

Theologies for Pastoral Ministry: Pastoral Epistle  
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To the Parish Pastor in a Secular Age, a loyal child in the faith, a Gospel-bearer amid seemingly impossible conditions:

Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the mounting pressures and anxieties you undoubtedly feel about the decline of Christianity in America, I assure you that your work and witness have never been so important. While your challenges are unique to this moment in history, you are not the first pastor to face the growing echoes of a sparsely-populated sanctuary; the lukewarm commitment of worshippers; declining budgets (which inevitably lead to declining imagination for ministry); the generalized commitment of leaders to “grow membership with young families;” a politically polarized society; the tension between holding fast to God’s faithfulness of earlier years while also reaching out toward the future; or situating a new generation of faithful people within sacred traditions and rituals instead of secular ones.

While any one of these challenges on their own would be enough to sow doubt among pastoral leaders, you are navigating ministry amid all these challenges at once (and many more!). There is no reprieve from the turbulence. Unfortunately, it’s likely that the turbulence will only continue to increase. So I urge you “to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you’ve been called.”<sup>2</sup> You were called to point people to the good news of Jesus Christ. It’s inevitable that as anxieties stir, you will face pressure to abandon the convictions of the gospel in favor of strategic plans, larger pledges, secular wisdom, advocacy agendas, and a seemingly more palatable version of Christianity.

I want to remind you that the troubles that stir are all imminent problems. They are particular to this time and place, meaning that they are problems to be solved. Humans have always gravitated toward solving the problems of imminence. We are *in the world* and naturally focus our energy on the problems *of the world*.

- In the days of declining membership this looks like assembling a task force to develop a shiny new strategic plan that includes intentional outreach to the community, new types of worship offerings, plans to launch a capital campaign, and fellowship gatherings that look no different than those of secular organizations.
- In the days of shrinking budgets this looks like segmented communications, marketing the merits of financial contributions to a wider audience than ever before, and

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from salutations in I & II Timothy

<sup>2</sup> Ephesians 4:1

challenging people to reach as deep as they need to in the interest of keeping the church doors open.

- In the days of a divided and divisive society this looks like churches worshiping at the altar of identity politics, reminding congregants of the ideological drumbeats to which they must march if they are to make meaning of their faith.

While not necessarily bad in and of themselves, imminent problems have a way of consuming religious communities to the point that transcendence is but a distant memory.

- Strategic plans focus on numbers and demonstrated growth at the expense of remembering why we're compelled to invite new people to take the first step of discipleship.
- Spiffy stewardship campaigns are hyper-focused on meeting minimums to pay staff and utility bills without attention to the transformative power of living as a giver instead of a taker and being a steward of your resources instead of a slave to them.
- Professing allegiance to one side or another of a hot-button social issue can both ignore the critical religious conversation about sin and suggest to the faithful remnant that uniformity of ideology among worshippers is a necessity for religious communities. Not to mention how tempting it can be to give into despair and guilt as a community when the enormity of our societal inequities and wrongs are uncoupled from the hope of the gospel.

You see, beloved, the imminent problems of the world will only continue to thrive. But your calling is one of transcendence. Don't forsake the transcendence of the gospel in the interest of fixing imminent problems. People are hungry for something they can't find anywhere else, and the church is the one place that acknowledges that deeper hunger. There is no need to water down the gospel. Gospel power comes from its radical proclamation of grace.

If you aren't holding fast to the good news of the resurrection then who is? If you aren't preaching about reverence, humility, and awe then where will it be found?

You are surrounded by people who are seduced by the secular gospel of self-satisfaction and self-reliance. It's easy to understand why imminent issues draw us in: they entice us into thinking that we have the power to solve them because if we use *our* smarts and *our* strategies, we'll fix the things that ail the church. But the church is rooted in the truth that God is other. The truths we proclaim and the hope to which we hold fast must be other as well if it is of God and not of us.

You see, just under the surface of most of the problems that will eat away at your days is the understandable yearning for the church to be relevant again. Just under the surface of hopes for new members and bigger budgets and social stances that draw people in is the desire that these things will prove our relevance in today's world. You know this yearning better than most. Don't

all pastors want confirmation that our vocation *is* relevant and necessary to world in which we live? Here's the thing I want you to remember: the grace of God is *always* relevant. You don't need to feel pressure to wrap it up in secular bows. The grace of God has the power to heal the sick, make the broken whole, sow relationships across enemy lines, make a way in the wilderness, shine light in the darkness, and bring life out of death. You are the one who points people to this truth and this hope, which can never be tamed and packaged into the seeming solutions we busy ourselves with.

This is your task, beloved, hard as it may be. Your congregants are fluent in the secular gospel of self-sufficiency even if they don't know it. The church is not just another possibility for a business school case study, because the church is not interested in conformity. The church has always and only been about the transcendent possibility of transformation. You have the chance *and the obligation* to change the conversation. When problem-solving is void of any mention of the power of God, you are the one who redirects the gaze upward. When metrics and numbers become the only measure of success, you are the one who speaks of the unexpected and refining power of the Holy Spirit. When the gospel is reconstituted by political and social agendas, you bring grace into the conversation.

To do anything other than this is ignore the central claim of our faith. You are the one charged with proclaiming the power of the gospel to save, redeem, and empower. No one else in society claims that privilege nor does anyone else face the same pressure to redirect conversations toward the deeper and truer subjects.

And, I can promise you that when you do this, it will be like streams in the desert because your people are thirsty for something that only the grace of God can quench.

So, point them to the true things, the transcendent things in this world littered with imminent problems. And trust your call because the grace of God is *always* relevant to our world and to the people we serve.

*Grace* be with you.