



Thrive in Ministry

Resident Theologians

Three Questions:

When do you best fulfill your role as “resident theologian”? When is it the hardest?

Do you have a group in your church who are truly seeking depth in their faith instead of simple answers? How can you set aside more time for them?

How can you cultivate, practice, and proclaim the gospel as mystery?

Douglas John Hall challenges pastors to see themselves in this light, “If the minister of the congregation is not herself or himself in some genuine sense a theologian, we cannot expect lay persons to reflect some measure of the sort of informed thoughtfulness that is needed if we, as church, are to find a way into the future.” (Hall, 1996, p. 49)

Most pastors see themselves as teachers, but do they see their role as “resident theologians” for their community of faith? Do they see themselves as qualified to speak both to the church and to those not in the church?

In his teaching role, Jesus very intentionally spoke to the spiritual quests of the day: isolation from God, holiness, the kingdom of God. He confronted the teachers of the law who reduced God’s words of redemption to strict rules of behavior. In Luke 4:16-30, Jesus begins his ministry by teaching that God had sent him not to uphold the rules of the synagogue, but to proclaim healing and freedom.



And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ. - Eph. 4:11-12 ESV

Equipping the Saints

Paul described the role of “pastors and teachers” as those who share the task of “equipping the body for the work of ministry.” (Eph. 4:11-12) The work of teaching is deep in the DNA of the church. Can pastors equip the church to speak to the spiritual hunger of this age without seeing this as a deeply theological calling. Has the teaching of the church focused either on social justice or a morality without

dealing with deeper issues that speak to the spiritual hunger of the day? If pastors are honest, many people in the pews just want simple answers, not to have to wrestle with the complexities of living out the faith in this age of upheaval. In a time when fewer people are seeking spiritual information from the church or pastors, pastors must be even more thoughtful in their response to the questions of this age.

The Spiritual Quest

If pastors are to speak authentically to the spiritual quests of this age, they must lean into their role as resident theologians. They must help their congregation develop the theological grounding on which they can build integrated spirituality. Hall argues that today the church, if it is to have a voice in this age, they must speak to these four spiritual quests:

Quest for Moral Authenticity: Hall claims that the church has for too long claimed to be the moral authority without ever wrestling with their moral authenticity. Ronald Sider says that people are too familiar with the scandalous inconsistencies of the church to ever seek wisdom and spiritual guidance from the church. (Sider, 2005, pp. 33–34) How does the church speak to the moral quests of this age? How does the church become something more than a reflection of the culture or age? The church must help people wrestle with authentic responses to the moral challenges of this age in an authentic, compassionate, and thoughtful way. “Bumper sticker theology” will not speak to the depths of this quest. Ethics, theology, and moral authenticity must be interdependent.

Quest for Meaningful Community: In her book, *Alone Together*, Sherry Turkle argues that in the age of social media, people are increasingly alone and isolated. In his final books on theology, Stanley Grenz attempted to paint a picture of the way in which the theology of the church must be a theology of community, not academia. The church must understand this it is a theological issue that people maintain their facades at church. How do we experience authentic, meaningful community? It cannot be done in five minutes of “greeting time” on Sunday morning. Pastors must help their people wrestle with a theology of time, community, and values.

Quest for Transcendence and Mystery: In his book, *Spiritual but No Religious*, Robert Fuller describes how unchurched people are seeking spiritual expressions of faith, but no longer seeking these in their local church. People in this age, perhaps more than in the past, hunger for transcendence and mystery. A retired American Baptist chaplain has found herself in an

Anglican church. In the new members class, seven out of the nine in the group came from a Baptist background. Are they seeking mystery in their worship?

Too often, the church has emphasized “Jesus is my friend” theology that reduces the mystery of the gospel. (Eph. 6:19). When the gospel breaks into the world, the first words are often, “Do not be afraid.” How can pastors cultivate, practice, and proclaim not just God’s immanence but also God’s mystery? How do we return to a sense of awe? What if on a Sunday, pastors had to stand in the pulpit and say to the people, “Do not be afraid!”

Quest for Meaning: Finally, Hall argues that people of this age are hungering for meaning in their life. For too long, the American culture measured meaning by gaining wealth and toys (as false as this is). For many today, this has been revealed as the lie that it is because it leaves people with emptiness and yearning for more. (Hall, 1996, pp. 64–65) Hall argues that gospel does battle with the emptiness and meaninglessness of this age. It fundamentally speaks to the quest for meaning.

This will not be easy work. The soil is definitely in need of preparation and work. It is often rocky and filled with weeds. The resident theologian must do the hard work of the farmer who prepares the field for planting (Matt. 13:1-9, 18-23). It will require asking the creative questions about how and when to communicate in this age. It requires time of study and reflection.

Journaling Assignment:

Your pastor has a challenging theological issue that has shown up in the congregation. How can you help the pastor think deeply with the people about this issue?