

EDITORIAL

A Case for the Seminary Today

— Brian J. Tabb —

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It is an honor to be installed as the third president of Bethlehem College and Seminary.¹ As an early graduate of The Bethlehem Institute and a longtime professor, I love this institution and am eager to lead us forward with God's help. Bethlehem College and Seminary equips men and women to treasure Christ above all things, to grow in wisdom and knowledge over a lifetime, and to glorify God in every sphere of life. Our Christian-hedonist, Classical, Great Commission-minded College aims to graduate mature men and women who are ready to witness for Christ with wisdom and wonder for the rest of their lives. Our Seminary prepares men to be mature, God-entranced pastors who will shepherd God's people with biblical clarity and Christ-exalting affection. We do all this to spread a passion for the supremacy of God in all things for the joy of all peoples through Jesus Christ.

In this inaugural address, I aim to offer a renewed case for the seminary today. Some analysts have announced “the ending of seminaries as we’ve known them.”² Others have offered guidance to adapt to the changing educational landscape.³ Notable seminaries have closed or contracted in recent years, and in the face of economic hardships, declining enrollments, and cultural pressures it's fair to wonder what sort of future seminary education has in the coming decades. Many schools have streamlined degree requirements and embraced online delivery options to offer students more flexibility in their theological training.⁴ Some seminaries now offer an array of programs beyond the traditional Master of Divinity, including degrees in biblical counseling, apologetics, humanitarian action, Christian leadership, and more.⁵ Doubtless many men and women around the world have benefited from expanded access to excellent theological teaching through formal and informal online resources—including TGC's new

¹ This column is based on Brian Tabb's inaugural address as president of Bethlehem College and Seminary, delivered at Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis on 11 October 2024.

² James Emery White, “The Ending of Seminaries as We’ve Known Them,” *Church & Culture*, 6 June 2022, <https://www.churchandculture.org/blog/2022/6/6/the-ending-of-seminaries>.

³ See, for example, Timothy Paul Jones et al., *Teaching the World: Foundations for Online Theological Education* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2017); Kristen Ferguson, *Excellence in Online Education: Creating a Christian Community on Mission* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2020); Daniel R. Day, *Remotely Close: A Practical Guidebook for Christian Online Higher Education* (Bloomington: Westbow, 2024).

⁴ 72 semester credits are the minimum requirement for M.Div. degrees, according to the ATS Commission Standards of Accreditation, 4.1, <https://www.ats.edu/Standards-Of-Accreditation>.

⁵ These examples are taken from the Liberty University Online website: <https://www.liberty.edu/online-at-liberty/divinity-degrees/>. According to the 2023–2024 report by the Association of Theological Schools, Liberty Theological Seminary is the largest US seminary with over 4,000 students (FTE): <https://tinyurl.com/3hnbwdkr>.

Carson Center for Theological Renewal.⁶ It has never been easier to enroll in seminary classes, and online programs do not require students to quit their jobs and relocate their families to focus full-time on pastoral preparation for three or four years. But does online seminary effectively equip aspiring pastors for decades of faithful, fruitful service to Christ's Church?

The great Princeton theologian B. B. Warfield cautioned, "A low view of the functions of the ministry will naturally carry with it a low conception of the training necessary for it."⁷

Indeed, pastoral ministry is about much more than coordinating church programs and conducting religious services. Pastor John Piper writes,

Christian preachers, more than all others, should know that people are starving for God.... If the fountain of living water does not flow from the mountain of God's sovereign grace on Sunday morning, will not the people hew for themselves cisterns on Monday, "broken cisterns that can hold no water" (Jer. 2:13)?⁸

God's Word reminds us, "If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task" (1 Tim 3:1). The apostle calls pastors "stewards of the mysteries of God," and insists that stewards "be found faithful" (1 Cor 4:1). What a solemn yet joyful responsibility to teach the Bible and to lead Christ's Church! If we grasp a biblical vision of the pastoral office, then we will agree with Dietrich Bonhoeffer: "The matter of the proper education of preachers of the gospel is worthy of our ultimate commitment."⁹

What then is the essential task of the seminary today? How should that task be accomplished? I contend that the seminary's essential task, in partnership with the local church, is to equip faithful pastors to teach God's Word and to lead God's people. Let's consider three components of principled pastoral training: (1) *entrusting* sound doctrine, (2) *expounding* God's Book, and (3) *exemplifying* a holy life. I'll offer biblical support for these points from Paul's letters to Timothy, glean wisdom from past generations, and highlight reasons why I'm passionate about the mission and model of Bethlehem Seminary.

1. Entrusting Sound Doctrine

First, *entrusting sound doctrine*. Second Timothy 2:1–2 offers one of the clearest biblical imperatives for training the next generation of church leaders:

You then, my child, be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus, and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses *entrust* [παράθου] to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also.

The Greek verb rendered "entrust" conveys committing something for safekeeping or transmission to others.¹⁰ Jesus uses this word for a servant entrusted with his master's property who will give an

⁶ <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/the-carson-center/>. See Brian J. Tabb and Benjamin L. Gladd, "Announcing the Carson Center for Theological Renewal," *Themelios* 49.1 (2024): 1–3.

⁷ Benjamin B. Warfield, "The Princeton Seminary Curriculum," *WRS* 15.2 (2008): 26.

⁸ John Piper, *The Supremacy of God in Preaching*, 3rd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021), 152–53.

⁹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Conspiracy and Imprisonment, 1940–1945*, ed. Mark S. Brocker, trans. Lisa E. Dahill, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works 16 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006), 265. Cf. Paul R. House, *Bonhoeffer's Seminary Vision: A Case for Costly Discipleship and Life Together* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015).

¹⁰ BDAG 772 (παράτιθημι, definition 3).

account of his stewardship (Luke 12:48). Three times the apostle speaks of guarding “the deposit” (παράθήκη), that which is entrusted (1 Tim 6:20; 2 Tim 1:12, 14). This deposit is “the gospel of the glory of the happy [μακάριοις] God,” the news that Jesus Christ fulfilled all of God’s promises through his righteous life, his saving death, and his victorious resurrection. Paul entrusts this gospel deposit to Timothy and exhorts him to “*follow the pattern of the sound words* that you have heard from me ... [and] *guard the good deposit* entrusted to you” (2 Tim 1:13–14). But the apostle’s vision does not stop with Timothy—he speaks here of four generations of gospel stewardship: (a) Paul (b) to Timothy (c) to “faithful men” (d) to “others.” Think of a wise man who plants acorns so that his grandchildren and great-grandchildren can enjoy the shade of beautiful oak trees. That’s the long-range foresight that fuels faithful investment in leadership development. In fact, the word “seminary” derives from the Latin *seminarium*, a seedbed. It’s an environment for planting gospel seeds and preparing pastors. This is why Bethlehem Seminary and other evangelical institutions must remain gladly grounded and guided by sound doctrine, as expressed in historic and contemporary confessions of faith.

The world’s oldest Baptist college was founded in Bristol, England, in 1720. The estate of the late Edward Terrill provided funding for a pastor “well skilled in the Greek and Hebrew tongues” who intended to “devote three afternoons in the week to the instruction of any number of young students, not exceeding twelve, who may be recommended by the churches, in the knowledge of the original languages, and other literature.”¹¹

Dr. Benjamin Foskett took up this calling and led the Bristol church and academy for thirty-eight years. Foskett trained at least sixty-four men including his successor, Hugh Evans. In a 1795 sermon, Dr. John Rippon (one of Evans’s noted students) charged the Bristol Academy students to be “holy and happy yourselves” and to “make others, many others, holy and happy.”¹² Do you hear the sweet notes of Christian hedonism in this seminary vision?

A commitment to prepare young men for ministry led the prince of preachers, C. H. Spurgeon, and his London church to establish the Pastors’ College in 1861. Historian Geoff Chang writes,

The tutors of the college were often not only scholars but also recognized elders in the church. They not only taught the students doctrine but also modeled godliness and leadership in the church.... The support of the [Tabernacle] members allowed the students to graduate without any debts. And as they participated in the worship, ministry, and discipline of a healthy church, the students gained a solid understanding of Baptist ecclesiology and a vision for pastoral ministry, “treasured up for future use.”¹³

A similar long-range vision motivated Pastors Tom Steller and John Piper and elders of Bethlehem Baptist Church to establish The Bethlehem Institute in 1998, which is the forerunner of Bethlehem College and Seminary.¹⁴ Like the Bristol Academy and Spurgeon’s Pastors’ College, Bethlehem’s pastor-

¹¹ John Rippon, “Towards A History of Bristol Baptist College, England,” *The Baptist Memorial and Monthly Chronicle* (1843). Reprinted at the *Baptist History Homepage*, <https://tinyurl.com/bdevdbyx>. Cf. David Bebbington, “The Significance of Bristol Baptist College,” *The Baptist Quarterly* 53 (2022): 149–51.

¹² Rippon, “Towards A History of Bristol Baptist College.”

¹³ Geoff Chang, “The Pastors’ College: Spurgeon’s Vision for Church-Based Training,” *The Spurgeon Center*, 12 January 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/2kf88ajv>.

¹⁴ See Tom Steller, “The Vision and History of The Bethlehem Institute,” in *For the Fame of God’s Name: Essays in Honor of John Piper*, ed. C. Samuel Storms and Justin Taylor (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 508–15.

professors entrust sound doctrine to seminary apprentices in a God-centered, missions minded, highly relational, church-based school generously supported by the saints. I have benefited personally from this education in serious joy. And I rejoice that there are hundreds of “holy and happy” Bethlehem grads filling pulpits and serving Christ across this country and around the world, making others “holy and happy” as well.

2. Expounding God’s Book

Second, pastors must be equipped to *expound* holy Scripture as approved workmen, “rightly handling the word of truth.” I put this apostolic charge at the top of every seminary course syllabus: “Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth” (2 Tim 2:15).

“Rightly handling” conveys care and precision. This Greek verb, ὀρθοτομέω, means “to cut straight” or “guide along a straight path.” We confess that “all Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (2 Tim 3:16). So it is vitally important for the seminary to train pastors to be Bible men, wielding the sword of the Spirit, which comes to us in a sheath of Greek and Hebrew.¹⁵

Consider the years of rigorous training required to become a neurosurgeon or an army general. Harvard Medical School does not prepare doctors virtually, nor does West Point train officers online. Why would we take the preparation of preachers of God’s Word less seriously?¹⁶ Over a century ago Warfield wrote,

If the minister is the mouth-piece of the Most High, charged with a message to deliver, to expound and enforce ... nothing will suffice ... but ... to know the Book; to know it at first hand; and to know it through and through. And what is required first of all for training men for such a ministry is that the Book should be given them in its very words as it has come from God’s hand and in the fullness of its meaning, as that meaning has been ascertained by the labors of generations of men of God who have brought to bear upon it all the resources of sanctified scholarship and consecrated thought.... A comprehensive and thorough theological training is the condition of a really qualified ministry. When we satisfy ourselves with a less comprehensive and thorough theological training, we are only condemning ourselves to a less qualified ministry.¹⁷

¹⁵ This line is adapted from Luther: “The languages are the sheath in which this sword of the Spirit [Eph. 6:17] is contained; they are the casket in which this jewel is enshrined; they are the vessel in which this wine is held; they are the larder in which this food is stored.... If through our neglect we let the languages go (which God forbid!), we shall ... lose the gospel.” Martin Luther, “To the Councilmen of All Cities in Germany That They Establish and Maintain Christian Schools (1524),” in *Martin Luther’s Basic Theological Writings*, ed. William R. Russell and Timothy F. Lull, 3rd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012), 463.

¹⁶ For a similar emphasis, see Lewis Guest IV, “We Are Soul Surgeons: Why I Would Never Skip Seminary,” *Desiring God*, 7 November 2019, <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/we-are-soul-surgeons>.

¹⁷ Warfield, “The Princeton Seminary Curriculum,” 29. Machen expresses similar sentiments: “If you are to tell what the Bible does say, you must be able to read the Bible for yourself. And you cannot read the Bible for yourself unless you know the languages in which it was written.... Sad is it for the church if it has only ministers whose preparation for their special calling is of the customary superficial kind.” J. Gresham Machen, “Westminster Theological Seminary: Its Purpose and Plan,” in *Selected Shorter Writings*, ed. D. G. Hart (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R

J. Gresham Machen lamented in 1918 that “in many colleges, the study of Greek is almost abandoned” in favor of more “practical” studies.¹⁸ In recent years many seminaries have made Greek and Hebrew exegesis optional in their M.Div. programs (not to mention other seminary graduate degrees that require no coursework in biblical languages). This is a concerning trend. Without adequate training in Greek, how can a pastor rightly handle the apostle’s glorious 200-word prayer in Ephesians 1:3–14? Without Hebrew, how can a preacher unpack the expansive acrostic of Psalm 119? Original language exegesis is difficult, but it is not drudgery. Studying God’s word in Greek and Hebrew should lead us to sing:

Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good! Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him! (Ps 34:8)

Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! ... To him be the glory forever. (Rom 11:33–36)

The well-equipped expositor carefully and prayerfully studies God’s Book in the original languages. He is no second hander but assiduously attends to what the text actually says, not just what commentators say. The seminary today must employ Bible-saturated professors and maintain a Bible-saturated curriculum to prepare faithful pastors to rightly handle God’s Book.

3. Exemplifying a Holy Life

Training pastors involves *entrusting* sound doctrine and equipping them to *expound* the Word of God in Greek and Hebrew. It also entails *exemplifying* a holy life. Paul exhorts the Ephesian elders, “Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock” (Acts 20:28), and he instructs Timothy, “Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching” (1 Tim 4:16).

As the Scottish pastor Robert Murray McCheyne once wrote: “Your own soul is your first and greatest care.... It is not great talents God blesses so much as great likeness to Jesus. A holy minister is an awful weapon in the hand of God.”¹⁹ I agree but would add: a holy *and happy* minister, whose soul is supremely satisfied in God, is a mighty weapon in the Lord’s hand.

First Timothy 3 sets forth qualifications for those who oversee God’s household. The list begins, perhaps surprisingly, with a holy *aspiration* for the work (v. 1). David Mathis says, “Christ grabs his pastors by the heart; he doesn’t twist them by the arm.”²⁰ Aspiring pastors should be “above reproach” or “blameless”—the standard is not perfection but a godly pattern, a reputation for integrity, a track record of faithfulness at home and in public.

Publishing, 2004), 188–89. Or as Luther writes, “Let us be sure of this: we will not long preserve the gospel without the [biblical] languages.” Luther, “To the Councilmen,” 463.

¹⁸ J. Gresham Machen, “The Minister and His Greek Testament,” in *Selected Shorter Writings*, ed. D. G. Hart (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2004), 211.

¹⁹ Iain H. Murray, “Robert Murray M’Cheyne,” *Banner of Truth*, 12 November 2001, <https://tinyurl.com/3deadnpc>. Similarly, the English Puritan Richard Baxter once wrote, “If the work of the Lord be not soundly done upon your own hearts, how can you expect that he should bless your labours for ... others?” Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor*, ed. William Orme, The Practical Works of the Rev. Richard Baxter 14 (London: James Duncan, 1830), 68.

²⁰ David Mathis, *Workers for Your Joy: The Call of Christ on Christian Leaders* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022), 46–47.

For current and aspiring pastors, *self*-examination is important yet insufficient. God's Word calls us to "take care" and "exhort *one another* every day" (Heb 3:12–13). Pastoral ministry has been called a "dangerous calling."²¹ It is spiritually perilous without regular, joyful communion with the Lord and meaningful accountability with others. Aspiring pastors should study, pray, and serve in intentional, face-to-face community with mentors, peers, and fellow church members.²² As the Proverb says, "Iron sharpens iron."²³ So-called "virtual learning communities" are a poor substitute.

Seminary students not only need excellent instruction in theology, church history, homiletics, and exegesis; they also need to observe and emulate faithful models. Paul frequently exhorts the churches, "Imitate me."²⁴ He reminds Timothy, "You ... have followed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness, my persecutions.... [So] continue in what you have learned...." (2 Tim 3:10–14). It is not enough for seminarians to "follow" popular theologians online and to "like" their social media posts. They need to follow faithful pastors to their homes, to the hospital, to elder meetings and prayer meetings, to emulate their lives and ministries. After all, we are preparing men to lead real, embodied congregations, not online religious groups.

I am grateful to God for outstanding professors who equipped me to study God's Word and also took an interest in my life. I am grateful to God for the pastors, elders, and church members who invited me into their homes, met me for coffee, took me to conferences, and modeled what it looks like to be a godly husband, father, and servant in the church.

At Bethlehem we call our seminary students "pastoral apprentices." They engage in hands-on ministry in partner churches under the guidance of seasoned shepherds. I am grateful to God for these faithful pastors and commend their personal commitment to mentoring future ministers. Don Carson writes, "We are called to emulate worthy Christian leaders. We are called to be worthy Christian leaders whom others will emulate. God help us."²⁵

Conclusion

I contend that the essential task of the seminary today remains largely unchanged from the aims of Bristol Academy, Spurgeon's Pastor's College, Warfield's Princeton, and Machen's Westminster. In vital partnership with the church, the seminary must continue to focus on equipping pastors to teach God's Word and to lead God's people. Pastoral preparation entails *entrusting* sound doctrine, *expounding* God's Book, and *exemplifying* a holy life. As online programs proliferate, aspiring pastors should prefer the ancient paths of rigorous face-to-face seminary education with intentional mentoring by godly pastors and professors and deep friendship with fellow students.

Let me close with final encouragements to several groups of people.

²¹Paul David Tripp, *Dangerous Calling: Confronting the Unique Challenges of Pastoral Ministry* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012). I reflect further on this topic in an earlier column, "Fulfill Your Ministry," *Themelios* 44.2 (2019): 211–15.

²²Bonhoeffer writes, "He who is alone with his sin is utterly alone," but "Our brother breaks the circle of self-deception." Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together: The Classic Exploration of Christian Community* (New York: HarperOne, 1954), 110, 116.

²³Prov 27:17.

²⁴See 1 Cor 4:16; 11:1; Phil 3:17; cf. 2 Thess 3:7, 9.

²⁵D. A. Carson, *Basics for Believers: An Exposition of Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 95.

To Teachers and Leaders of Seminaries: Hold fast to historic Christian doctrine, and treasure God's trustworthy Word. Cautionary tales abound of institutions that have drifted from their founding confessions and missions—may that not be true of us. Continue to follow the ancient paths, where the good way is (Jer 6:18), as you seek to glorify and enjoy God and build up his church through your teaching and scholarship.²⁶

To Pastors: Continue to faithfully feed and lead Christ's sheep, facing the difficulties and disappointments of ministry with the joyous day of Christ ever in view.²⁷ In this life we are sorrowful *yet always rejoicing* (2 Cor 6:10). Receive this encouragement from John Newton:

Every blessing we receive from [the Lord] is a token of his favour, and a pledge of that far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory which he has reserved for us. O! to hear him say at last, "Well done, good and faithful servant, enter thou into the joy of thy Lord!" will be a rich amends for all that we can lose, suffer, or forbear, for his sake.²⁸

To Seminarians and Aspiring Ministers: Pastoral ministry is a worthy calling, "a noble task" (1 Tim 3:1). I urge you to give yourself to serious study without taking shortcuts. Watch your life and doctrine, pursuing holiness and happiness in God. Learn the biblical languages and sound theology with professors and peers that know you and care about you. Love the local church. And find joyful, faithful pastors whose lives are worthy of emulation.²⁹

To Church Members: Pray for and encourage your pastors and men aspiring to pastoral ministry. Pray for and invest generously in faithful seminaries that hold fast to historic Christian doctrine and God's inerrant Word. Remember the examples of the Bristol Academy and Spurgeon's Pastors' College, where church members generously supported seminarians so that they could graduate debt-free and launch immediately into church ministry—investments "treasured up for future use."

Jesus has promised to build his church, and the church in every generation needs faithful shepherds. Seminaries are servants of the church, tasked with preparing future pastors who will guard the gospel deposit and teach others to obey all that Jesus commanded. May we recommit ourselves to the task of equipping pastors for Christ's church with biblical conviction, counter-cultural courage, and confident joy in our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. May God help us.

²⁶ Similarly, J. V. Fesko, "The Goal of Theological Scholarship: Academy or the Church?" *Themelios* 49.3 (2024).

²⁷ Phil 1:6; 1 Cor 1:8.

²⁸ John Newton, "Letter XI," in *The Works of the Rev. John Newton*, 12 vols. (London: T. Hamilton, 1821), 2:45–46.

²⁹ For more biblical and practical wisdom on this topic, see Bobby Jamieson, *The Path to Being a Pastor: A Guide for the Aspiring*, 9Marks (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021).