

# THE PASTOR AND THEOLOGY

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## Introduction

Although the terms *theology* and *theologian* were used in non-Christian Greek literature, they apparently were intentionally avoided by the biblical writers. In Greek usage, a theologian was a person who spoke of the gods or about divine things,<sup>1</sup> using mythological discourse. During the first two centuries, the Christian church did not have theologians, and yet much theology was formulated by the church. Early in the second century A.D., the term *theology* was being employed to designate the expression of the Christian faith.<sup>2</sup> In the Middle Ages a theologian described a person professionally dedicated to the study and teaching of theology.<sup>3</sup> That understanding of the term continues to be the prevailing one in the Christian world. Christian theology has become an academic discipline and a theologian a well-trained academician. The vastness of the field of theology gave rise to specializations such as biblical theology, historical theology, systematic theology, pastoral theology, etc.

Today it is practically impossible to provide a definition of theology acceptable to all. Here we can only provide a working definition that will help us in our discussion on the relationship between the pastoral work and the theological task. We suggest that for our purpose, we identify theology as the study of the nature and work of God as He has revealed Himself to us, in an attempt to better understand the world and ourselves. In that sense, then, theologians are individuals who reflect on the God they worship, on what He has done and is doing for them, and on the nature of a proper response to Him. Therefore, every believer is in a nontechnical sense a theologian.<sup>4</sup>

## Ministry and Theology—Inseparable

As indicated above, in the apostolic church, there were not theologians in academic settings as we understand the term today. The role of understanding the Christian message, teaching and proclaiming it, and developing its meaning and significance, was in the hands of the apostles, pastors, and teachers in the church. The doing of theology was at the service of the church with its ministry of reconciliation (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:17–21). In fact, asking at that time whether the pastor was a theologian or not would have been inconceivable. The connection between ministry and theology is still maintained at least in the training of ministers.

The ministerial curriculum contains, among many other things, two general fundamental components, namely methods and content. Courses dealing with method have to do with how to perform the work of the ministry. They deal with matters of the church administration, evangelism, homiletics, counseling, for example, and seek to enable the future ministers to function effectively in the performance of their responsibilities. Content courses provide the fundamental knowledge related to the nature, role, and significance of the ministry. Here theology plays a central role in the formation of pastors by exposing them to the different branches of theology (e.g. biblical theology, systematic theology, and pastoral theology). This aspect of the curriculum does not pretend to form theologians in the technical sense of the term, but provides for future ministers the basic tools that will enable them to function as theologians in the execution of their ministry in the setting of the local parish. It will also enable them to speak intelligently about theological matters and to develop their theological skills through further formal academic studies or as an autodidact through readings and dialogue with trained theologians.

Although we have separated method from theology, the separation is artificial. In other words, theology cannot be separated from the ministerial labor. How ministers perform their work can be determined by their biblical ecclesiology and more particularly by their theology of

the ministry. Therefore, ministers will always examine the theological and doctrinal foundation as well as the impact of what they are planning to do or accomplish in the parish.<sup>5</sup> The *how* needs to be evaluated by the content of the gospel they have been called to proclaim. With everything they do determined by their understanding of God in His self-revelation in Christ, preserved for us in the Scriptures, they seek to do His will for them and for the church. This equates with theology in its deepest and more dynamic sense.

### **Theological Function of Pastors**

The relationship between pastors and theology does not abruptly end after they leave the seminary. The interaction should continue throughout their ministerial work in order to have a more effective ministry. Based on the previous remarks, we can now proceed to explore in more detail the specific roles of ministers as theologians in their own right.

*1. Ministry and Theology: Missiological interaction.* While theological tasks within the church should be constantly oriented toward the mission of the church, the same applies to the pastoral work. Ministry, by its very nature, is mission oriented. Pastors are in mission as they serve the needs of the congregation, as well as when they reach out to the community at large as ambassadors for Christ. Within this context, it needs to be reaffirmed that mission and message are an indivisible unity, and that consequently theological thinking includes an intrinsic part of the missiology of the church (cf. Matthew 8:18–20). The nature of the Christian ministry reminds theologians in the academe that when theology is out of touch with the reality of the church, its mission, and its needs, it could be damaging or even useless. Theology has to be motivated by ministry or it cannot be called Christian theology.<sup>6</sup> Pastors do this type of theology constantly—a theology encrusted in mission and that, like all true theology, challenges the mind and dynamically integrated into the life of the church.

But this understanding of theology, as inseparable from mission and message, places serious demands on the pastor for an effective ministry and equates with a theologically well-informed ministry. In order to perform the mission of the church, pastors will need a clear comprehension of the message they intent to proclaim. Uncertainty with respect to the theological content of what we need to proclaim and teach reveals itself in lack of personal commitment and theological and doctrinal ambivalence (cf. Hebrews 2:1). The pulpit becomes a stage from which the public is entertained and from which the power of the gospel to change lives and to move the hearers to a commitment to Christ and the message and mission of His church is absent—an inherent danger. This absence of true biblical theology from the pulpit betrays the mission and message of the church. Pastors as theologians need to have a clear understanding of the message and mission of the church, in order to fulfill their divine call to the ministry. In the performance of that task, they will model the true nature of theology to professional theologians within the church who may have forgotten it.

*2. Ministry and Theology: A common search for meaning.* The theological task demands from the theologian a spirit of inquisitiveness, a constant desire to gain a deeper comprehension of the message of salvation.<sup>7</sup> But this search for the apprehension of the knowledge of God revealed in the life, work, and ministry of Christ does not remain as the exclusive property of theologians. The nature of the Christian experience includes seeking a deeper understanding of the gospel of salvation. This theological concern appears to have been placed by God in the heart of every believer, and must be satisfied and nurtured not only through personal devotion but particularly through the ecclesiastical ministry. In that task, theologians and pastors work together. With no topic deeper than the redemptive work of Christ on our behalf, every Christian should explore its significance and experiential power. Paul says, “And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge” (Ephesians 3:17b–19a NIV). The knowledge Paul describes here is more than intellectual; it reaches deep into the human soul and transforms it.

Like the theologian, ministers study and explore the Word to expand their knowledge and clarify and apply it to the life of the community of faith. The only possible difference may be that professional theologians flesh out the result of their studies in the language of theological discourse, making it difficult for church members to comprehend their conclusions. Not that theologians intentionally complicate the simple, but rather, in the search for precision of expression, technical terminology becomes extremely useful. This makes the role of pastors as theologians of particular importance as they minister to those who also want to comprehend better the faith they hold as true.

Pastors then function as mediators of theological knowledge to their congregations. Their acquaintance with theological discourse enables them to filter out the complexity of theological expression, in order to articulate the message in the common language of the parishioners. In other words, pastors stand between the trained theologian and the untrained church member to find ways to make the deep truths of the Scripture intelligible to those they minister.<sup>8</sup> This theological aspect of the ministry does not only contribute to make relevant the biblical message but also to nurture and develop the cognitive and religious experiences of the saints.

*3. Ministry and Theology: Apologetical task.* The history of Christian theology reveals that one of the basic functions of the theological enterprise includes the articulation of the Christian faith in a relevant and persuasive form within the society in which the church procures to fulfill its mission. In the realization of that important responsibility, theologians often become apologists of the Christian gospel. Christianity constantly competes with many other religious and philosophical ways of thinking and life that are essentially incompatible with each other. Demonstrating the correctness, logic, and experiential significance of the gospel in the life of the individual requires persuasive arguments and good communication skills. Apologetics have played an important role in the history of Christianity and particularly in the theological arena.

Pastors fulfill the theological task by proclaiming and defending the faith that was entrusted to them (cf. 1 Peter 3:15; Titus 1:9). With the Christian faith under constant attack from materialism, natural evolution, and secular and anti-Christian forces, evangelism has become not only a proclamation, but also a defense of the gospel against the other options offered to humans to satisfy their need for the divine and self-realization. Ministers use theological argumentation as they try to deconstruct the existential and conceptual paradigms of meaning offered by a secular or a non-Christian society in order to show the meaningfulness, relevance, and the unique salvific power of the gospel of Jesus Christ. This is apologetics at its best. The Spirit can use this combination of theological thinking with evangelistic outreach to move the hearts of the listeners to repentance and conversion.

Apologetics are also important within the church itself as pastors seek to nurture their parishioners (2 Timothy 1:13, 14). Within Adventism, we confront attacks from former Adventists whose personal religious frustrations have led them to try to find ways to undermine the consistency and relevance of our end-time message. Pastors and theologians have the responsibility of protecting the flock from attacks that will undermine their faith and commitment to Jesus, His church, and the mission He entrusted to His people. The effectiveness of this defense of the faith depends on the ability of pastors to understand the theological issues involved, and on their capacity to couch the biblical and theological arguments in simple and effective language. With the nurturing of the congregation is as important as doing public evangelism, we must do the former without neglecting the last.

*4. Ministry and Theology: Sermon preparation.* Theologians share their findings mainly through teaching and writing, and ministers do it through the proclamation of the Word. Describing preaching as the ministerial activity through which the theological function of pastors becomes more visible can probably be classed as correct. Preaching presupposes that ministers spent time on their knees studying the Scripture, reflecting on it, and dialoguing with the writings of theologians, while doing the exegetical work that will result in a solidly biblical sermon. As a result of that preparation, the pulpit becomes the place where the minister clearly proclaims the

gospel, instructs the community of believers, strengthens their faith, and reaffirms their commitment to Jesus through the hearing of the Word, empowering them for service.

During their pastoral training, prospective ministers receive an introduction to the art of exegesis, to the tools needed for that task, and to the preparation of the sermon itself. As indicated above, they should not leave the seminary without those tools, but on the contrary, they should continue to use that knowledge, sharpening its use throughout their ministry. Pastors have the ethical responsibility of sharing with their parishioners biblically reliable and sound theological knowledge. Since every sermon should comprise biblically centered content, doing a proper exegesis is unavoidable. The exegetical task requires the use of Bible dictionaries and commentaries that could help in gaining a better understanding of the text.

Sermon preparation should motivate pastors to remain theologically well informed. One could even say that in the preparation of a sermon a dialogical bridge is created between pastors and theologians. However, for pastors, the final arbiter of meaning lies in the text itself. In this case, the pastor's personal knowledge of the Scriptures and of the message and mission of the church plays a fundamental role in the evaluation of theological discourses. *It should be clearly and unambiguously established that what pastors are to proclaim is not what theologians believe, but the message of the Scripture* (2 Timothy 2:15). Therefore, they have to develop a deep understanding of the Word of God that will enable them to evaluate different theological perspectives in order to take to the pulpit and proclaim from there the biblical message and not human inventions, opinions, and theories. The authority of their proclamation does not depend on the renowned name of the theologian quoted in the sermon, but on the Scriptural basis of their message.

Useful for pastors, as long as it is grounded in the Scripture, theology seeks to build up the church through a full commitment to the message and mission of the church. The discriminating use of theological materials by pastors requires from them not only knowledge of the diversity of theological opinions in the church, but particularly a deep, personal comprehension and dedication to the message and mission of the church. All of this requires from pastors a significant development of their theological knowledge and a critical and discerning attitude towards the results of theological investigation.

*5. Minister and Theologians: Constant dialogue.* If we understand the theological role of pastors correctly, there has to be a constant dialogue between theologians and pastors. This suggests that theology is to a large extent a collective activity of the church as the body of Christ. The dialogue will contribute to remind theologians that they function as such not apart from the church, but as a needed component of it. As indicated already, their work should be motivated by the need to minister to the church and to the world at large. Pastors will benefit by the constant dialogue with theologians by being reminded that the message they proclaim stays rooted in the deep mysteries of God. They, like the theologians, have to dig deep in the Scriptures, in order to understand and be better prepared to proclaim the gospel in a meaningful and persuasive form to the church and to the world.

The recognition of the collective nature of theological development, and the need for pastors and theologians to be in constant dialogue, requires the direct involvement of church administrators in the dialogue. They should facilitate the communication through seminars, professional development courses for ministers, and by making accessible to pastors theological materials that will contribute to building up the theology, message, and mission of the church. When church leaders put the emphasis on the evangelistic task at the exclusion of the theological development of pastors, the effectiveness of the overall nature of the ecclesiastical ministry becomes weakened with the nurturing of the church put at risk. However, when pastors put the emphasis on the theological task and the nurturing of church members at the almost total exclusion of the evangelistic work, they, in the long run, put at risk the very existence of their own congregations. Pastors and administrators should cooperate in shaping a well-rounded and properly equipped ministry to fulfill the gospel commission and should consider this of great

importance.

## Conclusion

Theology and pastoral ministry are not to be sundered; what God united, humans should not pull apart. The nature, role, and realization of the pastoral ministry are essentially determined by biblical theology. Ministry is an expression of God's intention for His church and, consequently, we identify it as of theological nature; we comprehend it better when we reflect on the God who lovingly provided this gift to His church and on the nature of that gift. Therefore, the question does not center on whether pastors should function as theologians, but whether or not they will effectively perform their pastoral/theological task or mission.

Pastors particularly deal with important theological issues when they interpret for their congregations the mission and message of the church. They experience direct involved in the theological work when they stand for a message that is under attack, and when they prayerfully work on their sermons for the congregations. Interacting with theologians in the development of their theological knowledge should be considered important. However, the foundation of their theology and the content of their proclamation have to be firmly grounded on God's self-revelation in Scripture.

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<sup>1</sup>Walter Bauer, W. F. Arndt, F. W. Gingrich, and F. W. Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the NT and other Early Christian Literature*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 449. For a study on the history of the term theology, consult, F. Whaling, "The Development of the Word 'Theology,'" "*Scottish Journal of Theology*" 34 (1981): 289–312.

<sup>2</sup>D. F. Wright, "Theology," in *New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Sinclair B. Ferguson, David F. Wright, and J. I. Parker (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 680.

<sup>3</sup>T. C. O'Brien, "Theologian," in *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Religion*, vol. 3, ed. Paul Kevin Meagher, Thomas C. O'Brien, and Consuelo Maria Aherne (Washington, DC: Corpus Publication, 1979), 3496. Cf. J. Daane, "Theology," in *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, vol. 4, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), 827.

<sup>4</sup>This type of theology has been called "personal theology," understood as "that which is done as the individual church member studies his or her Bible, attempting to relate it to the realities of everyday life. . . . It may easily become myopic, self-centered, and limited in its ability to relate itself to others in the church or world at large." Willmore D. Eva, "Embracing the Role of Pastoral Theology," *Ministry*, October 1998, 4. Whenever theology is done in isolation from the community of believers, the dangers listed by Eva become real and threatening to the church.

<sup>5</sup>One of the areas in which biblical theology should determine pastoral practices is the worship service. Biblical liturgy in the Old and New Testaments is theologically rich because at its very center is the person of God. Every worship act seeks to adore Him, to thank Him for His many blessings, and to ask for His company and blessings. Every innovation should be evaluated from that theological perspective, in order to determine whether it contributes to that end, distracts from it, or places the human beings at the center. Perhaps a specific example can be used to illustrate the importance of theological analysis before the pastor makes and implements certain decisions. When pastors decide that during the Communion Service the Lord's Supper will be celebrated before footwashing, they are showing lack of theological perception. The order of the two ritual acts carry with it theological significance. Preserving that order is an act of submission to the will of the Savior who established the specific order. For Him, the Supper precedes the footwashing in the same way that covenant fellowship is preceded by God's redemptive act of salvation in Christ.

<sup>6</sup>Wallace M. Alston, Jr., has correctly stated that, "Christian theology without ministerial motivation simply does not exist and is found in the form of a pretender. The church, and particularly the congregation, is the locus of the ministry of Christian theology, and pastoral occasions test and evaluate its reality." "The Ministry of Christian Theology," in *Theology in the Service of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 19.

<sup>7</sup>The idea that theology is in a sense faith seeking understanding goes in principle back to Augustine. He wrote, "Dost thou wish to understand? Believe. . . . For understanding is the reward of faith. Therefore do not seek to understand in order to believe, but believe that thou mayest understand" *Tractatus in Joannis* 29.6, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 7, ed. Philip Schaff (Reprinted; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004), 184. The more common expression of the idea comes from Anselm: "For I do not seek to understand in order to believe but I believe in order to understand. For I believe even this: that I shall not understand unless I believe." *Proslogion* 1.

<sup>8</sup>Eva perceptively comments concerning pastoral theology, "Here the attempt is made to relate the revelation of God in the Bible and in life to the ebbs and flows, highs and lows, joys and sorrows, of the people of the congregation. Because of its rough-and-tumble nature and the almost raw, organic constraints that are part and parcel of doing it, this

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theology unearths, when conducted with any care, some of the purest forms of truth. In many ways it is the kind of theology done by the characters and writers of the Bible itself.” (Embracing the Role,” 4).

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