



# F.A.C.S. REPORT

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## Pastoral Training Part 1: The Deficient Seminary

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**T**HROUGH THE YEARS the Church has endured a long running hermeneutical<sup>1</sup> debate concerning the nature of the Bible. At the centre of this debate lies the question, is the Bible prescriptive or descriptive? The choice here is a simple one. Does the Bible prescribe, or lay down, rules, guidelines and procedures to follow, or does it merely describe the way in which others have lived their lives?

The answer to this question is important in that it will govern the way in which people apply the Scriptures. For example, those who believe the Bible to be only descriptive, tend to fall into Liberalism. This is natural, as a descriptive Bible only shows you *how* someone in the past answered a particular question. The reader is still left to decide for himself whether the answer was right or wrong. A present day illustration can be found in some of the statements on homosexuality. There you will find those who say that the Apostle Paul was right in condemning homosexuality. However, they continue by adding that what he condemned was the *type* of homosexuality found in his day. In other words, Paul condemned pederasty,<sup>2</sup> and not the concept of two consenting adult males in a loving relationship. In this arena there is no truth, only personal experience.

Hence, when the presupposition that the Bible is only descriptive is adopted, one is left with little more

than a biographical sketch of how various people in the past wrestled with the question of God. In effect, *the Bible is neutered*. It is no longer the authoritative Word of God, able to guide and impart wisdom. Rather, it takes on the status of a mere history book.

Here, the Church needs to learn a serious lesson. Whilst the Bible certainly does describe events, lives, and cultures, its primary purpose is to convey God's Law to mankind in the context of salvation. Therefore, it is quintessential that the prescriptive element be incorporated into any hermeneutic.

This then brings us to the importance of this belief. If the Bible is prescriptive, then we are obliged to seek out these various prescriptions and faithfully apply them to every sphere of life that we are able.

In a recent edition of the FACS newsletter,<sup>3</sup> Ian Hodge challenged the Church to adopt sound business practices or risk a prolonged tenure in the state of mediocrity. During his discussion he argued that the Church's problems were not necessarily caused by a "spiritual malaise" but by a "practical" one. Here, particular reference was made to the fact that some seminaries were struggling to attract students. This, in turn, led to the comment that some would like "to see apprenticeship type training at the local level" implemented for ministers.

Here, in a nutshell, we come face to face with one of the underlying factors that debilitates the Church. Simply put, *the Church is not practical*. Whether it be in planning, pastoral training, evangelism, or a host of other areas, the Church is renowned for having two left feet.

Why is this? Basically, it is because, to a large degree, the Church has failed to deal with the prescriptions that are found in Scripture. Consequently, she has often strayed from the mark, or wasted time following fruitless plans of action.

The sad reality is that the Church, often well intentioned, appoints a committee to invent a way of doing something that the Bible has already prescribed. Hence, the Church side-steps God's revelation and adopts an alternate strategy. When this does not prove fruitful, another committee is appointed et cetera, et cetera, and so the process continues. When a humble voice is raised and the words, 'the Bible says that we should ...' are heard, there is a denunciation of such ideas as simplistic and outmoded. *The time has come for this to change*.

Taking the lead from the above note on apprenticeship type training for ministers, let us take a look at this topic.

1. Hermeneutics can be defined as the theory of interpretation.
2. Sexual relations between a man and a boy.
3. State of Affairs, Vol. 17, No 4. 1998.

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## An Education

**F**IRST OF ALL, let us consider the purpose of the seminary. In essence, the seminary is an institution designed for teaching. However, this teaching is usually limited to the cerebral. Despite the many Scriptural injunctions to educate the whole man, seminaries tend to focus only upon the impartation of knowledge. What the student does, how he acts, and, more importantly, how he applies what he has learnt, are areas that are generally ignored (so long as he does not 'rock the boat').

At this point allow me to put forward two common scenarios. A person whom I know found that he had a few clashes with faculty at one particular institution. Interestingly, the advice he received from elders and laymen alike could be categorised as, 'be quiet, tell them what they want to hear, and, when you graduate, do and say what you want.'

This advice certainly makes it easier on the student, but consider for a moment the wider consequences of this counsel. Imagine that there are 30 students. Each tells the professor exactly what he wants to hear. Most disagree at one point or another with their teacher, but these grievances they keep to themselves. These men

then graduate. With the blessing of the faculty, who believe they have educated these men in the fundamental principles, these graduates take up positions as ministers. However, once incumbent they disseminate their version and implement their practice. The fundamentals are watered down and even radically altered. Suffice to say that cracks in the theological and denominational standards soon appear.

Given this situation, is it any wonder then, that denominational standards are failing? Should it surprise us that there is such diversity within denominations when this type of attitude is advanced?<sup>4</sup>

Secondly, there is the situation where a student progresses through college. On every exam he has answered the *theoretical* questions properly. He knows his theology. He can tell you why Christ had to die. He is able to articulate the *ordo salutis*. Placing the book of Romans in its historical and literary context is a 'piece of cake'. As a result he is ushered into the ministry. Now in charge of his own church he begins to deal with various issues and finds he is running into a great many problems. Why is this? It is because *he has never been taught to apply this knowledge in a consistent way to the practical issues of life*. Take, as an example, those ministers who initiate 'seeker services'. Generally, people are asked to invite unsaved friends and family to a worship service. Immediately, the question must be asked, how do the unregenerate worship God (in Spirit and truth)? Likewise, we must ask, how can ministers so easily mix and change the worship service as though God were not concerned with what is presented?

With these things considered, let us now look at some of the other areas involved with going to seminary.

## Candidature

**I**N THE FIRST INSTANCE a candidate must present himself to the college. Almost universally it is up to the individual to apply to the college for acceptance. Generally, the only church involvement is a letter from the session recommending the person to the college. The Presbyterian system requires that the student gain the approval of the session and the presbytery (in Victoria this also includes the

Theological Education Committee) before they can enter the college as a ministerial candidate.

The question that arises at this point is, should the burden always fall to the individual? 1 Timothy 3:1 tells us that it is a good thing to aspire to be an elder, teaching us that the individual does have a role to play. However, in 2 Timothy 2:2, Paul urges Timothy to entrust what he has learnt to faithful men who can teach. This text would imply that there is a need on the part of Timothy to be proactive in fulfilling this command. Similarly then, it would seem natural that the Church, through its elders, should actively look for faithful men who can teach, in order to entrust to them the teachings of the Church. In other words, the task should not be left to the individual alone. The Church should actively help discern their gifts and give sound guidance to individuals who believe they are called to a particular task.

This is a necessary change as the current system places a large burden upon anyone who believes they have a call to undertake pastoral training. Although letters of approval from sessions and presbyteries are required, these are often "housekeeping" matters, dealt with in a fairly cold and detached manner. For example, when a candidate is interviewed by a presbytery, it is often the case that he is unknown to the majority. There are probably one or two people at presbytery who can say they know the person in question. Furthermore, there may be no one who knows the candidate intimately.<sup>5</sup> How then can a presbytery truly be discerning?

## Selection Criteria

**T**HE SECOND POINT that needs scrutiny is the very selection criteria used to either accept or reject candidates. The only standards applicable are those which the Bible lays down.<sup>6</sup>

For too long, the Church has made her own rules to her detriment. There are many examples that could be given at this point, however, one famous one will suffice. It is a commonly held belief that the minister's children are the worst behaved children in the Church. Whilst this may be an exaggeration, there is enough substance to the rumour that people take it seriously. On Biblical grounds (1 Tim. 3:4-5) a pastoral candidate must have an exem-

4. It was not so many years ago that you could travel to a different church within the same denomination and find things almost as they were in your home church. Today, you can enter another church within the same denomination and find that it is completely foreign.

plary family life, yet many are accepted when this is clearly not the case. Wives too must be scrutinised to see whether or not they are suitable helpmeets. In one personal experience our family travelled 100 kilometres to an interview. Upon arrival my wife and daughter were excluded from the interview. I was then accused of being arrogant when, upon being asked what my wife thought of the idea, I said 'she is sitting outside the door, why not ask her!'

In essence the Church has swapped Biblical character for a few years at seminary, and she is currently paying the price. Men of boldness and certainty, based on the Biblical standard, are no longer sought out for the ministry. Rather, sensitive new age guys are all the rage. Men who are politically correct, adaptable, mouldable, and emotional, are the ones voted 'most likely to succeed.' After all, we must have men that can understand people's needs in our feminist driven twentieth century!

Once, a man who knew what he believed was hailed as a man of conviction, now he is simply narrow-minded and dogmatic. No longer are you able to be certain about a doctrine or an issue. Rather, you must pretend that you are always open to changing your mind. Solid rock has been exchanged for shifting sand!

Hence, one of the more significant transformations is away from the Biblical standards of character to pure academia. If you can score well on your exams, then you are almost guaranteed a passage through seminary and into your own church. It matters not that your wife may be a manic depressive, that your teenage daughter is pregnant, that your son prefers football to worship. The important issues are: can you pass the exams and keep silent about the fact that the 'emperor has no clothes on?'

## Higher Education

**F**OLLOWING ON we see that higher education is the key that will unlock the door to ministry. It was only a few years ago that entry to the Presbyterian Theological College (Victoria) required someone to have already attained two thirds of a degree. Another conservative college requires a five year course which reduces by one year if you have completed a degree, and a further year if you are competent in Greek and Hebrew.

In respect to the second institution, this system may seem fair, but it is in fact dangerous because there is no testing procedure. In other words, if the student has attained a degree, he is simply exempted from a year's worth of courses. Generally, these may be the more elementary courses, but the exemption is also governed by the timetable. The problem with this is that the student is not tested and may well be exempted from studies that he very much needs.

For example, a student may have a rudimentary understanding of the doctrines and chronology of the Old Testament. However, he has a poor grasp of apologetics. He applies to a college and is accepted. On the basis of already having a degree he is exempted from a particular number of courses. As it turns out, he is exempted from apologetics, but made to sit an introductory course on the Old Testament.

Here, 'higher learning' has served to despoil the Church. Higher learning, has pushed aside prudence and wisdom, and replaced it with an artificial standard, for which the Church is the poorer.

## God Given Gifts

**T**HE ARTIFICIAL STANDARD of 'higher education' has had its greatest impact upon God given talents. In the modern seminary there are few points awarded for these gifts.<sup>7</sup> You see, the course is structured with x

number of subjects. Every student must complete these successfully or be denied a degree and, thereby, entry to the Church as a minister.<sup>8</sup>

Now, let us clarify this. We are not arguing that ministers, elders, or deacons, should be men who are dull and untaught.<sup>9</sup> Rather, we are saying that they need not have an IQ in the top two per cent. Further, God has given gifts to some men that are superior to anything that can be taught at seminary. Gifts such as wisdom, discernment, boldness, the ability to teach, the ability to preach, are all given of God, and are not necessarily learnable.

To understand this point, let us take the area of music as an example. God has given the gift of music to some people. They are what we would commonly call "naturals." In their hands any instrument comes to life, and the distinction between musician and instrument is blurred. On the other hand, people can learn to play. They still sound good, and put everything in its right place, yet that certain "magic," as we would call it, is missing. No matter how many hours are spent practising, they will never improve beyond a certain point.

Ministry, in this sense is no different. After years at seminary, a person will be able to craft a good sermon. However, try as he might, he will never match the person to whom God has granted the gift of preaching. Hours of study will make one wise, but this too, will never equal the wisdom that is granted by God.

Therefore, it is of fundamental importance that gifts be recognised. At present, seminary is like an assembly line. No matter what goes in at the start, the process tries to turn everyone into a 200 gm tin of peaches. It is high time that denominational training colleges understood this fact, and began to package their goods according to God's specifications. This process must begin with the recognition that God has pears, peaches, apricots and even watermelons in his field. God has given men a diverse range of gifts (1

5. St Angus of Garvoc, speaks of a call to Biblical manhood. This means that God moves men to undertake training so that they may be better fathers, husbands, employees or employers. The importance of this is that many men feel the Lord is leading them to undertake training, but it always boils down to either being a minister or missionary. Hence when men go to college and find the going hard, they can feel ashamed that they have not succeeded in becoming an M and M. After all, they have quit their jobs, uprooted their families, and often shifted hundreds of miles to get their training. To then discover that this is not exactly what the Lord had in mind for them can come as a crushing blow. Therefore, if elders were more proactive such situations could be avoided. Men who believe the Lord is challenging them to face their call to Biblical manhood, could receive sound counsel from their elders to this effect. Thus they could be directed to undertake a more appropriate course of study.
6. This includes the qualifications for eldership, kingship, stewardship and so on.
7. Remember that Timothy was to entrust the Truth to faithful men who could teach. How many "bright" seminary graduates would qualify on this basis?
8. The sinister aspect of seminary is that it awards degrees or diplomas that must be obtained in order to be admitted to the ministry. If you fail one subject, so as to not complete your course, then you cannot be ordained. It is that simple.
9. Titus 1:5-9, would mitigate against any such understanding.

Cor. 12:4-11; Eph. 4:11-13) and the Church will be the poorer if these are not recognised and utilised.

### Cause and Effect

**A**S WE STAND ON THE BRINK of a new millennium, we must begin to ask serious questions about where the Church is headed. It is evident that the last decades of this millennium have produced few bright spots as far as the Church is concerned. More importantly, we can directly attribute the Church's failure to its continual rejection of the Bible's prescriptions.

With the advent of seminary training as the universal standard, we have ended up with an artificial priesthood. By this is meant that the standards imposed by man have divested the Church of particular gifts and talents. Further, it has restricted sanctioned

ministry to the few who meet these new standards.

Allow me to illustrate. Have you ever noticed that 'city ministers' serve as a constant source of frustration for the 'country folk'. Why is this? Primarily, it is because the majority of ministers come from middle to upper class city suburbs. They often have university degrees and have, therefore, spent most of their lives in a city. This being the case, most ministerial candidates have never been employed in practical (manual) employment, nor considered the world outside the city. Whilst, there is, in one sense, nothing wrong with this, it does present a problem in that these people have no idea of how to relate to those in rural areas.

One minister in a church in north east Victoria, once expressed concern to an elder because the males in the youth club were always going shoot-

ing. This he considered odd. The elder asked him what he thought they should be doing. In response, he said that his father had bought him a yacht so that he could go sailing on Sydney Harbour. To this the elder simply asked two questions; which families do you believe have the money to buy their sons a yacht, and where are they going to sail them?

This is a quaint anecdote, but it has a powerful message. By setting up a false (humanist) standard the Church has alienated many of its members. It has created an academic elite who are often unable to grasp practical matters. Therefore, when problems are encountered it is always blamed upon some irreducible "spiritual" complaint, rather than upon pure incompetence or a lack of simply being practical.<sup>10</sup>

Such is the offspring of the seminary.<sup>11</sup>

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10. Other areas of concern are those of pride, jealousy, and importance. Consider the public perception of theological issues. Often a person will be printed in the media because they have several letters after their name, regardless of the fact that they may well be heretics. Look also at where the, so called, "important" churches are. You will not find a "power broker" in a small country parish. Esteem is associated with big, city churches. Hence, those who are interested in ecclesiastical ladder climbing abandon country parishes for the spotlight of the city.
  11. It may well be worth noting the similar symptoms found in other areas of life. Think for a moment of those occupations that were once trained by apprenticeship, but which are now based upon higher education. One of the most prominent would be nursing. Is there a link between the current debacle in the health system and the training of nurse through higher education?