

What Can Be Done to Increase the Number of Clergy Who at Least Graduate College? (Passion, Perspective, and Pursuit)

by Brian Keith Hodges

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Perhaps one of the most challenging things that can confront a member of the clergy is one's awareness that he or she lacks proper educational preparation to do effective ministry. In the African American ministerial context, a heartfelt call from God to preach the gospel is, by some, believed to be enough. "God called me!" some exclaim, "And that is enough." Nothing could be further from the truth! God's call should challenge us to descend to a state of humility and hunger that drives our preparation and curtails our passion to move prematurely into pulpit or any area of ministry.

I grew up in a strict Pentecostal church in Detroit, Michigan. Our pastor, who was a great man of God, a great preacher, and a great person, never placed any value on theological training. In fact, he said a few times publicly that cold and dry preaching is birthed from those preachers who go to seminary (and sometimes he called it the cemetery!). This was his context. This was the street on which he lived theologically. It was where he was; he was a product of the ecclesiastical leadership that produced him.

In my teen years, this wonderful pastor and man of faith retired and his son-in-law assumed the pastorate. He, quite differently, suggested that preachers obtain training and acknowledged that seminary was helpful and beneficial. It was the first time I had heard a person speaking positively about being trained as a preacher. It was a passing thought, though. I had made up my mind that if God was calling, it was for the future and not for the present. I couldn't have been more wrong! God was calling me at that very moment and I continued to dismiss the overwhelming feeling to yield to God so that I could continue on my personal path to success.

At a Baptist church to which I was invited, I had two unique experiences. The first was that I again felt God's challenge to preach. The second was that the pastor suggested that if I were certain that God was calling me, I would need to be theologically trained. There it was! I had come to terms with two facts that I needed to embrace: being called to preach the gospel and getting training to do so. From that moment forward I was thinking, strategizing, planning, and preparing to say yes to God and to school.

Nearly twenty years ago, I made good on that commitment. I went to Bible College, then seminary, and then did postgraduate studies. It has been beneficial. I have become a better thinker, preacher, pastor, and churchman. Beyond that, I have a stronger devotional life, worship life, and passionate commitment to marriage, as a result. I do not believe I

could have experienced this measure of healthy and God-led living had I skipped seminary.

Passion

Wherever your passion is, that is where you will find your pathway. I had a passion to be trained. I understood that if I was going to be effective, knowledgeable, and best able to serve, I would have to get training. It was inescapable. It was unavoidable for me. When you reflect on practitioners of the gospel who refuse to go to college, ask whether they really have a passion for effective ministry.

Passion is the driving force that moves us to make decisions a reality. It opens the doorways of possibility and challenges one to be deepened and fruitful. Passion is all-consuming. It interrupts your sleep in a good way. In a good way? Absolutely! Passion reminds us that we have a more substantial purpose and that it can be realized with energies and efforts given to its manifestation. Passion says that we cannot only have it, but we can do it. It makes us believe that there is not anything that is too difficult to conquer or accomplish.

Passion is what is necessary when you are facing a mountainous reading of New Testament literature or a transliteration test in Greek or Hebrew. Passion is what is needed when you are writing and your mind is blocked by all the “other” stuff you have to do besides write. Passion keeps you focused on the assignment so that you accomplish it and do not put it off again and again. It’s passion: blazing, urging, and sustaining. I was a pastor, father to two young children, an evangelist, and an entrepreneur. I lost my way often while studying, but not for long. That blazing passion pulled me back and challenged me to put things in perspective, to prioritize and to succeed.

Perspective

Next to passion, how we view education is essential. I am angered when I hear someone preach or teach who, having achieved success in ministry without having gone to seminary, demean those who have. Maybe our critics should understand that we are not doing this to be better than anyone else, but to be better than we were. We are doing this to heighten our sense of God’s mobility in the world and to use Scripture to further flesh out what it means today to the Church and its people.

I see the world differently now that I have attended seminary. I don’t just see the Scriptures differently, I see all of life differently. I see possibilities in problems, joy in sorrow, hope in chaos, and fruitfulness where there is barrenness. While college and seminary did not “do it” for me, they aided and assisted in the process that made me more open-minded and more of a critical thinker. I have challenged many closely held beliefs and deepened others. I have surrendered entrenched patterns of thinking and fortified others as a result of college and seminary. My experience can be summed up in what I call the great wrestling match that was and is occurring within me. Now I am always thinking and rethinking, not out of insecurity and uncertainty, but through the lens of

profitable experiences. I am always seeking to know more so that I can do better. It is the ultimate check-and-balance system.

What else has college and seminary done for me? It helped me change the way I saw life, ministry, church, God, and God's people. My theological and socio-cultural lenses have been broadened and are more highly developed. Now I can articulate what I believe and yet be contemplative enough to embrace new ideas and concepts that were once difficult to accept or address. Education altered my perception.

Pursuit

Marrying healthy passion and a healthy perspective will lead to healthy pursuits. At the end of the day, anyone seriously passionate about theological training and education will do something about it. Your level of commitment requires action that corresponds with how you feel and what you believe. Practically speaking, people's actions almost always correspond with what they feel and believe. It is rare to feel and believe one thing and then do something else. Most often we marry our head and heart to corresponding actions.

If you believe that being equipped and trained for ministry is necessary and you feel strongly about it, you will enroll. It's just that simple. You will prioritize what is important and what may be expendable for you. There are some things in life we can jettison and others we have to protect. However, we will never do that which is difficult unless we are passionate in the pursuit of what we want to achieve. The Apostle Paul reminds us to get rid of anything that will hinder us from running swiftly and correctly in the race of life that is before us all.

The most powerful truth we can embrace today is that our direction in life ought to be fleshed out of our purpose, passion, perspective, and pursuits. If you have intentions of living out your purpose, this will be seen in your pursuits.

I am reminded of a story about a young man who is walking down a dusty road in rural South Georgia. He is walking with his head held high, his shoulders squared, and a bright gleam in his eyes. While taking broad and dramatic steps, one after the other, moving closer and closer to his destination, a "Grandma"-type rocking in her chair on the porch of her bungalow cried out to him, "Hey, young man!" He never replies. She hollered again, "Hey, young man, where you going?" He never looked her way or replied. Finally, with all the energy she could muster, she hollered one more time, "Hey you, where you going?" He relents and yells in a loud, clear, voice "Somewhere..."

Sometimes we must remember that the clearest response to others and ourselves is contained in this young man's answer—merely, somewhere. We will not have all the answers or know all the details, but when we have a clear sense of purpose, passion, and the right perspective, we will pursue what we want with every fiber of our being. We are on our way somewhere!

I want to conclude this piece by suggesting a few final things relative to clergy attending college and obtaining educational training beyond college. First, we should remember that the Church requires people who are trained to meet the demands of the congregations we serve today. We need education and the Holy Spirit, as we work with people who have diverse needs and numerous challenges. We need a foundation that will allow us to address and proffer solutions to the complexities found among congregants today.

Second, we need to be prepared practically and theologically to challenge the disciples in our congregations to deeper, more substantial service to God, the Church, and humanity. One compelling factor ought to be the model that they see in the pulpit. While clergy are not “gods” to be served, they are models who should reflect commitment to Christ, to the common good, and to the community of faith.

Third, every person engaged in ministry must have a sustained hunger to grow, develop, mature, and become. The public theologian who refuses to tap this hunger will not only starve but will starve the Church as well. The congregation is fed from a wealth of knowledge and experience bound up in the preaching, worship, service, sharing, and caring ministries of the Church. If these areas are fruitless and stale, they will produce fruitless and stale disciples. This is a tragedy to be avoided at all costs.

Finally, the person who is going to be a strong voice to this generation will need to be equipped with more than a Bible and an iPad. They will have to be trained theologically and poised to share the gospel of God in relevant, revelatory, and reasonable ways so that the light of God’s revelation shines on souls who are and who want to be transformed and make a difference in the Church, in the community, and in the world. While there is not a perfect formula to give preachers a hunger for training, I am reminded of the Apostle Paul’s word to young Timothy: “Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth” (2 Timothy 2:15 KJV).