

Let All the World in Every Corner Sing

George Herbert (1593–1633)

Let all the world in ev'ry corner sing,
 "My God and King!"
 The heav'ns are not too high,
 God's praise may thither fly;
 the earth is not too low,
 God's praises there may grow.
 Let all the world in ev'ry corner sing,
 "My God and King!"

Let all the world in ev'ry corner sing,
 "My God and King!"
 The church with psalms must shout:
 no door can keep them out.
 But, more than all, the heart
 must bear the longest part.
 Let all the world in ev'ry corner sing,
 "My God and King!"

ΤΩ ΚΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

In the Nick of Time

It's Not a Cadillac! Part One: A Bit of History

Kevin T. Bauder

The Association of Theological Schools, the primary agency that accredits seminaries, recently produced a study showing that the number of M.Div. students is falling, while the number of future pastors taking the shorter M.A. program is rising. The study was picked up by the Religion News Service, which opined that, while the M.Div. is the "gold standard," fewer students think that they need—or can afford—the "Cadillac" degree. The story also notes that an increasing number of seminaries are shrinking their M.Div. programs from the traditional 90 hours to 72 hours (and in some cases even less) to compete with the M.A. programs.

This is a wonderful trend for liberal denominations. They do not accept the authority of Scripture in the first place, so their ministers have little reason to spend years learning to handle it with skill. Those churches can be led by ministers who have studied sociology, anthropology, leadership theory, and social justice. Such leadership will continue to produce the results that liberal theologies have produced over the past century—sinners will remain unsaved, class resentments will be inflamed, churches will decline as they are turned into religious clubs, and the seminaries that have produced these graduates will eventually close their doors.

For Bible-believing churches, however, this trend will prove disastrous. We should know that. We've been here before.

The first generations of Baptist proto-fundamentalist and fundamentalists leaders were seminary trained. A. J. Gordon went to Newton and later served on its board. Oliver W. Van Osdel was an alumnus of the Morgan Park seminary, which later became the Divinity School of the new University of Chicago. Both W. B. Riley and J. Frank Norris graduated from Southern Baptist Seminary. Whatever their faults and limitations, these were educated men.

The same was not true of many of their followers. By the turn of the twentieth century, most of the seminaries had been captured by theological liberalism. As the seminaries turned away from the Bible, conservatives turned to the Bible institutes, which had originally been created to train Christian workers rather than Christian leaders. More and more pastors were trained



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(not educated) by being given a synthetic knowledge of the King James Bible, a modest grasp of Bible doctrine, and quick, hard practice at basic ministry techniques such as soulwinning.

Such training is not to be despised, and it was the only alternative at the time. Quickly, however, it became apparent that this model did not provide adequate preparation for Christian leadership. More was needed, and before long the Bible institutes had begun to transform themselves into colleges. The problem was that the Bible colleges were able to add only a fraction of the preparation that seminaries had traditionally offered, and they usually did this at the expense of the liberal education that was expected of undergraduate programs.

Perhaps it is worth pausing to distinguish *liberal education* from *liberalism*. *Liberalism* or modernism was a theological movement that denigrated the Word of God. *Liberal education*, on the other hand, is education that focuses on the tools of thought (grammar, rhetoric, and logic) while preparing the student to address the perennial questions. By definition, nothing is less conservative than liberalism, but nothing is more conservative than a liberal education.

In short, by the 1950s Baptist fundamentalism was producing pastors who were strong opponents of modernist theology, but who tended to be poor thinkers with a fairly weak ability to study the text of Scripture for themselves and a relatively sketchy knowledge of the system of faith. This weak preparation of fundamentalist leaders resulted in poorly-taught churches led by pastoral impresarios whose ministries more closely resembled circuses and theaters than New Testament congregations. It eventually left the movement open to such debilitating influences as the sham scholarship of a Gail Riplinger, the demagoguery of a Jack Hyles, the ecclesiastical politics of a Carl McIntire, and the sharp decline of skillful expository preaching. Clearly something needed to be done.

To be sure, a few seminaries existed outside of Baptist circles. A young man graduating from college could go to Dallas or Talbot, or later on to Carl McIntire's Faith Theological Seminary. But the Baptist alternatives were few. By the late 1940s, there was a little school in Los Angeles, and another was meeting in the basement of Wealthy Street Baptist Church in Grand Rapids. Conservative Baptists established a seminary in Denver in 1950, but it quickly abandoned both fundamentalism and dispensationalism.

By the mid-1950s, certain fundamentalist leaders began to see the need to offer seminary-level instruction for the coming generations of fundamentalist leadership. Over the next two decades, fundamentalists established several seminaries, including those in Minneapolis, San Francisco, Clarks Summit, Lansdale, and Detroit. Others were added later on.

These new seminaries faced an uphill climb. By the 1960s, most pastors and their churches believed that four years of Bible college was plenty of preparation for ministry. Young men were eager to get into the work; few wished to spend extra years on further education, and fewer still had the money for it.

Over time, however, churches began to see a difference in those pastors who came out of decent seminaries. Pastors who went through a traditional seminary program had the ability to study the Scriptures for themselves. When they preached, they did not have to echo commentaries but could explain what God actually said. They were able to bring biblical principles to bear upon the issues of life. They were leading churches to be churches and not religious theaters, social clubs, or encounter groups.

Seminary instruction is not a guarantee of effective ministry. Nevertheless, *ceteris paribus*, a man with seminary behind him will be more effective in ministry than the same man without it. Some men will become useful who would otherwise have been failures in ministry. Furthermore, a good seminary will help to keep some men from becoming effective at doing the wrong things.

In short, seminary instruction—which includes all the components of the traditional M.Div. program—is not a Cadillac. It is not a luxury to be enjoyed only by those with wealth and leisure to acquire it. No, seminary instruction is more like a box full of tools, each of which is essential for the pastor who wishes to lead a church in God's way. To neglect any of those tools is to cripple some aspect of vital, New Testament ministry.

That is exactly what happens when a future pastor refuses the M.Div. program in favor of the M.A. It is also what happens when seminaries, for the sake of enrollment, drop requirements so that they can shorten their M.Div. programs. It can even happen when a seminary cheapens its M.Div. by shifting the emphasis away from those tools that are more difficult to learn to use skillfully.

What tools does a pastor need? Which of those tools can a seminary provide? How is a future pastor to acquire the remaining tools? I intend to answer these questions, but before I do, I will argue that the usefulness of seminaries depends entirely upon what one thinks pastoral ministry is supposed to be.



This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, Research Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.
