



## The Pastor as Theologian

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A discussion of the topic, "The Pastor as Theologian," could suggest that theological activity is only one of several roles appropriate to the parish minister. This article will take a different view. The pastor *is* theologian, and the theological responsibility informs and shapes all other aspects of the pastoral calling. What follows is a reflection on essential dimensions of that responsibility as it is assumed by clergy living in late twentieth-century America.

### I

A growing number of Christian folk, both laity and clergy, would agree that there is a singular timeliness to this subject. Among them are those persons who recall with nostalgia an earlier pattern of ministry and the apparent doctrinal certainty of its practitioners. Certain clergy, consumed by every kind of pastoral activity except theological work, sense a growing lack of content and direction in their ministries and look to theology for help. Others wonder whether theology might succeed in areas where various techniques and programs have failed to deliver what they had promised. It comes to this: the majority of pastors and laypeople does not question the importance of theology. Their question rather has to do with the possibility and necessity of theological work within the setting of the parish ministry.

The question is not frivolous, and the difficulties are real. A modern congregation expects much from its pastor, and its demands upon time and energy can be extensive. The massiveness and complexity of the theological enterprise itself further intimidate the pastor who is well aware of personal academic limitations and the increasing specialization of those working in particular theological fields.

Frequent lack of support by clergy colleagues and laypersons undermines the confidence which a pastor undertaking serious theological work requires. The intellectual labor demanded, the uncertainty with respect to one's competency and judgment in areas of controversy, the loneliness that frequently accompanies any solitary activity—these factors also contribute to a minister's ambivalence with respect to the theological vocation. Perhaps most crucial is the question which the

conscientious pastor will ask continually, "Of what use is my theological work for the life and mission of the Christian community I am called to serve?"

These concerns merit serious attention. Nevertheless, the basic issue remains, and it brings into sharper focus the theological responsibility of the parish pastor. In lectures given to

American audiences, Karl Barth put the matter clearly:

Theology is committed directly to the community and especially to those members who are responsible for preaching, teaching, and counseling. The task theology has to fulfill is continually to stimulate and lead them to face squarely the question of the proper relation of their human speech to the Word of God, which is the origin, object, and content of this speech.<sup>1</sup>

The “proper relation of...human speech to the Word of God”—this issue, and all in the church’s life which depends upon its faithful resolution, defines the theological responsibility of the parish pastor. The vocation of the theologian-pastor is bound up with the integrity of the Christian message and community and mission. For it is in that unique calling that the lessons of the past, the challenges of the present, and the promises of the future come together in forms of thought which are related directly to the actual experiences of the congregation and its members. In this way and this person theology serves the church in its true service of the world.

## II

How is the vocation of the theologian-pastor to be understood in relation to the calling and work of the academic theologian? This is a question of decisive importance for both. From the standpoint of the pastor, a confused response may lead to frustration, hostility, and a crippling sense of inferiority. From the standpoint of the academic theologian, failure to resolve this problem may result in bitterness, alienation from the life of the church, and theological sterility.

It is immediately apparent that the pastor and the teacher of theology serve in different situations. The pastor must function as a theological generalist, while the teacher is expected to achieve specialized competence. The research upon which much of the progress of theological thought depends is ordinarily done in an institutional and not a parish setting. While parishioners and students have much in common, they also express different needs and expectations. The range of questions which pastor and teacher deal with will vary considerably, and their forms of response will differ widely.

Yet more unites than separates the theologian-pastor and the academic theologian. Both are “teachers of the church.” The same historical-critical methods are properly employed by each; the same passion for truth animates pastor and professor. The honored term “vocation” can be applied with equal validity to the committed service of the academic theologian and to that of the minister of Word and sacraments. Indispensable for both is the criticism and encouragement of colleagues.

Just as surely, they need one another. Both academic and pastoral theologians serve a living community, the church, and where they function with mu-

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<sup>1</sup>Karl Barth, *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction* (New York: Doubleday, 1964) 35.

tual understanding and respect they inspire the witness and service of the people of God powerfully. And as the German theologian Gerhard Ebeling reminds us, the test of their separate, though intimately related, callings is the same:

A higher evaluation of a scholarly career generally betrays a poor understanding of theology. The exercise of the theological vocation in which it develops its most comprehensive relation to life may not be placed in the shadow by the necessary special service of academic theology. *In each form, however, the measure of a theologian's vocation is whether what so easily threatens to break apart comes into a unity: that which is the object of knowledge and understanding and that which is the subject of innermost persuasion and utmost living devotion*<sup>2</sup> (italics mine).

Where there exists that unity of scholarly study and humble trust, of rigorous reflection and inner commitment, theologians in parish and academic institutions are able to work with vocational integrity. Furthermore, they are able to work with each other, correcting one another, giving to and receiving from each other the particular insights which their places of service and defined duties make possible. Together they can face the staggering tasks which confront humanity at this junction in its sad and splendid history. Together they can live in the liberating awareness that those who concern themselves with the proper relation of human words to the Word of God are also addressed by that sovereign voice. That stern yet comforting reminder comes to us from the pastor-teacher of Basel, who says,

In the last analysis, [the theologian] is the one who is concerned, questioned, and accused by God's Word; judged and justified, comforted and admonished, not only in his function and role among his fellow men, but also personally in his existence for himself.<sup>3</sup>

In this consciousness the pastor-theologian and the academic theologian are one. Acknowledging the necessary interdependence of their different callings, they are free to deal with one another as persons who experience—also in their theological work—the judgment and the mercy of God.

### III

What constitutes the calling of the theologian-pastor? Gerhard Ebeling has said that it is “the exercise of the theological vocation in which it develops its most comprehensive relation to life.” What then are the components of that “comprehensive relation to life” in terms of the pastor's calling? They include all that relates to the faith of the church, the understanding of the context in which that faith is expressed, the manner in which the faith comes to contemporary expression, and the process of interaction between theology and contemporary existence.

These four elements of the theological vocation of the parish pastor stand in essential relationship with one another. Not always do they occur in the sequence listed, but each has its necessary contribution to make to responsible theological work in a parish setting. To disregard any of these components is to trivialize a

<sup>2</sup>Gerhard Ebeling, *The Study of Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978) 3.

<sup>3</sup>K. Barth, *Evangelical Theology*, 72.

process which seeks to help the Christian community reach authentic self-understanding.

*1. The theologian-pastor has a primary responsibility to the Christian tradition.* Simply put, this means that the minister does not begin a new work but continues what has been inaugurated by earlier generations of theologians and martyrs and confessors of the faith. Theology emerges from the struggles of human history and the requirement that the church declare itself in respect to those struggles. Thus current questions and answers need to be examined in the light of what has been said and experienced by earlier Christians in circumstances somewhat similar to our own. No pastor can afford the arrogance that ignores the enduring contributions of those who have preceded us in time and thought. The pastor who takes seriously the theological vocation also becomes, in this place and age, a bearer of the Christian tradition.

The normative element in that tradition is the Bible. Knowledge of the Bible, a knowledge deepened through regular study and pastoral use, remains the most important single factor in the shaping of the theologian-pastor. Our advantages in this respect are considerable. No previous generation has possessed the scholarly resources for biblical study which are available to us. Contemporary methods of scriptural interpretation are superior to anything which existed in earlier generations. Yet without disciplined use, these resources are of little value for the preaching and teaching of the parish pastor. Employed with regularity and critical insight, however, they open up for the pastor the meaning of the biblical texts in terms of their historical meaning, their kerygmatic intent, and their theological usefulness. No “devotional” approach to the Bible, however well motivated, can substitute for the scholarly effort of the theologian-pastor to come to terms with the biblical message. What makes this disciplined concern with the text especially rewarding is the parish context itself, bursting with urgent and penetrating questions.

While the study of the Scriptures is foundational for the theological work of the pastor, one cannot dismiss as irrelevant the development of doctrine and theology since the first century. Movements and controversies of the past may offer important clues to the understanding of contemporary religious and cultural phenomena and an appropriate Christian response. Our own age exhibits a number of similarities to that historical period before Christianity became the religion of the Empire, and leading theologians of that era (e.g., Irenaeus and Origen) speak with amazing freshness even today. The Reformation should have particular, if not exclusive, interest for Lutheran pastors. Yet our concentration may have been too narrow. If, as Gustaf Wingren contends, Luther and Calvin stand in closer theological relationship than do the New Testament writers Paul and Matthew, we deprive ourselves of what both may contribute to a modern understanding of the faith by our customary practice of selective ignorance. Those fascinating individuals known as the “radical reformers” are being critically reassessed today, and it is shortsighted for us to discount them as merely precursors of modern fundamentalism. Critically important, of course, is some knowledge of the progress of reform in the Roman Catholic Church, from the Reformation to the present, as background for the impressive renewal which has followed the Second Vatican Council.

The twentieth century owes an immense debt to nineteenth century theo-

gians, and the pastor can derive real benefit from the works of its leading thinkers. At the same time, our century, in which the pace of social and technological change has vastly quickened, sets before us new situations and questions. If the pastor-theologian wants to attempt a serious

response to those challenges, he or she must gain a basic familiarity with the theological issues and leading thinkers of the present. Karl Barth, Rudolf Bultmann, Paul Tillich, Karl Rahner, and Hans Küng are among those whose theological engagement with contemporary culture calls for our respectful study, if not unqualified assent. Encouragement for the pastor to enter into theological conversation with these figures is no argument for some kind of faddish preoccupation with the “new,” but rather is the conscious acceptance of the obligation to discover those forms of human speech which best communicate the Word of God today. No one knows this better than the parish pastor, whose “comprehensive relation to life” requires the most thoughtful and imaginative efforts to convey to contemporaries the truth about the controlling realities of human existence.

To be responsible to and for the Christian tradition is not to relate to its manifold expressions in a naive or uncritical fashion. The pastor is also a confessional theologian, that is, one who receives Christian identity within a particular family of faith which historically has offered a unique witness and which even now is able to adapt its distinctive insights to new situations. At the same time, the theological work of the minister is a profoundly ecumenical activity, consciously carried on within and for the sake of the one Christian church. This also means that the pastor is open to the correction and enrichment which may come through the theological efforts of the representatives of other Christian communities. Perhaps the one activity of the parish pastor in which both the confessional and ecumenical commitments come to most unified expression is the weekly liturgy of the congregation. It too is bearer of the tradition; it also reflects the church’s struggle for authentic self-understanding as this has been sought through theological engagement. No sensitive pastor will be indifferent to its influence and power.

*2. The theologian-pastor must be involved in a continuing process of critical analysis.* A superficial understanding of either church or society inevitably results in a denatured message, a gospel which does not engage the realities of social and personal existence but floats above them in pious irrelevance. Equally alarming is the threat of the cultural cooptation of the church by the reigning values and dominant structures of a society. For the pastor this means the acceptance of the obligation to understand the prevailing social and ecclesiastical contexts. Commitment to a process of critical analysis is essential if one is to maintain the theological integrity of the Christian faith in rapidly changing circumstances.

Admittedly the pastor feels uncomfortable in the role of social critic. Limitations of education and experience quickly become apparent, and the incredible complexity of modern institutions and their supporting ideologies further inhibits the formation of independent and possibly contrary views. Efforts by the clergyperson to function in this area regularly will be countered by voices from within and without the religious community which attack the competency of the pastor who makes social evaluations and further question the propriety of such activity on the part of religious leaders. The nature of the opposition itself indicates the urgent need for the exercise of the pastor’s critical function.

The issue has to do fundamentally with the truth and the power of the gospel in any human situation. Certainly the pastor should seek greater competence in those fields of knowledge which contribute to social analysis and particularly in the area of economic theory

with its conflicting approaches. Clearly the pastor will want to resist all efforts to “use” the church and its leadership for purposes which run counter to Christian values and goals. Yet there is no reason for the minister to retire in silent embarrassment from the arena of social contention. That very “earthy” book, the Bible, is an invaluable resource for the pastor engaged in social critique. The controlling beliefs and commitments of the biblical writers, the central vision of a new cosmos “in which justice will make its home” (2 Peter 3:13), provide a unique vantage point from which the evasions and brutalities and corruptions of power endemic to society may be uncovered and identified for the destructive realities they are. From a biblical perspective, for example, how can anyone defend those social systems which heap additional suffering on the poor? How can any Christian tolerate the degrading and dehumanizing practices which emerge from class and racial and sexual distinctions? Does not the attentive reader of the Scriptures object to the continuing justification of ecological despoliation, militaristic terror, and economic exploitation and insist that they be exposed as the idolatrous and death-dealing powers that they are? We are not speaking here of solutions for these issues but of the pastor’s responsibility to understand and help others to understand the human situation in both its degradation and possibility. In more classic theological terms, the law must be seen as judge of society as well as of the individual.

Let no one assume, however, that the Christian congregation provides a protected haven from which the pastor may release occasional salvos of social criticism. Ecclesiastical structures and practices, and even our formulations of the faith, must be subjected to serious critique. Where a congregation or a pastor’s message mesh too comfortably with prevailing social attitudes—there this work must be undertaken with special urgency. No institution and no person, and especially the pastor (“bearer of the tradition”), can claim exemption from this necessary scrutiny. For example, familiar and deeply-loved theological slogans (e.g., law and gospel, salvation by grace, two kingdoms, Word and sacrament) need fresh examination in terms of what present hearers understand or misunderstand them to be saying. Or consider denominational loyalty. It can mask a hidden pride which arrogantly prevents the community from hearing what the Word of God has to say to it from beyond its confessional borders. There is the romantic tendency to exalt ethnic and cultural factors in a congregation, and this must be acknowledged as a dangerous foolishness which has nothing to do with the gospel. And who has not experienced the temptation to substitute so-called “pure doctrine” for saving faith, to mount fevered attacks upon “good works” while implicitly encouraging ethical passivity, of confusing numerical and financial success with evangelical fidelity? These threats must be confronted, understood...and repudiated. Critical analysis, in other words, is a continuing responsibility of the pastor who faithfully carries out the theological responsibility of the ministerial office.

*3. The theologian-pastor must be committed to the task of theological integration.* This may well be the typical, indeed, inevitable expression of the pastoral vocation. Every minister does this work daily and in an incredible variety of situa-

tions. The demand that theological reflection and the issues of life come into direct and helpful relationship is as old as Christianity itself.

The crucial question is this: given a certain context, what must be said, and how should it be expressed? The cautious repetition of old formulae provides no guarantee that the truth and

meaning of the Christian faith are being conveyed to present-day listeners. The conditioning of persons to ask only those questions to which we think we have the answers is not only dishonest but harmful. Clearly this responsibility can only be discharged by the pastor who listens with sensitivity and understanding, and who attempts to respond to what has been genuinely communicated. A presupposition of any response, of course, is that the pastor works at this task as one who has a basic confidence in the resources provided by the Christian tradition.

How does the parish pastor perform this constructive function? How is theological integration achieved, consciously and with direct application? The disciplined study and critical assessment of the minister have obvious significance for the essential pastoral obligations of preaching and teaching. These primary activities provide unparalleled opportunities for the pastor to bring the insights of the Christian tradition into lively engagement with the problems and questions and hopes of the present. Sometimes this will occur in the course of verbal exchange, and such dialogic interaction with laypersons, colleagues, and non-Christians is essential if theological reflection is to result in forms of expression which are authentically Christian and genuinely human. This does not relieve the pastor of the necessity for putting thought into writing, a discipline which not only encourages greater clarity and comprehensiveness but makes possible the later correction of one's formulations.

It is not generally helpful for the pastor to attempt the work of theological integration as a self-conscious adherent of a particular theological movement or even as the devoted student of an illustrious teacher. Such loyalties have their place, but when exaggerated they can impede the process of theological construction. In discharging this responsibility the parish pastor ought not to be under even the private compulsion of seeking the approval of a respected leader. The sole focus must be upon the Christian "text" and the human context as both come into relation with the actual concerns of those persons whom the pastor is called to serve. All other factors must be subservient to that central purpose.

*4. The theologian-pastor shares in the responsibility for bringing theology into relation with practice.* The work of theological construction does not exist for its own sake. Called to carry out the theological vocation in the "most comprehensive relation to life," the pastor is reminded that every formulation of the faith demands to be tested under the rigorous and ambiguous conditions of contemporary existence. It cannot be otherwise, for that Word spoken in Christ is meant to establish gracious communication with all that is touched by human thought and speech.

This is no novel requirement but is rooted in the biblical witness itself. The demand that theory be tested in practice, and that practice be modified by theory stems from the recognition that truth, for Christians, has to do with the struggle for congruity between thinking and doing. And the truth which concerns us is the gospel and its implications, for the gospel points to that truth which not only enlightens but transforms. It is in this process of speaking and acting, listening and responding, that theology reveals its essential usefulness for the church and

the world. No activity more fully engages the members and pastor of a congregation than this life-situated process.

The practical necessity for this component of the pastor's theological vocation is obvious. Statements which strike a pastor as lucid and compelling may be met with utter incomprehension

on the part of other Christians and non-Christians. A perceived kerygmatic “breakthrough” may only increase the confusion of others. The most well-intentioned theological statements may have tragic results as they are appropriated by persons in particular situations. Our own Lutheran history documents the sad misapplication of what seemed to be correct and appropriate theological formulations. In attempting to determine the truth and relevance of particular theological insights, both pastors and laypeople have to scrutinize the attitudes engendered and the actions taken in response to such formulations.

More than the church’s consistency is at stake. Latin American theologians recently have reminded us that the church exists not for itself but for others. Is what a pastor and laypeople say and do a true and effective expression of the liberating promise of the gospel? Are individuals and institutions which rob persons of dignity and hope confronted forcefully in the name of the God who sets the prisoners free? Is self-deception, in church and society, courageously acknowledged, and is the difficult task of reform inaugurated? Is the God who in Christ justifies the ungodly to be trusted as that strong one who establishes justice for the oppressed? And what are the tasks to which such a God sets his people in this time and place?

In the crucible of practice the words and deeds of Christians undergo that necessary transformation which renders them useful for the purposes of God. What is thus prepared returns again and again to the originating tradition, the gospel of life and hope. No one, pastor or layperson, can participate in this process without a humility that is ready to repent of both theological and personal error. And no one dare begin such work apart from the sustaining grace of Christ.

Thus we may view the theologian-pastor of our time. Profoundly distressed by the tragic and the brutal in human existence, standing in compassionate solidarity with all victims, compelled by the love of Christ to contend for justice and peace, the theologian-pastor announces the grace of that God who in Christ brings all things to blessed newness. Belonging to that community which originated in the event of Jesus and which believes and serves in anticipation of the future he brings, this minister of the congregation helps the church live in harmony with its own purified self-understanding. Together with all other brothers and sisters in Christ, the pastor asks those questions and receives those answers which disrupt every *status quo* that denies the power of death and institutionalizes the forces of death. In service of the one Lord, the crucified Jesus, the theologian-pastor thus proclaims that Word which alone sets humanity free and secures its hope.