

A Student Desirable for the Ministry

[Faculty Conference Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin, June 13, 1980]

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Even though this paper is being presented to friends who speak a common language, I suppose that at the outset it might be a good idea, in order to avoid misunderstanding, to spell something out which we all take for granted. Each of us has been called to play an important part in the training of men and women to work in fields ripe for harvest. That harvest belongs to the Lord. He must supply the workers, not we, and we are grateful for the workers he supplies. It's all right for us at this conference to talk about students whom we consider desirable for the ministry as long as we remember that it's not really we who determine their desirability, who set those qualifications. It's the Lord of the harvest who determines what kind of laborers he wants to work in his fields.

What, then, is our role in the process? The title assigned for this paper is not to suggest that each of us has the right to determine: "This is the kind of student I like to have in my classroom." We can consider our role a threefold one.

The church is not a democracy where the citizenry calls the shots. The church is an absolute monarchy. The Head of the church has through his apostle given us the directive: "Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands" (1 Ti 5:22). He has listed a few qualifications—very few—which he considers indispensable for the men and women who will reap his harvest. We will, in the first place, want to make sure we know what his wishes are in this matter. Our second task in training workers is to try to develop the gifts which the Lord has given those people who have presented themselves to us for training. But before sending them out into the harvest, we have a third task: we must evaluate their aptitude for the office to which they aspire. Our job this morning is to examine the guidelines the Lord has given his church as it confers the office of the ministry on frail vessels of clay, each of whom has imperfections, Just as their instructors do.

They say the accepted way to eat an elephant is to cut it in pieces first. To give us a handle on a pretty broad topic, let me suggest that we look at the assigned topic from three aspects, as we seek to spell out what makes a student desirable for the ministry. Let's think first of the *academic* or *intellectual* qualifications a student ought to possess, secondly of his *spiritual* qualifications, and finally of the *emotional* equipment we think he ought to have.

I.

What are the academic qualifications we look for in our future pastors? A teacher sometimes feels like the wizard of Oz, who you may remember said to the scarecrow: "I can't give you brains, but I can give you a diploma." Diplomas we, too, can give, but native intelligence is the Lord's to give—or to withhold.

Surely we will agree that the church of God would not be well served if we were to lower our academic standards to a level which anyone wanting to be a pastor could reach. Time was when more often than not the pastor was the best educated man in the community and ranked with the physician and the lawyer in eminence. That time is long gone. In the parish ministry today the pastor may very well be dealing consistently with people whose intellect has been stimulated and strengthened by more exposure to formal education than the pastor has had.

The pastor-to-be has to have an inquiring mind, and we'll want to structure our classroom procedures to encourage, rather than discourage, that. Earnestness is simply not enough for a man who must week after week stand before a congregation with a message which will not only prepare them to live forever at God's side in another world, but which will in the meantime equip them to live for God in a world which makes this frightfully difficult. If this is to be the result, then weekly sermon preparation must be more than merely imposing a new outline, a new pattern on the same limited assortment of ideas, a reshuffling of familiar themes. Carlyle speaks disparagingly of an "enormous and repeated thrashing of straw." It surely is not the seminary's ideal for its graduates that ten minutes into the sermon the congregation knows pretty well where the preacher is going to end, because everything the preacher has to say they've heard before. And it is no answer to say: "This is what our people want—simple and familiar." This may be true, but this may also be the reason why people stop attending services. If what a man offers from the pulpit is little more than predigested oatmeal, or a warmed-over dish of thin soup however attractively served, many Christians will leave the service unsatisfied—and dissatisfied. An *inquiring* mind, a mind that wants to learn, that is interested in touching life at as many points as possible is a prominent qualification in a student desirable for the ministry.

So is a *logical* mind. Whether we like to admit it or not, the Christian message has an intellectual cast—a Gospel formulated in propositions preached and understood, accepted and believed and put to practice. It demands that a pastor be clear and comprehensible, lucid and logical, in order to mediate saving truth to the minds of men in words and ideas they can understand and respect. A slovenly thinker in the pulpit, on the other hand, can do untold mischief in the church of God, and perhaps we have a reminder of that in this anniversary year of the Formula of Concord. The errors that arose within the Lutheran Church after the death of Luther bear ample testimony to this mischief.

In the church body of which you and I are members it's taken for granted that the synodical seminary trains men not to be amateur psychiatrists, but to be Bible scholars. As we do so, we cannot forget that we're spiritual children of a man who said: "As dear to us as is the Gospel, so hard let us hold on to the original languages." Accordingly, then, when we talk about a student desirable for the pastoral ministry, we must include language skills among the qualifications needed.

This means, in the first place, reading and study skills in the original languages of the Bible. Years ago the synod determined that students enrolling in its seminary should be able to read the Bible in Hebrew and Greek. Surely this is no more than realistic, when you consider that everything God has told us about himself, everything he has told us about ourselves, everything he has told us about his marvelous plans for us is contained in the vocabulary and syntax of the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures. During each of the three years the future pastor spends on the Mequon campus he will study exegetically one Old Testament book and one New Testament book. In his very first seminary year the student will have classes in New Testament Introduction, in which he will read virtually every book of the New Testament in Greek.

It's admittedly an uncommon curriculum, because our synod has been uncommonly blessed by a good and gracious God. It's a curriculum designed not to make life additionally difficult for the future pastor, but designed to equip him to listen carefully to the word God has spoken. After all, the whole art of Christian witness is to listen carefully to what God has said, and then to repeat and apply that word carefully and simply to sinners who need to hear it. With the prophets of old, God's kind of man for our kind of world is called to announce: "This is what the Lord says." Really this is the only message 20th century man needs to hear before the

deafness of death overtakes him. But how is God's messenger going to know what the Lord said if he has not read or cannot read the primary sources?

When you consult your attorney with reference to some legal problem, you like to think that he has worked with the state statutes. If you must undergo major surgery, you are reassured to learn that the surgeon has had more than a course in advanced first aid. A Bible scholar who can work with God's Word only in translation is a contradiction in terms. How is a man who is unable to handle Hebrew and Greek going to be able to evaluate the contemporary translations which have flooded the market the past several decades?

One can almost predict that there will be those who will respond to the opinion just expressed by asking: "You mean we can use only language specialists as pastors of our congregation?" The answer is no. God has not made all our future pastors language specialists. But a man doesn't have to be a language specialist to be able to read the original languages of the Bible with understanding and with profit—to be able, e.g., to recognize an inverted word order in a Hebrew sentence, to do meaningful word study with his lexicon and concordance when preparing a sermon or a Bible class presentation, to use a scholarly commentary intelligently.

Permit a digression for just a moment, just long enough to record publicly what a superb job is being done by those men who have equipped each new first-year class with the language skills they bring to the seminary. Ours is the more rewarding job of reaping where they have sowed; theirs is the thankless, usually unrecognized, often unrewarding job of laying the foundations. Foundations aren't all that glamorous, because they aren't spectacular. But the unsung work of those who lay the language foundations is indispensable for a language program which is the envy of many another denomination. I recall speaking to an Old Testament instructor at a Baptist seminary in the Twin Cities several years ago. When he learned that enrolling students at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary bring reading skills in Hebrew and Greek with them, he began salivating like one of Pavlov's dogs and remarked wistfully: "Five years ago I started a one-man campaign to get more Hebrew into our curriculum, and that's where it has stayed—a one-man campaign."

A second group of language skills that we must look for in a student desirable for the ministry are communicating skills in English. The first mark of an educated man is surely the correct use of his mother tongue. It seems that in recent years the opinion has been expressed more frequently in our faculty room—and perhaps in yours too—that we're reaping the bitter fruit of years of indifference to correct English not only on the part of elementary grade schools but also across the country as a whole. When in morning chapel services I hear a student who is engaged in postgraduate studies say that "Christ died for you and I," I don't need any more convincing that the problem is widespread and deeply rooted.

These, then, are the first qualifications a student desirable for the ministry must have—academic ones.

II.

By listing the student's spiritual qualifications second I hope no one will think the qualifications are being listed in order of their priority. The student enrolled in our pre-ministerial program will be no more effective a pastor than he is a Christian. It follows, then, that we will have to be concerned about the spiritual qualifications God looks for in a student desirable for the ministry. At the risk of oversimplifying, let me mention only two. A man who

wants to be a Lutheran pastor must have a thorough understanding of Law and Gospel. We do not demand that our pastor candidates be language specialists. But we do demand—indeed, we must demand—that they be Law and Gospel specialists. They must be able Sunday for Sunday, year in and year out, to present a meaningful message of Law and Gospel to a hungry flock. A good understanding of sin and grace is the antidote for the self-righteousness each of us brought into the world. An in-depth understanding of the natural depravity of the heart as well as of the amazing grace of God is the only safeguard against legalism. A proper understanding of Law and Gospel is the only doctrinal platform which alone gives all glory to God. And that, finally, is the aim of our whole endeavor.

What would you say is the picture the average American has of the typical pastor? A good fellow, well-meaning if bland? An insipid moralizer? Self-appointed father to all and sundry? An ecclesiastical entrepreneur interested primarily in seeing to it that his congregation doesn't become unglued? Or perhaps an amateur psychiatrist who offers peace of mind for the price of an offering?

The church doesn't need a clergy that will retreat behind the breastworks of administrative detail and ecclesiastical trivia and community vagrancy. The church does not need pastors who when conscience bothers them simply run off to another meeting to make arrangements for another meeting. The church does not need any more "good Joes." The church needs, has always needed, will always need "scholar teachers" who are equipped to bring God and man together in reasoned relation. The pastor must be the one man in our surfeited communities who knows about God, who knows that in Jesus Christ God has said all that he had to say to a sinful world. A student desirable for the ministry is a student committed to Jesus Christ—committed to him, first of all, as the Savior of our souls.

Our task as teachers of the next generation of preachers is not only to inculcate facts and to share techniques, but to help the student to marvel at what C. S. Lewis used to call the unscrupulousness of God's grace. A look around this room is all the proof anybody needs that God wasn't as particular when choosing members for his family as, e.g., we were when, as children, we chose sides for a pick-up game of baseball or football. Here we've rebelled against him and slapped his face and told him in a thousand ugly ways that we want to be our own boss. Like stubborn, spunky children we've run away from our Father's house, imagining we'd be happier making it on our own, and what did he do? Well, he didn't let us perish in our silly stubbornness. Since we weren't looking for him, he took the initiative and came after us. Christ Jesus became our Brother, to fill our shoes, to tread our paths, to face our trials, to shoulder our burdens, and even more—to take our place, to obey God's Commandments for us, to assume our guilt, to bear our punishment. And all so that we might belong to him, to live close to him now and at his side forever. A student desirable for the ministry has learned to be amazed at such grace, and gratefully to acknowledge Jesus Christ as the Savior of his soul.

As branches on a heavenly vine, however, you and I are not only to receive mercy and strength from God. Branches have another function besides to draw from the vine Jesus made this quite clear when he said to his disciples: "You did not choose me, but I chose you to go and bear fruit" (Jn 15:16). In other words, as Christian teachers we must remember that Jesus Christ asks to occupy the place of honor not only in our heart, but in our life as well. In each of us he wants to see the fruit of a life dedicated to him. Jesus Christ asks me to receive him not only as the Savior of my soul, but as the Lord of my life as well. And if I have not acknowledged him as Lord of my life, then I have not accepted him as my Savior, either. He will not take the one without the other. He will not take our faith without our life. He bought us soul and body. He

wants and claims all that there is to us. A student desirable for the ministry is one on whom the Gospel of Christ has had a maturing effect, leading him to reorder his priorities in life. The problem here for the student is that he's not only Joe Christian; he's Joe, son of Adam. There is a portion of his physical and mental equipment which is not under the direction of the Spirit of God but of self. That old nature is never going to be converted. All we can do is drown it, and that's not easy. Martin Luther once remarked that when you try to drown the old Adam you soon find out that that rascal can swim.

Students desirable for the ministry have been helped also to trust that drowning an old nature and letting a new nature arise is something which, though beyond our capabilities, is possible with God. He can and will bring about the changes in us for which he calls. A student desirable for the ministry has learned that not with his own strength but through the powers of grace he can respond to the apostle's admonition: "Sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law but under grace. . . . Just as you used to offer the parts of your body in slavery to impurity and to ever-increasing wickedness, so now offer them in slavery to righteousness leading to holiness" (Rm 6:14,19).

In short, a student desirable for the ministry realizes, every time he steps into a classroom, that he has only one goal in that classroom, just as he has a single goal in all of life: "Everything to the glory of God!"

III.

It's painfully obvious that a student will be no better a pastor than he is a person. If he's got some serious kinks in his personality, these are probably going to show themselves in his training, and they're most surely going to make themselves known in his ministry. I recall hearing one of the district presidents of our synod say several years ago: "It isn't often that a doctrinal controversy or a juicy scandal in the pastoral office rocks and shocks the congregation. The sort of thing that causes more grief for the congregation are the unacceptable personality traits in the pastor which cause the congregation to lose confidence in him." It was that district president's opinion that our training system puts the stress on academic competence rather than on emotional stability. You may agree with that opinion, or you may not. But surely we will agree that we ought not to do the one and leave the other undone.

Concern for the emotional stability of our future pastors has to be just as great as our concern for his academic and spiritual qualifications. I don't really have a good reason to offer you why this essay treats the student's emotional qualifications last. It's surely not because they're least important; it's probably because they're the most difficult to discuss. At the risk of oversimplifying, let me name only three emotional traits that in my view characterize a student desirable for ministry. As I see it, absence of these traits disqualifies a pre-ministerial student.

The first is humility, a rare gift of the Spirit in our day, when the life's motto of an increasing number of people seems to be: "Look out, world, here I come!" and when the rallying cry of group after group is: "I've got my rights, and I demand them!" Paul's words indeed sound strange to 20th century ears: "In humility consider others better than yourselves."

We all recognize the need for Christian humility in our students, and we can be quick to spot the evidence if humility seems to be lacking in a particular student. Is it possible, my brothers and sisters, that you and I could be part of that problem? It might seem at first as though the student's emotional make-up is pretty well determined at the time he enrolls in college or seminary. But who will deny that there is a substantial contribution which a professor can make

to help the student attain the emotional readiness he needs for a successful ministry? One of the best primary sources for the student in the learning process is the personality of the teacher. Because we are primary sources for our students to study, what we are is far more important than what we say.

Am I ashamed to confess in front of my students: "I was wrong" or "I'm sorry?" Am I too proud to admit: "I don't know?" As the pastor stands in his pulpit he must tell himself the same thing you and I must tell ourselves in the classroom: "These students are not here for my sake, but I am here for theirs." Humility is an important piece of emotional equipment we look for in a student desirable for the ministry.

When the Creator made us he did not intend for us to be hermits. Christianity is never just an individual affair; it always involves relationships. God has bound us to every other human being by a common blood line as well as by a command: "Love your neighbor as yourself." "Love each other as I have loved you." Here is a second emotional trait absolutely indispensable for a man studying for the ministry: love for people.

Christianity would be so much easier if we could simply love our fellow men in theory, if we didn't have to get involved in the problems of others, if we could simply forget about people who threaten us or bore us. When we're tempted piously to raise our "SOLA FIDE" banners in order to claim exemption from such works of love, Jesus draws a strange and shattering picture of the judgment: "Whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me" (Mt 25:45).

A common humanity binds us to every other member of the human race. There is, however, a special bond of love that unites sons and daughters of the Most High. A student who does not feel that bond which unites him with his brothers and sisters in Christ is not a student desirable for the ministry. Project that unloving, uncaring attitude into his ministry, and what do you see? There can be a great ministry with poor preaching, or with inadequate counseling, or with defective administration. But there cannot be a good ministry without love. An unloving pastor, a pastor who does not love people, is a contradiction in terms. There must be a love affair going on between pastor and people, no secret to either, as there must be between professor and students. A pastor who does not love is not apt to teach. It's difficult to build a fire with icicles.

Again the thought suggests itself that it's one thing for a professor to tell his students: "You should love one another; God said so. Now be loving!" It's much more helpful to the student if the professor will strive to help the student attain emotional readiness by living out the love of God in his classroom. Let each of us ask himself: "What opinion of myself do I give my students? In their eyes, do I consider myself the one who calls the shots in that classroom, or am I the one who takes the lead in loving?" St. Peter urges us to remember that we're not to lord it over those entrusted to us, but to be examples to the flock. And St. John adds the exhortation: "Let us not love with words or tongue, but with actions and in truth" (1 Jn 3:18).

On several occasions in recent years the seminary has had to terminate the enrollment of a student, even though the man had an intense desire to serve in the parish ministry. Here's a student who is academically quite capable. But for all his brains, he lives in a world pretty much his own. It's a kink in the man's personality which may easily pass unnoticed in a classroom, but which will come out into the open during a vicarship. He doesn't relate to people well. In confirmation instruction and in preaching he may very well talk about subjects which don't concern his hearers; he may well be answering questions they're not asking, or talking in language which is over their heads. During sick visits the sick person never really feels he has the vicar's undivided attention, or his full concern, for that matter. The sympathetic spark is

missing. The supervising pastor brings this to the attention of the vicar, but he either doesn't hear or feels the advice is uncalled for. Love for God's people is missing, and where this is missing, nothing will replace it. The supervising pastor submits his report on the vicar's service, and the disturbing facet of the student's emotional makeup is discussed by the seminary faculty. If there is a difference of opinion as to the man's aptitude for the ministry, he will be given the benefit of the doubt. If, however, it is clear to the faculty that this is a deep-seated problem and a serious one, the young man may not be re-enrolled for his final seminary year. Intellectually he has the gifts to teach, but emotionally he is not apt to teach. "If I can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, but have not love, I am nothing," God's apostle said (1 Co 13:2).

Still another piece of emotional equipment indispensable in a student desirable for the ministry is the ability to stand on his own feet. In the New Testament a pastor is called a *presbyteros*, an elder; he's called an *episkopos*, an overseer. Both terms describe the pastor as an official, a man with substantial leadership responsibilities. A leader who is by nature a follower is no leader. He may well lack the temperament to respond properly and promptly to a dangerous situation; he may buckle under pressure. In either case, the congregation will lack a shepherd's leading, and sheep are going to be hurt.

These, then, are the ingredients that we look for in students desirable for the ministry: academic, spiritual, emotional. The church has entrusted to us the responsibility of seeing to it that the young men who have presented themselves for theological training have the requisite gifts for the office of the ministry. The proportions in which these three kinds of gifts are present will of course vary with the individual student, according to the Creator's design. There is no standard model; God doesn't cut out his future pastors with giant cookie cutters. One marvels at the splendid variety of emotional types the Lord each year leads down seminary corridors.

At the seminary there is an ongoing evaluation procedure, to determine students desirable for the ministry. There is a more formal evaluation of each student prior to his vicar placement and following that vicarship. Again during the senior year, before the student's name is submitted to the Assignment Committee, there is an in-depth review of the student's capability for the office to which he aspires. We hope thereby to respond conscientiously to the apostolic directive: "The things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others" (2 Ti 2:2).

A Student Desirable for the Ministry

- I. His academic qualifications
 - A. Native intelligence; an inquiring mind
 - B. Logical thinking
 - C. Language skills
 - 1. In the biblical languages
 - 2. In his mother tongue

- II. His spiritual qualifications
 - A. Appreciation of Law and Gospel
 - B. Commitment to Jesus Christ
 - 1. As Savior of his soul
 - 2. As Lord of his life

- III. His emotional equipment
 - A. Humility
 - B. Love for people
 - C. Qualities of leadership

Discussion Questions

I. What reasons specific to our age would seem to urge the Synod to maintain its demanding language requirements in its worker training program?

Has the role assigned to Latin and German in our language program changed in view of the fact that the ministerial student is no longer bilingual?

II. WLS students often comment: "Here everything that we studied at NWC finally falls into place." What can we do to help transfer more of that attitude into students while they're still at NWC?

How could more NWC students get the opportunity of reading theological German and Latin not only for the purpose of increasing technical proficiency but for spiritual growth and inspiration as well?

III. What are we presently doing to evaluate the emotional stability of students?

What can we do to build and develop the emotional qualities we look for in future pastors?

How does the attrition rate at NWC compare with that of secular colleges?

How would we expect it to compare?