

The Pastor-Theologian as Ecclesial Theologian

Presented at the SAET Symposium, October 12, 2009

Revised, February 2010

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The Society for the Advancement of Ecclesial Theology (SAET) is, as its name suggests, a society dedicated to the advancement of ecclesial theology.¹ And in its effort to advance ecclesial theology, the SAET has largely placed its hope in the resurgence of the pastor-theologian. Not because academic theologians are incapable of producing ecclesial theology (quite the contrary), but because the pastoral office uniquely positions one to think both theologically *and* ecclesially. If history is any guide, the relationship between the pastor-theologian and ecclesial theology is such that the success of each rises and falls with the other. And postmodernity—for all its weaknesses—properly reminds us of the connection between theological formation and social location.² As Daniel Migliore appropriately notes, “the concrete situation of theology helps to shape the questions that are raised and the priorities that are set.”³ Who better, then, to articulate theology with a view to the church than those whose primary social location is the local church?

¹ The SAET is “an organization dedicated to assisting pastor-theologians in the production of biblical and theological scholarship, for the renewal of orthodox theology, for the renewal of the local church.” More information about the SAET can be found online at www.saet-online.org.

² For a more detailed discussion on the relationship between social location and theological formation, see Hiestand, *Pastor-scholar*, 360-66.

³ Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 14.

But the pastor-theologian paradigm has fallen on hard times. Local churches—in the main—no longer expect their pastors to be theologians—at least not in the fullest sense of the term. That responsibility has been delegated to the academy. In a North American context that has largely identified the pastoral office with duties such as leadership, administration, preaching, pastoral care, and counseling, adequate time for theological reflection and writing is not easily had; “publish or perish” is not a burden pastors must carry. Yet the institutional challenges, while significant, are not the most pressing. The fundamental challenge to the SAET is, at present, a semantic one.

As with any attempt to shift (or in this case, resurrect) a paradigm, the hardest work often lies at the conceptual level. This is no less true for the SAET. Given that our aim is to advance ecclesial theology via a resurgence of the pastor-theologian paradigm, a fundamental question emerges—one related specifically to the present symposium: what does the SAET mean by the term “pastor-theologian”? The difficulty at this point extends beyond the simple need to define terms. As we will see, the SAET is attempting to co-opt an existing word and infuse it with new meaning. Given that the term in question is already in circulation, and thus already has its own etymological baggage, those unfamiliar with the SAET’s vision (and even those of us on the “inside”) can too readily assume a diverging definition, and thus fail to grasp the full nature of the SAET’s theological project.

This short essay, therefore, is an attempt to flesh out the SAET’s vision for the pastor-theologian. Succinctly stated, the SAET’s vision of the pastor-theologian is that of a pastor who writes ecclesial theology. Of course, a second fundamental question now emerges. If the function of a pastor-theologian is to produce ecclesial theology, what

exactly is ecclesial theology? It becomes quickly apparent that we will not be able to parse out the identity of the pastor-theologian without first parsing out the nature of ecclesial theology.

The first half of this essay, therefore, will seek to provide a definition of ecclesial theology, using academic theology and popular theology as (friendly) foils. Ecclesial theology, I will suggest, is neither academic nor popular. It marks a third way, and represents its own distinct genre of theological discourse. Having thus identified the nature of ecclesial theology, the remainder of the essay will seek to define the pastor-theologian against the backdrop of ecclesial theology—contrasting the SAET’s vision with three alternative models of the pastor-theologian.

We turn now to ecclesial theology.

I. Ecclesial Theology: Toward a Definition⁴

Ecclesial theology is, in its most robust form, explicitly Christian theological reflection written from within the intellectual center of the church, to the thoughtful, theologically informed, historically aware, biblically literate, ecclesial community. At the outset, we must observe that such theology, though once the dominant genre of theological discourse among orthodox theologians, is so no longer. Understanding why this is so will be helpful both in defining it, and resurrecting it.

Throughout much of the history of the church, theological discourse was largely an in-house project. A broad house to be sure, but even during the upheaval and turmoil of the Reformation, both sides agreed with the basic tenants of historic Trinitarian

⁴ Much of what follows in this section is drawn from my *Reformation 21* article, “Ecclesial Theology.”

Christianity. Scripture was viewed as authoritative. Miracles were possible. God was transcendent and worthy of worship. In short, the God of the Bible existed. These starting assumptions guided theological reflection—both East and West—for much of the Christian tradition. Even theologians as diverse as Augustine and Pelagius, Athanasius and Arius, and Luther and Erasmus, all worked within the same bibliocentric framework. Whether pastor (Augustine) or professor (Aquinas), theological reflection was, by its very nature, ecclesial. Even the heretics presumed to write in service to the church.

But the European enlightenment brought with it a fundamental shift in the theological landscape. The old assumptions were challenged, and the intellectual grip that Christianity held on the Western world began to weaken. The secular/non-orthodox theologian began to emerge in greater numbers. To be sure, modernity wasn't the first age to birth unorthodox theologians. But it was the first age (since the third century, anyway) to produce an entire generation of scholars and theologians whose primary intellectual pursuit involved consciously deconstructing the apostolic faith.

And of course, such thinkers did not seek professional occupation in the churches. Instead, they moved toward the academy. Likewise, as the academy in the West became the dominant center of intellectual life, orthodox theologians also shifted increasingly from the churches to the academy. Speaking broadly, the net effect was a divide between academic theologians who worked within the boundaries of historic Christianity, and academic theologians who did not. Intellectual warfare ensued. Orthodox Christianity, while not routed completely, certainly did not ascend to a place of supremacy. The dominant worldview in the wider academic community became increasingly hostile to the historic faith. Set back on their heels, orthodox theologians found themselves

responding to an agenda set by secular/liberal theologians. Ours became a defensive posture, and it has largely remained so to this day.⁵

Given the dynamics of the academic turn, two distinct genres of orthodox theology have emerged—academic theology and popular theology. In as much as orthodox theologians now reside in the academy, the best of their theological writing tends to be written with an academic flavor not always helpful to the local church.⁶ And when our theologians do write for the church, they no longer view themselves as writing to fellow theologians, and thus tend to write popular theology. The net effect is that the best of orthodox theology is directed to the academy, while the less robust theology is directed toward the church. This, in my estimation, has been decidedly unhelpful for the church.

Academic theology is not bad. Popular theology is not bad. But neither suffices for ecclesial theology. There is a need to resurrect a robust ecclesial agenda within orthodox theology. Rearticulating the nature of ecclesial theology against the backdrop of both academic theology and popular theology will be helpful in this respect. As will be observed below, ecclesial theology is as intellectually robust as academic theology, and as church-centered as popular theology.

⁵ For a helpful discussion of this narrative in the Noth American context, see Marsden, *Soul of the American University*, as well as his shorter sequel, *Christian Scholarship*. For additional reflection on the anti-superanatural bias of the academy, see McGrath, *Theology*, 17-26.

⁶ For a more detailed discussion regarding the effect of the academic turn on orthodox theology, see Hiestand, *Pastor-Scholar*, 362-66.

A. Ecclesial Theology Contrasted with Academic Theology

Believing academic theologians now live and move in a theological environment dominated by agendas and presuppositions that are consciously *contra* orthodox Christianity. This shift in social location has resulted in a distinctly academic tone in orthodox theology. From where I sit, academic theology is theology written to the wider academic community, set within an academic context, and driven by academic concerns and presuppositions.

To be sure, the deconstructive aspects of enlightenment and post-enlightenment thought demanded an appropriate response from those in the orthodox fold. But one wonders if orthodox theology as a whole has become too preoccupied defending against, and responding to, an agenda that is not directly related to the mission and glory of Christ. Orthodox theology, given its academic context, has taken on an apologetic bent not seen since the first centuries of the early church.

I've written on this apologetic bent in the past, but without the necessary precision.⁷ Let me try again here. There are two kinds of apologetic theology. The first kind retains its explicit Christian commitments while arguing explicitly against a competing non-Christian worldview and explicitly in favor of the Christian worldview—the sort of thing one finds in Anselm's *Monologian*, or Lewis' *The Problem of Pain*, for instance. One is not left wondering which side Anselm and Lewis land on. Though it is not written *to* the church, it is clearly written in service *of* the church. This sort of project fits within the broad stream of ecclesial theology.

⁷ See Hiestand, *Pastor-Theologian*, 362-66 and Hiestand, *Ecclesial Theology*.

A second kind of apologetic theology is the kind that, in order to maintain a voice at the academic table, submits itself to the reigning academic rules of engagement. It is cautious in not overstating its Christian commitment. It does not endeavor to write from a confessional stance. It hesitates to preach. It approaches the biblical text from a historical perspective rather than a theological perspective. In short, the scholar does not write explicitly as a Christian in order to advance an explicitly Christian agenda. This second sort of apologetic posture is often the dominant genre of theological reflection among orthodox academic theologians. I understand why such writing exists, and there is (to a degree) a certain necessity to it if we wish to maintain a presence in the wider secular academy. If we are not allowed to give a Christian lecture, at least we are still allowed to give lectures. And fruit does come from the presence of orthodox theologians in the wider academy. But this sort of apologetic project is out of step with ecclesial theology.

This is not to say that orthodox academic theologians have completely neglected ecclesial concerns. Not at all. Many today, particularly those in the evangelical tradition, write with explicit concern for the church. But the yeast of the wider/secular academy has unhelpfully leavened the dough of orthodox theology.

Perhaps a compare and contrast will help flesh out this distinction in greater detail. Speaking in perhaps over-exaggerated terms, ecclesial theology differs from academic theology in the following ways:

- The depth of academic scholarship is often measured by its interaction with secondary literature. The depth of ecclesial scholarship is measured by its interaction with primary literature.
- Academic scholarship is written to the wider academic community, much of which lacks any commitment to historic orthodoxy. Ecclesial scholarship is written to the believing community, and builds upon and assumes—rather than defends—the basic commitments of historic orthodoxy.

- The success of academic scholarship is measured by its acceptance and influence in the academic community. The success of ecclesial scholarship is measured by its ability to renew the church.
- Academic scholarship is informative. Ecclesial scholarship is informative *and* prophetic (i.e., it makes moral assertions and calls the church to action).
- The power of academic theology arises out of the success of the academic-scholar *as a scholar*. The power of ecclesial theology arises—in large measure—out of the success of the pastor-theologian *as a pastor*. In other words, the influence of a pastor-theologian as a theologian is related to his success as a pastor.
- Academic scholarship tends to be guild-specific. Ecclesial theology is a cross-guild project, working within and attempting to construct a coherent theological system/worldview. It is explicitly theological.
- Related to the above, the academic-scholar functions more as a scholar (digging up new data) and less as a theologian (synthesizing that data in an ecclesial direction). In contrast, the ecclesial-theologian functions less as a scholar and more as a theologian.

Beyond the substance that separates these theological cousins, an important point needs to be made regarding literary style. There is a woodenness—a clinical exactness—that often accompanies academic theology. One sees this perhaps most sharply in historical theology and exegesis. (Sadly, exegesis has become just another form of historical theology.) The personality and passions of the author recedes into the background; the scholar, dressed in a white coat, clipboard in hand, coolly writes to us from his sterile laboratory. Of course, I exaggerate for effect. Many academic theologians write with energy and pathos. But the caricature is not wholly inaccurate. Methodological agnosticism—the need in the university context to marginalize one’s moral agenda lest it contaminate one’s research⁸—does not lend itself to reproducing the sort of writing that

⁸ Methodological agnosticism shapes the discourse of even evangelical studies, particularly exegesis and church history. James Bradley and Richard Mueller advocate for such a method in their introduction to historical method (written to evangelical graduate students). “As a historian, one makes no judgment about the rightness or wrongness of the person’s teaching on an absolute scale....One’s own writing should not register one’s own theological opinion, pro or con.” *Church History*, 52. I can think of few pieces of advice more at odds with ecclesial theology.

leaps from the pen of an Augustine, Luther or Calvin. Even Edwards, with his profoundly sophisticated, analytical theology, writes with poetry and passion.

But the ecclesial theologian, for his part, is not afraid to let his reader know that he loves Jesus. Indeed, a love for the triune God is what drives every stroke of his pen (or in our case, every tap of the key board). With ecclesial theology, the theologian not only preaches with his theology, but with his personality as well. It is not pressing my point too far, I think, to appeal to the human origins of Scripture as a model for ecclesial theology. God did not inspire for us a Bible devoid of human personality. When we read the letters of Paul, we encounter the apostle himself—brow furrowed, pacing restlessly, eyes blazing with holy joy. And when we read the epistles of John, we see the one whom Jesus loved gazing heavenward, his face calm, his words sure. John tells us what his eyes have seen, what his ears have heard, and what his hands have touched, and we are comforted—comforted because *John* wrote it, not just because it was written. The church's first theologians—the apostles themselves—did not write like disinterested scholars. They leaned into their theology.

Of course, every theologian is different. We do not all possess the pathos (indeed invective!) of Luther, the analytical intensity of Edwards, or the subtle wit of Athanasius. But we do possess a God-given personality, and we must not separate it from our theology. This aspect of ecclesial theology is, I think, the element I struggle with most. The channels of robust theological discourse are already cut deeply, and they are, for the most part, academic channels. It is difficult to immerse oneself (as we must) in the work of academic theologians who write with an academic tone, and then disengage and write

with an ecclesial tone. But God has called us, like Paul, to share not only the gospel, but our own lives a well.

Yet in drawing a contrast between academic theology and ecclesial theology, an important words needs to be said here about the mutually dependant nature of ecclesial theology and academic research. As the SAET project has unfolded, I've become increasingly aware of the need for a robust partnership between academic theologians and pastor-theologians. Doug Sweeney (himself a respected academic historian), helped crystallize this for me at the close of the 2009 SAET Symposium. Sweeney suggested:

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, people who synthesize the findings of those in the other scholarly disciplines and neither have nor require a methodology of their own. 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."⁹

Sweeney's way of parsing this out was extremely helpful in reminding me of the need for a robust partnership between pastor-theologians and academic theologians. We no longer live in a pre-critical context, and thus the pastor-theologian can no longer go it

⁹ Sweeney, *Seventeen Theses on the Pastor-Theologian*, 2, 4, presented at the 2009 SAET Symposium, October 14, at Calvary Memorial Church, in Oak Park.

alone. The modern research university—with all of its blessings and challenges—is here to stay. Given our current context, the professor is best positioned to engage in specialized research in a narrow field. Pastors—in the main—simply cannot afford the luxury of focusing so narrowly; ours is a synthesizing task. For example, I have neither the time nor desire to engage in textual criticism on extant copies of Athanasius' *On the Incarnation*. Yet projects such as this are vital to orthodox theology, and should not be left solely in the hands secular researchers. If the research professor is uniquely positioned to engage in specialized research, the pastor is just as uniquely positioned to engage in theological synthesis. I may not have an interest in Athanasian textual criticism, but I do have a strong interest in the fruit of it—Athanasius' theology, and how it bears on the life of the contemporary ecclesia.

Pastor-theologians need believing research professors to hand them the raw data necessary for theological reflection. And believing professors need pastors who can ably synthesize the data they mine, for the good of the church.

The current division of labor between the academy and the church is, “Professors will do the thinking, pastors will do the praxis.” But if we follow Sweeney’s advice, it should become, “Professors will do the research, pastors will do the theology.” Of course, it’s not a zero-sum game. No doubt pastor-theologians can (and will) do specialized research. And certainly professors will continue to make helpful theological contributions. But in the main, Sweeney’s suggestion makes the best use of our respective social locations.

B. Ecclesial Theology Contrasted with Popular Theology

While ecclesial theology is not academic, neither is it strictly popular. Thus, in our quest to identify ecclesial theology, we must say a word about its intended audience. Too often the distinction between academic theology and ecclesial theology presents a false alternative. Academic theology is viewed as sophisticated, robust reflection written to the informed theological community. Ecclesial theology, on the other hand, is often viewed as introductory, popular-level theology written to the lay believing community. Now I have no grievance with popular-level theology; it's an important part of the life of the church. Much of my writing falls into this category. But we sell ecclesial theology short when we limit it to the lay community. Ecclesial theology—in its most robust form—is neither academic, nor solely popular. Ecclesial theology is theological reflection written to the thoughtful, theologically informed, historically aware, biblically literate, ecclesial community. It's as intellectually robust as sound academic theology, but is driven by ecclesial concerns.

Luther's *Galatians* commentary comes to mind here. Luther's work is quite a bit different than the average modern academic commentary. It's different in that it doesn't feel a need to plumb the nearly endless depths of secondary literature (there wasn't as much). It's different because it's not afraid to be explicitly theological and confessional. And—most significantly—it's different because it prophetically calls the church to take action. But it's not different because it's "lighter" or "easier to read" or "pitched to a less informed audience." Luther did not change the world because he was a successful academician (though he was). Nor did he change the world by writing merely popular

tracts (though he did). He changed the world because he wrote as a robust, theologically informed, intelligent, prophetic *ecclesial* theologian.

Popular theology and ecclesial theology share much common ground. Both are concerned about the life of the church. Both tend to be prophetic and call the church to action. But ecclesial theology pushes beyond the introductory nature of popular theology. Below are a few additional points regarding the differences between ecclesial theology and popular theology (again, perhaps overstated):

- Popular theology is written to non-specialists. Ecclesial theology is written to orthodox theologians. This is perhaps the most striking difference between popular theology and ecclesial theology. Much of what follows flows out of this fundamental distinction in audience.
- Popular theology often does not attempt to fully integrate historical theology. Ecclesial theology draws deeply from the fullness of the Great Tradition, and reaches its conclusion in conversation with the past.
- Popular theology is often application oriented at the expense of theological precision. Ecclesial theology, while concerned about application, is more concerned about arriving at a correct, robust, ecclesially sensitive, theological conclusion. The theological principle—rather than the specific application—is what drives the ecclesial theologian.
- Popular theology is introductory. Ecclesial theology assumes a certain degree of theological robustness in its reader.
- Popular theology is reviewed by the laity and other popular theologians. Ecclesial theology is peer-reviewed by ecclesial theologians. In other words, the review process for popular theology is less rigorous than for ecclesial theology.

There is a need for popular theology. Indeed, there is a need for ecclesial theologians to write popular theology. Writing both “up” to the theological community and “down” to the laity keeps a theologian honest. As Helmut Thielicke wisely observes, the questions of the congregation “constitute a fire through which we [theologians] must always march.”¹⁰ Writing popular theology, therefore, applies as “relevancy” test to one’s

¹⁰ Thielicke, *A Little Exercise*, 25-26.

theological synthesis. Theological reflection that cannot connect with the existential questions of the congregation is not ecclesial, however robust it might be. But popular theology, in and of itself, cannot be the sum total of ecclesial theology.

In many respects the fundamental difference between popular theology and ecclesial theology is not qualitative but quantitative. Ecclesial theology is the same as, but more so, than popular theology. Or to say it another way, popular theology is what happened to ecclesial theology when all of our orthodox theologians turned their attention to academic theology.

C. Examples of Ecclesial Theology

In closing out our discussion regarding the nature of ecclesial theology, definition by example might prove useful here. My conception of ecclesial theology, past and present, includes:

Athanasius—*The Incarnation of the Word*
Augustine—*Confessions, On Grace and Free Will*
Luther—*Galatians, Bondage of the Will*
Calvin—*Institutes and commentaries*
Baxter—*The Reformed Pastor*
Edwards—*Freedom of the Will, etc.*
Bonhoeffer—*The Cost of Discipleship*
Stott—*The Cross of Christ*
Piper—*Desiring God, The Future of Justification*
Jenson—*Systematic Theology*
Wright—*Surprised by Hope, Justification*

Ecclesial theology then, is rich, scriptural theology covering the entire Christian life—Christian living, ecclesiology, ministry, exposition of Scripture, church history, dogmatics, etc., —anything relevant to the mission and life of the church. It does not address these issues merely as an academic exercise—a raw quest for knowledge. Nor

does it remain limited to popular level discourse. Rather the ecclesial theologian begins with the conscious and preeminent aim of building the church, and marshals all of his intellectual resources toward that end. Helmut Thielicke's description of a "true theologian" comports well within my conception of an ecclesial theologian. "Insofar as we are determined to be true theologians, we think within the community of God's people, and for that community, and in the name of that community;—how shall I say?—we think as a part of the community itself."¹¹

Who then is best positioned to think (and write!) as part of the ecclesial community? Who should occupy the office of ecclesial theologian? Is it not the pastor-theologian? Indeed it is, but here we must be more precise. As we will see, three basic models of the pastor-theologian exist today. And close examination reveals that all three models pursue an agenda distinct from the sort of ecclesial project I've outlined here. A fourth model, like ecclesial theology itself, must be resurrected.

II. The Pastor-Theologian: Three Contemporary Models Considered

It is apparent (at least to me) that our ecclesial and theological communities have assumed a definition of the term pastor-theologian without having adequately thought through that definition. That the term is used frequently is obvious. That we understand what we mean by it is not. Bringing definition to the current understanding of the term, therefore, is a necessary first step in identifying the SAET's vision of the pastor-theologian. In my analysis, the term pastor-theologian is used in a broad sense to denote three basic models: the pastor-theologian as *local theologian*, the pastor-theologian as

¹¹ Thielicke, *A Little Exercise*, 4-5.

popular theologian, and the pastor-theologian as *academic theologian*. While the SAET affirms—in varying degrees—the legitimacy of each of these models (most especially the first two), the SAET envisions a fourth model—a model that has all but gone extinct in recent times: the pastor-theologian as *ecclesial theologian*.

A. The Pastor-Theologian as Local Theologian

The first, and I believe most common, model of the pastor-theologian is that of a local theologian to one's own congregation. At this most basic level, the pastor-theologian is conceived of as a theologically astute pastor who ably services the theological needs of his local church.

Al Mohler Jr., in his recently published, *He Is Not Silent: Preaching in a Post-Modern World*, devotes a chapter to the calling and identity of the pastor-theologian.¹² It becomes evident throughout the chapter that Mohler is working largely within the framework of the local theologian model. Challenging pastors to think theologically about ministry and preaching, Mohler correctly emphasizes the theological nature of pastoral ministry. Theological reflection is not an academic exercise, he argues; pastors, even more so than academicians, are called to engage in the theological task. Yet for Mohler, this theological task is carried out chiefly within the context of a pulpit ministry. “As a theologian,” he writes, “the pastor must be known for what he teaches as well as for what he knows, affirms and believes. The health of the church depends upon pastors who infuse their congregations with deep biblical and theological conviction, and the

¹² Mohler, *Preaching*, 105-14.

primary means of this transfer of conviction is the preaching of the Word of God.”¹³ Thus for Mohler, to be a pastor-theologian is to be a pastor who discharges his pastoral duty—most of all his preaching ministry—in light of careful theological reflection.

Along similar lines, John Piper (himself considered by many a consummate example of a contemporary pastor-theologian) and D. A. Carson (a pastorally sensitive academic scholar) recently gave twin lectures entitled, “The Pastor as Scholar” and “The Scholar as Pastor,” respectively.¹⁴ It was clear throughout both lectures that Piper and Carson view the identity of the pastor-theologian largely within the framework of the local theologian model. Though Piper has a robust writing ministry, neither he nor Carson mentioned a writing ministry as an essential aspect of the pastor-theologian’s identity. Indeed, both men discouraged pastors from trying to emulate the theological writings of past pastor-theologians such as Edwards, whose most penetrating discourse was considered beyond the reach of pastors (and presumably even pastor-theologians).¹⁵ For Piper and Carson, to be a pastor-theologian is to embody a robust commitment to theological reflection, and to allow such reflection to influence one’s preaching and pastoral duties.

The mainline tradition seems to differ little in this regard. The Center for Theological Inquiry (CTI), an ecumenical institution working primarily within the

¹³ Mohler, *Preaching*, 111.

¹⁴ The lectures were hosted by the Carl F. H. Henry Center for Theological Understanding on April 23, 2009. Video and audio of both lectures can be found at <http://www.henrycenter.org/2009/04/29/piper-carson-media-is-here>.

¹⁵ To be sure, Edwards’ most sophisticated theology is beyond the reach of most pastor-theologians. But it’s beyond the reach of most academic theologians as well. Yet it is doubtful Carson and Piper would likewise discourage academic theologians from shooting for the Edwardsian moon.

mainline tradition, recently concluded a nine-year Pastor-Theologian program.¹⁶ The CTI's program followed a similar format as the SAET—symposia, collaboration between pastor-theologians and academic theologians, paper presentations, etc. Yet it becomes clear as one reads the literature¹⁷ from the CTI gatherings that the 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.”¹⁸ Paper presentations, along with common prayer, scripture reading, and theological study, are a means of achieving a “theologically thoughtful ministry.”¹⁹ In other words the Pastor-Theologian Program of the CTI was about creating better local theologians.²⁰

The sort of theological engagement being advocated by Mohler, Piper and Carson, as well as such organizations like the CTI, is commendable. Would that more pastors appreciated the vital connection between pastoral ministry and theology. But

¹⁶ CTI's Pastor-Theologian Program was funded in large measure by the Lilly Endowment, Inc., from 1996-2005. Information on The Center for Theological Understanding can be found at www.ctinquiry.org.

¹⁷ See, Alston and Jarvis, eds., *The Power to Comprehend*, and Welker and Jarvis, eds., *Loving God*.

¹⁸ McSween, *Theological Reflection*, 289.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 288.

²⁰ Following a similar agenda is the (now discontinued) Pastor-Theologian program of the PCUSA (see <http://www.pcusa.org/theologyandworship/whatwedo/pastor-theologian.htm>). While sharing much in common with such programs, the ultimate aim of the SAET remains distinct. The pastor-theologian programs of the CTI and the PCUSA were primarily concerned with furthering the pastor's ability to serve as an effective local theologian to one's own congregations. But the SAET is primarily (though not exclusively) concerned to further a pastor's ability to serve as an ecclesial theologian to the broader theological community. We encourage writing not primarily because the pastor is lacking (or even his local church), but because *orthodox theology is lacking*. Orthodox theology itself is most fundamentally in need of the pastor-theologian.

while I strongly affirm such engagement, this vision of the pastor-theologian remains insufficient for the ecclesial task outlined in the first half of this essay. The CTI is “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.’”²¹ The aim of the SAET is rather quite the opposite. Our goal is not primarily to get more of existing theology (now largely academic) into the church, but rather to get more of the church into theology. Our vision for the pastor-theologian, then, must necessarily include the written production of ecclesial theology as a vital component of the pastor-theologian’s identity.

The next two models considered below—the pastor-theologian as *popular theologian* and the pastor-theologian as *academic theologian*—get closer. But not quite.

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 actually writes theology—an objective function not typical of most pastors. 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 evangelicalism.

The writing ministries of evangelical pastors such as John MacArthur, John Piper, Kent Hughes, Kevin DeYoung and Mark Driscoll come to mind here. (Naming names at

²¹ Brian Daley, quoting Wallace Alston, director of CTI’s Pastor-Theologian Program. *St. Gregory of Naziansus*, 119.

this point runs the risk of landing on the wrong side of a given pastor's self-understanding, but for the sake of clarity, I press on.) Writing of this sort is not primarily an attempt to enter into the high-level theological discussions taking place among professional theologians.²² Rather it is an effort to help 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, aberrant 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.

To be sure, popular-level theology is necessary for the health and life of the church. As a pastor, I engage in it myself. And indeed, many evangelical academic theologians (Packer, Carson, McGrath, Sweeney, etc.) regularly function as popular theologians. But here we must ask if such theological writing appropriately qualifies as ecclesial theology in the fullest sense of the term. In as much as we have allowed the pastor-theologian to be solely identified with popular-level theology, we have compromised the intellectual integrity of his theological project. Just as a DMin lacks the theological credibility of a PhD, so too a pastor-theologian has come to lack the theological credibility of an academic theologian.

But the credibility gap for the current generation of pastor-theologians is not reflective of the historical precedence. Pastor-theologians such as Athanasius, Augustine, Luther, Calvin, Edwards, and Wesley were more than simply pop theologians. Their

²² An exception might be John Piper's, *The Future of Justification* (Crossway, 2007), wherein Piper interacts with N. T. Wright's understanding of justification.

theological systems represented the cutting edge thought of their day. Ultimately (and here's my main concern), this diminished theological credibility compromises the robust nature of ecclesial theology. If we embrace the popular theologian model as the sole identity of the pastor-theologian, ecclesial theology will never rise above popular-level discourse. Popular theology is great, but we already have plenty of it. What we're missing is robust ecclesial theology. We move now to the third model.

C. The Pastor-Theologian as Academic Theologian

When I tell people the SAET is a theological society for pastor-theologians, I am initially understood to be speaking of the local theologian model. When my listeners come to realize that I envision a writing ministry as a vital component of the pastor-theologian's identity, they quickly assume the popular theologian model. When I explain that we are going for something more robust than popular theology, they immediately envision (often with skepticism) this last model—the pastor-theologian as academic theologian. (After all, isn't academic theology the only alternative to popular theology?)

The pastor-theologian in this model is fully abreast of the academic discussions, and the bulk of his writing consists of articles in academic journals and scholarly monographs related to ongoing academic debates. His intellectual center is the academy, not the local church. And most significantly, like many academic theologians in the academy, the pastor-as-academic-theologian subjects his theological project to the demands and presuppositions of methodological agnosticism. He writes not as a pastor or a Christian, but as a disinterested scholar. Pastor-theologians of this variety are few and far between in wider evangelicalism, though perhaps more prevalent in certain

denominational contexts. Frequently, the pastor-as-academic-theologian is a freshly minted PhD who has taken a job at a local church while he looks for a teaching position in the academy.

Of the three pastor-theologian models discussed thus far, I am least enthusiastic about the academic theologian model. First, I am not convinced a pastor is called to engage in this sort of writing. It distracts, rather than serves, his ecclesial calling as a shepherd. Secondly, even if there are legitimate reasons for pursuing this model, such writing is decidedly not in keeping with ecclesial theology. It does not seem particularly helpful to use the term pastor-theologian to speak of a theologian whose theological project differs in no substantial way from that of an academic theologian. To be useful, the term pastor-theologian must denote more than simply the vocation of the theologian. It must denote a certain kind of theological project—one with a pastoral nature.

Ultimately, the SAET is not concerned to resurrect the pastor-theologian model simply as an end in itself. (We are, after all, not the Society for the Advancement of Pastor-Theologians). Our primary interest is advocating a pastor-theologian model that terminates in ecclesial theology. Indeed, the final *telos* of our entire project is ecclesial theology.

III. The Pastor-Theologian as Ecclesial Theologian

Having set ecclesial theology in contrast to both academic and popular theology, and having thus critiqued the reigning models of the pastor-theologian, the SAET's vision for the pastor-theologian begins to emerge—the pastor-theologian as *ecclesial theologian*.

A. The Pastor-Theologian as Ecclesial Theologian

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 ecclesial theology. 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.” God forbid! 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.

Ultimately, the mission of the SAET informs—and clarifies—the sort of pastor-as-ecclesial-theologian vision I’m arguing for here. While the SAET vision is ultimately about renewing the local church, renewing the local church is not the immediate (even if ultimate) concern of the SAET. There are a multitude of organizations dedicated to renewing the spiritual health of the local church. What justifies the SAET’s existence is—I believe—its unique insight regarding the need for ecclesial theology. The SAET operates under the fundamental conviction that a (perhaps the) primary means of renewing the local church is through the renewal of the global church’s theological reflection. In other words, the problem is not simply that we don’t have enough theology in our local churches, but rather that the kind of theology we do have, is, in large measure, the wrong kind. The church catholic—particularly its North American

evangelical expression—is in need of ecclesial theology. It’s at this point that the SAET seeks to resurrect the pastor-as-ecclesial-theologian model. The SAET advocates for the pastor-as-ecclesial-theologian paradigm only because it is through a resurgence of the ecclesial-theologian that a widespread resurgence of ecclesial theology is possible. Thus, while the renewal of the local church remains the ultimate goal of the SAET, the mission emphasis of the SAET is not the local church, but rather the theology that local churches are built upon.

This mission emphasis stands in contrast with other pastor-theologian initiatives. When faced with the question, “How do we renew the local church?” most pastor-theologian programs answer, “By getting theology into the churches, via a resurrection of the pastor-as-local-theologian.” But the SAET answers, “By recasting orthodox theology in an ecclesial direction *via* a resurgence of the pastor-as-ecclesial-theologian.” It is only after the ecclesial theologian paradigm has become a reality that the local theologian paradigm will be fully effective. After all, what good is a local-theologian without the sword of robust ecclesial theology firmly in his grasp? For the SAET, the pastor-theologian is pen-ultimate; ecclesial theology is ultimate. The problem of the local church is not simply that we don’t have enough local theologians. The root problem runs deeper—the church lacks robust ecclesial theology. Local theologians will continue to lack the theological resources they need until orthodox theological reflection is once again united to the ecclesial community.

Further, a primary reason we lack significant numbers of local theologians is precisely because we lack ecclesial theologians. As our theologians have moved from the churches to the academy, the pastoral vocation has gradually come to be seen as a non-

theological vocation. If the theological gate-keepers of the church were once again pastors, this would not only leaven orthodox theology with ecclesial yeast, but would also bring back a level of theological credibility to the pastorate overall. This in turn would increase the number of pastors who effectively serve as popular theologians and local theologians. The local-theologian model is doomed to a peripheral existence within the local church without a resurgence of the ecclesial theologian model.

B. The Pastor-Theologian as “Wider” Theologian

Everything I’ve been trying to say in the last half of this essay has been pushing toward this: there is a need for pastor-theologians to once again don the mantle of the ecclesial theologian—to serve as wider theologians for the entire ecclesial community, for the sake of orthodox theology itself. Perhaps the following four theses will help tie together the point I’ve been trying to make.

1. All individuals are called to draw a circle of theological protection around themselves, taking responsibility for their own relationship with Christ.
2. Some have a wife and children, and their circle of theological protection must extend to include their families as well as themselves.
3. Some individuals are called to the pastorate and must draw a circle of theological protection around themselves, their families, and an entire local assembly of Christians.
4. And even more broadly, some individuals are gifted and called to draw an even wider circle, serving as theologians for large swaths of the Christian tradition, or even the whole of the tradition.

In our present day, the church has looked to the academy to draw the wider circles (number four above). Historically, this hasn’t been the case. Theologians such as Athanasius, Augustine, Luther, Calvin, Wesley, Edwards, etc. were all churchmen, and it

was understood that the “wider theologians” would be drawn mainly from the pastorate. But today, we no longer look for pastors to fill this role. Those who feel a sense of theological calling beyond the local church do not remain in the church, but move into the academy, in as much as the academy has now become the center of gravity for theological reflection.

Now certainly not every pastor is gifted or called to this broader function. But we do orthodox theology a grave disservice when we suggest (implicitly or explicitly), that pastors—*because they are pastors*—need not aspire to this role. The bifurcation of theological formation from the womb of the church has not been good for the church or her theology.

There is a need for pastors to once again pick up the mantle of theological responsibility for the wider church—to step up and draw the wider circles. And it’s for this reason that I’ve pressed so hard for a writing ministry as definitional to what the SAET pastor is about. Without a writing ministry, I don’t see how someone can effectively function as a wider theologian for the broader church.²³

Not every pastor is called to be an ecclesial theologian. But many pastors (and divinity students)—particularly among the younger generation—feel pulled between the life of the mind and the life of the church. They love study, writing, reflection, and theology. They have the desire and gifting to serve as wider theologians. But at the same time they have a deep heart and calling for pastoral ministry in the local church. Sadly,

²³ Transcribed sermons can serve this role in part, but the many and varied theological needs of the church (spanning epistemology, soteriology, eschatology, philosophy, church history, etc.) cannot, nor should be, addressed in a sermon. There are many subjects that theologians must wrestle with, that lay people need not be burdened with.

our current context compels such people to choose between these two callings. Yet this need not be—history has proven otherwise! Orthodox theology (not just the local church) is crying out for individuals who are willing to unite the life of the mind (and pen) with the pastoral vocation. We must once again hold out the local church as a viable—indeed preferable—social location for orthodox theologians—not simply for the sake of that particular local church, but for the sake of orthodox theology itself.

IV. Conclusion

More work remains to be done. Perhaps the next great challenge will be overcoming the institutional hurdles of local church ministry. The local church, in its present form, is rarely an incubator for birthing ecclesial theologians. But such change will take time. For now, those of us committed to charting the uncharted territory of ecclesial theology must content ourselves with working in a system—as best we can—that does not always lend itself to the project we are pursuing. Our pioneering generation may not reap the full benefit of our efforts. But I'm convinced that our work now—even our work at this symposium—is laying the ground work for a return of the ecclesial theologian, for the renewal of ecclesial theology, for the renewal of the church.

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