

Faith Pulpit

What is in it for the Church?

Take heed to thyself, and unto the doctrine; continue in them: for in doing this thou shalt both save thyself, and them that hear thee” (1 Timothy 4:16).

Rarely do you meet a person who finished his education and is sorry that he did it. But how often do you meet a person who did not complete his education and sincerely wished that he had?

I sometimes hear pastors talk about how much they didn’t get in school. Some even drop these remarks from chapel platforms. They do have a point; a Bible college or a seminary is not a local church; it does not intend to be one, and it doesn’t teach the things we expect the church to teach. On the other hand, most of us could write a long article on what we didn’t get from the churches we came from.

There is a ministry for the local church, but there is also a ministry for the school. Every so often a pastor has the opportunity to get some more time in a seminary, but sometimes he gets complaints from members, as though his studies were somehow draining something away from his church. Only some members seem to realize that the church too gains from the later studies that its Pastor is able to do.

The tone is set at the top.

The local church in practice turns out pretty much to express its pastor’s character. The focal point of the church auditorium is the pulpit, the place from which he preaches the Bible. The core of the worship service is the sermon, that discourse in which he pleads and instructs from the Bible. The benefit that the members receive may at times be only their own spiritual communion with their Lord. The benefit we expect them to get is the impact of the preached Word upon their hearts. “So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God.” To a large degree, the faith of the members grows only to the extent that their preacher enables them to hear the Word.

At this point a church is pitifully dependent, even vulnerable. Some few members may be able to transcend any limitations of the preaching by meeting God daily in vital quiet time. But common observation should bear out the view that the spirituality of a church is not likely to rise above the level of the preaching it listens to. The tone is set at the top.

Therefore the church has a strong interest in the thought life of its pastor. If our church covenant binds us to seek the spiritual prosperity of the congregation, it surely binds us to pray for our pastors. It would seem that we also ought to support their study life. We don't like pride of intellect, but we surely do like sermons that cohere and that sparkle with fresh insights. But how often does a church expect great preaching at the very time that it begrudges its pastor the opportunity to sharpen his mind and warm his soul?

But does he need school?

Even for the preacher who has completed the full four years of college and the three-year Master of Divinity in seminary, there is something valuable about formal instruction. We enjoy workshops and seminars. More than just the pleasure of letting someone else work for a change, we appreciate the intellectual stimulus of another mind. True, every one of us expects to carry on his own disciplined study life. But years ago I heard a sharp electronics man remark, "When a person is self-taught, there will always be gaps." He had to be right. Self-study indeed has its values, but classes and seminars have their own values, and to the active mind, those values are surprisingly great.

However, some pulpit committees give the impression that they do not put a value on pulpit excellence; they seem to be satisfied with an undemanding ministry, be it ever so tedious. Others seem to feel that pulpit excellence is all right, so long as the pastor does not sacrifice vacation time to get more schooling. With such attitudes, probably no reasoning would have any effect. But the man himself knows that the classroom situation is refreshing, whether his people realize it or not.

What does content have to do with it?

Of all the pastors I've known who during their ministries have worked on advanced degrees, a few have mentioned using class content in their preaching. Sometimes this content comes through in chunks. For most of these men, however, they heard new insights as well as fresh data, and in these cases a hearer who had audited the course might recognize little of it in his Preacher's actual sermons. But the discerning members will probably sense a new freshness and richness in his preaching. Little wonder.

One reason for this added richness is that few pastors can maintain an absolutely disciplined study life. A cartoon not many months ago showed a pastor on his knees as the secretary walks in to say, "Oh good, you're not busy." Some emergencies seem impossible to put off, and it seems that with pastors

as with students, everything comes out of study time. It doesn't even take an emergency to pull his mind away; a long phone call, or the morning paper, or even some catalog can often do it. For this reason, the disciplined situation of a scheduled course with definite assignments has the benefit keeping his mind active. And the forced reflection of a course can translate itself into a more disciplined study life of its own.

So what does the church gain?

When a pastor furthers his education, the church profits in several ways. It profits from a more knowledgeable ministry. It profits by hearing preaching that is informed by fresh insights and richer stores of content. It profits from the preacher's greater platform confidence and a new sense that his ministry is more than a treadmill.

Unlike denominations I could name, Baptists have rarely demanded an educated ministry. Often this has worked against our best interests.

Dr. Robert Delnay

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Dr. Robert Delnay (Th.D., Grace Theological Seminary) was a distinguished theologian, educator, and author whose ministry spanned over seven decades. A graduate of Wheaton College, Dallas Theological Seminary, and Grace Theological Seminary, Dr. Delnay served in numerous leadership and teaching roles, including at Faith Baptist Bible College, where he was a beloved professor known for his commitment to expository preaching and biblical scholarship.

A prolific author, he wrote several books and articles, leaving a lasting legacy of theological insight and pastoral wisdom. Dr. Delnay's deep love for God's Word and his dedication to training the next generation of Christian leaders impacted countless students and ministries worldwide. He went home to be with Christ in 2023.