

Pastoral Epistle
Dr. Joel Lawrence

Dear Friend,

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

I am writing to encourage you in the vocation that has been laid upon you by the Spirit and the Church: the role of shepherd of God's people. May His grace abound in and through you as you take up this vocation as a humble servant of God and of the people of God. The calling to be a pastor is among the great graces God gives us. None are worthy, and yet God takes up earthen vessels for His purposes to build up the Church to maturity in Christ and to shepherd her mission in the world.

But, as you are keenly aware, it is a challenging time to receive this calling. In our time, those who are called to shepherd the church are under a tremendous strain. Over the past few years, we have clearly seen clear that large segments of the American Church have been captured by the ruling ideologies of our day, resulting in the conformity of the church's theological imagination to the pattern of the age. With this, the role of pastor has been tossed back and forth by the waves, blown here and there by cultural forces that have led to pastors suffering an identity crisis.

This identity crisis runs deep. The church, having ceded its form and desires to the pattern of late-modern America, now seeks pastors whose work is geared toward meeting the demands of late-modern American Christianity. Lacking a clear understanding of pastoral identity, pastors today operate in myriad false identities: CEO, CFO, armchair psychologist, activist, medical expert, political partisan, or cruise ship director, making sure everyone is having a good time. Disconnected from a clear identity, pastors too often take on roles that they hope will please their congregations (and secure their salary).

But this confusion is demoralizing; called to a vocation, many pastors today find themselves doing a job (or a lot of jobs), leading to the significant burnout we see today. For the sake of the health of the church, for the sake of the glory of God and the growth to maturity of the Body of Christ, pastors must be renewed in our identity as Pastor Theologians. And you, my friend, must be rooted in this identity.

But why Pastor Theologian? Why do I commend this as your foundational identity as a shepherd? I'm sure I've mentioned to you that I regularly meet with a community of pastors in my home city. We gather to encourage each other, to read theology, and to reflect on our pastoral vocation. In our conversations, the theme of pastoral identity comes up regularly. Many of these pastors have expressed to me that, early in their ministry, they experienced a deep sense of loss as they came to realize that taking on the role as pastor meant sacrificing their identity as theologian. This is because many of these pastors serve in churches where theological reflection is discouraged, either passively by the nature of the job as administrators in an ecclesial bureaucracy or actively by the concern of a church board or other pastors that theological reflection takes the pastor away from her "real" pastoral work. These pastors have had to make the choice between being a pastor or being a theologian. The landscape of modern American Christianity has made it clear to them that you can *either* be a pastor *or* be a theologian, but you can't be both.

But as we have studied together, we have seen that, for much of the history of the church, this choice wasn't necessary; the theologians of the church were the pastors of the church. Augustine was a Bishop, whose remarkable theological corpus arose from the daily, gritty, difficult work of shepherding the church to maturity in Christ and protecting the flock against theological error. Luther's reforms were rooted in the praying life of a priest-monk and grew through his ministry as a Pastor Theologian in Wittenberg. Barth's theological revolution arose from his work as the parish priest, as he guided his congregation through the tumult of the First World War, re-discovering "the strange world within the Bible" that confronted him as he ministered Word and sacrament, week by week, to farmers, tradespeople, and factory workers.

Through our explorations together, we have grown in our conviction that we are Pastor Theologians, an identity that connects our calling to be shepherds of the church with the deep longing of our souls to ground our vocation theologically. And this has renewed our identity. Our calling is unified in the identity of Pastor Theologian, a unity that brings clarity and integrity to our ministry, transforms our sense of vocation, and energizes our work as shepherds of the flock entrusted to our care.

And this is what I want for you! As you begin your pastoral ministry, I pray that you will be secure in your calling to be a theological shepherd of your people. This is the calling that will sustain you in the challenges of pastoral ministry and give shape to your work. You see, the pastorate cannot be defined simply by sociological categories or organizational hierarchies. As much as the leadership experts and the latest best-seller want us to believe

that successful pastoring is found in perfecting technique (one they have discovered and are selling), the Scriptures make it very clear: Pastors exist, not due to human initiative or as functionaries in an org chart, but because Christ has called and equipped some to be pastors and teachers, to serve the Body of Christ as his under shepherds. If this is misunderstood, or de-emphasized, the foundational theological identity of the pastor is lost.

And this is the danger that has come to the church, and her pastors, as we have imported false identities into the church. These identities functionally deny the uniquely theological foundation of the pastorate, and so pastors, having lost the theological mooring of their identity, have utilized leadership methodologies, utilitarian practices, and culturally defined criteria that ultimately deny the fundamental nature of our calling. We have adopted methodologies that pursue visions of success that look far more American than they do Biblical and have become a real and present danger to the soul of the pastor and the mission of the church in the world.

You see, when false identities dominate the pastorate, a slow erosion of the humble shepherd occurs. As reward structures for pastors are created that look very unlike Jesus, a church is constructed that no longer makes sense of Jesus's vision of a shepherd. When this happens, the great tragedy of the pastorate today becomes undeniably clear: we do not trust the Biblical vision of the pastor. This is a tragic reality that *you* must resist if you are going to take up the identity that have been given to you: Pastor Theologian.

And herein lies the promise of your vocation as Pastor Theologian: This identity will ground you in your ministry as a humble under-shepherd of Jesus who is reliant on the Spirit and growing in the character of Christ. If you are rooted in this identity, you will reject the ways that have come to dominate the pastorate today. And when you are freed from pastoral identities that have been imported from outside the theological reality of the church, that don't view the pastoral office theologically, then you can embrace the reality that you are a broken vessel, who by God's amazing grace can be used by the Spirit to be a means of God's grace in the world. Where a genuinely theological identity of the pastorate reigns, then a shepherd can stand as the humble under-shepherd of Christ, as a receiver of the Word of God, an instrument of the grace of God, as one who stands, with all the flock, under the grace of God.

My friend, an awesome burden has been laid upon your shoulders. But it is not the burden of building a "successful" church. It is not the burden of growing your followers on social media. It is not the burden of securing the church budget. It is the burden of being a Pastor

Theologian, of being a faithful steward of the mysteries of God, of being servant of God's church. But, as I close this letter, let me remind you that the words of our Lord are still true: "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

Yours friend in Christ,

Joel