

Theological Vocation and the Church

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I am neither a prophet nor the son of a prophet (cf. Amos 7:14); my grandfather was a pastor, as was my father. From my early teens I, too, felt called to pastoral ministry. This has been my vocational self-understanding since I had a concept of vocation. As this call deepened and expanded, I came to conceive of the pastoral vocation as a distinctly theological vocation. As such, I am grateful for the opportunity to be included in this panel on the future of theological vocation, with the task of speaking to the intersection of theological vocation and pastoral ministry. As a way to introduce the main thesis of my presentation, I thought it might be helpful to share my personal story.

I attended a Bible college right out of high school and then went on to serve as an associate pastor in an Evangelical Free Church in small town Nebraska. Along the way, I was very interested in theology. During my time serving as a pastor, I began to think a fair bit about the doctrine of justification. The questions I had surrounding this doctrine emerged out of my own personal history as well as what I was seeing in my church. I left pastoral ministry to attend Trinity Evangelical Divinity School (Deerfield, Illinois). While there, I completed a graduate degree in Christian thought, with a cognate in church history. I had not enrolled as a graduate student to become better educated about the practical nature of pastoral ministry. I had already spent a number of years in pastoral ministry and did not feel the need to go back for pastoral training *per se*; instead going back to school for more distinctly theological motivations. Throughout my program my sense of vocation remained unchanged.

I am deeply grateful for my time at Trinity. It was a seminally shaping experience in a number of key ways. Upon returning to school after a number of years in pastoral ministry, it struck me that there was a disconnect between the sorts of theological questions I wanted to engage with as a pastor and the way those questions were being framed in the classroom. At the time I was unable to articulate this disconnect. It was more a sense, a feeling. I do not want to overstate this, but there was a bit of a miss between what was happening theologically in the classroom and what I had been experiencing theologically as a pastor. Please note, the disconnect I am referring to was not between praxis and theology (an oft lamented disconnect) but between theology in the pastorate and theology in the academy. In other words, I was sensing a *theological* disconnect, not a *ministerial* disconnect.

One of the classes I took while at Trinity was taught by Dr. Doug Sweeney on the theology and ministry of Jonathan Edwards. During the class we examined the life and times of congregational New England. Dr. Sweeney pointed out that Jonathan Edwards, despite his later fame, was by no means the only pastor theologian of his day. In Edwards' day the primary theologians of New England were located in the pastoral community.¹ Pastors such as Samuel Hopkins and Joseph Bellamy served shoulder to shoulder with other pastors as the primary theologians of the New England colonies. The schools such as Yale and the College of New Jersey (later to become Princeton University) were still fledgling at this time. What struck me was that the schools were formally and informally under the theological and ministry leadership of the pastoral community. In the main, the prestige and the honor of being a professional theologian were not to be found in the classroom but in the churches. This meant that as theology was produced in the colonies, it was produced by pastors in local churches and then given by the pastoral community to the schools that were training the future generation of pastors.

The situation that one finds in colonial New England—where the pastorate represents the apex of the theological vocation—can be found in the broader history of the church. Many, arguably most, of the most important theologians in the history of the church have been clergy—Theophilus, Irenaeus, Athanasius, Augustine, Gregory the Great, Calvin, Baxter, Edwards, Wesley, et al. The list is a veritable Who's Who of the most important theologians in the church's history.² However, such is not the case today; the term "theologian" most immediately conjures up images of the classroom and the university. The academy, not the church, has become the default vocational context for theologians. We now view the academy as the principal vocational home of a theologian. Theology now *originates* in an academic context and is *taught* in an academic context to

future pastors. Without yet saying whether this is good or bad, this is surely an observation that bears noting.³

When young folks are making their way through ministry training, many come to that point where they have to make a choice between pursuing a PhD and opting (or perhaps more modestly, hoping) for a career in the academy, or leaving theological scholarship behind and heading into the pastorate. This vocational dichotomy was brought home in a fresh way when I was invited to give an address to the Student Theological Society at Moody Bible Institute. This group of motivated students meets once a week to discuss the latest issues in theology, and most weeks they invite a guest theologian to speak to a specific issue. The student president had been there for a couple of years, and after I gave my presentation, he said to me, “You are the first pastor that we have had in two years.” Now that is pretty interesting. And telling. At a theological college that is training men and women for pastoral ministry and for church ministry, the Student Theological Society does not look to the pastoral community to speak to theological issues.

I do not want to be absolute here; I think there are exceptions to this. By and large, however, the pastoral vocation is no longer principally conceived of in theological terms; it is conceived of primarily in pragmatic terms. This is especially the case for those traditions that trace their heritage back through the Second Great Awakening.⁴

As a result we find ourselves in this reversal of the historical paradigm in North America, and we might ask, I think fruitfully, “Does it matter?” That things have reversed is obvious; but is this of consequence? I would suggest that it is for two reasons.

Theological Anemia of the Church, Ecclesial Anemia of Theology

To begin, as we have moved theologians away from the pastorate and into the academy, we have inevitably ended up with a decline in the theological integrity of our churches.⁵ There really should not be any surprise at this point. Certainly, a decline of theologians in the pastoral community is going to necessarily result in a decline of theological acuity in our churches. The problem here, of course, is that theology and ethics are inexorably tied together. To be sure, there is more to ethics than theology, but there is not less. What we believe about God, about the world, about our future, inevitably influences the choices we make. We live in complex times. Questions regarding anthropology, gender, wealth, and the nature of the family and marriage are all up for grabs in our culture. Without

careful theological reflection, our churches are inclined to lose their way. As Kevin Vanhoozer has pointed out, doctrine is the script that allows the church to play its part well.⁶ Without robust theology, the plot line is lost; ethics falter, and the church loses sight of its mission to be the people of God on mission with God. A return of the pastor theologian will not solve all the ethical (or theological) ills of the church, but certainly this would be a step in the right direction.

Beyond the theological anemia of the churches, there is a corresponding ecclesial anemia of theology.⁷ Contemporary theology is no longer grown out of the native soil that it is intended to serve. The world of the academy is not the world of the church. If there is one thing postmodernity has shown us, it is that our respective worlds inform and shape the questions we bring to the theological enterprise. This is not to suggest that there is no overlap between the academy and the church, but folks on both sides will admit, quite readily, that these are different worlds. The sorts of theological questions that I am interested in asking as a pastor are often very different sorts of theological questions than an academic theologian might be interested in asking.

As a pastor, I spend an enormous amount of time working with folks who are struggling with issues related to parenting, marriage, sexual boundaries in dating relationships, anger issues, pornography, and such. These are all issues that require astute theological reflection if they are to be handled well. Yet these issues are not generally the entry point for Christian academics. For the most part these types of issues are only being addressed at a popular level. That is insufficient for how important they are in the lives of God's people.

This reality of social location is what gives rise to the lamentable caricature of academic theology as being out of touch with the church. The problem is not that Christian academics live and serve in a different context than the church; the problem is that the church has placed unrealistic expectations on academic theologians. We pastors have unwisely outsourced the theological enterprise to the academy and then complained when we find ourselves underserved. What did we expect? The pressing questions of the academy are not always congruent with the pressing questions of our churches. This is not a critique of the academy. The academic guild has its own standards, methods, concerns, and questions. If these questions and concerns do not always overlap with the church, then perhaps it is time for the pastoral community to once again embrace the role of the theologian.

We find ourselves today in a place where there is a theological anemia in the church and an ecclesial anemia in theology. What can be done moving forward? It is at this point that we need to rethink the future of theological vocation with respect to the local church. Or to put it into a question: What would it look like to have a theological vocation in the church?

A Taxonomy of the Pastor Theologian

A big part of my work as a pastor, and as the director of the Center for Pastor Theologians, has been to try and reimagine what it might be like to raise up a new generation of pastor theologians. Toward that end, I have begun to think of the pastor theologian along the lines of a threefold taxonomy.⁸

The term “pastor theologian” is a bit vague and subjective. This is less so with the term “academic theologian.” If someone says so-and-so is an academic theologian, what that means objectively is that the person resides in the academy as a vocation and they do theological scholarship. If we say that someone is a pastor theologian, it is not quite as clear. Certainly it means that such a person is a pastor, vocationally. The meaning of the term “theologian” when used in the context of the pastor theologian is not immediately discernable. Sometimes it means that the pastor has many hardcover books in his study, and sometimes it means that the pastor’s preaching ministry is shaped by theological categories, jargon, and concerns. For many, it just means that the pastor is a very smart pastor. But I want to give us three ways of thinking about the pastor theologian that are all mutually interdependent and mutually complementary.

The Pastor Theologian as “Local Theologian”

The first species of pastor theologian in my taxonomy is what I call the local theologian. By this I mean a pastor theologian who brings theological leadership to a local congregation. Here, the primary mechanism for doing theological work is the sermon, but this is also extended through classes, a church newsletter, or perhaps individual counseling situations. The key here is that the local theologian has a local audience for his theology (i.e., the local congregation) and that the principal audience of the local theologian is laity. This is probably the most common understanding of the pastor theologian in contemporary parlance. It is certainly the most common understanding of the pastor theologian advocated for today.⁹

The Pastor Theologian as “Popular Theologian”

The pastor theologian as popular theologian is another way of thinking of the identity of the pastor theologian. This second species is a pastor theologian who has embraced the calling of the local theologian, but then has extended his theological reach through a writing ministry. This might take the form of a popular blog, but more often it takes shape in the form of books that are written to congregants and that address theological topics. The idea here is that of a pastor

theologian who engages as a reader of theological scholarship and who then serves as a translator of theology for the uninitiated. The popular theologian sorts through academic scholarship, determines what is relevant to the church, gets their hands around it, and then repackages it in ways that can be communicated to laity. Like the local theologian, the principle audience for the popular theologian is the laity, spread out over a number of congregations.

The Pastor Theologian as “Ecclesial Theologian”

Both of the above identities of the pastor theologian are vital to the health of the church, but they do not exhaust the full range of possibilities for the pastor theologian. At the Center for Pastor Theologians we have been pressing toward a third species of the pastor theologian: the pastor theologian as ecclesial theologian. What we have in mind here is a pastor who embodies the best of the local theologian, does some of the work of a popular theologian, and then beyond this, is doing theological work for other theologians and pastors. In other words, the ecclesial theologian is doing the sort of theological scholarship reflective of past generations of pastor theologians. A key identifying mark of the ecclesial theologian is audience. The principal audience of the ecclesial theologian is not the laity but rather other theologians and scholars.

Pretty quickly at this point I am at pains to clarify the difference between an academic theologian and an ecclesial theologian.¹⁰ Is an ecclesial theologian simply a theologian who is doing academic scholarship but in a different context? The short answer is no. The difference between an ecclesial theologian and an academic theologian is that the ecclesial theologian consciously embraces the context of congregational life as the grist for his or her theological scholarship. Or again, the questions that drive the ecclesial theologian’s scholarship are the questions that are bubbling up from congregational life.

It is now widely recognized that social location significantly influences theological reflection. Insofar as theology is an effort to appropriate the truth of Scripture in light of life’s questions, each theologian’s theological paradigm will be—cannot help but be—heavily influenced and directed by the particular questions that arise from his or her unique social location. As Daniel Migliore has appropriately noted, “the concrete situation of theology helps to shape the questions that are raised and the priorities that are set.”¹¹

The reality of social location and its impact on theological formation is now well known, due in no small part to the rise of postmodern epistemology. Postmodernity, for all of its hang-ups, has reminded us that our seemingly neutral ways of looking at a given data set are not so neutral. We are unable to fully dis-

entangle ourselves from our own particular contexts. God alone has the bird's-eye view. Our respective social locations not only influence what we see, but also and more importantly they influence our "first thoughts"¹²—the presuppositions we bring to the epistemic task. No longer can we naïvely conceive of ourselves as approaching theological investigation from without, over, and above. Immersed within our own unique social location, the road before us has—to a certain extent—already been forked. Postmodernity's fresh acknowledgement of social location opens the doors for a fresh contribution from the ecclesial theologian.

The ecclesial theologian is not just an academic theologian doing academic theology. Nor is the ecclesial theologian a newly minted PhD who cannot find an academic position and so has gone into local church ministry as a fallback (all the while hoping to be able to get back into the academy at some point). Rather, we are thinking of someone who is immersed in the social location of the church and whose scholarship is driven by ecclesial concern.

Both the academic theologian and the ecclesial theologian have advantages with their respective social locations, and the advantages of both locations should be utilized. A friend of mine is a theology research professor at a major university in Chicago. He gets every other semester for research. That is a different world than the world in which I live as a pastor. He has opportunities to engage in research that I simply am not going to be able to match. I am not here suggesting that somehow the ecclesial theologian should try to keep abreast of the kind of research pace that is possible in the academy. What I have that my friend does not have is the social setting of the local church and the press of the local church ministry that helps to shape the questions that need to be answered.

Likewise, the academic guild standards are both a blessing and a bane for meeting the theological needs of the church. Many of the guild constraints in the academy are good; the peer review process and the burden of proof threshold help foster a high level of integrity in theological scholarship. In many ways, the guild constraints of the university that emerged from the Enlightenment do not serve the theological needs of the church. The valorizing of neutrality and objectivity, and the too often refusal to make moral truth claims, runs counter to the theological needs of the church. The church's best theologians have been those with much personal investment in their subject matter and who are not afraid to preach. The ecclesial theologian is free of these Enlightenment guild constraints and is able to press forward in distinctly ecclesial projects without the negative peer pressure, as it were, that comes from the academy.¹³

Conclusion

Both social locations—the academy and the church—are legitimate. Both have legitimate questions, and both need legitimate Christian responses that emerge from within these respective social locations. An argument in favor of the ecclesial theologian is not to say that we should move all of our theologians out of the academy and make them pastors in local churches. That would be disastrous on a number of levels, both for the churches and for the academy. What I am saying here is that we need to get beyond the day when it is assumed that all those with theological, scholarly gifting must go into the academy as the only appropriate vocational context for producing theological scholarship. Some of these folks should be directed into church ministry and be given space to do theological work that is not just popular, not just for their congregation—as important as that is—but theological work that is driven by all the things that a local church would drive a theologian to think about.

All of this is to say that I think there is a bright new future for a theological vocation in the church that positions pastors not merely as passive receivers of theology, but rather positions the pastoral community—or at least some within the pastoral community—as equal conversation partners with academic theologians for the betterment of evangelical theology and for the betterment of the church.

Notes

- * Gerald Hiestand is Senior Associate Pastor at Calvary Memorial Church and the Executive Director and cofounder of the Center for Pastor Theologians (www.pastorth theologians.com). He is the author, along with Todd Wilson, of *The Pastor Theologian: Resurrecting an Ancient Vision* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015). This paper is an edited transcript from a session on “The Economics of the Theological Vocation,” organized by the Theology of Work and Economics consultation at the 2014 annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society.
- 1. For more on the North American context, see Gerald Hiestand, “Pastor-Scholar to Professor-Scholar: Exploring the Theological Disconnect between the Academy and the Church,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 70 (2008): 355–69. Also, Donald M. Scott, *From Office to Profession: The New England Ministry 1750–1850* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1978), 52–53.
- 2. For a detailed analysis of the pastor theologian in church history, see Hiestand and Wilson, *The Pastor Theologian*, 21–41, 133–72; also Kevin J. Vanhoozer and Owen Strachan, *The Pastor as Public Theologian: Reclaiming a Lost Vision* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), 69–93.

3. See Hiestand and Wilson, *Pastor Theologian*, 42–52, for an executive summary of the decline of the pastor theologian in European and North American history.
4. See Nathan Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 27–30.
5. See Hiestand and Wilson, *Pastor Theologian*, 53–64, for an extended discussion of this theme.
6. See Kevin Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005).
7. See Hiestand and Wilson, *Pastor Theologian*, 65–78.
8. For a detailed exposition of this taxonomy, see Hiestand and Wilson, *Pastor Theologian*, 79–87. Also, Hiestand, “A Taxonomy of the Pastor Theologian: Why PhD Students Should Consider the Pastorate as the Context for Their Theological Scholarship,” *The Expository Times* 124, no. 6 (2013): 261–71.
9. The pastor theologian as local theologian is the default identity of the pastor theologian in contemporary literature. See Vanhoozer and Strachan, *Public Theologian*; Vanhoozer, *Drama*, 454–55; the twin essays by John Piper and D. A. Carson in *The Pastor as Scholar and the Scholar as Pastor: Reflections on Life and Ministry*, ed. Owen Strachan and David Mathis (Wheaton: Crossway, 2011); Al Mohler Jr., *He Is Not Silent: Preaching in a Postmodern World* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2008), 105–14. For a similar vision of the pastor theologian in the mainline tradition, see in Wallace M. Alston and Cynthia A. Jarvis, eds., *The Power to Comprehend with All the Saints: The Formation and Practice of a Pastor-Theologian* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009); and Michael Welker and Cynthia Jarvis, eds., *Loving God with Our Minds: The Pastor as Theologian* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004).
10. We make this distinction at length in Hiestand and Wilson, *Pastor Theologian*, 88–101.
11. Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 14.
12. Kevin Vanhoozer, *First Theology: God, Scripture & Hermeneutics* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 19. For Vanhoozer, “first thoughts” (or prolegomena) involve the questions that each theologian brings to the theological task.
13. See Hiestand and Wilson, *Pastor Theologian*, 65–78.