

# Do I Need to Go to Seminary to be a Pastor?



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Every seminary-trained pastor who emphasizes the helpfulness of seminary for those aspiring to ministry, at some point, will receive questions like these: “Do I really have to go to seminary to be a faithful pastor? Can’t I just stay home and read books? After all, isn’t that what Spurgeon did?”

These are not bad questions. I even get the skepticism toward an expensive, often residential degree. Put simply, one does not have to go to seminary to be a faithful pastor. After all, seminary training—as we know it today—is not explicitly in the Bible.

There have been faithful pastors for centuries who had no formal training. For many throughout church history, such training was simply not an option. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, pastors who have letters behind their names will receive a crown no more glorious than those who do not (cf. 1 Peter 5:4). At the end of time, what is required of stewards—seminary trained or otherwise—is that they be found trustworthy (cf. 1 Cor. 4:2).

Having said that, however, if a man wants to be faithful to the weighty calling of a shepherd and all that this sacred office entails, then yes, he must be trained by someone, somewhere! Because while seminary is not explicitly in the Bible, pastoral and theological training is (cf. 2 Tim. 2:2). In our context, seminary is often where that much-needed training is given. And in a day such as ours, with cultural chaos and complicated ecclesiological issues, perhaps the time has come when self-study will simply no longer do. In this article, I will present to you five reasons why the sacred office of a shepherd demands superior seminary training.

## POWERFUL PREACHING DEMANDS SKILLED PREPARATION

To learn to preach, you must have seasoned exegetes prepare you to handle the Word with precision. You need to be trained not only to prepare a sermon, but also to read your Bible. The truth is, we must be taught to accurately handle the Word—it doesn't come naturally to anyone. To be "able to teach" (1 Tim. 3:2) necessitates being well-taught, for embedded in discipleship is not only to be taught all that Christ commanded, but also to be taught to teach others also.

At the end of the day, we—as pastors—are not orators or motivational speakers, and we are not giving our people homilies or speeches. Rather, when we preach, we are engaging in the most sacred activity on the planet: we are speaking on behalf of the living God. The Word, preached with power and received with humility, is one of the central means by which the plan of salvation unfolds in this fallen world.

You might be able to impress a crowd with a speech, but that in no way qualifies you to preach, for even the mighty Apollos himself—a lion in the pulpit—still needed the training of a seasoned couple. How much more then do we need training.

## EXEGESIS DEMANDS EXACTNESS

Exegesis—drawing the meaning out of Scripture—demands precision in the original languages of the Bible (Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek). If a central aspect of a pastor’s ministry is to wrestle the meaning of the text out of a book (and it is), then we will want every tool at our disposal to accurately handle the Word (cf. 2 Tim. 2:15). And the most precise and effective tool available is a comfortability reading the biblical languages. When we neglect or minimize the languages, our precision with the biblical text begins to get fuzzy. Our confidence is no stronger than our precision.

John Piper put it this way: “It is difficult to preach week in and week out over the whole range of God’s revelation with depth and power if you are plagued with uncertainty when you venture beyond basic gospel generalities.”<sup>1</sup>

While there are a few geniuses out there who can learn the biblical languages entirely at their kitchen table, the rest of us need professors and classmates and deadlines—we need the 2 Timothy 2:2 model.

<sup>1</sup> John Piper, *Brothers, We Are Not Professionals: A Plea to Pastors for Radical Ministry*, Updated and expanded ed. (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishers, 2013), 99.

## BEING AN EQUIPPER DEMANDS EQUIPPING

One thing must be made clear to aspiring pastors and their future flocks: pastors are not program managers. They are equippers. Paul makes clear in Ephesians 4:11–12 that one of the central reasons leaders exist in the church is to “equip the saints for the work of ministry.” And the “work” Paul speaks of is the soul-work of “speaking the truth to one another in love” (v. 15).

This “speaking truth” is far more than just being honest with one another; it’s where each member owns one another’s spiritual maturity as their priority. Each member of a church needs to be trained and equipped by the leaders to speak the Word of God into one another’s lives. The health of any local church depends, in large measure, on the robust discipling of the saints to help one another mature in Christ.

The ability to help people love and care for one another requires a level of depth in a man—a pastoral wisdom and skill that is gleaned most often from seasoned, wiser churchmen. This is why seminary training exists—not only to produce the next generation of expositors, but also the next generation of equippers, who equip the flock for the mission-advancing health of the church.

## CONTENDING FOR THE FAITH DEMANDS CAREFUL INSTRUCTION

Did not Paul warn the Ephesian elders: “Savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock” (Acts 20:29)? Did not Peter give us ample notice that “there will be false teachers among you” (2 Peter 2:1)? Did not Jude tell the church to “contend earnestly for the faith” (Jude 1:3)? The church has been warned.

False teachers are rarely blatant. They likely won’t use the word “heresy” to describe their teaching. They are smooth and winsome. But their pursuit is the same—to seduce the church away from sound doctrine in a creative and engaging way. They come with novel insight and alternative renderings of passages, which you wonder why you never heard before. The difficult thing about false teachers, is that most of their teaching isn’t false. It’s about 80% true, and the other 20% is subtle and difficult to detect—at first.

Churches need leaders who know how to “hold fast the faithful . . . so that he will be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict.” Add that to the sacred list of what pastors are called to do: “exhort in sound doctrine” and “refute those who contradict.” Therefore, the protection of the flock and contending for the faith demands a rigorous thinking on Scripture that most people, on their own, are not prepared to do. Therefore, we need men—pastor-theologians—to train men to fend off wolves from the flock.

## REPLICATION DEMANDS RIGOROUS TRAINING

The goal of a local church is not merely to run programs or meet church growth criteria. It's not to build bigger barns (although we do want as many people saved as possible). Our aim as churches is to be healthy enough to multiply—to multiply disciples who make disciples who plant churches that make disciples, and on and on and on until the nations are reached with the gospel. This all begins with pastors investing and training others for the work of ministry.

Pastors must raise up and train other elders. Elders are not simply appointed; they are prayed for and taught and equipped and cultivated in the incubator of the local church. A pastor must mold the very elders he wishes to recruit. Thus, most pastors need something beyond what self-study can supply.

The greatest legacy of any pastor is not what he achieves in his own lifetime, but the impact of his life on faithful men that he himself trained. This kind of replication, however, requires specialized training that few can duplicate on their own.

# SUPERIOR TRAINING FOR A SACRED OFFICE

No one is saying that you can't be a pastor without going to seminary. What I am saying, however, is that the sacred office demands superior training. Because to shepherd the sheep, to feed the flock, and to lovingly lead the lambs, we need all the help we can get.



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