

HISTORICAL THEOLOGY AND THE PASTORAL OFFICE

Introduction

Whether conscious of it or not, evangelical Christians yearn for a sense of transcendence that historical connectedness can offer. There is a longing, or at least there should be, for a rootedness in tradition amid a twenty-first century entertainment-driven, fade-based Western society. How do people living today know the content of the “...faith that was once for all delivered to the saints?” (Jude 3)¹ unless this truth has been revealed, entrusted, and passed down to them through the ages? John of Salisbury, a medieval humanist and bishop of Chartres who lived from 1115-1180² wrote in his work *Metalogicon*, “Bernard of Chartres used to compare us to dwarfs perched on the shoulders of giants. He pointed out that we see more and farther than our predecessors, not because we have keener vision or greater height, but because we are lifted up and borne aloft on their gigantic stature.”³ We gain knowledge and understand the world around us because of the efforts of those who have gone before us. These persons of the past are the foundations upon which we build. We simply advance, or perhaps at times merely reintroduce previous works and ideas. To ignore voices from the past is to commit chronological snobbery. It reveals our hubris. History and tradition are imperative for our understanding of Christian doctrine and righteous living. The theological discipline of historical theology helps us to see this.

Those in pastoral ministry must listen to voices of the past to inform their philosophy ministry and root them in a firm understanding of priorities within the pastoral office. This paper

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Bible quotations come from the ESV.

² F.L. Cross and Elizabeth Livingstone, eds., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Oxford: New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 902.

³ Daniel McGarry, trans., *The Metalogicon of John Salisbury: A Twelfth-century Defense of the Verbal and Logical Arts of the Trivium*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1955), 167.

will first answer the question, “What is historical theology and what place does it have in the local church?” Progressing from this launchpad, the two primary functions pastors spend the most time performing, the ministry of the word and pastoral care, will be considered in concert with wisdom from the past. Finally, application will be made to both areas of the pastoral office by indicating how historical theology should shape or reshape pastoral priorities in ministry.

What Is Historical Theology and What Place Does It Have in the Local Church?

Perhaps the term itself “historical theology” is foreign to the reader. What exactly is historical theology? The late Jaroslav Pelikan, longtime professor of history at Yale University, states that historical theology is what the church, “believes, teaches, and confesses as it prays and suffers, serves and obeys, celebrates and awaits the coming of the Kingdom of God.”⁴ Defined another way, “Historical theology is the study of the interpretation of Scripture and the formulation of doctrine by the church of the past.”⁵ Although its own discipline, it is also related to several other theological disciplines, namely, exegetical theology, biblical theology, systematic theology, and practical theology.⁶

At bare bones, exegetical theology seeks to find the meaning of the biblical text. Biblical theology articulates the progress of redemptive history and traces the common themes found throughout Scripture as a whole. Systematic theology is probably the discipline with most familiarity. Basically, it is the study and formation of doctrines. Systematic theology expresses, “What Christians and churches are to believe, do, and be today in accordance with all the teaching of Scripture.”⁷ All three of these disciplines deal directly with Scripture. Historical theology does not. However, that does not mean it has no interaction with Scripture, rather, it

⁴ Jaroslav Pelikan, *Development of Christian Doctrine: Some Historical Prolegomena*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1969), 143.

⁵ Gregg R. Allison, *Historical Theology: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 23.

⁶ Joseph Harrod, “What Is Historical Theology” (lecture presented at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky, January 7-10, 2020).

⁷ Allison, *Historical Theology*, 32-33.

assists exegetical, biblical, and systematic theology by informing each of these three disciplines with wisdom from past ages.⁸ The aim of all these disciplines then, is what is known as “practical theology.” Allison explains this task of the theologian well, “Practical theology consists of the communication of the Word of God to churches today through preaching, teaching, discipling, mentoring, counseling, and so forth.”⁹

Simply put, historical theology is the academic discipline that seeks to explain the development and change of Christian doctrines over time.¹⁰ As a theological discipline, its aim is to reflect the wisdom of the church of the past for aiding the ministries of the church today. However, when evangelicals speak of development or growth of doctrine over time, they mean greater clarity and further nuance as opposed to innovation. Allison clarifies, “Church tradition must always have reference to Scripture; hence, historical theology must be either approved or chastened by the Word of God.”¹¹ Historical theology then plays a pivotal, but helping rather than a title role.¹²

Attentiveness to, and absorption of, the accumulated wisdom from over 2,000 years of church history is of great advantage to Christ’s bride as she seeks to live faithfully in a hostile world. Theologians do themselves a disservice if they approach a biblical text or theological question as if they are the first to ever do so. Historical theology broadens and adds depth to exegesis. It checks our interpretation of Scripture, it guards, and guides us so that we may not error. Much of the legwork of the most essential tenants of the Christian faith has already been done. Certain ministry contexts may, and often do, demand interaction and application with particular doctrines in a variety of ways, but in most cases, the foundation of truth has already been laid. Contemporary expression of historic doctrines comes by way of, “a meditation *on*, and

⁸ Allison, *Historical Theology*, 33.

⁹ Allison, *Historical Theology*, 33.

¹⁰ Harrod, “What Is Historical Theology”

¹¹ Allison, *Historical Theology*, 23.

¹² J. I. Packer, “The Comfort of Conservatism” in *Power Religion: The Selling Out of the Evangelical Church?* ed. M. S. Horton (Chicago: Moody, 1992), 288.

even more importantly a meditation *through*, earlier stages of historical expression.”¹³ Take the doctrine of the incarnation for example. In their own doctrinal formation pastors and theologians today are heavily dependent upon the conclusions expressed at the Council of Chalcedon in 451. Any modern expression of this cardinal doctrine that uses terms like, “two unchanging natures, divine and human, united in the person of Jesus Christ”, is relying on the work of the early church.¹⁴ The task of Christians today is to reflect on these classic doctrines and expound upon them for this generation with greater clarity and sensitivity to their individual contexts, while holding fast to Scripture alone as ultimate authority.

Second, historical theology aids the church in its ongoing endeavor to distinguish sound doctrine from heresy, truth from error (1 Tim 1:10; 2 Tim 4:3; Titus 1:9; 2:1). Daniel Williams, professor of patristics and historical theology at Baylor University argues, “If the aim of contemporary evangelicalism is to be doctrinally orthodox and exegetically faithful to Scripture, it cannot be accomplished without recourse to and integration of the foundational Tradition of the early church.”¹⁵ The hope of studying doctrinal development throughout the ages is to not stumble into the same heretical snares from the past, but to rightly recognize orthodox belief. Vincent of Lerins called it, “that faith which has been believed everywhere, always, by everyone.”¹⁶ To further nuance the example above, regarding the doctrine of the incarnation, the heretical teachings of Nestorius and Eutyches in the fifth century demanded the Council of Chalcedon.¹⁷ More needed to be said than what took place at Nicaea in 325 and Constantinople in 385, because the person of Christ was under attack.

Third, as Allison helpfully points out, historical theology gifts the church with inspiring examples of faith, piety, perseverance, commitment, and suffering for the gospel.¹⁸ For

¹³ Richard Muller, “The Role of Church History in the Study of Systematic Theology,” in Woodbridge and McComiskey, *Doing Theology in Today’s World*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 79.

¹⁴ Allison, *Historical Theology*, 24-25.

¹⁵ Daniel Williams, *Retrieving the Tradition and Renewing Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 13.

¹⁶ Vincent of Lerins, *Commonitory 2.6*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, Philip Schaff, and Henry Wace, 2nd ser., 14 vols. (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1994).

¹⁷ Tony Lane, *A Concise History of Christian Thought*, (rev. ed., Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 60.

¹⁸ Allison, *Historical Theology*, 25.

example, there survives an emotive account of the martyrdom of Polycarp, a young disciple of the apostle John, titled, *The Letter of the Smyrneans on the Martyrdom of Polycarp*.¹⁹ When pressed to deny Christ, he said these words, “Eighty and six years have I served Him, and He never did me any injury: how then can I blaspheme my King and my Saviour?”²⁰ Or think of *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, in which Augustine, arguably the church’s greatest theologian, recounts his early life and conversion to Christianity. Works like these serve to fuel the believer’s faith and spur them on to greater trust in the Lord.

Fourth, historical theology helps ward off what Timothy George coins “theological faddism.”²¹ By way of analogy, Allison explains what George means: “Tragically, numerous factors—a consumerist mentality, an insistence on individual rights, an emphasis on personal autonomy, a pronounced sense of entitlement—have converged to foster an atmosphere in which too many Christians pick and choose their doctrines like they pick and choose their clothes or fast-food meals.”²² The increasingly post-modern, relativistic culture in the Western world often denies, minimizes, or perverts fundamental doctrines such as the sovereignty of God, hell, and the authority of Scripture. Historical theology offers the hard facts and evidence of a long-standing faith tradition, rooted in Scripture, that across the ages has corporately affirmed the doctrines of God’s sovereignty, eternal punishment of the wicked, and biblical authority.²³ The historic doctrines of the church are a safeguard for her to protect orthodoxy and combat heresy.

Churches who see little value in historical theology run the risk of being, as Williams states, “characterized by an ahistorical and spiritual subjectivism...more susceptible to the influences of accommodating the church to a pseudo-Christian culture such that the uniqueness of the Christian identity is quietly and unintentionally traded away in the name of effective

¹⁹ Lane, *A Concise History of Christian Thought*, 9.

²⁰Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, eds. “The Encyclical Epistle of the Church at Smyrna.” In *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, Vol. 1. The Ante-Nicene Fathers. (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1885), 41.

²¹ Timothy George, “Dogma Beyond Anathema: Historical Theology in the service of the Church,” *Review and Expositor* 84 (Fall 1987), 697.

²² Allison, *Historical Theology*, 26.

²³ Allison, *Historical Theology*, 26-27.

ministry.”²⁴ Historical theology can be a tool for unity and gospel centrality in a polemical fad-based society, because it seeks to keep the church from being a group of, “children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes” (Eph 4:14).

Fifth, historical theology gives the church hope by exposing her to the promise keeping God’s past and present faithfulness. Allison correctly identifies this precious truth in noting that, “God for Christ’s sake has always been faithful to his promise to build his church” (e.g. Matt 16:13-20).²⁵ Because of this reality, Christians today are able to sense a connectedness to the church universal, prophesied by Jesus (Matt 16:18) and begun at Pentecost with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:8; 2). How is this? The universal church consists of all believers who have put their faith in Jesus Christ (John 3:16-17; Acts 16:31; Rom 4:3-5) in all times and all places (1 Cor 12:12-13; Eph 1:22-23, 4:4-6). At conversion (Mark 1:15; Acts 20:21) the Holy Spirit incorporates all believers into the one, holy, universal, apostolic, spiritual body (Rom 12:4-21; 1 Cor 12:27; Eph 2:19-22; Col 1:24-27) over which Christ rules supremely as its head (Gal 3:27; Eph 1:20-23; 5:23; Col 1:18), builder (Matt 16:18; 1Cor. 3:11), and caretaker (Acts 2:47; Eph 4:14-15; 5:29-30). Muller wisely explains the connectedness of Christians with believers of the past, “The study of the history of the church and its teachings is not only an objective, external discipline, it is also a subjective, internal exercise by which and through which the life and mind of the church becomes an integral part of the life and mind of the individual Christian.”²⁶

Not only does the discipline of historical theology, with its accumulated wisdom from prior ages, benefit the church as she seeks to live faithfully for Jesus Christ, but it seems to me to be demanded in Scripture. Hebrews 13:7-9a says, “Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith. Jesus

²⁴ Williams, *Retrieving the Tradition and Renewing Evangelicalism*, 14.

²⁵ Allison, *Historical Theology*, 28-29.

²⁶ Richard A. Muller, *The Study of Theology: From Biblical Interpretation to Contemporary Formulation, Foundations of Contemporary Interpretation*, vol. 7 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 107.

Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. Do not be led away by diverse and strange teachings...” Since historical theology should inform our theological formation and church practices, I will now explore the two main areas mentioned above regarding the pastoral office.

The Pastoral Office

The Ministry of the Word

In this section the preaching and teaching ministries of the church will take precedence. There is a prophetic task, a ministry of the Word of God to be done in the church (Heb 4; Acts 5:42). This begins with our willingness as Christians to receive the wisdom and truth of Scripture (Mark 4:3-25), a willingness to tenaciously search it out (Prov 2:15; 25:2), and a willingness to speak His word, or rather let God speak through us with the intent of shaping the consciousness of His people. We have no right to alter Scripture’s message (1 Cor 2:1-5; 2 Cor 2:17; 4:5; Rev 22:18) nor do we have a right to determine whether we want to declare it (2 Tim 4). Teachers and preachers of the bible are not called to tickling ears and should seek to speak God’s words after him.

However, preaching seems to be on the decline. It appears to be taking the back seat to other responsibilities a pastor may have. Unfortunately, for most ministers, programs and pastoral care situations rank higher on the church’s priority list. The pulpit needs revived. Preaching needs to be seen in its proper place in the ministry of pastors. The church needs reintroduced to expository preaching; preaching that speaks God’s words after him.

A definition would be helpful at this point. Preaching is verbal, oral communication characterized by several key features: its content is the Bible, it is biblical truth mediated through human personality, it calls humans to respond to the truth proclaimed, and its ultimate goal is the glory of God and edification of the Church. Preaching God’s word is a divine mandate (Mark 13:9-10; Matt 10:6-7); it must be done. We see in the New Testament that preaching was central and fundamental to the spread of the gospel. John the Baptist came preaching (Matt 3:1-14), Jesus preached (Matt 4:17; Mark. 1:14, 38), Jesus commanded his disciples to preach (Matt 10:6-

7; Mark. 16:15), the apostles preached (Acts 6:1-4; 8:8, 17:13), and leaders of churches in the first century were commanded to preach (1 Tim 5:17; 2 Tim 4:2). This command was not just for first century believers; it applies to all New Covenant believers.

One of Augustine's lesser known works is *De Doctrina*. It was completed in 427 just a few years before his death.²⁷ Not only was Augustine one of the greatest theological minds the church has ever known, he was a preacher too. In book four of *De Doctrina*, Augustine explains the art and importance of preaching.²⁸ Like all of us, he had many things vying for his time, yet as the *De Doctrina* shows, he prioritized preaching. The entirety of book four of *De Doctrina*, is dedicated to teaching the art of preaching. Two traceable themes that appear throughout book four are the personal holiness of the preacher and depth of teaching. In section twenty-seven, Augustine writes, "But the life of the speaker is of more effect in disposing men to hear him obediently than any grandeur of diction however great."²⁹ Robert Murray McCheyne a Scottish pastor, who lived a short life, 1813-1843, expressed this need ministers have as well, noting that the greatest gift a pastor can give to his congregation is his own personal holiness, "Above all things, cultivate your own spirit. A word spoken by you when your conscience is clear, and your heart full of God's Spirit, is worth ten thousand words spoken in unbelief and sin."³⁰ This wisdom is derived from 1 Timothy 4:16, "Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers."

Secondly, is depth of preaching. Augustine says in section twenty-one of book four, "But these sayings of the Apostle, though plain, are also profound, and in the form in which they have come down to us they require not merely to be read or heard, but also to be explained, if one would go below the surface and try to discover their depth."³¹ The task of preaching is to

²⁷ Baker, W. J. Vashon, and Cyril Bickersteth with S. Augustine. *Preaching and Teaching according to S. Augustine: Being a New Translation of His de Doctrina Christiana, Book IV, and de Rudibus Catechizandis*. (London; Oxford: A. R. Mowbray & Co. Limited, 1907), 17.

²⁸ Baker and Bickersteth, *Preaching and Teaching According to S. Augustine*, see 45-100.

²⁹ Baker and Bickersteth, *Preaching and Teaching According to S. Augustine*, 95.

³⁰ R. M. McCheyne and A.A. Bonar, *Memoir and Remains of the Rev. Robert Murray McCheyne*, (Edinburgh; London: Oliphant Anderson & Ferrier, 1894), 100.

³¹ Baker and Bickersteth, *Preaching and Teaching According to S. Augustine*, 82.

explain and apply what has already been provided. What makes preaching “preaching” though, is that it elicits a response, it calls its hearers to something, shows them their inadequacy to accomplish what needs to be done, and connects them to the savior of the world Jesus Christ, and the God who is able to transform their lives. Preaching’s aim is to stimulate appropriate human responses to the truth being declared. Preaching is not an information dump. Preaching is a means to an end, and that end is the call to righteousness, salvation, and edification of believers. It is not enough to merely say what the text says. Preachers must demand a verdict, encourage, appeal, correct, and challenge their listeners. This type of work cannot be done if the ministry of the word is not the priority and ample time is not given to the most important task of the pastor.

John Wycliffe was an English philosopher, theologian, and reformer in the mid to late 1300s. He spoke out against the Roman Catholic Church, of which he was a member, in no small part because he was witnessing the demise of the pastor office in his own time.³² His work, *On the Pastoral Office*, offers a helpful critique for Grace Bible Church regarding the ministry of the word taking precedence in the like of a pastor. Like Augustine and McChyene, in the first half of this work, of most importance to Wycliffe is the holiness of the pastor, “Therefore the condition of the pastor is to cleanse his own spring, that it may not infect the Word of God.”³³ He then moves to define the pastoral office as having a threefold function,

The pastor has a threefold office: first, to feed the sheep spiritually on the word of God, that through pastures ever green they may be initiated into the blessedness of heaven. The second pastoral office is to purge wisely the sheep of disease, that they may not infect themselves and others as well. And the third is for the pastor to defend his sheep from ravening wolves, both sensible and insensible. In all these the especial office of the pastor seems that of sowing the Word of God among his sheep...Among all the duties of the pastor after justice of life, holy preaching is most to be praised.³⁴

The thoughts of these men, Augustine, Wycliffe, and McChyene offer a healthy critique for Grace Bible Church, and others who may struggle in prioritizing the ministry of the

³² Cross and Livingstone, *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 1781.

³³ Matthew Spinka, ed. *Advocates of Reform, from Wyclif to Erasmus*. (The Library of Christian Classics, V. 14. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953), 48.

³⁴ Spinka, *Advocates of Reform*, 48.

word. There are 33 verbs used over 100 times in the New Testament that equate to our word “preach”, yet as noted earlier preaching seems to be on the decline, taking the back seat to other responsibilities. Preaching needs to be seen in its proper place in the ministry of pastors and historical theology helps us place our priorities where they should be.

The ultimate goal in preaching and teaching is the glory of God, and the edification of the Church. When we open God’s word, we must long to put on display for all to see and hear the inexhaustible majestic glory of God. When we proclaim the words of scripture, we want people to be captivated by the gospel, to see how foolish their idolatry is, and to see why God should be their deepest desire. When we proclaim the word of God, we must desire to paint a portrait of Jesus Christ that is so compelling that people’s eyes begin to be opened to how he is better than everything else in life. This takes viewing the ministry of the word as primary.

Pastoral Care and Community Life

As noted in the previous section, most pastors and churches need some reorientation of priorities in ministry. However, shepherding the body of Christ means equipping his people to live skilled and holy lives within their individual contexts. Teaching of the word is of first importance; theology takes precedence. Theology helps bring clarity by which one can then engage in ministry more effectively, accurately, and faithfully. Nevertheless, pastoral care and community life are not to be neglected. They are an essential task in pastoral ministry.

Martin Luther, a key player in the Reformation, better known for his battles with the in situation of the Catholic Church, was above all a shepherd of God’s people. Luther once said of pastors,

Unless your heart toward the sheep is like that of a mother toward her children—a mother, who walks through fire to save her children—you will not be fit to be a preacher. Labor, work, unthankfulness, hatred, envy, and all kinds of sufferings will meet you in this office. If, then, the mother heart, the great love, is not there to drive the preachers, the sheep will be poorly served.³⁵

³⁵ Martin Luther, “Ministers,” in *What Luther Says: A Practical In-Home Anthology for the Active Christian*, ed. Ewald M. Plass; 1959; repr., (Saint Louis, MO: Concordia, 1991), 932.

Luther did not merely write theological treatises, he was also concerned with helping people relate to God in all of life's circumstances. He counseled many in person and through letters. For example, Luther wrote a treatise on prayer for his barber after revealing to Luther that he struggled with prayer.³⁶ In 2011, the late reformed theologian, R.C Sproul, wrote an illustrated children's book about it, attesting to its staying power. As pastors, it is not an option to live life at a distance, we must pursue people and be sensitive to the Holy Spirit's leading and guidance.

In the same era as Luther, John Calvin, though most famously known for his contributions in forming much of reformed theology, was also a physician of the soul. A sermon of Calvin's on 1 Timothy 5:1-3 expressed his heart for pastoral ministry:

And therefore, if we want to do our duty toward God, and to those who are committed to our charge, it is not enough for us to offer them the doctrine generally but when we see any of them go astray we must labor to bring him to the right way. When we see another in grief and sorrow, we must go about to comfort him. When we see anyone who is dull of the spirit, we must prick him and spur him, as his nature will bear.³⁷

Theodore Beza, a disciple of Calvin and Reformation theologian in his own right, embraced his mentor's teaching on pastoral ministry and preached similarly on pastoral care,

It is not only necessary that [a pastor] have general knowledge of his flock, but he must also know and call each of his sheep by name, both in public and in their homes, both night and day. Pastors must run after lost sheep, bandaging up the one with a broken leg, strengthening the one that is sick...In sum, the pastor must consider his sheep more dear to him than his own life, following the example of the Good Shepherd.³⁸

Jesus Christ took on humanity in part to identify with us in our struggles, so we too are to identify with the people we minister to. Jesus taught his disciples to go out into the world. Jesus came into our neighborhood (John 1:14), so we should go into those of others as well. Jesus went to weddings, funerals, and ate meals in homes with tax collectors and sinners (Matt 9:10). Jesus's ministry was inclusive and he never favored one class over another (Rom 2:11). Whether one was on the fringes of society, or a teacher of the law, Jesus ministered to them

³⁶ Martin Luther, "To Peter Beskendorf"; in *Luther: Letters of Spiritual Council*, ed. and trans. Theodore G. Tappert, (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1955), 124-30.

³⁷ John Calvin, "Measured Rebuke", in *Sermons on 1 Timothy*, trans. Robert White, (Banner of Truth: London, 2018), see 551-566.

³⁸ Scott M. Manetsch, *Calvin's Company of Pastors: Pastoral Care and the Emerging Reformed Church, 1536-1609*, (Oxford Studies in Historical Theology. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) 281.

passionately. My favorite metaphor of Paul's, and personal commitment in ministry in this area, is in 2 Corinthians 11. Here Paul likens his ministry to a father, preparing a bride for her husband. It is the goal, duty, and honor as minister of God to take on this task. To prepare for Jesus a lovely, pure bride.

It is our duty to participate in Christ's edifying work continuing the building up of his people and maturing them. This was what drove Paul's ministry (1 Thess 2:15; Rom 11-15; Col 1:28, Eph 4). This involves giving attention to the details of the persons life, envisioning what the Spirit has designed the person to become, and the gifts with which the person has been endowed (Eph 4:8). We do this because it is Jesus' essential ministry with each of us individually, to build us up more into his image and equip us for ministry.

Pastors need reminded, as these voices from church history show, that our ministries do not make Christ present. We can only do ministry because Christ is alive and has called us to enter his ministry as a conduit from which his grace pours (John 15:5-6). It is his ministry that will heal, speak, bless, save, comfort, and guide.

Secondly, community life in the body of Christ is important and thus is worth mentioning here as well. Ministry is done in specific contexts. Most importantly, it is done in the context of community. God himself, in his triune nature, has eternally existed in community as the Trinity. For all of time the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have lived in perfect unity and community with each other. He has created us to reflect this in his church and in our relationships. In John 17 Jesus prays for unity between us and himself and the Father. Paul's "you's" are plural in his letters. Scripture is what God is saying to us as a community, not the individual. It is impossible to live out the "one another's" (which are commands) of Scripture without community. The sacraments (communion and baptism) happen in community (1 Cor 10:16, 11; Matt 28:16-20). 1 Corinthians 12:13 tells us there is one body, and a body cannot be formed without all the parts. The body needs you and me; our gifts are not our own. If we are not in community, we are robbing ourselves and others. We all need to be held accountable; we all need pastors and shepherds over us, even if we are pastors ourselves.

Community draws us out of our self-centeredness (e.g. 1 John and the call to love). In fact, we are called into a local community when we come to Christ. The fact the church is going to let us down at times and is imperfect is not an excuse to avoid community. The entire New Testament attests to a history of people becoming part of a local church community that looks different than anything else in the world around them (e.g. Acts 2, 4, 6). Pastors need to model an active involvement in the church community and teach its importance.

It seems to me that most churches embrace this theological thinking about the importance of community, but many of their members struggle to have deep community with one another. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was born in 1906 in Germany and would later become a pastor and professor during the World War Two era.³⁹ By 1941, Bonhoeffer had been forbidden to lecture, preach, teach, write, or publish any of his thoughts and works.⁴⁰ However, just a few years before these unfortunate circumstances, Bonhoeffer wrote a book called *Life Together* first published in 1939 as part of *Theologische Existenz heute* (Theological Existence Today).⁴¹ In the first chapter titled *Community*, Bonhoeffer says, “Christian community is not an ideal we have to realize, but rather a reality created by God in Christ in which we may participate. The more clearly we learn to recognize that the ground and strength and promise of all our community is in Jesus Christ alone, the more calmly we will learn to think about our community and pray and hope for it.”⁴²

Bonhoeffer’s thoughts are something we need to meditate on as Christians not just pastors. Considering Galatians 6:2 he writes speaking of Christians, “They must suffer and endure one another. Only as a burden is the other really a brother or sister and not just an object to be controlled. The burden of human beings was even for God so heavy that God had to go to the cross suffering under it.”⁴³ This is a difficult but necessary teaching. On the other hand, as a pastor myself, I observe that, many of our members also fail to realize what Bonhoeffer explains

³⁹ Lane, *A Concise History of Christian Thought*, 281.

⁴⁰ Lane, *A Concise History of Christian Thought*, 281

⁴¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer. *Life Together*, V. J. Barnett, ed., D. W. Bloesch, trans., Reader’s Edition, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015), xiii.

⁴² Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 13.

⁴³ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 77-78.

elsewhere as the incomparable joy and strength the physical presence of other believers are in a Christian's life.⁴⁴ Being a follower of Christ necessarily involves living in community in such a way that we celebrate all the good things God brings us in life, but we don't shy away from bearing others' burdens. Works like Bonhoeffer's *Life Together* are convicting for the Western mind's idol of individualism. Yet we are not dismayed, but are encouraged by Bonhoeffer as he points us to Christ, because we know it is the Holy Spirit who brings life despite our failures to always engage as we should (Rom 8:1-11).

Conclusion

History and tradition are imperative for understanding of Christian doctrine and righteous living. The theological discipline of historical theology helps us to see this not just as pastors, but as Christians. Attentiveness to and absorption of the accumulated wisdom from 2,000 years of church history is of great advantage to Christ's bride as she seeks to live faithfully in a hostile world. Aquinas, in the introduction of his shorter *Summa*, writes,

My whole endeavor in the present work is taken up with these three virtues. I shall treat first of faith, then of hope, and lastly of charity. This is the Apostle's arrangement which, for that matter right reason imposes. Love cannot be rightly ordered unless the proper goal of hope is established; nor can there be any hope if knowledge of truth is lacking. Therefore, the first thing necessary is faith, by which you may come to knowledge of the truth. Secondly, hope is necessary, that your intention may be fixed on the right end. Thirdly, love is necessary that your affections may be perfectly put in order.⁴⁵

Aquinas' thesis statement gets at the heart of what pastors should seek to do in their ministries today, foster these virtues in their people through preaching the word and pastoral care. The human condition (Rom 3:23) transcends time, therefore wisdom from the church of the past, critically aids the ministries of the church today. We are not the first to experience the hardships of life or interpret a biblical text and seek to apply it to our lives and the lives of others. As elders, ministry leaders, and Christians who seek to be faithful, we need historical theology to guide and guard our doctrinal conviction and practices so that we, along with the

⁴⁴ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 3.

⁴⁵ Aquinas, *Shorter Summa*, 4.

Apostle Paul, might say with integrity, “I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to him” (2 Cor 11:2).

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