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The Pastor As Theologian, Part Three

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The Pastor's Conviction

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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 Timothy 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.

Paul had affirmed Scripture as "inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness" [2 Timothy 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 in the preacher presenting a set of theological options to the congregation. Instead, the pastor should stand ready to define, defend, and 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 gained 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" [Philippians 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 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 Timothy 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 Timothy 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.

