

The Pastor as Theologian



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Every pastor is called to be a theologian. This may come as a surprise to some pastors, who see theology as an academic discipline taken during seminary rather than as an ongoing and central part of the pastoral calling. Nevertheless, the health of the church depends upon its pastors functioning as faithful theologians — teaching, preaching, defending and applying the great doctrines of the faith.

The transformation of theology into an academic discipline more associated with the university than the church has been one of the most lamentable developments of the last several centuries. In the earliest eras of the church, and through the annals of Christian history, the central theologians of the church were its pastors. This was certainly true of the great Reformation of the sixteenth century as well. From the patristic era, we associate the discipline and stewardship of theology with names such as Athanasius, Irenaeus and Augustine. Similarly, the great theologians of the Reformation were, in the main, pastors such as John Calvin and Martin Luther. Of course, their responsibilities often ranged beyond those of the average pastor, but they could not have conceived of the pastoral role without the essential stewardship of theology.

The emergence of theology as an academic discipline coincides with the development of the modern university. Of course, theology was one of the three major disciplines taught in the medieval university. Yet, so long as the medieval synthesis was intact, the university was always understood to be in direct service to the church and its pastors.

The rise of the modern research university led to the development of theology as merely one academic discipline among others — and eventually to the redefinition of theology as “religious studies” separated from ecclesiastical control or concern. In most universities, the secularization of the academy has meant that the academic discipline of theology has no inherent connection to Christianity, much less to its central truth claims.

These developments have caused great harm to the church, separating ministries from theology, preaching from doctrine and Christian care from conviction. In far too many cases, the pastor's ministry has been evacuated of serious doctrinal content and many pastors seem to have little connection to any sense of theological vocation.

All this must be reversed if the church is to remain true to God's Word and the Gospel. Unless the pastor functions as a theologian, theology is left in the hands of those who, in many cases, have little or no connection or commitment to the local church.

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The Pastor's Calling

The pastoral calling is inherently theological. Given the fact that the pastor is to be the teacher of the Word of God and the teacher of the Gospel, it cannot be otherwise. The idea of the pastorate as a non-theological office is inconceivable in light of the New Testament.

Though this truth is implicit throughout the Scriptures, this emphasis is perhaps most apparent in Paul's letters to Timothy. In these letters, Paul affirms Timothy's role as a theologian — affirming that all of Timothy's fellow pastors are to share in the same calling. Paul emphatically encourages Timothy concerning his reading, teaching, preaching and study of Scripture. All of this is essentially theological, as is made clear when Paul commands Timothy to “Retain the standard of sound words which you have heard from me, in the faith and love which are in Christ Jesus. Guard, through the Holy Spirit who dwells in us, the treasure which has been entrusted to you” [2 Tim 1:13-14]. Timothy is to be a teacher of others who will also teach. “The things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, entrust these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also” [2 Tim 2:2].

As Paul completes his second letter to Timothy, he reaches a crescendo of concern as he commands Timothy to preach the Word, specifically instructing him to “reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction” [2 Tim 4:2]. Why? “For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths” [2 Tim 4:3-4].

As Paul makes clear, the pastoral theologian must be able to defend the faith even as he identifies false teachings and makes correction by the Word of God. There is no

more theological calling than this — guard the flock of God for the sake of God’s truth.

Clearly, this will require intense and self-conscious theological thinking, study and consideration. Paul makes this abundantly clear in writing to Titus, when he defines the duty of the overseer or pastor as one who is “holding fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, so that he will be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict” [Titus 1:9]. In this single verse, Paul simultaneously affirms the apologetical and polemical facets of the pastor-theologian’s calling.

In reality, there is no dimension of the pastor’s calling that is not deeply, inherently and inescapably theological. There is no problem the pastor will encounter in counseling that is not specifically theological in character. There is no major question in ministry that does not come with deep theological dimensions and the need for careful theological application. The task of leading, feeding and guiding the congregation is as theological as any other vocation conceivable.

Beyond all this, the preaching and teaching of the Word of God is theological from beginning to end. The preacher functions as a steward of the mysteries of God, explaining the deepest and most profound theological truths to a congregation which must be armed with the knowledge of these truths in order to grow as disciples and meet the challenge of faithfulness in the Christian life.

Evangelism is a theological calling as well, for the very act of sharing the Gospel is, in short, a theological argument presented with the goal of seeing a sinner come to faith in

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the Lord Jesus Christ. In order to be a faithful evangelist, the pastor must first understand the Gospel and then understand the nature of the evangelist’s calling. At every step of the way, the pastor is dealing with issues that are irrefutably theological.

As many observers have noted, today’s pastors are often pulled in many directions simultaneously — and the theological vocation is often lost amidst the pressing concerns of a ministry that has been reconceived as something other than what Paul intended for Timothy. The managerial revolution has left many pastors feeling more like administrators than theologians, dealing with matters of organizational theory before ever turning to the deep truths of God’s Word and the application of these truths to everyday life. The rise of therapeutic concerns within the culture means that many pastors, and many of their church members, believe that the pastoral calling is best understood as a “helping profession.” As such, the pastor is seen as someone who functions in a therapeutic role in which theology is often seen as more of a problem than a solution.

All this is a betrayal of the pastoral calling as presented in the New Testament.

Furthermore, it is a rejection of the apostolic teaching and of the biblical admonition concerning the role and responsibilities of the pastor. Today's pastors must recover and reclaim the pastoral calling as inherently and cheerfully theological. Otherwise, pastors will be nothing more than communicators, counselors and managers of congregations that have been emptied of the Gospel and of biblical truth.

The Pastor and Theological Triage

The pastor's stewardship of the theological task requires a clear sense of pastoral priority, a keen pastoral ear and careful attention to the theological dimensions of church life and Christian discipleship. This must be foundational to the ministry of the local church, and ministry must emerge from a fundamentally theological foundation.

In a very real sense, Christians live out their most fundamental beliefs in everyday life. One essential task of the pastor is to feed the congregation and to assist Christians to think theologically in order to demonstrate discernment and authentic discipleship.

All this must start with the pastor. The preacher must give attention, study, time and thought to the theological dimensions of ministry. A ministry that is deeply rooted in the deep truths of God's Word will be enriched, protected and focused by a theological vision.

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the local church. Such a theological vision is deeply rooted in God's truth and in the truth about God that forms the very basis of Christian theology.

The pastor's concentration is a necessary theological discipline. Thus, the pastor must develop the ability to isolate what is most important in terms of theological gravity from that which is less important.

I call this the process of theological triage. As anyone who visits a hospital emergency room is aware, a triage nurse is customarily in place in order to make a first-stage evaluation of which patients are most in need of care. A patient with a gunshot wound is moved ahead of a sprained ankle in terms of priority. This makes medical sense, and to misconstrue this sense of priority would amount to medical malpractice.

In a similar manner, the pastor must learn to discern different levels of theological importance. First-order doctrines are those that are fundamental and essential to the

Christian faith. The pastor's theological instincts should seize upon any compromise on doctrines such as the full deity and humanity of Christ, the doctrine of the Trinity, the doctrine of atonement and essentials such as justification by faith alone. Where such doctrines are compromised, the Christian faith falls. When a pastor hears an assertion that Christ's bodily resurrection from the dead is not a necessary doctrine, he must respond with a theological instinct that is based in the fact that such a denial is tantamount to a rejection of the Gospel itself.

Second-order doctrines are those which are essential to church life and necessary for the ordering of the local church, but which, in themselves, do not define the Gospel. That is to say, one may detect an error in a doctrine at this level and still acknowledge that the person in error remains a believing Christian. Nevertheless, such doctrines are directly related to how the church is organized and its ministry is fulfilled. Doctrines found at this level include those most closely related to ecclesiology and the architecture of theological systems. Calvinists and Arminians may disagree concerning a number of vital and urgently important doctrines — or, at the very least, the best way to understand and express these doctrines. Yet, both can acknowledge each other as genuine Christians. At the same time, these differences can become so acute that it is difficult to function together in the local congregation over such an expansive theological difference.

Third-order doctrines are those which may be the ground for fruitful theological discussion and debate, but which do not threaten the fellowship of the local congregation or the denomination. Christians who agree on an entire range of theological issues and doctrines may disagree over matters related to the timing and sequence of events related to Christ's return. Yet, such ecclesiastical debates, while understood to be deeply important because of their biblical nature and connection to the Gospel, do not constitute a ground for separation among believing Christians.

Without a proper sense of priority and discernment, the congregation is left to consider every theological issue to be a matter of potential conflict or, at the other extreme, to see no doctrines as worth defending if conflict is in any way possible.

The pastor's theological concentration establishes a sense of proper proportion and a larger frame of theological reference. At the same time, this concentration on the theological dimension of ministry also reminds the pastor of the necessity of constant watchfulness.

At crucial points in the history of Christian theology, the difference between orthodoxy and heresy has often hung on a single word, or even a syllable. When Arius argued that the Son was to be understood as being of a similar substance as the Father, Athanasius correctly understood that the entirety of the Gospel was at risk. As Athanasius faithfully led the church to understand, the New Testament clearly teaches that the Son is of the same substance as the Father. In the Greek language, the distinction between the word offered by Arius and the correction offered by Athanasius was a single syllable. Looking back, we can now see that when the Council of Nicaea met in A.D. 325, the Gospel was

defended and defined at this very point. Without the role of Athanasius as both pastor and theologian, the heresy of Arius might have spread unchecked, leading to disaster for the young church.

The Pastor as Teacher

As a theologian, the pastor must be known for what he teaches, as well as for what he knows, affirms and believes. The health of the church depends upon pastors who infuse their congregations with deep biblical and theological conviction. The means of this transfer of conviction is the preaching of the Word of God.

We will be hard pressed to define any activity as being more inherently theological than the preaching of God’s Word. The ministry of preaching is an exercise in the theological exposition of Scripture. Congregations that are fed nothing more than ambiguous “principles” supposedly drawn from God’s Word are doomed to spiritual immaturity — which will become visible in compromise, complacency and a host of other spiritual ills.

Why else would the Apostle Paul command Timothy to preach the Word in such solemn and serious terms: “I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by His appearing and His kingdom: preach the Word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction” [2 Tim 4:1-2].

As we have already seen, this very text points to the inescapably theological character of ministry. In these preceding verses, Paul specifically ties this theological ministry to the task of preaching — understood to be the pastor’s supreme calling. As Martin Luther rightly affirmed, the preaching of the Word of God is the first mark of the church. Where it is found, there one finds the church. Where it is absent, there is no church, whatever others may claim.

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Paul had affirmed Scripture as “inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness” [2 Tim 3:16]. Through the preaching of the Word of God, the congregation is fed substantial theological doctrine directly from the biblical text. Expository preaching is the most effective means of imparting biblical knowledge to the congregation, and thus arming God’s people with deep theological conviction.

In other words, the pastor’s conviction about theological preaching becomes the foundation for the transfer of these convictions into the hearts of God’s people. The

divine agent of this transfer is the Holy Spirit, who opens hearts, eyes and ears to hear, understand and receive the Word of God. The preacher's responsibility is to be clear, specific, systematic and comprehensive in setting out the biblical convictions that are drawn from God's Word and which, taken together, frame a biblical understanding of the Christian faith and the Christian life.

The Pastor's Confession

All this assumes, of course, that the pastoral ministry is first rooted in the pastor's own confession of faith — the pastor's personal theological convictions.

The faithful pastor does not teach merely that which has historically been believed by the church and is even now believed by faithful Christians — he teaches out of his own personal confession of belief. There is no sense of theological attachment or of academic distance when the pastor sets out a theological vision of the Christian life.

All true Christian preaching is experiential preaching, set before the congregation by a man who is possessed by deep theological passion, specific theological convictions and an eagerness to see these convictions shared by his congregation.

Faithful preaching does not consist of the preacher presenting a set of theological options to the congregation. Instead, the pastor should stand ready to define, defend and

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document his own deep convictions, drawn from his careful study of God's Word and his knowledge of the faithful teaching of the church.

Our model for this pastoral confidence is, once again, the Apostle Paul. Paul's personal testimony is intertwined with his own theology. Consider Paul's retrospective analysis of his own attempts at human righteousness, coupled with his bold embrace of the Gospel as grounded in grace alone.

“But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ,” Paul asserted. “More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ, and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith, that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death; in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead” [Phil 3:7-11].

In other words, Paul did not hide behind any sense of academic detachment from the doctrines he so powerfully taught. Nor did he set before his congregation in Philippi a series of alternate renderings of doctrine. Instead, he taught clearly, defended his case and made clear that he embraces these very doctrines as the substance of his life and faith.

Of course, the experiential nature of the pastor's confession does not imply that the authority for theology is in personal experience. To the contrary, the authority must always remain the Word of God. The experiential character of the pastor's theological calling underlines the fact that the preacher is speaking from within the circle of faith as a believer, not from a position of detachment as a mere teacher.

The pastor's confession of his faith and personal example add both authority and authenticity to the pastoral ministry. Without these, the pastor can sound more like a

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theological consultant than a faithful shepherd. The congregation must be able to observe the pastor basing his life and ministry upon these truths, not merely teaching them in the pulpit.

In the end, every faithful pastor's theological confession must include an eschatological confidence that God will preserve His work to the end. As Paul confessed, “For this reason I also suffer these things, but I am not ashamed; for I know whom I have believed and I am convinced that He is able to guard what I have entrusted to Him until that day” [2 Tim 1:12].

In the end, every preacher receives the same mandate that Paul handed down to Timothy: “Retain the standard of sound words which you have heard from me, in the faith and love which are in Christ Jesus. Guard, through the Holy Spirit who dwells in us, the treasure which has been entrusted to you” [2 Tim 1:13-14].

In other words, we are the stewards of sound words and the guardians of doctrinal treasure which has been entrusted to us at the very core of our calling as pastors. The pastor who is no theologian is no pastor.

