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The Ideal Preparation For The Ministry

Warren Vanhetloo, ThD, DD
Professor, Calvary Baptist Theological Seminary

What is the ideal training for the ministry? What course should a young man follow? What special training should he include? What preparation should the churches expect of their pastors and missionaries? What facilities should they make available for the training of young people anxious to serve the Lord?

The first and most important preparation, of course, is spiritual. A conversion experience, a commitment to the Lord, growth in the grace and knowledge of the Savior, personal spiritual development -- these things are a must for any Christian service. No course can in itself instill these qualities, and yet any course pursued should be conducive to the attaining of them.

When considering ideal preparation, we are aware that there are exceptions. Baptists historically have recognized that God calls into His service men who have no specialized training, nor opportunities for specialized training. God has marvelously used men who have had nothing more than a Bible Institute training. And God will continue to call and use many who do not have the ideal preparation; yet such is and should be the exception rather than the rule.

For those who have the endurance and the financial ability, the usual and most acceptable preparation has been that of a four year college and three year theological seminary. For almost all cases this is sufficient; apart from the exceptions just noted, this is the minimum. Local churches expect this much.

"The Ideal Preparation For The Ministry" is a reprint from Central Bible Quarterly (Spring 1962) at which time Dr. Vanhetloo served as Dean of Central Baptist Seminary.

For the young man looking forward to full time Christian service, the question arises, which type of college and which course in college? God has raised up in our generation many fine Bible colleges, and certainly if at all possible a young person should make every effort to attend a Bible-centered institution.

Logically his major should be in Bible. A few men come to seminary without proper background in English Bible, but they do not profit as they should from the seminary curriculum in so doing. No man can know his Bible too well in serving the Lord.

Language is an important preparation. A student should include English grammar, composition, literature, and some speech training, plus two foreign languages if at all possible. He certainly should have at least two years of Greek during his college work.

A well-rounded preparation would include introductory or survey courses in philosophy, logic, history, psychology, biology, sociology, economics, anthropology, etc, to enable him to minister acceptably in the world in which we live today.

These will be included in his minimum program. He will also want to specialize according to his interests, his future plans, and the opportunities available in the school he chooses. Some may wish to prepare specifically for missionary service, some may wish to receive a degree in education, some may be interested in the Christian education program, some may emphasize philosophical studies, some may major in sociology, and so on.

For some there is a question of continuing on to get an advanced degree in the particular field of their special interest, and in certain cases this is advisable. If it means a choice between a well-rounded theological preparation or specialized study for some particular work of the church, certainly the thorough preparation is of greater importance.

Our typical young man faces next the problem of what to take in seminary. Most liberal seminaries of our day are replacing content courses with methods courses. We believe there should be a well-balanced curriculum with emphasis upon content of the Word and one's ability to work with Scripture.

There is thus emphasis at the seminary level upon the original languages: further study of the languages used in Scripture, thorough consideration of the principles of Scripture interpretation, and guided experience in proper exegesis and specialized problems of the text and canon. Critical positions of the day as these relate to Scripture

interpretation are likewise included to the extent of acquaintance and refutation.

The Lord Jesus Christ promised that the Holy Spirit would lead into all truth, which He does for individual believers and has done for believers as a whole through the centuries. Consequently, the study of church history, and in particular of Baptist history, and the history of missions is included in a well-rounded curriculum.

More than any one other thing a minister or missionary must be a theologian. Advanced study on a graduate level of the theological thought of our day is at the heart of a seminary curriculum. This will include such phases as the history of revelation, the history of theology, and contemporary trends. It will also include a positive presentation of apologetics and our theistic position, as well as ethical principles, standards and practices.

In order for a minister to carry on efficiently his compound duties as pastor, preacher, administrator, organizer, and teacher, there must be strong emphasis upon the practical aspect, including such phrases as preparation and presentation of sermons, counselling, administration, evangelism and pastoral theology. For those interested and qualified, provision is sometimes made for consideration of sociological and psychological aspects of the ministry.

Along with these basic fields of preparation, a seminary student has opportunity to specialize in missions, Old Testament, theology, etc, both in his electives and in his thesis.

The emphasis of such a curriculum is to prepare for a well-grounded and well-rounded ministry. Every servant of the Lord these days needs to know the Word, to defend the faith, to guide the church, to advance the gospel.