

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

Book Critique: John MacArthur

Submitted to Dr. Ben Gutierrez, in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the completion of the course

201520 Spring 2015 LEAD 635-B03 LUO

Theology of Pastoral Ministry

by

Matthew McNutt

March 1, 2015

Bibliographical Entry

MacArthur, John F. *Pastoral Ministry: How to Shepherd Biblically*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, Inc, 2005.

Summary

“Pastoral Ministry: How to Shepherd Biblically” is MacArthur’s, and the faculty at the Master’s Seminary’s description of what it is to be a pastor. Through a series of essays connected together through MacArthur’s outline and writing, they have put together a resource that systematically works its way through the pastoral role as they see it in scripture.

MacArthur divides the book into four sections, contributing to each of the sections as well as including chapters from his fellow faculty. The first section is titled Biblical Perspectives, which looks at pastoral ministry in general, as well as through the lens of history and the Bible. The second section is titled Preparatory Perspectives, and works its way through the process of becoming a pastor, both in what type of man he needs to be, as well as the training and ordination.

The third section is labeled Personal Perspectives, which focuses on the pastor himself; his home, his prayer life, how he studies and his heart for those around him. The largest section is the fourth and final section, titled Pastoral Perspectives, which really gets into the practicalities of pastoral ministry now that the foundational issues have been established in the previous three sections. In this section MacArthur and the contributors work their way through the primary responsibilities of the pastor, what they interpret the Bible to say those look like in the American church, as well as warnings against where they have seen churches deviate or miss the mark.

There are two underlying themes throughout the four sections and 22 chapters that make up this book; the first is in regards to what kind of man the pastor is called to be. This is covered in the chapters that describe his qualifications, his heart, his relationship with God, and so on. The second is in regards to what the pastor is called to do. These are the chapters that talk about the hows and the practicalities of ministry, the ways in which a pastor acts on his calling with regards to the ministry and the church.

Ultimately, the book could even be summed up with one core thought that shapes all the rest; that the pastorate is a high calling not to be taken lightly. That it is to be “a redemptively centered, God-focused, biblically defined, and scripturally prioritized ministry.” (4)

Critique

MacArthur and his faculty peers have set out to create a resource that lays out the fundamentals of what it is to be a pastor. In fact, their stated goal is to “encourage and instruct ... the next generation of pastors, missionaries, and teachers to provide the kind of shepherd leadership for the church that God’s Word requires.” (vii) In large part, they succeed in forming an overview of pastoral ministry, the requirements that go in to it, and the practical realities in following through with it. Of course, as a single volume, it cannot cover every detail and possible scenario, but it does provide a tremendous overview of the requirements and realities of pastoral ministry for the reader.

Their strict adherence to scripture and descriptions of ministry found in the Bible as their starting point for describing how a pastor is to be and what they are to do provides both a focused and solid approach to ministry. For MacArthur, the most important part of a pastor’s role is the preaching of the word. “Among the varied responsibilities assigned to a pastor, that of

preaching stands head and shoulders above the rest in importance.” (204) As such, throughout the book – not just the chapter on preaching – it is a reoccurring theme, with both the personal aspects of ministry as well as the practical realities playing a role in shaping the pastor to be an effective preacher. As such, MacArthur gives invaluable insight into the process, motivations, and God’s heart for preaching in his guidance on the topic.

There are two weaknesses that come out in the examination of the book. A reoccurring theme warning against the impending implosion of the American church comes across as creating fear more than what is necessary. In one instance, one of the authors in building his case for the failure of the American church culminated his thoughts by saying, “This eventually will create a virtually unbreakable cause-and-effect cycle that will render the American church impotent and condemned by Christ.” (10) Is the God who was able to preserve His church through the Roman Empire’s persecution, the dark ages, the centuries of illiteracy and misguided works focus, who has seen the church flourish in nations that outlaw it – is that God really unable to preserve His church in America? Are the failures and weaknesses of the church here finally the challenge too much for Him? Yes, there is much to be concerned about and much to address – but overstating the potential outcome creates a motivation from fear, not love of God and His church, and subtly weakens the view of God’s power and sovereignty, and His proven ability to preserve His church through the centuries.

A second weakness is the amount of criticism for churches and leaders who do not share MacArthur’s approach. I am far more interested in reading more about MacArthur and his fellow author’s wisdom on applying the scriptures to pastoral ministry than the frequent condemnations of those who do it incorrectly in their opinion. Yes, warnings are important. But there were times where it became overbearing. For example, in the chapter on worship, it felt like there was more

focus on those they felt were doing it wrong than in rejoicing in how they pursue worship. MacArthur was absolutely correct in his definition of worship; “God has designed worship to be honor and adoration directed to Himself. It has outward, inward, and upward dimensions and touches every area of a Christian’s life ...” (189) Some of his critiques seem to have transitioned from defending a Biblical style of worship, however, to labeling his personal preference as the right style.

Having said that, in spite of those weaknesses, the volume is a powerful collection of essays providing tremendous insight into pastoral ministry. The strength of that wisdom outweighs the criticisms above.

Evaluation

“Pastoral Ministry: How to Shepherd Biblically” is a critical resource for the student preparing for ministry as well as the veteran pastor. For both it is a powerful reminder and teaching on the high calling of pastoral ministry and the critical need to take it seriously for God’s glory and kingdom.

It is well written and easy to read. While prepared on the academic level, and a great textbook for the pastoral student, it is written in a way that is accessible enough for lay leaders and congregation members to be able to read and grow in their understanding of pastoral ministry as well.

Like many of us his works and resources, MacArthur has put together another solid work well worth the reader’s time and a place on their bookshelf. For the pastor and student of ministry, it is a critical overview and a must read. Over the decades MacArthur has proven

himself to be amongst a short list of leaders and writers that have contributed enormously in the instruction of those called to ministry. While this may not be his greatest work, it is certainly one that will be relevant for many years to come.