

Why Non-Pastors Should Study the Pastoral Epistles

February 1, 2019

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This Sunday our church begins a new series in the book of 1 Timothy. In six chapters, 1 Timothy contains a great deal of instruction about the gospel, false teaching, men and women, life together in the church, and how to recognize godly leaders.

1 Timothy is often grouped with two other Epistles— 2 Timothy and Titus. Together these three letters are known as the “Pastoral Epistles.” They are written to two of Paul’s sons in the faith (1 Tim 1:2; 2 Tim 1:2; Titus 1:4), ministers of the gospel sent by Paul to Ephesus and Crete for the purpose of building up those churches. As a matter of fact, Timothy and Titus are not so much pastors themselves but envoys sent out by Paul to confront error (1 Tim 1:3-7), preach sound doctrine (2 Tim 1:13; Titus 2:1, 15), further the faith of God’s elect (Titus 1:2), and give health and life to the household of God (1 Tim 3:14-16).

From this synopsis, one might get the impression the Pastoral Epistles are only for pastors, or at least for those working in the ministry. One might conclude they have little relevance for the stay-at-home mom or the data analyst. Such a conclusion would be premature, for they actually have great application for all Christians. And what follows are five reasons why every Christian should read them, study them, and apply them.

Five Reasons Why Non-Pastors Should Read the Pastoral Epistles

First, the content in these letters pertains to the life of the church, more than pastoral ministry.

While the Pastoral Epistles contain sections describing the qualification of elders (1 Tim 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9) and deacons (1 Tim 3:8-13), and other sections pertain to teaching sound doctrine and rebuking error (1 Tim 1:3-7; 2 Tim 2:24-26; Titus 1:9-15), the majority of Paul’s letters to Timothy and Titus concern life in the household of God. Paul writes “I am writing these things to you so that . . . you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of truth” (1 Tim 3:14-15). Indeed, if God inspired Paul to write letters concerning how the church ought to behave and believe—the next verse (3:16) recounts an early church creed—then all Christians need to know what God says in Pastoral Epistles. In fact, one of the key words in 1 Timothy is “household.” The letter has much to say about God’s house and our homes.

Second, it is vital that church members understand what a pastor is called to do.

Many conflicts arise in churches because of competing visions of the pastoral office. Many are the models of worldly leadership that are imported into the church, and yet going back to Jesus himself (see Mark 10:42–45), the models of the world are inadequate for God’s work. Especially today, where personality trumps character, the Pastoral Epistles give us the needed reminder God’s leaders are qualified on the basis of their character (2 Tim 2:24–26) and faithfulness to the truth (2 Tim 2:15). As ambassadors of King Jesus, they are called to preach the Word, disciple, and guard the flock from error (2 Tim 2:2; 4:2; Titus 2:1–8). Executive experience and entrepreneurial creativity are nice, but not necessary for pastoral ministry. In a world of competing leadership models, the Pastoral Epistles tell us that in the church doctrine, discipleship, and spiritual devotion are of greatest concern.

Third, while some men are called to become elders (Titus 1:5), and others are called to vocational ministry (1 Tim 5:17), all men and women are called to serve God.

What’s striking about the qualifications for church leadership is how ordinary they are. In a mature and growing church there should be little difference between the character of the “clergy” and “laity.” The Protestant Reformation sought to end such a division. It is the Catholic Church that divides between priests and parishioners. Protestants, by contrast, believe all men and women are priests (1 Pet 2:5, 9) and that God has given the church pastor-teachers to “equip the saints for the work of service” (Eph 4:11–12).

Why read the Pastoral Epistles? So that every Spirit-endowed, spiritually-gifted saint can grow in godliness and fruitful service. Pastors are not hired to do the work; they are commissioned to catalyze the work with the Word of God and prayer. Like a spiritual older brothers—not like those who rub your face in the dirt—they are to model the kind of godliness that should be ubiquitous in the whole church. Moreover, they are given to the church to help younger (and older) members of the church fulfill their various ministries.

Fourth, every believer *functions* as a shepherd, a teacher, and a pastor.

Though the Pastoral Epistles restrict the office of pastor to men (1 Tim 2:11–15; 3:1–7), every godly mother functions *pastorally*. When she prays for, prays with, and instructs her children in the things of God, she is “pastoring” them. Likewise, every Christian is called to be a light in their school or workplace. Accordingly, the growing disciple of Christ will want and need to develop pastoral skills—a growing understanding of God’s word (1 Tim 2:15; 3:15), a heart to pray for others (1 Tim 2:1–7), a competence to speak the truth in love, and ability to share Christ with others (2 Tim 4:2). The church that relegates pastoral ministry to the pastor (or pastors) will quickly lose effectiveness. God’s design is for pastors to model the faith, teach the faith, and encourage the faith in others (2 Tim 2:2). The Pastoral Epistles help equip all Christians to fulfill their various callings.

Fifth, the Pastoral Epistles help call out the called.

If God is building his church, one component piece of that living edifice is a group of men who will shepherd the flock. While God uses all kinds of people to build his church, the office of pastor-elder-overseer (synonymous terms for the same office) will always be a part of God’s growing church. Where do these men come from? They arise from within the church and are recognized by the church. It is the church—not the seminary—that has the responsibility to train, test, and affirm ministers of the gospel. At the same time, God also raises up bi-vocational elders—men who are not called to full-time ministry but whose godly living, Biblical knowledge, and inward desire qualifies them to shepherd the flock (1 Tim 3:1–7; Titus 1:5–9).

Therefore, since it is the church that recognizes and sends out ministers, the church must be familiar with the teaching of the Pastoral Epistles.

Take Up The Pastoral Epistles and Read

In the end, the Pastoral Epistles are not the final word on church, church leadership, or church ministry. But it would be folly to pursue ministry without a serious consideration of their teachings. Therefore, give yourself to the Pastoral Epistles and pray for God's church to flourish.

Sunday we begin in 1 Timothy. So join with us and this powerful book. Let's pray for God's gospel to build his family of faith in our church and beyond.

Soli Deo Gloria, ds