

Blessed Is the Man

Orations on Theological Education



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Introduction

Depending upon how one handles the data, somewhere between 85 and 95 percent of pastors globally have no formal theological education.¹ Yet, churches continue to be planted, and God's covenant people continue to pass through the waters of baptism. Christ's church is growing rapidly in much of the world. The need for pastors who can rightly handle the Word of truth grows apace. If every Bible college and seminary in the world were to operate at 150 percent of its capacity, we wouldn't come anywhere close to meeting the need. And, in the manner of one of those intimidating hockey stick graphs, the need will likely increase in years to come. Assuming that the center of Christianity continues to shift toward the Majority World, what are the likely consequences for the church if, a century from now, the vast majority of pastors struggle to read and interpret the Bible in dialogue with the catholic church throughout the ages?

¹ The Center for the Study of Global Christianity at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, for example, estimates that 5 percent of "pastors/priests in all Christian traditions worldwide ... are likely to have formal theological training (undergraduate Bible degrees or master's degrees)." "Quick Facts about Global Christianity," January 21, 2025, <https://www.gordonconwell.edu/center-for-global-christianity/research/quick-facts/>.

In the United States, where I call home, the challenge is just as real, if perhaps not quite so immediately overwhelming. Since the sixteenth century, both Western Protestants and Roman Catholics have become almost wholly reliant upon seminaries to provide congregations with pastors. But various social and cultural pressures have made pastoral ministry a less attractive professional option for the younger generations.

To put it bluntly, young men who sense a call to ministry are not beating down seminary doors. To speak of my own ecclesiastical circles, most NAPARC (North American Presbyterian and Reformed Council) denominations are hovering around a 20 percent pastoral vacancy rate. That number is likely to increase in the future, which will make replacing pastors, let alone planting additional congregations, increasingly difficult, unless we find another roadmap to pastoral formation. As Paul put it, “How shall they hear without a preacher? (Rom. 10:14 KJV).

Various creative solutions have, of course, been proposed and rolled out by seminaries and some churches. Online, hybrid, evening, and combined degree programs, reduced credit hours, programs that feature increased flexibility or appeal to older students, local learning communities, multiple and satellite campuses, recruitment of international students, church partnerships, and so forth. In the shuffle, some seminaries have closed or merged; others have floated shrinking MDiv programs (traditionally the standard degree for pastoral ministry) by recruiting for other degrees (such as MAs, ThMs, or DMin) or disciplines (like counseling). A few flagship schools have grown, especially those enjoying the support of large denominations.

The fact remains that the church needs a steady (and even increasing) flow of godly pastors who are competent

to read, understand, and proclaim the gospel revealed in God's Word, who are both tender and firm in their care for Christ's sheep, and who readily defend the flock from those who would do harm. To fail in this endeavor, even for a single generation, is to place the church in the most vulnerable of positions. It means opening the door to an age of theological darkness akin to what Israel experienced under Jeroboam or Rome during the late medieval period.

To demand that newly minted MDivs be, as James put it, "perfect and complete, lacking in nothing" is absurd. Young pastors typically lack the experience, knowledge, and credibility of counterparts who've spent decades in the trenches, and part of every Christian's life is a putting off and putting on more and more as we are conformed to the image of Christ, the Good Shepherd. Nevertheless, setting an unformed or only partially formed shepherd over a flock rarely results in a healthy, thriving church. Shepherds unable to rightly handle God's Word foster churches where that same Word is either abused or sidelined. The result of those missteps is tragic, as we've seen over and over.

To be clear, this is not a doom and gloom prediction. Our posture toward the church's future should always be optimistic, since we have Christ's clear promise that the gates of hell will not prevail against her (Matt. 16:18). But playing fast and loose with that which God has given us to steward is foolhardy. We must foster a culture that values and honors the call to ministry. We must encourage our boys and young men to discern that call in a sober and prayerful manner. We must support those who have set their sights on the pastorate as well as the institutions that partner with churches to form them. Finally, we must do a better job of keeping faithful and competent pastors in the ministry for life rather than losing them to burnout or less stressful jobs. These are difficult challenges, and because

they are difficult, we do well to seek the counsel of those who have gone before us in the faith.

Zanchi and the Discipline of Theological Education

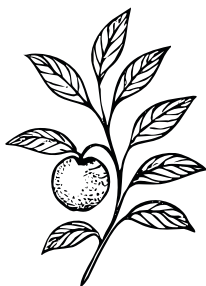
For students of Reformation history, Girolamo Zanchi's reputation as a theologian is well established, and increasingly his importance as a biblical exegete is coming into focus. The speeches collected here evidence his skills in both of those disciplines, but they primarily highlight a third one: Zanchi's reflections upon the method and practice of theological education. Although rarely thought of as educational theorist, Zanchi's contributions in that area were not insignificant insofar as he directly influenced Protestant theological education at a critical moment in its development through his teaching and writing, and more indirectly through his students.²

In fact, theological education was at the heart of Zanchi's entire career in ministry. Early on, his teachers in Italy found him an apt pupil and sent him for advanced training, with the intention of seeing him become a teacher within his religious order. Once he embraced Reformation theology in the 1540s, Zanchi found himself involved in leading and teaching at an underground seminary in the city of Lucca. After fleeing from Italy in October 1551, he enjoyed a year of rigorous personal study in Geneva before accepting a position in Strasbourg in early 1553. Following a decade in Strasbourg, he accepted a pastorate in Chiavenna, in

² For example, at least four of his students became professors of theology at the newly established University of Leiden in the Netherlands: Franciscus Gomarus, Jeremias Bastingius, Sibrandus Lubbertus, and Antonius Thysius. Gomarus was one of the key figures at the Synod of Dordt; Lubbertus and Thysius were two of the four authors of the *Leiden Synopsis*.

The Dignity of Theological Study

*Delivered at the Promotion of
Drs. Kimedoncius, Bastingius,
& Bollius,
18 December 1576*



Two things constitute man's total and full blessedness. And He who cannot lie, the Holy Spirit, promises and confirms both of them as a certainty to the man who is devoted to that divine wisdom which we call theology. The first is *godliness*, specifically, *with contentment*¹ in this age [1 Tim. 6:6]. The second is the perfect possession of eternal and heavenly life in the age to come. *O blessed is the man who meditates day and night*, and so on, as you know (Ps. 1[:1-2]).

The first aspect of blessedness consists in this: The devotees of this heavenly doctrine are, especially in this life, rewarded with true knowledge of God and divine matters, and they're justified, which is granted by means of faith in Christ, and they're regenerated by His Spirit as different men. What's more, once regenerated, they always retain a peaceful and good conscience, and on that basis bear good fruit, each one in his own time, living in a holy and pious way to the end of their lives, and always content with their lot in life.

The second aspect of blessedness is that, after overcoming all of their enemies, those who depart this life are received in triumph into the altogether pleasant and delightful community of blessed spirits and of Christ, and they dwell with Him eternally and in complete happiness. This is the summary of the true happiness which can be granted to man.

¹ εὐσέβειαν, *nimirum*, μετ' αὐταρχείας.

Honestly, what could be added to these two things so as to increase man's true and perfect blessedness? And so, as was just indicated through the prophet in the psalm, God promises full and perfect happiness to those who devote and consecrate themselves to the pursuit of heavenly wisdom.

For, first, God pronounces that the man who has rejected the counsels and teachings of the wicked, who has condemned the customs and habits of heinous and outrageous men, who (lastly) has forever bid farewell to all Epicurean mockers of everything that smacks of religion, having instead turned his whole soul toward the genuine pursuit of the holy law (that is, the Holy Scriptures) and trained his whole self in it at all times, both day and night—God pronounces that that man simply is and will be more blessed. This is the first thing.

Second, what God said generally with regard to the blessedness of pursuing this law, He explains bit by bit. The first bit is that, once a pursuer of this sort has gathered true knowledge of God from the fountain of the divine books, he becomes a new creation in this age. Having been, as it were, a wild olive tree, he becomes a superlative olive tree, an evergreen planted by a river of water that flows constantly and endlessly, a tree which, in its time, bears the most pleasant of fruits. It constantly delights with its wonderful perennial greenness. And (finally) it is a tree for which everything culminates in a prosperous outcome. This is the first element of the blessedness of the pursuit of divine wisdom. The prophet then adds a second to it, which follows the first.

The second element is that, having completed his course of life in a sober, righteous, and pious manner [Titus 1:8], he who pursues the law will ultimately rise up with all the pious and stand in the judgment and live on in an

eternal and fully blessed life with Christ and all the angels. At the same time and conversely, all of the wicked, who have lived like inconsequential chaff in this world, driven about by all the winds of desire, will on that account be sentenced to eternal punishment in the universal judgment. For God approves of the intentions, life, and habits of pious men and the pursuers of true theology, just as (conversely) He hates the ways of the wicked and of those who mock His teaching.

Since this is the way things are—and that this is how they are could also be confirmed and demonstrated by many testimonies, if it were necessary—it follows that those who earnestly and consistently apply themselves to the pursuit of this Christian wisdom are of all people especially praiseworthy. This is the case not only on account of their piety but also on account of their prudence. For they choose for themselves that which is best.

But if this were to happen not so much for the sake of their salvation as for the sake of their role in serving the church and advancing Christ's kingdom, then doubtless they're not only altogether worthy of praise but also of the greatest love and honor. For who wouldn't praise someone who commits himself to the pursuit of the sort of knowledge which is, in fact, not only the most noble and useful of all but which is also reckoned to be so in the judgment of all wise men and which word of mouth constantly proclaims as such?

Consider a person who, moved by true piety toward God, intends and undertakes his studies for his neighbor's salvation and the public benefit of the church. Would anyone deem him to be singularly unworthy of love and honor in his church and homeland? But what's more praiseworthy or more expedient for the church's well-being than the pursuit of Christian wisdom? Certainly, when the apostle

exhorted Timothy to continue steadfast in the pursuit and practice of theology, he said: *If you do this, you will save yourself and those who hear you* [1 Tim. 4:16].

What's more, if the dignity and nobility of arts and sciences are to be reckoned on the basis of the superiority and dignity of those who first established them, then are any of them more worthy than this divine philosophy? For its Establisher is not a man or an angel but God Most High Himself, who having formerly spoken to the fathers by the prophets, has at last spoken to us in the Son [Heb. 1:2].

Likewise, if a thing is worthy of praise because of its antiquity, what's more praiseworthy than theology? Nothing is more ancient. For wisdom is from God, dwelling in His breast from all eternity but now revealed and manifested from the world's beginning to the first people, by means of whom it has been faithfully transmitted to all their posterity. And the books that have been written about wisdom are the oldest and most ancient of all. For, among writers, is anyone older than Moses or Job?

But in the schools, they say that a subject (that is, a subject of study) obtains praise and dignity based on what it discusses. What's more excellent, more noble, or more worthy than heavenly doctrine? For vain or useless subjects aren't even discussed in this context. Nor do we discuss anything unworthy of a Christian man. Rather, we summarize subject matter pertaining to God and His kingdom and the eternal salvation and life of men. This is where the true principles of all things are taught no less clearly than truly and surely. This is where the source of every good law is revealed to all, and what we should avoid and what we should pursue is made gloriously manifest. This is where the truest histories of what has been done from the beginning of the world are recounted altogether faithfully. This is where the firmest foundations of all other histories are

laid, for the benefit and salvation of humankind. This is where the true rhetorical method and the effective plan of persuasion (namely, the one that consists not in persuasive words of human wisdom, flourishes, trappings, colors, or lights but in the power of the divine Spirit and the efficacy of the divine Word) is bequeathed. This is where the proper way and method of providing medicine not (certainly) for bodies but for our souls, and (indeed) for bestowing eternal health—the happiest of health—upon our bodies is taught most profitably. This (finally) is where the method is readily asserted whereby each one can rule himself and his family. What's more, by this same rule, the state, the republic, the kingdom, and even the whole world can be administered and governed by men.

What more do you want? And our theology, which is nothing other than teaching about God and His nature, will, and works for the salvation of men revealed in the Holy Scriptures, furnishes all these things. Therefore, if the dignity and excellence of the arts and sciences themselves depend on those things that are the concern of each art or science, then does anyone fail to see that the pursuit of no other science can compare to the pursuit of theology?

Now add this as well: The things that are delivered in our theology are so reliable that nothing could be more certain. To be sure, the dignity of the mathematical sciences is great on account of the sure and evident demonstrations whereby they prove their [conclusions], but what are such things compared to the reliability of God's Word? For just as God cannot be deceived, so He doesn't will to deceive, and obviously He who is truth and wisdom itself cannot do so. Moreover, true theology advances only by the Holy Scriptures, which are themselves God's utterly reliable speech. And as, indeed, by our God's kindness, no one

doubts this, so it can also easily be demonstrated by completely well-founded reasons. In fact, this has already been sufficiently demonstrated by our fathers against the Gentiles of their own times. For besides the fact that the Holy Spirit inscribes this truth in the very souls of all the elect so that they cannot doubt it, it's also evident on the basis of the testimony of nearly all Gentiles and peoples. For did anyone mock the writings of both the Old and New Testaments more than Julian the Apostate, that most heinous of men?

All the Jews, from Moses to our day, have constantly testified (and still do) that what we have in the Old Covenant Bible was revealed by God to Moses and the other prophets and holy writers, just as the apostle also reports concerning those same Scriptures in his second letter to Timothy [2 Tim. 3:16]. Indeed, throughout the whole world, scattered far and wide, everyone who has enlisted to serve Christ with lasting and steadfast faith has recognized the same thing about all of the apostolic books. They've openly proclaimed this, and they still do. In fact, a great number have and daily do seal it by spilling their lifeblood.

Do you think this testimony insufficient? But how many and how great are the miracles that have, from the times of Moses up to our own day, confirmed this eternal truth and made it manifest throughout the whole world? More than 600,000 Israelites saw the very signs and portents whereby God revealed Himself and promulgated His law on Mount Sinai. So then, is anything more reliable than Mosaic teaching? And innumerable people from every nation of those that are under heaven were present (as Luke tells it [in Acts 2:5–6]), and they saw what fell upon Jerusalem from heaven. For Christ's will was to confirm that the apostles' teachings were His own teachings, which He had commanded be made known throughout the whole world.

Thus, the teachings of both the law and the heavenly gospel have been confirmed by totally unmistakable and universally recognized signs declared from heaven. Therefore, except perhaps among the Julians, doubting that eternal wisdom from God is found therein is no longer possible. For what man of sound mind can have doubts about the teaching which, in addition to the reasons already alleged, contains the settled outcome of things predicted in it many generations earlier? But don't we see that everything Moses and the other prophets predicted about Christ had its fulfillment? If all these things weren't completely obvious to us, I would explain each one of them very clearly, comparing what the gospel writers relate with what the prophets prophesied, for they abundantly prophesied about the same specific things.

And, indeed, the gospel writers have made good on this in abundance. For how often do they relate something about Christ and then immediately subjoin to it a testimony from the prophets, that such and such a thing had to happen in such and such a way because it had thus been written? Honestly, who among you doesn't know, for instance, that, before the exodus from Egypt, God foretold to Abraham that his seed would be a slave in Egypt and yet would be freed from there after four hundred years and more [Gen. 15:13–14]? To be sure, all of it came to pass.

What did Isaiah foretell of Cyrus (by name!) and of his famous actions more than a century before they happened [Isa. 45:1–7]? How is it possible for them all to have been simultaneously fulfilled, and precisely as predicted? If you don't believe it based on the sacred histories, then read the secular ones; they set down a very accurate account of Cyrus's deeds. Then you'll know with complete clarity how things stand.