

Bridging the Divide:

The Pastor-Theologian in Church History

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Abstract: The primary location for the theological task has historically been the pastorate. The founding of universities at the turn of the millennium results in professional theologians divesting themselves of their ecclesial settings and finding a new home detached from the church. While the trajectory began long ago, the ramifications of such a trajectory change are being felt in the present day. The church of today is theologically averse and pragmatically driven, resulting in a biblically and theologically deprived church. The pastor-theologian must be recovered in order to infuse the church with rich, biblical theology once again.

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Introduction

When thinking of the pastoral office, the first thought that comes to mind for many might be that of a business manager, a counsellor, a communicator, an administrator, or an amalgam of all four; rarely will one think of a theologian. The past two centuries of Christian history has seen an unprecedented bifurcation between professional theologians and those within the pastorate; this is a bifurcation which ought not stand. From the early days of the church, the primary purveyors of the theological task were pastors. In recent

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years, there has been a trend towards resurrecting this vision of a unified pastor-theologian, seeking to recover that which was assumed early on but has since been long forgotten.² What follows is a survey through church history to understand the central role that pastor-theologians have played from within the church. By recovering an understanding of the role pastor-theologians have played in Christian history, one will be given an idea of what a resurgence of this vision could mean for the present-day church.

The Pastor-Theologian in the Early Church

Following the death of the apostles, Clement of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch, and Polycarp were some of the first non-apostolic elders placed in the first century church. These titans of church history produced theologically rich writing for the edification of the body of Christ. Following after the manner of the apostles, their theological output largely consisted of letters written to churches, which formed the foundation of much that followed after them.³ There are many faithful and significant pastors standing in line behind these luminous church fathers, none of whom have made as significant an impact on the church as Athanasius and Augustine.

² A few notable attempts to articulate and resurrect such a vision are The Center for Pastor-Theologians founded by Gerald Hiestand and Todd Wilson, who also authored *The Pastor-Theologian: Resurrecting an Ancient Vision* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015). Kevin Vanhoozer and Owen Strachan recently wrote a similarly titled book, *The Pastor as Public Theologian: Reclaiming a Lost Vision* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015). These aforementioned titles, paired with a study of church history, have strongly shaped this author in his understanding of the necessity of pastor-theologians. Their work has helped to shape the structure of this article, especially the appendix in Hiestand and Wilson, *The Pastor-Theologian*, which includes a table of significant figures in church history noting whether such figures were “clerical,” “nonclerical,” or “monastic” in focus.

³ Cyril C. Richardson, ed., *Early Christian Fathers* (New York, NY: Touchstone, 1996).

As the church approached the fourth century, Athanasius, bishop of the church in Alexandria, spent his life as a pastor in theological conflict. As one fabled to have entered at a young age under the care of Alexander, the bishop of Alexandria, Athanasius was long known to be a churchman.⁴ Athanasius is known today primarily for his theological contributions in articulating the Trinity against the Arians, his role in the Nicene formulation, and his short book extolling the necessity of Jesus as the God-man, *On the Incarnation*. After forty years in ministry and three exiles, Athanasius stood victorious over his defeated foes, Arius and the Arians.

Overlapping somewhat during Athanasius's later years, Augustine, bishop of the church in Hippo, is known for his vast theological output, including his most famous work, *The Confessions*.⁵ In addition to *The Confessions*, Augustine wrote the extensive theological treatises *On the Trinity* and *The City of God*, alongside shorter works such as those written against Pelagius or the Donatists. By all measures, Augustine was a great theologian who inspired many towards the task of thinking deeply and writing well. If the story of Augustine is left here, however, a significant foundation for his theological work will be missed: his love for the church. In addition to Augustine's voluminous theological writing, his most

⁴ Archibald T. Robertson, "Prolegomena," in *St. Athanasius: Select Works and Letters*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, vol. 4 of *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, Second Series (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1892), xiv.

⁵ Some estimate Augustine's writing output to be somewhere near 5,000,000 words, which not only placed him as one of the most substantial authors of his time, but one of the substantial authors in history. For further reading, see Shari Boodts, "5,000,000 Words: How St. Augustine's Works Made It into the Middle Ages," *Medievalists.Net*, April 22, 2018, <https://www.medievalists.net/2018/04/how-st-augustines-works-made-it-into-the-middle-ages/>.

significant source of written work comes from his writings on Scripture, whether taking the form of commentary or sermon.⁶

In many ways, Augustine can be viewed as the archetypal pastor-theologian. Deeply rooted in a local congregation, regularly preaching, teaching, catechizing, and evangelizing, Augustine was a pastor as everyone would understand the term. The scope of his ministry, however, was not singularly focused on the needs in Hippo, but broadened from his specific locale to the church at large. Augustine recognized that issues facing the church from abroad never stayed abroad; they always wind up in neighbouring cities and local congregations. Pelagius, one of Augustine's main theological opponents, may have begun his ministry in modern day England, but his writings undermining original sin ended up in North Africa and could not be ignored—the church needed its pastor to be able to defend the good deposit against wolves, a task which is primarily theological in nature.

The Pastor-Theologian in the Medieval and Reformation Church

As this initial, brief sampling shows, from the very beginning of the church those who played the role of theologian were predominantly pastors.⁷ In many cases, the distinction between a pastor and a theologian would have been nonsensical. To be a pastor was to be a theologian, and to suggest otherwise would be a misreading of the first millennia of Christian history. While there were certainly those who wrote theologically from outside the pastorate, these rather exceptional cases prove the rule (here one

⁶ Augustine wrote many commentaries and sermons, including those which are still accessible today, on Genesis, the Psalms, the Sermon on the Mount, the Gospel of John, and John's first epistle.

⁷ While this sampling from the early church only consists of five figures in history, it is representative of the state of affairs for the first thousand years of the church, as can be seen in the appendix to Hiestand and Wilson's *The Pastor-Theologian*.

might think of Justin Martyr, Origen, or Boethius). However, after the turn of the millennium, coinciding with the rise of universities, there was a rise of theologians detached from formal ecclesial roles who were, nonetheless, ecclesiastically minded (e.g. Abelard and Aquinas).

Bridging the gap between the first millennium and the modern day, the pastorate was still filled with many of the sharpest theological minds of the day. In the early days of the new millennia, Anselm, bishop of Canterbury, stands out as a figure who was rooted in the church while staying true to the call for pastors to be theologians. Anselm was a pastor writing theology from within the context of the local church, and was able to produce works of deep theology, penetrating prayers, and astute apologetics.

Closer still to our current day, the reformation and post-reformation time period was another marked by closely tied pastor-theologians. Martin Luther and Martin Bucer both stand out during this period as theologians who were not ecclesiastically based, but a majority of those who come to mind during this time period were within the pastorate. John Calvin, a lawyer and second generation reformer, is renowned for his magnum opus, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, which is prefaced with Calvin's statement that such a writing was intended as an introduction written for the edification of the church. The Puritan, John Owen, the English revivalist, John Wesley, and the American revivalist, Jonathan Edwards, all fall into the canon of theologians rooted in and labouring for the church while producing high quality theological tomes. While some figures in post-reformation history were more likely to have placed a foot in either academic or ecclesial settings, a majority were still pastor-theologians rather than mere pastors or mere theologians.

The Pastor-Theologian in the Modern Church

Looking to the modern day, the division between the university and the pastorate has grown. Where there once was a ditch, there now stands a chasm; erosion has done its work. Where it was once an exceptional thing to find a theologian apart from the

pastorate, the exception has now become the rule. The modern day is marked by theologians given to the task of theology and pastors given to the task of management. Despite the chasm, some pastors and theologians have been able to straddle between the ecclesial and academic worlds.⁸ While standalone theologians apart from a formal pastoral office have their place, and likewise many in the pastoral office have no desire for the theological task, if this brief overview has taught us anything it is that the current divide between pastors and theologians is a historic novelty.

Pastors in most recent history have a pattern of not merely lacking theological vision but, in many cases, having an outright theological aversion. Theology has become pragmatized, and if a theological concept is not immediately applicable then the task of theology is seen as a waste. For many in history, life in the pastorate was a draw because it was one of the few vocations that afforded one the opportunity to study, think deeply, and write. While our modern day may have many vocations that can afford one such opportunities, the pastorate is, nonetheless, the most obvious place from which the task of theology ought to be conducted. History has displayed the synonymy between the office of pastor and the work of theology, and a recovery of this vision could have significant implications for the present-day church.

The Pastor-Theologian in the Future Church: Recovering an Ancient Ideal

As the church recovers the idea of pastors as theologians, the body will likewise recover a more robust biblical literacy. As goes the head, so goes the body. As goes the king, so goes the kingdom. As goes the shepherd, so goes the sheep. Where the church was once a bastion of biblically and theologically astute members, the current

⁸ John Piper and N. T. Wright come to mind as those who sought to remain in the pastorate while engaging in the theological task and conversation.

church faces a battle against theological anemia.⁹ When theology becomes a question of pragmatics, the church begins to understand that anything less than the immediately practical is utterly pointless. When the church becomes the main place for evangelism and attraction rather than the gathering of God's people meant for edification, theology is pushed aside in favour of something more flashy.

As pastors recover their God-ordained role as theological shepherds of God's flock, they will be more readily able to push back against the proliferation of unbiblical ideas. When the wolves come creeping into the church, espousing ideas contrary to the biblical witness, the one whom God has placed to protect the flock is not the detached theologian but the pastor who is a theologian. Athanasius *contra mundum* goes the common saying, not Athanasius *contra ecclesiam*.¹⁰ The pastor is tasked to be for the church, for the sheep, guarding the good deposit, and passing it down; not standing in opposition against the church, or apathetically beside the church. In short, the primary task of the pastor is one of biblical-theological education and edification through the proclamation of eternal truths as laid down in God's Word. Pastoral neglect towards the task of theology is tantamount to pastoral neglect in shepherding the sheep of God; a recovery of the pastor-theologian will, likewise, result in a recovery of the pastor as shepherd.

As theologians recover the purpose for which theology exists, namely to worship God and edify the church, they will be drawn back to the basic institution of God's people: the church. Just as the church is in need of theology, so too are theologians in need of the church—the institution for which all theology ought to be done.

⁹ The idea of the church being theologically anemic is from Hiestand and Wilson, *The Pastor-Theologian*, 53. They later go on to describe academic theology as being ecclesiastically anemic.

¹⁰ That is, Athanasius “against the world,” not Athanasius “against the church.” While it is true that many of those whom Athanasius was standing against may have been located within the church, Athanasius was never against the church but was always fighting for the church.

Conclusion

Throughout history, the pastorate has been the primary seat from which theology has been written. From the first century to the collapse of the Roman Empire, from the middle ages to the reformation and beyond, theology has by and large been done by pastors. The rise of the university at the turn of the century led to professional theologians detached from the church which, in the millennia since, has led to a church that is theologically averse and unable to answer the questions of the day. Looking back through history provides an opportunity to assess, course correct, and Lord willing, bridge once more the pastor-theologian divide.