



## **Seminary Teaching in the Context of the Church**

### *A Perspective on "Theology for Christian Ministry"*

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I was asked, for this article, to discuss how the context of the church and its ministry has affected my work as an adjunct professor of Bible and homiletics in a Presbyterian seminary. It is a fair question, and if we change it to ask how that context *should* affect the work of a seminary professor, it becomes one with which every seminary teacher has to wrestle. Above all, it is a question pertinent to every pastor and preacher, for like it or not, he or she is viewed by the congregation as its resident theologian and biblical expert.

Certainly there are a number of seminary teachers and theologians in this country for whom the contemporary context of the church and its faith play no role in their work whatsoever. They personally have no connection with the church and its weekly worship. And their theology is constructed largely on abstract, theoretical and philosophical grounds. I remember so well when I was a seminary student in one of Paul Tillich's systematic theology classes and was struggling mightily to understand Tillich's thought. Reinhold Niebuhr asked us one day what Tillich's "Ground of Being" had to do with our everyday lives. It was a question that should be asked of every theologian's "system."

Similarly, there are seminary professors whose approach to the Bible is limited to a strictly historical-critical scientific investigation. The question never arises as to what implications their work has for the life and faith of the church. They write largely for the scholarly "guild," and it is indifferent as to whether they be Protestant, Catholic, Jew, or Christian.

I do not want to be misunderstood on this score, however. One should not scorn the work of such biblical scholars, because their contributions to the understanding of the Scriptures have been enormous. It was absolutely necessary for the Scriptures to be freed from the confining limits of dogmatic orthodoxy, in both Protestantism and Catholicism, and to be subjected to the scrutiny of the historical

critics. And that scrutiny has given us much more reliable texts of the Scriptures; placed the biblical writings in their proper historical and cultural contexts; illumined the Bible's meaning from linguistics, geography, archaeology, history, sociology; taught us about the genres found in the Scriptures; uncovered the original meaning of countless passages; and removed many obstacles that would hinder us from reading the plain message of the biblical text.

Unfortunately, however, that purely scientific approach in my field, which is biblical study, has brought with it many problems for the workaday preacher and pastor. Most of our

seminary graduates are trained in the historical-critical method, and it is often with that training alone that they then enter local churches. They therefore are faced with the enormous problem of how to use that training in preaching and teaching and pastoral work in their parishes. They have not been educated in the proper hermeneutical use of the Scriptures—that is, in how to exegete and open up a biblical passage to get at its message for their contemporary congregations; in how to let the sacred page speak its Word of God to his gathered people; in how to view the biblical text not merely as an interesting historical object, but as a lively oracle of God that immediately addresses and confronts his covenant people. All of the problems of biblical interpretation get dumped on the poor struggling pastor as he or she prepares the Sunday sermon, and some such struggling souls never solve the problems involved.

George Lindbeck told once about one of his Yale colleagues who remarked that after studying the Scriptures for so long from an historical-critical point of view, he found he could no longer read them devotionally. Many seminary-trained clergy are in exactly the same boat.

The burdens thereby laid on the clergy are almost overwhelming. First, in order to keep up with scientific, scholarly study of the Scripture, ministers sometimes get the feeling that they have constantly to master a new scientific discipline. Lately, for example, the scholarly guild has been emphasizing the sociological study of the Scriptures, and the parish clergy person, to understand that, feels called upon to try to master sociology.

Second, unable to bridge the gap between what has been learned in seminary about the Bible and what must be preached on Sunday morning, some clergy have just buried their historical-critical training within themselves as some sort of “secret” knowledge that is unknown to the laity and never revealed to the laity. The preacher thus becomes the only one in the congregation who “truly” understands the Bible—which sometimes leads to smugness—and the laity are for all practical purposes shut off from an understanding of that Scripture which is supposed to form the basis of their faith and practice.

Third, by way of contrast, some preachers let all of their seminary training “hang out,” as it were, and their sermons become historical-critical explanations of the “real” meaning of the text and of what “actually happened” in the biblical story, all gleaned from the preacher’s reading of the historical-critical commentaries.

Reinhold Niebuhr once also remarked that we can read nothing but commentaries for twenty years and think we are educated. That is true of too many preachers. And unfortunately, too many commentaries on the Bible limit themselves simply to historical-critical matters without ever asking about the message of a biblical text for the church today—a fault, praise be, that is being overcome in

the new commentary series, *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Westminster/John Knox Press). In that series, historical criticism is presupposed but never seen as self-sufficient, and the beleaguered pastor is given scholarly help in interpreting the message of the Bible for a sermon or a Bible study class.

In evaluating any training that goes on in a seminary, I think we have to ask about the nature of the subject that is being studied. In relation to the Bible, one has seriously to ask if a purely historical, scientific approach is adequate to the subject matter. Does the Bible purport to be merely an historical document? Does it claim that it is simply one more ancient collection of

books among others, which may therefore be analyzed as to its origins, sources, styles, genres, historical, cultural and geographical settings, historical reliability, and so forth, or does it claim to be much more?

Certainly the Bible claims to be an historical account, to which all of these scholarly disciplines may be rightly applied. But the biblical writings also claim much more. They claim that they are witnesses to the activities and words of the one true living Lord and God of the universe. They claim that that God has created all things good; that because his good creation has been distorted by human sin, he has created for himself a people through whom he intends to set his creation right again; that he has constantly dealt with that people in judgment and in mercy to make them a fit instrument of his saving work; and that finally he has raised up from that people one man, who is his only begotten Son, to accomplish his final salvation of all creation. It therefore seems contradictory to the subject matter at hand to teach anything about the Bible without finally dealing with that claim. Otherwise one has not really dealt with the full content of the Scripture's own understanding.

Let me put it in other words. In the final analysis, the biblical record is, from beginning to end, a confession of faith. It contains the testimony of thousands of witnesses to what the one God has said and done in their individual and corporate lives and in the lives of all human beings. Indeed, it makes a confession of faith about how God dealt and continues to deal with the world of nature and with creation as a whole. Any teacher of the Bible, and any student of it, must therefore take some stance toward that confession if he or she claims to have heard and read the Bible as it intends to be heard and read.

More than that, the biblical witnesses passionately urge upon their hearers and readers a wholehearted commitment to the God revealed through their testimony: "These words...shall be upon your heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your children," says Deuteronomy (6:67). "These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God," writes John (20:31), "and that believing you may have life in his name." The biblical authors and transmitters have handed down the Scriptures to us for the purpose of engaging our lives in a commitment to the God to whom they bear witness. They want to draw their hearers and readers into the covenant community of God's people and preserve the faithfulness of such converts to their Lord within that community in order that they may have life and have it more abundantly. To ignore that passionate purpose of the Scriptures when we teach them seems to me therefore to distort what they are actually saying.

This does not mean, let me say once again, that there is no place in the seminary

classroom for dispassionate and scientific study of the Bible. What would we do without the honest work of our textual critics or of all those other careful scholars who have not been afraid to plumb the depths of the biblical texts and to let the chips fall where they may? It also does not mean that biblical study should be confined once again within the limits of dogmatic presuppositions. But it does mean, it seems to me, that seminary professors and teachers of the Scriptures need to be very forthright about what they are doing. If they themselves accept the faith claims and confessional nature of the Bible, and yet intend in their teaching to ignore those claims and nature, then that should be stated from the beginning, in order that students may know what approach is being taken to the subject matter. If, on the other hand, the instructor does not

believe the Bible's claims, that should be made known to his or her students, just as, contrarily, an instructor's acceptance of those claims should be revealed. It seems to me the height of academic deceit and dishonesty to teach the Scriptures from just one point of view without making the presuppositions of that viewpoint evident to the students involved. And perhaps any clergy reading this article might profit by trying to recall what point of view they were taught in their approach to the Bible.

Because we are dealing in this article with seminary teaching—that is, with the training of future preachers, pastors, and teachers of the Christian church—it further seems to me that if classes in Bible at theological schools are devoted solely to scientific, historical-critical matters, there should be a conscious inclusion somewhere in the school curriculum of courses that train young men and women in how to use that historical-critical material in their pastorates, but then also to train them in how to go beyond that material in their work in their parishes. In short, there should be deliberate instruction in Christian hermeneutics as it applies to preaching, teaching, and pastoral care. Too many clergy have not had that instruction, and the church is suffering for it.

At what point in the seminary curriculum should such instruction be given? Ideally, it should occur in every course. For example, many of the courses in Bible here at Union Seminary in Virginia delve deeply into historical-critical exegesis. But then, having established a biblical text and exegeted its original meaning, they go on to ask, How can and should this text be preached in the Christian church?

Similarly, every January I teach an intensive course in English Bible that is designed to prepare the students for their Bible Content Exam, required for ordination in the Presbyterian Church (USA). In the space of four weeks, the students read through the entire Bible, taking detailed quizzes every other day on its content. At the same time, I lecture every day on biblical theology, so that the Bible is never seen as just a more or less interesting historical document and so that it can never be viewed in merely scientific terms, but must always be understood as having to do first of all with God and his claims on human life. Not only are the students introduced to the whole biblical story from Genesis to revelation—most of them for the first time in their lives—but they are compelled to confront the confessional demands of that story as a whole. Such confessional confrontation can sometimes be overlooked if isolated texts are being studied in exegesis, but it is difficult to ignore when the entire biblical history is studied and known.

In pastoral training, I would think that all pastoral approaches should arise out of the biblical understandings. But unfortunately—as in the biblical field—psy-

chological concepts and educational theories alien to the biblical understanding of human nature have become the norm for some pastoral approaches. Therefore, somewhere in a pastoral department's curriculum, the biblical understandings should be brought to the fore.

The same should be said of training in church history and systematic theology. Finally, every development in the church's past and every theological system of thought should be subjected to scrutiny on the basis of the biblical authority. And surely, only those professors who are committed to serve that authority are able to engage in such scrutiny, which finally means, I suppose, that Christian seminary faculties should be made up of scholarly experts who are at the

same time committed and practicing members of the Christian church.

That would be the ideal. Failing that, perhaps the one place where biblical claim and confession should and must and can be integrated into the learning process is in homiletics classes. A homiletics professor may have a class full of students who know only how to approach the Bible from an historical-critical standpoint. Incumbent on that professor, then, is the responsibility of teaching students how to read and hear and then preach the scriptural text, not as history from the distant past, but as living Word addressing a congregation.

Communication technique alone cannot accomplish that; rhetorical training by itself cannot produce it, though both are important in the art of preaching. For my part, I think it comes only from passion—passion on the part of the professor for the Word of God; passion that arises out of that Word burning in one's bones; passion that knows the gospel of Jesus Christ is a matter of life and death for all people; passion that cannot rest until Christ be proclaimed as Lord over all.

If a professor has that passion, he or she will not let a student preach anything less than the gospel. Such a professor will demand that the major part of the sermon arise out of the biblical text, with God, and not the sinful state of human beings, as its principal subject. As I often tell my students, a twelve-year-old can tell you what is wrong with the world, but it takes a preacher to say what God is doing about it.

Such a passionate homiletics professor will critique the theology in the students' sermons and insist that their thought be solid and Christian. He or she will work on hermeneutics and demand that interpretation be valid, clear, and interesting. And every student's sermon delivery will be wrestled with until the trumpet gives no uncertain sound, but reaches the tired and oldest and most indifferent in a listening congregation.

If no place else in a seminary curriculum, in homiletics classes the Bible must be heard as Word of God, with its demand for faith. Paul wrote it long ago:

How are men and women to call upon him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without a preacher?...faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes by the preaching of Christ. (Rom 10:14-15, 17)

As its preachers are, so will be the Christian church. That is a terrible responsibility for all who teach others to preach. God grant that we may be faithful in our calling.