

Theologies for Pastoral Ministry: Pastoral Epistle
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September 10, 2024
Dallas, TX

Dear Preacher,

I know better than to ask how you are doing. The question itself feels tired. The conversation that follows would wear us both out and leave us more confused about the mix of emotions we are experiencing relative to the state of our beloved church. How could we possibly capture our worries and dreams for the church? How could we capture the spiritual tensions alive within us as its leaders?

Rather, I'll start with gratitude for the work you are doing. Right now, I am grateful to God that you are bearing witness to our Savior Jesus through your work. You are showing up in the community to which you were called. You are hearing heartache as a relationship falls apart, you are planning funerals for loved ones and strangers alike, you are breaking bread with those diagnosed with a disease. You are physically there to hear their stories and to show in your being that God comes close to us in our suffering. God does not leave us there. God gives us hope through Jesus, that Apostle Paul reminds us, does not disappoint us.¹ Hope in Christ will not let us down.

You, dear preacher, are living the gospel truth by showing up in suffering and not walking away. And, if you have walked away, even for a few minutes or for an entire season of your life, it's okay. Our Savior understands. The weight of a crisis bears heavy upon us. I need you to know you are not alone in this pain. Not only did Christ enter pain and face rejection and death, but there are thousands of us across the nation who are in this spiritual tension at the state of our church with you. We are acutely aware of the crisis in our church. We see the signs of death. And we sense the impending pain of a communal gathering place dying together. Sometimes the weight of that reality weighs heavy on the chest. Sometimes it keeps us from sleeping.

It is imperative that we name what is dying. Being honest about what is real can set us free. We do not do ourselves any favors by sidestepping the truth.

¹ Romans 5:5 NIV

The institution of the church is dying. The denominations we take pride in are dying. The building in which you serve is probably dying. Has that roof let you down? Has it rained in your office yet? Are you facing major renovations and worried about how you are going to pay for them when the cost of maintaining the building is going up, but the number of people willing to bear the cost of it is diminishing?

It seems to me one of the greatest challenges of our time is that more and more of our colleagues are strapped with the burden of costly buildings. More and more, the commitment to maintaining, or rescuing those buildings takes priority over our preparation of the proclaimed word. And I get why.

Buildings are proven to keep us safe from the elements. Buildings help us gather people together in one place. Buildings allow the asset to be shared among many, both the joy of the space and the burden of it.

Our ancestors were wise to build buildings and to pass them down to us.

However, now, the question must be asked. Has caring for church buildings taken priority over following Jesus?

Are we allowing ourselves as servant leaders of an institution, enough time to follow the footsteps of Jesus? Are we investing time in the stranger by our modern day well? Are we telling people about Jesus? Or, are we too busy in the business of saving the church that we no longer attend to the spiritual path set before us following Jesus?

The wear and tear on old buildings tugs like the wear and tear of an aged body. We can't fight in the same ways we used to fight. We must find grace. And, we must not fall into the spiritual trap of despair when the institution is not what it was once promised for us.

That's okay. It's okay for the institution to die. The gospel lives.

Now, I don't want to belittle the pain for those of us whose career is tied to this institution of church. I am one of you. The creature comforts of being a preacher in the modern church are diminishing in most places. Don't put your calling in the hands of that call. That will leave you in so much pain thinking that the gospel died.

The gospel lives.

In you. In us. In the story of our Savior handed down with precious care from one generation to the next.

People are still talking about the man who was killed on a tree by the people who loved him. Empires have tried to kill Jesus' story without success. Don't worry, we don't have the power to stop that story. But, we do have a call to attend to the story. We have the call to tell people about Jesus.

I spoke with a pastor recently who feels trapped in an old church facility. His days as a pastor are filled with worry about the next thing that will break, the money required to fix it, and the diminishing numbers of people committed to bear that financial stress of the institution's property with him.

God has given him a vision to sell the property to break free of the chains they feel. In prayer and study, he has discovered that Jesus didn't spend most of his time inside a temple teaching. There are no records of Jesus being consulted about how to pay the sanctuary light bill.

Jesus was outside.

Jesus was meeting people where they are.

Jesus was hearing people's stories and jokes and taunts and fears.

Jesus was with the people, where the people are.

And that is our cue to follow.

Think about the woman at the well. Jesus didn't meet her in the temple at bible study. He didn't meet her over coffee hour. He met her at the watering hole at an unlikely time of the day. He wasn't supposed to talk to her, but did anyway. In their meeting, she discovered realities about herself and an invitation for her to no longer walk alone. Jesus opened up the kingdom to her and this is what the spiritual calling for us is today.

Where are the places in ministry that we feel stuck?

Where are the places we burrow our brow and clench our teeth and form fists with our hands?

Those are physical manifestations of where we need to open up.

And one clear place is for us to get outside of our physical church buildings.

Jesus doesn't say to the called disciples, "Stay in this office, attend to the building and budget maintenance." No! He says, "Come, follow me."² And where does Jesus lead them? Not to a church building, but to people, where people already are.

Buildings, property, brick and mortar all serve a purpose. They are assets. Things we can move and touch and depend on. They are physical ways we mark meaning. A wall is no longer just a wall once it bears the pencil marks of a kid growing up in time. A space becomes a home when you add rugs and chairs and tables and people and food and trash and brooms.

The physical space exists to serve the people. Not the other way around. It's ours, preacher, to keep that in check.

I know you need your building. I know you have church members who are attached to certain parts of your property. I know the brick and mortar matters. But when you follow Jesus in and out of the temple in your telling of his story, it's your responsibility to let God's people know that there is life outside of the church building. There are people outside who are not interested in maintaining a church building nor an institution that you helped build.

Here's what the people are interested in...
Jesus.

They want to know Jesus. They want to hear what Jesus does for people. How he heals and forgives and challenges and invites us into community with him and one another.

The call hasn't changed since it's formation. We are still called to let go of what we are currently doing to follow Jesus. For us, preachers, it's time to let go of the business of maintaining a building and follow Jesus outside.

Listen dear preacher, for the sound of Jesus' voice. Map out his footsteps from the temple to the seaside to the city center to the well. Follow this ancient trail and stop for the people. Some will surprise you and come along. People are eager to be a part of something bigger than themselves, that's what makes building campaigns successful. But you, dear preacher, get to share the most

² Mark 1:17 NIV

important thing of all, following Jesus into the kingdom. People are eager to go there with you.

Tell them about Jesus.

Surround yourselves with those who will tell you about Jesus, too. You need to hear it. You need someone else to point it out to you.

You are equipped already for this call. You have everything you need. You will be required to let go of attachment to your particular flavor of denomination and your particular steeple and stained glassed window and newest iPad.

Those were never the selling points of this mission anyway.

Following Jesus is what's compelling.

Tell them about Jesus.