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# The Unnecessary Pastor: Rediscovering the Call

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much a reflection of Jewish custom as it was of waiting for the Lord's return. He contrasts the "Cathedral Office" (prayers offered twice daily in the parish church for the world) with that of the desert fathers (who prayed ceaselessly for their own salvation), and sees a synthesis in the monastic office (prayers five times daily, for world and self). In speculating on the origins of the Christian Sunday, he goes against much scholarly opinion in debunking the idea of Sunday as a replacement for the Jewish Sabbath.

Bradshaw's writing is concise and accurate. He provides copious quotes from the early Church Fathers and other documents. This is cumbersome, but it reminds us that this is our source material for our knowledge of early Christian worship, rather than speculation on customs and practices at the time of the reformation. At times Bradshaw is quite revisionist, especially in his discussion of initiation. He is sensitive to the development of infant baptism, but makes no absolute theological claims for this.

Is this a suitable introduction to early Christian worship? Perhaps so, but Bradshaw presents nothing transparently, and does not back away from the difficult issues of liturgical history. This results in many tentative conclusions, and illustrates the complexity of his subject.

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### **The Unnecessary Pastor: Rediscovering The Call**

Marva Dawn and Eugene Peterson  
Vancouver BC: Regent College Publishing 2000  
256 pages, \$22.99 Softcover

At the opening of the clergy study conference, the pastoral leader for the day included this petition in her prayers: "Gracious and loving God, we live in a competitive world that measures worth and fulfillment far too readily by success and numbers and by a daybook crammed with appointments upon appointments. Help us, O God, by

the power of the Holy Spirit, not to practice or evaluate ministry by these worldly standards; rather enable us to see you calling us to a faithfulness to the gospel of Jesus Christ. In Jesus' Name. Amen."

*The Unnecessary Pastor* is written precisely to assist pastors and laity fulfill the wishes of the prayer. In this exciting and engaging text, two renowned teachers, ministers and authors – Marva Dawn and Eugene Peterson – help pastors recover their gospel vocation and identify and clarify their vision of Christian leadership. "Pastors are in charge of keeping the distinction between the world's lies and gospel's truth clear. Not only pastors, of course – every baptized Christian is part of this – but pastors are placed in a strategic, counter cultural position." (2) The authors go on to state: "The purpose of this book... is to reconnect pastors with the authoritative biblical and theological texts that train us as counter cultural servants of Jesus Christ." (2)

In his chapters, Peterson explores 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus the Pastoral Epistles drawing from them insights for living counter culturally and searching scriptural images for pastoral identity. In alternating chapters, Dawn turns to Ephesians for instructions to persons and churches seeking to live faithfully against societal trends and tides. In many respects, Timothy, Titus and Paul – "unnecessary pastors" – have much to offer in helping us today understand better what it means to be faithful not necessarily successful in ministry.

It is a courageous claim to make: Pastors are unnecessary. It is indeed courageous to say this at a time when practically every denomination is experiencing a shortage of pastors. To say nothing of seminaries and theological schools desiring an increase in candidates for ordained and commissioned ministries. Yet, I believe that Dawn and Peterson are correct in their claims.

Pastors are "unnecessary" though not in the sense of being worthless or irrelevant or shiftless. Dawn and Peterson, using the counter cultural benchmarks of the gospel, note that pastors are unnecessary in at least three ways: 1) "We are unnecessary to what the *culture* presumes is important: as paragons of goodness and niceness. 2) "We are also unnecessary to what *we ourselves* feel is essential: as the linchpin holding a congregation together, and 3) "And we are unnecessary to what *congregations* insist that we must do and be: as the experts who help them stay ahead of the competition." Say the authors: "It is our conviction that only when

we realize how unnecessary we are will we be free to do the ‘one thing needful’ – the gospel necessity laid upon the glorious but battered life of the pastor” (2-4).

Dawn and Peterson call for a paradigm shift in how congregations and pastors regard their relationships with one another. “People like to make their pastoral leaders feel necessary so that they can cop out of their responsibilities in the ‘priesthood of all believers’. If we rediscover our pastoral call, however, we know that we are merely equippers, prodders, encouragers and promoters of all the people so that each one fulfills his or her vocation in the Church. Then no one is any more ‘necessary’ than any others, but all are set free to ‘be Church’, to live in a way corresponding to the priesthood to which each Christian has been called.” (228)

In short, it is not a matter of being ‘necessary’ or not; it’s a matter of being in ministry together – of being in mutual ministry!

This is a well-written, carefully planned and reflective practical book. Both authors share helpful insights from their own journeys in ministry. Their in-depth explorations of the selected scriptures, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus and Ephesians, provide a lot of ‘food for thought’ not only of scriptural precedents but also of ministry in these postmodern times.

Having used this text as required reading in one of the courses I teach in theological reflection, and noted the healthy engagement students encountered with the text, I highly recommend that this book be read by seminarians. I also believe that it is of tremendous assistance to pastors and laity already in ministry whether in congregational settings or elsewhere.

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