

Theology Matters

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The Confession that the PCUSA Needs

by John P. Burgess

The writing of a new confession of faith is not undertaken lightly, for “any proposed change to the *Book of Confessions* should enhance the church’s understanding and declaration of who and what it is, what it believes, and what it resolves to do (*Book of Order*, F-2.01).”¹

As a teaching elder who exercises his ministry as a professor of theology at a PCUSA-related institution, Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, I write in response to the action of the 225th General Assembly (2022) to form a special committee to write a new confession of faith for consideration for adoption by the Presbyterian Church (USA).

I believe that the time is not right for a new confession of faith. Rather, what we need today is:

*a confession of our present *inability* to make a common confession of faith

*and, nevertheless, a clarification of *what we would confess*, were we able to

A review of the history of, and the theological rationale for, Reformed confessions of faith will help us understand our situation.

Distinctive Characteristics of Reformed Confessing

Reformed confessions have three distinguishing characteristics: they emerge from the church’s shared identity in prayer, worship, and service; from a conviction that God has given the church a Word from Scripture that the church must declare; and from the

church’s awareness of its specific historical context. Today, we will ask whether proposals for new confessions of faith share these features.

Shared prayer, worship, and service. Reformed confessing had its first blossoming at the time of the Reformation. In fewer than fifty years (1523—1566), twelve confessions of faith were composed. Some were directed to the civil authorities and the citizens of particular towns—Bern, Basel, Lausanne, or Geneva. Often these confessions were prepared to present the Protestant position in public debates with representatives of the Roman Catholic Church.

Other confessions embraced larger geographical units—Scotland, France, or the Netherlands—where representatives of the churches had assembled to declare in writing their loyalty to the teachings of the Reformation. As religious minorities, they knew how much they needed one another’s encouragement and guidance.

What made this Reformed confessing distinctive was that it arose out of particular communities that shared a deep life of prayer, worship, and service. Reformed confessions were not to be imposed from on high. Rather, they were to come from below—from debate and discussion on the ground among people who knew each other personally and lived out the Christian life together.

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This is not to say that Reformed confessing spoke only to a local context. On the contrary, those who composed and endorsed a Reformed confession of faith understood themselves to be speaking to the church as a whole. Members of a particular community of prayer, worship, and service made *their* confession, but they *shared* it with others.

They shared it because they hoped that others would *benefit* from it. Representative is the preface to the Scots Confession:

We are considering our own weaker brethren, to whom we would communicate our deepest thoughts, lest they be troubled or carried away by [Satan].

Moreover, those who made confession welcomed correction. In the words again of the Scots Confession:

If any man will note in our Confession any chapter or sentence contrary to God's Holy Word, [may it] please him of his gentleness and for Christian charity's sake to inform us of it in writing . . . [and] we shall give him satisfaction from the mouth of God, that is, from Holy Scripture, or else we will alter whatever he can prove to be wrong.

A Word of the Lord from Scripture. This statement from the Scots Confession identifies a second key dimension of Reformed confessing: a confession of faith is to be based on an *explication of Scripture*, in the confidence that the Bible sets forth a living Word of God for us today.

Reformed confessing has aimed at clarifying biblical teaching, while rejecting its misinterpretation and distortion. John Calvin had declared that his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* were a guide to reading Scripture, and Reformed confessions have followed suit. That does not mean that the confessions simply collected scriptural proof texts. Rather, Reformed confessions have sought to set forth a biblical theology that offers a compelling and cohesive vision of life before God.

This commitment to setting forth God's living Word in Scripture has meant that Reformed confessions have been characterized by a pattern of affirmation and negation. They have affirmed the great truths that the Reformation sought to recover from the New Testament and the ancient church, such as "the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit"; "Jesus Christ is Lord"; and "there is salvation in no other name." On the basis of these positive truths, Reformed confessions have rejected nontrinitarian theology, loyalty to other gods, and salvation through one's own efforts or through the mediation of church authorities.

It is important to note that in Reformed confessions, the affirmations have always had theological priority. Indeed, in the Reformed manner of making confession, only in the light of God's gracious, saving work can false teaching be identified and rejected. For this reason, Reformed confessions have focused on, and given most of their space to, explicating God's redemptive acts in Jesus Christ. Secondly, however, they have not shied away from discussing where other theological positions have gone wrong.

This pattern of affirmation preceding negation is most evident in three later Reformed documents included in the *Book of Confessions*. In explicating the Ten Commandments as a guide to Christian living, the seventeenth-century Westminster Larger Catechism identifies the "duties required" by each commandment, prior to the "sins forbidden." In the twentieth century, the Theological Declaration of Barmen makes the pattern even more explicit. Each of its six theses begins with scriptural citations. Next, and as a theological explication of those Scriptures, comes an affirmation of the God whom we know in Jesus Christ. Only then is there a rejection of false teaching. The Confession of Belhar adopts a similar pattern: "we believe" always precedes "we reject," and the positive affirmations of "we believe" are developed more fully than the negations of "we reject."

An awareness of the church's present historical context. Reformed Christians have understood their confessions of faith to emerge from a shared life of prayer, worship, and service; to be based on Scripture; and to be *historically situated*. Reformed confessions of faith seek to relate God's Word to their particular historical contexts.

Other Christian traditions have regarded particular confessions of faith as timeless statements. Eastern Orthodox churches use only the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed from the fourth century. The Roman Catholic Church recognizes three confessions of the early church—the Nicene-Constantinopolitan, the Athanasian, and the Apostles' Creeds—while taking the Apostles' Creed to be the most ancient and basic of them. In the sixteenth century, Lutheran churches adopted the *Book of Concord*, which includes the three ancient creeds as well as key dogmatic statements composed by Luther and Melancthon. Nothing has been added since.

In contrast, Reformed churches have argued that new historical circumstances may call forth new acts of confession. As the preface to the Confession of 1967 notes, "No one type of confession is exclusively valid, no one statement is irreformable." For nearly two hundred years, Presbyterian churches in the United States adhered to one confessional document, the Westminster Confession of Faith, but amended it several times in light

of changing historical circumstances. In 1967, the United Presbyterian Church (USA), arguing that Westminster alone was inadequate, adopted a new confession of faith, the Confession of 1967.

This does not mean that the church adheres only to contemporary confessions of faith. Older confessions may also speak powerfully into the present.² In worship, Presbyterians regularly confess the Nicene and Apostles' Creeds. For nearly three hundred years, the Reformed church in Basel asked its members to take an oath of loyalty annually to their confession of faith of 1534. At the time of adopting the Confession of 1967, the United Presbyterian Church (USA) created a *Book of Confessions* that included key confessional statements from the ancient church, the Reformation (including Westminster), and the twentieth century. The church continues to ask teaching and ruling elders to affirm the confessions' "essential tenets" and to be "instructed and led" by the confessions.

In emphasizing the historical character of every confession, Reformed churches have understood that confessing requires both confidence and humility. The church is to make confession only when it believes that it truly has a new Word that the Lord commands it to speak—and then the church is to speak boldly. Nevertheless, the church also acknowledges that it may have heard wrongly, that it may have mistaken its words and its agenda for God's. The church sets forth a new confession of faith in a spirit of calling upon God to make right in its words what the church itself is not able to.

In historical practice, this has meant that Reformed churches have been generally reluctant to promulgate new confessions of faith. The great twentieth-century Swiss Reformed theologian Karl Barth asserted that only a *status confessionis*, a situation in which the very life of the church is at stake, justifies the composing of a new confession. He himself felt this was the case during the time of Nazi Germany, thus leading to his involvement in writing the Theological Declaration of Barmen in 1934. However, over the next thirty-four years of his life, he did not see a compelling reason for the church to prepare another confession of faith, despite the many challenges that the church faced from new forms of heresy and injustice.

In sum, according to Reformed understanding, a new confession of faith is most likely to speak authoritatively when it has met three conditions: 1) it has emerged out of the church's shared prayer, worship, and service; 2) it has been written in the confidence that the Scriptures set forth positive affirmations of God's living presence and work among us; and 3) it is understood to be historically situated—necessary for the present moment but open to reform.³

Why a New Confession?

The flurry of confession writing at the time of the Reformation was motivated by a desire to clarify the church's foundational teachings about God in Jesus Christ. Today, the interest in adopting new confessions has been accelerated by a concern to declare the church's commitment to justice. Although General Assemblies and their agencies have already adopted numerous statements on justice, the church (in part? as a whole?) seems to keep wanting something more. Just what, then?

Over the last sixty years, the Presbyterian Church (USA) has adopted three confessions of faith: the Confession of 1967, "A Brief Statement of Faith" (1991), and the Confession of Belhar (adopted in 1986 by the Dutch Reformed Mission Church in South Africa, and approved by the PCUSA in 2016 for inclusion in its *Book of Confessions*). The 223rd General Assembly (2018) voted to initiate consideration of Martin Luther King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail" (1963) for confessional status. However, the King family, which owns the copyright to the document, refused the denomination permission to use it.

The three overtures that came to the 225th General Assembly (2022) suggest that the church has not "kept up" with current social movements for justice. While noting that various PCUSA statements and position papers have repudiated racism, the overture from the General Assembly Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Relations contends that the church has not yet investigated "the extent to which our own institutions and common life have benefited from the sins of racism and racialized supremacy."⁴

The overture from Arkansas Presbytery asserts that the church has not attended adequately to theological anthropology and interconnected ethical issues, "such as love, justice, sexual identity, equality, immigrant status, ecology, and reconciliation."⁵ The overture from the Synod of the Northeast includes "A Confession for Such a Time as This," which accuses the church of helping "to maintain systems that perpetuate injustice" against persons of color; of participating "in violence against women, LGBTQI+ persons, and others"; of making choices that "have led to the deaths of countless [migrants]"; and of failing "to be good stewards of God's very good creation."⁶

The overtures from Arkansas Presbytery and the General Assembly Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Relations acknowledge the importance of the Confession of Belhar but argue that it does not go far enough. The Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Relations makes the point succinctly: "false teachings will continue to find a foothold in the hearts of believers, in the practice of congregational life, and in the structural and

institutional life of the PC(USA) [until it] develops, adopts, and lives into its own confession.”

Taken together, the overtures and the Assembly action suggest that new confessions function primarily as calls for justice. Moreover, they will be directed, first, to the church, asking the church to confess its complicity in injustice and to reform itself. Older confessions are inadequate, because they do not speak directly to specific injustices that contemporary American society perpetuates and in which the church itself participates. Adopting a confession will commit the church as a whole to work more fully for justice, than do the church’s present, fragmentary efforts.

What are we to make of these arguments? Would a new confession truly accomplish something that other General Assembly documents have not? The special committee may wish to give greater attention, than do the overtures, to the deep commitment to justice already set forth not only in the Confession of Belhar but also more broadly in the *Book of Confessions*, for the “Book of Confessions as a whole enriches our understanding of what it means to be Reformed Christians [and] helps us escape the provincialism to which we have been prone.”⁷⁷

A Confessional Concern for Social Justice

It would be good for the church to recall the treasure that it already has in its *Book of Confessions*. Social justice has been an enduring confessional theme since the Reformation. The church has long seen that its teaching about God in Jesus Christ has practical implications for the Christian life personally and communally. God’s righteousness in Jesus Christ is the foundation for our commitment to justice.

As noted earlier, the Westminster Larger Catechism explicates the Ten Commandments as a comprehensive guide to the Christian life, including a commitment to justice. Representative is the sixth commandment, “Thou shalt not kill.” The “duties required” include “comforting and succoring the distressed, and protecting and defending the innocent.” Among the “sins forbidden” are “hatred, envy, . . . oppression, . . . and whatever else tends to the destruction of the life of any.”

The eighth commandment, “Thou shalt not steal,” requires “rendering to everyone his due,” moderation in use of “worldly goods,” and “an endeavor by all just and lawful means to procure, preserve, and further the wealth and outward estate of others.” Forbidden are “man-stealing [slavery], . . . fraudulent dealing, . . . injustice and unfaithfulness in contracts, . . . engrossing commodities to enhance the price [what today we call “monopolies”], . . . and all unjust or sinful ways of taking or withholding from our neighbor what belongs to him, or of enriching ourselves.”

The ninth commandment calls for a commitment to “preserving and promoting . . . truth, . . . [and] defending [others’] innocence.” The commandment rejects “holding our peace when iniquity calleth for either a reproof from ourselves, or a complaint to others” (compare “For Such a Time as This,” which laments that “we have not spoken up and out against the vilifying” of others).

The concern for justice is a steady drumbeat in the church’s confessions from the twentieth century. According to the Theological Declaration of Barmen, the church “calls to mind the Kingdom of God, God’s commandment and righteousness, and thereby the responsibility both of rulers and the ruled” for “justice and peace.” It rejects a political order that would “become the single and totalitarian order of human life.”

Later twentieth-century confessions help specify what constitutes justice. The Confession of 1967 includes concern for racial and economic justice, areas also identified for attention in a new confession. C67 calls for breaking down “every form of discrimination based on racial or ethnic difference.” The church labors “for the abolition of all racial discrimination.” Moreover, “enslaving poverty in a world of abundance is an intolerable violation of God’s good creation. . . . The cause of the world’s poor is the cause of his disciples.”

C67 is also significant in calling the church to repent of its own failures—something that the overtures to the 225th General Assembly (2022) emphasize. According to C67, “congregations, individuals, or groups of Christians who exclude, dominate, or patronize their fellow [human beings], however subtly, resist the Spirit of God and bring contempt on the faith which they profess.” Similarly, “a church that is indifferent to poverty, or evades responsibility in economic matters, or is open to one social class only, or expects gratitude for its beneficence makes a mockery of reconciliation and offers no acceptable worship to God.”

A Brief Statement of Faith calls on the church is “to hear the voices of peoples long silenced, and to work with others for justice, freedom, and peace.” A Brief Statement particularly affirms human equality (God “makes everyone equally in God’s image, male and female, of every race and people,” and calls both “women and men . . . to all ministries of the Church”) and responsibility for the environment (“we exploit neighbor and nature, and threaten death to the planet entrusted to our care”).

While emphasizing race, the Confession of Belhar’s commitment to justice goes well beyond it. The church “must stand by people in any form of suffering and need. . . . [It] must witness against and strive against any form of injustice.” Like C67, Belhar does not hesitate to call the church to account: “We confess our guilt, in that we

have not always witnessed clearly enough in our situation” (part of the “Accompanying Letter”).

Where does this leave us? A new confession of faith may specify additional social groups who cry out for justice today. Moreover, a new confession may use more accessible, present-day language to speak of what justice requires. But a new confession will not break new ground in emphasizing the church’s responsibility for justice. Perhaps our need is less for a new confession of faith, and more for renewing our commitment to what our present confessions already demand.

Shared Life, Scriptural Word, & Historical Context

Reformed confessing takes place in responsible freedom before God. As the special committee meets in prayer and thoughtful deliberation, it will seek to respond faithfully to a God who is free to call the church to new insight but also to direct the church to earlier insight. Therefore, lessons from the past may strengthen the church’s ability to make confession in the present. Let us return, then, to what we have identified as distinctive characteristics of Reformed confessions of faith.

Will a new confession of faith emerge from a shared life of prayer, worship, and service? In an era in which secular rhythms of life reshape (and weaken) church participation, Presbyterian congregations often have a limited sense of a common life. Moreover, congregations do their ministry largely in isolation from each other. Presbyteries once cultivated a shared identity of prayer, worship, and service, but now focus for the most part on “business.” Life at higher judicatory levels has become increasingly defined by struggles for power behind a veneer of prayer, worship, and service.

The special committee, representing the church’s diverse constituencies from different parts of the country, will do its work at an even more abstracted level. The current budget of \$40,000 translates to approximately \$2,500 per member, enough for only two or possibly three in-person gatherings, with other meetings presumably to take place by Zoom. Members will have limited opportunity to shape a common life in a short amount of time over long distances, although it is possible that they could ask a future Assembly to extend their work.

An additional challenge faces the special committee. The originating overtures have already identified what in their view needs to be confessed; now the rest of the church simply needs to be brought up to speed. This easily gives the impression that the special committee will simply deliver a new confession from “on high.”

To be sure, the General Assembly approved formation of the special committee by a margin of nine to one, but there is less evidence of a groundswell of support or

interest at the church’s grassroots. The special committee will have its work cut out for it to relate a new confession of faith to the many local contexts in which Presbyterians gather to pray, worship, and serve. For a “[new] confessional statement should prove itself foundational to the church’s life and faith before it is proposed for inclusion in the church’s confessional standards”⁸—even if that takes many years.

Will a new confession of faith be written in the confidence that the Scriptures set forth positive affirmations of God’s living presence and work among us? A striking feature of the overtures to write a new confession is their spirited criticism of the church. Indeed, they begin not from new insight into God’s redemptive work in the world, but rather from the church’s manifest failures to work for justice. The Confessions of 1967 and Belhar do not hesitate to call the church to account, but they do so only after an extended presentation of a biblical vision of reconciliation.

For the overture from Arkansas Presbytery, the church is failing because it lacks an adequate theological anthropology. The Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Relations sees the problem as a church that is unrepentant: indeed, the church will not be able to develop new confessional statements until it first looks backwards and practices “the act of confessing its complicity.”

“For Such a Time as This” takes a similar tack. Rather than moving from affirmation to negation (as do Barmen and Belhar), it first “rejects” specific sins of injustice, next “confesses” the church’s complicity in those sins, and only then “affirms” God’s gracious work in the world. Representative is its first thesis:

We reject the twin heresies of white supremacy and racism ...

We confess that we have ... helped to maintain the systems that perpetuate injustice against persons of color ...

We affirm that God created all people unique and beloved in God’s image. ...

A difficult challenge again faces the special committee: Does it clearly have a living Word of God to offer to the church—indeed, that it must risk offering the church, because earlier confessions have not? Is that Word framed by a careful exposition of Scripture? If so, will the committee be able to affirm that grace precedes law, that God’s promise precedes God’s condemnation, and that our recognition of God’s saving work precedes our ability to repent of our sin?

Will a new confession of faith acknowledge our present historical situation—and will it speak confidently yet

humbly into the present moment? The overtures to write a new confession tell us that certain ideologies and practices of social injustice threaten the very life of the church today. The special committee will determine whether the church indeed finds itself in a *status confessio-nis* that demands a new confession. But the committee may also determine that the church is already clear about what it is called to say and do. Writing a new confession of faith is not the only way—and not necessarily the best way—to combat heresies and injustices.

The special committee will carefully reflect on why the church keeps calling for new confessions but often forgets about its earlier ones. How can the *Book of Confessions* as a whole better inform the life of the church? How can teaching and ruling elders more fully live out their vows to the confessions? If the church adopts a new confession, how can the church truly live into it, along with its other confessions?

None of the overtures to write a new confession acknowledges its own limited historical perspective, or that the church may be able to speak to some justice issues (racism) more clearly than to others (“corporate capitalism”). The overture from Arkansas Presbytery rightly identifies theological anthropology as a major concern but does not add that the church may need more time than a special committee will have, to take adequately into account the relation of new scientific research to the church’s key theological affirmations about what it means to be human.

Similarly, one may affirm “For Such a Time as This” in its condemnation of xenophobia but wish to note, as the statement does not, that every country has a limited capacity to receive immigrants fairly and helpfully. To be sure, saying that an issue is “complex” can be a form of avoidance, but it can also be a recognition that the church’s judgments are still too limited and fallible to be helpful on certain matters. God sometimes asks of us patience, not abstract declarations that are little more than empty slogans.

Preliminary Work

Given these concerns, I believe that the church is not yet ready to prepare or adopt a new confession of faith. We still have much work to do in the three areas that we have identified as necessary preconditions for Reformed confessing.

Shared prayer, worship, and service: National church structures are called to strengthen congregations and local ministries. In a time in which many congregations have dwindling numbers and resources, this support and encouragement is all the more important. Moreover, congregations benefit by shaping a common life. Only as Presbyterians learn to pray, worship, and serve *together*

—to deepen communion (*koinonia*), both within their own congregations and with other communities of faith—will we grow in our capacity to make confession together.

A Word of the Lord from Scripture: Sociological studies have determined that most Presbyterians do not read the Bible regularly. Few Presbyterians attend worship weekly, to hear the Scripture read and proclaimed; even fewer attend Bible study classes. Moreover, while pastors read the Scriptures to prepare for preaching or teaching, many do not read the Bible devotionally, as a “two-edged sword, piercing to ... the thoughts and intentions of the mind.” Only as Presbyterians grow in their experience of *God’s living Word in Scripture*, will we grow in our capacity to make confession together.

Awareness of our particular historical situation: Presbyterians’ historical context has changed dramatically in recent decades. Membership numbers have steeply declined, and the church’s social influence has diminished. Presbyterians are used to thinking of themselves as part of an important cultural majority, but increasingly we are a minority. Indeed, Christianity itself is for most Americans now just one religious/spiritual option among many. Only as Presbyterians learn to understand their new *historical situation*, with both its possibilities and its limitations, will we grow in our capacity to make confession together.

It is striking that none of the overtures calling for a new confession of faith mentions either the minority status of Presbyterians (and Christians) in American society, or one other matter of grave concern. Over the past sixty years, even as the church has been writing new confessions, it has experienced deep conflict and division. Ministers, members, and congregations have left the PCUSA and joined the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), the Evangelical Presbyterian Church (EPC), ECO: A Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians, or other denominations.

Some of the social justice issues to which the originating overtures call attention remain deeply controversial among those Presbyterians who remain in the PCUSA. If the day comes that the church is ready to write a new confession of faith, the church will need not only bold words but also pastoral sensitivity to those who in Christian conscience hold a different position.

A Call to Confess

I have come to a preliminary conclusion that the special committee is called not to write a new confession but rather to confess the church’s present *inability* to make a common confession of faith.

*Our shared identity is too fragile. We first need to strengthen our practices of prayer, worship, and service both within and between our congregations, and in our presbyteries and other judicatory bodies.

*Our encounter with Scripture is still too haphazard. We first need to deepen our disciplines of receiving the Scriptures as setting forth a living Word of God.

*Our assessment of our present historical context is not yet realistic enough. We first need to acknowledge and understand the increasingly secular context in which we are called to set forth the gospel.

I would therefore like to see the special committee move in a direction that in my judgment is more pressing and promising than a new confession of faith. The committee will have done the church a great service if it clarifies *what we would confess*, were we able to. By this I mean, a confession that precedes any call for justice with a recognition of God’s faithfulness to a church that is *weak*.⁹ In my words:

We confess that Jesus makes his disciples “salt of the earth, the light of the world.” Presbyterians (and

Christians) in North America are now in a missionary situation. This is not reason for despair. Christianity has been and will be a creative force, when it is in the minority. The Holy Spirit will be teaching us how to witness in word and deed to God’s good news in Jesus Christ in a society that is increasingly indifferent to our message, yet that desperately needs it.

We confess that “the glory which [the Father] has given [the Son], [the Son has] given to them, that they may be one even as we are one” (John 17:22). Presbyterians (and Christians) in North America are called to work for unity with one another, a unity that God has already secured for us on the basis of God’s truth and righteousness in Jesus Christ. The work of building unity through justice and reconciliation is hard and sometimes discouraging, but God blesses it. As we learn to be the salt of the earth, the Holy Spirit will be teaching us just how much we need one another, as we pray, worship, and serve.

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¹ See “The Assessment of Proposed Amendments to the *Book of Confessions*,” added to the introduction of the *Book of Confessions* by the 209th General Assembly (1997). This document should guide any consideration of writing or adopting a new confession.

² “The Confessional Nature of the Church,” added to the introduction to the *Book of Confessions* by the 209th General Assembly (1997), carefully discusses the need for a balance between adherence to the church’s adopted confessions and freedom “to hear a new and perhaps different Word from the living Lord.”

³ For additional reading about the character of Reformed confessing, see Karl Barth, “The Desirability and Possibility of a Universal Reformed Creed,” in Karl Barth, *Theology and Church: Shorter Writings, 1920–1928*, trans. Louise Pettibone Smith (New York: Harper and Row, 1962).

⁴ GA Committee Report: Theology, Worship, & Education–01.

⁵ GA Committee Report: Theology, Worship, & Education–08.

⁶ GA Committee Report: Theology, Worship, & Education–13.

⁷ From “Confessional Nature of the Church.”

⁸ From “Assessment of Proposed Amendments.”

⁹ See Joseph D. Small, *Flawed Church, Faithful God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018).

Pastoral Ministry and Scholarship

by D. Paul La Montagne

Why do pastors need to be trained as scholars, and how can their theological studies be organized so that their training as scholars will support their pastoral ministry?

1. Why Pastors Need to be Trained as Scholars

One of God’s good gifts to the Church is that some of God’s people are called to be pastors and teachers to equip the saints for the life and ministry to which they have been called. Such persons are not the rulers of the Church, but its servants. In the Reformed tradition their

ministry is recognized and they are called to specific roles by the action of the Church in the calls issued by particular congregations under the guidance of their denominational governing bodies. Those denominational governing bodies also set the standards for their preparation for ministry.

In the Reformed tradition we have always required our pastors to be trained as scholars. This word means something slightly different than it did when the

tradition was first adopted. Scholarship is now defined by the needs of the research University. A scholar is understood to be someone who is trained to be able to do original research in a specialized field. Original research is almost always carried out on the borders and fringes of a field, or in its hidden depths, because that is where it is easiest to discover new things. But this meaning of scholarship oriented to the needs and demands of research is somewhat less than two hundred years old, and has only proliferated in America since the Second World War. For more than a thousand years before that to be a scholar was to have learned the languages, history, and seminal works necessary to be conversant in a particular tradition. It meant to be a living participant in a tradition, able to read in it, learn from it, explain it, teach it, and carry on a conversation with it. This is the kind of scholars that our pastors need to be. They do not need to be capable of doing research into the tradition, as research is defined by the University, although they must be capable of learning from research. But they must be able to carry on a conversation with the tradition of the teaching of the Church throughout the ages.

Sometimes it is suggested that the modern world is so complex, new, different, and strange that it is necessary to break with our traditions and to deal with it entirely in the present in order to be able to cope with it at all. But on the contrary, it is only participation in the deep tradition of the Church that gives us any hope of being able to keep our balance and to deal with this world in a way that enables us to do the good to which we have been called, rather than being swept away by the social and intellectual currents of our times. The tradition of the Christian Church gives us access to experience that extends beyond our own culture and beyond the lifetime of the oldest person we know. It is composed of contributions from a wide variety of cultures stretching across more than three thousand years of human history. To be a conversation partner in this tradition, to be skilled at using this tradition to interpret the Bible, and to interpret our present experience in light of the Bible, is a specialized task. Every particular congregation of the Christian Church needs someone to do this with them and for them. It is for this reason that we train our pastors as scholars and call and pay them as professionals.

This is not to say that there are not other tasks which we require of our pastors as well. Counseling in a variety of forms, something that was traditionally called the care or the cure of souls, is also a critical ingredient of pastoral ministry. The logistical necessities impose administrative and program-oriented responsibilities upon pastors as well. But the defining task, by virtue of which a pastor is not just a family practice counselor, or church business administrator, or a custodian of culture

or religion, or church project manager, or a religious lecturer and performer, is the task of being a conversation partner *in*, and an interpreter *of*, the tradition of the Church. This does not fail to put the study of Bible in its proper place as the first of our concerns. The Bible is the root of our Church tradition, and the majority of our tradition is devoted to understanding and interpreting the Bible.

It is the duty of the *whole* Church to proclaim the Gospel and serve as ambassadors for Christ. Pastors equip their congregations for this task by teaching them from the Bible in continuing conversation with the whole church throughout all of time and space. In this way the Church measures and criticizes its talk about God and its proclamation of the Gospel by reference to the Word of God written. The theological tradition of the Church is, in large part, the history of our self-criticism in continuing encounter with the Word of God. Pastors care for their congregations, but so do elders, deacons, and many other people in the congregations. It is the specialized task of Reformed pastors to exercise their care from out of a deep knowledge of the Scripture and in conversation with the theological tradition of the Church.

This does not mean that pastors should or would spend their time with their congregations teaching them as if a church were a small college. Far from it. Nor does it mean that the scholarship in which the pastor is trained comprises most of what a pastor does on the job. Far from it. It only means that this training as a scholar in the tradition of the church constitutes the *defining* feature of who the pastor is and how the pastor does all the various things that constitute professional pastoral ministry. It is the specific ingredient that makes a pastor more than a ceremonial leader. It is the defining characteristic that makes pastors the particular kind of counselors, teachers, mentors, preachers, servants, leaders, and healers that they are.

2. Concerning the Order and Structure of Theology for Training Pastors as Scholars

A. Pastoral Theology

The most important job in theology is Pastoral Theology. Pastoral Theology is the work of enabling the people in our churches to grow up to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ so that the whole body, knit together by every joint with which it is supplied, may truly be his body upon the earth and complete the work, which he began in us, of reconciling the world to himself so that the whole of creation might acknowledge his lordship and enjoy his blessing forever. This is an impressive statement, assembled out of bits and pieces of Scripture, and easy to agree with on that account. But unless it is broken down into smaller more direct

statements it will remain, for all its scriptural impressiveness, meaningless.

To pastor is to shepherd, to parent, to guide, to preach, to enable, to teach, to coach. Pastors are not hired holy people whose job is to become what the members of the congregation do not have time to become themselves. A pastor's job is precisely to enable people to become what they do not have the time or ability to become by themselves: children of the living God, Christlike servants of their Lord. This is something that no one can do for themselves. This is something that pastors cannot, of themselves, do for any other person. It is something that only God can do for anybody. But the good news is that it is something that God has done, is doing, and will do. The pastoral ministry is one of the ways that God has chosen to do it.

How do the pastors do this thing that they cannot do, that only God can do? They do it by talking about God. That is what theology means: talking about God. We have created a great many more specialized, specific, scholarly definitions of theology, but the root meaning remains: talking about God. Pastoral theology is the actual way that pastors talk about God with their churches. The abstract, academic, scientific description of the principles and content of pastoral work are secondary reflection upon pastoral theology.

This is not to disparage the abstract theorizing that scholars do. This very article is composed mostly of abstract theorizing. Sometimes, abstract thinking is the most practical thinking possible. But scholars are servants, not people called to some higher way. Their work should serve the church, not leave it gasping in the dust.

How do pastors talk about God in such a way as to enable the people of the congregation, the children of the living God, to become Christlike servants of their lord? There are three primary ways.

The first is fairly simple. Its profundity lies in the fact that it is simply an instrument by which the Holy Spirit does much deeper and more important things inside people's hearts. Pastors proclaim the gospel. They tell again the story of how God made himself present to the people of Israel. They tell how God made himself present to us in the life of Jesus Christ. They declare the forgiveness of sins through Christ's death on the cross. They announce the new life in Christ made possible by his resurrection from the dead. And they tell us these things over and over again because we need to hear them over and over again. For, although we do not usually forget them, we constantly forget to take them to heart, to put our trust in them.

The difficulty here is that merely repeating the words that accomplished this task hundreds of years ago will not often be successfully heard. The Gospel has not changed, but the hearers of the Gospel have. To proclaim the Gospel in new words, and yet to be careful that those new words proclaim the same Gospel, requires the training of a scholar, in the sense defined above.

The second is more complex. Pastors talk about Christ's command that we love one another. They talk about our calling to upbuild one another in love. They talk about the gifts of the Spirit that enable us to serve one another in love. They talk about the life that we have together in Christ. They talk about the maturity in Christ that is the goal of our growth.

"Talking about God" here includes a great many other things that usually have more specific names, such as preaching, teaching, leading in worship, personal counseling, encouraging fellowship, enabling personal and corporate Bible study, fostering personal and corporate prayer, coordinating church activities and staff responsibilities, and much more. These things are "talking about God" because pastors do them as a part of a continuing conversation with their congregations about who Jesus Christ is and what difference that makes to who we are.

The third is the most difficult of all. Pastors talk about God's call to us to be ambassadors for Christ. They talk about the ministry of reconciliation which has been given to us. They remind us of our call to love our enemies. They tell us again how Jesus redefined for us who the neighbor is whom we are called to love.

This is difficult in several ways. But the most significant difficulty in the United States in the twenty-first century may be that most congregations would prefer the church to be a safe haven in a stormy world. We shy away from the enormous expense in time, effort, and money that is needed to minister to a world that is as broken as this one is. And we are afraid to expose ourselves and our families to the dangers of this culture. But just as surely as we were saved by grace, and that through faith, we were also saved for good works that we should walk in them.

It must be understood that all these categories and characterizations are temporary conveniences, being used to understand how training pastors as scholars will serve their work. They are an attempt to construct conceptual tools that will help us do the job of formulating a scholarly education that serves the ministry of the church first and foremost. We are making a new effort to offer a variant on the usual pattern of training for pastors. That effort, and the development

and improvement of that variant, will require the ongoing conversation that this paper intends to serve.

B. Biblical Theology

The second most important job in theology is Biblical theology. I am not a properly trained Biblical theologian and am not going to attempt to say anything about the content and practice of Biblical theology. I only speak here to the place of Biblical theology among the theological practices that train pastors as scholars.

In order to put Biblical theology in its proper place as a scholarly enterprise and to understand how to teach it to those preparing for pastoral ministry we need to understand the relationship between the human and the divine in Scripture after the model of the relationship between the human and the divine in Jesus Christ. But the Chalcedonian formula is not a statement of what we understand out of our own powers, but rather a statement of something perceived at the limit of rational understanding which nonetheless grasps us and demands to be known by us. So also our understanding of the authority of Scripture is based not upon our own powers of understanding but upon the hold it takes of us in revelation. We need not fear to turn all the powers of critical scholarship or of any other tool of human understanding upon the Scripture, for it is the self-revelation of the living God. God is responsible for revelation, as it is beyond our power to reveal God no matter how good our theology is. And that is as it should be, for being both living and active, God is well able to keep up with all that develops in the various schools of scholarship and still have strength to spare to reveal himself in and through his Word.

It may be helpful to distinguish between biblical studies and Biblical theology. Biblical studies are oriented to the human character of the Scriptures and are usually well served by academic scholarship. But Biblical theology is talking about the content of the Scriptures rather than their form and the material of which they are constructed. Biblical theology is the interpretation of the Scriptures on the presumption that God speaks and that God says what this text says. All further conversation on this point needs to be carried out by those properly trained and qualified for it.

C. Church History and History of Doctrine

The third most important job in theology is the History of the Church and its Doctrine. This is the substantial work in which pastors are trained in the tradition of the church as a living conversation in which they are engaged on behalf of their congregations and to which they bring their congregations. Church history and history of doctrine are here joined together in a unity in which the emphasis should lie slightly on the side of

history of doctrine. Church history as taught in departments of history at secular universities is not directly helpful here, as it treats the history of the church as a mere record of sociological, political, and economic causes. Such history may serve a useful purpose as background and commentary, but the point of this study is that pastors should be initiated as living bearers of the tradition of the church as it reflects upon its talk about God in light of the Scripture.

The proper elaboration of this is a coherent plan of core courses in Church History and Theology. The best possible introduction into the tradition would be a series of courses, lessons, or conversations in the core works of Reformed theology. This is the classic sense of introduction, that is, being put into interaction with the thing, rather than the modern sense of becoming briefly acquainted with the thing from the outside.

And again, the particular development of this part of the training of pastors must be done by those with the professional qualifications for it. I have only a few things to say about it from my perspective as a philosophical and systematic theologian.

The character of each of these courses, lessons, and conversations must be carefully considered by those that teach them. I once took a master's level course at seminary on "Creation, Trinity, and Christology in the Early Church." This course was taught by an excellent scholar and was well taught given its goals. But its goals were oriented to preparation for Ph.D. work. Ten of the twelve weeks of class were spent on recondite aspects of the background to these issues in the early church: Philo, middle Platonism, and newly discovered resources within the historical documents of the Syriac churches. Only two weeks were spent on the actual content of the Nicene controversy itself, and Chalcedon we never even got to. Now this work on the fringes is precisely the proper preparation for research scholars whose job it is to search out new things. But the great majority of those taking the course were preparing for pastoral ministry. What they needed was a firm and solid grounding in the heart of the matter that led to the Nicene Creed and the definition of Chalcedon.

All of the course work planned for training pastors as scholars must take a lesson from this, and every course must concern itself for the heart of the matter, seeking to enable students to understand the faith in such a way that it enters into their own heart and becomes part of their own thinking and understanding. It is true that little that is new and has not been studied and understood for long centuries will be treated in these courses. But our students are not centuries old, and these matters are new to them. The Pelagian controversy (the problem of how

much human free will can accomplish in our salvation and sanctification) breaks out afresh in every college fellowship and every congregation blessed with new believers. And the church has never yet developed a theology and a preaching that is not challenged by the Chalcedonian definition. We are agreed that Jesus Christ is fully God and fully human. But how that can be the case “without confusion, without change, without division, without separation” eludes us. And if all that eluded us were the intellectual problem of how to formulate an understanding of the problem, then it could be left to the systematic theologians. But for pastoral theologians the problem of understanding how the divine and human are joined in Christ is the problem of understanding how we are to be human as Christians, as those joined to Christ. It is a problem for preaching and pastoral counselling. And the Reformation is still taking place, in individuals as well as in the church. The course work must concentrate on the heart of the matter because that heart is the life of the church.

None of this is meant to demean the work of modern scholars but only to reorient slightly the way in which they teach those preparing for pastoral ministry. Pastors need to be exposed to and informed by research scholars. Research scholarship has four great strengths. First, it tends to dissolve nonsense by exposing error. Second, it discovers new things, or things long forgotten, by probing in new ways into the material. Third, it relates what is found in the Scripture to everything else that we know. And fourth, it questions everything, even when it seems irreverent to do so. This is important because our greatest sin in interpreting the Scripture is our constant assumption that we already know what God is saying. Even when it seems irreverent, research scholarship does us a service by reminding us that our interpretation of the Word of God is not, in and of itself, identical with the Word of God. But research scholarship must not be permitted to define the content and methods by which pastors are trained as scholars.

It should be noted that this idea of how to train pastors as scholars for the good of the church may mean a course of studies with more required courses and fewer electives than is the modern custom.

D. Philosophical and Systematic Theology

Philosophical and systematic theology is, at best, only the fourth most important job in theology. Philosophical and systematic theology is, first, an attempt to fashion a set of conceptual tools to be used when reflecting upon our talk about God, and, second, an attempt to talk about everything in our experience from out of our talk about God. We reflect upon our talk about God because we feel constrained by our calling to check and correct all our talk about God by reference to God’s talk about

himself and our relation to Christ. By God’s talk about himself I mean the Word of God written. This task is only of third or fourth importance among the tasks of theology because it does not even begin until we are already doing the work of pastoral theology and biblical theology as defined above. We cannot reflect upon our talk about God until we are talking about God. And we cannot correct our talk about God by reference to God’s self-revealing talk until we have heard and studied the Scriptures, the Word of God written.

Philosophical and systematic theology often creates the illusion of being of first importance by the character of its job. As the art of creating a conceptual tool kit for doing the other jobs of theology, it often seems as though the tools must come first. In actual fact, we begin the work of pastoral and biblical theology at the call of God, in the midst of life, with whatever tools come to hand. And, unsurprisingly, those first tools are often clumsy or derived from the culture which surrounds us and only partly suited for the work to which we put them. It is the nature and character of the work itself that forces us to seek and invent better, more widely varied, more carefully honed, and more suitably designed tools. After two thousand years of theologizing, it often seems as if the tool set is so well developed and so complete that we must study the tools first. But the work comes before the tools, for it is the work that teaches us how to use the tools, not the tools that teach us how to do the work.

Philosophical and systematic theology also sometimes creates the illusion that it is of first importance because, in attempting to draw conclusions and implications from the Word of God written, it often idealizes and systematizes what it finds there. By idealizing, philosophical and systematic theology gives theology infinite extension in the manner of both mathematics and philosophical idealism. But this is often an illusion. The revelation of the Word of God is actual, not ideal, and in its actuality it criticizes both the lesser finite elements in which it is found and also the greater infinite idealizations which can be extended from it. The ultimate actuality of the revelation of the Word of God is Jesus Christ and him crucified, not idealized universalizations that can be derived from him. This is a mistake that has been made several times in the history of theology, and it is so severe that it might be understood as idolatry on a new plane.

We see from Scripture that God is sufficiently powerful to accomplish whatever he chooses. But when idealized into an abstract concept of omnipotence we are exposed to the problem of whether this means that God exercises all power. Is God the active agent in doing everything that happens? This idealization threatens to turn God into fate and makes the ethical demands of the Gospel

problematic. And the ethical demands of the Gospel are one of the premiere problems of pastoral theology.

We see from Scripture that God knows the consequences of choices and actions. But when that knowledge is systematized as an abstract concept of omniscience it leaves human free will stranded. How can we be free to choose if God already knows what we will choose and what we will do? There are possible intellectual answers to this question. But the original data from which omniscience was abstracted appear most often in the context of God making a demand for the choices and actions of his people. The pastoral problem is helping people to choose consequences when they make decisions. This is done by talking about God's knowledge of the consequences of choices and actions, not by knowing the future.

The abstractions and idealizations of philosophical and systematic theology lie closest to reality when they stand in subordination to the actuality of the crucified and risen Jesus as attested in the witness of the prophets and apostles. They are abstractions from, and idealizations of, our actual encounter with God in Christ. In practical terms, they will be the best abstractions possible when they arise immediately *from*, and are kept in close interaction *with*, the concrete work of pastoral and biblical theology. A theology which becomes pure abstraction, far from being the most refined and ideal form of theology, has become philosophy. The purification has purified the distinctive content out of it.

This does not mean that theology will not use philosophy; it will use it frequently. But a right theology will always understand that it abstracts away from its characteristic content for the sole purpose of shaping its conceptual tools more appropriately to its object in order then to return to the concrete revelation of God in Jesus Christ with minds better prepared to hear what God has to say. It will never treat some one set of philosophical tools as definitive or complete. This means that abstraction and idealization are always and only intermediate steps in the work of theology. In mathematics and philosophy they may rightly be the end goal of our work, but in theology and the sciences they remain a subordinate means.

All this means that philosophical and systematic theology is at its best and truest when it voluntarily submits itself to the service of Pastoral theology, Biblical theology, and the history the Church and its teaching. It is an abstract art, it is true. But it is the art of abstracting *from*, and providing conceptual tools *to*, the actual pastoral and biblical work of the church.

As a philosophical and systematic theologian my primary concern is theological epistemology. John Calvin writes: "God alone is a fit witness of himself in his Word" (*Institutes* 1.7.4). This means we know God in and through God, by God's own act of self-revelation. As abstract and theoretical as this is, it leads directly to the concept of the proper place of philosophical and systematic theology elucidated in this paper, for the church is the body of Christ on earth. If God is known in, through, and by God, then God is known in, through, and by the church. But epistemology ought to lead directly to pedagogy. So, I have often formulated my concern for theological epistemology in terms of teaching students for pastoral ministry.

The nature of the act of knowledge in faith and theology is a product of the relationship of love in which we find ourselves by God's grace and mercy.

When we learn and know something, we build a model of it in our minds. But the character and quality of that model are dependent upon our constant effort to bring the model, our knowledge, into interaction with reality. This means that when we know anything, the *act* of knowledge, in as much as it is a response to an encounter with an other, is specifically and necessarily an act of changing our minds, and changing them in response to the other and because of the other. Calvin writes: "all right knowledge of God is born of obedience" (*Institutes* I.6.2). This means that in every act of knowledge of God, who we are changes. When we do not change, we do not really know. Thus, every act of knowledge is an act of love in which we allow who we are to be changed by that which we love in our knowledge of it.

In theology this means that we only know God as we are changed by our encounter with the crucified and risen Jesus Christ. And given our sinful being, for God does not become incarnate in order to save the unfallen, the change which we undergo in being given such knowledge is *radical*. Nothing less or other than love can be the ground of our acceptance of such a radical change in our being. Repentance is not only a religious and moral dimension of our relation to God, it is an epistemological dimension as well. Moreover, given the sinful state in which we receive such knowledge, the love in question can only be, in the first instance, God's love for us, of which our love for God is only a consequence. Knowledge depends upon and arises from love, and theologians should know and understand this better than anyone.

All of this reflection on the parts and structural relations of theology means that the basic shape of any effort to train pastors as scholars is not a practical decision arising from any disappointment or dissatisfaction with

seminaries as they are currently organized. It is, rather, an integral and organic consequence of abstract theorizing about the nature of the act of knowledge in the realm of theology. It is not an attempt to transform an entrenched and impractical emphasis on scholarly study (as the university defines it) into a more practical and useful form of professional training. It is a radical attempt to formulate the most thorough and self-consistent form of academic and scholarly study (in the traditional sense) that can arise from a true understanding of the nature of the act of knowledge in the Church and the nature of learning among those who

are called to be pastoral scholars for the sake of the Church. Just as the most abstract, theoretical, academic, and scholarly thing a scientist can do is go into the laboratory or the field and test theories against reality, so also in theology. At least, in any theology that attempts honestly to correct its talk about God by reference to God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ.

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Encouragement for the Journey

by Richard A. Ray

The work of parish ministry is one of the most daring and demanding journeys that one can take. It is not without profound meaning, but it also tests an individual in every dimension of experience. It provides great opportunity for friendship, but it also requires maturity and poise in the face of life's most devastating issues. It depends upon a growing capacity for theological wisdom, but it requires compassion and humility in the personal application of one's theology. Above all, perhaps, it involves the capacity to understand one's life as a special calling.

In the Presbyterian Church, we have the opportunity to encourage men and women to consider the ministry as a special calling from God. Our involvement is important, for the sense of call which finally compels a person to accept this journey of ministry is far from being one that is highly individualistic. The call to ministry is, as is everything else in the life of the Christian church, a product of a profoundly deep and satisfying acknowledgement of one's place in the Christian community.

In our church, we may have underestimated the significant role which our encouragement of candidates for ministry plays in preparation for leadership in the church. Those to whom we offer encouragement are those who will lead our church in the years ahead. We must be alert for those whom we think Christ might be calling to this special task, and we must look for special characteristics that in some measure indicate their qualifications for the ministry of the Word and the Sacraments. While not everyone is possessed of all characteristics equally, they are all significant.

The Great Commandments

The first characteristic is, of course, a growing sense of importance of the love of God and neighbor above all else. Jesus' emphatic admonition of the summary of the law and the prophets is the one thing that will hold a person's life together when many other parts of it seem to be challenged. It is thus the fundamental feature that will hold a person steady in the midst of many crises. This growing conviction that this love of God and neighbor will be an absolute commitment in a highly personal way will enable the potential minister not only to maintain direction during the years of training but will also enable the minister to maintain a strong sense of personal priority through the years of service.

A Sense of Personal Identity

Theological education includes the testing of one's knowledge in many areas and the development of skills in many areas of pastoral service. It seems to work best, however, when an individual has completed some of the basic stages of personal maturation and when one has a reasonably accurate appreciation of one's own abilities and strengths. One, of course, learns a great deal more about oneself through an in-depth encounter with the Word of God. As scripture is studied in depth, the theological student will learn to appreciate more about the incredible complexity and subtlety of the human spirit. Nevertheless, it is important that a certain degree of personal stability and maturity be achieved. This will enable the theological student to gain the most from the educational experience and to emerge from it better prepared to serve a local church with a sense of personal satisfaction, enthusiasm, and appreciation for the gifts of other people.

Stable Family Relationships

If a person is married, one should expect an enjoyable, stable structure of family relationships. It is simply a fact, proven from experience through the years, that one is not going to be able to minister to others very effectively if family issues are unresolved. It is not possible to seek perfection in family life, for it does not exist, but when we encourage another person to consider the calling of the ministry, we must be aware of the strength in this person's family life. The ministry requires as much stability in this area as possible. If a person is single, it is wise to be reasonably confident that this person has a strong and positive appreciation for family life as well as for the role of a single person in the ministry.

Financial and Professional Responsibility

The stewardship of one's own life and resources, as well as one's capacity to serve in a leadership position in the life of the church, requires a certain amount of resourcefulness and clarity about one's own financial needs. If a person is saddled with heavy debts, this may not be the time to turn to theological education. A potential pastor must also be considered in light of the professional or business responsibilities which this person may already carry. A man acknowledged to me recently that while he was very deeply interested in going into the ministry, he was aware that if he terminated his own business organization and ended those relationships, he would be responsible for putting a number of people out of work. His awareness of his sense of responsibility for the lives of others spoke to me in a very clear way about his genuine aptitude for the ministry even as it also indicated that this might very well not be a calling for him at this particular time in his life.

Steadfast Convictions and Creative Response

To serve faithfully requires an ability to hold fast to certain fundamental, central convictions while remaining open and flexible with their application. That is to say, one must come to realize, as a pastor, that the service to the church is one which involves a heritage of beliefs and values. It is not one that is to be reinvented on the basis of a sense of today's particular needs and concerns. The pastoral ministry has a remarkably strong, persistent identity in western society, and it is one which is very deeply rooted in the church's history of the care of souls. Thus, the individual who feels a sense of rapport with this great heritage, who understands that the ministry involves a personal sense of responsibility to the historical development of this calling, will have a very strong sense of assurance about the nature of this work. It is wise, therefore, to be aware of an individual's potential to enter into the historic nature of this work with a great degree of appreciation for its enduring spiritual principles and purposes. At the same time, the

pastoral ministry requires an unusually secure person who is able to respond with fluid, adaptable style. The chances are great that a pastor will be called to serve varied congregations and interact with diverse personalities. Thus, the capacity to maintain certain basic commitments and convictions while applying them with innovation and creativity is essential.

The Spiritual Dimension of the Call

It is one thing to enjoy working in church activities. It is even understandable that a person might have participated in many areas of the church's life and received a great deal of reward and encouragement from these responsibilities. It is quite another, however, for us to be aware that an individual is growing spiritually and that we can at least surmise that somewhere down the line the significance of the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ will become the most important element in this person's life. In the end, what matters the most is the pastor's capacity to interact productively with the parishioner's growing commitment to Christ. Here is where the critical issue in the pastor's life will ultimately be faced one day. Only as a person is drawn toward the significance of that reality in the lives of others will that person really come to enjoy, and to succeed in, the role of the minister of a local church. What this will mean, in the life of the individual, is impossible to predict with precision. Nevertheless, what is important, is that this individual be aware in at least some elementary way of the central significance of Christ in the formation of the church's work.

An Enthusiasm for Leadership

Those who take a genuine delight in helping draw others into the work of the church and in developing its outreach of witness, care, and compassion will be those who provide strong and able leadership for our church in the years to come. The personal capacity to find satisfaction in this work and to become enthusiastic about it is essential. The ministry has at least two points of special concern. One is, of course, profoundly spiritual in nature. The other, without a doubt, is essentially social in application. Only the person who enjoys drawing others together into a unified community will have the capacity that is needed to direct a congregation's ongoing passion for ministry. This characteristic, the delight and the enthusiasm in drawing people into the work of the church, will be especially important in years to come. The formation of community, the creation of fellowship opportunities around the worship and work of the church, will be increasingly important in a society which is as fragmented as ours is today. The ministry, apart from its specialized areas of service, will always require an essential capacity for social organization. A person who can take the initiative in forming opportunities for service and discussion and who has a

genuine pleasure in opening up dialogue with others will be one who has remarkably positive contributions to make to the health of a congregation.

I am convinced that responsibilities of the pastoral ministry remain much the same, however novel and diverse the circumstances might be in any particular situation. It is still a very special calling, one which is primarily spiritual in nature and which is respected and trusted to the degree that this spiritual character is accepted and observed. I am very enthusiastic about this calling because I believe there is no greater adventure

on this earth. It is not a time to become discouraged about it. It is, instead, a time to be alert for those whom we suspect God may be calling to this service. We can help to open the door for those who are seeking to follow God's will for their lives.

This essay appeared in a brochure entitled, "As I See It," of Union Seminary, Richmond, Virginia, Summer 1994

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The Institute for Theological Education

Our goal is to equip a new generation of pastors and congregational leaders for Presbyterian and other Christian congregations. We seek to provide theological education that is biblical and from the mainstream of the Reformed tradition. We begin by offering three programs:

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Reformation & Modern Church History
Presbyterian History and Confessions
American Puritanism through Edwards
The Theology of Augustine
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Dr. Randal Working is President of *Theology Matters*. Dr. Richard Burnett is Executive Director and Managing Editor. The Board of Directors consists of ruling and teaching elders in various Presbyterian denominations. *Theology Matters* exists to equip, encourage, and inspire, members of the Presbyterian family and the wider Christian community through the clear and coherent articulation of theology that is reformed according to God's Word. It is sent free to anyone who requests it. You can reach us at 864-378-5416, at this email address, admin@theologymatters.com or at our website: www.theologymatters.com

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Theology Matters has launched the Institute for Theological Education and has partnered with Dubuque Theological Seminary to offer a Master of Arts Degree in Reformed Theology. Focusing on classic texts and practices valued by the Reformed tradition, it offers instruction from pastor-scholars whose knowledge has been tested in the academy and significant pastoral ministry. The M.A. in Reformed Theology is a fully accredited, 36-credit degree offered in a hybrid format that includes both face-to-face and online learning. In-person instruction is held at Providence Presbyterian Church, Hilton Head Island, South Carolina.

We seek to identify, to attract, to recruit, to gather, to train, to educate, and to help raise up the next generation of pastors and leaders for the congregations where we all worship every Sunday morning. And we need your help.

Please recommend to us qualified students who have faith in Jesus Christ, desire to be his disciples, and seek to understand God's Word; who exhibit intellectual and moral courage; who are spiritually curious and eager to learn; who have a solid Bachelor's degree, a strong academic record, a serious work ethic, a good recommendation from a teacher and pastor or church leader, and a growing sense of call.

Please give generously to help the Institute gather and train the next generation of pastors. To give by check, please make it out to Theology Matters, write Scholarship Fund on the "For" or "Memo" line, and mail it to: Theology Matters, P.O. Box 50026, Greenwood, SC 29649-0018. To give electronically, please go to our website at <https://www.theologymatters.com/institute/> and click the "Donate Now" button.

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