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ARE SEMINARIES PREPARING PROSPECTIVE PASTORS TO PREACH THE WORD OF GOD?

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There is an acute crisis for preaching today, due in part to a fragmentizing of Christian ministry into various specialized professions without the integrating input of theological training. Preparation for pulpit ministry should be a high priority in the design of seminary curriculums. Training for such ministry must cultivate a theistic mentality, a correct methodology, and a balanced motivation.

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INTRODUCTION

ARE seminaries preparing prospective pastors to preach the Word of God? I believe that valid criticism has been leveled against contemporary preaching. Since theological seminaries are the primary agencies for training ministerial students, they must bear the brunt of this criticism and take steps to correct the problem.

Several preliminary comments are in order. First, my concern is with evangelical seminaries. The evangelical community looks to these schools to provide the education essential for the task of preaching the Word of God (cf. 2 Tim 4:2). It must be insisted, however, that mere academic training cannot guarantee proper preaching of the Word of God. Preaching the Word is more than simply learning the technique of sermon preparation in a homiletics class. While the skill of communication can be taught in class, effective preaching depends upon the work of the Holy Spirit. Sittler evidently had this in mind when he wrote, "the expectation must not be cherished that, save for the modest and obvious instruction about voice, pace, organization, and such matters, preaching as a lively art of the church can be taught at all. . . . Disciplines correlative to preaching can be taught, but preaching as an act of witness cannot be taught."¹ Therefore,

¹Joseph Sittler, *The Anguish of Preaching* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966) 7.

evangelical seminaries must offer an academic program that has the potential to cultivate a profound reverence for preaching in the power of the Holy Spirit. Such reverence may be cultivated by a curriculum centered around the Bible and Christ.

It is my hope that this essay will stimulate further study on the place of preaching in the evangelical seminary. Areas for research may be in constructive criticism of the pulpit ministry, the priority of the pulpit ministry in the local church setting, and the training for the pulpit ministry.

CRITICISM OF THE PULPIT MINISTRY

Sittler states, "Preaching is in trouble everywhere."² He adds, "Of course preaching is in trouble. Whence did we ever manufacture the assumption that it was ever to be anything but trouble?"³ Preaching has seldom experienced the luxury of praise. This fact has been well-documented by numerous books related to the subject of preaching. Fant underscores this point by noting that no generation of preachers has escaped criticism, for even during the so-called Golden Age of Preaching when Liddon, Spurgeon, Parker, Beecher, MacLaren and Brooks were at the height of their careers, Mahaffy wrote *The Decay of Preaching* in 1882.⁴ Fant concludes, "every aspect of preaching is under attack today just as it always has been from the beginning. . . . No age of pulpit proclamation has ever escaped heavy criticism."⁵

However, the current crisis in the pulpit ministry is particularly acute.⁶ Kaiser comments,

It is no secret that Christ's Church is not at all in good health in many places of the world. She has been languishing because she has been fed, as the current line has it, "junk food"; all kinds of artificial preservatives and all sorts of unnatural substitutes have been served up to her. As a result, theological and Biblical malnutrition has afflicted the very generation that has taken such giant steps to make sure its physical health is not damaged by using foods or products that are carcinogenic or otherwise harmful to their physical bodies. Simultaneously a worldwide spiritual famine resulting from the absence of any genuine publi-

²Ibid., 26.

³Ibid., 27.

⁴Clyde E. Fant, *Preaching for Today* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966) 5.

⁵Ibid., 9.

⁶Cf. Chevis F. Horne, *Crisis in the Pulpit* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1975) 15: "the present crisis may be the most serious preaching has had to face in the whole history of the church."

cation of the Word of God (Amos 8:11) continues to run wild and almost unabated in most quarters of the Church.⁷

The crisis is real; nevertheless as Fant said, one must be careful "to make sure [preaching] is in trouble for the right reasons."⁸ Criticism of the church and the pulpit ministry by unbelievers is to be expected. It is the criticism from within the church that is the real concern. As Craddock states,

The alarm felt by those of us still concerned about preaching is not a response solely to the noise outside in the street where public disfavor and ridicule have been heaped upon the pulpit. . . . More disturbing has been the nature and character of those who have been witnesses for the prosecution. Increasingly, the brows that frown upon the pulpit are not only intelligent, but often theologically informed, and quite often deeply concerned about the Christian mission.⁹

He goes on to say,

the major cause for alarm is not the broadside from the public, nor the sniping from classroom sharpshooters, but the increasing number who are going AWOL from the pulpit. Some of these men move into forms of the ministry that carry no expectation of a sermon, or out of the ministry altogether. In addition, there are countless others who continue to preach, not because they regard it as an effective instrument of the church but because of the combined force of professional momentum and congregational demand. . . . It is the opinion of many concerned Christians, some who give the sermon and some who hear it, that preaching is an anachronism.¹⁰

Craddock focuses attention on the seminaries in his examination of the problem. He notes that some seminaries offer little work in homiletics and that there is, "in some quarters, a serious reexamination of the wisdom of having instruction in preaching as a separate curriculum item" because "preaching so taught has its form defined not by the content of the Gospel nor the nature of Christian faith but by Greek rhetoric."¹¹

This last point is worth noting, for the crisis is not merely over preaching, but rather over *the preaching of the Word*. Will preaching

⁷Walter C. Kaiser, *Toward an Exegetical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981) 7-8.

⁸Fant, *Preaching for Today*, 10.

⁹Fred B. Craddock, *As One Without Authority* (Enid: Phillip University, 1975) 1-2.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 2.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 3.

survive the humanistic influences which press pastors to moderate and compromise the biblical message? Should preachers accommodate preaching to fit the model of Lifton's "Protean man," who like the Greek god Proteus alter their shape to conform to any situation?¹² Evangelical seminaries need to shoulder the responsibility of seeing that these questions are answered properly. However, there is doubt as to whether the seminaries are doing the job. Guelich, writing in sympathy with Ladd's convictions, states,

the primary task of the pastor is to be a minister of the Word. I am also convinced that such a ministry is what the church is in desperate need of today. Rather than preparing men and women to be ministers of the church, ministers of youth, ministers of counseling, ministers of outreach, and even ministers of Christian education, as indispensable as these all are, the primary task of seminary education should be to prepare ministers of the Word.¹³

Guelich believes that seminaries have failed in this primary task.¹⁴ He laments the fact that theological education has been fragmented into various specialties that do not involve preaching the Word. He concludes that the anemia of the church today "is not lack of ministers but a dearth of ministers of the Word."¹⁵

Farley also criticizes the seminaries because theology "has long since disappeared as the unity, subject matter, and end of clergy education and this disappearance is responsible more than anything else for the problematic character of that education as a course of study."¹⁶ In the process of fragmenting theological education, emphasis upon the ministry of the Word has been eclipsed, and in some cases, sidelined as an antiquarian oddity. Seminaries have allowed their curriculums to be modeled according to specialized professions to the point that "present-day theological schools simply cannot provide a theological education."¹⁷ Evangelical seminaries must not allow this trend to continue. They must make certain that preparation for the ministry of the Word is given top priority.

PRIORITY OF THE PULPIT MINISTRY

Just as the ministry of the Word ought to be given top priority in seminary education, the pulpit ministry ought to be given top priority

¹²Wallace E. Fisher, *Who Dares to Preach?* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1979) 24-25.

¹³Robert A. Guelich, "On Becoming a Minister of the Word," *Theology News and Notes* 30:2 (1983) 8.

¹⁴Cf. *Ibid.*, "theological education has increasingly abandoned the task of preparing ministers of the Word."

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁶Edward Farley, *Theologia* (Philadelphia: Fortres, 1983) ix.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 14.

in the ministry of the pastor.¹⁸ This ministry should be the catalyst of all church functions and the guiding light of all church activities. Preaching is the primary method ordained by Christ to build his church (Matt 28:18–20).

However, is it mandatory that a pastor preach the Word on every occasion of public worship? Evans has answered this question in the negative. Evans believes that "the common practice today of a clergyman preaching a sermon to a passive audience seems to have its origin in tradition (and/or expedience) rather than in a scriptural pattern."¹⁹ He believes that because "monologic" preaching causes a detrimental congregational passivity, a pastor should vary the worship service to include audience participation. He states, "occasion may necessitate a strong sermon of exhortation, refutation or teaching, but there are no biblical grounds for a tradition that tends to discourage congregational activity in worship and ministry."²⁰ In his discussion of 2 Tim 4:2, Evans points to the aorist tense of the verbs in the exhortation to Timothy. He says,

The verb, *keryxon*, is the first of five aorist imperatives. Had the author meant 'be preaching all the time,' one would have expected a present imperative instead. The other imperatives—'reprove,' 'rebuke,' and so on—are aorists and not present tenses because what the author wants the young pastor to do is to reprove when necessary, rebuke when necessary, and so forth. Likewise with 'proclaiming the word': On occasion as a minister he must herald the (authentic) gospel. In these 'pastoral' epistles the apostle warns against heresy in doctrine as well as in practice. Just as Timothy must occasionally rebuke one whose behavior is wrong, so must he proclaim the apostolic gospel when heresy threatens it.²¹

Rather than preaching, Evans would prefer that opportunity be given for each saint to exercise his spiritual gift in the worship services of the church.

Several points raised by Evans may be disputed, however. It is true that saints ought to be given opportunity to exercise their spiritual gifts, but is the worship service of the church the proper time for this to be done? Presumably, the pastor has the gift of preaching and teaching the Word, while others in the church have gifts related to other functions in the total ministry of the local church. Therefore, it would be expected that the pastoral gift of teaching should be

¹⁸Cf. the remark of Guelich ("On Becoming a Minister," 11) who says, "the primary task of the pastor is to be a minister of the Word."

¹⁹Craig A. Evans, "Preacher and Preaching: Some Lexical Observations," *JETS* 24 (1981) 321.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 322.

²¹*Ibid.*, 318.

exercised at the time of public worship. Further, Evans' treatment of the aorist imperatives in 2 Tim 4:2 is questionable. According to Dana and Mantey, "the fundamental significance of the aorist is to denote action simply as occurring, without reference to progress. . . . The aorist signifies nothing as to completeness, but simply presents the action as attained. It states the fact of the action or event without regard to its duration."²² Hence, the point of the aorist imperatives in 2 Tim 4:2 is to emphasize the *act* of preaching, reproving, rebuking, etc., not the *duration* of the act. Paul says the act of preaching should be performed "in season" and "out of season" (phrases, interestingly enough, that Evans does not discuss). These phrases indicate that preaching the Word is always in vogue. A pastor, as Chrysostom said, should not ask, "is this a suitable occasion for preaching?" but rather, "Why should not this be a suitable occasion?"²³ Surely the worship service of the church is a suitable occasion for preaching. Further, the reproving, rebuking, and exhorting of 2 Tim 4:2 are specific facets of the more general command to preach the Word. At least some of these activities are always present in proper preaching and should not be separated from the general command. Also, Paul did not exhort Timothy to rebuke heresy when it came, but rather to preach the Word in view of the coming apostasy (2 Tim 4:3-4). Finally, this exhortation to Timothy must be understood in light of Paul's own practice. He preached the Word at every opportunity, whether in synagogues, market-places, prisons, or Christian assemblies. In commenting on Paul's charge to Timothy, Moule states,

[Preaching], in the Apostle's view, as he stood upon the threshold of eternity, was the thing of all things for Timothy to do. True, he would have to minister ordinances and to be the administrative leader of the mission-churches. But supremely, he was to 'proclaim the Word'; this before all things was man's great need, and this therefore was the Lord's pastoral servant's highest and incessant task.²⁴

Making the pulpit ministry the pastor's highest priority is based on the Word of God. Therefore, pastors are morally responsible to preach the Word. For the pastor to speak to issues of politics, psychology, philosophy, sociology, and the like has no such biblical basis. And God has promised that his Word will not return unto him

²²H. E. Dana and J. R. Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1955) 193. See also the recent discussion by D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984) 69-75.

²³As quoted by E. M. Blaiklock, *The Pastoral Epistles* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1972) 119.

²⁴H. C. G. Moule, *The Second Epistle to Timothy* (London: The Religious Tract Society, 1906) 128.

void, but will accomplish what he pleases and will prosper wherever he sends it (Isa 55:11).

TRAINING FOR THE PULPIT MINISTRY

Above all other appellations a pastor should be known as a man of God whose life is shaped by the Holy Spirit through the Word of God. This should stir the pastor's heart to communicate the Word to the members of his church in the hope that they will come under the mastery of the Word.

In light of this, evangelical seminaries ought to be structured in such a way that the personal life as well as the academic life of the student cultivates the ability and desire to preach the Word. In the midst of a diversified academic program, seminaries must guard against factors that tend to overshadow this supreme pastoral task. I suggest that the academic programs of seminaries should be structured to cultivate a theistic mentality, a correct methodology, and a balanced motivation.

Theistic Mentality

A "theistic mentality" is one conformed to the mind of Christ. It is a mind-set disciplined, dominated, and directed by the Scriptures, conscious of the sovereignty of God. Seminaries can cultivate this kind of mind-set through focusing their curriculum on the person and plan of God. This may be done by making theology the core subject of the seminary program. Regrettably, because of the fragmentation which results from catering to specialized ministries, theology no longer has the dominion over the education of seminarians that it once had.

Farley has also noted this change in seminary curriculums. He says, "the typical product of three years of seminary study is not a theologically educated minister. The present ethos of the Protestant churches is such that a theologically oriented approach to the preparation of ministers is not only irrelevant but counterproductive."²⁵ Farley does not say that seminaries have eliminated theology from the curriculum, but he is pointing to the fact that it is no longer the basic subject matter of the curriculum. He says, "theological education [has become] an amalgam of academic specialization and culture adaptation"²⁶ and that theological understanding is needed to restore unity to the curriculum.

²⁵Farley, *Theologia*, 4.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 151.

Stott contends that biblical or expository preaching is extremely rare in current Christendom. He affirms that such preaching will not come merely from the mastery of certain techniques, but rather from being mastered by convictions that "cannot be taught without a solid theological foundation." Technique can make orators; only theology can make preachers. Stott believes that if "our theology is right, then we have all the basic insights we need into what we ought to be doing, and all the incentives we need to do it faithfully."²⁷

To speak of theology as the core curriculum of a seminary is not to say that it is an end in itself; rather, theology is a means to an end. Theology should address the heart as well as the mind. Theology ought to be taught with an emphasis on doing and living. Strong wrote,

I make no apology for the homiletical element in my book. To be either true or useful, theology must be a passion. . . . No disdainful cries of 'Pectoral Theology!' shall prevent me from maintaining that the eyes of the heart must be enlightened in order to perceive the truth of God, and that to know the truth it is needful to do the truth. Theology is a science which can be successfully cultivated in connection with its practical application. I would therefore, in every discussion of its principles, point out its relations to Christian experience, and its power to awaken Christian emotions and lead to Christian decisions. Abstract theology is not really scientific. Only that theology is scientific which brings the student to the feet of Christ.²⁸

Bavinck stated that a "theologian is a person who makes bold to speak about God because he speaks out of God and through God. To profess theology is to do holy work. It is a priestly ministration in the house of the Lord. It is itself a service of worship, a consecration of mind and heart to the honor of His name." One of Bavinck's former students commented, "His lectures became a sermon, as the professor was stirred by the truth." During his final illness, Bavinck uttered the words, "Now my scholarship avails me nothing, nor my dogmatics: it is only my faith can save me."²⁹ These statements by and about Bavinck do not disparage theology but simply indicate the practical goal of theology, the development of faith.

The development of faith requires the preaching of theology in a manner that might be called "incarnational preaching."³⁰ Such preaching emphasizes "the Word made flesh" (John 1:15), and makes biblical truth live in contemporary situations through the living Christ. Fant

²⁷John R. W. Stott, *Between Two Worlds* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) 92.

²⁸Augustus H. Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Philadelphia: Judson, 1953) xi.

²⁹Herman Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956) 7.

³⁰Fant, *Preaching for Today*, 26, 29.

has said, "The Word of God is never irrelevant, but my preaching may well be. And it will be, if it does not bear the eternal Word, and if it does not touch the living situation. Only the word which dwells among us is the word of Christian preaching."³¹ In other words, preaching theology means preaching the living Christ—the embodiment of theology.

Only the professor whose mind and heart have been transformed by the living Christ can effectively teach theology. Orthodoxy and orthopraxy go hand in hand. Only such a professor can instill in his students the theistic mentality that will prepare them to preach the Word of God.

Correct Methodology

The methodology used to study the Bible should be in harmony with the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith. The traditional historical, grammatical system of hermeneutics (based on the orthodox doctrine of the verbal and plenary inspiration of Scripture) is such a methodology. Biblical exegesis has as its goal understanding the meaning of the text. Unfortunately, exegesis as a vital aspect of theological education is now sometimes overshadowed by the proliferation of skill-oriented programs designed to meet the demand of churches for specialized professional workers.³²

A method of biblical study that has gained popularity is the so-called critical method. Is this method compatible with the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith? The history of the critical method clearly reveals that this method has been mainly destructive to orthodox Christianity. German Rationalism (with its elevation of human reason above the authority of Scripture) has influenced many practitioners of the critical method. Since it is beyond the scope of this essay to detail the use of this method, the reader is referred to the books by Lindsell which document the use and effects of the critical method.³³

The basic fault with the critical method as it is generally practiced is its tendency to emphasize the human aspect in the writing of

³¹Ibid., 41.

³²Cf. Guelich, "On Becoming a Minister," 8, who says, "a survey of seminary curricula over the past generation will show a growing demise of the exegetical disciplines" and "the deemphasis of biblical studies in general and the abandoning of the exegetical disciplines such as biblical languages and courses in exegetical methods and aids in particular suggest the growing acceptance of exegesis as an option rather than a necessity." Similarly, Kaiser (*Towards an Exegetical Theology*, 17) says that the crisis in exegesis is the "crisis that has precipitated the other theological crises."

³³Harold Lindsell, *The Battle for the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976); and *The Bible in the Balance* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979).

Scripture to the neglect of the divine aspect. This is not to say that correct methodology should not take into account the historical circumstances and literary processes through which the Bible was written. But it must also consciously realize the divine element as well (cf. 2 Tim 3:16; 1 Cor 2:13). Unless methodology is based upon correct theological presuppositions, it inevitably leads to a humanistic rather than a theistic emphasis in the study of the Bible. A method that focuses almost exclusively on the human aspect of Scripture cultivates a mentality antagonistic the fact that the Bible is the Word of God, not the Word of Man.

An illustration of the results of the critical methodology is Gundry's commentary on Matthew. According to Gundry, Matthew employed the literary genre of midrash and haggadah. This is the genre employed by rabbinical writers to embellish OT history. Gundry says Matthew embellished his source (Mark) and wrote a gospel which mixed historical events with midrashic theological embellishment. Thus for Gundry, when Matthew said, "Jesus said . . ." or "Jesus did . . .," he did not necessarily mean that Jesus said or did anything in history. Matthew may have been using a "literary Jesus" to make a theological point.³⁴ Gundry's view has been challenged both methodologically and theologically. This will not be pursued further here, but the controversy provides an excellent case in point to show the need for correct methodology.³⁵

Evangelical seminaries must take the initiative in training pastoral students in the practice of correct methodology—methodology which does justice to both the divine and human aspects of Scripture. The axiom of seminary training should be, "scholarship is a tool, a means for discerning God's Word. It is not a new authority."³⁶

Balanced Motivation

Two attitudes that must be balanced to motivate preaching are the conviction of a divine call to the ministry and the commitment to obey that call for the glory of God, whatever the cost. Both are essential to establish a balanced motivation for the work of the ministry centered in the preaching of the Word.

³⁴Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew, A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) 623, 629–30.

³⁵For a lengthy critique of Gundry's approach see D. A. Carson, "Gundry on Matthew: A Critical Review," *TrinJ* 3 NS (1982) 71–91. Gundry's position was debated at length by Norman Geisler and Douglas Moo. See *JETS* 26 (1983) 31–116. See also David L. Turner, "Evangelicals, Redaction Criticism, and the Current Inerrancy Crisis," *GTJ* 4 (1983) 263–88; and J. W. Scott, "Matthew's Intention to Write History," *WTJ* 47 (1985) 68–82.

³⁶Fischer, *Who Dares to Preach*, 49.

The divine call stresses the fact that a pastor is God's servant. He should echo the words of Christ, "I came . . . not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me" (John 6:37). Pastors do not merely choose the ministry as a profession;³⁷ they are called by God. The call of God should focus attention on the eternal consequences of the pastor's work. Seminaries need to cultivate this attitude toward the ministry.

Equally important for the development of balanced motivation is the commitment to fulfill the divine call. A pastor serves God by serving man. This is evident in the example of Jesus who came to do the will of God (John 6:38) and to minister to men (Matt 20:28).

CONCLUSION

The primary responsibility of evangelical seminaries is to train prospective pastors to preach the Word. In order for this task to be accomplished, theology needs to be taught as the core of the curriculum. Proper theology cultivates a theistic mentality, a correct methodology, and a balanced motivation. Pastors so trained will be inspired to preach the Word in season and out of season. They will say with Paul, "necessity is laid upon me; yea, woe is unto me, if I preach not the gospel" (1 Cor 9:16).

³⁷Cf. the remarks of Farley (*Theologia*, 3-23) who criticizes seminaries for developing a professional paradigm for the ministry rather than stressing the divine call.