

AlbertMohler.com

The Pastor As Theologian, Part One

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.

Monday, April 17, 2006

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.

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 Timothy 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 Timothy 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 Timothy 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 Timothy 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 goal of seeing a sinner come to faith in 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.

Content Copyright © 2002-2010, R. Albert Mohler, Jr.