

## The Shepherd's Seminary

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*"I will feed My flock and I will lead them to rest," declares the Lord God. "I will seek the lost, bring back the scattered, bind up the broken and strengthen the sick; but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with judgment."*

Ezekiel 34:15-16 (ESV)

Five years ago, on becoming the Professor of Pastoral Theology at Reformed Presbyterian Theological Seminary (RPTS), I considered the theme of *"The Shepherding Seminary"* for my inauguration. Upon becoming the President of the seminary, I want to revisit the same theme and consider the topic of "The Shepherd's Seminary" in this paper. Though RPTS has a president to lead it, has a Board that oversees it, and is controlled by the RPCNA, RPTS belongs to Jesus, the True Shepherd. It is his seminary! In this paper, I want to explain why a model of shepherding is the best model for RPTS, and how we best ensure that RPTS remains committed to that model.

### Reviewing Our Vision

The motto of Reformed Presbyterian Theological Seminary, is "Study under pastors." The Shepherd's staff running through the initials of our institution is a reminder that the chief work of a pastor is to be a shepherd. Indeed, the very word "pastor" comes out of French and Latin words for shepherd. At the heart of being a pastor is to be a shepherd; at the heart of doing kingdom work in teaching, counseling, and caring for people is shepherding. Though the seminary is an academic and theological institution, RPTS is to be a place where shepherds are trained and where shepherding takes place.

Yet shepherding is often not the model being employed in many churches and ministries today. In many places, the shepherding structure of the local church has been replaced with a pastor using a business model where he acts like a CEO. To many, a model of the church or seminary training that follows shepherding seems antiquated. The corruption we are seeing today, not just in the Catholic church, but in the evangelical church as well, has much to do with a failure of the shepherds, a failure to teach and insist on having the church structured with a shepherding model.

Compounding the challenge, the Digital Age has brought momentous changes to theological education. Some of these trends in theological education that RPTS and others are facing are:

- 1) Centralized education in brick and mortar buildings was once the sole means of theological education; now bytes and pixels mean training can be done all over the world.
- 2) Seminaries used to be supported by the church but basically isolated from the people in the pews; today, means exist for the people of God to know what is happening and being taught at the seminary. Thus, they can also receive various forms of education for themselves.

3) In former days, theological education was basically restricted to those in Western nations; in this new age, the nations themselves are seeking to be trained. Indeed, forty years ago only 7% of those attending seminary in North America were non-white; racial/ethnic student enrollment has grown more than fourfold over the past thirty years.<sup>1</sup>

4) The rule used to be that the students came and sat at the feet of the professors; in this new age professors often must go to the students. Men and women have the ability to get a degree without even stepping onto the seminary campus. These challenges also raise the question, “Is shepherding still the best model?”

I believed then, and even more so now, that actually these challenges are met best by a seminary showing it belongs to the Good and Great Shepherd by following his principles. If one looks at works on pastoral theology through the ages, the metaphor of shepherding is one that is consistent. Chief among them is Martin Bucer’s *Concerning the True Care of Souls* from the 16th century. His work is structured on these two verses of Ezekiel. “I will feed My flock and I will lead them to rest,” declares the Lord God. “I will seek the lost, bring back the scattered, bind up the broken and strengthen the sick; but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with judgment” (Ez. 34:15-16). Indeed, the full title of the book was *Concerning the true care of souls and the correct shepherd-service, how this is to be established and carried out in the Church of Christ*. John Calvin, who spent three years in exile from Geneva, arrived in Strasbourg, the year Bucer’s “little handbook” as it was called was published, and was greatly influenced by it. Bucer, as many who followed him, saw Jesus as this wonderful shepherd, and those who were to care for his people as ones who had to be like him in this regard. In this paper, we will consider three concise emphases in Bucer to renew our vision to this model of being and ministering as the Shepherd’s Seminary.

## **Renewing Our Vision**

*RPTS will continue to follow a shepherding model because Christ is the head shepherd and king of the church.*

Bucer, after citing eleven texts establishing Christ’s headship over the church, states in sharp contrast to Rome,

“And so we have seen from the aforementioned texts that Christ our Lord alone has and exercises all power and rule in his church and congregation. It is he himself who rules the church . . . He acts as a King in his kingdom, a Master with his disciples, a faithful Shepherd with his flock...”<sup>2</sup>

Bucer is the earliest reformer who gave the most clear expression to the beloved doctrine of the RPCNA, the mediatorial kingship of Christ. Christ alone is head of the church. In *Dei Regno Christi* he said, “Our heavenly King, Jesus Christ, is, according to his promise, with us everywhere and every day, ‘to the consummation of the world’ (Matt. 28:20). He himself sees, attends to, and accomplishes whatever pertains to the salvation of his own.”<sup>3</sup>

Consider Bucer’s strong warning to those who would deny this truth and harm the people of God by not shepherding them properly:

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<sup>1</sup> Eliza Smith Brown, “Enrollment: Steady declines and other shifting sands,” *Colloquy* 18, no.2 (Spring 2010): 27.

<sup>2</sup> Martin Bucer, *Concerning the True Care of Souls* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2009), 13.

<sup>3</sup> Wilhelm Pauck, Melancthon and Bucer (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969), 178.

This means that all those who claim spiritual authority for themselves over the church of Christ...but do not serve the Lord Jesus with the utmost loyalty in providing pasture for these his holy ones, continually encouraging all the elect of God through true faith in him to forsake all their sins and seek all righteousness, by proclaiming the holy gospel and Christian discipline – that is, those who do not share with him in gathering and feeding his lambs, but rather scatter and devastate Christ's sheep – such people are opposed to Christ and have neither part nor share in the kingdom of Christ, that is, in the church of Christ.<sup>4</sup>

RPTS will be the Shepherd's seminary by continuing to found its teaching on the eternal Word of God; equipping men to feed the Church from that Word; submitting to Christ by requiring faculty, administration, and students alike to live holy lives; and recognizing that it is here to serve the church. Our commitment to Christ as Shepherd means we will follow a shepherding model and be known as a place submitted to Jesus.

*RPTS will also continue to follow a shepherding model because Christ, as the chief shepherd, appoints ministers and elders to be his under-shepherds.*

Bucer develops in his work that the true care of souls, or conducting proper shepherd-service, involves having pastors as shepherds. Bucer made it clear from the Biblical patterns of Christ and the apostles, as well as from arguments of human nature and need, that ministers had the duty of feeding the sheep the pure Word of God found in the Bible. He stated very clearly what the pastor's chief work was. "The duties of this sacred ministry include the teaching of Christ, the dispensation of his sacraments, and the administration of his discipline."<sup>5</sup> It is clear that the Reformation understanding of the marks of the church is nothing but a redevelopment of what Bucer and others like him taught.<sup>6</sup> He taught that this rigorous ministerial work could not be accomplished merely at public gatherings, but required intense, personal visiting, catechizing, and discipleship.

He also demonstrates that since pastoral work is so great and varied, a need exists for elders to assist the pastor in this work. Bucer develops in the early Reformation period the foundation for what would eventually become known as the office of ruling elders. He taught how each congregation needed shepherds, several elders with a pastor (or "president", akin to the modern concept of a moderator of a session) to guide the whole.<sup>7</sup>

RPTS is committed to training these future leaders of the church. This last decade has seen RPTS expand its courses to further train our men in pastoral ministry, from counseling to church planting. We are partnering more and more with churches and ministries to adequately prepare these shepherds, from having them preach the Word of God on the streets and chapels of Pittsburgh; having local pastors mentor students while they do distance learning, having them learn the practice of visitation, be it evangelism in residential homes or sitting with the elderly at the RP Home; working with pastors and churches in providing rigorous internships; or developing courses for ruling elders and deacons. All of this is stressing shepherding!

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<sup>4</sup> Bucer, *True Care*, 13-14.

<sup>5</sup> Pauck, *Melanchthon and Bucer*, 232.

<sup>6</sup> For the present author's work on the marks of the church, see Barry J. York, *Hitting the Marks* (Pittsburgh: Crown & Covenant Publications, 2018).

<sup>7</sup> Pauck, 35.

*RPTS will continue to follow a shepherding model because Christ has assembled the church as a flock of needy yet contributing sheep.*

The people of God are needy, and ministers and elders must care for them. Yet they must not only see their needs but the contributions to the body each member is to make.

Bucer in his work wonderfully develops the idea of discipline, which to our modern ears can sound only corrective in nature, but he meant more than that with the term. In his ecclesiology, discipline was also formative and sounds like what we might call discipleship. Discipline in Bucer's work "referred to the sum of all the efforts of the church to encourage piety and to maintain Christian standards of behavior, and thus took in a multitude of practices."<sup>8</sup> Bucer has in view the life of self-control and obedience to the word all followers of Christ are to exhibit.

He also moves beyond the role of the elders to develop in practical fashion the priesthood of all believers, insisting, for instance, that all Christians and not just pastors are to be evangelistic. The pastor is taught that all believers have a God-given responsibility to attempt to heal straying and hurting sheep. Bucer saw each believer's need to be "like a perpetual spring" who "must pour out the goodness of which God imparts to him through Christ by furthering the welfare of all men, yet especially to his comrades in faith."<sup>9</sup> Seminaries must follow a shepherding model because all of God's people need to be equipped in caring for one another.

Seminary can be a dangerous place. Paul Tripp reminds us of this when he says in his book *Dangerous Calling*:

"I am convinced that the crisis of pastoral culture often begins in the seminary class. It begins with a distant, impersonal, information-based handling of the Word of God...It begins with classrooms that are academic without being pastoral. It begins with brains becoming more important than hearts."<sup>10</sup>

We must labor and ask the church to pray that as pastors, elders, missionaries, and other kingdom workers are raised up through RPTS, they would go out with a heart burning with love for the people of God.

Often we give this benediction from Hebrews in the Church: "Now may the God of peace, who brought up from the dead the great Shepherd of the sheep through the blood of the eternal covenant, even Jesus our Lord, equip you in every good thing to do His will, working in us that which is pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen" (Heb. 13:20-21). If he is the one who equips his people "in every good thing" to do the Father's will, then he must be honored as Lord over the seminary and displayed as such throughout. In times such as these, may the Great Shepherd give us grace to meet these challenges to be his seminary. Amen.

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<sup>8</sup> Glenn S. Sunshine, "Discipline as the Third Mark of the Church: Three Views," *Calvin Theological Journal* 33, no. 2 (1998), 470.

<sup>9</sup> Martin Bucer, *Instruction in Christian Love*, trans. Paul Traugott Fuhrmann (Facsimile edition, Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1952), 49.

<sup>10</sup> Paul David Tripp, *Dangerous Calling: Confronting the Unique Challenges of Pastoral Ministry* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2012), 52.