

A Taxonomy of the Pastor-Theologian: Why PhD Students Should Consider the Pastorate as the Context for Their Theological Scholarship¹

The Expository Times
124(6) 261–271
© The Author(s) 2013
Reprints and permission: sagepub.
co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/0014524612465381
ext.sagepub.com


Gerald Hiestand

Senior Associate Pastor at Calvary Memorial Church, Illinois

Abstract

The bifurcation of theological scholarship from pastoral ministry has led to a twofold problem in contemporary church/academy relations: the theological anemia of the church, and the ecclesial anemia of theology. This essay explores these twin problems and suggests that the way forward in bridging the gap between academy and church is to reunite the pastoral vocation with the vocation of the theologian. Toward this end, the essay offers a taxonomy of three contemporary models of the pastor-theologian, examining the strengths and limitations of each. Ultimately, the paper calls for a resurrection of an all but extinct, yet historically rooted model of the pastorate—the pastor as ecclesial theologian, and challenges the emerging generations of theologians to consider the pastorate as a viable context for their future theological scholarship.

Keywords

Pastor-theologian, academic theology, Ecclesial theology, social location

The sub-title of this essay may sound a bit naive. In what sense could the pastorate ever be a legitimate context for robust theological scholarship—especially the sort of theological scholarship that would justify the time and effort needed for acquiring a PhD? And indeed, incredulity here would not be without warrant. The announcement by

Tom Wright regarding his retirement from the See of Durham to take up an appointment at the University of Saint Andrews offers us a telling glimpse into the contemporary working relationship between theological scholarship and the pastoral ministry. Announcing his career move, Wright stated,

¹ This paper reflects my North American evangelical context, but has application, I believe, for the wider academic/ecclesial community. It was presented in a modified form at the 2009 Symposium of the Society for the Advancement of Ecclesial Theology.

Corresponding author:

Gerald Hiestand

Email: geraldhiestand@calvarymemorial.com

This has been the hardest decision of my life. It has been an indescribable privilege to be Bishop of the ancient Diocese of Durham, to work with a superb team of colleagues, to take part in the work of God's kingdom here in the north-east, and to represent the region and its churches in the House of Lords and in General Synod. I have loved the people, the place, the heritage and the work. But my continuing vocation to be a writer, teacher and broadcaster, for the benefit (I hope) of the wider world and church, has been increasingly difficult to combine with the complex demands and duties of a diocesan bishop. I am very sad about this, but the choice has become increasingly clear.²

As Wright's example shows, modernity has not been kind to the theological vocation of the pastor. The local church—in the main—is no longer fertile soil for the sort of robust theological engagement pastors once offered the larger church. Instead, our contemporary ecclesial context has largely pushed the pastoral office toward 'practical' duties such as leadership, organizational administration, pastoral care, and counseling. To be sure, all of these represent necessary and historic pastoral responsibilities. But amidst the inevitable pragmatism of ecclesial ministry, the church has lost sight of the need for her pastors to function—collectively—as a body of theologians.

Such has not always been the case, of course. One need only think of history's most important theologians to be reminded that the pastoral office was once capable of robust theological production. The heritage of pastors such as Irenaeus, Athanasius, Basil, Augustine, Anselm, Luther, Calvin, Edwards, Wesley, etc., all demonstrate the viability—indeed desirability—of uniting ecclesial ministry and robust theological scholarship. But the pastor-theologian is no

longer the norm; he has been replaced by the professor-theologian. This transition has not been without effect on the health of the Church or her theology, notably in two primary ways.

First, as theologians moved from the pulpit to the lecture halls the theological water level within the pastoral community—and thus our congregations—fell considerably. The collective capacity of the pastoral community to think deeply and carefully about the crucial social, cultural, and theological issues facing the church has waned. A vapid pragmatism has been the inevitable result. And the cultural moment in which we find ourselves—particularly in the post-Christian west—exacerbates this theological deficiency. If there was ever a time when the church needed a pastoral community able to construct and articulate theological leadership on sexual ethics and anthropology, surely this is it. Yet the pastoral community—in the main—is largely incapable of providing such leadership. Consequently, local churches—and the congregants who inhabit them—now suffer from a sort of theological anemia not representative of our past. It should not surprise us that the near universal removal of our theologians from the pastorate to the academy has resulted in a deep and chronic theological deficit within our churches.³

In the second place, not only has the church become *theologically* anemic, but theology itself has become, in many instances, *ecclesiastically* anemic. With the rise of the university in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, Christian theology began to suffer the loss of a distinctly

² See Justin Taylor, 'N. T. Wright Leaving Durham, Appointed to Chair at St. Andrews', n. p. [cited 27 April 2010]. Online: <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justin-taylor/2010/04/27/n-t-wright-leaving-durham-appointed-to-chair-at-st-andrews/>.

³ Certainly the sky is not falling in every quarter. But evangelicalism, when considered broadly, demonstrates a disturbing lack of theological depth at the congregant level. David Wells, in his now classic, *No Place for Truth: Or, Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1993), rails against the secularizing tendency of modernity, noting in particular its deleterious effects on the theological integrity of evangelicalism, and especially pastoral ministry. Wells draws a sharp and compelling connection between the demise of the pastor-theologian and the pragmatization of the pastorate. See his entire work, but especially 218-57.

ecclesial voice. Our theologians no longer live and breathe in an ecclesial environment. The academy, not the church, sets the agenda (and establishes the rules of engagement) for broader theological discourse. Joseph Ratzinger (then Cardinal, now Pope), in his *The Nature and Mission of Theology*, draws upon the work of Italian historian G. Alberigo, and observes insightfully,

....at the close of the twelfth century theology rushed as impetuously as a flash flood from its traditional centers — the bishop's residence, the monastery and the chapter of the canons regular — to a new, ecclesiastically neutral center, the university, and in doing so radically altered its spiritual and scientific complexion....The orientation of theology toward a scientific status initiated a movement tending to divorce theology from the life of the Church: an ever more pronounced 'hiatus develops between the Christian community and the institutional Church on one hand, and the guild of theologians on the other. The fact that the university became the new seat of research and of the teaching of theology without a doubt enervated its ecclesial dynamism and furthermore severed theology from vital contact with spiritual experiences.'⁴

Ratzinger's observation that contemporary theology is often 'enervated of its ecclesial dynamism' is correct. Theologians now often find themselves absorbed in academic discussions that at times are only tangentially related to explicit ecclesial concerns. The inevitable result is a theological project that often fails to terminate in doxology and true Christian formation. As Ratzinger goes on to observe, 'A theology wholly bent on being academic and scientific according to the standards of the

modern university, cuts itself off from its great historical matrices and renders itself sterile for the Church.'⁵ The situation is perhaps not as dire when one considers the professors of Christian colleges and divinity schools; many such professors operate self-consciously as theologians and scholars of the church, and their theological context provides the freedom to reflect this commitment. Yet the methodological agnosticism of the wider university is not without effect, even in the divinity schools. It does not take one long to note the difference between the earnest, pastoral tone of a Calvin or Luther, and the more 'disinterested' tone one often finds in a contemporary academic journal of theology. There are (as is noted below) a number of distinct strengths of contemporary academic theology. But theological scholarship—when considered within the wider university setting—has become overtly *academic*

⁵ *Ibid.*, 116. Ratzinger's concerns are hardly isolated. For similar sentiments germane to biblical studies, see Craig Bartholomew's, 'Table in the Wilderness? Towards a Post-Liberal Agenda for Old Testament Study', in *Making the Old Testament Live: From Curriculum to Classroom*, eds., R. Hess and G. Wenham (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1998), 19-47. Voicing sentiments similar to Bartholomew's, Kevin Vanhoozer laments the bare historicism that plagues much of the academic biblical studies guild, noting that there is a 'near consensus among biblical scholars that there is no place for doctrine in the exegetical inn....One is hard pressed to say which is uglier: the ditch separating theory and practice or the ditch that separates exegesis and theology'. *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2005) 20. Alister E. McGrath makes similar observations regarding the discipline of theology in his, 'Theology and the Futures of Evangelicalism', in *The Futures of Evangelicalism* eds. Craig Bartholomew (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 2003) 17-29. For a look at the historic church/academy disconnect in North America, see Donald M. Scott, *From Office to Profession, The New England Ministry 1750-1850* (Pa.: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1978), 124-25; Gary Scott Smith, 'Presbyterian and Methodist Education', in *Theological Education in the Evangelical Tradition* (ed. D. G. Hart and R. Albert Mohler, Jr.; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1996), 88-93, and Gerald Hiestand, 'Pastor-Scholar to Professor-Scholar: Addressing the Theological Disconnect between the Academy and the Local Church', in *The Westminster Theological Journal*, vol. 70 (2008), 360-66.

⁴ Joseph Ratzinger, *The Nature and Mission of Theology: Essays to Orient Theology in Today's Debate* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995), 115-16. Ratzinger is drawing from Alberigo's 'Sviluppo e caratteri della teologia come scienza', in *Cristianesimo nella storia II* [1990]: 257-74.

in ways not always helpful to ecclesial ministry.

What can be done to correct these twin problems—the theological anemia of the church, and the ecclesial anemia of theology? Recognition of the problem is not new. But despite our best efforts to redress the dilemma, the problem remains. I am convinced the chronic nature of this problem is connected to the issue of social location. Whatever the limitations of postmodernity, it has properly reminded us that social location plays a key role in theological formation. The questions that need answering, the issues that need solving, largely emerge out of the soil of the vocational grind that constitutes a theologian’s life context. And it bears observing that the academy and the church represent two distinct social locations. Simply put, the theological questions that press in upon a professor are not always the same set of questions that press in upon a pastor. It is, I contend, simply asking too much of academic theologians to be sufficiently aware of and driven by the questions of a social location that they do not vocationally inhabit.⁶ We need a new way forward, which, as we will see, is in many respects a way back.

Given the current bifurcation between the academy and the church, it is time to ask the emerging generation of theologians to once again consider the pastorate as a viable context for their future theological scholarship. This single move addresses both issues raised above. More theologians in our pulpits will deepen the theological integrity of our churches, while at the same time add an ecclesial voice to

evangelical theology. There are, of course, many challenges here. As Wright’s story reveals, the institutional structures of the church do not often lend themselves to theological scholarship. And the theological/scholarly methodology of the modern research university does not often lend itself to the sort of theological project a pastor would be interested in pursuing. These are legitimate concerns, but we leave them aside for an issue that I believe is more foundational: charting a new vision for the pastor-theologian. If a new generation of pastor-theologians is the answer to the theological deficit of the church and the ecclesial deficit of theology, then it will be necessary to articulate a precise and robust vision of the pastor-theologian.

As we will see, contemporary notions of the ‘pastor-theologian’—however important they may be—are insufficient for addressing the twin concerns raised in this essay. To move forward, we must assess the dominant understandings of the pastor-theologian with a view to articulating a fresh vision. From what I can observe, the term ‘pastor-theologian’ conveys two basic meanings: the pastor-theologian as *local theologian*, and the pastor-theologian as *popular theologian*. While I affirm the legitimacy (indeed necessity) of each of these paradigms, this essay will argue for the addition of a third, historic understanding of the pastor-theologian: the pastor-theologian as *ecclesial theologian*.

We begin with an assessment of the contemporary identities of the pastor-theologian.

I. The Pastor-Theologian as Local Theologian

The near universal meaning of the term ‘pastor-theologian’ is that of a *local theologian* to one’s own congregation. In this model, the pastor-theologian is conceived of as a theologically astute pastor who ably services the theological needs of a local church, most immediately through a preaching ministry. Such pastors are easily identifiable: their libraries are full of

⁶ The fact that many academic theologians are practicing Christians and active in local church life—while admirable—does not sufficiently overcome the social location divide. One is reminded here of Jesus’ words in Luke 12:34, “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” The very basic and visceral reality of how one earns a living can not be underestimated. The institutional audience, agenda, questions, and concerns that comprise one’s vocational habitation—be it the church or academy—inevitably shape a theologian’s intellectual horizons in no small way.

theological works, and their teaching and preaching ministries are strongly influenced by theological concerns. Notably, in the local theologian paradigm, a pastor-theologian's sense of theological responsibility does not extend beyond one's own local congregation; written theological scholarship to other theologians, if engaged in at all, is not seen as intrinsic to the pastor's identity as a pastor-theologian.

A robust vision of the pastor as local theologian can be found in Kevin Vanhoozer's important work, *The Drama of Doctrine*. In this helpful work, Vanhoozer offers us an account of Christian doctrine that draws upon the imagery of the theatre. The gospel is to be performed, not merely believed. Doctrine, then 'is a condensed form of Christian wisdom, rooted in the Scriptures and accumulated over the centuries, about how rightly to participate in the drama of redemption'.⁷ Canonical doctrines are thus like 'stage directions' that provide instructions for the church's performance of the gospel.⁸ Keeping with the theater metaphor, Vanhoozer likens the pastor to the 'director' of a local performance of the gospel.

The Father is the playwright and the producer of the action; the Son the climax and summation of the action. The Spirit, as the one who unites us to Christ, is the dresser who clothes us with Christ's righteousness, the prompter who helps us remember our biblical lines, and the prop master who gives gifts (accessories) to each church member, equipping us to play our parts. While the Holy Spirit is the primary director who oversees the global production, it is the pastor who bears the primary responsibility for overseeing local performances.⁹

Thus for Vanhoozer, the pastor is an 'assistant director' (working under the Spirit), who ensures that a local Christian community is performing

the gospel according to the stage directions of canonical doctrine. Given that doctrine provides the stage directions for the performance, it is vital that the 'directing' duties of the pastor be carried out with careful attention to doctrine. Theology 'far from being an obstacle to pastoral ministry (as per the common misconception)... is in fact its servant'.¹⁰ Vanhoozer notes how Scripture, creedal theology, and confessional theology, all serve as necessary sign posts that help maintain continuity between a local performance and the Spirit-directed universal performance. Thus, 'pastors who neglect Scripture become disoriented and lose the way of the gospel. Pastors who neglect creedal and confessional theology disinherit and dispossess themselves and their congregations of the accumulated dramaturgical wealth of the church'.¹¹

Vanhoozer's vision of a theologically astute, doctrinally informed pastorate is needed today, and would that more pastors embraced the vision of the pastor-theologian he offers. Notably absent, however, in Vanhoozer's account is a sense that a pastor-theologian should function as a writing theologian beyond the local congregation. For Vanhoozer, the pastor-theologian is a local theologian. Certainly Vanhoozer's proposal does not prohibit the pastor from engaging in written theological scholarship, but is clear that such activity is not vital to the pastor-theologian's identity as Vanhoozer conceives it. In this respect, Vanhoozer's articulation of the pastor-theologian as a local theologian is in keeping with others who advocate for the pastor-theologian model.¹²

¹⁰ Ibid., 449.

¹¹ Ibid, 454-55.

¹² See for example, Al Mohler Jr., *He Is Not Silent: Preaching in a Postmodern World* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2008), 105-14. Mohler devotes a chapter to the nature and identity of the pastor-theologian, in which he argues that the theological duties of the pastor-theologian are carried out chiefly within the context of a pulpit ministry. 'The health of the church depends upon pastors who infuse their congregations with deep biblical and theological conviction,

⁷ Vanhoozer, *Drama*, 448.

⁸ Ibid., 18.

⁹ Ibid., 448.

The larger Protestant tradition seems little different in this regard. The Center for Theological Inquiry (CTI), an ecumenical institution working primarily within the mainline tradition, concluded a nine-year Pastor-Theologian program from 1996- 2005.¹³ The CTI's program included theological symposia, collaboration between pastors and academic theologians, paper presentations, etc. It is clear as one reads the literature from the CTI gatherings¹⁴ that its predominant understanding of the pastor-theologian remains largely that of the local theologian. Allen McSween, a participant of the program remarks, 'The purpose of the program was to inculcate and develop the habits of theological reflection from the beginning of one's ministry'.¹⁵ Paper presentations, along with common prayer, scripture reading, and theological study, are a means of achieving a

and the primary means of this transfer of conviction is the preaching of the Word of God'. Like Vanhoozer, Mohler's account of the pastor-theologian does not mention a writing ministry. See also the twin essays by John Piper and D. A. Carson in *The Pastor as Scholar and the Scholar as Pastor: Reflections on Life and Ministry*, eds., Owen Strachan and David Mathis, (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2011). It is clear throughout both essays that Piper and Carson view the identity of the pastor-theologian almost exclusively within the framework of the local theologian model. Additionally, see Wells, *No Place for Truth*, 6, 221, 245, who refers to pastors as 'brokers' of theological truth. For Wells, pastors function as intermediaries between professional theologians and congregants; writing theology is not part of Well's vision for a theologically reinvigorated pastorate.

¹³ Information on The Center for Theological Understanding can be found at www.ctinquiry.org.

¹⁴ See in particular Wallace M. Alston and Cynthia A. Jarvis, eds., *The Power to Comprehend With All the Saints: The Formation and Practice of a Pastor-Theologian* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), and Michael Welker and Cynthia Jarvis, eds., *Loving God With Our Minds: The Pastor as Theologian* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004).

¹⁵ Allen C. McSween, 'Formed By a Lifetime of Theological Reflection and Study', in *The Power to Comprehend With All the Saints: The Formation and Practice of a Pastor-Theologian* (eds., Wallace M. Alston Jr. and Cynthia A. Jarvis, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 289.

'theologically thoughtful ministry'.¹⁶ Little if any mention is made of helping pastors develop as writing theologians to the broader community. Here again, the local theologian model is assumed.¹⁷

B. The Pastor-theologian as Popular Theologian

Moving beyond the local theologian model, we arrive at a second definition of the pastor-theologian—the pastor-theologian as *popular theologian*. In this model, the pastor-theologian is a pastor who writes theology—an objective activity not typical of the local theologian. Bridging the gap between the professional theological community and the local church, the popular theologian translates academic theology 'down' to other pastors and the laity. Many pastor-theologians of this variety have post-graduate degrees, read widely in theology, and serve as significant (and necessary) voices in contemporary Christianity. Writing of this sort is not primarily an attempt to enter into the theological discussions taking place among professional theologians and biblical scholars. Rather it is an effort to help other pastors and non-theologians better understand the importance of relevant issues in theology.

Thus, in the popular theologian model, the job of the pastor-theologian is to unpack the complexities of Nicene Trinitarianism, Chalcedonian Christology, the Reformed confessions, atonement theories, and the like, in ways that are accessible to the average pastor and person in the pew. Commentaries written in this genre tend to be devotional and focused on application. Theological works tend to be introductory. Popular theology also tends to cover ground not covered by academic theologians. For instance, topics such as dating, parenting,

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 288.

¹⁷ Following a similar agenda was the (now discontinued) Pastor-Theologian program of the PCUSA (see <http://www.pcusa.org/theologyandworship/whatwedo/pastor-theologian.htm>).

marriage, finances, church leadership, liturgy, and the like are not frequently addressed in evangelical academic journals.

In short, the job of the popular theologian is to speak to issues (at a popular level) that tend to be left unaddressed by academic theologians, as well as to translate academic theology down into the common vernacular of the local church.

D. Assessing the Contemporary Models

What follows is not a critique of the local theologian and popular theologian models in themselves, but rather an attempt to show how these paradigms do not contain the resources for overcoming the theological anemia of the church and the ecclesial anemia of theology. While the local theologian and the popular theologian occupy a vital place in the life of the church, they represent only two legs of a three-legged stool. Central to my critique of both models is that they lack a theological writing ministry as essential to their identity. Without such a writing ministry, the current paradigms of the pastor-theologian lack a capacity to address the twin problems highlighted at the beginning of this essay.

1. Limitations of the Local Theologian

As noted above, the CTI pastor-theologian program was ‘seeking for ways to let the best theological research and thought of our time find its way into the “the blood stream of the Church”’.¹⁸ This is fine, as far as it goes. But what the present occasion demands even more so, I would suggest, is in many respects the reverse. We do not simply need to get more of existing theology (now largely academic) into the church, but also to get more of the church into theology. Yet

this will not happen if pastors do not self-consciously view themselves as theologians beyond their own parishes. Without a robust theological writing ministry, it is very difficult to imagine how the pastoral community could ever function as an important body of theologians. Contemporary theological discourse will never be seasoned with ecclesial yeast via the local theologian model.

Further, the sole identification of the pastor-theologian with the local theologian model ironically perpetuates the theological anemia of the church. For as long as the term ‘pastor-theologian’ is identified with the local theologian model, the emerging generation of theologians—who have an inherent desire to engage in the publication of theological scholarship—will not view the pastorate as the best way to fulfill their sense of theological calling. The local theologian model, as valuable as it is in itself, has not served as a sufficiently compelling vision for pulling theologians back into the churches. This inevitably pushes many of our brightest divinity students away from the pastorate and toward the academy, thus perpetuating the chronic disconnect noted at the beginning of this essay. We will never reclaim the emerging generation of theologians for the pastorate if our primary conception of the pastor-theologian is that of a local theologian.

2. Limitations of the Popular Theologian

The same basic limitations attend the popular theologian model. Like the local theologian model, the popular theologian model is necessary for the health and life of the church; as a pastor, much of my writing fits into this paradigm. But popular theology, given its audience, lacks the ability to influence theological discourse in an ecclesial direction. Typically, those who publish robust theological scholarship do not often write readable popular theology, and those who write popular theology do not often publish robust theological scholarship. This division of labor, while not without fruit, often

¹⁸ Brian Daley, quoting Wallace Alston, director of CTI’s Pastor-Theologian Program in ‘Saint Gregory of Nazianzus as Pastor and Theologian’ in Welker and Jarvis, eds., *Loving God with Our Minds: The Pastor as Theologians*, 119.

results in academic theology that has lost touch with its ecclesial moorings, and popular theology that lacks theological integrity. There are of course happy exceptions (noted below).

And here again the association of the pastor-theologian with the popular theologian pushes the emerging generation of theologians away from the pastorate. Popular writing does not appropriately merit one the term ‘theologian’ in the fullest sense of what that term has historically implied. Pastors such as Irenaeus, Athanasius, Augustine, Luther, Calvin, and Edwards, were more than popular theologians (though they were often that as well). Their theological systems represented the cutting edge thought of their day. To the extent that we chiefly identify the pastor-theologian with popular-level theology, we inadvertently reduce the ‘pastor-theologian’ to a second-tier thinker. This second-tier status is in turn intuitively sensed by the emerging generation of theologians, who thus do not see the pastoral vocation as the best use of their intellectual gifting. Thus the popular theologian model (like the local theologian model) pushes the emerging generation of theologians away from the church and into the academy, perpetuating the chronic disconnect between the vocation of pastor and the duty of the theologian.

However important the local-theologian and popular-theologian models are to the life of the church—and they are important—a third conception of the pastor-theologian is needed: the pastor as ecclesial-theologian.

E. The Pastor-Theologian as Ecclesial Theologian¹⁹

The pastor-as-ecclesial-theologian marks a new path. The ecclesial theologian is, first and foremost, a theologian who writes robust, biblical,

ecclesially centered, theological reflection to other theologians. It includes, but pushes beyond, the local theologian and popular theologian models, prosecuting a theological agenda consistent with the theological needs of the church. The ecclesial theologian counters the sentiment that says, ‘Deep, penetrating commentaries and books on the atonement—that stuff is for the academy. Pastors should stick to writing pop theology and Christian living stuff’. *Me genoito!* Expounding God’s Word and reflecting on the nature of the atonement, etc., is the duty of bishops and elders and pastors. The ecclesial theologian represents a return to the days when pastors wrote theology that was richly theological, deeply biblical, historically informed, culturally aware, prophetic, and intelligent.

Luther’s *Galatians* commentary comes to mind here. Luther’s work is quite a bit different than the average modern commentary. But it is not different because it is ‘lighter’ or ‘easier to read’ or ‘pitched to a less informed audience.’ It is different in that it does not feel such a need to plumb the nearly endless depths of secondary literature (there was not as much), because it is not afraid to be explicitly theological and confessional, because it interacts with the great thinkers of the past who have helped shape orthodox thought, and—most significantly—because it prophetically calls the church to take action. We cannot dismiss the academic training that informed and undergirded Luther’s theological insights. But neither can we dismiss the way his pastoral duties at Wittenberg shaped his overall theology.²⁰ Luther did not change the

¹⁹ The following paragraphs are modified and expanded from my essay, ‘Ecclesial Theology and Academic Theology: Why We Need More of the Former’, *Reformation 21*, August, 2009, n. p., online: <http://www.reformation21.org/articles/ecclesial-theology-and-academic-theology-why-we-need-more-of-the-former.php>. See the whole essay for more of my comments on the theological project of the ecclesial theologian.

²⁰ While Luther was not the pastor of the town church in Wittenberg (a position occupied by his friend Johannes Bugenhagen), Luther’s involvement in ecclesial life was remarkable. He regularly participated in ecclesial disputes, pastoral training, and was a frequent preacher at the town church. Between 1510 and 1546 Luther preached approximately 3,000 sermons to the laity—a preaching schedule more rigorous than most contemporary pastors. For a concise treatment of Luther’s pastoral duties at Wittenberg and beyond, see John Piper, *The Legacy of Sovereign Joy: God’s Triumphant Grace in the Lives of Augustine, Luther, and Calvin* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2000) 86-90. See also, Fred W. Meuser, *Luther the Preacher* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1983).

world solely because he was a successful academician (though he was that). He changed the world because he wrote as a robust, theologically informed, intelligent, prophetic Christian who understood—as a matter of vocation—what it was to have the weight of souls upon his shoulders.

It is important here to state what I am *not* suggesting. I am not suggesting that pastors can or should try to do exactly the same sort of specialized scholarship that is being done in the academy. Narrow work in a specialized guild (textual criticism on extant copies of Gregory of Nyssa's *Contra Eunomius* for instance), while important in our critical and post-critical context, is most likely not the best use of a pastor's time or social location. As such, many theological tasks are best suited to the academic context. But there are other theological tasks—particularly those tasks associated with theological synthesis—that would be enriched by an ecclesial context. At the close of the 2009 Symposium on the 'Identity of the Pastor-Theologian' hosted by the Society for the Advancement of Ecclesial Theology, Doug Sweeney offered the following proposal regarding a possible working relationship between academic scholars and a new generation of ecclesial-theologians.

We will not always need academic, systematic theologians to do all the heavy theological lifting for God's people. We are not often explicit about this, but systematic theology, insofar as it is distinguished from biblical, historical, philosophical, psychological, and intercultural theology, is the work of generalists.... They put the big picture together and apply it to our lives. They don't require the resources or the structures of the academy to do this kind of work (though they do need very good libraries). In fact, the people best suited to synthesize our knowledge of God and His ways in the world, applying this knowledge to the empirical realities people face, are pastor-theologians.

We should work toward a day when professors view themselves as handmaids serving

pastor-theologians, and pastor-theologians play an important public role in guiding people theologically. Professors should continue to offer specialized instruction in ancient languages and history, exegesis, church history, social science, and philosophy. They will continue to raise up future generations of pastors. But we should work to raise up the kinds of pastors who can synthesize, exposit, and apply the knowledge of God to the lives of all God's people with authority.²¹

Sweeney's comments here are both helpful and generous. The pastoral office is capable of theological scholarship, and we serve the church poorly when we forget this. To be sure, there is still a need for academic systematicians. I am not here suggesting (nor is Sweeney) that academic systematicians be replaced by ecclesial systematicians. The academic vocation offers the academic theologian time and resources that the ecclesial theologian will not be able to match. (The contract of one research professor I know includes thirty-two weeks a year for study and writing.) When functioning in service of the church, the ability of an academic systematician to produce technical work that engages with a wide range of conversation partners is a great value to Christian theology, and a tremendous resource for ecclesial theologians. Given the rise of the modern research university, as well as the development of the specialized guilds, it is no longer realistic to expect pastor-theologians to flourish wholly independent of the academy. The fields have simply become too specialized and the secondary literature too vast.

Yet Sweeney is correct that it serves the church poorly when we rely exclusively on academic theologians, to the exclusion of ecclesial theologians. What the ecclesial theologian loses in research time and institutional support is compensated for by the shaping influence of the

²¹ Douglas A. Sweeney, 'Sixteen Theses on the Pastor Theologian', presented at the annual gathering of The Society for the Advancement of Ecclesial Theology, October, 2009.

pastoral vocation. As Vanhoozer rightly observes, 'The church is less the cradle of Christian theology than its *crucible*: the place where the community's understanding of faith is lived, tested, and reformed'.²² The pastoral vocation raises questions that are not always congruous with the questions of the academy, pushing the ecclesial theologian into the exploration of issues that remain underserved in contemporary theological discourse. And beyond this, the grind and press of pastoral care forces one to grapple in deeper ways with one's theological conclusions. One's theodicy is deepened (and confronted) when one has to conduct the funeral of a six week old baby who was accidentally killed by his own mother when the mother shifted in her sleep. And one's theology of marriage is pressed and shaped in profound ways when one has to provide counsel to a husband whose wife is on her third affair, or to a woman whose husband has left (for the fourth time) because of drug addiction. And one's anthropology and views on gender are forced beyond the facile when one has to help a man wrestle through the question of gender identity. One cannot help but be shaped in profound ways by the steady rhythm of such experiences, and consequently one's theology is likewise shaped. Pastors are not, of course, the only Christians called upon to give counsel and care in the face of such circumstances. But without question the vocational *Sitz im leben* of the pastorate uniquely tests and shapes one's theology in ways the vocational context of the academy does not. The church will continue to need the vital contributions of academic theologians, but ecclesial theologians are uniquely positioned, as a matter of vocation, to produce ecclesially sensitive, field-tested, theological work that deepens faith and nurtures the church.²³

²² Vanhoozer, *Drama*, 25.

²³ One thinks here of the work of Hans-George Gadamer who dispenses with modern notions of objectivity, as well as the corresponding post-modern epistemic despair associated with this loss, and instead argues (rightly, in my mind) that one's immersion in a given social location is *the very means* by which one is able speak intelligently about

The ecclesial theologian then, is a pastor who writes ecclesial theology—theology that is self-consciously Christian (avoiding the scourge of methodological agnosticism) and whose agenda is driven by the questions that emerge from the grind and angst of the ecclesial context. What's more, the ecclesial theologian writes his theology to other theologians, drawing upon the wealth of resources found in the most enduring works of the church, and in conversation with the most relevant contemporary dialog partners—both within and outside of the church.

Not every pastor is gifted or called to be an ecclesial theologian, of course. Local theologians and popular theologians are likewise vital to the health and vibrancy of the church. But our default understandings of the pastor-theologian must include that of the ecclesial theologian, and this model of the theologian must serve as viable and complimentary alternative to the academic theologian.

F. Conclusion

In a past essay I argued that pastors, not professors, should be leading the church theologically. I've since come to realize that this is the wrong way of framing the issue. Though we pastors have attempted to delegate the responsibility of theological leadership to the academy, the simple fact remains that pastors *are* leading the church theologically; we just have not been doing it well. The theological, gospel integrity of the Christian community will never rise above the level of her pastors. Gifted though academic theologians are—and indeed better positioned for some aspects of the theological task—the burden of the theological formation is a yoke pastors have been divinely appointed to carry. For the last 100 years we (in North America, at least)

that social location in the first place. See his, *Truth and Method* (New York : Continuum, 2004). Modern attempts at distance are futile; post-modern despair about such futility is misplaced. Subjective placement within a context (in this case, the church) is not a liability, but indeed a necessity for properly understanding that context.

have tried to slip this yoke, and the church and her theology have suffered for it. But it is the sober and joyous duty of the pastor, even before the professor, to nurture the church theologically—to proclaim the truth of the gospel, defend the truth of the gospel, think deeply about the truth of the gospel, and indeed *write* about the truth of the gospel, in ways that advance the church's message and nurture her children.

Many PhD students feel pulled between the life of the mind and the life of the church. They love study, writing, reflection, and theological scholarship. They have the desire and gifting to serve as theologians to the wider evangelical community. But at the same time they have a heart and calling for pastoral ministry in the local church. Sadly, our current context compels such individuals to choose between these two callings. Yet this need not be—history has proven otherwise. Both the church and evangelical theology itself is in need of individuals who are willing to unite the life of the mind (and pen) with the pastoral vocation. Both pastors and professors must once again hold out the local church as a viable social location for theologians—not only for the sake of a particular local church, but for the sake of theology itself.

More work remains to be done. As Wright's story shows, the local church in its present form is rarely an incubator for birthing ecclesial theologians. But progress *is* being made, even if slowly. I belong to a small network of pastors who are striving to embrace the ecclesial theologian model articulated above.²⁴ Perhaps a small sampling of their work will help encourage others that such a project is indeed feasible: Dr. Todd Wilson, a pastor in Chicago, is currently writing a number of New Testament commentaries, while also working on a larger project that explores the Pauline notion of

'praise from God' as an eschatological motif that informs our conceptions of the final judgment; Rev. Matthew Mason, an Anglican pastor in the D.C. area, is looking to Irenaeus' concept of human maturation as a framework for constructing a contemporary anthropology; Dr. Ryan Jackson, a Pentecostal pastor in North Carolina is working on a project that seeks to construct a healthy relationship between experience and Scripture; Dr. John Yates, an Anglican pastor in North Carolina, is editing a seven volume series on Anglican catechesis; Dr. David Rudolph, a Messianic Rabbi in Virginia, continues to publish important scholarly and theological work concerning the contemporary relationship between the Jewish and Christian communities; Rev. Greg Thompson, a Presbyterian pastor in Virginia, is exploring the pastoral/theological implications of the work of James Davidson Hunter. More examples from the network could be listed, but the salient point has been made; the ecclesial theologian model is possible, even if difficult.

And thus we restate in our conclusion the principle application of this essay. There is need, I believe, to challenge the emerging generation of theologians to seriously consider the context of their theological calling. We are in need of theologians who once again don the clerical mantle—who work explicitly and openly within the framework of historic, Nicene orthodoxy; who work and write as those who bear the weight of souls upon their shoulders; who write—above all—as *pastors*. Such writing has been the lifeblood of the church, and has constituted her highest theological discourse. It is, I am convinced, only by reuniting the office of pastor with the historic duty of the theologian that we can begin to address the theological anemia of the church and the ecclesial anemia of theology.

²⁴ The Society for the Advancement of Ecclesial Theology (SAET) was founded in 2006, and is an organization dedicated to assisting pastors in the written production of biblical and theological scholarship for the theological renewal of the church and the ecclesial renewal of theology. For more information about the SAET, see www.saet-online.org.