

Do You Need A College Degree To Be A Preacher?

I've heard it said many times: "You shouldn't be preaching unless you have a college degree." The idea that a divinity degree "qualifies" one to teach or preach is full of holes. First of all, it gives a sense of complacency to "uneducated" men, who don't have to worry about the burden of making a lesson plan in case the "regular" teacher is out of pocket. Second, it breeds this notion that only those with a paper pedigree know anything. Only *their* words are relevant.

Someone may scoff and say I'm overstating the issue; that this is the result of a bruised ego. At my age, ego has little meaning. I've personally seen small congregations close their doors and sell their buildings merely because they couldn't hire a preacher. I've also seen home study groups who relied on DVD-based instruction because no one in the home felt "qualified" to lead a study. Churches that sponsor or support Small Groups (home-based bible studies) exist because the church has reviewed the lesson plans and qualifications of the group's leader. I suppose this prevents individual nut cases from propagating their errors. But it also reeks of unnecessary bureaucratic oversight and assumes that no one in a home study group can sniff out a false teaching when they hear one.

"Get a college degree, and then go into the whole creation to preach the gospel."

I sat in a class where someone said that church-based evangelism programs were "a mile wide but only an inch deep." In other words, churches have a lot of (untaught) bodies to throw at saving sinners, but their knowledge is deficient. The answer was to make sure the colleges were preparing young men and women to go into all the world and preach the gospel. Only in this way could Christ's mandate be met.

A college degree certainly has benefits. It trains or disciplines a person on how to approach problems. It can improve writing and speaking skills. Unfortunately, students graduate with the *school's* perspective instead of grasping biblical truths. However, Moses told the Israelites, concerning learning God's word,

He will do this if you obey him and follow his commands and laws that are written in this Book of Teachings and return to the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul. This command I'm giving you today **isn't too hard for you or beyond your reach. It's not in heaven.** You don't have to ask, "Who will go to heaven to get this command for us so that we can hear it and obey it?" **This command isn't on the other side of the sea.** You don't have to ask, "Who will cross the sea to get it for us so that we can hear it and obey it?" **No, these words are very near you. They're in your mouth and in your heart so that you will obey them.** (Deut 30:10-14) (Emphasis mine.)

In other words, God's word isn't so difficult that you need a college-bred preacher telling you what it means. The New Testament reflects this same idea:

I will put my laws into their minds, and I will write them on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And they shall not teach every one his fellow citizen, and every one his brother, saying, "know the Lord," for all will know Me, from the least to the greatest of them. (Heb 8:10-11)

Anyone with a modicum of reading skills and understanding can pick up a bible and ascertain what God requires of them. The Bible wasn't written for or by elitist university types; it was written mainly by fishermen, shepherders, and tent makers. The old farce that "the bible is too difficult to understand" is parroted by those just too lazy to read it.

A Real-World Comparison

Some would argue that you wouldn't want someone performing surgery who hadn't gone to medical school. Or, you wouldn't be caught dead driving a car across a bridge designed by someone lacking an engineering degree. Therefore, they reason, you don't want some schmuck teaching you the Bible who doesn't hold a Divinity Degree, or better yet, a Ph.D.

I have a 4-year degree in interior design and painting. (Yes, painting is a bit more involved than most realize.) I learned everything from color psychology to advanced coating applications. As a result, I have an advantage over those who spent a couple of summers painting houses for their uncle. I have the skills and know-how to paint the Seattle Space Needle. I can apply expensive foil to the walls of an upscale boutique.

The logic is faulty, however, for one important reason: *teaching God's word deals with relationships with others*. You don't need a piece of paper vetted by a crew of professors stating you're somehow better qualified to preach or teach. There are lots of *facts* a preacher or teacher can pour into your ear, but Christianity isn't based on *facts*, it's based on a *relationship* with God and people. That cannot be taught, only experienced. As such, the older the preacher, the more seasoned and pertinent his words to the listener. A 20-year-old college grad hasn't suffered life's hardships enough to nail the relationship aspect and have true empathy for fellow human beings.

What is the goal of teaching others God's will? Paul made it clear:

The goal of our instruction is **love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith** (emphasis mine). For some men, straying from these things, have turned aside to fruitless discussion, wanting to be teachers of the Law, even though they do not understand either what they are saying or the matters about which they make confident assertions. (1 Tim 1:5-7) NASU

If a preacher doesn't have those three things in mind, he needs to step aside for others who do care about others. Relationships.

Colleges Teach You How To Think, Write, etc. Oh, *Really*?

Most of the great “thinkers” who have touched my life had callused hands and sore bodies from a lifetime of hard work. They didn’t learn hermeneutics in a comfortable, Wi-Fi-connected classroom. They couldn’t rattle off the Greek participles. They probably knew what systematic theology was, but they didn’t know it was called that.

Those who have spent a lifetime in the halls of academia want you to believe that only by going to college can one learn to be a competent writer, thinker, and mission field coordinator. Since the colleges have deep roots in the local church and by extension, the mission field, they determine priorities and most of what goes on. Only *their* graduates are qualified to equip and teach the saints. Surely, a 21-year-old graduate is better prepared to build and educate churches, rather than some old preacher who has been in the trenches most of his life.

A College Degree Is No Guarantee Against Error

The idea that only the formally educated can correctly understand the bible is presumptuous, arrogant, and patently false. Colleges typically train others to understand the bible *the way they think it should be interpreted*. The book of Revelation is a good example. I have a legitimate perspective on Revelation, one that involved more than 20 years of dedicated study. Yet because I don’t have a Ph.D, my work isn’t relevant. It certainly can’t be published, and thereby risk contaminating the extant work by “qualified” doctors of theology.

This human-made restriction has good intentions: assurance that the teacher has a firm grip on the subject matter. This may guard against false teaching, but it also artificially divides the church into educators versus students.

What About James 3:1?

Folks who have spent most of their lives in “church” are woefully ignorant of the bible. It is my humble opinion that this attitude stems from hearing preachers rant about James 3:1, which says,

Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment.

I’ve heard God-fearing men claim they’ve “taken up a terrible burden by teaching others the word of God.” In other words, if they present an incorrect interpretation, God will hold them accountable. That may be, but this is not to what James is speaking. Notice verses 10 – 12:

...from the same mouth come both blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be this way. Does a fountain send out from the same opening both

fresh and bitter water? Can a fig tree, my brethren, produce olives, or a vine produce figs? Nor can salt water produce fresh.

Sound familiar? This is what our Lord said:

The scribes and the Pharisees have seated themselves in the chair of Moses; therefore all that they tell you, do and observe, but do not do according to their deeds; **for they say things and do not do them** (emphasis mine). (Matt 23:2)

James points out the contradictions evident in a person's life—figs and water—which is hypocrisy, according to Jesus. If teachers and preachers were facing a “stricter judgment” simply by misunderstanding doctrine, they would all be in trouble. The misrepresentation of James 3:1 continues due to pride and arrogance. A teacher likes to put himself on the front lines, braving the potential wrath of God for goofing up a bible study. Makes him look like a hero of sorts.

Romans 10:14 is another one they like to use to justify using only qualified preachers:

How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?

First of all, Paul is referring to the *unsaved* hearing the gospel, not a classroom full of born-again believers who have studied the word most of their adult lives. Secondly, not all preaching or teaching has to take place in a formal setting. It can be done at work, through casual meetings at local coffee shops, or via an Internet blog.

I can't blame any church which forbids “uneducated” men from teaching. In this culture, one can't be too careful. And if the truth is known, most folks are happy to sit in the pews anyway, avoiding responsibility for putting a lesson plan together. Some take the same stance when it comes to their own family—let the church teach them.

Summary

I grew up in the CoC, where I was allowed to preach and teach without any college pedigree. Since most CoC congregations nowadays are so small, anyone with even a modicum of public speaking skills is allowed to teach. That said, I've had to endure a lot of terrible sermons and even worse bible studies. The lessons tend to meander, fail to connect the dots, miss important truths, and muddy up the Word. Not all CoCs have this problem, but it is common. The Christian Church, on the other hand, have men who know how to put a sermon together. They are fluent in Greek and sometimes, Hebrew. They typically preach without any paper outline or podium. (Many preachers or teachers can't get further than 6 feet from their outlines.)

The notion of mandating a college degree certainly relieves many from the burden of spreading the Word. But you should never use that excuse to avoid bringing the gospel message to the lost world, especially to your family and close friends.

Formal training has its benefits for those needing rough edges sanded and polished. But those who wander the halls of academia should always tread carefully concerning their egos, lest they follow the Pharisees, who looked down on common folk.

The days of rough-hewn, pioneer preachers who abandoned their families for weeks and months at a time and who were paid in barter (if paid at all) were fading fast. Perhaps some of these concerns were valid, for it seems that the more time (college-educated) preachers had on hand to write and promulgate their views, the more trivial many issues became. (*A Report on Churches of Christ from World War II to the Present*, p. 11, by Jim Jonas)

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