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The Pastor As Theologian, Part Two

In a very real sense, Christians live out their most fundamental beliefs in everyday life. One essential task of the pastor is to feed the congregation and to assist Christians to think theologically, in order to demonstrate discernment and authentic discipleship. All this must start with the pastor. Today, Dr. Albert Mohler encourages the preacher to give attention, study, time, and thought to the theological dimensions of ministry. A ministry that is deeply rooted in the deep truths of God's Word will be enriched, protected, and focused by a theological vision.

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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.

The pastor's stewardship of the theological task requires a clear sense of pastoral priority, a keen pastoral ear, and careful attention to the theological dimensions of church life and Christian discipleship. This must be foundational to the ministry of the local church, and ministry must emerge from a fundamentally theological foundation.

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All this must start with the pastor. The preacher must give attention, study, time, and thought to the theological dimensions of ministry. A ministry that is deeply rooted in the deep truths of God's Word will be enriched, protected, and focused by a theological vision.

The pastor's concentrated attention to the theological task is necessary for the establishment of faithful preaching, God-honoring worship, and effective evangelism in the local church. Such a theological vision is deeply rooted in God's truth and in the truth about God that forms the very basis of Christian theology.

The pastor's concentration is a necessary theological discipline. Thus, the pastor must develop the ability to isolate what is most important in terms of theological gravity from that which is less important.

I call this the process of *theological triage*. As anyone who visits a hospital emergency room is aware, a triage nurse is customarily in place in order to make a first-stage evaluation of which patients are most in need of care. A patient with a gunshot wound is moved ahead of a sprained ankle in terms of priority. This makes medical sense, and to misconstrue this sense of priority would amount to medical malpractice.

In a similar manner, the pastor must learn to discern different levels of theological importance. First-order doctrines are those that are fundamental and essential to the Christian faith. The pastor's theological instincts should seize upon any compromise on doctrines such as the full deity and humanity of Christ, the doctrine of the Trinity, the doctrine of atonement, and essentials such as justification by faith alone. Where such doctrines are compromised, the Christian faith falls. When a pastor hears an assertion that Christ's bodily resurrection from the dead is not a necessary doctrine, he must respond with a theological instinct that is based in the fact that such a denial is tantamount to a rejection of the Gospel itself.

Second-order doctrines are those which are essential to church life and necessary for the ordering of the local church, but which, in themselves, do not define the Gospel. That is to say, one may detect an error in a doctrine at this level and still acknowledge that the person in error remains a believing Christian. Nevertheless, such doctrines are directly related to how the church is organized and its ministry is fulfilled. Doctrines found at this level include those most closely related to ecclesiology and the architecture of theological systems. Calvinists and Arminians may disagree concerning a number of vital and urgently important doctrines—or, at the very least, the best way to understand and express these doctrines. Yet, both can acknowledge each other as genuine Christians. At the same time, these differences can become so acute that it is difficult to function together in the local congregation over such an expansive theological difference.

Third-order doctrines are those which may be the ground for fruitful theological discussion and debate, but which do not threaten the fellowship of the local congregation or the denomination. Christians who agree on an entire range of theological issues and doctrines may disagree over matters related to the timing and sequence of events related to Christ's return. Yet, such ecclesiastical debates, while understood to be deeply important because of their biblical nature and connection to the Gospel, do not constitute a ground for separation among believing Christians.

Without a proper sense of priority and discernment, the congregation is left to consider every theological issue to be a matter of potential conflict or, at the other extreme, to see no doctrines as worth defending if conflict is in any way possible.

The pastor's theological concentration establishes a sense of proper proportion and a larger frame of theological reference. At the same time, this concentration on the theological dimension of ministry also reminds the pastor of the necessity of constant watchfulness.

At crucial points in the history of Christian theology, the difference between orthodoxy and heresy has often hung on a single word, or even a syllable. When Arius argued that the Son was to be understood as being of a *similar* substance as the Father, Athanasius correctly understood that the entirety of the Gospel was at risk. As Athanasius faithfully led the church to understand, the New Testament clearly teaches that the Son is of the *same* substance as the Father. In the Greek language, the distinction between the word offered by Arius and the correction offered by Athanasius was a single syllable. Looking back, we can now see that when the Council of Nicaea met in A.D. 325, the Gospel was defended and defined at this very point. Without the role of Athanasius as both pastor and theologian, the heresy of Arius might have spread unchecked, leading to disaster for the young church.

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