

THE PRINCETON SEMINARY CURRICULUM¹

Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield²

Editor's note: This famous essay by B. B. Warfield not only explains the philosophy of the Old Princeton curriculum, but it also is an apology for classical theological education for the ministry. It is the same high view of the gospel ministry that motivates Western Reformed Seminary and its students and supporters. Although written nearly a hundred years ago, this essay's defense of thorough ministerial training in the academic disciplines related to Scripture study is more timely than ever. JAB

Much of the confusion into which opinion as to the proper curriculum of a theological seminary is apparently drifting, seems to arise from altering, or perhaps we would better say varying, conceptions of the functions of the ministry for which the theological seminary is intended to provide a training. A low view of the functions of the ministry will naturally carry with it a low conception of the training necessary for it. A rationalistic view of the functions of the ministry entails a corresponding conception of the training which fits for it. An evangelical view of the functions of the ministry demands a consonant training for that ministry. And a high view of the functions of the ministry on evangelical lines inevitably produces a high conception of the training which is needed to prepare men for the exercise of these high functions. Our Episcopalian brethren are complaining bitterly of the difficulties they are experiencing in obtaining candidates for orders with anything like adequate equipment. They may enact canons galore requiring real and precise tests to be applied. What they find impossible is to convince either examiners or examined that these tests should be seriously applied. They do not see the use of it, when all that is required of the clergy is *Ut pueris placeant et declamationes fiant*. Pretty nearly anybody seems to them “to know enough to get along in a parish.” Similar difficulties are not unknown to Presbyterians. All the requirements which can be stuffed into a Form of Government will not secure that a high standard of training will be maintained, if a suspicion forms itself in the minds of the administrators of this Form of Government that a minister does not need such learning. And this suspicion will inevitably form itself—and harden into a conviction—if the functions of the minister come to be conceived lowly: if the minister comes to be thought of, for example, fundamentally as merely the head of a social organization from whom may be demanded pleasant manners and executive ability; or as little more than a zealous “promoter” who knows how to seek out and attach to his enterprise a multitude of men; or as merely an entertaining lecturer who can be counted upon to charm away an hour or two of dull Sabbaths; or even—for here we have, of course, an infinitely higher conception—as merely an enthusiastic Christian eager to do work for Christ. If a minister's whole function is summed

¹ B. B. Warfield originally wrote this article as “Our Seminary Curriculum” in the *Presbyterian* (Sept 15, 1909), 7-8. It is reprinted in *Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield*, ed. by John E. Meeter (Nutley, N. J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1970), Vol. 1, 369-373. Western Reformed Seminary considers the old Princeton Seminary as part of its spiritual heritage; see the *WRS Journal* 4:2 (August, 1997): *Hodge and Princeton: A Bicentennial Reminder of Our Roots*.

² Benjamin B. Warfield was Professor of Didactic and Polemic Theology at Princeton Theological Seminary, 1887-1921.

up in these or such things—we might as well close our theological seminaries, withdraw our candidates from the colleges and schools, and seek recruits for the ministry among the capable young fellows about town. The “three R’s” will constitute all the literary equipment they require; their English Bible their whole theological outfit; and zeal their highest spiritual attainment.

It has not been characteristic of the rationalistic bodies to think meanly of the functions of the minister or of the equipment requisite to fit him to perform them. Their tendency has been to treat the minister rather as an intellectual than as a religious guide; and they have rather secularized than vulgarized his training. For a hundred years, now, our Unitarian friends have been urging upon us this secularized conception of the ministerial functions and of the minister’s training. Ex-president Charles W. Eliot, of Harvard, for example, winningly commended it to us a quarter of a century ago in a much-talked of article in the *Princeton Review*, but was happily set right by Dr. F. L. Patton in the next number. What now attracts attention is that this secularized conception has begun to wander away from home in these last days, and to invade evangelical circles. It is a highly honored Presbyterian elder whose voice carries far over the land, who has lately told us that the proper function of the ministry is to mediate modern advances in knowledge to the people, through the churches. Were that true, the ministry would no longer be a spiritual office, but only an educational agency; and training for it should be sought not in theological seminaries, but in the universities.

He would be the best-equipped minister who had obtained the most thorough knowledge, not of the ways of God with men and the purposes of God’s grace for men, but of the most recent currents of thought and fancy which flow up and down in the restless hearts of men.

Extremes meet. Pietist and Rationalist have ever hunted in couples and dragged down their quarry together. They may differ as to why they deem theology mere lumber, and would not have the prospective minister waste his time in acquiring it. The one loves God so much, the other loves him so little, that he does not care to know him. But they agree that it is not worth while to learn to know him. The simple English Bible seems to the one sufficient equipment for the minister, because, in the fervor of his religious enthusiasm, it seems to him enough for the renovating of the world, just to lisp its precious words to man. It seems to the other all the theological equipment a minister needs, because in his view the less theology a minister has the better. He considers him ill employed in poring over Hebrew and Greek pages, endeavoring to extract their real meaning—for what does it matter what their real meaning is? The prospective minister would, in his opinion, be better occupied in expanding his mind by contemplation of the great attainments of the human spirit, and in learning to know that social animal Man, by tracing out the workings of his social aptitudes and probing the secrets of his social movements. If the minister is simply an advance agent of modern culture, a kind of University-Extension lecturer, whose whole function it is to “elevate the masses” and “improve the social organism”—why, of course, art and literature should take the place of Greek and Hebrew, and “sociology” the place of Theology in our seminary curriculum. If the whole function of the minister is “inspirational” rather than “instructional,” and his work is finished when the religious nature of man is roused to action, and the religious emotions are set surging, with only a very vague notion of the objects to which the awakened religious affections should turn, or the ends to which the religious activities, once set in motion, should be directed—why, then, no doubt we may dispense with all serious

study of Scripture, and content ourselves with the employment of its grand music merely to excite religious susceptibilities.

But, if the minister is the mouth-piece of the Most High, charged with a message to deliver, to expound and enforce; standing in the name of God before men, to make known to them who and what this God is, and what his purposes of grace are, and what his will for his people—then, the whole aspect of things is changed. Then, it is the prime duty of the minister to know his message; to know the instructions which have been committed to him for the people, and to know them thoroughly; to be prepared to declare them with confidence and with exactness, to commend them with wisdom, and to urge them with force and defend them with skill, and to build men up by means of them into a true knowledge of God and of his will, which will be unassailable in the face of the fiercest assault. No second-hand knowledge of the revelation of God for the salvation of a ruined world can suffice the needs of a ministry whose function it is to convey this revelation to men, commend it to their acceptance and apply it in detail to their needs—to all their needs, from the moment that they are called into participation in the grace of God, until the moment when they stand perfect in God’s sight, built up by his Spirit into new men. For such a ministry as this the most complete knowledge of the wisdom of the world supplies no equipment; the most fervid enthusiasm of service leaves without furnishing. Nothing will suffice for it but to know; to know the Book; to know it at first hand; and to know it through and through. And what is required first of all for training men for such a ministry is that the Book should be given them in its very words as it has come from God’s hand and in the fullness of its meaning, as that meaning has been ascertained by the labors of generations of men of God who have brought to bear upon it all the resources of sanctified scholarship and consecrated thought.

How worthily our fathers thought of the ministry! And what wise provision they made for training men for it, when they set out the curriculum of their first theological seminary! This curriculum was framed with the express design that those who pursued it should come forth from it these five things: “a sound Biblical critic”; “a defender of the Christian faith”; “an able and sound divine”; “a useful preacher and faithful pastor”; and a man “qualified to exercise discipline and to take part in the government of the Church in all its judicatories.” A well-rounded minister this, one equal to the functions which belong to a minister of the New Testament order. But that we may have such ministers, we must provide such a training for the ministry as will produce such ministers. And that means nothing less than that our theological curriculum should provide for the serious mastery of the several branches of theological science. A comprehensive and thorough theological training is the condition of a really qualified ministry. When we satisfy ourselves with a less comprehensive and thorough theological training, we are only condemning ourselves to a less qualified ministry.