It is a very good question and an important one. I do not think that there is as tight a relationship as people think. Obviously, having some theological knowledge is very important to being a good pastor. But being a good pastor is about far more than just knowing the Bible well, or even being able to communicate that well.

A good pastor is someone who is able to deal with people in a particular way, to uphold the life of a community, to serve as the backbone of that community, to be the one who guards the boundaries, and the one who sets the foundations. And that is a very different thing from just having an extensive seminary education, knowing your Bible very well, and being able to master the works of systematic theology. No, it’s being able to lead a congregation; it’s about being able to uphold the boundaries and being someone who is able to guard the people of God against threats from without and against disorder from within.

That is a very particular set of skills, and the more that we have tended to define the task of the pastor as being that of the preacher—the person who is just communicating biblical truth in that context—I think we have missed out a lot of what it involves. It is one of the reasons why we struggle to understand some of the biblical teaching about who should and should not be a pastor—the qualifications, these sorts of things. And the life of the church is so often disordered because we do not have a clear sense of what this calling is supposed to involve.

Theological understanding can be exercised in a number of different quarters within the church, and the idea that the sole organ of theological understanding within the church is that of the pastorate is a limiting one. Obviously, the pastor is the person who is setting the foundations of truth and creating the most basic and fundamental framework of teaching for the church—the authoritative teaching that guides its understanding—but the pastor should ideally be operating within a broader body of teaching and practice of teaching within the life of the church.

The pastor, for instance, is one who has a task of ruling, of exercising authority, and the person who exercises authority is not necessarily the person who just has teaching ability. There are other things involved in that: there is an ability to work with people and there is an ability to use the counsel of others to exercise good judgment and make decisions—to lead. So, for instance, when we think about kings and rulers of nations, they do not act alone. They do not have to have all this knowledge of political theory and other things in their own minds. It is helpful to have some, but they should surround themselves with good advisors who can counsel them and who can give them direction. And, in the same way, I think a good pastor is doing a different thing from the task of the gifted theologian.

What we really need is for those two figures to work in concert with each other, so that the one informs the other. A theologian should be ordered towards the health of the church and should be doing their work for the sake of facilitating pastors in what they are doing. The theologian who is merely doing their task for their own sake, or for the service of some abstract understanding of God—they are missing the point. Their task is to equip pastors and others in *their* tasks. They are supposed to be counselors and advisors that enable the pastor to make wise decisions. In the same way, having elders within the church and around the pastor is an important thing. Often the pastor will be a younger person than the elders, and the elders around the pastor will equip the pastor to act prudently, and the pastor will enable the elders to rule forcefully and effectively.

There is a relationship between authority and power in these sorts of situations, a relationship that exists paradigmatically as the father-son relationship, in which the father exercises his authority through the son, who in turn renders effective what the father authorizes. And I am not using that with a capital “F” and “S” here; it is more of a general thing within Scripture and elsewhere that the father-son relationship represents this sort of dynamic.

Getting back to the subject of theologians and pastors: there has been a lot said about the pastor-theologian and the bringing together of those two disciplines. I’ve been very appreciative of a lot that’s been said on this. The Center for Pastor Theologians are doing some really great work on this sort of thing, and we have [discussed this previously on the Mere Fidelity podcast](https://mereorthodoxy.com/mere-fidelity-the-pastor-theologian/). What I think we need to recognize is that, although it is desirable to have a communication between these two disciplines, so that a good pastor will be someone who is deeply interested in and curious about theology (in the same way as a good ruler will think about political theory and political philosophy, history, etc.), no one is going to be able to master these two things together. You will always lean more towards one or the other, and there will always be a certain set of gifts that are more pronounced in one calling than in the other. I do not believe that I am called to be a pastor. I do believe that I am able to serve as a theologian who equips pastors, and that is a different sort of thing. I do not believe that the gifts that I have are the gifts that are best situated within the pastoral office, yet there are people I know who are not gifted theologians but are incredibly gifted as pastors. They are able to lead a congregation wisely, to take charge of the overseeing of people’s souls and their spiritual well-being, to make that their concern, and to speak truthfully and forcefully into situations that need that truth.

It is interesting to look through the Old Testament and the different sorts of people that God chooses for different tasks. Yoram Hazony’s discussion of this in [*The Philosophy of Hebrew Scripture*](https://amzn.to/2FuMgK1)is superb. He talks about the way that we see contrasts between the different sons of Jacob: Joseph is a very gifted administrator, but someone who is very much in danger of just serving the status quo, even if that status quo is not a good one. Levi is a person characterized by zeal, the zeal that leads to the slaying of 3,000 brethren when they practice idolatry with the golden calf, or the zeal of Phinehas, who runs a spear through the man and the woman committing fornication and ends the plague. It can also be associated with the misguided zealotry of Levi with Simeon when they attack the people of Shechem. So, we see the different traits that are at play here. Judah is also, as Yoram Hazony describes, someone who is set apart for kingship, and he actually has the kingdom, rather than Joseph and his descendants. It is interesting that Joseph and his descendants, who are associated with very gifted administration, are not the ones who are supposed to be king. Instead, it is the descendants of Judah, who comes out pretty poorly within many parts of the book of Genesis but yet repents—he is the person who set apart for the kingdom, and that is interesting.

In the same way, the treatment in Scripture of different offices within the church and the different callings within the life of the people of God is following a similar recognition of different gifts and how they interact with each other. There are some people who are the Josephs of the church—very gifted in administration but not so good at leading the church in a way that is faithful, and repenting when that is necessary. There are other people who are like Judah, who are good as kings and as those who lead the people, who are faithful, and who repent when they need to repent. And so we see that the story of David contrasts with the story of Saul in certain respects on this front. David is a person who is characterized by many sins but also by true repentance. Likewise, when we think about the character of Levi, we see that Levi is set apart for the priesthood because his zeal makes a big difference there. The zeal that leads him to kill many people when they break the law is a zeal that enables him to guard the faithfulness of the people of God and uphold their holiness.

The office of the pastorate is very much one that is associated with the work of Levi. It is an office that maintains the holiness of the church, that oversees the house of God, that ensures that no unrighteous way of life starts to take root, that no bitterness takes seed. This requires a set of gifts and character strengths that are not found in many people. It requires a certain strength of will and a certain ability to stand against the crowd—a zeal. It requires traits that we see within many of the great leaders of the people of God, traits that are expressed in poor ways but also in righteous ways. The same zeal that led Paul to persecute the church and to seek to kill his people is the same zeal that we see God harnessing for his ministry. The same zeal that led Levi to kill the people who were associated with the seduction of Dinah is used for the service of God’s holiness later on with the Levites.

This is something that I think is very important when we are talking about these callings within the people of God. The theologian, who may be a very gifted administrator or counselor, is not necessarily a gifted ruler or priest or someone who oversees, looks after, and shepherds the people of God. We see a similar thing in the story of Moses. This zeal that leads him to kill the Egyptian is the same zeal that helps him to lead the people of God. The shepherd’s staff, the rod that he uses to judge Egypt is the same shepherd’s rod that he uses to drive away the shepherds from the well where he meets the daughters of Jethro.

Putting all these things together, I think that preaching ability, love for people, management skills, and theological acumen are not enough to make a good pastor. A good pastor requires something more than that. All of those skills are helpful and they can serve the pastor, but ultimately the pastor is the guardian of the flock. He is a shepherd, and he is the one who has to protect the people. This requires a very specific set of abilities and skills. It requires someone who can exercise authority effectively, someone who can exercise zealous authority, someone who is well-counseled and well-guided, and someone who listens to the elders, but also someone who is able to lead in a way that is effective, who can draw the lines when they need to be drawn to protect the people from outside threats, and who can guard them from unfaithfulness within.