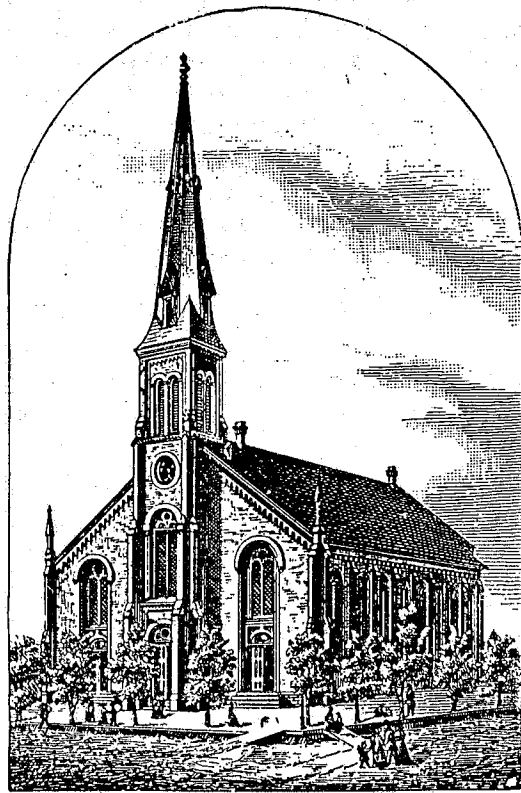


The Perils of Theological Education

*A Warning to Students and a
Word to the Church*



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THE PERILS OF THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

A Word to Seminarians and a Warning to the Church

A Convocation Address Delivered By
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*Do not neglect your gift, which was given
you through a prophetic message when
the body of elders laid their hands on you.
Be diligent in these matters; give yourself
wholly to them, so that everyone may see your progress.
Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in
them, because if you do, you will save
both yourself and your hearers.*
1 Timothy 4:14-16, [NIV]

The opening convocation ceremony has been a part of the formal life of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary from the school's inception. In one form or another, the community was gathered together for the purpose of marking the transition of a new academic year, welcoming new students, and focusing minds and spirits upon the challenges ahead.

This is a proper motivation; to ready mind and heart for the work ahead, and to ready the soul and spirit for the proper focus and attitude of study. Sometimes, the concern has included the body.

This was certainly a concern of John A. Broadus, one of the founding faculty and second president of this institution, when he addressed the student body on the first day of classes in the

fall of 1890. "Suppose we try to make this the best session of our Seminary," Broadus urged.¹ Then, as we say, he got personal: "Great attention must be paid by us all to bodily health," he instructed. "Now do not discount what I may say on this subject because my own health is not as good as usual. That is none of your business."

Dr. Broadus then proceeded to warn that city life was dangerous to the health, and asked his students to take particular note of Louisville's sudden changes in weather. Students from the deep South come without realizing that winter comes earlier here than down South, and do not clothe themselves properly, take cold, and bring on the malaria.

The president urged his students to take to the gymnasium, after seeking instruction on the proper use of the apparatus. He also commended intramural sports, describing games on the Seminary campus that were "more or less active and violent."

In addition, President Broadus was concerned that his students should get adequate sleep. A student, said Broadus, requires more sleep "than a ploughman or a rail-splitter," for the brain and nerves require more time for recovery than do the muscles. He acknowledged that individuals vary in the amount of sleep needed, citing Benjamin Franklin, who asserted that the correct pattern was "six hours for a man, seven for a woman, eight for a child and nine for a hog." Broadus rejected Franklin's argument out of hand: "I have always needed eight

¹ John A. Broadus, "Opening Talk to Students, October 1, 1890," The Seminary Magazine, October 1890, pp. 225-229.

hours of sleep, and I am the better for a little more, and I mean to get it if I can."

While mindful of Dr. Broadus' concern for the student body--taken literally--my concern is quite different. This message, like that of Dr. Broadus, is primarily directed to students, new and returning. But I pray that it will be a message with application to us all.

My title must seem a bit odd as the convocation address offered by a seminary president. My concern is not the threats to theological education, but the perils of theological education.

One way of framing this question would be this: "Is theological education a blessing for the Church, or a curse?" Though this is an awkward question, it is one I hope never to leave behind--and never to leave unasked.

Sociologists Roger Finke and Rodney Stark argue that theological seminaries are a curse. In The Churching of America 1776-1990, the authors attempt to trace the inexorable secularization of denominations and to blame that pattern of doctrinal declension on the seminaries.²

Their concern has long been shared by many grassroots laypersons and clergy in the churches. Virtually every student who comes here is warned by some friend, relative, or church leader: "Be careful up there. Don't let them turn you into

² Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, The Churching of America 1776-1990: Winners and Losers in our Religious Economy (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992).

something you are not."

But no layperson I know has made the point any more clearly than the cantankerous Methodist divinity professor at Vanderbilt whom I quoted in my inaugural address: "Men have gone into them [the seminaries] with an eager enthusiasm for the work of the ministry and have come out as limp and good-for-nothing as a dish-rag. 'I may not be sticking to my text here, but I am sticking to my crowd'."³

Well, he may have been sticking to his crowd, but my concern today is with the crowd of ministers and seminarians whom God has called together in this place. My word is sincere and it is direct: Theological education is dangerous business. What we do here is to handle the mysteries of heaven. We study, consider, teach, and discuss the deep things of God--Truths which are unutterable, but for the fact that God has loosed us to speak. Truths that are matters of life and death.

Theological education is not a topic to be taken lightly or glossed over with a superficial warning. You have come here with fellow students and teachers to handle the life-giving substance of Christian truth--fellow stewards of the mysteries of God.⁴

I would lay out for you this morning five grave dangers to acknowledge and to avoid. These are five detours on the way to our high calling which is in Christ Jesus.

³ Gross Alexander, "A New and Excellent Grammar of the Greek New Testament," The Methodist Quarterly Review, 58 (1909):781-789.

⁴ I Corinthians 4:1

First, the Danger of Conceiving Theology as Knowledge About God, Rather than the Knowledge of God.

The difference between the knowledge of God and knowledge about God is infinite and eternal in its significance. Much of modern theology is mere speculation, divorced from and holding itself superior to the faith of the Church. In other forms, it is an explicit attempt to redefine and reconceptualize God in a way fully in keeping with modern notions of divine possibility and existence.

Without the armor of God's protection, the theologian always risks losing God among the theologies. That protection is none other than the true knowledge of God--a personal, devotional, humble knowledge of the Creator.

To claim a personal knowledge of God himself is indeed a raid upon the unspeakable. But it is also the grace of God made manifest toward us, that He has chosen to condescend to us, to reveal Himself to us that we might know Him, even though we see through a glass darkly and no man has seen Him face to face.

We know God only because He has shown himself to us. As Martin Luther stated in the Heidelberg Disputation: "That person does not deserve to be called a theologian who looks upon the invisible things of God as though they were clearly visible in

those things which have actually happened."⁵ But, Luther continued, "He deserves to be called a theologian, however, who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross."⁶

We have no right to speak of God except as He has shown us himself to us. We have no right of speculation. God is not an object of our investigation, our experimentation, or our theorizing.

As Scripture records, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding."⁷ The knowledge of the one true God is indeed the beginning and foundation of all wisdom. To misconceive or to misrepresent God is to commit theological error. To fail to know God is eternal death.

John Calvin well understood that only the believer can properly know God or even know about God. As he stated: "Now, the knowledge of God, as I understand it, is that by which we not only conceive that there is a God, but also grasp what befits us and is proper to His glory, in fine, what is to our advantage to know of Him. Indeed, we shall not say that, properly speaking,

⁵ Martin Luther, "The Heidelberg Disputation," Thesis 19, in Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings, ed. Timothy F. Lull (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), p. 43.

⁶ Luther, Thesis 20, p. 43.

⁷ Proverbs 9:10.

God is known where there is no religion or piety."⁸

You should study the field of theology and give yourself diligently to understanding the discipline, but do not be lost in the midst of much human speculation. Understand how God has revealed himself and His ways in Scripture and how the believing Church has come humbly but truly to know Him.

It has been said, Charles Spurgeon acknowledged, that the proper study of mankind is man. "I will not oppose the idea," responded Spurgeon, "but I believe it is equally true that the proper study of God's elect is God; the proper study of a Christian is the Godhead. The highest science, the loftiest speculation, the mightiest philosophy, which can ever engage the attention of a child of God, is the name, the nature, the person, the work, the doings, and the existence of the great God whom he calls his father."⁹ Spurgeon continued:

There is something exceedingly improving to the mind in a contemplation of the Divinity. It is a subject so vast, that all our thoughts are lost in its immensity; so deep, that our pride is drowned in its infinity. Other subjects we can compass and grapple with; in them we feel a kind of self-content, and go our way with the thought, "Behold I am wise." But when we come to this master-science, finding that our plumb-line cannot sound its depth, and that our eagle cannot see its height, we turn away with the thought, that vain man would be wise, but he is like a wild ass's colt; and

⁸ John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, Book One, Chapter II, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John T. McNeill, "Library of Christian Classics," vol XX (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), I:39.

⁹ Charles Haddon Spurgeon, "The Immutability of God," in The New Park Street Pulpit, vol. I (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1990), originally published in London by Passmore and Alabaster, 1856), p. 1. The sermon was preached at New Park Street Chapel on January 7, 1855.

with the solemn exclamation, "I am but of yesterday, and know nothing." No subject of contemplation will tend more to humble the mind, than thoughts of God.¹⁰

We are to know the God who is our Sovereign King, who reigns in majesty, who created the universe and all within as the theater of His own glory; the God in whom there is no shadow of turning, the God whose glory exceeds the burning of a thousand suns, the God whose sovereign providence upholds the world and orders all within; the God of infinite love and mercy, who is also the God of absolute holiness and of burning wrath against sin.

This is the God who reigns, who Isaiah saw high and lifted up, with His train filling the temple, the God of whom the seraphim proclaimed Holy, Holy, Holy; the God of infinite power and omnipotence, the God who is omniscient and all wise, the God who is always faithful and never changeth; the God who is one-in-three: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The one true God, whose love is seen even through His holiness and whose mercy is seen even through His wrath. The Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the God of all grace and glory.

Know Him. Do not leave here knowing only about Him.

Second, the Danger of Sacrificing Piety for Study.

Burdened with the responsibility of preparing for classes, courses, and other study, you will be tempted to sacrifice your private devotions and personal spiritual nourishment on the altar

¹⁰ Ibid.

of study. Do not allow yourself this temptation.

The demands of ministry will be no less than the demands of seminary preparation. The pressures and deadlines of academic life will wilt before the unscheduled pressures and interruptions of ministry.

Study hard and study well. You will never study in such an atmosphere of theological and biblical learning with the resources here at your disposal. Spend hours in the library. Plumb the depths of research and commit yourself to excellence in your study even as you will commit yourself to excellence in ministry.

As Paul instructed Timothy: "Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth."¹¹ Our study and preparation should be an act of worship and accountability to God, but it is not in itself sufficient. Do not neglect your personal devotions, prayer, and Bible study.

President Broadus was concerned with the personal piety of his students even as he was concerned for the health of their bodies. "What is the most important of all things for you and for me?", he asked.¹² "What touches the most solemn issues of life for time and eternity? What is most indispensable to all true ministerial achievements and success?" He answered:

You could not make a more hurtful, a more fatal mistake than to suppose that engrossment in study will excuse

¹¹ 2 Timothy 2:15 [KJV].

¹² Broadus, "Opening Talk," p. 228.

your neglect as to the cultivation of personal piety. The question is not whether you have time for this, but how much time this leaves you for other things. Indeed, all our daily pursuits should enter into the life of piety. And not only to the inner, but as to the outer life, I pray you to be heedful.¹³

For some students, seminary studies can represent a spiritual desert with wilted prayer and arid devotion. As Princeton Seminary's B. B. Warfield noted, "It is possible to study--even to study theology--in an entirely secular spirit."¹⁴ This can only be so if you neglect that first relationship. Learn here to pace yourself and to measure yourself devotionally as well as intellectually.

Third, the Danger of Mastering Scripture, when we are to be Mastered by Scripture.

Every theologian and student of the Scriptures must answer this fundamental question: Am I the judge of the Bible, or is the Bible the judge of me? The answer to this question will determine the essence of one's ministry, and reveal the character of one's soul.

Oxford theologian Alister McGrath recently described what he termed the "Babylonian captivity" of the Scriptures at the hands of scholars who are distant from the life of the Church and

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Benjamin Breckenridge Warfield, The Religious life of Theological Students (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., n.d.). The address was originally delivered at the Autumn Conference of Princeton Theological Seminary on October 4, 1911.

hostile to its theological convictions.¹⁵

Almost twenty years ago, Lutheran professor Edgar Krenz celebrated that shift from the Church to the academy:

In the past the study of the Bible had been carried on in the church or in university faculties that prepared men for ordination. Today such study is more and more being done in university departments of religion that are in no way related to the church. The Bible is studied critically with the same methods used on all ancient literature.¹⁶

The rise of the historical-critical method has presented the Church with the clearest challenge to theological authority of its twenty centuries, but it is not methodology, but attitude which is my immediate concern.

You should and must study the Scriptures diligently, carefully, reverently, and theologically. We must practice that method of interpretation which seeks honestly and faithfully to understand the meaning of the text without denying the full truthfulness of the text. This "believing criticism" will honor the Bible as the very Word of God in written form, perfect and without blemish, free from all error and preserved by the

¹⁵ Richard E. Koenig, "Reclaiming the Bible: The Church's Book," The Christian Century, August 24-31, 1994, p. 774. McGrath's statement was made at the "Reclaiming the Bible for the Church" conference at St. Olaf College in June 1994, as reported in the above article.

¹⁶ Edgard Krenz, The Historical-Critical Method, Guides to Biblical Scholarship," ed. Gene M. Tucker (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), p. 4.

providence of God.¹⁷

The Bible is not just another ancient Middle Eastern document or collection of documents to be submitted to scrutiny by believers and unbelievers alike. It will not submit itself to such a posture. It is the living Word of the eternal God.

The issue I would address in this context is the posture and attitude of the student of Scripture. Do we stand over Scripture, submitting it to our tests, experiments, investigations, and scrutiny, or do we stand under Scripture, confessing its truthfulness and authority even prior to our reading, our exegesis, our careful language and grammatical study, our faithful struggle to understand the text, and our interpretation of the text?¹⁸

The distinction of that posture will spell the difference in interpretation and understanding. The Christian interpreter of Scripture stands within the circle of the Church, the believing community. The Bible is the Church's book, not in that the

¹⁷ The term "believing criticism" was apparently coined by historian Mark Noll in his Between Faith and Criticism: Evangelicals, Scholarship, and the Bible in America (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987). The term is a fertile expression, though Noll does not himself offer a hermeneutical model.

¹⁸ I have elsewhere described these different postures in relation to the Bible as a "hermeneutic of suspicion" and a "hermeneutic of submission" or a "hermeneutic of acceptance." The first term is a part of the established literature. The second, it seems to me, describes a proper evangelical posture. See R. Albert Mohler, Jr., "Has Theology a Future in the Southern Baptist Convention? Toward a Renewed Theological Framework," in Beyond the Impasse? Scripture, Interpretation, and Theology in Baptist Life, ed. Robison B. James and David S. Dockery (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), pp. 91-117. See esp. pp. 100-101.

Church authorizes or controls the Bible, but in that the Bible controls and authorizes the Church.

The Church confesses that we are dependent upon the Holy Spirit, not only for the inspiration and preservation of the Bible, but for its illumination in our midst. We cannot understand the true meaning of Scripture unless the Spirit illuminates our hearts and minds and opens our understanding.

Study diligently, faithfully, and eagerly, but study to show thyself approved unto God; one who rightly divides the Word of Truth. Master the tools of faithful biblical study, but be mastered by the Bible as the eternal Word of God.

Fourth, the Danger of a Ministry Well Trained, but Unconverted or Uncalled.

The theological seminary does not make ministers. This is one of the most dangerous and injurious notions ever to beset the Church. God makes ministers. He calls them first to himself through election and the atoning work of His Son, and then into the ministry by the mystery of His call.

That must be the order. The seminary assumes and expects that those who come to study here are those who have been converted from rebellion to discipleship, from estrangement to redemption, from death to life by grace through faith. Furthermore, we expect that those who study here have experienced a discernible call to the ministry of the Gospel and the service of the Church. We require that you give testimony and evidence of both prior to entry into programs of study.

This has been the expectation and design of the Seminary from its inception, and it is for good reason. Nothing is more dangerous to the Church than an unconverted and/or uncalled ministry.

On March 8, 1740 pastor Gilbert Tennent preached his great sermon, "The Danger of an Unconverted Ministry."¹⁹ As he eloquently and passionately stated: "As a faithful Ministry is a great Ornament, Blessing, and Comfort, to the Church of GOD; even the Feet of such Messengers are beautiful: So on the contrary, an ungodly Ministry is a great Curse and Judgment: These Caterpillars labour to devour every green Thing."²⁰

Such a minister cannot be but a curse to the congregation so unfortunate as to be so led:

Is a blind Man fit to be a Guide in a very dangerous Way? Is a dead Man fit to bring others to Life? a mad Man fit to give Counsel in a Matter of life and Death? Is a possessed Man fit to cast out Devils? a Rebel, and Enemy to GOD, fit to be sent on an Embassy of Peace, to bring Rebels into a State of Friendship with GOD? a Captive bound in the Massy Chains of Darkness and Guilt, a proper Person to set others a Liberty? a Leper, or one that has Plague-Sores upon him, fit to be a good Physician? Is an ignorant Rustick, that has never been at Sea in his Life, fit to be a Pilot, to keep Vessels from being dashed to Pieces upon Rocks and Sand-banks? "Isn't an unconverted Minister like a Man who would learn others to swim, before he has learn'd it himself, and so is drowned in the Act, and dies like a Fool?"²¹

¹⁹ Gilbert Tennent, "The Danger of an Unconverted Ministry," in American Christianity: An Historical Interpretation With Representative Documents, ed. H. Shelton Smith, Robert T. Handy, and Lefferts A. Loetscher (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, n.d.), I:322-328.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 322.

²¹ Ibid., p. 326.

Therefore, as we are instructed in Scripture, "make your calling and election sure."²² Search your hearts and know the peace that passeth all understanding. Make certain that you know the assurance of your salvation, or you will cause confusion and stumbling among God's people.

Make certain also your call to the ministry. That is the confidence which will see you through theological education, and through the joys, trials, and sorrows of ministry. As Spurgeon asserted to the students of his own Preacher's College:

If any student in this room could be content to be a newspaper editor, or a grocer, or a farmer, or a doctor, or a lawyer, or a senator, or a king, in the name of heaven and earth let him go his way; he is not the man in whom dwells the Spirit of God in its fullness, for a man so filled with God would utterly weary of any pursuit but for that which his inmost soul pants. . . . We must feel that woe is unto us if we preach not the Gospel; the Word of God must be unto us as fire in our bones, otherwise, if we undertake the ministry, we shall be unhappy in it, and shall be of little service to those among whom we minister.²³

This is not a school for inquirers after ministry, but for ministers. The ministry is not a profession, it is a calling.

Fifth, the Danger of a Ministry Intended for the Church, but Alienated from the Church.

We have not been called as lords over the Church, but as servants for the Church. Furthermore, this is not a school for

²² 2 Peter 1:10.

²³ Charles Haddon Spurgeon, Lectures to My Students (London: Passmore and Alabaster, 1881), I:23-24.

religious specialists, but for ministers committed to the life and work of the local church.

Keep the Church ever in your mind as you study, as you prepare, as you learn, as you dream, and as you go. We have no excuse for our existence other than as an extension of the ministry of the local church. The congregation is our accountability, and we hold their trust in so far, and only in so far, as we are unquestionably committed to the faithful education and preparation of their ministers.

Do not hold the congregations under your scorn or think yourselves superior in insight or giftedness to the laypersons to whom and among whom you will minister. Cultivate a love for the Church which is in a line of faithfulness with the Fathers and Mothers of the Church, the Martyrs and the Reformers.

Avoid the danger of alienation from the local church by investing yourself in ministry during your seminary sojourn. Be active, be faithful, be watchful, and be humble as you serve and as others serve you in the community of faith. We expect you to be active regular members of a local church, and for you to be growing in grace even as you participate in the life, mission, and ministry of that congregation. We are to serve the Body of Christ, the assembly of the redeemed, the Church for which Christ died.

We welcome you back to this sacred place--this school of ministers--as we mark the beginning of a new academic year. May

this be for each of you a term of growth into godliness and into the fullness of the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ, Amen.