

THE PASTOR
AS PUBLIC
THEOLOGIAN

Reclaiming a Lost Vision

KEVIN J. VANHOOZER
AND OWEN STRACHAN



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Preface

The idea for this book began with a shock (in a cemetery) and a scandal (in a seminary). Kevin was teaching in the University of Edinburgh when he happened to overhear two American tourists visiting Greyfriars Kirk (most come to see the statue of Greyfriars Bobby). The couple were looking at headstones when the wife suddenly blurted out, “Look, honey: they buried two people in one grave!” “What makes you think that?” asked her husband. The woman replied: “It says so right here: ‘Here lies a pastor and a theologian.’”

It is not comic but tragic that we instantly understand what’s funny about the anecdote, namely, the source of the woman’s confusion. The average American is simply not used to thinking of pastors as theologians or theologians as pastors. However, for much of church history, the distinction we today take for granted would have been viewed as an aberration. What happened? The reasons are complex, and though we will mention some of them, the primary focus of our book lies not in understanding how we got here, but rather in proposing how best to move forward.

As to the seminary scandal, it happened during Kevin’s office hours. A bright student came to ask advice about his future. Jordan (not his real name) was struggling between wanting to pursue further theological studies, which in his case meant applying for a PhD, and working in a church. He was not sure his grades were good enough (which was code for “Am I intelligent enough?”) to get into a doctoral program. “Please don’t tell me I’m only smart enough to be a pastor,” he pleaded. I found the implication that pastors were somehow second-class intellects wrong-headed. It took me a few moments to rightly order my righteous indignation and collect my thoughts. Then I

replied: “I regret to inform you that you may not have the right stuff. It takes wisdom and joyful enthusiasm to be a pastor. To get a doctorate, you need only have a modicum of intelligence and the ability to grind it out. I’m afraid you may only be qualified to be an academic, not a pastor. Ministry is a lot harder than scholarship.”

These two anecdotes are revealing symptoms of a deeper problem, a vision problem that afflicts the twenty-first-century church, especially in North American evangelicalism. Though there are some shining exceptions, by and large there is widespread confusion about the nature, identity, and role of the pastor.

Elsewhere Kevin has said that the pastor-theologian ought to be evangelicalism’s default public intellectual.¹ This claim intrigued Owen, a former doctoral student, eventually prompting him to ask Kevin to coauthor the present book. Kevin and Owen had earlier worked together in connection with the Center for Pastor Theologians (formerly known as the Society for Advanced Ecclesial Theology), a fellowship of pastors with PhDs committed to engaging in biblical and theological scholarship for the twin purpose of the theological renewal of the church and the ecclesial renewal of theology. We briefly toyed with the title *The Pastor as Public Intellectual*, only to realize that, as a stand-alone title, it would probably be misunderstood. The original idea has nevertheless sneaked its way back into these pages. Readers are therefore advised to pay special attention to what we mean by “public” and “intellectual,” and why we qualify both with “theological.”

So much for the origins of the book. As to the actual process of coauthoring, we quickly came up with the book’s general structure after a little brainstorming. Owen wrote chapters 1 and 2 while Kevin wrote chapters 3 and 4, as well as the preface, introduction, and conclusion. Next we read and commented on each other’s drafts, then revised accordingly. We are particularly grateful to “the twelve”—not our disciples but rather our partners in the ministry of the gospel—who have contributed testimonies to the importance of reclaiming the vision of the pastorate as a theological vocation. These twelve affidavits—testimonies from everyday ministerial life—provide concrete evidence that the vision we set forth, far from being an abstract ideal, is indeed being lived out on the ground. They also provide practical advice about how to make our vision more visible in the local church. These twelve minor (i.e., in terms of length) prophets give our book’s argument, if not street cred, perhaps a bit more pew cred.

Speaking of credibility, what gives us, two *professor* theologians, the right to issue statements about the nature and role of the *pastor*? We are acutely conscious of our lack of qualification. To be a theologian in the academy is to risk becoming a disembodied mind. To return to the graveyard: the theologian who is not a pastor is like a soul that, after death, has been separated from its body (i.e., the church). We regret this unnatural “intermediate state,” but as believers in resurrection, we look forward to the time when body and soul are reunited.

Theological minds belong in ecclesial bodies. We don’t wish to exaggerate: there is a place for academic theology, but it is *second* place. First place—pride of theological place—belongs to the pastor-theologian. It is therefore only fitting that we dedicate this work to Gerald Hiestand and Todd Wilson, cofounders of the Center for Pastor Theologians, and to all the members of the Center’s two Fellowships. These exemplary pastor-theologians embody the vision our book seeks to reclaim. May they be fruitful and multiply!

Owen Strachan
Kevin J. Vanhoozer

Introduction

Pastors, Theologians, and Other Public Figures

KEVIN J. VANHOOZER

“Societies become secular not when they dispense with religion altogether, but when they are no longer especially agitated by it.”¹ The church, the society of Jesus, is similarly in danger of becoming secular, and in the very place where we would least expect it: its understanding of the clergy. This is not because churches are dispensing with the pastorate, but because they no longer find its theological character particularly exciting or intelligible. The idea of the pastor as a theologian—one who opens up the Scriptures to help people understand God, the world, and themselves—no longer causes the hearts of most church members to “burn within” them (Luke 24:32).

Too many pastors have exchanged their vocational birthright for a bowl of lentil stew (Gen. 25:29–34; Heb. 12:16): management skills, strategic plans, “leadership” courses, therapeutic techniques, and so forth.² Congregations expect their pastors to have these qualifications, and if pastors have an MBA, well then, so much the better. In these circumstances, it is hardly surprising that newly installed pastors so often complain that their seminaries failed to prepare them for the “real work” of ministry. Meanwhile, seminaries race to catch up to new expectations, reforming their curricula in ways that result in an even greater loss of theology in the church.

The story is complex and has been told elsewhere.³ The basic gist: theology has been more or less banished from Jerusalem. Theology is in exile and, as a result, the knowledge of God is in ecclesial eclipse. The promised land, the

gathered people of God, has consequently come to resemble a parched land: a land of wasted opportunities that no longer cultivates disciples as it did in the past.

This book is written to hasten theology's return. It sets out to *reclaim* the land—the place where God dwells—by viewing the people of God as the principal medium with which the pastor works. The underlying conviction is that theological minds need to return to where they belong: in the body of Christ. The present book aims to reclaim the theological pedigree of the world's boldest profession and to awaken the church to the immensely challenging, exciting, and joyful vocation of being an evangelical pastor.⁴ Specifically, the present book sets out to reclaim a lost vision for three sets of people.

We are writing to you, pastors (and not senior pastors only!), because you need help in recovering the theological heart of your vocation, whether it is defined narrowly in terms of “youth ministry,” “Christian formation,” “congregational life,” “worship leader,” or something else. It is no mean feat to speak of God, or to relate to people, yet pastors often (always?) have to do both things at once, regardless of their area of primary responsibility. Every pastor is responsible for communicating Christ and for ministering God's Word, at all times, to everyone, and in many ways. Ministering the Word of God to the people of God is the pastor's lifeblood.

We are writing to you, churches, because you need to be encouraged to rethink the nature, function, and qualifications of the pastors whom you appoint to serve you. In particular, you need to think hard about how to create the conditions in which the pastor is able to serve, and grow, as a public theologian (on which see below). We also think you need to reclaim your heritage as a theological community created by God's Word and sustained by God's Spirit, and to remember that you are part of God's story, not that God is part of your story (pastor-theologians ought to be able to help you with this!).

We are writing to you, seminaries, because you exist to train pastors and serve the church. You are in the broader academic world, but you must not simply be of it, for the simple reason that God's Word is “not of the world” (John 17:16). In particular, you need to do everything possible to minimize the ugly (and embarrassing) ditch between the so-called theoretical and practical theological disciplines. We also think that seminaries should do more to encourage their brightest students to consider working in the church rather than the academy, precisely because cultivating the wisdom of Jesus Christ on the ground requires more intelligence and creativity than writing scholarly articles does.

“Parched land” is a harsh but accurate term, describing a place where nothing can grow or be built. The “world”—men and women who have no personal knowledge of or relation to Jesus Christ—is indeed a land that has become barren (fruitless), overgrown with material, psychological, and ideological weeds that choke out life. This is indeed a tragic waste, a matter of deep heartache. The church, by way of contrast, should be a land flowing with milk and honey, and especially with the fruit of the Spirit. The pastor-theologian is a farmer of men and women, charged with working and keeping the promised land—the gospel of Jesus Christ—and with bringing streams of living water to urban and suburban deserts in order to cultivate the new creation in Christ. But we are getting ahead of ourselves. First, the bad news. . . .

Problem: A Lost Vision

Without theological vision, the pastors perish. Vision is what allows us to see where we are and where we are going. Sometimes what we see frightens and intimidates us: Peter walked on water with his eyes fixed on Jesus until he saw the wind (and presumably the waves), at which point he began to sink (Matt. 14:28–31). In Peter’s case, physical vision overwhelmed his faith in Christ. Yet ultimately it is faith in Christ that enables us to see the world as it truly is: created, redeemed, and loved by God. This was the message of the prophets, spokesmen for God who *said* what they *saw*, namely, that God is renewing all things through his covenant servant and his covenant people. If this is the vision, why are so many pastors sinking into the sea?

*The faithful pastor
will always be a
countercultural figure.*

Sea storms are not the problem. What causes pastors to sink—or rather, to shrink from the theological task—are the waves of public sentiment and winds of public opinion that act as obstacles and temptations, hindering progress toward their vocation of bringing others to maturity in Christ (cf. Eph. 4:14). Make no mistake: it is not easy to go against the cultural grain, and in a real sense, the faithful pastor will always be a countercultural figure: what else can pastors be when they proclaim Christ crucified and then ask disciples to imitate their Lord by dying to self? The call to self-emptying will always be unpopular to those whose pockets and closets are full.

What makes the pastor's role even more challenging is the existence of three different sets of people, *three publics*, each with its own kind of opinion. By three publics, I mean three social realities, three locations into which pastors may speak of God and Jesus Christ: (1) the academy, (2) the church, and (3) the broader society.⁵ Because God is the maker of everything that is,

*It is Scripture that
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the world.*

visible and invisible, and because the good news of God's self-giving love concerns the whole world, there is not a square inch in the cosmos, nor a single aspect of human existence, that does not somehow relate to God and the gospel. However, most of us live in more than one cultural world, and the way we talk about truth or the meaning of life varies considerably, depending on our social location (e.g., classroom, church, megaplex, etc.).

If there are college students and professors in a congregation, then the pastor needs to address all three publics, sometimes—in particular on Sundays—at the same time. How does one speak of God to a teenager, a graduate student, an unemployed carpenter, a working mother, a mayor, and a physics professor simultaneously?

David Tracy claims that the way a person does theology is largely a function of the particular public identified as one's primary audience. Each public has its own norms and forms of discourse and particular concerns, and these generate three types of theology: fundamental, systematic, and practical.⁶

Tracy is right to be concerned about religion dwindling into one more private option or personal choice. But his separation of theology into different modes of discourse may leave pastors either scratching their heads—or burying them in the sand. Clearly, the pastor's primary location is the church, but do pastors therefore get a free pass (no obligation) when it comes to speaking the truth in ways that address the general populace and college population? It is not easy to divide real people into three publics. The reality is that many of us indwell two or more of these social locations. Tracy is aware of this, and he argues that the task of systematic theology (the one most closely associated with the church) is to interpret Scripture in critical correlation with the contemporary situation. This comes close to the role of the pastor-theologian that we shall propose as well, though we are inclined to give pride of critical place to Scripture rather than the contemporary situation, not least because it is Scripture that illuminates the life story of everyone who has come into the world.

Tracy's analysis nevertheless helps clarify the nature and scope of the challenge in reclaiming the vision of the pastor-theologian. Pastor-theologians must be trilingual, able to speak the language of all three social locations, or at least speak it well enough to ask directions (and give them). Our task in this book is to argue, first, that pastors must be theologians; second, that every theologian is in some sense a public theologian; and third, that a public theologian is a very particular kind of generalist. We begin by tracing how the vision of the pastor-theologian was lost in all three publics.

Academy: Power and Principality of Theology?

It is difficult to pinpoint the precise moment when pastors lost interest in theology, though clearly its migration to the academy was an important factor. Whereas the separation of church and state empowers the church to practice its faith and order its life as it sees fit, the separation of church and academy, combined with the migration of theology from the one to the other, has had a debilitating effect.⁷ “No one can serve two masters” (Matt. 6:24). The sobering question for would-be theologians is whether one can both serve the needs of church communities and simultaneously satisfy the demands of contemporary scholarship.⁸

Theology first became a classroom endeavor in the medieval period, when cathedral schools developed into the first universities. For centuries afterward, theology nevertheless continued to thrive in the church, in large part because the most important theologians were also churchmen.⁹ The more decisive break took place in the early nineteenth century, when Friedrich Schleiermacher, a pastor appointed professor at the University of Berlin (and widely considered to be the father of modern theology), restructured the theological curriculum into its now-familiar fourfold division—biblical studies, church history, systematic theology, and practical theology—and viewed their unity in terms of vocational training rather than subject matter. This “Berlin” model has proved influential in North American theological education and has led to a division between the classical or academic disciplines (the first three divisions) and the professional or practical disciplines (the fourth).

The perception that academic scholarship is abstract and “theoretical,” disconnected from the issues of daily life, neither relevant nor necessary for “practical” ministry, is perhaps the single greatest prejudice against theological education (I can't say “misconception” because, alas, there is an element of truth in it as

a description of many academic programs).¹⁰ Relatedly, but from the other side as it were, the perception that the “practical” disciplines are nontheological, driven by pragmatism and influenced by secular models in the human sciences, is another prejudice that works against the notion of the pastor-theologian.

The further division in the academy between biblical studies and theology has only made matters worse. Scholars who study the Bible belong to their own professional organizations (e.g., the Society of Biblical Literature), read their own journals (e.g., *Journal of Biblical Literature*), and typically specialize not only in Old or New Testament but often in one genre or author (e.g., Pauline studies; apocalyptic). Theologians, likewise, have their own professional organizations (e.g., the American Academy of Religion), journals (e.g., *International Journal of Systematic Theology*), and areas of specialization (e.g., analytic theology; Reformed theology; Christology).

The would-be pastor-theologian wrestles not with flesh and blood, but with institutional powers and academic principalities. In particular, pastor-theologians must fight on two fronts. Pastor-theologians must contend, first, with the fact that much theology is written by academics for academics (i.e., “professor-theologians”). It is often difficult to translate or apply these technical treatments of specialized topics to the everyday needs of one’s congregation. What has Thomas Aquinas’s understanding of the persons of the Trinity as subsistent relations to do with visiting a deacon who has just learned he has pancreatic cancer, or the economic Trinity with church members struggling with unemployment? For that matter, what bearing does the doctrine of the Trinity have on the life of the church at all? To think that it has no bearing is as unfortunate as it is false. The doctrine of the Trinity is the lifeblood of the church and has everything to do with the identity and saving work of Jesus Christ, though it is true that professor-theologians do not always make this as clear as they should.¹¹

Second, pastors also have to contend with the disciplinary Berlin Wall separating biblical studies and theology that is now a fixture in the academy.¹² Given the centrality of preaching in most pastors’ lives, it stands to reason that, if forced this day to choose whom they will serve, most would opt for biblical studies. The problem, however, is that much of what pastors find in many scholarly commentaries on the Bible is hard, if not impossible, to preach. The standard biblical commentary produced in the modern academy typically treats the Bible as a historical document, often focusing more on the world *behind* the text (e.g., historical backgrounds, ancient Near Eastern parallels) than on what God is saying to the church today *in and through* the text about

the subject matter *of* the text: God's plan of salvation summed up in Jesus Christ (cf. Luke 24:27; Eph. 1:9–10). Not a few biblical scholars think that the biblical commentary ought to be a theological no-fly zone.¹³

Institutional powers and academic principalities have put asunder what had originally been joined together under God: theology and church life, biblical studies and theology, pastor and theologian. While theologians shoulder the primary responsibility for demonstrating the importance of doctrine for discipleship, pastors cannot afford to neglect theology or to wait for someone to broker peace talks between biblical scholars, systematic theologians, and practical theologians. The way forward is for pastors and theologians to bear one another's burdens, responding together both to the ecclesial amnesia of the academy and to the theological anemia in the church. It is to the latter that we now turn.

Church: Pictures That Hold Pastors Captive

The past fifty years or so have seen a bewildering variety of images describing what pastors are and what they do. There continues to be widespread confusion about just what a pastor is. Indeed, the term "pastor" itself is a metaphor, taken from the Latin *pastor* for "shepherd." Metaphors are powerful imaginative instruments that can color our daily experience. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson speak about metaphors we live by, like "Time is money."¹⁴ We can also speak about metaphors pastors minister by.

Metaphors pastors minister by often gain such a grip on the imagination that it sometimes becomes difficult to dislodge them. Such metaphors become pictures that hold us captive. These pictures often reveal more about the concerns of the age in which they were produced than they do about pastors themselves. Indeed, the prevailing picture of the pastor almost always reflects the broader intellectual and cultural influences of the day.¹⁵ We can go even further and hazard the suggestion that pictures of the pastor are themselves tossed to and fro by waves (i.e., cultural trends) and by every wind of doctrine (i.e., academic trends).

Others have enumerated some of these leading pictures, so I can be brief. William Willimon rightly observes: "Contemporary ministry has been the victim . . . of images of leadership that are borrowed not from scripture, but from the surrounding culture—the pastor as CEO, as psychotherapeutic guru, or as political agitator."¹⁶ There is nothing wrong with organizing

programs and helping people, to be sure; the only question is whether these things *distinguish* the pastor's vocation. What, if anything, is distinct about the person and work of Christian pastors? This is the point on which there is ongoing confusion.¹⁷

Images of what pastors do affect what seminaries do in turn. Everything hinges on the dominant metaphors that guide pastors' ministries. Joseph Hough and John Cobb trace the rise and fall of four models that prevailed at different times in American church history: the "master" of biblical and theological knowledge (late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries), the "revivalist" (nineteenth century), the "builder" of churches and congregations (late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries), and the "manager" of people and programs (twentieth century).¹⁸ Willimon has helpfully updated this list of images that hold us captive, or threaten to do so, in the twenty-first century. In addition to older images (e.g., political negotiator, therapist, manager) that continue to enjoy considerable influence, he mentions the media mogul and community activist.¹⁹ Still other images include the "living human document," the wise fool, the moral coach, the agent of hope, the diagnostician, the indigenous storyteller, and the midwife.²⁰

This proliferation of images is a sign of the lack of consensus, even widespread confusion, over just what pastors are and are supposed to do. As one observer of the pastoral scene puts it: "It is hard to conceive of persons in other lines of work—construction workers, hair stylists, dentists, tennis pros, even systematic theologians or biblical scholars—bothering to concoct so steady a diet of metaphorical equivalents to their chosen fields."²¹ Yes, there are more literal descriptions of the pastor's work, like "soul care" or "preacher." But these beg the question as to what kind of care is worth giving and what preachers have to say that no one else does.

What do pastors have to say and do that no one else can say and do? This question brings to a boil the issue of the pastor's distinct identity. In 1967 Karl Menninger delivered the Stone Lectures at Princeton Theological Seminary and was struck by the number of seminarians who had doubts about their profession. Menninger suggested that one reason for their doubts was the disappearance of sin. Many aberrant behaviors previously considered "sins" (e.g., gluttony) are now considered symptoms of some underlying psychological or social condition, and others (e.g., cohabitation before marriage) have largely been declassified as sins due to widespread social acceptance. Menninger rightly describes the significance of this semantic development:

“The disappearance of the word ‘sin’ involves a shift in the allocation of responsibility for evil.”²² This shift from sin to symptom also means that people are more likely to turn for help to those who understand the problem. If the problem no longer is sin, but some underlying psychological, social, or perhaps even biological condition, one may wonder, “What distinct help can a pastor give? What distinct service can a pastor perform?”

Uncertainty about what pastors are good for is not good for a minister’s soul. This was undoubtedly one factor that explained a headline in the *Chicago Sun-Times*, April 9, 1971: “Young Clergymen Bewildered, Disillusioned.” It is easy to see why. If the metaphor by which you minister is “helping profession,” then you had better be prepared to say what kind of help you have to give.²³ But this was precisely the problem. What do pastors have to say and do that other people in the helping professions—psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, and so forth—are not already doing, and often doing better? Today there are many “experts” in a variety of helping professions who are offering solutions and strategies for coping with diverse personal problems. Mental and social health services offer up a smorgasbord of theories and therapies for what ails us. Pastor-theologians must have confidence that the ministry of the gospel is more than another helping profession.

Pastor-theologians must have confidence that the ministry of the gospel is more than another helping profession.

John Leith makes a similar point by asking, “What do churches have to say and do that no other institution can?” His Reformed answer: minister God’s Word, in preaching, teaching, and counseling. To this we shall want to add, “and shape God’s people so that they reflect the new humanity that is in Christ.” Leith’s follow-up question to Presbyterians could easily be broadened to include evangelicals: “Can we today claim that in terms of competence our Presbyterian preaching matches the performance of the best professional people in the community in the discharge of their duties—that is, the best lawyers and doctors?”²⁴ One need not accept the suggestion that pastors are professionals (professional *what?*) to grant Leith’s point: it is hard to apply standards of excellence to what pastors do unless we first determine what it is they are (or should be) doing.

One especially powerful metaphor for the pastor is therapist: someone who addresses personal or interpersonal problems and effects healing.²⁵ The

temptation here is to rely overmuch on gold taken from other mines (e.g., clinical psychology) in order to appear “professional”: “Seminarians would learn the rudiments of human nature from psychiatrists, psychologists, and social workers who knew those rudiments; that is, from the professionals who currently control the definitions of them.”²⁶ The net result of this heavy conceptual borrowing, however, was that the clergy as a group “had lost any vestige of cultural jurisdiction over personal problems.”²⁷ No longer can one apply theological categories to personal problems. This leads to the disappearance not only of “sin,” but also of “grace” and even “God.”²⁸

Another powerful metaphor for the pastor is manager of religious people and programs. Indeed, the image of the pastor as manager resonates so well with contemporary culture that it has captured the imagination of mainline Protestant, Roman Catholic, and evangelical churches alike. According to George Weigel, for much of the twentieth century the Roman Catholic Church “came to conceive the Bishop of Rome as the chief executive of a global enterprise whose local leaders (the bishops) were, in effect, papal delegates (or branch managers) for their respective areas.”²⁹ Individual parish priests were thought of “as men who had been licensed to conduct certain types of ecclesiastical business: baptizing infants, hearing confessions, celebrating Mass, presiding at weddings and funerals.”³⁰

Eugene Peterson has been especially critical of the managerial metaphor: “The vocation of pastor has been replaced by the strategies of religious entrepreneurs with business plans. . . . I love being an American, . . . [but] I don’t love the rampant consumerism that treats God as a product to be marketed.”³¹ The most insidious image of all is that of the pastorate as professional *career*: “American pastors, without really noticing what was happening, got our vocations redefined in terms of American careerism. We quit thinking of the parish as a location for pastoral spirituality and started thinking of it as an opportunity for advancement.”³² A cultural picture holds pastors captive, even in the church. It is therefore to the loss of vision of the pastor-theologian in broader society that we now turn.

Society: The Predicament of Public Discourse

Once upon a time, as recently as the nineteenth century, pastors were revered and respected public figures with a certain degree of social status. Pastors were frequently the best-educated persons in small- and medium-sized

towns, the village intellectuals. When we fast-forward one hundred years, we see how radically things have changed: the popular portrait of the pastor these days is often no more than a stereotypical caricature (e.g., the self-righteous and repressed prude, the self-inflated and well-dressed megalomaniac). Sadly, there is more than an element of truth behind these cardboard cutouts. David Rambo's 1999 play *God's Man in Texas* (based on a true story) features an eighty-one-year-old pastor of a megachurch who cannot bring himself to hand over the reins of power to his younger assistant. The pastor's arrogance, stubbornness, paranoia, and self-doubt are on conspicuous display.

David Wells worries that the average churchgoer confesses faith in Christ but ingests the same cultural fare as everybody else. Television shows and films shape our perceptions of everything from the good life to the "normal" family. Wells does not mention it, but popular culture both reflects and influences how people view pastors. Novels, television, and films exercise far more influence than live plays on the general population. What kind of public figure does the pastor cut in these media?

David Larsen, professor emeritus of preaching at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, has undertaken a labor of love in combing Western literature and examining the various models of ministry depicted by works of fiction over the centuries. This is serious business: fiction is not simply the realm of make-believe but rather a laboratory of human possibility, where the human condition is being examined and tested. A serious work of fiction can explore the challenges and yield insights into the life and work of a pastor more effectively than textbooks because they give readers a taste of the reality, not a lesson but a vicarious experience.³³ Pastors can learn important things about the possibilities and pitfalls of their vocation by seeing how others respond and act in diverse particular situations.³⁴ Moreover, works of fiction both reflect and inform a society's understanding of what it is to be human—and what it is to be a pastor. Larsen observes: "More in Western literature is negative about the ministry than is positive. This is evidence which requires reflection not a knee-jerk reaction."³⁵

Name a work of fiction in which the hero is a faithful pastor (extra points if you can think of a novel whose protagonist is an *evangelical* pastor). It is an interesting, though painful, thought experiment. Two come to mind: John Buchan's *Witch Wood* (published in 1927 but set in the seventeenth century) and Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead* (published in 2004 and set in the twentieth century). Larsen devotes one chapter of his book to images of the faithful pastor ("Cameos of Character and Courage") and examines "A Parson's Tale"

in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, Oliver Goldsmith's *The Vicar of Wakefield*, Anthony Trollope's *The Warden*, and the character of Father Tim from Jan Karon's *Mitford* series, among others. Alas, these promising pastoral profiles give way to five chapters focused on novels that cast a less flattering light on ministers, where one encounters images of inadequacy, immorality, intellectual infidelity, familial instability, and vocational obscurity respectively. Along the way readers are treated to ministers in the fiction of Jane Austen ("peerless prigs"), George Eliot ("the stately, stiff and starchy"), and Charles Dickens ("ministerial menagerie").

Earlier I mentioned my pet theory that, like biblical commentaries, our images of pastors serve as barometers for larger ideological and cultural trends. Much work needs to be done to make good on this hypothesis. Although many books have been written on the way in which God or Jesus Christ have been portrayed in film, studies that focus on church leaders are far less common.³⁶ Yet film and television are probably more instrumental than books in influencing public perceptions of the pastor. Richard Wolff's *The Church on TV: Portrayals of Priests, Pastors, and Nuns on American Television Series*³⁷ is one of only a handful of studies attempting to discern what popular culture tells us about Americans' attitudes toward the church and its leaders. His book studies television series that feature members of the clergy (e.g., *The Flying Nun*, *Father Dowling Mysteries*, *7th Heaven*). What does it say about pastors, or contemporary culture, that one is much more likely to find a television show about a pastor-detective than a pastor-theologian?

To be a pastor-theologian—to speak of God before some public—is to be squarely in the public eye. And this is the pastor-theologian's predicament: to make truth claims about God in a way that satisfies the requirements of public discourse. Karl Barth, a pastor-theologian, expressed the predicament this way: "*As minister we ought to speak of God. We are human, however, and so cannot speak of God.*"³⁸ Here Barth reflects not only on the limits of human language and reason but also on the difficulty of giving an account of one's *authority* to make claims about God. What creature is qualified to speak of its Creator? How dare we, or anyone, speak of God?

Who has the authority to speak of God? Whose say-so counts, and why? Coming up with a satisfactory answer—satisfactory in the sense of being acceptable in the public square—is no easy feat, in part because a hermeneutics of suspicion holds sway there. A well-known postmodern suspicion holds that all truth claims are either partial, a reflection of one's particular social

situation, or oppressive, a reflex of the will to power. These suspicions increase exponentially when the subject of our public discourse is God and when the discourse appears to benefit either an individual (in terms of status, money, or power) or a special interest group.

Sinclair Lewis's novel *Elmer Gantry* encapsulates the contemporary predicament of public discourse about God. The novel follows the life and career of Elmer Gantry from the time of his conversion in college to his ascent as a pastor with national recognition. The book became the number one fiction bestseller in 1927 and in 1960 became a film, with Burt Lancaster playing the part.³⁹ In the story, Elmer Gantry confuses his desire for praise with a call to the ministry: he is addicted to "the drug of oratory" and finds the most receptive crowds in churches.

Elmer Gantry is exactly what postmoderns warn us about: a person who cares more about rhetoric, and the recognition that dramatic speaking brings, than about truth, and the suffering that speaking truth might entail. Lewis says, "Elmer assumed that he was the center of the universe." For Gantry, God is an ingredient in Gantry's own story, rather than Gantry being a bit player in God's story. To paraphrase Milton's Satan: better to reign in my own narrative than to be a minor character in God's.

Elmer Gantry is a cautionary tale of ministerial hypocrisy. Gantry personifies exactly what worries Eugene Peterson: that pastors will pursue successful careers rather than vocations, the magnification of their own names rather than the name of Jesus Christ. Sinclair Lewis has word-crafted a portrait of the pastor as a young professional. In some respects, the story is remarkably contemporary even though it is now almost a hundred years old. The temptation for pastors to view themselves as the heroes of their own story is even more palpable in an age of televangelists and megachurches:

"If the ministry is simply a profession, then everything about the ministry is professionalized. For the minister, then, the only question becomes, how will this promote, or impede, the advancements of my ministerial career?"⁴⁰

Here is the central paradox: the pastor is a public figure who must make himself nothing, who must speak not to attract attention to himself but rather to point away from himself—unlike most contemporary celebrities. The pastor must make truth claims to win people not to his own

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way of thinking but to God's way. The pastor must succeed, not by increasing his own social status but, if need be, by decreasing it.⁴¹ Moreover, when pastors do refer to themselves, they must follow the example of the apostle Paul, acknowledging themselves to be public sinners who have received yet continue to need God's grace and mercy (1 Tim. 1:15). Finally (again like Paul), pastors must engage in public speaking about general matters, such as the meaning of life, for which there are no publicly acknowledged credentials, unlike specialists whose expertise is publicly recognized.⁴² The situation is even more difficult and paradoxical when we factor in the widespread assumption that public figures are neither trustworthy nor truthful. As recent opinion polls make clear, people are largely disenchanted with public figures, especially those connected with some institution or organization whose interests they are seen to represent.

To be sure, people tend to trust neurosurgeons when they need operations or pilots when they fly. However, neurosurgeons and pilots are specialists with demonstrable instrumental knowledge (i.e., they operate on brains, they operate jet planes). Here, then, is the pastoral predicament. To explain what contribution they make to the public good, pastors must either specify the kind of specialist knowledge they have *or* take up the mantle of the intellectual: one who claims a certain kind of intelligence and authority to speak about matters of general philosophical and social import (e.g., the meaning of life). Let us take one example: Alexander Solzhenitsyn's 1978 commencement address at Harvard University, "A World Split Apart," tackles no less a topic than the trajectory of Western civilization. Solzhenitsyn states—in public!—that the West has lost its civic courage, perhaps because it is materially well off and organizes itself in legalistic (i.e., procedural) ways that focus on rights and freedoms more than responsibilities and purpose. No doubt he raised many American eyebrows when he discussed whether he could in good conscience propose the West as a model for his country to follow (at the time, he lived in the Soviet Union): "No, I could not recommend your society as an ideal for the transformation of ours. Through deep suffering, people in our own country have now achieved a spiritual development of such intensity that the Western system in its present state of spiritual exhaustion does not look attractive."

Solzhenitsyn's address becomes more pointed, even sermonical, toward the end. The fight for our planet, he says, is "physical and spiritual, a fight of cosmic proportions." Solzhenitsyn concludes with something like an altar

call: a summons to recover a spirituality beyond materiality. He mentions Evil (with a capital *E*), and locates the problem at the very foundation of modern thought: “the proclaimed and practiced autonomy of man from any higher force above him.” Remember, he is speaking at Harvard, making grand claims at a secular university with hundreds of academic specializations. And then he goes and does it. He risks offending polite society by mentioning God: “The West has finally achieved the rights of man, and even to excess, but man’s sense of responsibility to God and society has grown dimmer and dimmer.”

Solzhenitsyn’s address impresses because of the scope of its claims. There are some grand assertions: not predictions, but predications. To “predicate” is to affirm something about something. Predication is the preeminent act of the preacher (the French term for “sermon” is *prédication*). “Predication” is also linked etymologically to the term “predicament,” and we need only consider Solzhenitsyn’s address, or a sermon, to see why. To affirm something about something as large as Western civilization, not to mention *God*, is no easy task, particularly when one is speaking in front of an audience. If speaking in public is people’s greatest fear, how much more fearful is making public predications about God and the world! It is precisely this ability—to speak meaningfully and truthfully about broad topics of ultimate social concern—that is the mark of what I shall call a public intellectual. The question before us is whether a pastor-theologian is also a public intellectual.⁴³

Proposal: The Pastor-Theologian as Peculiar Public Figure

To this point we have painted a negative picture of the contemporary situation: many churches have lost the vision of what a pastor is and should be doing. As we have seen, pastors have a plethora of metaphors from which they can choose a ministering style to follow. Consequently, pastors are leading the people of God in a number of ways and different directions. Without a biblical vision of the pastor, the people of God may indeed perish; they certainly will fail to prosper. How, then, are pastors to lead? The rest of our book attempts to answer this question by setting out a positive proposal, thereby leading the church out of its wanderings in the wilderness of modernity.⁴⁴

So we lay out our argument: First, pastors are and always have been theologians. Second, every theologian is in some sense a public theologian, a peculiar sort of intellectual, a particular type of generalist. A key underlying conviction

of our argument is that one need not be an academic to be an intellectual. Pastor-theologians are not necessarily persons with high IQs, but they must have high TQ (theology quotient).⁴⁵ Third, the purpose of the pastor-theologian being a public intellectual is to serve the people of God by building them up in “the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3). Let me briefly comment on these three points.

Theologian: Saying What God Is Doing in Christ

Pastors are and always have been theologians: yet this, one of those things that should not have been forgotten, was forgotten . . . and lost. As we saw in the brief narrative above, theologians and pastors have been torn asunder, relegated to separate publics (the academy and the church, respectively). “The invention of ‘theologians’ as the professional authorities on Christian belief may turn out to be one of the really damaging things that have occurred in the history of the church.”⁴⁶ This claim may be startling, but the rationale is straightforward: the existence of “professional” theologians suggests that pastors and laypeople—those who are not paid to do theology—either cannot do

To be a Christian theologian is to seek, speak, and show understanding of what God was doing in Christ for the sake of the world.

theology (because they don’t have the “smarts”) or do not have the authority to do so (because they do not have the right academic qualifications).

Theology is too important to be left to the “professionals.” Every human being is accountable before God for responding to the knowledge of God that is available in the things that have been made, including the human heart (Rom. 1:19–21). “Ordinary” Christians (if such a thing exists) are able to read the word of God with a measure of understanding and, again, are responsible for responding in love, trust, and obedience. Theology is part and parcel of faith’s incessant drive for greater understanding. Theology is inevitable: William Ames says it is simply the teaching [*doctrina*] of “living to God.”⁴⁷ Theology is about speaking and doing the truth divinely revealed in Jesus Christ.

Thus theology is the attempt to speak well of God, and to live to God’s glory, on the basis of the story of God recounted in the written Word of God (the Old and New Testaments). The adjectival qualifier “Christian” signals

the centrality of Jesus Christ to the theological project. Jesus Christ is God's final word (Heb. 1:2), God's fullest disclosure (1:3a), and the agent of God's greatest work (1:3b). Jesus Christ is the alpha and omega of both revelation and redemption. He is the sum of divine wisdom and the fulfillment of the divine plan for the world (Eph. 1:8–10). The risen Christ claimed that everything in Scripture centers on him (Luke 24:27). *To be a Christian theologian is to seek, speak, and show understanding of what God was doing in Christ for the sake of the world.* Christian theology sets forth in speech *what is in Christ*: God; true humanity; all visible and invisible created things; the reconciliation of the world to God (2 Cor. 5:19).

Public: Involved with People in and for Community

We have already provided a brief account of the three publics or social realities in which theologians speak of God. Which public—church, academy, or society—do we have in mind in speaking of the pastor as public theologian? One might think that “public” is the most obvious of our three terms, but in fact it is the most elusive, largely because there is an already-established sense of public theology in use (see below). This conventional meaning is partly, but not wholly, what we have in mind when we use the term. Our use is more radical because it reclaims the etymological root (*radix*) of the term “public” (from Latin *pubes*, “adult population,” and *populus*, “people”). Pastors are public theologians because they work in and for the public/people of God, for the sake of the public/people everywhere.

Public theology: The prevailing view. The standard meaning of public theology is “theology in and for the public square.” The particular public in view is society: the broader *polis*. Public theology is therefore theology that addresses common concerns in an open forum, where no particular creed or confession holds pride of place. Specifically, public theology concerns the forms and means by which individual Christians (and churches) should bear witness to their faith in the public square (i.e., society at large). A brief discussion of how this kind of public theology relates to public policy, political theology, and the social gospel will help clarify the ways in which our proposal for pastors as public theologians is distinct.

Public theology is first and foremost a reaction against the tendency to privatize the faith, restricting it to the question of an individual's salvation. As we shall see in later chapters, the church is not a collection of saved individuals

but the culmination of the plan of salvation: to create a *people of God*. Moreover, Christ is Lord over all areas of life, and it is important that Christians avoid dualistic ways of thinking so as not to compartmentalize discipleship (for Sundays and the privacy of one's home only) from citizenship (for the rest of the week, schools, and the workplace). As Max Stackhouse, one of the leading pioneers of public theology reminds us, the public world—schools, businesses, clinics, theaters, restaurants, factories, and so forth—is the place where disciples live out their faith: “If these public worlds are the larger context of our ministries, we need a public theology to deal with that reality.”⁴⁸

According to Stackhouse, there is a sharp distinction between public and political theology. Political theology is the analysis and criticism of politics (the art or science of governing) and the relationship of church and state. The focus is on the organization, distribution, and use of political power to address social issues. By way of contrast, public theology does not treat every problem as if it were a political problem, nor does it solve every public problem through reforming the state or by creating a moral majority.⁴⁹ Public theology aims to win not elections but arguments: “It intends to offer to the world not ‘our confessional perspective,’ but warranted claims about what is ultimately true and just that pertains to all.”⁵⁰ Stackhouse would have the pastor be a public theologian in the sense of “the philosophical-theologian of universally valid truth and justice, . . . [able] to equip the people to discern how and where, *in the world*, the traces of God’s truth and justice may be unveiled.”⁵¹ Hence Stackhouse worries that theology, “the only thing pastors have to offer the world not already better offered by others,”⁵² is too often cut off from public discourse, as if no public warrant could be offered. Consequently, Stackhouse calls pastors to take on “the additional burdens of recovering and recasting the fundamental notions of truth and justice in the larger domain of public discourse.”⁵³

The editors of a volume honoring Max Stackhouse put it this way: “As Christians are in the world, so must the church be, and thus the church must have a public theology.”⁵⁴ Public theology involves critical reflection on how Christians should bear witness in the public square. One of the key issues is whether, and to what extent, Christians can and should make common cause with those of other faiths, or no faith at all, over social issues. The prevailing view, represented by Stackhouse, is that public theology should employ forms of discourse and arguments that are in principle intelligible and acceptable to all, regardless of their faith (or lack thereof). In short: public theology is theologically informed

discourse aimed at the general public. Interestingly, Stackhouse believes that seminaries ought to be preparing pastors to be public theologians who can in turn teach their congregants to be “lay public theologians.”⁵⁵

Richard Mouw speaks of an earlier generation of North American evangelicals who believed the church’s primary task was to get people ready to go to heaven: “Paying too much attention to major issues of public policy was viewed as bordering on a God-dishonoring ‘worldliness.’”⁵⁶ The ethos today is quite different, especially among evangelicals in their twenties and thirties, many of whom are “public intellectuals not driven by a partisan political agenda.”⁵⁷ Evangelicals are now speaking out on a variety of public policy issues, from the more familiar moral issues such as abortion and poverty to newer ones like immigration and health care.⁵⁸

Does being a public theologian mean that pastors must be proponents of the social gospel, focusing their ministry and energies on this-worldly problems—peace and justice issues such as economic inequality, racism, and so forth?⁵⁹ The basic problem with early twentieth-century debates about the so-called social gospel was that they were too polarized: its proponents emphasized the this-worldly nature of the kingdom of God, the proclamation and practice of liberating people from oppressive institutions here on earth; its opponents stressed the otherworldly nature of the kingdom of God, a proclamation of the individual’s liberation from sin and death.

Pastor-theologians should not have to choose between a “social” and a “spiritual” gospel, for there is only one gospel (Gal. 1:6–7).

Pastor-theologians should not have to choose between a “social” and a “spiritual” gospel, for there is only *one* gospel (Gal. 1:6–7), “an eternal gospel” that concerns the heavens *and* the earth (Rev. 14:6).

The good news is not merely that individual souls go to heaven but especially that God has established “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (1 Pet. 2:9; cf. Exod. 19:6; Rev. 1:6), that he has established social peace in reconciling Jews and Gentiles (Eph. 2:14), and that all this will come to fruition on a new earth. While the gospel has implications for public affairs—after all, the whole created order is being renewed in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17)—it must not be reduced to a series of positions on public policy issues. Rather, public theology is, or ought to be, the church’s demonstration of life in Christ—to the glory of God and for the sake of the world.

Public theology: An ancient-future alternative. Conventional public theology is therefore not what we have in mind. We're reclaiming a lost vision, not jumping on a bandwagon. Miroslav Volf is closer to what we have in mind when, sailing between the Scylla of the social gospel and the Charybdis of old-time gospel, he encourages Christians to be neither a domineering presence in society nor an otherworldly absence, but rather a witnessing presence. There is no one single way that the church ought to relate to contemporary culture, though the goal in every cultural encounter is to be salt and light by bringing the Christian vision of God and the good life into the public sphere: "A vision of human flourishing and the common good is the main thing the Christian faith brings into the public debate."⁶⁰ Public theology is, for Volf, a matter of the church bearing public witness to Jesus Christ, the embodiment of the good life. Living well to God—which is to say, along the grain of the created order being renewed in Christ—cannot be anything other than public theology; Christian doctrine gives specific content to the meaning and lived shape of love, justice, and being human.

Rowan Williams provides another good example of a public theologian. The lectures that make up his *Faith in the Public Square* treat issues that are of concern for the academy, church, and broader society alike: secularism, the environment, justice, religious diversity, to name but a few. These lectures are "worked examples of trying to find connecting points between various public questions and the fundamental beliefs about creation and salvation from which (I hope) Christians begin in thinking about anything at all."⁶¹ His aim is not to influence public policy directly, nor to proclaim the gospel directly in the public square, but rather indirectly to communicate a vision of Christian faith in corporate life oriented around God. A religious life is a material life in a particular place, a life that takes on "the task of ensuring a habitation for God, . . . [who] is visible only when a human life gives place, offers hospitality to God, so that this place, this identity, becomes a testimony."⁶²

The present book shows "a still more excellent way" of conceiving and practicing public theology. It is radical in that it returns to the etymological roots of the term *public* (see above). Public theology, as we are using the term, means "theology made up of people": "God is at work to bring into being a people under his rule in his place. The idea of the people of God, therefore, stands at the heart of biblical theology."⁶³ The church—not a building but the people of God speaking, acting, and perhaps suffering—is that "place" where God and the kingdom of God best come into focus.

Lesslie Newbigin describes the life of the local congregation as a “hermeneutic of the gospel,” the best indication of what it really means to speak of the new creation in Christ.⁶⁴ This too is public theology—and public truth. It is precisely as a hermeneutic of the gospel that the church is a hermeneutic of the Triune God, for what the church lives out, as the people of God, is the life of Jesus Christ and the fellowship with the Father in the Son through the Spirit, made possible by Christ’s person and work. Trinitarian faith is not a private opinion but a public truth. The doctrine of the Trinity underscores how the Father extends familial relations through the Son and Spirit to those who were formerly not his people.⁶⁵ The church is thus a *public spire* in the public square, the visible, sharp-pointed part of a structure “knit together” [*syμβιβασθῶ*] in God’s love made flesh in Christ (Col. 2:2, 19).⁶⁶

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a public spire in the
public square.*

The church is wherever the people of God—the public of Jesus Christ—live out their faith and fellowship in the Triune God. This is public theology: children of light being “the light of the world” (Matt. 5:14), bringing to light “the plan of the mystery hidden for ages” (Eph. 3:9), namely, “to unite all things in [Christ]” (Eph. 1:9–10). In Newbigin’s words: “This *koinōnia* is indeed the very being of the Church as a sign, instrument, and foretaste of what God purposes for the whole human family.”⁶⁷ The church, as public spire, is the vanguard of the realization of this plan. As such, the church is the public truth of Jesus Christ, and not only truth, but also the public goodness and public beauty of God’s plan of redemption.

The church is a set-apart public whose life and witness serves the interests of the broader public (i.e., “every nation and tribe” [Rev. 14:6] as well as every social caste and class). Public theology has to do with shaping the people of God to be a hermeneutic of God’s love. Eugene Peterson comments: “But our vocation is very public in what we do in relation to God and a life of love. . . . [People] see and are influenced either for good or bad by the seriousness and reverence in which we order our response to God (the showcase for this is Sunday worship); and they notice the way we live with our families and our friends.”⁶⁸ In sum: the people of God are the public place where what is in Christ is remembered, celebrated, explored, and exhibited. Stated simply: the pastor’s task is to help congregations “to become what they are called to be.”⁶⁹ This is the ancient-future task of the pastor as public theologian.

Pastor: A Public Theologian qua Organic Intellectual Who Builds Up People in Christ

While all Christians participate in the ministry of building one another up in Christ, the pastor's distinct office is to serve others by building them up into Christ through the ministry of Word and sacrament in particular. Ordination means that a person is set apart for a special purpose, namely, for special service in the house of God. The pastor is thus the *prime* (but not the sole) minister, the first (servant) among equals. The pastor is a household manager [*oikonomos*]*—*a "steward of the mysteries of God" (1 Cor. 4:1 altered). Our immediate concern is to describe the pastor's work as a public theologian, a person who works with people, both in the sense of working alongside them as their colaborer but also in the sense of working with people as the very medium ("material" sounds too impersonal) of the ministerial art. The pastor's special role is to edify or build people up: in particular, to build them into the house of God, the body of Christ, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.

Stanley Woodworth, my high school French teacher, once described the peculiar passion for his own vocation in the following terms: "The joy of teaching lies not in one's own enthusiasm for the students, or even for the subject matter, but rather for the privilege of introducing the one to the other." If this is true of French, chemistry, or history, how much more is it true of the pastor's passion, which is not simply love of God or love of people, but rather the love of introducing the one (people) to the other (God)? The pastor's special charge is to care for the people of God by speaking and showing and by being and doing God's truth and love. Success in ministry is determined not by numbers (e.g., people, programs, dollars) but by the increase of people's knowledge and love of God. This is the only way "to present everyone mature in Christ" (Col. 1:28).

By this point, I trust that it is clear why pastors must be public theologians. But why must pastor-theologians, in order to minister truth, be "intellectuals"? Recall the example of Solzhenitsyn: an intellectual is one who speaks meaningfully and truthfully about broad topics of ultimate social concern. The truth of God's plan for the world is clearly such an issue! Indeed, even to speak of "God" is to address a topic of potentially universal concern. Surely we would not want those who speak of God's plan for the world to be *anti*-intellectual?

The way forward is to clarify further what we mean by "intellectual." There are intellectuals in the academy as well as society, but they are few and far

between. Most academics are specialists: they know a lot about a little, but they are often tongue-tied when forced to address the big questions. Yet on a regular basis pastors address the big questions: issues of life and death, meaning and meaninglessness, heaven and hell, the physical and spiritual. To be sure, no church wants a pastor to be an intellectual if this means being so cerebral and preoccupied with ideas that one cannot relate to other people. This kind of intellectual is so theoretical as to be practically good for nothing. However, the kind of intellectual we have in mind is a particular kind of generalist who knows how to relate big truths to real people.

Tom Oden examines a number of titles for a minister (e.g., curate, rector, priest, reverend, etc.) and finds that each illumines an aspect of the pastor's work; he concludes by stating his preference for pastor as the central paradigm, with shepherding as the pivotal analogy.⁷⁰ Our English term "pastor" comes from the Latin *pastor* ("shepherd"). More important, Jesus designates himself the Good Shepherd (John 10:1–18) and commissions Peter to "Feed my sheep" (John 21:17). Oden thinks the shepherding analogy still works in a postindustrial society because the Bible spells out how the shepherd relates to the flock. Interestingly enough, one of the marks of a good shepherd also characterizes intellectuals: "The shepherd characteristically is 'out ahead' of them, not only guiding them, but [also] looking out, by way of anticipation, for their welfare."⁷¹

The kind of intellectual we have in mind is a particular kind of generalist who knows how to relate big truths to real people.

The flock of Jesus Christ is threatened not by lions, bears, or wolves (1 Sam. 17:34–35) but by false religion, incorrect doctrine, and ungodly practices—not to mention "principalities and powers" (Eph. 6:12 KJV). Consequently, pastors who want to be out ahead of the congregations must be grounded in the gospel and culturally competent. Public theologians help people understand the world in which they live and, what is more important, how to follow Christ in everyday as well as extraordinary situations. "Ministerial leadership is, first and finally, discipleship,"⁷² though to follow Jesus one has to know where one is, what is happening, and which way is the way of truth and life. *The pastor-theologian is the organic intellectual of the body of Christ, a person with evangelical intelligence who is "wise unto salvation"* (2 Tim. 3:15 KJV).⁷³

An organic intellectual is neither a genius—an individual thinker alone with their own brilliant thoughts, detached from everyone else—or a member of an elite intelligentsia. Rather, the organic intellectual articulates the needs, convictions, and aspirations of the social group to which they belong. The organic intellectual brings to the level of speech the doctrines and desires of the community.⁷⁴ The organic intellectual is not a product of the Ivy League

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“wise unto salvation.”*

but homegrown, as it were, on the farm. Most important, the organic intellectual does not speak down to people: “The mode of being of the new intellectual can no longer consist in eloquence, which is an exterior and momentary mover of feelings and passions, but in active participation in practical life, as constructor, organizer, ‘permanent persuader,’ and not just a simple orator.”⁷⁵

In chapter 4 we shall return to the role of the organic intellectuals in exposing and combating cultural hegemony—the pervasive worldview that circulates in so many ways and places that we are often not even aware of it.⁷⁶ The immediate focus is on the organic intellectual as one who serves the interest of a minority or oppressed social group by giving it prophetic and poetic voice—speech designed to clarify the situation, express the aims and objectives of the community, and rouse it to act in ways consistent with its vision.⁷⁷ The organic intellectual knows that ideas matter, that they have the power to give shape to certain forms of life. The organic intellectual is therefore no abstract theorist but rather a social activist and political organizer.

The term “organic intellectual,” we submit, gives concrete content to the analogy of the pastor as shepherd. The pastor-theologian is an advocate for the community of God’s people. The pastor-theologian takes every false thought captive to sound doctrine (2 Cor. 10:5)—christological “ideas” (i.e., truths) that are both indicative of life and life-giving. David Wells points out that historically church leaders were scholar saints, pastors who were “as comfortable with books and learning as with the aches of the soul.”⁷⁸ Reading books—not only of theology but also of fiction (see chap. 3 below)—ought to be part of every pastor’s plan of action for staying out ahead of the flock.

It bears repeating: pastor-theologians ought to be not academics but intellectuals, and organic intellectuals at that. Pastor-theologians do not need to

be the smartest people in the room—but then again, neither did the apostles. When Peter and John were arrested for preaching the gospel and dragged before the Sanhedrin, they had to do some impromptu—or rather inspired—public speaking: “This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone. And there is salvation in no one else” (Acts 4:11–12). When the high priests, elders, and scribes—all highly trained in rabbinic schools—saw the “boldness” of Peter and John, they were astonished, for “they perceived that they were uneducated, common men” (4:13). Peter and John were not geniuses but apostles: they knew something that the Sanhedrin did not know (“He is risen!”), and they knew it not because they were clever but because they were told. They *had* learned something, something that astonished the Jewish leaders, but they had not learned it at school. Luke tells us that the Jewish leaders recognized that Peter and John “had been with Jesus” (Acts 4:13)—an understated way of acknowledging their educational qualifications.

Pastor-theologians know something that others do not know, and they know it because the Bible tells them so. To be instructed by the Spirit in the school of the Scriptures is to be, as Peter and John had been, “with Jesus.” What pastor-theologians know is something quite particular (what God was doing in Christ) but has enormous, even universal, implications. The organic intellectual resembles not the fox, who knows many things, but rather the proverbial hedgehog, who knows one big thing: in this case, what God is doing to create a people for his treasured possession (Exod. 19:5; Deut. 7:6; 14:2; 26:8; Mal. 3:17; Titus 2:14; 1 Pet. 2:9).⁷⁹ Pastor-theologians, like Solzhenitsyn, are generalists, yet with a difference: pastor-theologians give voice to the church’s understanding of the meaning of life—or rather, the meaning of the life hidden in Christ (Col. 3:3). Pastor-theologians know something particular and definite, but strictly speaking, it is not specialized knowledge. The pastor-theologian is rather a special kind of generalist: *a generalist who specializes in viewing all of life as relating to God and the gospel of Jesus Christ*. Better: the pastor-theologian is an organic intellectual who is present as the *mind of Christ*, which animates the *body of Christ*.

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Prospect: The Ministry of What Is “in Christ”

For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. (1 Cor. 2:2)

I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. (Phil. 3:8)

This book sets forth a vision for reclaiming the vocation of the pastor-theologian, but that does not mean that it is for clergy only. On the contrary, we have written this book for congregations as well; they too need to reclaim a lost vision. Every Christian is a living exposition of the Bible, charged with responding to God’s Word for using the Spirit’s gifting to build up the church: “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs” (Col. 3:16). Still, our primary focus is on the work of the pastor-theologian. What should organic intellectuals—minds activating the body of Christ—actually do?

We have introduced the pastor as a public theologian, a participant in the divine economy of “public works.” The pastor is one who works with people, ministering the reality of Jesus Christ in order to build people up into the house of God. To minister the reality of Christ is to do more (but not less) than inform others about him. The apostle Paul speaks of the “surpassing worth” of knowing Christ. Paul wants to know the Christ, the whole Christ, and nothing but the Christ. The pastor-theologian communicates this knowledge not to swell people’s heads but to transform their hearts. Ultimately what pastor-theologians want their people to know is “the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge” (Eph. 3:19).

A brief outline of what follows may prove helpful. Our four chapters treat the biblical, historical, systematic, and practical theology of the pastorate respectively. Chapter 1 examines the way in which Scripture, both Old and New Testaments, describes those who lead the people of God. God has never left his treasured possession without some kind of shepherd leaders to guide them. Special attention is given to the distinct theological nature of the pastoral office. Chapter 2 surveys the rich tradition of the pastor-theologian in church history. Special attention is given to certain figures that either exemplify or wrote on the theological nature of the pastoral office. Together, these two chapters make the case that we are indeed reclaiming a lost vision rather than creating a novel version.

Chapters 3 and 4—the systematic and practical theology of the ministry of the word of God—were conceived of and are best read together, two edges of the same sword (Heb. 4:12). Chapter 3 focuses on systematic theology, the attempt to say in a coherent and culturally intelligible way *what is* “in Christ” (and then conform to it). We present a threefold ministry of theology: a ministry of reality, understanding, and edification of the people of God. Chapter 4 likens the pastor-theologian to a master craftsman whose work is to build God’s house. Special attention is given to the pastor-theologian’s practical work of preaching, catechesis, celebrating the Lord’s Supper, and organizing the people to do works of love that are simultaneously demonstrations of the gospel’s truth.

The book concludes with fifty-five summary theses on the pastor as public theologian. These theses bring the pastor’s theological work with God’s people into sharp focus. Some readers may object that our vision is too idealistic: pastors are too busy or too finite to do everything we say they should be doing. We understand the concern, but we believe that the problem has less to do with time, energy, or native intelligence than it does vision and priority. Theology is not a luxury, an optional extra (like leather trim), but a standard operating feature (like a steering wheel) of the pastorate. The briefer essays interspersed throughout the book from twelve pastors attest in various ways to the possibility and practicality of our vision. These contributions provide evidence that theology is part and parcel of ministry on the ground, not least because the pastor’s task is to conform disciples, here on earth, to Christ as he is in heaven.⁸⁰

Pastoral Perspectives

Six Practical Steps toward Being a Pastor-Theologian

GERALD HIESTAND

If there's one thing I've learned as a pastor, it's this: being a pastor-theologian requires swimming against the current of the atheological swamp that is contemporary evangelicalism. I don't claim to have it all figured out, but over the years I've developed an increasing sense about some of the moves a pastor can make to help facilitate the pastor-theologian vision. Here are six steps I've found helpful, in a roughly descending order of importance.

1. *Hire staff with the vision.* Building a staff that values theology will go a long way toward creating a robust theological culture at your church. I don't recommend making staffing changes solely with a view to the vision for pastor-theologian. But if you oversee hiring at your church and are in need of new ministry staff, let me strongly encourage you to look for ministry partners who share your sense of calling to theological leadership. If you can find a like-minded ministry partner who is serious about theological leadership, you will have overcome perhaps the most significant hurdle of the pastor-theologian: isolation. This is a significant disability to the pastor-theologian. In previous church contexts, I didn't have a working environment where I could pop my head into the room next door and talk about how Aquinas's prioritization of the intellect in

- conversion causes him to arrive at a different *ordo salutis* than Calvin, and the implications this has for the doctrine of total depravity (for example). Now I do, and the difference it has made is significant.
2. *Get networked.* Not all of us are in a position to hire a fellow pastor-theologian. Perhaps your church is too small. Regardless, the next most important thing you can do is to become involved in a network of like-minded pastors. Whether a denominational gathering, or an informal meeting of outside colleagues, having a network of pastoral peers who desire to engage theologically is crucial to sustaining your theological calling. Use Skype, connect at ETS, or start a blog. I meet monthly with two other pastors via Skype to discuss what we've been reading and writing. The regular exchanges help to provide a sense of camaraderie and motivate me to keep sharp theologically. However you do it, find a group of pastors who are committed to engaging theologically.
 3. *Make your study time a priority in your weekly schedule.* The expectations and demands of your congregation will almost certainly push you away from theological study and writing. If you're going to do it, you need to make it a priority in your schedule. I've found that setting aside my mornings works best. I spend the first hour or more in prayer and Scripture reading. The next hour is given to my Latin primer (I'm working on a PhD in classics), and the next three hours or so are spent engaging with theology. This year I'm reading Augustine on Mondays, Barth on Wednesdays, and contemporary theology/scholarship on Thursdays. Tuesday mornings I spend on church-vision matters. Staff meetings, counseling appointments, and administrative duties are reserved for the afternoon. Of course, sometimes I have to pull up from studying: funerals, emergencies, and so forth press in occasionally. Don't just study for your next sermon or teaching assignment. Too many pastors are merely one step ahead of the theological train. The lifeblood of the pastor—whether your congregation realizes it or not—is a steady intake of rich theology, prayer, and Bible reading. Stop feeling guilty about prayerfully reading Calvin's *Institutes*, or Athanasius's *On the Incarnation*, or Augustine's *The Trinity*. Theological study isn't something a pastor fits into his schedule after fulfilling other pastoral duties; rather, theological study *is* the pastor's duty. For the good of your congregation—for the good of your preaching, teaching, counseling, and capacity to offer pastoral care—it is vital that you not neglect to feed yourself.

4. *Get buy-in from the leadership of your church.* If you're doing your job right, the leadership of your church should eventually come to value the time you spend in your study. After all, they should reap the benefits of your theological labor more than anyone else. But depending on the history of your church, robust theological study might be seen as a distraction from your pastoral duties. Go slow here. Since theology has been separated from the church for so long, it is no longer self-evident to many congregations that sustained theological engagement by their pastors is a good thing. This will need to be demonstrated, not simply argued. In any case, it's important that you help your church leadership see that your pursuit of theological scholarship is not ancillary to your calling as a pastor but rather a vital part of it. And this leads to my next point.
5. *Don't forget that theology exists for the church—your own church first and foremost!* If the people in your congregation don't feel valued as your first priority, then you are being a poor pastor-theologian, regardless of how smart you become. Your congregants should feel like your study time is about them, not simply your next writing project or sermon. If they start to begrudge you your study time (e.g., "He spends all his time holed up in his office"), you will need to take a hard look at yourself and your priorities. It is very likely that your study time isn't really as much about God and his kingdom as you think it is. Theology serves the church, not the other way around. Love for God and his people should drive us to our books. If love for God and our congregations isn't the fuel that powers our study, then what are we really studying for?
6. *Stop calling the place where you work an "office" and start calling it your "study."* Never, under pain of excommunication from the pastor-theologian club, refer to your study as an "office." If this is the first time you've heard this rule, you get three free passes to break the habit. After that, your pastor-theologian license will be suspended. Semantics matter. If you call your study an office, the people in your church will have a certain set of expectations regarding what you do during the day. If you refer to it as your *study*, they will come to have a different set of expectations. The room with all your books, where you read the Scriptures and pray—that room is your study. Start referring to it as such, and your people will come to expect that studying is part of your calling.