

Cultivating Ministers of the Word:
The Ecclesiastical Duty of Encouraging Qualified Men to Pursue the Gospel Ministry

ARBCA Circular Letter 2004

Dear Brethren,

“The Legitimate Encouragement of Qualified Young Men in our Churches to Consider and to Train for the Gospel Ministry” was the original title I was given for this circular letter. As you can see, I have chosen a different, but equally puritanical title. My intention is not to obscure the subject at hand, but rather to elucidate the fact that the present discourse is concerned with the practical outworking of the external call to the ministry of the Word. Let me explain.

Throughout the Scriptures the minister of the Word is described in lofty terms. He is a servant of Christ and steward of the mysteries of God (1 Cor 4:1), a treasure (2 Cor 4:7), an ambassador of Christ (2 Cor 5:20; cf. Rom 10:14-17), and a gift of the ascended Christ (Eph 4:8-15.). Yet, as each of these texts would confirm, the significance of the minister is attached to his divinely appointed functions in the economy of grace, specifically the preaching of the Word and the administration of the sacraments, both of which are made effectual unto our salvation by the Spirit of God.¹ Paul, for example, exhorts Timothy, “Take heed to thyself and thy teaching. Continue in these things; for in doing this thou shalt save both thyself and them that hear thee” (1 Tim 4:16, ASV). Pastors are bestowed upon the church by her head and King, Jesus Christ, for her good and God’s glory, and so, we confess along with Calvin that “neither the light and heat of the sun, nor food and drink, are so necessary to nourish and sustain the present life as the apostolic and pastoral office is necessary to preserve the church on earth.”²

Because the gospel ministry is such a high and holy calling, and ordained by God unto such high and holy ends, as confessional Reformed Baptists we must be actively concerned with seeing more ministers raised up from within our churches. Paul’s injunction in 2 Timothy 2:2 must be understood as our responsibility. “And the things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also” (NKJV). This text, according to the nineteenth century Presbyterian Samuel Miller, expresses “the indispensable duty of the church of Christ, in all ages, to take measures, for providing an able and faithful ministry.”³

¹ The Second London Baptist Confession of Faith concurs. For example, citing Rom 10:14,17, Luke 17:5, 1 Pet 2:2, and Acts 20:32, our Confession teaches that the Spirit of God ordinarily works, strengthens, and increases saving faith by the outward means of grace, namely the Word, sacraments, and prayer (see 14:1).

² John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 4.3.2.

³ Samuel Miller, *The Duty of the Church to Take Measures for Providing an Able and Faithful Ministry in The Sermon, Delivered at the Inauguration of the Rev. Archibald Alexander, D.D. Professor of Didactic and Polemic Theology, in the Theological Seminary of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America: to Which are Added, the Professor’s Inauguration Address, and the Charge to the Professor and Students* (New York: Whiting and Watson, 1812), n.p.

Our present objective, then, is not to describe the nature of the external call to the ministry *per se*, but rather to delineate the concrete measures the church must utilize to fulfill her duty of cultivating within her midst able ministers of the new covenant. We must encourage qualified men to pursue the gospel ministry, and the question with which we are concerned is, as Miller posed it, “what are the means which the church is bound to employ, for providing an able and faithful ministry?”⁴ As I see it our biblical and confessional commitments draw our attention to three interrelated responsibilities that comprise the substance of the church’s duty to cultivate ministers of the Word.

First, the church must be active in identifying and selecting qualified men for the work of the ministry. The call to the ministry is the sovereign prerogative of God. Christ gives some men the determination to serve him in the ministry by his Spirit placing upon the individual conscience the earnest desire to pursue this good work (2 Tim 2:3-7; 1 Tim 3:1). Yet God, in his good and wise providence, does make use of means to carry out his sovereign purposes (cf. 2nd LBCF 5:3). So, each local church has the responsibility to recognize those within her membership who are “fitted and gifted by the Holy Spirit” (2nd LBCF 26:9), or to use Paul’s terminology, faithful and able men (2 Tim 2:2). Necessarily, then, not everyone is called to the ministry. This may seem obvious, but because the majority of contemporary evangelicalism has adopted the error of an every-member view of ministry, this is an important reminder. Nonetheless, those whom the church would call into the ministry must possess certain essential qualifications.

The prospective pastor must be a man (1 Tim 2:12; cf. 2 Tim 2:2), who sustains an irreproachable life in the home, in the church, and towards the world (1 Tim 3:2,4,7; Titus 1:6). He must likewise be a man of proven godly character and conduct (1 Tim 3:6). Furthermore, he must possess the ability to teach (1 Tim 3:2; cf. 1 Tim 4:13-16; 2 Tim 2:2; 4:2) and the ability to rule (1 Tim 3:4-5), both of which require a clear understanding of and honest commitment to the system of truth set forth in the Scriptures (Titus 1:9). The church has the responsibility to identify and select *qualified men*, that is, men who possess these graces and gifts, or the piety and ability requisite for the ministry. “The church,” according to Miller, “is bound with vigilant eye, to search for, and carefully select, from among the young men within her bosom, those who are endowed with piety and talents, whenever she can find these qualifications united.”⁵

How, then, is it possible to identify men of grace and gift? What practical measures does the church take in order to select men of piety and ability? Answering those kinds of questions, it seems, is analogous to determining whether a sinner’s profession of faith in Christ is a credible profession. In both circumstances the church is not able to peer into the soul, but rather discerns, to the best of her ability, the presence of an inward spiritual reality by means of external evidence. In the case of the call to the ministry such evidence consists primarily of the gifts the Holy Spirit bestows upon men for the preaching of the gospel, which is “the principal work of the ministry of the

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid. Emphasis is original.

church, the foundation of all other duties...”⁶ John Owen, in his very fine treatment of spiritual gifts, marks out three requisite gifts.

The first gift is wisdom, knowledge, or understanding of the mysteries of the gospel. This certainly necessitates saving faith in the gospel, but Owen has in view “a comprehension of the scope and end of Scripture...an acquaintance with the systems of particular doctrinal truths...a distinct insight into the springs and course of the mystery of the love, grace, and will of God in Christ” that enables ministers “to make known the way of life, of faith and obedience, unto others, and to instruct them in their whole duty to God and man thereon.”⁷ The gospel is “the wisdom of God in a mystery” (1 Cor 2:7), a mystery revealed in Christ (Rom 16:25-27; Eph 3:1-7), and as stewards of the mysteries of God (1 Cor 4:1) ministers are “to become so wise and understanding in that mystery as that they may be able to declare it unto others...”⁸

The second gift is the ability to rightly divide the Word of God (2 Tim 2:15). Preaching requires the skill of interpreting and applying the Scriptures with an awareness of the various needs present in the congregation. Thus, for the minister to discharge this duty properly he must have an understanding of (1) the state and condition of the congregation, (2) the way in which the grace of God operates upon the minds and hearts of men, (3) the nature of temptation, as well as common hindrances to faith and obedience, and (4) the nature of spiritual diseases and their proper remedies.⁹

Finally, Owen mentions the gift of utterance, or opening the mouth with boldness to make known the mysteries of the gospel (Eph 5:19). Not simply natural rhetorical skill, utterance consists of (1) freedom and liberty in the proclamation of the truth, (2) boldness and holy confidence despite present difficulties or hindrances, (3) preaching “with that gravity and soundness of speech which become them who speak the oracles of God,” and (4) the authority that accompanies the right preaching of the Word of God.¹⁰

Although these gifts will be cultivated and increased over a lifetime of faithful ministry (cf. 1 Tim 4:14-15; 2 Tim 1:6), and will be evident to a greater or lesser extent prior to both formal training and active ministry, Owen’s discussion provides the basis for determining the concrete measures the church can take to identify and select such gifted men, because these gifts, if present, will become evident to the church. With this in mind, let me offer a few practical suggestions to the end of identifying and selecting qualified men.

The first and foremost measure required of the church is fervent prayer, both private and public. If the call to the ministry, and the abilities requisite for the ministry, are gifts from the sovereign Lord of the church, then we must pray that God would grant

⁶ John Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, 16 vols. (Reprint, Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth, 1967), 4:508.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 4:509.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*, 4:510-511.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 4:512-513.

these things to men in our churches. The Lord Jesus himself said to his disciples, “The harvest truly is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Therefore, pray the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest” (Matt 9:37-38, NKJV). If we are to identify those who are qualified to be ministers of the Word of God, God himself must raise up faithful and able men, and likewise grant us the grace and wisdom necessary to examine whether a man possess the necessary qualifications.

It is also important that the church discern a young man’s willingness to deny self and serve Christ and his church. Is he willing to help the church by taking upon himself even the most menial of tasks? Furthermore, does he intend to garner attention on account of his service, or does he simply serve without care or concern of recognition? By itself, every Christian ought to be marked by these godly character traits, but the combination of these kinds of graces with the requisite spiritual gifts may serve as evidence of a call to the ministry.

In addition, the church, both her members and her officers, ought to engage young men in private conversation concerning the mysteries of the gospel. True men of piety and ability will be humble, and to varying degrees may be reticent to publish their aspirations for the ministry. Miller writes, “Piety is humble and retiring; and talents, especially of the kind best adapted to the great work of the ministry, are modest and unobtrusive. They require, at least in many instances to be sought out, encouraged, and brought forward. And how, and by whom, is this to be done? The *children of the church* are, if I may so express it, *the church’s property*. She has a right to the services of the best of them.”¹¹ To be sure it is a serious error to push unqualified men into the ministry. But if the Spirit of God bestows an extensive knowledge of biblical truth upon those he has fitted for the ministry, then this is an excellent means of identifying whether a man possesses such knowledge, and is able to articulate and apply the truth to the people of God. A more formal way of deciphering the presence of an intellectual grasp of the system of theology may be to establish a limited propaedeutic (i.e., pre-seminary) reading program.¹² This could include periodic meetings in which one or more of the elders would be able to examine a man’s ability to comprehend and communicate divine truth.

In a related sense, Christian parents in our assemblies potentially play a role in identifying gifted young men. As godly parents inculcate reverence for the public ministry of the Word and catechize their children, they have the ability (and unique privilege) to observe first hand whether or not a young man loves and understands gospel truth. Paul seems to indicate that this was something of the experience of Timothy (2 Tim 1:5; 3:14-16). A notable historical example of the influence of godly parentage is Herman Witsius, a seventeenth century Dutch Reformed pastor and theologian. Recalling the Lord’s providence in his call to the ministry and appointment as professor of theology at Franeker, Witsius remarked, “My pious parents devoted me to the church in my early childhood and took care to have my mind imbued with such doctrinal and

¹¹ Miller, *The Duty of the Church*, n.p.

¹² A suggested book list suited for this purpose has been compiled by J. Ligon Duncan, III and can be found in Herman Witsius, *On the Character of a True Theologian*, ed. J. Ligon Duncan, III (Reprint, Greenville, SC: Reformed Academic Press, 1994), 54.

practical instructions as were fitted to form me into one who would do no dishonor to the house of God. Yet both their humble desires and my own were fulfilled when, not without deriving some benefit from my ministrations, they heard me discourse on divine things, with but little pomp and to a small assembly.”¹³ We cannot expect this to be true in every case, nor should we separate this consideration from its proper ecclesiastical context. At the same time, however, we must recognize the potential role godly parents have in encouraging young men to consider the pastoral office.

To this end, the church ought also to give qualified young men opportunities to evidence before the church a knowledge of the gospel, an ability to rightly interpret and apply the Word of God, and boldness in speech. The specific application of this principle will necessarily vary from congregation to congregation, but the church must find ways to provide occasions on which a ministerial candidate may demonstrate to the church that he is both pious and able. For instance, call on young men to pray, for the church can easily evaluate public prayer. If your church conducts services for a nursing home or the like, you may be able to give young men opportunities to teach in these settings. After some time, the church may call upon the candidate to lead a Lord’s Day worship service, and eventually you may call upon him to preach, especially if he is attending seminary and in need of completing the necessary internship hours. At this stage there may be sister churches in your area in need of pulpit supply, and they too may be able to identify the presence of those graces and gifts, and so give their conscientious commendation.

Certainly these considerations are not exhaustive, but they demonstrate that for the church to identify and select qualified young men for the gospel ministry, these men must be put before the church, and their graces and gifts must be made evident to the church.

Second, the church must be active in assisting and training qualified men for the work of the ministry. Having identified and selected qualified young men for the ministry, the church is bound to teach them for the sake of the church (2 Tim 2:2). We, as an association of churches, have the obligation to instruct qualified men in order to furnish them with every resource necessary for the performance of their ministerial duties. Anything less demonstrates disdain for the church of Christ. Ministerial education, therefore, is a vital aspect of cultivating faithful and able ministers of the Word.

In seeking to fulfill this responsibility of ministerial training it is important to bear in mind that our conception of the nature and necessity of ministerial education is tied to our understanding of the character and functions of the ministry. B. B. Warfield was correct to point out, “A low view of the functions of the ministry will naturally carry with it a low conception of the training necessary for it.”¹⁴ We have already seen that both the New Testament and our Confession espouse a rather lofty view of the ministry and its divinely ordained significance. Consequently, our commitment to the Word of God and

¹³ Witsius, *Character*, 23-24.

¹⁴ Benjamin B. Warfield, *Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield*, ed. John E. Meeter, 2 vols. (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1970), 1:369.

our subscription to the Second London Baptist Confession of Faith leave us no other options; *we must maintain the highest possible regard for theological education.* Certainly, if we believe that the primary function of the minister of the Word is to proclaim the whole counsel of God as it has been revealed in his only begotten Son, for the sake of the redemption of men, women, boys, and girls mired in the misery and guilt of sin, then we are conscience bound to provide the kind of ministerial training that supplies qualified young men with an extensive knowledge of the whole counsel of God, and likewise prepares them to apply the whole counsel of God to the Lord's redeemed children. Accordingly, several practical measures are required of us.

This view of the necessity and function of ministerial training requires the church to provide a comprehensive theological education. Again, Warfield reminds us, "What precisely must be taught in a theological seminary will be determined by our conception of the ministry for the exercise of the functions of which it offers preparation."¹⁵ If, in other words, the function of the ministry were therapeutic we would commend an education that consists of all that is relevant to the discipline of therapy. Since, however, "the business of the minister is to apply the saving gospel to lost men for their salvation from sin," we must insist upon an education that seeks to impart a thorough knowledge of the gospel "in all its details, and in all its power."¹⁶ To be comprehensive, then, ministerial education must include the detailed treatment of each of the four theological disciplines, for (1) exegetical theology and biblical theology deal with the explanation of the Word of God, (2) systematic theology entails the organization and confirmation of the truth of the Word of God, (3) historical theology supplies a demonstration and illustration of the church's interpretation (or misinterpretation) of the Scriptures, and (4) ultimately practical theology involves the application of the three previous disciplines to the life of the church and the worship of God. With the intention of offering this kind of rigorous and robust theological education, ARBCA established the Institute of Reformed Baptist Studies to work in conjunction with Westminster Seminary in California.

Consequently, then, our churches ought to encourage qualified men to pursue this kind of theological education, specifically at IRBS and WSC. Witsius declared that, "no one teaches well unless he has first learned well."¹⁷ It seems that this is implied when Paul commanded his apostolic emissary, Timothy, to teach to faithful men what he had learned from the apostle (2 Tim 2:2). Yet does this mean that IRBS offers the best educational preparation for the ministry? For ARBCA churches, yes, unless providentially hindered. Allow me to answer several potential objections.

1. "Doesn't this subvert the place of the local church in ministerial training?" While there is not enough space to deal adequately with this objection, it is important to remember that Paul addresses Timothy in 2 Timothy 2:2 as his apostolic representative; Timothy is not the pastor of a local church. This duty belongs, then, to the church, not to the pastor of a specific local church. Thus, ministerial training is an appropriate function of an association of churches like our own.

¹⁵ Ibid., 1:375.

¹⁶ Ibid., 1:376.

¹⁷ Witsius, *Character*, 28.

2. “Isn’t this narrow minded?” Not in the least. For we, collectively, as an association of like-minded churches, have determined that IRBS is currently the best possible way in which we can provide a theological education for prospective ministers.
3. “Aren’t distance-learning programs and self-designed reading programs adequate means of preparation for the ministry?” Paul would not think so. In 2 Timothy 2:2 he tells Timothy to teach the things he has *heard*. The verb *avkou,w* necessitates verbal face-to face instruction. Just as faith comes by hearing the preached Word (Rom 10:17), so ministerial students learn by hearing. We would all agree that tape ministries and theological literature have their place in the Christian life, but are no substitute for preaching. In the same way reading is important, but cannot replace verbal instruction in the training of future ministers. Furthermore, distance learning and reading programs are often chosen in lieu of a traditional seminary because they supposedly take into consideration various time constraints, as the student can meet most of the program requirements on his own time, at his own pace. But being a seminary student for three to four years not only grants the student the privilege of learning from experienced pastor-scholars who are experts in their respective fields, but it also allows for an unparalleled period of consistent and constant reflection upon the word of God.
4. “But California is too far away from home?” This objection is emptied of any and all weight, it seems to me, as soon as we remember that a minister must possess a spirit of self-denial and willingness to serve Christ wherever he may be called. If the minister must be prepared to go anywhere for the kingdom of God, then California is not too far away to receive ministerial training.

This view of the necessity and function of ministerial training also requires the church to offer willingly whatever assistance is necessary to provide a theological education. The puritan divine, William Perkins, in his important book *The Art of Prophesying*, argued, “Good ministers are one in a thousand. If therefore their number is to be increased, training institutions must be well maintained. In order to uphold the kingdom of Satan, Antichrist is careful to erect colleges and endow them with financial backing, to be seminaries for his synagogue...He employs strenuous means to sow his tares in the hearts of young men, so that they may in turn sow them in the hearts of people abroad. Should not Christian rulers be just as careful, indeed, even more zealous, to increase the number of godly ministers?”¹⁸ While our ecclesiology entails changing the reference to Christian rulers to read the church, the point is well taken. We must continue to fund IRBS and its professor(s). Yet, we must also find ways to give assistance to students who have the need, as biblical principle demonstrates. Paul argues in favor of a paid ministry in 1 Timothy 5:17-18 (cf. 2nd LBCF 26:10). Giving financial assistance to prospective ministers seems to be but an implication of this teaching. And the church ought not “to consider this provision a burden, or imagine that, in making it, she confers a favor. It is as clearly her duty, a duty which she as really owes her Master and herself, as the ordinary provision which she makes for the support of the word and ordinances. Or rather, it is to be lamented that she has not been accustomed always to

¹⁸ William Perkins, *The Art of Prophesying* (Reprint, Edinburgh/Carlisle: The Banner of Truth, 1996), 96-97.

consider it as an essential part of her ordinary provision for the maintenance of the means of grace.”¹⁹ There is also historical precedent for such a practice. At the General Assembly of 1689 our Particular Baptist forefathers determined to establish a fund to assist ministerial training.²⁰ We should do likewise, especially at the associational level. Individual churches may not have the means to help pay a student’s educational costs, but as our brief history demonstrates there are greater resources available when we work together.

There is one final word concerning this matter of ministerial training. Our convictions necessitate that we encourage qualified young men to pursue suitable undergraduate education as the proper preparation for seminary. A well-rounded liberal arts education is the foundational study of the book of natural revelation, while seminary is the concentrated study of the book of special revelation. A bachelor’s degree is a necessary prerequisite for seminary training, not as an arbitrary mandate of the modern academy, but because the Scriptures were written in ancient languages, have been applied in successive periods of history, and need to be applied to our post-modern era. Thus, a rudimentary knowledge of at least the languages, ancient and modern history, and various philosophical schools of thought, may prove quite helpful in preparation for the detailed study of the Scriptures.²¹

Witsius was correct when he declared that “no one teaches well unless he has first learned well; no one learns well unless he learns in order to teach.” It is the church’s duty to encourage qualified young men to learn well in order that they might teach well. This clearly requires that the church be active in assisting and training qualified men for the work of the ministry.

Third, and finally, the church must be active in commending, calling, and ordaining qualified men to the work of the ministry. According to our Confession, “The way appointed by Christ for the calling of any person, fitted and gifted by the Holy Spirit, unto the office of bishop or elder in a church, is, that he be chosen thereunto by the common suffrage of the church itself; and solemnly set apart by fasting and prayer, with imposition of hands of the eldership of the church, if there be any before constituted therein...” (2nd LBCF 26:9). The calling and ordaining of a man to the gospel ministry is the culmination of the church’s duty to cultivate ministers of the Word. The measures for calling and ordination are laid out rather plainly in the Scriptures. The congregation, having examined a man for the presence of the necessary graces and gifts, votes on whether or not to call that man to serve their assembly (cf. Acts 14:23). Upon that man’s acceptance, the current elders of the church lay hands upon him, formally setting him apart to do the work of the ministry (cf. 1 Tim 4:14). But how does the church come to

¹⁹ Miller, *The Duty of the Church*, n.p.

²⁰ See James M. Renihan, “A Reformed Baptist Perspective on the Association of Churches,” in *Denominations or Associations: Essays on Reformed Baptist Associations*, ed. James M. Renihan (Amityville, NY: Calvary Press, 2001), 58-59. Cf. James M. Renihan, “The Practical Ecclesiology of the English Particular Baptists, 1675-1705” (Ph.D. diss., Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 1997), 354-357.

²¹ See the section entitled “studies” at <http://www.wscal.edu/pstudents/preparing.html> for general suggestions for undergraduate course work.

know of the prospective minister? Are our young men on their own after seminary, dependant upon their own wits to find a church in which they can serve?

The answer to these questions is found in the forgotten practice of ministerial commendation, a practice when rightly understood and implemented can be a great help to our associational life. Paul counted Epaphroditus and Tychicus as his co-laborers in the gospel, and so was able to commend them to the churches in Philippi and Colossae, respectively (cf. Phil 2:25; Col 4:7). While Paul's apostolic office was unique to the apostolic age, the practice employed by Paul on these two occasions is to be used by the church in every age. In the framework in which we are discussing the call to the ministry, we must recognize that attending seminary does not abolish a young man's ties to his sending church. He would maintain his membership at his home church even while in school. Upon graduation, then, if the student's church of record maintains the conviction that this young man possesses the necessary qualifications for the ministry, that congregation may commend him to a sister church in need. Churches in which the ministerial student has served as an intern could also perform this function. As the last step in this process, then, churches must commend, call, and ordain men of evident piety and ability to the gospel ministry.

Conclusion. If our commitment to the Reformed faith means anything, then we will readily confess that our triune God is sovereign in this matter of calling men to the ministry. Our duty, however, is not to remain idle. By God's sovereign appointment we possess the responsibility to cultivate within our churches faithful and able gospel ministers. Accordingly, we must heed this exhortation of Samuel Miller: "Yes, you who call yourselves Christians! If you love the church to which you profess to belong; if you possess a single spark of the spirit of allegiance to her Divine Head and Lord: nay, if you desire not a 'famine of the word of life' (Amos 8:11); if you desire not the heaviest spiritual judgments to rest upon you, then come forward, and act, as well as speak, like friends of the Redeemer's kingdom. Come forward, and give your influence, your substance, and your prayers, for 'the help of the Lord is against the mighty' (Judges 5:23)."²²

It is my sincere and earnest prayer that this discussion will prove to be fruitful for our mutual endeavors in the gospel, and, as a result, that our covenant God would be glorified.

In the fellowship of the gospel,

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²² Miller, *The Duty of the Church*, n.p.