portrays a God whose redemptive work is always both confrontational and compassionate, calling the church to bear faithful witness to justice and restoration in the world until his kingdom is fully realised.

Conclusion

This article demonstrates that the church in Zimbabwe occupies a complex yet vital role within the country's social and political landscape. Its public ministry is expressed through two complementary dimensions: pastoral care, which offers healing, presence, and material support, and prophetic witness, which confronts injustice and calls for accountability. While these roles are often exercised separately in practice, the biblical witness consistently encourages their holistic integration.

Scripture consistently affirms that the church's ministry must reflect God's character and purposes. Texts such as Micah 6:8 and 1 Peter 2:9–12 provide concrete examples of how justice, mercy, and ethical witness guide the balance between pastoral compassion and prophetic courage. Likewise, the vision of Revelation calls the church to remain faithful and courageous amidst societal pressure, holding fast to truth while extending care and hope to the marginalised. Beyond these specific texts, the wider biblical narrative – from the prophets and wisdom literature to the Gospels and Pauline letters – offers a rich theological foundation for understanding how pastoral and prophetic imperatives interact within ministry.

The incarnation provides a central model for this integration. In Jesus Christ, God enters human reality, becoming fully present with those who suffer while remaining fully engaged in the work of justice and redemption. His ministry demonstrates that care and challenge, mercy and truth, are not opposed but inseparably linked. Likewise, the church's engagement in society is shaped by this incarnational pattern: pastoral care addresses immediate human needs, while prophetic witness confronts structural injustice, embodying God's presence in both word and deed.

Ultimately, the interplay between pastoral and prophetic mandates equips the church to function as both a community of care and a voice of truth, ensuring that its ministry remains faithful, relevant, and transformative. Grounded in the full breadth of Scripture and shaped by the incarnational model of Christ, the church is enabled to navigate complex social realities while faithfully reflecting God's mission in the world.

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