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Q&A#95 Must the Pastor be a Gifted Theologian?

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Today's question:

"What do you think the relationship is between depth of theological understanding and being a good pastor?"

Is it a straight one to one correlation? Other things being equal, a better theological understanding will make a better church leader? Once you are over a certain threshold of theological understanding does it then become more about preaching ability, love for people, management skills etc?

I think I default to thinking that there is a very strong correspondence (as the people whose books have greatly helped me have all been deep thinkers), but the more I think about it the more this seems wrong (most local church leaders are not going to have the time or money to train to a very deep level)."

Within the video, I mention this Mere Fidelity discussion of pastor theologians:
<https://mereorthodoxy.com/mere-fidelity-the-pastor-theologian/>.

My new blog for my podcasts and videos is found here: <https://adversariapodcast.com/>.

If you have any questions, you can leave them on my Curious Cat account:
<https://curiouscat.me/zugzwanged>.

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The audio of all of my videos is available on my Soundcloud account:
<https://soundcloud.com/alastairadversaria>. You can also listen to the audio of these episodes on iTunes: <https://itunes.apple.com/gb/podcast/alastairs-adversaria/id1416351035?mt=2>.

Transcript

Welcome back. Today's question is, what do you think the relationship is between depth of theological understanding and being a good pastor? Is it a straight one-to-one correlation? Are the things being equal a better theological understanding will make a better church leader? Once you're over a certain threshold of theological understanding, does it then become more about preaching ability, love for people, management skills, etc.? I think I default to thinking that there is a very strong correspondence, as the people whose books have greatly helped me have all been deep thinkers. But the more I think about it, the more this seems wrong.

Most local church leaders are not going to have the time or money to train to a very deep level. It's a very good question and an important one. I don't think that there is as tight a relationship as people think.

Obviously, a good pastor is going to have some theological knowledge. That's very important to being a good pastor. But being a good pastor is about far more than just knowing the Bible well and even being able to communicate that well.

A good pastor is someone who is able to deal with people in a particular way, to uphold the life of a community, to serve as the backbone of that community, to be the one who guards the boundaries, the one who sets the foundations. And that is a very different thing from just having an extensive seminary education, knowing your Bible very well and being able to master the works of systematic theology. No, it's being able to lead a congregation.

It's about being able to uphold the boundaries and someone who's able to guard the people of God from threats from without and from disorder from within. That is a very particular set of skills. And the more that we've tended to define the task of the pastor as being that of the preacher, the person who's just communicating biblical truth in that context.

I think we've missed out a lot of what it involves. And it's one of the reasons why we struggle to understand some of the biblical teaching about who should and should not be a pastor, the qualifications, these sorts of things. And why the life of the church is so often disordered because we do not have a clear sense of what this calling is supposed to involve.

And so theological understanding can be exercised in a number of different quarters within the church. The idea that the organ of theological understanding within the church is that of the pastorate is, I think, a limiting one. Now, obviously, the pastor is the person who is setting the foundations of truth and creating the most basic and fundamental framework of teaching for the church, the authoritative teaching that guides its understanding.

But the pastor should ideally be operating within a broader body of teaching and practice

of teaching within the life of the church. The pastor, for instance, is one who has a task of ruling, of exercising authority. And the person who exercises authority is not necessarily the person who just has teaching ability.

There's other things involved in that. There's an ability to work with people. And there's an ability to use the counsel of others to exercise good judgment and make decisions to lead.

So, for instance, when we think about kings and rulers of nations, they don't act alone. They don't have to have all this knowledge of political theory and other things in their own minds. It's helpful to have some, but they should surround themselves with good advisors who can counsel them, who can give them direction.

And in the same way, I think a good pastor is doing a different thing from the task of the gifted theologian. What we really need is for those two figures to work in concert with each other so that the one informs the other. And when we think about a theologian, a theologian should be ordered towards the health of the church, should be doing their work for the sake of facilitating a pastor in what they're doing.

And the theologian who's merely doing their task for their own sake or for the service of some abstract understanding of God, they're missing the point. Their task is to equip pastors in their task. They're supposed to be counselors and advisors that enable the pastor to make wise decisions.

In the same way, having elders within the church around the pastor is an important thing. Often the pastor will be a younger person than the elders and the elders around the pastor will equip the pastor to act prudently and the pastor will enable the elders to act forcefully and effectively. And so there's a relationship between authority and power, for instance, in these sorts of situations, a relationship that we see very much as paradigmatically one of the father-son relationship, that the father exercises his authority through the son.

That the son renders effective what the father authorizes. And I'm not using that with a capital F and S here. This is a more general thing within scripture and elsewhere that the father-son relationship represents that sort of dynamic.

So getting back to the subject of theologians and pastors, there's been a lot said about the pastor-theologian and the bringing together of those two disciplines. And I've been very appreciative of a lot that's been said on this. The Center for Pastor-Theologians, they're doing some really great work on this sort of thing.

And we've discussed this previously on the Mere Fidelity podcast. I can leave a link to that below. What I think we need to recognize, though, is although it is desirable to have a communication between these two disciplines so that a good pastor will be someone

who's deeply interested and curious about theology.

In the same way as a good ruler will think about political theory and political philosophy and history and these sorts of things. But no one is going to be able to master these two things together. You will always be leaning towards one or the other.

And there will always be a certain set of gifts that are more pronounced in one calling than in the other. I don't believe that I'm called to be a pastor. I do believe that I'm able to serve as a theologian who equips pastors.

And that's a different sort of thing. And I don't believe that the gifts that I have are the gifts that are best situated within the pastoral office. But yet there are people I know who are not gifted theologians, but yet are incredibly gifted as pastors.

They're able to lead a congregation wisely, to take charge of the overseeing of people's souls and their spiritual well-being. To make that their concern and to speak truthfully and forcefully into situations that need that truth. It's interesting as we look through the Old Testament, the different sorts of people that God chooses for different tasks.

Yoram Hazoni's discussion of this in the philosophy of Hebrew scripture is superb. He talks about the way that we see contrasts between the different sons of Jacob. So Joseph is a very gifted administrator, but yet someone who's very much in danger of just serving the status quo.

Even if that status quo is not a good one. Levi is a person characterized by zeal. He's characterized by the zeal that leads to the slaying of 3000 brethren when they exercise, when they practice idolatry with the golden calf.

Or the zeal of Phinehas, who stabs or who runs a spear through the man and the woman who are committing fornication and ends the plague. It can also be associated with the misguided zealotry of Levi with Simeon who attacks the people of Shechem. And so we see different traits that are at play here.

Judah is also, as Yoram Hazoni describes, someone who's set apart for the king, leading the people as king. And he actually has the kingdom rather than Joseph and his descendants, which is interesting. Joseph and his descendants, who are associated with very gifted administration, are not the ones who are supposed to be king.

Rather, it's the descendants of Judah who comes out pretty poorly within the book of Genesis in many parts, but yet repents. He is the person who is set apart for the kingdom. And that's interesting.

In the same way with scripture, it's treatment of different offices within the church, different callings within the life of the people of God, I think is following a similar recognition of different gifts and how they interact with each other. So there are some

people who are the Josephs of the church, very gifted in administration, but not so good in leading the church in a way that's faithful and repenting when that's necessary. There are other people who are people like Judah, who are good as kings, as those who lead the people, who are faithful and who repent when they need to repent.

And so we see the story of David contrast with the story of Saul in certain respects on this front. David is a person who's characterized by many sins, but also by repentance, true repentance. Likewise, when we think about the character of Levi, Levi is set apart for the priesthood because his zeal makes a big difference there.

The zeal that leads him to kill many people when they break the law is a zeal that enables him to guard the faithfulness of the people of God. And uphold their holiness within the life of the church. The office of the pastor is very much one that's associated with the work of Levi.

It's an office that maintains the holiness of the church, that oversees the house of God, that oversees its holiness, that ensures that no unrighteous way of life starts to take root, that no bitterness takes seed. And this requires a set of gifts and character strengths that are not found in many people. It requires a certain strength of will, a certain ability to stand against the crowd, a zeal.

And it requires traits that we see within many of the great leaders of the people of God, traits that are expressed in poor ways, but also in righteous ways. The same zeal that led Paul to persecute the church and to seek to kill his people is the same zeal that we see God harnessing for his ministry. The same zeal that led Levi to kill the people who are associated with the seduction of Dinah are those abilities and those traits that are used for the service of God's holiness later on in the Levites.

And this is something that I think is very important when we're talking about these callings within the people of God. The theologian, who may be a very gifted administrator, who may be a very gifted counselor, is not necessarily a gifted ruler or priest or someone who oversees and looks after and shepherds the people of God. We see a similar thing in the story of Moses.

This zeal that leads him to kill the Egyptian is the same zeal that helps him to lead the people of God. The shepherd's staff, the rod that he uses to judge Egypt, is the same shepherd's rod that he uses to drive away the shepherds from the well where he meets the daughters of Jethro. Putting all these things together, I think that preaching ability, love for people, management skills and theological acumen are not enough to make a good pastor.

A good pastor requires something more than that. And all of those skills are helpful and they can serve the pastor. But ultimately, the pastor is the guardian of the flock.

He's the shepherd. He's the one who has to protect the people. And this requires a very specific set of abilities and skills.

It requires someone who can exercise authority effectively, someone who can exercise zealous authority, someone who's well counseled and well guided and someone who listens to the elders. But also someone who's able to lead in a way that's effective to draw the lines when they need to be drawn to protect the people from outside threats and to guard them from unfaithfulness within. I hope this is of some help.

If you have any further questions, please leave them on my Curious Cat account. And if you would like to support this and future videos, please do so using my Patreon account or my PayPal account. And I'll leave the links for those below.

At the moment, I'm trying to sort out transcriptions for my podcasts and videos. If you would like to be involved in that and volunteer to maybe do one or two podcasts a month and just transcribe those, it's something that you can use the transcripts that are offered on YouTube itself, which are usually quite reliable, and then polish those up and get those to me. It would help as a way to make these talks more accessible to a wider audience.

Thank you very much for listening. And Lord willing, I'll be back again tomorrow. God bless.