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The Pastor as a Theologian

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The Pastor as Theologian

ONE OF the saddest aspects of the church in these times is the gulf between the pastor and the theologian. As we look out over the Christian world at large, it seems evident that theology increasingly is limited to "the experts." Theologians as a group spend a large portion of a lifetime mastering the ancient language of the Bible, church history, and philosophical skills in order to understand and help develop the theology of the church. The learning required in preparation is enormous and difficult; small wonder, then, that the theologians seem to be a breed apart and that their pronouncements often go unchallenged.

Some aspects of this situation, however, create unhealthy conditions as far as the life of the church is concerned. On the one hand, the writings of the theologians attract an ever-diminishing circle. More and more they appear directed toward *other* theologians; what we end up with is a self-perpetuating system within the church. Further—and this is a distressing fact of modern theology—many theologians seem to feel that they can carry on their endeavor without a deep commitment to the church itself. A curious detachment (or even divorce) from church policy and evangelistic endeavor often marks their efforts.

The pastorate, on the other hand, is less and less concerned about theology. It is preoccupied with accommodating itself to methods and skills made available by the human sciences such as counseling, guidance, and sociological understanding.

Problems of church administration also demand the pastor's constant atten-

dren respond very quickly to a worthy word of honest praise.

4. *Spend money on recreation.* Our children are the best investments we have for the future. When we come to the end of the way and the road is lonely, loving and considerate children will then be far more precious than all the accumulated assets we can imagine. In order to bind their hearts to ours we need to provide for their recreational needs. Money spent on suitable games, hobbies, and sports equipment is well invested. So often we deny our children's needs in this area because of our personal interest in cars, cameras, tape recorders, and such gadgets, which we consider so essential or because of our feverish desire for a larger bank balance. The Bible says, "He that is greedy of gain troubleth his own house" (Proverbs 15:27). It should be added that one does not have to be lavish in this regard. Actually the value comes more from your involvement in your children's sports than from the amount of money spent.

5. *Make religion attractive.* Children are expert detectives. We cannot deceive children by a façade of piety. They can read us like a book. Let us bring the reality of the Christian life into the home and show our children that we love Jesus, and that He is real to us.

6. *Watch your personality.* Jesus said, "Be of good cheer; I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). As ministers we have more reason to live cheerfully than any other person on earth because we should know Christ, and be experiencing His presence with us daily. Of all people we ministers should "rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory."

While we are to relax when at home we should not assume the right to save our smiles and pleasant expressions for those outside the family circle. If anyone has a claim to our cheerful demeanor it is our immediate family. We ought to be fun to live with.

Whatever may have been our past experience, Christ is able to make the future all that it ought to be. If we have been neglectful of our wives or children; if we have allowed the burden of our profession to rob us of the radiant joy that is our right to experience, we now have opportunity to correct our course and to learn to live in love before it is forever too late.

"And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you" (Ephesians 4:32). ■■

tion. Very often pastors look upon theologians as enjoying a life of luxury—luxury that the hard-pressed church can no longer afford. The concern more and more is for “relevance”; for answers for the here and now, not the abstruse meanderings and hair-splitting arguments that seem rooted in an age long since dead.

It is in the light of such a situation that I would like to frame a proposal: The best theologian will be one who is also a pastor, while every pastor, if he is truly to be a pastor, must also function as a theologian.

Time to Define “Theology”

Perhaps it is time for a definition of “theology.” Standard works on systematic theology usually employ statements like that of Augustus H. Strong, “Theology is the science of God and of the relations between God and the universe.”¹ The problem with this definition, and all others like it, is that they do not presuppose any requirement on the part of the one who is doing theology—presumably, *anyone* can be a theologian. But is this so? Must not theology be a study that grows out of the life committed to God in Jesus Christ?

For this reason I reject Strong’s definition in favor of a much older statement. Anselm of Canterbury in the twelfth century spoke of *fides quaerens intellectum*—“faith seeking understanding.”² It is the one who *believes* who seeks to understand! Personal understanding, communication of the faith and its defense all drive us ever onward and deeper in the search for the “science of salvation.”

So often we read the Bible and rejoice, but when we read the works of the theologians we wonder where the life has gone. In my judgment theology is *never* to be viewed as a cold, detached, rational study. Instead, it is to be rooted and grounded in “the faith;” it should glow with life, for it deals with ideas that are gloriously alive.

Thus, the best theology will grow out of a deeply devotional life. Theology and piety are not opposed; each may support the other. Nor will the best theologian be one who locks himself away among his erudite books and comes out periodically to blink in the light of the day. No; he is dealing with *the faith*—not a faith once held by the saints, but the faith that is *now* to be lived—and preached. Only as he keeps close to life, only as his ear is open to “the still, sad music of humanity,”³ can he do his best

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work. Ultimately, the faith is concerned with *people*, not with remote ideas. This is why the best theologian at heart will truly be a pastor.

How Can Pastors Be Theologians?

What of the pastor—how is he to be a theologian? Granted, it is not his calling to spend long hours with books as does the theologian—though I fear that ministers today study all too little. The pastor’s work of communicating the gospel inevitably involves him, however, in the tasks of theology. Every time he opens his mouth to speak about the faith, he is revealing his understanding of it—he is in some measure a theologian. The only question is whether he will be a good or poor theologian.

As the pastor visits his flock and senses their needs, he must be driven to ponder the great truths of the Word. The people look to him for guidance, for instruction, for comfort. He must spend many hours on his knees, pleading with the Lord for wisdom and understanding; he must come back again and again, pondering the mysteries of his religion. Without this, he may indeed be a counselor, a social worker, an organizer, or even a jolly good fellow—but not a pastor. Only as he himself has sought (even with tears and intensity of struggle) for understanding can he feed the flock. So, at his own level and in his own way, the pastor is a theologian.

Theology Not a Luxury

Theology is *not* a luxury. Without theology there would be no Christian church. It is theology that has made us what we are.

Nor can we rest upon the work of the past. The pillars of the faith shall continue to stand, but the ongoing rush of time calls for continual effort in theology. Each generation must rethink the faith; it must seek to understand it in an effort to be more effective in communicating and defending it. The task of theology will never be done.

And in that task every pastor is to have a part. He should not become an echo of the voices of those who are professional theologians, nor should he dismiss the entire theological enterprise with a shrug. Let him be, first of all, a man of the Word and a man of the people. Then his work as a pastor will truly forward the theology of the Church. ■

¹ Augustus Hopkins Strong, *Systematic Theology*, London, 1958, p. 1.

² Anselm, *Proslogion*, I.

³ William Wordsworth, “Tintern Abbey.”