

SEMINARY EDUCATION

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I have been asked to write about the nature of training men for ministry in the Reformed churches. The topic is important because we take it for granted and in the minds of many, the future of traditional, campus-based schools is up for grabs.

There is one other reason why this topic is very important. We live in a time of knowledge overload, a time when many people in their fields are highly skilled and educated, a time of many more advanced degrees above the baccalaureate level such as MBAs, Masters, and Ph.Ds. We come out of a tradition in which our ministers were normally the best educated of anybody in the culture, but today we have the worst generation of Presbyterian ministers in the history of American Presbyterianism. All you have to do is attend the typical Presbytery meeting or listen to the average preacher to see what I mean.

So you see the issue is important. I am involved in theological education at the seminary level because I believe that to a large degree the future of the Reformed seminary is the future of the Reformed church. If we are to see a blessing from God, there are certain things that we ought to be doing and so it is very important.

I do not have space in this article to discuss the necessity of a well-trained ministry. The Bible clearly establishes the importance of ministerial training. For some examples look at 1 Timothy 4:11-16 and 2 Timothy 2:1,2,15.¹

We need to begin with the biblical and historical background for ministerial training. Why do we use seminaries? Is there a biblical base for doing so? How did the whole idea of seminaries develop? Look up seminary in the encyclopedia and do you know what it is going to tell you? The seminary is a place basically where Roman Catholic priests are trained for the priesthood. So how in the world did seminaries develop in the Protestant tradition and why do we use them?

Let's begin to answer our questions with an overview of the history of the training of ministers. When did this training begin? Apparently theological training schools were begun under Samuel. We find the first mention of the group or the company of the prophets in I Samuel 10:5,10 (see also 1 Samuel 19:19,20). 1 Kings 20:35; 2 Kings 2:3,5,15; 4:1,38; 5:22; 6:1 refer to the men involved as "son of the prophets." Under Samuel, the prophetic office developed in Israel. Men studied in these schools and prepared to serve as prophets. The fact that most prophets came from these schools is seen further in Amos' claim that he was not a prophet. When he was rebuked by Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, for prophesying at Bethel, Amos responded, "I am not a prophet, nor am I the son of a prophet; for I am a herdsman and a grower of sycamore figs" (Amos 7:14 NASB). Amos is saying, "I am not a regular prophet nor have I been trained at the school of the prophets." The fact that he would emphasize this suggests that he was the exception and not the rule. God called Amos in an extraordinary way, but normally the prophets came from the schools.

The prophetic schools began in the days of Samuel and continued through the divided kingdom. These schools of prophets would have been similar to our theological schools. The men probably would have studied the law of God, since part of the prophetic office was to teach the law and interpret it in the context of the covenant and theocratic life of their day. So they would have been trained in the Scriptures and the interpretation of the Scriptures. Their training would have included history and historical writing, since they were the historians of the Old Covenant church (2 Chron. 12:15; 20:34 cf. 19:2). The training evidentially included musical and poetical training, as they made use of musical instruments and songs in their ministry. They also employed elaborate literary structure, suggesting poetical training.

¹ See R.L. Dabney. *Discussions* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1982) vol.2, pp. 651ff. and William Cunningham. *An Introduction to Theological Studies* (Greenville, SC: A Press, 1994).

Now it is interesting to note that when a prophet preached or wrote he enjoyed the special work of the Holy Spirit. The prophets wrote many books of the Old Testament. In addition to the books bearing their names, they wrote the history books of Samuel, Kings and Chronicles. Since they had the Holy Spirit, why did they need to go to school? God used prepared men, men who studied for their task. We conclude, therefore, that the “school of the prophets” was basically an Old Covenant Seminary.

In the New Testament we continue to find an emphasis on training. Christ chose the twelve that they might be with him (Mark 3:14). Paul himself spent three years in the desert in preparation (Gal. 1:17,18); Paul taught his young assistants and commanded Timothy to do the same (2 Tim. 2:1,2).

Note as well that within the “schools of the prophets” mentoring and discipleship played a very important role in the development of these men. God used mentoring relationships throughout biblical history to train men for ministry. Just consider Moses and Joshua; Elijah and Elisha; Christ and the twelve; Paul and his young men who traveled with Him. The concept of mentoring shows why those studying in the school of the prophets are called the “sons of the prophets.” The prophets-in-training were in a father-son relationship with their teachers. Such relationships are essential to spiritual and ministerial formation and should be practiced in the church: pastors with elders, elders with other men in the church, women with other women in the church, parents with our children. One of our particular goals at Greenville Seminary is to keep the student body at 100 so that we will never lose the mentoring relationship. We recognize that we cannot accomplish our goals only in the classroom. Mentoring relationships must be developed and sustained.

Early on the post-apostolic church manifested a commitment to ministerial training. The most famous, early school was in Alexandria where Clement of Alexandria began the Catechetical School. Initially the purpose of the school was to train new converts. Eventually they began to train men for the ministry, and the Catechetical School of Alexandria became a theological center. Unfortunately, a theological center with a deviant foundation that caused a great deal of damage because of its allegorical approach of Scriptures and compromise with Greek philosophy. That school, to a great degree, shaped the direction of the church in the middle ages. Again we are reminded of the importance of theological education and the danger the seminary can be to the church. You must keep in mind that most error in a denomination comes from the place where she gets her ministers. All of our seminaries and educational institutions must be accountable to the churches otherwise they will eventually subvert the church.

Hardly a day passes that I do not think about the fact that no Christian institution of learning has ever remained faithful to God, none even as long as Princeton. This fact is sobering. A number of reasons may be offered, but the two most important are seeking academic acclaim and failing to teach from an experimental point of view — with love for God so that we do not turn our subject matter into abstractions. We must worship as we study, teach, and learn. Pray for us that we will be faithful, humble, and worshiping teachers.

In the Middle Ages, the educational level of the priests was abysmal, but the monasteries kept learning alive. The monks were, for the most part, better educated than the priests were. The monastic school tradition developed in Jerome’s Monastery School in Palestine and Cassiodorus’ Monastery School in Italy. Charlemagne and later Alfred the Great sponsored education reforms. Eventually schools developed around some of the great Cathedrals. In the twelfth century, the monastic schools and the cathedral schools coalesced into Universities. The European universities gave rise to the development of scholasticism and laid the foundation for the revival of learning called the Renaissance. But it was really the Reformation that captured the Universities and used them to prepare men for the ministry. Almost to a man, the reformers were university men and they all placed a great emphasis on education.

With the Reformation came a whole system of Protestant universities following the pattern of Wittenberg. Initially the University of Wittenberg was the most significant powerhouse of the Reformation as men came from all over Europe to study with Luther and Melancthon. In Geneva, one of Calvin’s life long goals was to establish the Academy. Finally in 1559, five years before he died, he was able to see the Academy established. Its primary purpose was to train men for the ministry.

The Reformers emphasized Greek and Hebrew in their teaching. The commitment to study the Scriptures in the languages of the Scripture was essential to the Reformation. The commitment to studying the Bible in the original languages is illustrated in Zwingli's method in Zurich. When he began his ministry he entered the pulpit with his Hebrew and Greek Bible and began to expound the Scriptures. Today many ministers and seminaries disdain the possibility of a minister finishing seminary really knowing Greek and Hebrew. It was the knowledge of Greek and Hebrew that, in great part, the Spirit used to give birth to the Reformation. Let me give a very simple illustration: when Jerome translated the Latin Vulgate, he translated the word "metanoeo," which means "repentance" with a Latin idiom that meant "do penance". And thus for centuries the church based its doctrine of penance on this faulty translation. It was only as men began to read the New Testament in Greek did they properly understand the biblical concept was repentance and not penance. We are almost as bad off today when faulty English translations go unchallenged and the Bible study notes are full of error. With respect to Greek and Hebrew, we have an illiterate ministry. While the *Westminster Confession of Faith* insists that "in all controversies of religion, the Church is finally to appeal unto them (original languages of the Bible)" (WCF 1.8). The Reformation understood this and so they instructed men then in the languages as well as in Biblical and Systematic Theology.

The Reformation also brought a shift in the instruction of Homiletics (the study of preaching). Up to the time of the Reformation, Homiletics had been taught, as a subset of classical rhetoric and Aristotelian logic. This approach destroyed preaching. With the Reformation, men began to understand the importance of preaching and that it should be taught distinct from rhetoric and logic (not to say that these subjects are unimportant). The Reformers insisted that Homiletics be taught as a separate subject, according to its Biblically defined purposes and scriptural principles. On the Continent a man named Hyperius wrote a Homiletics textbook that revolutionized preaching. While in England, William Perkins wrote a book to train English preachers how to preach.

As you understand history, you realize that there is nothing new under the sun. Today we find ourselves with the pre-reformation problem of teaching preaching as a subset, not of rhetoric, but of communication theory. Today in many seminaries communication theory has usurped the role of classical homiletics. Though rhetoric and communication theory are helpful, we must teach homiletics as a distinct discipline.

For the most part the training of ministers was carried on through the universities through the eighteenth century. The Puritans made great use of Cambridge and Oxford to train young ministers, but they also used the concept of mentoring. Prospective ministers went to live with seasoned pastors to develop their pastoral skills.

When the Puritans came to New England, they brought this commitment to theological education. John Harvard gave the funds to establish Harvard so that the colony would have a well-trained ministry. Fifty-two percent of the seventeenth-century Harvard graduates became ministers. When Harvard began to slip, Yale was formed. When Yale began to slip, Princeton developed. In fact, all but one of the Ivy League schools started as Christian schools. Dartmouth was started to train missionaries to send them overseas. William and Mary began for the propagation of the Gospel. This was the commitment that our reformed forefathers — Congregational, Anglican, and Presbyterian — brought to our country. American Presbyterianism carried on this tradition in the nineteenth-century.

Having laid the biblical and historical foundation for ministerial training, I want to focus on the particular method that developed in America. As I mentioned we inherited the university system of training men for the ministry. But other systems had developed as well. In England the non-conformists developed divinity halls to train ministers, while in Scotland the parsonage system, in which a young man would attach himself to a mature minister to study and prepare, was utilized.

In America, in addition to the University system, some began to implement the parsonage approach to ministerial education. Sometimes it would be less formally organized; a young man would go and live with a minister to learn informally from him through reading and joining in pastoral labors. Oftentimes though, the arrangement was more formal, and a young man would attach himself to a pastor to

read divinity. There would be a set curriculum. The candidate would read and discuss with his mentor and thus prepare for the ministry.

The parsonage system though was very inefficient for a country that was experiencing rapid growth. A more efficient system was needed to produce a sufficient number of trained ministers to keep up with the growth of our country. So out of the parsonage system the Academy developed. In the Academy (the most famous being the Log College) a group of students would live with and study under a minister. But the need remained to train a larger number of men; so in the late eighteenth-century, the forerunner of seminaries developed. Three schools began: The Dutch Reformed developed one in New York; a group of Associated Presbyterians developed one in Geneva, Pennsylvania; and Associate Reformed Church developed one in New York. Each of these schools had one faculty member, a small library, and very few students. A number of people saw the need for a well-endowed school that had more than one faculty member and a good library. And so in 1808, the Congregationalists in New England developed Andover Theological Seminary in Connecticut. Before they started, they had amassed a large library and endowment. They began with three full-time faculty members. This school was the first seminary. Three years later, in 1811, the Presbyterians started Princeton Theological Seminary.² And in 1812, the Reformed Church in America started New Brunswick Theological Seminary. Remarkably, in a five year span three seminaries were begun in the Northeast and in fifty years sixty seminaries had been started in America. These schools laid the foundation for the Protestant seminary education in America, which system is now the predominate way men prepare for the ministry. Westminster Seminary basically was formed on the plan of old Princeton. When Dr. Morton Smith started Reformed Seminary and later Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, he used the plan of old Princeton. In a sense Greenville Seminary is a grandchild of old Princeton.

Now the exciting thing today is that we can combine the best of seminary tradition with mentoring. Not only do faculty members mentor students, but also our students must work in local churches.

Moreover, with the advent of distance education, we are seeing the rise of parsonage and presbytery-centered training. Men may now do part of their seminary education in their local churches, taking courses by audio and videotapes, CDs, and on the Internet. At Greenville Seminary we are attempting to work with both local sessions and presbyteries to train men for the ministry. We are using a blend of taped and digitally recorded courses, live courses mediated by computer, local teaching, and men attending classes on campus for a minimum of twenty-four semester hours.

With respect to distance education, we need to keep two cautions in mind. First, private, non-social learning is not the best way to train men for the ministry. The classroom environment is essential for the development of well-balanced ministers. Second, we need to use the Internet with great caution. I trust we have learned our lessons from the television that the medium does shape the message. The Internet is probably not the best place for serious intellectual pursuits.

We live in a day with amazing resources. We need to pray that God will raise up godly men and that our seminaries will labor to provide the churches with an academic, confessional, and practical program for ministerial training. Why should we settle for less? Why should the people in the pew settle for less when our forefathers who lived in a less educated age with fewer resources had a ministry so superior? But as long as the church settles for less, as long as the church settles for mediocre preaching, as long as the church settles for men that cannot carry on a logical conversation, she will have a poorly educated ministry. On the other hand, if the church is guilty of wanting her ears tickled and not wanting doctrine taught and sin exposed, she is going to get a ministry that will meet her expectations.

² For an excellent study on Princeton see David B. Calhoun. *Princeton Seminary*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1994).

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