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**Theological-Historical Research Paper**  
***Theology of Army Chaplaincy***

**Introduction**

According to Alan T. Baker, a retired American Navy and Marine chaplain, chaplaincy is “the most exciting and fastest-growing segment of specialized ministry.”<sup>1</sup> In the modern culture of America where our nation is continuing to become less religious, it is predicted that Americans are more likely to meet a chaplain than a local pastor at a church.<sup>2</sup> As such, chaplaincy is increasingly becoming not only a popular position of ministry, but also impactful in its effectiveness and reach. Furthermore, military chaplaincy in the United States plays a vital role in its functions. It is strongly supported by both the government, people, and soldiers.<sup>3</sup> The chaplains of the U.S. Armed Forces play a vital role in fulfilling the multifaceted welfare of every member.

The course of U.S. history proved the population to become more and more diverse in ethnicity, culture, and religion. The same is reflected within the Armed Forces of America. In such a place, chaplains are the key in forming and celebrating diversity, “in this complex environment, the military chaplain is called upon to ensure the free exercise of religion for everyone.”<sup>4</sup> As military chaplains continue to be pioneers in diversity within the organization, it is crucial for Evangelical chaplains to not only understand their role as a military chaplain, but

1 Alan T. Baker, *Foundations of Chaplaincy*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Pub.), 9.

2 Alejandra Molna, “As Americans become less religious, the role of chaplains may grow,” *The Washington Post*, November 29, 2019,

3 Robert W. Tuttle, “Instruments of Accommodation: The Military Chaplaincy and the Constitution” *GW Law Faculty Publications & Other Works*, 23.

4 Military Chaplains Association, *Voices of Chaplaincy*, (Arlington, VA: MCA), 15.

also as a servant of the Lord. Carefully navigating the waters of Army chaplaincy as a Christian minister is challenging. Knowledge in the history of chaplaincy, its functions, and unique opportunity for ministry is important. Furthermore, building a solid theological foundation through the basis of Scripture is crucial. This essay will explore the role of Military chaplain to establish a Christian theology of Army chaplaincy.

### **History of Military Chaplaincy in the U.S.**

The U.S. Chaplain Corps was first established on July 29, 1775. Since the War for Independence, chaplains have served in every American war. Therefore, chaplaincy has always played a role in the history of the U.S. Armed Forces. However, even before the U.S. Armed Forces, the Army understands that the tradition of chaplaincy existed centuries before, “as long as armies have existed, military chaplains have served alongside soldiers, providing for their spiritual needs, working to improve morale, and aiding the wounded.”<sup>5</sup> In fact, the earliest form of chaplaincy is often referred to the Israelites of the Old Testament who brought their priests into battle with them.<sup>6</sup> Since its establishment, the U.S. Army Chaplain Corps has grown and evolved with the addition of Roman Catholicism, Jewish, Muslim, and Buddhism. Currently, there are more than 2500 Army chaplains in both active duty and reserves who provide diverse care for all soldiers in need. Although the Army Chaplain Corps had its share of controversies and contention during the Vietnam War, the Chaplain Corps is held in a place of profound honor in modern times.<sup>7</sup> Pauletta Otis, a professor at Marine Corps University, describes the honorable

5 “U.S. Army Chaplain Corps.” The National Museum of the United States Army. Accessed May 1, 2022. <https://armyhistory.org/u-s-army-chaplain-corps/#:~:text=The%20Chaplain%20Corps%20dates%20back,counted%20chaplains%20among%20their%20ranks.>

6 Ibid.

7 John Hannah, “The Chaplain: Instrument of Peace or Cheerleader for War?”, *Journal of the Lutheran Historical Conference*, 212.

profession of chaplaincy, “chaplains are advocates of spiritual, moral, and ethical maturity and resiliency and are considered militarily essential and inherently governmental in nature.”<sup>8</sup>

### **Biblical Foundations for Military Chaplaincy**

There are no specific biblical figures that were directly mentioned as being a chaplain. However, as mentioned above, the role of a chaplain was seen in Old Testament priests who accompanied soldiers into battle (Deut. 20:2). As a symbol of God’s presence, the Levites, who were the ancient Jewish priestly class, carried the Ark of the Covenant into battle. The Ark of the Covenant represented the literal manifestation of God’s presence on earth. Therefore, for the Levitical priests to access and carry the ark literally meant that their duty was to play the connection between God and His people.<sup>9</sup> Clearly, the priests, although not mentioned specifically as chaplains, played the role of providing God’s presence to the Israelites.

Another nature of chaplaincy is found in God’s character and heart for His people as it is seen in John 3:16, “For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.” God’s love is expressed through His only Son, Jesus, who gave his life to the whole world, even if some people chose not to accept it. Thus, Jesus’ presence among the sinful represents God’s grace, mercy, and access to reconciliation. Chaplains, just like the Son of God, are called to be present and show the depth of God’s love to His people in public places. Chaplains lean upon the power of God and operate under Jesus’ Great Commission by being Christ’s ambassadors. Just as Jesus was the greatest model of servant leadership, chaplains do the same, “chaplain servant-leaders blend their calling

<sup>8</sup> Pauletta Otis, “An Overview of the U.S. Military Chaplaincy: A Ministry of Presence and Practice,” *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*, 4.

<sup>9</sup> Ancient Jewish History: The Ark of the Covenant. Accessed May 1, 2022.  
<https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/the-ark-of-the-convenant>

from God as ‘servant’ and their role as ‘staff-officer-leader’ in the command with the talents and gifts of troops for mission and ministry through their command.”<sup>10</sup>

### **The Role of a Military Chaplain**

According to Otis, “the military chaplaincy serves primarily to ensure that the free exercise of religion is supported in all military settings.”<sup>11</sup> Hence, the first and utmost duty of the chaplain is to provide a safe place for soldiers to practice their religious beliefs. As ordained clergy, chaplains are endorsed by their supporting agency or denomination and provide spiritual support and guidance to those in need. This is most often shown in their role as counselors, providing religious services, and performing religious ceremonies such as weddings or funerals. Although chaplains come from different religions and denominations, as it is their role to protect the freedom of religion and freedom of worship, they are required to avoid activities that create a preference for any specific religion, “the U.S. military chaplaincy is the embodiment of interfaith structure and pluralists cooperation while serving as a strong front line defense of freedom of religion.”<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, chaplains in the Army are commissioned military officers who serve under the command of a senior officer. As advisors, chaplains support the commanding officer to properly engage issues of spirituality, religious dynamics, ethics, morality, and personal wellbeing. For other staff officers, enlisted, and military personnel, chaplains “advocate for the specific religious needs.”<sup>13</sup> In fulfilling both the duty as clergy and staff officer, chaplains stand as a pillar of religious practice, expression, and freedom for the Military as a whole. As such, most notably, Army chaplains are called to a ministry of presence to soldiers they serve.

10 Military Chaplains Association, *Voices of Chaplaincy*, (Arlington, VA: MCA), 41.

11Pauletta Otis, “An Overview of the U.S. Military Chaplaincy: A Ministry of Presence and Practice,” *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*, 3.

12 Ibid.

13 Alan T. Baker, *Foundations of Chaplaincy*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Pub.), 22.

## **The Ministry of Presence of An Evangelical Chaplain**

As chaplains are called to ministry outside the normal walls or constraints of a church, they have the opportunity to deeply engage with people in their everyday lives. Chaplains are instruments who provide ministry of presence, where God is extended to people in areas of life beyond the places of worship. As an evangelical chaplain this is to understand that each individual is involved in ministry at every juncture of their lives, including their vocational work.<sup>14</sup> To these places, chaplains have the opportunity to bring the presence of God with them so people can be met with God exactly where they are.

Scripture clearly tells of God who is concerned and desperate for His people. God longs to love His children, walk with them through hardships, and affirm them in doubt. In this situation, chaplains get to be the very hands and feet of God. To do this, Paget and McCormick write in *The Work of the Chaplain* that “presence is both physical and emotional.”<sup>15</sup> The Christian chaplain must make the decision and commitment to be physically present with soldiers in need. Furthermore, the chaplain is emotionally present through empathetic listening. Therefore, ministry of presence is more of *being* than doing. It is being present. It is being available. It is being the hands and feet of God. Chaplains choose to visit the sick, accompany the lonely, and find ways to strengthen the weak. We represent God’s presence and give the assurance as told in Isaiah 41:10, “so do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.”

The ministry of presence requires rapport with soldiers and rapport requires time and effort to build. Because of its slow process, chaplains are quite often disappointed by the lack of

14 Mark Labberton, *called*, (Westmont, IL: InterVarsity Press), 47-49.

15 Janet R. McCormack, *The Work of the Chaplain*, (Prussia, PA: Judson Press),

progress. However, although it seems passive in its approach, ministry of presence is actively engaging the Kingdom of God. To be able to carry God's redeeming presence into the other's life, the chaplain's heart, mind, and soul must experience redemption. This redemptive process is life-long and for the chaplain to be effective, he must begin the ministry of presence with himself (Psalm 63). When we are met with God, only then we have the opportunity to share his presence.

As evangelical chaplains, we can look to Jesus who modeled a ministry of presence throughout his life here on earth. Jesus was fully present and fully focused on serving (Luke 22:27). He made himself available to people, reached out to those in need, and allowed the Father's love to flow through his servitude (Matt. 20:28). To do so, Jesus continued to live amongst the people of God but also turned to God to be filled with His strength (Matt 14:23). As such, Christian chaplains are to imitate Jesus through our presence. As Jesus did, we go, both to places of worship and the public square, to announce the coming of the Kingdom of God. We do not sit back and allow brokenness and evil abound amongst our brothers and sisters in arms, but we actively engage by being present and available. Through it, we are able to remind the crowd, no matter where they are or what they are facing, that God is still here. As chaplains in the Army we have the opportunity, an opportunity that is often difficult and lonely, but an opportunity nonetheless where we get to be where God's presence is most needed. As default, soldiers most often go through toughest of situations. We have the great honor to bring light to the darkest of places.

### **An Evangelical Theology of Army Chaplaincy**

A Christian engages in the vocation of Army chaplaincy because God first loved us (1 Jn 4:19). As the ambassadors of Christ, we serve a God who, having created us, justly expelled us

from the Garden, now goes to great lengths to reestablish and reconcile us back to Him, “that’s the God whose desire for relationship with humans drives the provision of Tabernacle and Temple, the sending of prophets and angels, and the sending of God’s own Son, Jesus.”<sup>16</sup> This is the very God that calls Christians into chaplaincy. He sends us out into the world to be the outcry to the lost and broken that the God of love is alive and longing to be with you. God calls Christians to go beyond the walls of the church, to public places of religious diversity and confusion that we may represent the one, true, God (2 Cor. 5:14).

As Jesus modeled ministry in the public square, we, the people of God, were called to be ambassadors to other people. As Jesus was sent to earth as a human being and met us where we are, who we are, and how we are, we are called to do the same. Through our ministry of presence, chaplains stand, live, dwell, and seek the lost to be reconciled to God (Lk. 19:10). However, unlike Jesus, we are broken and sinful. We are not called because we will be perfect. Christian chaplains must recognize our own brokenness and shortcomings. We cannot provide ministry of presence because we have all the answers, but we are able to journey together with travelers and having been “shown mercy in Christ... we extend mercy to another. We understand again our own need for Jesus’ death for us on the cross... asking what is ‘good news’ for this person?”<sup>17</sup>

An evangelical chaplain is one who has been called to be a leader in the Kingdom of God. We are called to represent the living God effectively by demonstrating His love, justice, and mercy (Mic. 6:8). As an officer to the enlisted, chaplains guide people to the path of righteousness and life. As a fellow officer, chaplains work together with other officers to lead with fairness, promote equality, and promote justice. As an advisor to the commander, chaplains

<sup>16</sup> Robert Hubbard, “Chaplaincy: Incarnation in Action,” *The Covenant Quarterly*, Vol. 73, 9.

<sup>17</sup> Kate Bradford, “What does an Evangelical Theology of Chaplaincy Look Like?” Accessed May 1, 2022. <https://pastoralthinking.org/tag/theology-of-chaplaincy/>

provide expert advice on religious affairs but also pertaining to moral and ethical decisions. Therefore, as Christians, Army chaplains get to embody the presence of God into the institution as a whole. Evangelical chaplains are spiritual leaders who lead soldiers to God, both in and out of combat.

Finally, an evangelical chaplain's ministry, although institution-based and regulated, flows out of their relationship with the living God. We must know God intimately to represent His will and direction for people. It is only in a deep relationship with God that is cultivated through worship, Scripture, prayer, and meditation that chaplains can become priests who share God's word and offer prayer. This too is modeled in the life of Jesus who regularly returned to God in solitude (Lk. 4:1-2, 4:16, 6:12-13; Mk. 6:30-32; Mt. 14:1-13). Robert Hubbard writes, "a chaplain's representing the living God effectively- demonstrating God's love and mercy, or speaking or acting on God's behalf- requires an ongoing relationship with our Lord that profoundly shapes our outlook, our attitudes, and our very personhood."<sup>18</sup>

## **Conclusion**

As a chaplain candidate in the U.S. Army, I am privileged to be under training at both seminary and building experience through the Army Reserves. Although being under the two institutions have been immensely helpful, what I learned often seemed to contradict each other. When seminary taught me about chasing after the Lord with all my heart, the Army taught me regulations that were limited by reach. When the Army gave me real life experiences with soldiers in pain, seminary taught me about the hopeful salvation and joy of being part of God's Kingdom. Because of this, I knew that both training and education were valuable, but I struggled to connect one to the other. However, researching and learning about the history of chaplaincy,

18 Robert Hubbard, "Chaplaincy: Incarnation in Action," *The Covenant Quarterly*, Vol. 73, 10.

reading testimonies of other chaplains, learning about disciplines, and finally forming a theology of evangelical chaplaincy, I got to see that, more than anything, it is God who calls His children to the vocation of military chaplaincy. There is not a single place that God is not willing to go to reconcile the lost back to His presence. In this perspective, I was able to once again realize that, even through all the Army regulations and limitations, God is the one who works through it all to demonstrate His Kingdom to the soldiers. I am only the bearer of his presence.

I was often told that most of chaplain work is centered around the ministry of presence and struggled to grasp exactly what that meant. Growing up in an evangelical church, ministry was most often than not program-based instead of spirit-lead. Therefore, when I was told to simply be present and allow my presence to be a blessing to the soldiers, I had no idea what to do. In fact, being told that I am the gateway for soldiers to meet God felt boastful and I often hid away in shame. However, after this research, I realized that this was my pride-lead humility that kept soldiers from having access to God. As an aspiring chaplain, it is my duty to remain close to the Lord and to understand His will so that I may convey it to the soldiers He loves. Being ministrally present and carrying the heart of the Father to soldiers of all rank, age, and experience, was my duty and calling. Now, I know that, through the ministry of presence, I can creatively make myself available for soldiers to awaken to the fact that God is near and that He cares.

Finally, learning about my role as an advisor was empowering. As most junior ranking officers do, I often found myself shying away from speaking with the commander. However, it is my job and responsibility to establish clear, precise, and effective communication with the command. Learning about the chaplain's role as an advisor helped me to strategize when and

how to approach the commander and to take it as a privilege and responsibility to protect both the commander and fellow brothers and sisters in need.

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