Special Order 937, by Jason Strange

Theological Reflection: Trauma, Ecclesial Crisis and Vocation Through x3 Theological Lenses

... PRIORITY ONE

INSURE RETURN OF ORGANISM

FOR ANALYSIS.

ALL OTHER CONSIDERATIONS SECONDARY.

CREW EXPENDABLE ...

SPECIAL ORDER 937.

(From Alien, 1979, Dir. Ridley Scott)

Introduction

Special Order 937 was a classified retrieval order given by the Weyland-Yutani Corporation to Science Officer *Ash* aboard the USCSS *Nostromo* in 2122. The order tasked Ash with ensuring the retrieval and survival of a sample specimen of the species Xenomorph XX121, and stipulated that this task superseded all other priorities, even the safety and survival of the crew. It was Special Order 937 that caused *Ash* to surreptitiously work against the rest of the ship's crew and aid the Alien in its survival.

My life story—marked by privilege, trauma, conversion, disillusionment, and reluctant obedience—has forced me to wrestle with the nature of God, the Church, and my own vocation. When I reflect on this journey through structured theological models, I find that the Pastoral Cycle, Liberation Theology, and Practical Theology each illuminate different dimensions of my experience. Together, they help me discern how God may be forming me now, and why I feel compelled to re-engage with a Church that historically failed, or as in the case of Ash, surreptitiously worked against me.

1. The Pastoral Cycle: Experience, Analysis, Reflection, Action

The Pastoral Cycle (Holland & Henriot, 1983) begins with experience, and my early experiences were defined by trauma. Though raised in material comfort, I endured emotional neglect, childhood abuse, and psychological instability. By adolescence, I was already navigating addiction and suicidal ideation. These experiences shaped my spiritual development profoundly. When I encountered Christ at sixteen, it was not through intellectual

persuasion but through existential rupture. My conversion resembled what James (1985) describes as a "divided self" finding unification in a transcendent encounter. James writes that conversion occurs when "*the divided self… becomes unified and consciously right, superior, and happy*," a description that mirrors the inner shift I experienced.

The analysis stage of the Pastoral Cycle invites me to interrogate structures around me and former caregivers. My early church experiences were marked by rigid behavioural expectations and a lack of trauma-informed pastoral care. When my pastor forbade me from drinking in pubs—despite my social world being rooted in music venues—it revealed a superficial approach to discipleship. Fortunately, he relented and came to see us play but over time, I witnessed leadership cultures that resembled corporate hierarchies more than communities of grace. This aligns with Ward's (2017) critique of churches shaped by consumerism and managerialism. Ward argues that contemporary ecclesial life is often "*colonised by managerial and consumerist logics*," a dynamic I repeatedly encountered, persisting to this day.

The theological reflection stage forces me to ask: where was God in all this? Scripture reveals a God who draws near to the broken-hearted (Ps. 34:18), who binds up the wounded (Isa. 61:1), and who confronts oppressive religious systems (Matt. 23). My experience of the Church often contradicted this biblical vision. Yet God continued to meet me outside institutional structures—through counselling, music, and moments of profound inner healing. Van der Kolk's (2014) insight that trauma is stored in the body helped me understand why spiritual platitudes could not reach the depths of my pain. As he notes, "*the body keeps the score*," meaning that trauma is held somatically and cannot be resolved through cognitive or spiritual statements alone. Healing required embodied, relational, and psychologically informed practices.

Finally, the action stage challenges me to consider how I might respond. Perhaps my calling now is to help the Church become a place where trauma is acknowledged, not avoided; where discipleship involves honesty, not performance; and where people are not treated as expendable as was the case with the crew of the Nostromo.

2. Liberation Theology: Naming Oppression and Seeking Freedom

Liberation Theology offers a second lens through which to interpret my story. Although traditionally applied to socio-economic oppression, its core principles—naming oppression, standing with the marginalised, and seeking liberation—speak directly to my experience of ecclesial dysfunction.

My childhood trauma created internalised oppression: shame, silence, and a belief that my pain was inconvenient. Later, in church contexts, I encountered what Gutiérrez (1973) calls "institutionalised sin"—structures that perpetuate harm through neglect, control, or spiritualised denial. Gutiérrez describes such structures as "*the negation of love… the breaking*

of friendship with God and neighbour," a definition that captures the relational and spiritual harm I experienced. When churches prioritised growth metrics, worship aesthetics, or leadership charisma over pastoral care, they mirrored the oppressive systems Jesus consistently challenged. Christ's ministry was marked by solidarity with the wounded and marginalised (Luke 4:18), yet many churches I encountered seemed more aligned with the Pharisees who "tie up heavy burdens" but "are unwilling to lift a finger to move them" (Matt. 23:4).

Liberation Theology insists that salvation is not merely personal but communal and structural. My healing journey—through professional counselling rather than church programmes—revealed the inadequacy of ecclesial structures to address trauma. Swinton (2012) argues that churches often rush to offer spiritual solutions without attending to the psychological and relational dimensions of suffering. He writes that Christian communities frequently "*move too quickly to explanation and resolution*," bypassing the lived reality of pain. This resonates deeply with my experience. Liberation, for me, meant stepping outside the Church to find the healing God desired for me.

Yet Liberation Theology also calls the oppressed to become agents of transformation. Moses, once traumatised and exiled, became the liberator of his people. Joseph, betrayed and imprisoned, became a source of salvation. Paul, wounded and persecuted, became a vessel of grace. My own suffering may similarly equip me to challenge ecclesial systems that harm people. If God is calling me back into engagement with mainstream Christians, it may be to advocate for those whose voices are ignored or silenced.

3. Practical Theology: Integrating Lived Experience and Theological Understanding

Practical Theology emphasises the interplay between lived experience and theological interpretation. It recognises that theology is not merely conceptual but embodied, relational, and contextual. My life exemplifies this dynamic. My understanding of God has been shaped not by abstract doctrine but by encounters with suffering, healing, and divine presence.

Lewis (1952) argues that Christian maturity involves the surrender of self-will. He writes that "*the real problem of the Christian life comes where people do not usually look for it… in the daily surrender of the self*." For me, this surrender has been neither romantic nor straightforward. It has involved wrestling with God, resisting transformation, and confronting the false selves I constructed to survive trauma. The biblical metaphor of circumcision of the heart (Deut. 10:16; Rom. 2:29) captures this process: painful, exposing, yet ultimately covenantal.

Practical Theology also emphasises the importance of community. Yet my experience of church community has been ambivalent. On one hand, I encountered fellowship, worship, and moments of genuine spiritual encounter. On the other, I witnessed leadership cultures marked by control, narcissism, and superficiality. Bonhoeffer's (1954) distinction between cheap grace

and costly grace helps me interpret this tension. He famously writes that cheap grace is "*grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ*," whereas costly grace "*is the call of Jesus Christ at which the disciple leaves his nets and follows him*." My healing journey required costly grace—grace that confronted my trauma, not concealed it.

Practical Theology invites me to integrate these insights into a renewed sense of vocation. My past—its wounds, its resilience, its encounters with God—forms the raw material of my calling. Paul writes that God "comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble" (2 Cor. 1:4). This verse has become a guiding principle for me. My scars are not liabilities but resources for ministry. One imagines a t-shirt range to complete the look.

Conclusion: Toward a Theology of Non-Expendability

When I return to the metaphor of Special Order 937, I recognise that much of my life has been shaped by the fear of being expendable—within my family, within the Church, and within society. Yet the gospel proclaims the opposite: that every person bears the image of God (Gen. 1:27), that the Shepherd leaves the ninety-nine to rescue the one (Luke 15:4), and that Christ came "that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (John 10:10).

If God is calling me to re-engage with the Church, it is not to perpetuate its dysfunctions but to help cultivate communities where no one is expendable. My life, with all its brokenness and healing, may be part of that rescue mission. This is Jason … signing off.

Bibliography

Bonhoeffer, D. (1954) *The Cost of Discipleship*. London: SCM Press.

Gutiérrez, G. (1973) *A Theology of Liberation*. Maryknoll: Orbis.

Holland, J. & Henriot, P. (1983) *Social Analysis: Linking Faith and Justice*. Maryknoll: Orbis.

James, W. (1985) *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. London: Penguin.

Lewis, C.S. (1952) *Mere Christianity*. London: Geoffrey Bles.

Swinton, J. (2012) *Raging with Compassion: Pastoral Responses to the Problem of Evil*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

Van der Kolk, B. (2014) *The Body Keeps the Score*. New York: Viking.

Ward, P. (2017) *Introducing Practical Theology*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.