

Foreword by R. Albert Mohler Jr.

15

Things Seminary Couldn't Teach Me

edited by
Collin Hansen and
Jeff Robinson



“Many come to seminary thinking that it will teach them everything they need to know for ministry, but seminary is the foundation, not the entire building. Some things are learned only through on-the-job training; which is to say, some things are learned only in life and in ministry. Hansen and Robinson have brought together a number of essays that convey the struggles and joys of pastoral ministry. They remind us that all successful pastoral ministry is a miracle, that apart from Jesus we can do nothing. Here we find words of wisdom that will help prepare future and present pastors for the road ahead.”

Thomas R. Schreiner, James Buchanan Harrison Professor of New Testament Interpretation, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“What would it be like if you could sit down with a dozen or so veteran pastors who have learned from their own successes and failures? What would you ask them, as an aspiring pastor or other church officer? This book is very helpful for all who realize that seminary can’t teach them everything.”

Michael Horton, J. Gresham Machen Professor of Theology and Apologetics, Westminster Seminary California; Host, *White Horse Inn*; author, *Core Christianity*

“In the few years of instruction it offers, a seminary cannot do everything. Often what is missing is getting oriented to the relational things that come with ministry, something a classroom does not teach us. Here is a book that tackles those other, mostly relational things. It does so with sensitivity and wisdom. I commend this book for the heart it can give to your ministry.”

Darrell Bock, Executive Director of Cultural Engagement, The Hendricks Center, Dallas Theological Seminary

“We are blessed in our modern day to have some wonderful seminaries. And yet even the strongest seminaries fall short of equipping men with the practical tools every pastor needs in ministry. That is one of the many reasons this book is a brilliant, needed resource. *15 Things Seminary Couldn’t Teach Me* is a gift not just for every seminary-trained pastor, but also for every man laboring in the trenches of pastoral ministry. An all-star cast of pastors has been assembled to fill this long-exposed gap in the training of pastors.”

Brian Croft, Senior Pastor, Auburndale Baptist Church, Louisville, Kentucky; Founder, Practical Shepherding; Senior Fellow, Mathena Center for Church Revitalization, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“I’ve come to realize that no matter how much seminary teaches us, there remain some massive lessons that no number of degrees can impart. Since the first step to learning is finding out what we do not know, open this book and begin a ministry-long educational journey in fifteen of the most important subjects of your life.”

David Murray, Professor of Old Testament and Practical Theology,
Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary

“Going to seminary is about more than picking up a few skills and getting an education. It is about getting a life. This book is about the contours of such a life, a life of ministry replete with swerves and curves, but sustained all the while by the grace of a God who calls and keeps. Every seminary student should read this book.”

Timothy George, Founding Dean, Beeson Divinity School, Samford
University; general editor, Reformation Commentary on Scripture

“I am grateful for the opportunities I have had to receive seminary training. Learning from men who have spent years thinking about biblical and theological matters can be invaluable. Tools and disciplines that I took away from my years of formal education have served me well. But no amount of seminary training can completely prepare a man for pastoral ministry. This book, by faithful men who have both years and scars in gospel ministry, is full of wisdom. Every pastor and aspiring pastor should read and benefit from their experience.”

Tom Ascol, Executive Director, Founders Ministries; Pastor, Grace
Baptist Church, Cape Coral, Florida

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Couldn't Teach Me

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Edited by
Collin Hansen and Jeff Robinson Sr.

Foreword by R. Albert Mohler Jr.

15 Things Seminary Couldn't Teach Me

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To Chris Castaldo,
who modeled the love of Jesus in his care
for me during the seminary years

Collin Hansen

To the faculty of
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary,
who taught me by humble example
to be a pastor-theologian

Jeff Robinson Sr.

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Foreword

You might think that a seminary president would be the last person to write the foreword to a book on what a seminary *didn't* provide for pastors. Actually, I welcome the opportunity. I have committed my life to the education of pastors through The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, and after nearly twenty-five years of leading a seminary, I am more convinced than ever of the value of a seminary education.

But seminaries do not call pastors. God does. And seminaries do not make pastors. Churches do. Keeping that straight is important.

A good seminary can add immeasurably to a pastor's ministry, and the rigorous study involved in a quality seminary education should be expected of any preacher of the Word of God. The theological disciplines are of crucial importance, and though a faithful pastor will be more than a scholar, the church learned long ago the necessity of a learned ministry.

The most faithful seminary envisions itself as a servant of the churches, assisting the local church in the making of pastors. The seminary serves the church. The church does not serve the seminary. The paradigm for the education of a pastor in the New Testament is Timothy under the teaching and mentoring of the apostle Paul.

So we should not be surprised that experienced pastors would be able to detail and document the lessons of ministry that were not learned at seminary. In some cases, this may reflect poorly on the seminary, but in most cases it points profoundly to the centrality of

the local church and to the lessons of ministry that can be learned only through ministry to a congregation.

The structure of a theological education has developed into a fairly standard pattern—three years of courses separated into biblical studies, theological studies, and ministry studies. There is a wealth of wisdom in that structure, which explains why almost every seminary finds its way into this pattern.

The weakest component has always been ministry studies. This is not due to a failure of the faculty, and most pastors look back on those courses as very helpful. So, what explains the weakness?

It is the important distinction between analysis and experience. I didn't identify the problem as theory as opposed to practice. Ministry studies in the seminary are not merely theoretical. But there is no teacher of ministry like the local church. The preacher should learn a great deal about preaching in the seminary but will become a true preacher only through the call and experience of preaching the Word to a congregation. In the best context, this means a senior pastor taking younger pastors under his care and teaching—the congregation invested fully in the perpetuation of a gospel ministry.

There are ample analogies. The United States Military Academy at West Point exists for good reason, but officers are made by leading troops and fighting battles. I would not want to have surgery at the hands of a physician who had not graduated (with high honors) from a good medical school. But I'd also want to know that the surgeon had trained with the very best doctors in residency and had performed the procedure many times.

You get the point.

I would actually be interested in reading a book of essays by veteran army generals on what they did not learn at West Point. It might be that West Point would gain some important information from such a book and take it to heart. My guess is that most of those essays would look back to West Point with deep appreciation and affection, while understanding that some lessons have always been learned only in the crucible of war. I'll also bet that those generals

would be incredibly glad they did not go to battle without that West Point education.

And so it is with the Christian ministry. The essays in this book, seasoned with thoughtfulness and seeded with experience, are really helpful in clarifying the centrality of the local church in the education of a pastor. Some of the essays will make you smile; others may make you wince. Every essay will make you think.

This book will be helpful to new pastors, pastors of long tenure, seminary leaders and professors, and seminary students. Up front, these essays will help seminary students to prepare for ministry. Then, given enough experience in ministry, the thoughtful pastor would be able to contribute on his own not only an essay like one of these, but an entire book of essays.

The faithful pastor needs an education in exegesis but is made in the preparation and delivery of sermons to the people of God. That pastor needs the theological studies gained in seminary, but that theology is eventually hammered out when the pastor is called to preach the funeral of a child. A background in hermeneutics and homiletics is vital, but the preacher discovers his real method of interpretation and his real understanding of preaching when deciding how to preach a specific text to a specific people—and then preaching to the same congregation again and again and again.

I would read the *What West Point Couldn't Teach Me* book with genuine interest. You will read this book with nothing less than urgency. Don't miss a single lesson to be learned—but keep in mind that every pastor learns the most important lessons only through years of ministry. At the same time, learn as much as you can before you hit the battlefield alone. It matters.

R. Albert Mohler Jr.

Knowledge and Credentials Aren't Enough

Jeff Robinson Sr.

I warned them, but I don't think they believed me.

No doubt, they thought I was merely trying to exhibit humility or was trafficking in a garden-variety form of preacher talk. The pastoral search committee had zeroed in on me as its final candidate, but the three letters that sometimes appear to the right of my name kept hijacking our conversation: PhD.

"Should we call you doctor?" one asked. "I'll bet you'll really get this church going with all you bring to the table as a doctor," another said. I fidgeted in my seat. I didn't doubt the sincerity of their admiration, but I felt profoundly unprepared to play the role of spiritual superhero.

I had no idea.

At last, I said: "I'm grateful you want to honor my studies, but please don't mistake a degree for maturity, fitness for ministry, or competence, and certainly not for godliness. The one does not

necessarily portend the others. All it really means is that I persevered long enough to meet some academic requirements.”

From the standpoint of interview skill, that was the correct answer. But over the next three years, God burned the truth of those words deep into the recesses of my soul.

Soon, the church called me as senior pastor. Soon, I learned that advanced degrees from a leading theological institution had not transformed me into the godly, humble, wise, selfless leader this congregation desperately needed. Soon, I realized only suffering-laden service on the front lines of ministry could make me that man. Soon, it hit me: I serve the church at war.

Sadly, my tenure in that first pastorate lasted little more than three years, due mostly to a major financial crisis in the church. Today, I am privileged to serve a different congregation. And thanks to lessons learned from many mistakes and foolhardy decisions I made in the first church, I am a different pastor. My prayer is that the good people in my current field of service will benefit from the hard lessons learned in the earlier work.

I also serve as an adjunct professor at the seminary that trained me, so I am deeply invested in the lives of future pastors. I have a love for the church and for theological education that serves the church, but the pastoral ministry has taught me three major lessons that I could have learned only by serving God’s people in the local church, and those lessons form the basis and the rationale for the book you are now reading: credentials are not competence, ministry means war, and apart from God’s absolute, unilateral grace, a pastor labors in vain.

Credentials Are Not Competence

Prior to becoming a pastor, I had preached 1 Corinthians 13 many times and had seen it cross-stitched on home decor at least a thousand more. But once I began to shepherd a local flock, Paul’s words became one of the most perplexing passages to me in the entire Bible. Why? It’s not difficult to interpret, but therein lies the rub; it’s difficult because it’s easier to be orthodox than it is to be loving.

And knowledge puffs up. As one who prizes the study of theology and church history, that phrase hits close to home. It hits home because, if God gave me one wish in a prosperity-theology sort of way, I'd be tempted to choose "have all knowledge" instead of "be perfect in holiness."

Every hour of seminary delighted my soul. It left me with much knowledge, and, as it is designed to do, equipped me to gain more for myself. But I soon realized that my command of Greek or Hebrew or the Puritans is not enough to keep me from erupting when an angry church member brings false charges against me. Those things don't necessarily provide wise leadership decisions when a deacon tells me that the church is almost out of money.

Sure, my theological knowledge positions me to make wise decisions and enables me to feed the flock with healthy grass, but the maturity needed to be a godly under-shepherd comes only through days, weeks, months, and years of labor in the vineyard of the Lord. It didn't take long for me to realize that I am a man in the middle of his sanctification, just like the people who listen to me preach every Lord's day.

Love Surpasses Knowledge

Soon, I realized the people under my care were not all that interested in my orthodoxy, although I could never compromise it. They really wanted to know if I loved them. Once they knew that I genuinely cared and saw them as cherished family in Christ—and not so much as subjects for evangelism or discipleship—they were much more willing to listen to my attempts at expounding orthodoxy.

There was only one means for building such a relationship: time in their presence.

I recall one particularly cranky man who just didn't seem to like me—at first. So, taking a page from the Richard Baxter playbook, I visited his home. It was summer and we sat on his porch. We talked about the respective football teams at Auburn and my alma mater, Georgia. I listened to him talk about Dale Earnhardt. I listened to his wife talk about her family's role in the founding of our church.

Before long, they seemed to move into my corner. On the day I left the church, he bear-hugged me and, through a river of tears, told me how his family had grown to love mine and how they would miss us. They would miss my teaching, too, he said.

Love never fails, and love surpasses knowledge.

The inspired writer warned me about this: “If I have . . . all knowledge . . . but have not love, I am nothing” (1 Cor. 13:2). If I do not love my people, they will not care how much theological talk comes from the pulpit. They will follow me only when I prove that I love them and can be trusted as a mature teacher and under-shepherd.

In his excellent book *Dangerous Calling: Confronting the Unique Challenges of Pastoral Ministry*, Paul David Tripp, a longtime pastor and seminary professor, identifies a binary syndrome that too often inflicts the inexperienced but self-assured pastor. Tripp appropriately labels this dangerous malady as “big theological brains and heart disease”:

Bad things happen when maturity is more defined by knowing than it is by being. Danger is afloat when you come to love ideas more than the God whom they represent and the people they are meant to free.

. . . I longed for [seminary students] to understand that they aren’t called just to *teach* theology to their people but also to *do* theology with their people.¹

The apostle, after reciting his lengthy biological, theological, and experiential pedigree, concluded much the same: “I have reason for confidence in the flesh, but whatever gain I had, I have counted loss for the sake of Christ” (Phil. 3:8). From a worldly standpoint, Paul possessed all the ingredients to serve as an omni-competent pastor, yet it was all rubbish compared with knowing Christ and exhibiting his love for people.

If you have served in a local church for long, a second lesson will

1. Paul David Tripp, *Dangerous Calling: Confronting the Unique Challenges of Pastoral Ministry* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 42–43.

become axiomatic for you: ministry means war, which is to say, suffering is the norm for God's under-shepherd, but it is good.

Ministry Means War

A. W. Tozer famously said, "It is doubtful whether God can bless a man greatly until He has hurt him deeply."² In the ministry, as in the Christian life, there is no crown without a cross. The great men of Scripture were formed under the lash of suffering—Job, Daniel, King David, Peter, Paul, and, of course, our Lord Jesus Christ.

The great names in church history walked the Calvary road of affliction. Luther and Calvin were forced to run for their lives. John Bunyan spent twelve years in a Bedford jail for preaching the gospel. Charles Simeon served an irascible congregation that once locked him out of the church. I had a friend whose church fired him because he planted grass at the parsonage without a committee's permission. Another friend was sent away two weeks after being elected because a deacon found an objectionable theology book in his library as the moving van was being unloaded.

How bad can it get? The cauldron of suffering nearly drove the great Charles Spurgeon from the ministry at the age of twenty-two. On October 19, 1856, seven people were killed and twenty-eight injured when someone shouted "Fire!" during a Sunday evening service at the Surrey Garden Music Hall, causing hundreds of the twelve thousand gathered to stampede.

The depression that resulted from this disaster left Spurgeon prostrate for days. "Even the sight of the Bible, brought from me a flood of tears, and utter distraction of mind."³ This set the tone for his ministry, and he battled acute anxiety and dark depression the rest of his life.

Seminary did not teach me how deeply ministry could wound. But it *couldn't* teach me that, for seminary is to ministry what basic training is to combat: a training ground, a relatively safe place to

2. A. W. Tozer, *The Root of the Righteous* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2015), 165; originally published 1955.

3. *The Autobiography of Charles H. Spurgeon*, compiled by his wife and his private secretary, vol. 2 (New York: Revell, 1899), 207.

acquire the tools of ministry—Greek, Hebrew, exegesis, homiletics, systematic theology, church history, and much more. Basic training is not war, and seminary is not local church ministry. Nothing but the battlefield of ministry could have prepared me for the pain ahead.

Yet, had I been paying closer attention to Scripture, I would have seen the warning signs. Through the lens of Paul’s ministry, 2 Corinthians is a manual for suffering in pastoral ministry. Read a few verses and you’ll see the office of elder is not for the faint of heart. It is dangerous, even deadly. It will bruise the new man I’m becoming in Christ, and it will kill the old man I was before the grace of God stormed the battlements of my heart. It is a glorious death sentence from the hand of a loving God. In 2 Corinthians 11:23–28, Paul contrasts his ministry with that of the so-called “super-apostles” (2 Cor. 11:5). The apostle offers his own ministry résumé. It includes such items as five times receiving forty lashes less one, being beaten with rods three times, being shipwrecked three times, sleeplessness, hunger, thirst, and danger. Tough stuff. And Paul is mostly describing the war that rages outside the pastor. Perhaps a more intense and potentially bloody battle plays out in another theater—the heart of the pastor.

The War Within

There will be difficult days in ministry. You will doubt your calling. You will question God’s goodness. Your heart will struggle to trust the divine sovereignty your mouth has so often celebrated. You will fear people. You will resent the apparent ministry success of your friends, though pride will lead you to publicly congratulate them. You will want to quit, particularly on Mondays. To summarize: you will wrestle with you.

Voices will fill your ears with an alluring siren song, urging you to find, by whatever means necessary—even by small increments of theological or ethical compromise—a place where ease and earthly prosperity reign. There, in ministerial Rivendell, you will be far from the bad deacons meeting, far from the church member whose

marriage is imploding, far from the family who thinks you are killing the church by teaching the Bible instead of building the youth group.

This is the internal battle of Ephesians 6:17, and it is intensified within the minister because of his calling. If you are to survive this war, you must feed upon God's Word daily. You must become a man of constant prayer, of vigilant self-examination. You must live in habitual awareness that you utterly depend upon the grace of God. Paul asked the question in 1 Corinthians 4:7 to which you must learn the correct answer: "What do you have that you did not receive?" Absolutely nothing.

Suffering is normal in ministry. Paul suffered. Our heroes from church history suffered. Affliction is at the heart of the gospel as our Lord suffered in our place. God will use this struggle with foes from without and within to make us more like Jesus, to slay our pride, to arm us with gospel comfort so we may comfort fellow sufferers in our charge, and, perhaps above all, to provide the church with a picture of the sufferings of Christ. Humiliation precedes exaltation, both for Christ and for his people (2 Cor. 4:7-12). It's the gospel way.

Affliction will either drive God's servants to my third and final lesson or drive them from ministry.

Apart from Him You Can Do Nothing

One phrase the minister must burn above the doorpost of his heart is our Lord's words in John 15:5: "Apart from me you can do nothing." If you are to persevere in faithfulness, God's undiluted, unilateral grace must uphold you. Various studies communicate a grim but unified message: a high percentage of seminary graduates disappear permanently from gospel ministry within five years. You will need grace upon grace upon grace.

In the context of his being lifted up to the third heaven in 2 Corinthians 12, the apostle tells his readers that God does not weigh strength on the same scales as we do: "I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. . . . For when I am weak, then I am strong" (12:9-10). Paul realizes

that only the grace of God makes his ministry effective. Paul has no strength in himself—only that which the Lord gives him.

He Alone Makes Dry Bones Live

A few days into that first pastorate, I realized that only the Lord working through his Word and his Spirit could make dry bones live. All I could do was preach the Word, pray, and shepherd God's sheep. Mercifully, the pressure is not on us to change hearts. The gospel is the power of God for salvation. In 2 Corinthians 4:7–12, Paul aptly summarized the minister's place in the economy of God's work: "But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us" (4:7).

That's good news! The power belongs to God. I don't have to muster it—I cannot muster it. God takes his preached Word and transforms sinful people. Faith comes by hearing, and hearing through the Word of Christ (Rom. 10:17). We sow the seed. God grows the seed. God's ministers—as God's people—utterly depend upon him.

Conclusion

At Kings Island amusement park near Cincinnati, there was once a wooden roller coaster that stood more than three hundred feet tall. At the entrance, there was a sign that said, "This ride is not for the faint of heart." Pastoral ministry is like that. It is a delightful calling with many dizzying highs. It is a dangerous calling with many depressing lows. It will rattle your bones all along the way.

But preaching God's Word and watching him use it to transform lives is a marvel that strains the descriptive capacity of human words. Yet Paul's words reflect my assessment of the ministry God has given me: "Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!" (1 Cor. 9:16).

Some lessons can't be learned in a classroom.

A seminary education is immensely valuable, offering theological preparation, spiritual formation, and wise mentoring. But many new pastors are discouraged when the realities of their first call don't line up with what they came to expect from assigned readings and classroom discussions.

Bridging the gap between seminary training and real life in a local church, fifteen veteran pastors and ministry leaders offer advice and encouragement related to a host of real-world issues, such as leading congregations through seasons of suffering, handling conflict, accepting a call, leaving a church, and more.

“Here we find words of wisdom that will help prepare future and present pastors for the road ahead.”

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“Open this book and begin a ministry-long educational journey in fifteen of the most important subjects of your life.”

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Brian Croft, Senior Pastor, Auburndale Baptist Church, Louisville, Kentucky; Founder, Practical Shepherding

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PASTORAL RESOURCES

