

TRAINING FUTURE PASTORS

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Pastors are among the last people who need to be reminded that there's more for them to do than they're currently getting to. If the normal demands of ministry weren't enough, unplanned pastoral emergencies are sure to intrude upon our best-laid plans.

Biblical directives for the pastor, however, are not meant to be burdensome, but illuminating. They clarify the most important priorities and direct us into the most consequential labors. They protect us from the pull of the pragmatic, from paradigms of leadership adopted from the world, and even from well-meaning activities that give the illusion of productivity but bear little long-term fruit. Ultimately, they give the pastor *hope*, guiding him into paths that God promises to accompany with his saving, sanctifying, life-giving power.

A Neglected Imperative

One of those directives that is most easily neglected—that *feels* unproductive in the moment but holds unmatched promise for the future—is the mandate to replenish oneself in ministry. Paul's familiar words to Timothy are meant to land upon every pastor and pastoral team with a grace-filled weight that holds strategic promise: "and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also" (2 Tim. 2:2).

As warmly personal as Paul's letters to Timothy and Titus are (including even medicinal advice for Timothy's heartburn), Paul looks beyond his protégés and their immediate challenges. It will not be enough for Timothy simply to "guard the good deposit" personally (2 Tim. 1:14). Six verses later he expands Timothy's imagination, envisioning three generations of leaders who will descend from the great apostle. The conclusion is inescapable: *the pastor bears*

a responsibility not only to his own church, but to future leaders he will not see.

This command is no optional extra on an already lengthy to-do list. To be sure, pastors must keep a laser focus on their own souls and on the flock entrusted to their care, with all this entails (Acts 20:28). But we don't have the luxury of merely minding our little corner of God's pasture, dutifully attending to daily chores with little thought of the future. It is part of our inspired job description to ensure that new shepherds emerge who are equipped to feed, care for, and protect future flocks in future fields for generations to come.

For the perceptive pastor, this added vocational imperative is explosive with implications. As we invest in future leaders who themselves can train others, we're leveraging our personal, finite pastoral capacity so as to exponentially multiply kingdom labors in the future.

Training in Partnership

Each pastor and pastoral team must devise their own ways to obey the imperative of 2 Timothy 2:2. However, in Sovereign Grace this is also a command our churches have pursued together. For the past 24 years, a primary way SGC has sought to fulfill this mandate is through our Pastors College.

The Pastors College exists for a very specific purpose: *to equip men for pastoral ministry in the churches of Sovereign Grace*. In other words, we seek to provide pastoral training that is calibrated to our partnership. From a student's application and admission, to the content of his training, on through to his deployment after graduation, the entire program is informed by our ecclesiology.

This mission calls for a particular kind of program. First of all, we're ever cognizant that we're training *pastors*. We are not training academics who merely master information, or professionals who master techniques, or administrators who master processes. We exist to help form men into pastors who cherish Christ and Christ-likeness, who relish and faithfully transmit the gospel and God's Word, who diligently oversee and care for the church of God, and who wisely and courageously lead the church in gospel mission.

We're also cognizant that we're training men for ministry *within Sovereign Grace*. We're not a free-standing academic institution, with self-determined goals and standards. We exist to serve our churches, and we are accountable to the churches we serve.

Training for Partnership

This raises a question that we in the Pastors College never assume and never tire reflecting upon:

What kind of pastoral training will best serve our churches and strengthen our partnership? How can the PC affirm, embody, and instill the things that unite us as churches—the doctrine that defines us, the values that inform us, the virtues we aspire to?

For the purposes of this article (and not a catchy slogan for a website), here is an admittedly cumbersome attempt to capture the type of training we strive for:

“The Pastors College seeks to provide pastoral training that is Scripturally rooted, theologically faithful, gospel centered, local church connected, relationally nourished, and life and doctrine focused.”

Each of these values is precious to us in Sovereign Grace, and we're convinced that applying them in our training will not only prepare faithful pastors, but will serve to nourish, strengthen, and protect our partnership as a family of churches. A brief examination suggests why.

Scripturally Rooted

Everything begins here. The pastors we train will scatter to serve in various locales and different settings. We can't begin to predict the cultural issues they will face in the future. But we can—we *must*—ground them in God's authoritative, never-changing, all-powerful and always relevant Word. All genuine pastoral ministry rests upon the abiding truth of holy Scripture, the Word by which God reveals himself, the Word through which he speaks, the Word by which he accomplishes his purposes in the world. As such, the Pastors College aspires to be, to use John Sailhamer's term, a “textual community” in which all instruction, reflection, application, and fellowship emerges from a

rigorous and devout engagement with Holy Scripture.¹ In a famous essay, J. Gresham Machen affirmed “...the Bible is unique; it is not merely one of the sources of the preacher’s inspiration, but the very sum and substance of what he has to say. But, if so, then whatever else the preacher need not know, *he must know the Bible...*”²

Theologically Faithful

Beyond the obvious desire for theological integrity, the Pastors College is, by definition, a confessional institution. Our charge entails that SGC’s biblical and theological convictions undergird all of our instruction. These convictions are crystallized in our *Statement of Faith* (SoF), which functions for the college as a clarifying and mission-strengthening document. Indeed, we consider the SoF a solemn pact between the Pastors College and our churches—simultaneously a standard for our instructors, a pledge to our students, and an assurance to our churches that a Pastors College education is designed to match, not the current fashions of our cultural moment, but the biblical and theological character of our partnership.

Gospel Centered

More than a slogan (who in the reformed world *doesn’t* claim to be “gospel-centered”?), this is first and foremost a recognition of the primacy of “Christ and him crucified” in Scripture (Luke 24:25-27, 44; John 5:39), in pastoral ministry (1 Cor. 2:2; 15:3ff.; Col. 1:28), and in the Christian life (John 15:5; Gal. 2:20; Eph. 1:17-23; Phil. 1:21; 3:7-11; *et al.*). As expressed in SGC’s second Shared Value: “We believe that the gospel—the good news of God’s saving activity in Jesus Christ—is the pinnacle of his redemptive acts ... the center of the Bible’s story ... and the essential message for our faith, life, and witness.” A Pastors College education seeks to honor these realities by training men to build their

1. John H. Sailhamer, “The Nature, Purpose, and Task of a Theological Seminary,” in *The Seminary as a Textual Community: Exploring John Sailhamer’s Vision for Theological Education*, ed. Ched Spellman and Jason K. Lee (Dallas: Fontes, 2021), 14-15. Quoted in Jason S. DeRouchie, “A Biblical Vision for Theological Higher Education,” *Midwestern Journal of Theology* 21, no. 2 (Fall 2022), 90.

2. J. Gresham Machen, “The Minister and His Greek Testament,” in *Studying the New Testament Today, vol 1.*, ed. John H. Skilton (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1974), 154 (emphasis added).

lives, families, and churches upon the life-transforming gospel of Jesus Christ.

Local Church Connected

Unlike many educational institutions, it's especially here that our ecclesiology intersects with our program. Because our students are being trained to serve the local church, we don't want their education isolated from the very context for which they're being equipped. This isn't simply education within a church's physical walls, but training that is informed and illustrated by a shared church context. Like medical students trained in connection with a teaching hospital, our students benefit from the powerful combination of instructional expertise and contextual application. Every day, in every course, we intentionally make connections between the content of lectures and the life and ministry of the host church where our students worship, serve, and receive pastoral care. We self-consciously train our students to do what we call "theological ministry"—ministry in which methodology is not incidental, but where all methodology is informed and shaped by theological conviction.

Relationally Nourished

One of the unique aspects of the college is that students aren't just passing one another in the halls, or pursuing a similar curriculum on-line. Rather, a *community* is formed. The students learn together, laugh together, and grow together, experiencing the entire year together in a way that leverages every aspect of the program, making each component—academic, pastoral, and personal—more effective. Moreover, these relationships extend beyond the Pastors College year, connecting graduates over the miles and over the years. The roots of these relationships, nourished by cherished memories and shared experiences, run deep in Sovereign Grace and help stabilize the soil of our partnership.

Life and Doctrine Focused

The phrase echoes a Bible verse that encapsulates all we seek to do in the Pastors College. It's a verse that we exposit on Day 1 of orientation and that is embossed on the diplomas at graduation: "Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers" (1 Tim. 4:16). Every aspect of the Pastors College seeks to cultivate these two priorities, both of which are imperative for a pastor, and neither of

which is meant to be pursued in isolation from the other. Just as there will be no Christ-exalting ministry without the faithful wielding of God's Word and the transfer of sound doctrine, neither will there be Christ-exalting ministry unless the pastor's character testifies to the reality of the gospel and serves as a faithful example to those he serves.

It's for this reason that so much of a student's PC year—weekly men's groups, monthly couples' groups, one-on-one meetings with a Director of Student Care devoted to the students' care, bi-weekly meetings with C.J. Mahaney, *Tischreden* ("Table Talk") lunches with instructors—involves *discipleship*. As a band of brothers, our students, along with their wives, link arms throughout the year to encourage one another, pray for one another, help each other grow in godliness and battle sin and rely upon grace. Paul's training regimen for Timothy inspires our own: "You, however, have followed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness..." (2 Tim. 3:10).

An Urgent Priority

Denominations around the world are grappling with a crisis in formal theological education. Christian colleges are closing their doors, a number of once illustrious seminaries are on life support, and students are flocking to online educational options. Virtual education has a number of benefits, especially for those with limited access to training. However, it also raises searching questions for every church leader. Can pastoral training be reduced largely to information transfer? How effective is virtual instruction in the absence of personal investment? Is online education really sufficient to *shape a pastor*?

In light of such challenges, I believe that the urgency of the Pastors College for our partnership has only increased. Here are a few examples:

As our family of churches expands and diversifies, having a common mechanism of pastoral training protects our partnership against the erosion of our shared doctrine, convictions, and values.

In our increasingly diffuse family of churches, the Pastors College has a galvanizing, unifying effect on SGC. PC students interact with a wide range

of SG pastors, as well as with our Leadership Team and other key leaders. This exposes students to our history and breadth of mission, reinforces our shared values, cultivates relational networks, and strengthens our bonds of partnership as graduates return to their home churches.

As we plant more churches, the Pastors College affords a robust and theologically consistent education vital for a man who will lead a church in Sovereign Grace. Here are some more examples:

Time and again we've seen the Pastors College powerfully shape men from other nations who return home to lead and strengthen gospel efforts in their own countries. Of course, this is not always possible, and our long-term vision involves the multiplication of global PCs. Still, the US PC has sown strategic seeds in SGC work in other nations, including Mexico, Bolivia, Brazil, the UK, Germany, the Philippines, South Korea, and, just this past year, Italy.

Our long-term health requires the development of leaders who cannot only thrive locally but eventually serve our partnership extra-locally. Such men greatly benefit from the immersive experience of the PC which, while never separated from pastoral concerns and the context of church life, nevertheless affords the luxury of concentrated study and formation without the burdens of pastoral responsibility.

Wherever one serves as a pastor or whatever the specifics of one's call, the complexities of our increasingly cosmopolitan world call for leaders deeply rooted in Scripture, in the great tradition of biblical orthodoxy, and in the gospel values of our churches. Although not every pastor may be able to attend the PC, we desire as many as possible to gain the foundational, whole-life training it affords, to the end that a man might run a durable, life-long pastoral race.

For such reasons and more, the Pastors College seems to present a particularly strategic opportunity for the future of SGC. This article wouldn't be complete, however, without acknowledging something precious to us in the Pastors College. We do not simply exist to serve our churches; *we exist because*

of our churches. It is the pastors of SGC who disciple and identify men called to pastoral ministry. The training we provide simply builds upon and reinforces the investment our current pastors make into future leaders, day in and day out, with no fanfare. The doctrine we teach, the values we instill, the virtues we cultivate, the mission we prepare for—this constitutes the substance of the faithful labors of SGC pastors around the world. It’s an unspeakable privilege for the Pastors College to partner with such pastors and the churches they lead.