

# Faith Pulpit

## The Value of a Seminary Education

Is seminary education valuable for those entering ministry? Two verses in the epistle of Paul to the Colossians concisely describe what ministry is all about: the Word, people, and a goal. Ministry involves a capacity to work with all types of people, an ability to communicate God's Word, and a determination to labor to the point of exhaustion. An analysis of these verses teaches us that ministry demands certain qualifications, and an application of this learned truth reminds us that meeting these qualifications requires training.

Paul writes, "Whom we preach, warning every man, and teaching every man in all wisdom; that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus: Whereunto I also labour, striving according to his working, which worketh in me mightily" (Colossians 1:28, 29).

### **Ministry involves people**

Paul begins with the words, "whom we preach." Paul viewed ministry as a collaborative endeavor. Paul was not a loner. The New Testament tells us much about the members of Paul's ministry team. The book of Acts depicts Paul ministering in cooperation with people like Barnabas the encourager, John Mark the beginner, Silas the replacement, Timothy the disciple, Apollos the author, Priscilla and Aquilla the explainers, and, of course, Luke the team doctor. The Pauline epistles refer to assistants like Titus, Crescens, Tychicus, Epaphras, Epaphroditus, Trophimus, Erastus, Onesimus, Aristarchus, and Justus. Paul's vocabulary included words like fellow soldier, fellow worker, fellow prisoner, and fellow servant. Ministry, as seen in Paul's life, was a cooperative effort.

This coactive nature of ministry persists to this day. The experienced minister knows that some challenges are best faced with reassuring companions. Networking best begins before embarking into vocational ministry, and seminary is a fine place to start. Seminary students who sit together in classes may sit together one day on a camp board. Seminarians who study Hebrew vocabulary cards together

may assist each other years later in canvassing a town. Seminary is valuable because it may be the only place where fellow students eventually become fellow workers.

Ministry not only entails working with fellow ministers but also working with all kinds of people. In the Colossians passage, three times Paul says, “every man.” The Apostle Paul could talk as easily with a ship’s captain as with a jailer, with an emperor or with an entrepreneur, with friends or foes. Paul was a great minister because he ministered to every man.

Seminary can prepare one to minister to every man. Seminary experience includes six semesters of Christian service in a local church that culminates with an intensive ministry internship. In these contexts seminarians learn to work with a variety of people: Christians and non-Christians, motivated and indifferent, educated and uneducated, timid and brash, young and old. Seminary chapel is another context within which students may develop people skills. Chapel authors are usually pastors or missionaries who sometimes share their own experiences dealing with people. It is good to learn from the mistakes and successes of others. Thus, a seminary education is valuable because it provides opportunities to establish long lasting relationships, and it prepares students to work well with all kinds of people.

### **Ministry involves preaching**

Paul also explains in the Colossians passage that the ministry involves the ability to preach. Preaching should be at the heart of the ministry, and Christ should be at the heart of preaching. When Paul and his co-laborers preached Christ, they did so by means of “all wisdom.” Christ-centered preaching is not redundant in its content; it engages the mind. Nor is good preaching mundane in its approach because it contains both negative and positive elements: “warning” and “teaching.” Although the content and approach of preaching vary, the goal is always the same—to present every man mature or complete in Christ Jesus. Preaching, then, involves proclamation, admonition, and indoctrination, all for the purpose of bringing God’s people to higher levels of maturity. By virtue of its curriculum, a seminary education prepares men for preaching ministry. Homiletics classes and labs sharpen the student’s skills to proclaim, church history and theology courses improve his ability to warn, and courses in Bible exposition and Biblical languages enhance his capacity to teach. A seminary education does not impart all wisdom, but it does impart a great deal of wisdom. A seminary-educated preacher has more tools at his disposal to preach Christ.

Times have changed, and more people are college graduates than ever before. It does not surprise us that mission boards prefer seminary-educated candidates and that pulpit committees often look for seminary- trained prospects. The future pastor or missionary should consider additional training at the seminary level to communicate well to this generation.

Some young men seem hasty in their desire to get out into the ministry. For them, four years of Bible college is more than enough training for ministry today. It is true, many choice servants of God have labored well with only a Bible college education, and some have done so with even less formal education. However, if four years of Bible college is valuable, and it is, then three years of graduate-level training is that much more valuable. Paul was not satisfied with some wisdom but yearned for all wisdom. Even as he awaited execution, he requested books, especially the parchments (2 Timothy 4:13). He read much to reach many until the end of his life. Great preachers are great students, and seminary is the ideal port from which to embark on a lifelong journey of study.

### **Ministry involves exertion**

Paul concludes this Colossians passage by underscoring the work of the ministry. In this section of the text Paul no longer speaks for the members of his team. He speaks instead of his own personal labor. Paul expended great effort in the toil of the ministry. Experienced preachers know that preaching is not simply proclamation; it is striving. After a man stands before men and contends with them about sin, judgment, repentance, and grace, he ought to feel like a wrestler at the end of his match. Preaching and the work that goes into it require exertion. However, preaching should not be done in the power of the flesh. Paul makes this clear as he writes, “striving according to His working, which worketh in me mightily.” We exert ourselves in the ministry, but God is the One who is at work. He is the One whom we proclaim and the One who works mightily through that proclamation.

Some refuse to enroll in seminary simply because seminary requires work or because they are in a hurry to enter the ministry. However, ministry requires exertion, and those who try to avoid work have no business in the ministry. Moreover, seminary is the perfect place to realize the power of God at work. The Lord enables seminary students to get the job done, and discerning seminarians recognize this. It is God who works mightily in the review for a Greek exam, in the writing of a theology paper, and in the preparation and delivery of a sermon. Seminary graduates enter the ministry more conscious of how God works through their intellectual and homiletic exertion.

We believe, therefore, that a seminary education should involve work. At the same time, as faculty mentors we encourage our students to flourish in their studies, to excel in their preaching, and to complete their degrees with distinction. Our faculty is known not only for its academic credentials but also for its active participation in the gospel ministry. We can give living testimony to our students and to others that it is God who works through His working workers.

Is a seminary education valuable for those entering ministry? The answer is “Yes.” Seminary prepares its graduates to minister the Word to all types of people, and seminary makes its graduates ready for the exertion of this kind of ministry.

**Dr. John Hartog, III**

*Dr. John Hartog III, (Th.D., Grace Theological Seminary) served as a professor and also as an interim president of Faith Baptist Bible College and Theological Seminary in Ankeny, Iowa. With a deep passion for biblical education and leadership, he is committed to equipping students to serve Christ in churches, communities, and around the world.*