

A Young Minister Looks At Biblical Studies

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In our generation the theological curriculum of our seminaries has been under thoughtful scrutiny by those to whom is entrusted the training of the pastors and leaders of the Church. This is due considerably to the enlarged concept of the ministry and a better understanding of the human personality in all its ramifications. It may be, at the same time, a tacit admission that the curriculum of the previous generation had either failed to prepare the student for his high calling, or that it had failed to guide him so that he might "communicate" to laymen the divine message given to the Church.

Every young minister looks back and tries to evaluate his own seminary training. In the few years since completing graduate work in the New Testament I have looked back repeatedly on the type of training I received. I think of what I have seen in seminary catalogues and what I have heard while talking with other ministers. No unanimous sentiment is found as to what a seminary ought to be doing. To me, however, there are several basic elements inherent in theological studies.

Let me add, parenthetically, that my observations and comments in honor of the one whom we acknowledge in this number of *The Seminarian* will be limited to the field of biblical studies.

Several fundamental propositions will be set forth as preliminary to a consideration of the seminary program. First, a long ministry presupposes a lengthy period of continuous disciplined study and preparation in depth. The typical seminary graduate is about twenty-five years old and sees ahead of him a ministry of four decades. Before he is half-way through much of the seminary curriculum of his day will be outdated and parts of it will be irrelevant. In these years he will expose (assuming his sermons are expository) thousands of biblical texts. He will read hundreds of books and articles to keep his preaching rich and spiritually uplifting. And he will spend many hours alone with the Word. For a seminary

graduate to enter the ministry uncommitted to continuous study is to enter the field of battle without armor or weapon. His seminary work, therefore, must be preparatory for this discipline.

Secondly, if a seminary program ought to be viewed as preparatory to a lifetime of study, it will be geared less to content, with a primary emphasis on materials and method. As one scans the catalogues of our seminaries, he finds the core curriculum in the area of biblical studies often limited to such courses as Introduction to the Old Testament, Old Testament History, Introduction to the New Testament, and New Testament History. If we accept the descriptive paragraphs as genuinely indicative of the nature of these courses, far too often we find them scanning the Scriptures, giving the background, book by book, as well as surveying the history of the people of God. This is material that could easily be obtained by reading through any one of a number of text books. Wherein lies the preparation for a lifetime of study? Aside from the natural observation that knowledge builds on knowledge, one finds that these courses may be providing little in the way of material--and even less in methodology--which will equip the seminarian to be a student in the years to come. The writer does not propose that such instruction should be dropped, but rather that another area of instruction precede it.

A third proposition is the awareness that no seminary is able to turn out scholars. Its task is to lay the groundwork so that the graduate will go on to maturity. This again underscores what has already been said about the preparatory nature of seminary studies and the emphasis on materials and methodology.

A final assumption is that a minister committed to an evangelical position must prepare himself especially in the field of biblical studies. The evangelical pastor contends for the sola scriptura of the Reformation. To prepare to do this effectively the seminary student will want to do as much as his ability and talents permit so that he will feel at home as he reads in the biblical field. His formal training will be most beneficial when it gives him the wherewithal for effective academic attainment in the years to come.

Having expressed these basic presuppositions we ought now to move forward and consider the scope of seminary training. If I were just finishing undergraduate work and were shopping

around for a theological school, and if I were idealistic enough to believe that the ideal existed, I would look first for a seminary that would provide me with a broad background on what has been written. I am speaking of bibliography. Repeatedly we find in reading book reviews that the reviewer notes that the value of the book under consideration is vitiated by the lack of a bibliographical index. Some of our biblical dictionaries and encyclopedias are valued largely for the bibliography accompanying the more important articles. The same attitude should hold true in formulating the seminary program. There is no reason to believe it impossible for a seminary in three years to acquaint a student in a firsthand way with a solid core of the most important works that have been written, say, in the last fifty years. What, for example, can we say of a seminary curriculum which enables a student to receive his B.D. without having heard of Kittel, Streeter, or Dodd? Is it enough to know that Dibelius was the progenitor of Form Criticism, or that the phrase "realized eschatology" is linked to Dodd? Should we not seek to read them? I do not pretend to believe that every student would be able to read every one of the more substantial contributions made to biblical studies.

I often think that one of my most profitable courses was a one-hour-a-week book review period. Each week a book was reviewed by a student. The review took a small part of the period. During the rest of the period a discussion centered about the author, his background and methodology, the historical setting in which he wrote, and the basic contribution of the book to the area of biblical studies. Each student prepared one review each quarter; but by the end of the year his experience in the class gave him background on thirty books. View this as a three-year project and the possibilities are far-reaching indeed. This is the type of literary background I would covet for each seminary student. One hour each week in a small group discussing books seems to me to be an ideal start in producing a literate ministry. Incidentally, one of the advantages of this approach is that it takes up comparatively little time in an already overcrowded program.

This approach also cures two maladies: first, the habit of labeling each writer according to his theological perspective when we ought to be listening to him for what he has to say and because of the problems he raises; secondly, the overwillingness to accept what others say about authors and their books.

To read such books as A. M. Hunter's *Interpreting the New Testament*, or C. F. H. Henry's *Fifty Years of Protestant Theology* is a fine start, but they give only the broad panorama to make our future reading more profitable.

One of the problems a minister faces is that of where to begin reading. So often he is not aware of issues in the study of Scripture. He wants to use his study hours effectively, and to do so he needs this literary background. With new books being produced continually it is imperative that his background should guide in the selective reading that is necessary in the busy pastorate. With background reading in such stalwarts as Dodd, Cullman, Dibelius, Barth, Streeter, Kittel, Jeremias, Black, Barrett and a host of others, the young minister will have at least the beginning of a solid foundation from which to proceed in his own private study.

I have a strong conviction that aside from the depth of his spiritual life, the one factor that determines a minister's effectiveness is what and how much he reads. If this be true, it follows that a school of theology would render invaluable service by opening up the significant books that have been written in the field of biblical studies.

A second means of preparing the young minister to progress in the study of Scripture is the study of the original languages of Scripture. In all the broad field of theological studies, no question has received as much attention as that of whether Greek and Hebrew are worth the time necessary to teach them. The pros and cons are fairly well known, and I would have little to add to them now. I would like to inject, however, a reminder that comes from the field of educational psychology, and that is the fact that much, if not most of our learning, is subconscious or unconscious learning. This principle is the justification for such things as inter-scholastic sports and the Boy Scout movement. This principle is not unrelated to the question of whether Greek and Hebrew ought to be part of the core curriculum. In wrestling with paradigms and subtleties of the subjunctive the student may be learning more than Greek. May he not be realizing the difficulties of bringing out in one language the true implications of a text in another language? May he not be learning the inadequacy of leaning on any single version or translation to the neglect of others? He may be finding--in what might otherwise appear to be a very pedantic exercise--insights into the very basic problem of communication. To this

writer it appears that so many glibly accept the idea that the meaning of Scripture is easily discernible to all who read. Perhaps this is a by-product of the Reformation, which insisted that the right to interpretation of Scripture must be in the hands of the people. But it is a misconception the minister should avoid at all costs. Exposure to the biblical languages will assist here.

No theological faculty which requires Greek and Hebrew is so naive as to believe that all, or even a majority, of their students are going to retain a working relationship with these languages. In spite of this known fact other values are clearly apparent. In the first place it must be questioned whether adequate academic standards can be maintained when the original languages are not included in a course of study. As Professor James Barr has stated so well, "...experience with students who have had no language training at all demonstrates the difficulty of maintaining academic standards in theology where the Biblical languages are regarded as optional. In comparison even with students who have gained little real mastery of Hebrew, those who have never attempted it at all may display a seriously second-hand quality in thought on the Biblical material and a dismal dependence on translations" ("The Position of Hebrew Language in Theological Education," *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin*, LV, No. 3, p. 16f.). Aside from the exceptional student who will go on to graduate school, the majority of students will remain outwardly unaffected by exposure to language study. But insights into culture, linguistic expression, and the mentality of a people abide long after a working relationship with the language has ceased. The language is then learned simply as basic background knowledge.

Furthermore, after one has lost the ability to read the Greek or Hebrew text he is still able to benefit from the use of lexicons, concordances, and word books. One professor made the comment in my presence that every perfect tense on the New Testament is a sermon in itself. But these are sermons the non-Greek student will not preach. He may be told the implications of the perfect tense, but his insights will not be as clear as will those of the student who has at some time in the past wrestled with the perfect in translation.

This point can be carried a little farther. For example, in John 1:18 we read that no one has ever seen God but that Jesus "has made Him known"--exegeseto. Here is a text over which

translators have wrestled. Monsignor Knox translates it, "has brought us a clear message." The Greek word is the word from which we get our word "exegesis." In one sense, then, Jesus is an exegesis of God. Is this what John is trying to say? If so, can one see the implications in the Incarnation itself as clearly if he has never labored over the task of exegesis. The experience of exegesis, in this example, might be the learning experience that enables us to see the implications of John's choice of words. The thought is carried farther by the writer of the book of Hebrews, who begins by saying that God spoke to the sons of men through "a son" after various other means had been used. The nature of son-ship was the ultimate means of revelation. The background of experience in exegesis becomes in itself a means of comprehending minutiae in textual exposition.

This is not the only basis for keeping the original languages in the seminary program. This position has been set forth, however, because the writer believes it is often neglected in the welter of views offered over whether the seminary graduate will ever use the knowledge he has spent so long obtaining.

The appealing factor in language study is that it is preparatory in nature, and along with a solid background in bibliography provides, in part at least, for those long years when, except for brief contacts, a minister will be away from professors and theological libraries and will necessarily plan his own long-term program of study.

In another area of my formal study a few years ago, I was often perplexed because a certain professor never finished a course. The course, at least as we students understood it, was conceived in the mind of the professor--and not till later did I realize this--the body of material was simply the basis for developing a technique for studying. We students wanted information on a body of material. The professor was attempting to inculcate method. He viewed the course as preparatory, with the hope that the method he developed would be used by his students as they continued the life-time task of studying to show themselves approved.

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In closing I would like to pay tribute to the abiding worth of the instruction which I received at the hands of the retiring

Dean of Asbury Theological Seminary, Dr. William D. Turkington. He embodied, it seems to me, the basic suggestions made in this paper, both in his personal scholarship and in his teaching methodology. His intellectual curiosity, and his ability to stimulate this in others, remains in my mind as outstandingly characteristic of his ministry as a faithful teacher.