

SEMINARY TRAINING FOR THE POLICE BEAT?

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You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hid. Neither do men light a lamp and put it under a bushel, but on a stand; and it shines unto all that are in the house. Even so let your light shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven. – Matthew 5:14-16

Much has happened since I graduated from seminary in 1990—far different from my expectations at that time, but which I believe God was preparing me for even before I knew. I entered the police world late in life by most standards, eleven years ago at the age of 42, and after what I believe were 19 years in Christian education. I remember well some of the struggles as the “senior” member of my academy class and the quizzical looks of “are you out of your mind?” Even my family, while supportive, had some trepidation and concern, both for my sanity and my safety.

The realities of police work are overwhelming when you stop to consider them. The demands are 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year. They work when others are sleeping and sleep when others work. They miss social gatherings and events, Christmas mornings with their families; and their weekends never seem to match the normal world. The work is often crisis driven, much like an emergency room where every decision is important and may have unpredictable and serious consequences. The risks are injury, lawsuits, or even death. It is an occupation which is constantly open to public scrutiny: police are expected to be where they are needed, unafraid in the face of danger, instantly solve any problem, and always be in control. It is emotional work—but they are not permitted to demonstrate emotion. Few other professions accept injury and death as do police, and they are reminded of it daily by the equipment they wear. They deliberately put themselves in harm’s way daily, whether it be on a traffic stop or stepping between an abuser and his victim; and THEY become targets for hate groups, anarchists, or gangs. August Vollmer, the father of modern policing, once stated in frustration that police are expected to “have the wisdom of Solomon, the courage of David, the strength of Samson, the patience of Job, the diplomacy of Lincoln, the tolerance of the Carpenter of Nazareth, and finally, an intimate knowledge of every branch of the natural, biological, and social sciences.” In reality, it would be hard to find a job more written about and less understood than that of a police officer. Their world has been scrutinized by writers, playwrights, Hollywood producers, politicians, and the press; yet the world knows little of the world they occupy. Men and women enter the field filled with idealism and a desire to solve crime and make this a better world. After five years they often feel like the best they can do is to maintain order and try to hold the line. They are filled with negativity: the judicial system doesn’t work, criminals have the advantage, and victims are re-victimized. They see themselves unappreciated by the community they try to serve, hounded by the local politicians, and scrutinized by the media which is more interested in scandal than in the thousands of everyday acts of courage. And then

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they are expected to take off the uniform, open the door and say “Hi, honey, I’m home.” Job satisfaction is often low, divorce rates high; suicide and self destructive behaviors are not uncommon.

While daunting, the need to demonstrate a biblical lifestyle is enormous. We see people and the consequences of sin at its worst. We deal constantly with the results of poor choices and the hopelessness of temporal things. We are often cast into the position of counselor, confessor, advisor, surrogate parent, or mentor. In some senses, the job is a mission field in itself. A pastor friend and I were recently talking about our similar backgrounds yet divergent careers, when we came to the conclusion that we often deal with the same people and circumstances, but from differing perspectives. I remember an occasion several years ago transporting a prisoner in the early morning hours. I had my radio on a Christian music station and he began to share with me how he had recently come to Christ through the witness of a jail chaplain and asked me to pray for him as he struggled with numerous “demons” in his life. As officers, we certainly have opportunities to demonstrate compassion, integrity, and Christian character to those we come in contact with. But beyond this, Christians understand that their hope and trust is not in this world’s systems, but only in the work of Christ. One evening I was returning from booking someone into jail, knowing that he would probably be back out on the street before I finished my report, when I was reminded of the psalmist bemoaning the seeming prosperity of the evildoer. I’ve also felt the frustration of seeing someone escape justice in court because of a legal technicality. At times like this we are reminded that the psalmist always concluded with trust in the justice and righteousness of God.

As a Christian, I find myself daily challenged in ways that I have never faced before, working in a largely non-Christian environment, but serving a community in ways that others could not. I also find myself learning to apply lessons with difficulty—lessons I had often taught so glibly to others. As a “person of faith,” I have often been viewed with suspicion by coworkers, and frequently challenged to compromise principle. Even as a Christian, it is easy to fall into the trap of self reliance and not realize our crucial and God-given role. On one occasion early in my career I had to take a very difficult stand on an issue that put me in opposition to fellow officers, but it was a stand that established the importance of integrity and value of Christian principle in my life, a position for which I later earned respect, if not agreement. During this time I often thought of Christians we had studied in church history classes, who had stood on principle and died for their faith, and how little the opposition I faced compared. But I am also reminded of the lesson of the beatitudes, that we are salt and light—not that we become salt and light—that we are already salt and light to the world by our calling. And since we are salt and light, we can’t be hidden, even if we want to be. In this, I am thankful for the grounding in God’s Word I received at seminary and believe it provided the foundation for my work today. I am also thankful for the lessons of my teachers and their mentorship in my life to give me perspective and encouragement. Luther wrote that “every man in his office must be useful and beneficial to the rest, that so many kinds of work may all be united into one community, just as the members of the body serve one another.” Whether as pastor, teacher or police officer, God has called us to serve him. In each new challenge, I have valued the preparation I have received.