

The Safety Net

National Church Growth Research Center

P. O. Box 368 · Mt. Hood OR 97041 · 541-352-7636 · sishot@aol.com · www.liftedhands.org

Silas Shotwell, Regional Director

June 1, 2006

“Ministerial Training”

Dear ones,

I have been a lifetime fan of baseball, and I think some of it goes back to the early TV broadcasts of Dizzy Dean and Pee Wee Reese. I never saw Dean pitch, but I loved his down-home humor and colorful way of expressing himself. He was famous for saying that someone “slud” into third base or was “thowed out” at second. I watched the games to listen to him as much as to see the games themselves.

My most memorable Dean quote came from an interview that he had with news legend Edward R. Murrow. Murrow asked him how much formal education he had. Dean smiled his winning smile, and replied, “Well Ed, I only went through second grade, but that’s enough for broadcasting.”

That raises the question, “How much education is enough?” With all the emphasis we put on college degrees, there are those who have done well, at least financially, without them: Sam Walton, Donald Trump, and Bill Gates, for instance.

You have probably guessed where I’m going with this.

What about ministry? What is adequate education for a person going into ministry?

As in other fields, things have changed through the years. When I was a boy, where I grew up, college training was deemed to be a liability as much as an asset. The Baptists and Pentecostals were much more interested in a person’s “call” than in his training. Lots of good men got off the tractor, answered the call, and began serving the Lord.

In my own fellowship, we weren’t as sold on the idea of a “call,” as we were with a person’s knowledge of the scriptures. And there was common opinion that said that you could get all you needed of that by diligent personal study. Our little congregation was near a Christian College and we had preacher boys come to practice on us. But the going thought was that they all sounded pretty much alike and were cookie-cutter clones of a professor or two. There was the well-known story of boys in Arkansas who read and memorized Hardeman’s Tabernacle Sermons and preached them verbatim. They even addressed “Those of you who are in the balcony” in country churches where there was no balcony.

When I enrolled in a Christian College I got far more warnings from well-meaning friends and family than I did words of encouragement. The students all sounded alike, the school was too liberal, or I might come home quoting that confounded Greek. There was also fear of my coming home with something other than the King James Version. All other versions were referred to as “Devil’s Bibles” in my neck of the woods.

Dizzy Dean’s theory would have been unquestioned where I grew up. If you could read the book of Acts, quote it and yell it, that’s “enough education for preachin’.”

Well we’ve come a long way. If formal education enlightens and improves, we ought to be much closer to heaven.

I ended up getting four college degrees, and finished class work for two more. I spent so many years in college that much of it is a blur, and I never used drugs or alcohol. I don’t know why education often has to be so boring.

Oh, I had some great teachers. My favorite was a Swede named Gareth Icenogle. And I loved Frank Pack and Prentice Meador. The most scholarly professor I ever had was Dr. John Parker. He had earned doctorates in three different fields, earned at three different universities on three different continents. But he was also one of the humblest men I ever knew. He preferred teaching freshmen because he wanted to whet their appetites for learning. He was truly “educated.”

I also ran into a PhD or two that were nothing short of stupid. Arrogantly stupid. I’d say they were “fools” but Jesus said not to use that word. My granddad used to say, “You’re young only once but you can be immature for ever.” I learned that university learning is not an automatic path to maturity, and that formal education doesn’t equate necessarily with wisdom.

I’m all for learning. But I think the best lessons are sometimes learned outside the classroom. Maybe that’s why Amos insisted that he was not a prophet or the son of a prophet. Or maybe that’s why Jesus picked disciples from the docks and the IRS rather than the seminaries.

I have a reason for bringing this up. As you know, I work with church leaders who are hurting. Many of them have been fired. Many of them have been emotionally beat up to the point that they would have grounds for filing charges.

I see a lot of preachers quitting ministry. Of those I see, half of them are in their first ministries. And they have bachelor’s degrees, master’s degrees, and even doctorate degrees. But they were not prepared for ministry! They graduated with the knowledge of parsing Greek verbs, writing an essay on the differences in theology between Barth and Bultmann, but they don’t know how to cope with business meetings and church politics! They know the differences between Willow Creek, Saddle Back, and Gateway, but they don’t know how to determine God’s will for their lives! And worst still, they don’t know how to pray!

You don't have to like what I'm saying, or agree with it. Many won't. But my overall, unscientific, opinionated view is this: Our Bible-colleges and seminaries are failing! At least when it comes to training preachers. I'm sure there are exceptions. But I spend hours EVERY DAY with hurting people who are floundering for their lives in the deep end of the pool and they don't have a clue how to swim! They went to school, but they didn't learn how to survive.

(It's times like this, when I'm using the exclamation key repeatedly and I can feel my blood pressure rising, that I need Edna Mae's gentle editing. To her I say: "Forgive me dear, for I have sinned.")

I have some suggestions. They are not cure-alls, but they might help a few.

1. Colleges can't adequately train preachers, by themselves. One of the basic rules of creation is that things "reproduce after their own kind." I believe that professors produce professors, preachers produce preachers. This is a tough one. Most professors in Christian college view themselves as preachers. They even get tax benefits as a result of describing themselves as preachers. But being able to preach a sermon, or teach a class, is a far cry from being a preacher. You don't know what it's like to be a preacher until it is your life, your reputation, your being. How else can you know what it's like to be on call 24/7, to always be one business meeting away from getting fired, to being the object of a whole congregation's scrutiny and judgment? A fill-in, part-time preacher is not a preacher. And they can't train preachers. At least not fully.
2. Experienced, godly, preachers need to help train new preachers. Internships can be a great addition to college programs. They ought to be compulsory. Chemistry and biology lectures weren't very helpful without labs.
3. Young men, right out of school, should go into internships in healthy churches with good leadership. Not only the senior minister, but elders and others of maturity can help them grow into the needs of the job. But young preachers often end up in the far reaches of the frontier in works that would frustrate and overwhelm seasoned prophets and apostles. And very talented young men may even end up in big churches trying to impress people with their skill. The skill may be there, but the depth often isn't. I hear from lots of these bright young men who are living a sham and they know it. When they finally break and fall the church throws them away like yesterday's news.
4. Another thing that frustrates me is the thought, held by so many broken young ministers, that they can recover and restart by simply "going back to school." If school didn't prepare in the first place, what is going to be accomplished by going back and getting more of the same?
5. More than thirty years ago I attended the Congress on World Evangelization in Lausanne, Switzerland. It was a life-changing experience. Before the conference took place we were sent all the lectures and class material. We were urged to read it, critique it, and question it. We mailed those responses

back, long before the meeting. Then, when we actually got to the meeting, the lecturers and teachers reflected on our reflections. It was most helpful. There was a give and take process that had great benefit. We came away, not so much dazzled by the personalities like Stott, Schaeffer, and Ortiz, but moved by the material we had learned.

6. I believe the schools need to look at their curriculum. If they are more interested in pleasing an Accreditation Board or keeping up with the university in the next state, they are not necessarily going to help the students. How about some courses in basic human relations? How about some practical sociology? How about some real work in spiritual formation?
7. And finally, (I can feel Edna Mae's urging for me to calm down), I'd like our college lectureship directors to wake up. I've been one of those, and I know it can get rather heady to parade the new young guns before the brotherhood before someone else does. And I guess there's some value in addressing the current trends. BUT, many people come home discouraged! Yes, discouraged! I hear from them. I know. They haven't been helped. Their churches are not mega-churches and never will be. The lectureship is addressing brotherhood "issues" and the local guy is just trying to get through the day.

I know my perspective is seriously limited by my age, my location, and my constituency. I just know what much of the pain is like, how overwhelmed a lot of folks are, and how few of us live in ivory towers.

I'm certainly not advocating ignorance. Ignorance binds, whereas truth frees. I think what I am really opposing is a false and self-centered intellectualism that does more to glorify individuals than enlighten searchers. And I'm against learning that emphasizes the wrong things.

The real truth is the kind that Jesus brought and the kind He embodied. That's the kind that truly frees. It's the kind that works.

Pseudo-intellectuals are cynical, like Pilate. They ask, "What is truth?" as though they know there is none. But they keep on teaching. I've seen a few preachers recently that seemed more like they had been trained by Pilate than by Jesus. May heaven help them, and us.

Yours in Christ,
Silas