

# IN RESPONSE – GRACES, GIFTS, AND CALLING

by Dennis Prutow

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The part of the process I looked forward to least was the interview on the floor of the 170<sup>th</sup> Synod. In the rush of activity in preparation for Synod I thought little of the interview except with dread. I had the pleasure of being peppered with questions by a room full of ecclesiastical lawyers. I should have carefully thought through possible questions and taken time to anticipate appropriate answers. I did neither. The upshot was that I did not do well in that interview.

Notwithstanding, Synod was merciful and elected me to a position at the Reformed Presbyterian Theological Seminary. I am grateful. As the *Book of Psalms for Singing* renders Psalm 119:2, "I'm humbled much; LORD, quicken me According to Thy word."

My purpose now is to use this forum to answer two questions more fully and, hopefully, properly. The first question, as I recall, had to do with my views regarding the goals of the Seminary education. In my view, what should the final product look like? These are not the exact words of the question but, as I recall, this was the thrust of the query.<sup>1</sup>

The second question had to do with apologetics. In essence, since I do lean toward the classic side in apologetics, how would my apologetic stance affect my teaching? This is a fair question and deserves a thoughtful answer.<sup>2</sup> I shall seek to answer this second question in the next issue of *In Response*.

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<sup>1</sup> I also refer my readers to other *In Response* articles. In "Two Ministries" (March 2000) I discuss the need to be a shepherd of God's people, one who leads, rather than a cowboy, one who drives God's people. In "Christ and Covenant Leadership" (October 1999) I discuss the need for leaders who love God with all their hearts and live out the covenant before God's people.

<sup>2</sup> In the context of this question, my views concerning the man in Romans 7 also arose. I hold the man in Romans 7 to be one under conviction by the Holy Spirit but not necessarily regenerate. *In Response* (May 1997) gives my exposition of Romans 7. *In Response* (June 1997 and July 1997) gives extensive interaction with John Murray.

To answer the first question, I utilize two sources. The first is a portion of the "Manual for Ministerial Candidates" being developed by the Candidates and Credentials Committee of the Midwest Presbytery of the RPCNA, namely, the Statement of Approach to the examination process. I authored this statement. It represents my thinking.<sup>3</sup> The second is the RPTS Catalog and the Student Outcomes given in the catalog.

I quote the Statement of Approach in its entirety and make comments. The question the Statement is addressing is simple. What is the goal of the examination process in Presbytery?

The Seminary experience prepares men for ministry. Presbytery exams, at least in part, explore the preparedness of a candidate. We may put the question this way. Did the seminary in its own training, in its own particular orb and focus, adequately equip the candidate? In one sense Presbytery exams test the candidate. In another sense, the preparation given by the seminary is in the background.

A natural tension may exist here. Should the Seminary yield to the desires of the church and prepare men as deemed appropriate by the church? Or should the church simply accept men as taught by the Seminary? In the end, the church is in control through Presbytery exams. Reformed Presbyterian Theological Seminary is an institution of the church. She prepares men for the ministry of the Reformed Presbyterian Church. In the end, she prepares men meeting the Standards of the church as determined by Synod and then by Presbytery examinations. Seminary training is, in this way, directly tied to the church.

I therefore ask the question, What kind of man does the church want and need? The Seminary, in preparing men, serves the church by supplying men who meet the criteria established by the church. Hence I go back to my Statement of Approach to the examination process in Midwest Presbytery.

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<sup>3</sup> Used with permission of the Midwest Presbytery Candidates and Credentials Committee.

The examination process is not a set of perfunctory tests given to candidates after which Presbytery, by a majority vote, declares men fit for the ministry. Scripture asserts that two or three witnesses must confirm every matter. What are the witnesses with which ministry is confirmed? The examination process, from the first stage of being taken under care through ordination, is a set of procedures designed to test graces, gifts, and calling.

Presbytery exams, and by extension, Seminary training, are not simply hoops through which men jump to be fit for ministry. Neither Seminary diplomas nor declarations by Presbyteries, in themselves, make men fit pastors.

Presbytery exams are, in a sense, professional exams. They determine competency for service in the pastoral ministry. These exams test the more academic qualifications. Is the person *gifted* to carry out the needed responsibilities? They also test, over a period of time, whether a person is suited to the gospel ministry. Does he exhibit the much-needed graces? Does he have a call from God? One may question the order of importance. In the end, the grace of God exhibited in the life is fundamental. With God's grace as the foundation, gifts are properly utilized. A man exhibiting God's grace who has the gifts may then sense a call from God that is confirmed by a congregation and Presbytery. I therefore use the order of graces, gifts, and calling.

RPTS Student Outcomes cover: Cognitive / Theological / Critical thinking, Spiritual development, and Ministry Skills. The accent is on graces and gifts. Cultivation of one's graces and gifts serves to confirm a man's calling. What kind of man does the Seminary need to set before the church? Seminary training should cultivate a man's Christian graces and ministerial gifts. The Seminary's goal should be to graduate men developed in the grace of God, in their gifts, and in the utilization of their gifts.

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## IN RESPONSE – GRACES, GIFTS, AND CALLING, PART 2

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We now move to a more direct discussion of graces, gifts and calling. The Statement of Approach reads.

Under-shepherds must be covenant leaders. That is, they must be shepherds of the covenant community, equipped to lead men and women in full orbéd covenant life before God by example and by precept. Their lives must exhibit certain graces, natural and spiritual, supplied by God. They must have certain gifts given by God. They must also have the call of God.

In order for men to be covenant leaders, the Seminary must not only teach covenant theology but also engender a deep appreciation for covenant life and the effectual nature of covenant leadership as exhibited by Jesus Christ. Pastoral theology is covenant theology personified in the work-a-day world. Covenant leaders must be filled with the grace of God, utilize their gifts to the glory of God, and see their work as God's calling.

Speaking of the ministerial candidate, the Statement of Approach continues.

Does the man's life exhibit the graces, both common and spiritual, necessary for pastoral service in the midst of God's covenant people? The candidate must give evidence of the fruit of the Spirit at work in his life in a variety of situations. He must hold "fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching so that he will be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict" (Titus 1:9). However, in so doing, he must possess common courtesies and exhibit spiritual fruit in his dealings with peers, associates, and elders. He must have a good report among members of the church and with those outside the church. The examination process must expose these graces.

By "graces, both common and spiritual" I mean common courtesies *and* spiritual fruit, as indicated later in the paragraph. It is my humble opinion that many pastors wade through troubled waters simply because they often do not use common courtesy in dealing with people in their congregations. It is simply discourteous to be late for appointments and

keep others waiting. It is simply discourteous to announce times for services and keep people well past those announced times. Failure to keep confidences is highly offensive. One ought always to be courteous and respectful in his dealings with others.

Manifesting the fruit of the Spirit is essential. Christ indicates this is His priority. First, how may we distinguish between false prophets and those that are true? "You will know them by their fruits" (Matthew 7:20). Second, how do people identify disciples? "By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35). Love is a chief fruit of the Spirit. Seminary training must cultivate common courtesies and spiritual fruit.

The apostle Paul also places emphasis on the fruit of the Spirit in ministry. In speaking about preaching and teaching Paul exhorts Timothy, "But the goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith" (1 Timothy 1:5). Instruction is not an end in itself. It must lead men and women to God and to the love of God.<sup>1</sup>

Further, when Paul sets forth the qualifications for elders, he does not center his thoughts on systematic theology. Paul gives us a set of qualifications revolving around personal relationships and personal character. "An overseer, then, must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, prudent, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not addicted to wine or pugnacious, but gentle, peaceable, free from the love of money" (1 Timothy 3:2-3). A possible translation for the term rendered "able to teach" is *teachable*. This translation fits with the other qualifications. An elder must have a teachable spirit. In sum, the qualities necessary for the eldership emphasize a life full of the fruit of the Spirit.

Seminary training must cultivate this fruit in the lives of students and future candidates for the ministry. Fruit, being a direct manifestation of the presence of grace, determines *how* gifts will be util-

ized. Men must use their gifts graciously and courteously.

The test of grace comes in the midst of opposition. Paul's guidance under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit once again emphasizes the fruit of the Spirit. "The Lord's bond-servant must not be quarrelsome, but be kind to all, able to teach, patient when wronged, with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition, if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth" (2 Timothy 2:24-25).

Pastors must be kind, patient, and gentle. There must be an ability to teach. Knowing a subject and being able to expound upon it are one thing. Being able to set forth the truth of God with patience, gentleness, and kindness is essential. Paul indicates patience and kindness, among other qualities, are the first requisites of love. "Love is patient, love is kind and is not jealous; love does not brag and is not arrogant, does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong suffered" (1 Corinthians 13:4-5).

This does not mean men must hold back in straightforward presentations of the truth. There is a difference between animated earnest appeals and confrontation bearing a hostile edge. Fervency and urgency are necessary. But the idea is not to score points or win arguments. Correction must come, not with fierceness or animosity, but with gentleness (2 Timothy 2:24-25). We speak the truth with love (Ephesians 4:15).

Once again, as the Holy Spirit teaches in 1 Timothy 1:5, "But the goal of our instruction is love." If "God is love" (1 John 4:16), the ultimate goal in teaching is God. If the goal of instruction within the church is love and ultimately God, the goal of instruction within the Seminary is also love and ultimately God.

The Seminary product is therefore a man who learns to keep covenant with God by loving Him with all his heart, and learns from his instructors to lead others, by precept and example, into the self-conscious covenant love of God.

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<sup>1</sup> See "Love (*v.t.*) Love (*n.*)," In Response, (September, November, and December, 2000) and my expositions of 1 Timothy 1:5.

## IN RESPONSE – GRACES, GIFTS, AND CALLING, PART 3

by Dennis Prutow

Before moving to gifts, one more word about the Christian graces is in order. The Student Outcomes at RPTS include emphasis on seeing the grace of God operative in a graduate's life. These Outcomes seek "Evidence of the fruit of God's Spirit, including patience, meekness, and self-control; Demonstration of faithfulness, wisdom, and spiritual unity in family relationships; and Eagerness to labor for Christ and His church with a servant's heart, motivated by a vision to see the nations disciplined."<sup>1</sup>

With such a strong emphasis upon Christian graces and the fruit of the Spirit, one might conclude there is a lack of emphasis upon academic ability. Such is not the case. The Midwest Presbytery Statement of Approach regarding the examination process looks at academics under the heading of gifts.

Has God given the requisite gifts to the man to fulfill pastoral ministry among God's covenant people? The candidate shows his ability to grasp the message of the Bible, Systematic Theology, and church history. The candidate displays his talents before Presbytery in writing, exegesis, preaching, teaching, and defending biblical truths. Presbytery must assure itself the candidate has the requisite gifts for his proposed service. The examination process must reveal these gifts.

Men coming from Seminary must have certain abilities. From an academic perspective they must have begun to hone certain skills. Under the category of Cognitive, Theological, Critical Thinking the RPTS Student Outcomes point the Seminary in the direction seeking to foster:

Belief in the Bible as the infallible, fully-sufficient, Word of God; Knowledge of Biblical facts, themes, and doctrines, with an understanding of how these have been articulated and defended throughout the history of the church; Ability to interpret the Bible in a proper manner and to understand its application to doctrine and

life, with a working knowledge of the original languages; Understanding of, and growing commitment to, historic Reformed theology and its worldview, with a recognition of the mediatorial Kingship of Christ over every area of life; and Enthusiasm for learning, resulting in a life-long pattern of study and inquiry.

Academic ability in pastoral ministry is a must. Presbytery exams seek to ascertain a candidate's linguistic, biblical, theological, and practical abilities. Does a man have the gifts to handle Scripture, to preach, teach, counsel, and lead?

On the other hand, the church is not a seminary. A man must be able to translate information gained in the more academic setting to the more pedestrian church setting of worship, Bible studies, counseling, and church meetings. This requires gifts. It requires teaching, administrative, and leadership skills and abilities. Part of the Seminary experience involves not only bringing out these skills and abilities but also guiding men in the use of their gifts.

For example, from their study, men must be able to set down an exegetical outline of a text. Men must also learn to ascertain the exegetical point from a text; they must know the main point coming out of the text. This is not enough for preaching. Men must also learn to make the turn from exegesis to homiletics. Men must make the turn from the exegetical point of the text to the homiletical point of their sermon. They must make the turn from the exegetical outline, what the text says, to the homiletical outline, what the text means for us today in our church.

A goal of a Professor of Homiletics and Pastoral Theology is to guide men in the process from exegesis, the study, to homiletics, the sermon. In the same way, a goal of a Professor of Homiletics and Pastoral Theology is to guide men in applying their academic knowledge and understanding to the pedestrian work-a-day world of the church, business, and the home. A goal of a Professor of Homiletics and Pastoral Theology is to help students help students see how Greek and Hebrew exegesis, hermeneutics, Old and New Testament studies, Church History, Mis-

sions, Biblical Theology, Systematic Theology, other academic disciplines practically interface with the world outside of Seminary.<sup>2</sup>

After my interview before Synod, I was apparently criticized for saying I needed to get a better handle on the Seminary curriculum. I should already have a handle on the curriculum it was supposed. It is one thing to know the areas of study and the list of classes taught. It is quite another matter to have an understanding of *how* various classes are taught, *how* a Professor of Homiletics and Pastoral Theology may compliment the rest of the faculty, and therefore *how* such a professor may best bring the disciplines others teach into the more practical and pastoral arena.

In many respects, the Seminary curriculum is a set of building blocks. The aim of Homiletics and Pastoral Theology is to help students put the building blocks together, in their own minds and hearts, to form a practical and useful structure. From this perspective, Homiletics and Pastoral Theology is probably more interdisciplinary than other subjects.<sup>3</sup> In some respects, Presbytery examinations measure how effectively candidates are assembling academic building blocks in practical ways useful for biblical ministry in the church.<sup>4</sup>

A seminary education should develop a man's gifts for ministry within the church. The seminary should then present gifted men to the church. Presbytery exams then test the presence of needed gifts for ministry in the church and the adequacy of a man's use of his gifts.

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<sup>2</sup> This is one reason why a prerequisite for teaching at RPTS is solid pastoral experience.

<sup>3</sup> Systematic Theology, however, builds on exegesis and biblical theology.

<sup>4</sup> A criticism of Seminary education in general is that practical courses are often introduced early in the curriculum. Since they are practical, it is thought, they may be taught while students learn the languages, exegesis, and theology. Evangelism is an example. However, can a man implement a biblical evangelistic methodology without an adequate biblical and theological base?

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<sup>1</sup> Quotes taken from *Reformed Presbyterian Theological Seminary Catalog*, 1999-2001, page 10.

## IN RESPONSE – GRACES, GIFTS, AND CALLING, PART 4

by Dennis Prutow

The third witness to a man's eligibility to serve in the pastoral ministry is the call of God. The Statement of Approach for exams in Midwest Presbytery puts it this way.

Is the call of God to lead His covenant people upon the life of the candidate? The candidate may have a sense of call to the ministry. This personal sense of call must be confirmed by Presbytery in the examination process. It must also be confirmed by the actual call of a congregation upon the candidate. The examination process must confirm this calling. This is the culmination of the process.

As a man passes through his seminary training, professors may bear witness to his preparation, God's grace operative in his life, and his gifts. Professors and fellow students may also encourage a man regarding his call, based upon his gifts and God grace within him. A local congregation and the Presbytery respectively bear witness to God's call on the heart by means of a call upon a man to serve as a pastor and approval of a man to serve by way of sustaining him in the examination process.

Seminary life must not dampen a man's vital life in Christ. The Seminary must teach men to keep covenant with God by loving Him with all their hearts, and teach them to lead others, by precept and example, into the self-conscious covenant love of God. The Seminary must therefore be a training ground for the development of Christian graces. In addition, a seminary education should develop a man's gifts for ministry within the church. The seminary should present gifted men to the church full of the grace of God. The testimonies of a confirming call and confirming examinations follow.

The Statement of Approach concludes with these words.

The examination process therefore takes the candidate through a series of crucial tests over a period of time. At the end of the process, Presbytery and the candidate must be sure, before God, that the candidate does indeed have the graces, gifts, and calling for pastoral ministry among God's people. A candidate may have the

gifts and graces, but in God's providence no formal call may emerge. A candidate may have a sense of call and possess evident graces but Presbytery may determine he lacks the needed gifts. A candidate may have gifts and a congregation may call but the candidate may lack the necessary graces. Presbytery must assure itself, and the candidate must assure himself, that God is providing a shepherd of the covenant, a leader in the covenant community, prepared to shepherd men and women in covenant life before God. This covenant life requires graces, gifts, and calling.

A point to be made here is that graces, gifts, and calling are equally ultimate and interconnected. For example, training men in the covenant love of God, the priority of God's love for sinners, and the priority of love within the church necessitates more than an academic grasp of these concepts. Students must begin to have an experimental understanding of God's covenant love.

R.C. Sproul speaks of teaching the Doctrine of God in Systematic Theology and seeing students move from an understanding of more abstract concepts to an actual awe of God. I recently taught the Doctrine of Christ at Sangre de Cristo Seminary in Westcliffe, Colorado. The class evaluation asked how the sessions might be improved. A student responded with the suggestion of "a fieldtrip to heaven."

At the climax of the class, we sat on the edge of heaven savoring the good things of Christ. Students grasped this. Academics turned to awe. The precept and example of the classroom makes students eager to move to the church and lead God's people into heavenly worship of the Savior.

Christian graces, the fruit of the Spirit, and gifts stand together. The fruit of the Spirit undergirds and validates the gifts. Paul is very forthright about this in 1 Corinthians 13:1-2. "If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to

remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing." Men may be gifted preachers and expositors of Scripture. They may be gifted linguistically. They may have penetrating minds. They may grasp lofty concepts and be able to articulate them in simple terms. If the principle fruit of the Spirit is absent, if love is not present in their lives, all their giftedness counts for nothing. This is the judgment of the Holy Spirit.

Men must grasp *this* truth. They must grasp this truth academically and spiritually. They must grasp this truth formally and savingly. The possession of extraordinary gifts is indeed good. The possession of such gifts without the more foundational love of God born of the Spirit is quite disastrous. The outstanding examples of Balaam, Saul, and Judas punctuate the truth. These were prophetically gifted men. They were also self-centered, selfish, lovers of the world devoid of the requisite love for God.

The product of the Seminary ought therefore to be a man<sup>1</sup> trained to utilize his gifts.<sup>2</sup> The product of the Seminary ought to be a man full of the grace of God displayed in a life exhibiting the fruit of the Spirit. Seminary training draws out and hones the graces and gifts God gives to men.

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<sup>1</sup> I have been keying in on the ordained ministry in these articles. The principles are no less valid for women seeking further training to serve the Lord in a non-ordained capacities and may be in the Master of Theological Studies program at RPTS.

<sup>2</sup> Another area to explore is that of teaching men to play to their strengths. They ought to focus on their strengths and improve what they can do well rather than spending inordinate amounts of time attempting to compensate for their weaknesses. Leaders learn to delegate so others use *their* gifts and thus compensate for the leader's weaknesses. This is a vital part of Presbyterianism and the plurality of elders within a local church.