

Crisis in Pastoral leadership



Dr. Robert L. Dean, Jr.

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Crisis **in Pastoral leadership**

Today, on every side, we witness the erosion of the influence of biblical Christianity on our culture. We observe a decline in the priority placed on teaching the Bible in our churches. Seminaries turn out pastoral CEOs who function like business managers rather than like shepherds who nourish their flocks with biblical truth that transforms thinking and changes lives. As a result, conservative churches that do seek Bible-teaching pastors are often unable to find anyone with the training and the desire to teach the Word of God verse by verse, systematically, and categorically.

Many Christians are starving spiritually and do not even realize it. They think they are learning the Word of God because they attend Bible classes and Sunday services where the Word of God is supposedly being taught. But there has been a gradual decline over several decades, and most Christians today are so anesthetized with music, entertainment, and motivational sermons that they no longer know what it is to really hear in-depth teaching of the Word of God. As the church growth movement becomes more popular and churches become “purpose driven” and “seeker friendly,” the Sunday morning message becomes shorter and shallower. Few people today even have a frame of reference for what a teaching ministry should be. We have “dumbed down” the pulpit and we have “dumbed down” the pew with the result that we are in a crisis.

Doctrinal Bible churches fall within the tradition of the Bible church movement which originated in the context of the Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy in the late nineteenth century. Then, as now, the established church was in a crisis because it was sending its young men to elite seminaries in the United States and in Europe where the Bible was no longer taught as the infallible Word of God. These men returned with heretical ideas that denied the miracles of Scripture, the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture, the virgin birth, the substitutionary atonement of Jesus Christ, the physical, bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ, and the literal, physical return of Jesus Christ to the earth.

One of the conservative responses to this liberal trend in the church was the rise and spread of the Bible conference movement. This included the Niagara

Bible Conferences in Ontario, the prophecy conferences in New York City, and the Northfield Conferences held by Dwight L. Moody in Massachusetts. It was at these conferences where men like Lewis Sperry Chafer, C. I. Scofield, W. H. Griffith-Thomas, and other great Bible teachers of that generation met, learned to teach the Bible from one another, and went throughout the nation to challenge people with the timeless truths of Scripture.

From the Bible conference movement, a network developed that led to the founding of the Bible institutes and the conservative seminaries of the early twentieth century. Schools like Biola (the Bible Institute of Los Angeles), Moody Bible Institute, Dallas Theological Seminary, and many others had their roots in the Bible conference movement of that day. These schools were established by men who understood the need for well-trained men to pastor biblically literate congregations.

One of the men who came out of this movement was Lewis Sperry Chafer. He began in the ministry as a musical evangelist and later realized that he had a gift of teaching. C. I. Scofield, who became his mentor, once remarked to him, "Lewis, some day you may make a passably good teacher, if only you had something to say." It was in the context of the Bible conference movement that Chafer learned the Scriptures and acquired a solid biblical theology. He recognized his own weakness: because he did not have training in the original languages and in theology, he was dependent upon the work of others. He realized that pastors needed this kind of training to adequately teach Christians the Word of God so that they could grow spiritually and truly have an impact on this world for Jesus Christ. This awareness led Dr. Chafer to establish Dallas Theological Seminary and to build a curriculum that demanded four years of Hebrew, four years of Greek, and four years of systematic theology.

When we compare that to seminaries today, we find that some denominational seminaries require only one semester of systematic theology, two semesters of Greek, and perhaps one semester of Hebrew. Two- and three-year graduate programs are much more common than four-year programs. They emphasize courses in church management and organization, adult ministries, Sunday school programs, and church growth. These are the basic elements in the curricula of many seminaries today. Typically we find that seminaries experience the devaluation of their priorities seventy to eighty years after their founding. We must not opt for lower standards or minimum qualifications for the ministry. To do so is a poor reflection on how we view God and His Word. We need a new generation of seminaries to come along and replace those that are beginning to fall by the wayside.

That has been the objective of Chafer Theological Seminary ever since its inception. It is the hope of the Governing Board and all those associated with the Seminary that it will stand in the gap and provide the training necessary to produce highly qualified pastor-teachers who can accurately handle the Word of God.

The question has been asked, "Why should we as individual believers and congregations around the country be concerned about the establishment, financial support, and continued existence of a biblically based seminary?" The short answer is, the future. Who will teach our grandchildren? Who will replace the current generation of pastors when their time in ministry is finished? We need to prepare men now who will continue to teach the Word of God to the next generation.

We all know of doctrinal pastor-teachers who have gone home to be with the Lord and of others who have retired and are no longer able to fill pulpits. These men had received seminary or Bible college training. They were trained academically in the use of the original languages and in theology; they were trained in how to do exegesis and how to study the Bible. They were men dedicated to a teaching ministry, not just a ministry of encouragement and exhortation, which is the common practice in many churches today. What has happened to the vacant pulpits of these men? In most cases they were filled, but often by men who had less education and less training than the men who preceded them. In some cases, they were filled by men who had no formal biblical education or theological training whatsoever.

In still other cases, vacant pulpits remain vacant, and these churches have had to settle for something less than ideal. Rather than having their own live, face-to-face pastor-teacher, they must rely on audio or video recordings of Bible classes. These doctrinal churches have searched diligently and interviewed many pastoral candidates. They have received numerous applications from seminary students at some of the better-known conservative evangelical seminaries with reputations for producing Bible teachers in the past. Doctrinal questionnaires were sent out to potential candidates, and the responses these churches received indicated that some of these seminary graduates, men with three or four years of training from some of the foremost schools of our country, could not adequately answer those questionnaires.

An organization that tracks what goes on in religion in America is the Barna Research Group. They have made a number of observations as a result of their research about trends in the church today. Pastor Mark Perkins, who serves on the governing board of Chafer Seminary, discovered this report:

All Barna research studies define evangelicals as individuals who meet the born-again criteria. These are people who say their faith is very important in their life today. They believe they have a personal responsibility to share their religious beliefs about Christ with non-Christians. They acknowledge the existence of Satan; they contend that eternal salvation is possible only through God's grace, not through good deeds. Evangelicals believe that Jesus Christ lived a sinless life on earth. Evangelicals describe God as the all-knowing, all-powerful perfect Deity who created the universe and still rules it today. In this approach, being classified as evangelical has no

relationship to any particular church affiliation or attendance, nor does it rely upon people describing themselves as evangelical.

The Barna Research Group has a set standard of doctrinal beliefs, and if you subscribe to those, you are classified as an evangelical. They go on to say, “This classification model indicates that only nine percent of adults in America are evangelicals. Barna research data shows that twelve percent of adults were evangelicals a decade ago.” Thus, we have dropped from twelve percent to nine percent over the last ten years. Perkins goes on to conclude, “This is staggering. In the last ten years, one fourth of evangelical Christians compromised an essential component in their Christian faith. How did it happen? Let there be no mistake, there is a direct correlation between the compromise of seminary curricula and the loss of faith in the rank and file of churches.” The Barna report goes on to say, “Evangelicals are most likely to come from those very churches that have pastors skilled in exegesis.” Perkins also noted that it is uncommon today for seminaries to emphasize the development of exegetes. They give it lip service but not the time and attention that are needed. Exegesis is something that is gradually vanishing from the curricula of many seminaries.

As a result, fewer and fewer pastors are skilled in exegesis today. We want to emphasize the phrase “skilled in exegesis” because many seminaries offer Greek and Hebrew, but few produce skilled exegetes. Biblical exegesis is the process of deriving the meaning of a text of Scripture by determining the meaning of the words in the text and the significance of their grammatical and syntactical relationships within the literary context of the book and in light of the historical and cultural background of the book. Exegesis is not only a science but a skill and an art. You cannot learn to do exegesis by listening to someone else exegete the Scriptures.

H. H. Rowley, although a liberal Old Testament theologian, made this telling observation: “One who made it his life’s work to interpret French literature but who could only read it in an English translation would not be taken seriously. Yet it is remarkable how many ministers of religion, week by week, expound a literature that they are unable to read, save in translation.”

This brings us back to the question of why we should be concerned about the state of seminaries in our nation and support a relatively new, start-up seminary. We said before that the short answer is the future. We need to prepare men who are qualified to fill the pulpits of our nation. But there is a long answer, and that leads to the details of why a seminary education is so important.

A seminary education upholds a high standard for the pulpit that is consistent with our high view of Scripture. We believe that every word in the original languages of Scripture is the revealed, inspired, breathed-out Word of God (2 Timothy 3:16–17) and that inspiration extends down to the very letters of Scripture. As Jesus said in Matthew 5:18, “One jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the Law till all is fulfilled.”

Inspiration impacts the very forms of the words in all their different grammatical constructions in the original languages. All of this is crucial to understanding what God has revealed to us in His Word. The Bible is not just a collection of moral challenges — it is the very thought of the God who created the heavens and the earth! It is God’s communication and instruction to each and every one of us. Our view of Scripture as the inspired Word of God should result in high standards for the man in the pulpit who interprets the Word of God and teaches it to us.

A seminary education should give men the tools they need to be able to correctly handle, or “rightly divide,” the Word of God as Paul says in 2 Timothy 2:15. Seminary training and the idea of training men for future ministry is not something that has just developed in the church in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The form it takes today may be somewhat different, but it has a rich history. Its foundation, at least in the church age, can be traced to Paul’s challenge to Timothy.

You therefore, my son, be strong in the grace which is in Christ Jesus. The things which you have heard from me, among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also (2 Timothy 2:1–2).

Timothy was not Paul’s literal son but rather his son in the ministry. Paul led Timothy to the Lord on his first missionary journey and took Timothy with him on his second missionary journey. Timothy received on-the-job training from the Apostle Paul, one of the greatest rabbinical minds ever known.

It is part of the pastor’s responsibility to identify and mentor young men for the ministry. We must challenge them to consider the ministry, either as a pastor in the pulpit or as a missionary in the field, while they are still in their teenage or college years. The optimum time to attend seminary is after undergraduate work is completed, when a man is in his twenties. It is not that older men cannot recognize that they have the gift of pastor-teacher, but valuable time has been lost, and it is more difficult for a man with a family to move away to seminary, where he can receive the kind of training he needs to be an effective pastor-teacher.

There was a precedent for this kind of training in the Old Testament as well, where Samuel developed a school of the prophets to prepare young men for prophetic ministry. We also see how the Levitical priests were trained in the Law. These men memorized the Scriptures and knew them backward and forward. Ezra is one example. He was a priest, a scribe, a teacher of scribes, and an expert in the Law. After the remnant of Israel returned from the Exile, Ezra read the Law aloud to the people, while the Levites helped them understand the meaning of it.

In the New Testament, we see how Jesus gathered together twelve men as His disciples. He lived with them, ate and drank with them, and taught them day in

and day out through the three and a half years of His ministry. He poured His heart and soul into training these men because He was preparing them to be the foundation for the church.

As we saw, Paul followed the same pattern. In addition to Timothy, Paul taught Silas, Luke, Epaphras, Titus, and many others. He took young men with him whenever he traveled and taught them along the way. He then sent them out to evangelize, to teach and proclaim the Word, and to solve problems in the early churches. When Paul was in Ephesus, he taught at the school of Tyrannus for two years and trained young men who went out with the Gospel and the Word to establish churches in cities and towns all over Asia Minor.

The Apostle John trained young men for the ministry as well. We know about this from two of his students, Papias and Polycarp, who went on into the second century to become leading church fathers. That generation is called the Apostolic Fathers because they were trained by the apostles themselves, and they laid the foundation for the future church. We begin to see then how a seminary education, or some kind of formal education, fits into the flow of history.

During the Middle Ages, the original languages of Scripture were lost and forgotten. Prior to that time, Jerome had translated the Old and New Testaments into Latin, the common language of his day, because he knew that people needed to read the Bible in their own language. As the Roman Empire declined, only clergy spoke Latin. The Roman Catholic Church had developed the cathedral schools for the training of clergy, but those in the villages and small towns around Europe did not have access to that training. As a result, the church of the Middle Ages, the Roman Catholic Church, slipped into a shallow, superficial theology, a superstitious theology, and a theology of works that completely departed from the truth of the Scripture. Europe was plunged into a truly dark age spiritually.

There were lights that appeared here and there, men like Wycliffe in Britain and John Huss in Czechoslovakia, who began to translate the Scriptures into the common language of the people despite opposition and persecution. But the Reformation — that tremendous bright light of history that began when Martin Luther nailed the Ninety-five Theses to the door of the church at Wittenberg on October 31, 1517 — was touched off by a series of historical events that occurred in the middle of the fifteenth century.

In 1453, the Muslims came up through Turkey and conquered Constantinople. As they were coming North and West, the scholars in what remained of the Byzantine Empire, gathered up all of their manuscripts and scrolls and their copies of the Greek New Testament and fled to Europe. All of a sudden, a flood of documents and manuscripts of the early writings of the Bible in Greek and Hebrew entered Europe, and men began to rediscover the original languages of Scripture.

A humanist scholar by the name of Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam began to collect some of these manuscripts of the Greek New Testament and started

putting together a critical text edition that later became the foundation for the *Textus Receptus*, the basis for the King James translation of the New Testament. There was a rediscovery of the Hebrew language, as well. The early reformers sought out the rabbis in their towns and asked them to teach the Hebrew language. With this renaissance of the biblical Greek and Hebrew in the late 1400s and early 1500s, men examined and investigated the original text of the Bible, rediscovered the truths of justification by faith alone, and realized the errors of the “works salvation” of Roman Catholic theology. The light of truth began to shine on western civilization.

This light gave birth to the Reformation. Men like Martin Luther, John Calvin, Ulrich Zwingli, and Heinrich Bullinger were the great beacons. They dedicated their lives to the study of theology and Greek and Hebrew so that they could accurately handle the Word of God. There was the restoration of an understanding of the grace of God and of free grace salvation. The battle cry of the Reformation was *Sola Scriptura*, by Scripture alone; *Solus Christus*, Christ alone; *Sola Fide*, by faith alone; *Sola Gratia*, by grace alone; and *Soli Deo Gloria*, glory to God alone.

Training schools and institutes were established, including one of the most significant, the college founded by John Calvin in Geneva. Men from England and from Scotland, like John Knox, and men from Holland, France, and Germany all came to Geneva where they studied under Calvin and others. Then they returned to their homelands, teaching and proclaiming the truth of the Word of God.

Historically, the seminaries of this country were in that tradition. Harvard College, the first college founded on the continental United States, was established to produce trained ministers for succeeding generations. Its curriculum included Greek, Hebrew, and Latin. In the Puritan culture of New England, the students who entered Harvard Divinity School, and men like Jonathan Edwards who went to Yale, knew more Greek, Hebrew, and Latin when they entered seminary than most seminary graduates today know when they come out. That is the extent to which our education system and our seminaries have declined.

What then should we expect of a seminary education today, and why should a man with the gift of pastor-teacher attend seminary? A traditional seminary curriculum should include four years of Greek and four years of Hebrew. Not only should a seminary teach the original languages of Scripture, but it should make students proficient in those languages. It takes years to develop facility and comfort in the original languages, so that when a man leaves seminary and enters the maelstrom of life in a local church, he is adequately prepared.

Sometimes the pastor of a smaller church must wear many hats. He might be the first one there to open the door and the last one to sweep up after everyone else has left. Since his congregation is small, he might need to take a part-time job. He does not have the time to learn Greek and Hebrew or to relearn what he

did not fully comprehend when he was in seminary. Seminary should be the time when he is living and breathing the original languages, as it were, so that by the time he graduates, those exegetical skills are with him to stay.

In addition to teaching the exegetical skills, a seminary must teach the theological skills and the framework into which everything fits. Students should understand the different theological views as well. By comparing and contrasting the different views of theology, students come to understand why they believe what they believe. They understand truth and develop clarity of focus when they see it contrasted to error. Students should study the history of Christianity. They need to see how men developed erroneous ideas and went off-course, and how it might have been centuries before the outworking of wrong assumptions was realized. They need to understand the wrong paths that people have gone down in the past, so that they can stay on track with sound doctrine.

Students learn not only the trends of the past but also the trends of the present in a good seminary education. The application of the great truths of Scripture and doctrines taught in sermons of a previous generation will not necessarily communicate to the current generation. It is not that the truth has changed, but the target has shifted a little because the culture has changed. For example, a man who is considered one of the greatest preachers and expositors of Scripture in the English language, Charles Haddon Spurgeon, had a tremendous ministry in England in the late nineteenth century. While there are areas of his theology that we might not agree with, Spurgeon had a tremendous impact in his day. The Metropolitan Tabernacle, the church where he taught in London, generated hundreds of missionaries. He was a strong supporter of men like James Hudson Taylor, George Mueller, and others. When we read Spurgeon's sermons today, the timeless truths of Scripture are still there but he is teaching, like any pastor should, to people in his generation and dealing with matters facing them in the late nineteenth century. The message doesn't resonate as much with readers in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Even great sermons by men like Lewis Sperry Chafer and Donald Grey Barnhouse from the last century lose some of their brilliance after forty or fifty years. Pastors in the pulpit must be able to study the Word for themselves in order to shape and craft the truths of the Bible for their own generation. They can learn from those who have gone before, but they must be able to get into the text for themselves. They need to learn the original languages and develop exegetical skills, theological skills, and communication skills. Pastors must be able to take these timeless truths and put them within a contemporary framework that addresses the thinking, the culture, and the context of the hearers in their congregations. They need the training that comes from having attended a seminary of high caliber, a school which fully prepared them to address the issues of their day.

Chafer Theological Seminary is this kind of school. At Chafer, there is a requirement of four years of Greek and four years of Hebrew. The curriculum has

been designed to integrate exegesis with biblical theology as the student progresses through the school. The curriculum is like a pyramid with the text of Scripture as the foundation, biblical theology at the next level, and systematic theology at the top. Systematic theology is where doctrinal categories for life are developed, and it is within the framework of those categories that pastors are able to communicate the timeless truths of Scripture in ways that people can apply to every situation in their lives.

The thrust of Chafer Seminary is a consistent theology based first of all on free grace: salvation by faith alone in Christ alone. It is our job to teach and proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ and that this free salvation is available to all. The curriculum is based upon a view of history known as premillennial dispensationalism and a pretribulation Rapture. It is based on a high view of Scripture, that every word of Scripture is inspired by God; therefore, everyone who teaches the Word of God should be taught how to handle it carefully and accurately in the original languages. That is the high standard and the ideal that we should strive for in the preparation of a pastor. These men should then go forth, not just prepared academically but also prepared in their own spiritual lives. For when a man goes to seminary, God is going to begin to work in his life to teach him the application of what he is learning in the classroom — to trust God to provide for his finances, his logistics, and his education, and to take him through those aspects of training that he does not receive in the classroom, but which are equally important in the preparation for a pulpit ministry.

The goal of Chafer Seminary is to prepare pastors for the pulpits of the future. There is a challenge and there is a cost. Jesus told His disciples to count the cost of commitment in Luke 14:28. Training men to fill our pulpits and teach our children and grandchildren is not inexpensive, and we must give it our full consideration. For example, the Seminary must have a place to meet. Chafer Seminary currently rents space in an office building and will eventually need to purchase land and build a permanent facility. Ideally, we should pay the faculty of the seminary a living wage, so they can concentrate on their teaching. Jesus said in Luke 10:7 that “the laborer is worthy of his wages,” and that principle applies to Seminary faculty as well as to pastors.

A seminary should have excellence in tools and technology. This is in keeping with the principle that all things should be done to the glory of God. Seminaries need computers, software, LCD projectors, and other technological tools, as well as classroom furnishings and books for their library. A seminary should have a good research library of 100,000 to 200,000 volumes. It must have an administrative staff with the professional skills necessary to handle the various aspects of running an organization, along with the many administrative details that are needed, such as office equipment and office supplies. All of these together cost a substantial amount of money.

This is the challenge before us. Chafer Seminary needs the support of believers who are committed to the future. We recognize above all things that God has

unlimited resources, and He can supply the needs of Chafer Seminary. That is part of God's sovereignty, but His sovereignty does not operate apart from human responsibility. God supplies the needs through the volition of people who are motivated out of gratitude and out of a vision for the future to support the seminary.

There is a wonderful story about Lewis Sperry Chafer in the early years of Dallas Seminary. It was during the depression, and the salaries of the faculty had gone unpaid for lack of funds. The Seminary was in danger of closing its doors, so Lewis Sperry Chafer, Harry Ironside, and others gathered in Chafer's office to pray that God would supply the needs of the Seminary. Ironside prayed, "Father, we know that the cattle on a thousand hills are yours. Please sell some of them and send the money." Meanwhile, a rancher from West Texas brought in a large check from the sale of some cattle in Ft. Worth and presented it to the Seminary. When Chafer examined the check, he exclaimed to Ironside, "Harry, God sold the cattle!" The amount of the check matched the amount of the Seminary's debt.

We live in an age of crisis. We need believers who are not overwhelmed by the challenges, but who are willing to see through the challenges to the opportunity and the privilege of supporting and standing with Chafer Seminary. God in His grace has supplied in many ways and many times in the past. We know that if it is God's will for Chafer Seminary to continue to provide this kind of training to fill the pulpits of the future, then God will supply the need. God will supply the need through committed believers and committed churches with a vision for the future.

The Author

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