Are You Ready for Your Ordination Council?
Some Thoughts on Expectations and Preparations
David Linde, North Central District, EFCA

Ordination in the EFCA is a formal affirmation that, among other things, a pastor is committed to preach and teach the sacred Scriptures. (This is stated in a definition of ordination adopted by the EFCA national conference a number of years ago.) Effective, helpful preaching and teaching presupposes that a pastor is well acquainted with the Bible and theology—not only in his head but also in his heart and life. Your upcoming ordination council will mainly examine your knowledge of Bible and theology. (The council event itself presupposes and rests on your local church’s commendation of your personal integrity and your ministerial competence.) There are high standards of expectation for this knowledge because the EFCA is a movement based on a commitment to the inspiration and authority of the Bible and to sound teaching from the Bible. The future of our movement will be guarded, in part, as we hold our pastors accountable to a high standard of Biblical knowledge.

“Wait a minute,” someone might say. “I’m not a theologian. God has not wired me academically. I could not sit and study all day. I must be true to the way God has made me. I am a shepherd, an evangelist, a leader. Why can’t the EFCA credential me in that role?” Good question. From one angle, you’re right. You must be true to the way God has made you. The credentialing pathway will affirm and celebrate your unique gifts and leadership style. But we also want to help you go deeper and broader in your pastoral leadership. We want to help you strengthen and extend your Biblical-theological footings so that the unique way God has made you will have all the firmer a foundation for its faithful and fruitful expression.

Remember, too, that if you are in pastoral leadership, whether lead or associate, God does in fact expect you to “be a theologian” in some sense no matter what your personal wiring and your ministry sphere are. He expects you to shepherd by teaching the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:25-31); to exhort in sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it (Titus 1:9); to watch your life and your doctrine closely (1 Tim. 4:16); to handle accurately the word of truth (2 Tim. 2:15). So developing your Biblical-theological abilities is essential. You must be faithful to your unique personality and gifts and you must handle the Bible well. In the credentialing pathway you must be you and you must meet the expectations of the EFCA for its ordained pastors.

So what are the expectations of a candidate for ordination? What will the council be looking for? What will you be expected to know and discuss? The national Board of Ministerial Standing has published specific guidelines about this. You will find them in the document that outlines the requirements for writing your ordination paper. (This document is available on the EFCA and NCD websites.) Be sure you read that document carefully and note what is expected of you. What I am writing here is not a substitute for those guidelines and expectations, nor an attempt to raise or lower the standard set by our national Board. Rather, I will try to describe how that standard will be expressed and upheld by the members of your council—what the ethos or “culture” of the council will be. I want to do that by offering you three words that will help you prepare to meet this established bar.
Three Words

The first word is *mastery*. This is the explicit standard set by the Board of Ministerial Standing. It does not mean that we somehow master the Bible; indeed, our goal is for the Bible to master *us*. Rather, *mastery* refers to a master’s-degree-level of understanding. But since an academic degree does not necessarily translate into true Biblical understanding, and the absence of a degree does not necessarily imply Biblical ignorance, the EFCA doesn’t want to tie the ordination expectation to an academic degree. So we use the general term *mastery* instead. This term is also more narrow in its scope that a formal Master of Divinity degree. The M.Div. usually includes study in subjects such as church history, counseling, Christian education, and Biblical languages. The EFCA ordination council will not examine you in these areas. The focus will be on Bible and theology.

I want you to be both encouraged and challenged by this. Be encouraged that eligibility for EFCA ordination does not ultimately depend on a formal academic degree. But also be challenged: eligibility does depend on a high level of capability—capability in handling the Word of God. *Mastery* assumes a high level of understanding of Bible and theology that is the result of serious, intentional, ongoing study and reflection—by whatever means that study and reflection has been pursued.

So, are you ready? Have you been intentionally and seriously studying and reflecting on the Bible and the theological concepts of our Statement of Faith?

A second word that describes what will be expected of you, a word that is simply expressive of mastery, is *facility*. This means “readiness or ease due to skill, aptitude, or practice.” This is *familiarity* with the Bible. Not an arrogant command of it nor a bored acquaintance with it, but a deep *being at home* in the Bible because of time spent in it, especially time that grows out of personal searching, not just studying for a test or a sermon—or an ordination council. Are you familiar with Romans 6 because you’ve pored over it as you’ve struggled with sin? Are you familiar with Psalm 3 because you’ve frequently prayed it from deep within your own soul? Can you demonstrate facility of understanding Christ’s resurrection because you’ve desperately leaned on it in the loss of a friend or loved one? Can you demonstrate facility of understanding God’s attributes because you regularly and heartily praise God for them? The ordination council will want to see if you exhibit facility of Biblical-theological understanding.

So, are you ready? Are you presently developing an “at-homeness” in Scripture?

A third word that captures the council’s expectation (and again is simply an expression of mastery) is *conversance*. The council will want to see whether you are *conversant* with Biblical-theological concepts. Can you talk (converse) about them readily? Can you put your thoughts into words? Can you express orderly understanding in orderly conversation? Think about some subject in which you are readily conversant: politics, football, classic cars, gardening, nutrition, whatever. You can talk about it comfortably—even eagerly—because you know it well and are personally engaged by it. This is what the ordination council is looking for. Your paper will have been read by the council members. Now they will want to hear you talk about what you have written. It’s one thing to write something down: you have lots of time to revise and re-
write and consult others till you get it just right. That’s fine. But the council is going to examine you to see if you can converse about what you’ve written. If you can, it will show that you understand well what you’ve written. If you can’t, it calls your understanding into question. It also raises the question: if you can’t converse about these things with your peers, can you do so with your congregation—in sermons, lessons, discussions, and counseling?

So, are you ready? Can you readily engage in conversation about the Biblical-theological concepts of the Statement of Faith?

**Some Specifics**

But what does all of this mean more specifically? What will the council be expecting of you in the way of demonstrating or exhibiting mastery, facility, and conversance?

I can’t offer you a definitive list of things (and that would be hazardous anyway, for then you might be tempted to simply “study for the test”), but I can point to three main areas.

First, you will be expected to know *specific theological concepts, topics, and themes*. For example, you will be expected to be familiar with God’s attributes, inspiration, Christ’s incarnation, the baptism of the Holy Spirit, premillennialism, and so on. These concepts come from the Statement of Faith. But you will also be expected to understand concepts that are implied in the Statement of Faith or are related to themes in the Statement. Examples of this are textual criticism, the perseverance of the saints, open theism, and amillennialism.

Second, you will be expected to understand *specific theological terms*. These may be important Biblical words such as *atonement, justification, redemption, sanctification*, and *reconciliation*. Or they may be terms related to theological ideas or views, such as *cessationism, Pentecostalism, semi-Pelagianism*. You will not be expected to know every theological term possible. It will be OK to sometimes say, “I don’t know.” But if you show ignorance of a number of basic theological terms it will cause the council to wonder about the adequacy of your understanding. Why is this? Why should the council seem picky about technical terms, some of which are not used very often these days? Remember that ordination in the EFCA includes a “commitment to teach and preach the sacred Scriptures.” You can’t teach and preach well what you don’t understand, and understanding what the Bible teaches means understanding its own important words (*grace, faith, repentance, propitiation*, etc.) and other important terms that students of the Bible have used through history to describe the Bible’s teachings (*incommunicable, plenary, substitutionary*, etc.). Understanding and teaching the Bible well assumes a certain precision of thought and a certain familiarity with how others (whose writings you will presumably read in the course of your ministry) have understood the Bible through the centuries. This requires a common vocabulary. Indeed, it should be a vocabulary common to all Christians, not just pastors.

Third, you will be expected to demonstrate *wide knowledge of the Bible itself*. This encompasses a number of things. It includes familiarity with the content of the Bible (*I John* talks about light and love and truth; *Esther* does not mention God’s name). It implies that you understand important passages of Scripture and can explain their meaning, in context, and their application to life (*Gen. 12:1-3; Exod. 20:1-17; Deut. 6:4-9; Psalm 2; Matt. 5-7; Rom. 3:21-26;
etc.). It presupposes acquaintance with basic Biblical history (can you talk your way through the basic historical movement of the Old Testament from Abraham to the return from the Exile?). It includes knowing key passages for the main concepts of the Statement of Faith—and being able to cite from memory most of those references (chapter, at least, if not the verses: inspiration, 2 Tim. 3; resurrection, 1 Cor. 15; millennium, Rev. 20). It involves basic skill in interpreting the Bible soundly—in other words, demonstrating sound hermeneutics (such as paying careful attention to context). And it means being familiar with classic theological differences among Christians and what those alternate views are (Calvinism-Arminianism; the subjects and mode of baptism; church government).

None of this knowledge do we value for knowledge’s sake. The council is not looking for reasons for you to be “puffed up” (1 Cor. 8:1). Rather, the council wants to see if you are a man of the Word who exhibits the familiarity and understanding that are implied in a “commitment to preach and teach the sacred Scriptures.”

**How to Meet the Bar**

Be assured, the council will not be looking for perfection, for hundred-percent “right answers,” for flawless recall of chapter and verse, for acquaintance with every topic brought up. The council will cut you some slack. But also be forewarned: the council standard is high.

So how can you become prepared to meet this standard? If you have a formal degree in Bible or theology, that may help. But don’t assume that because you have a degree you are automatically ready.

How then can you prepare, whether you have a degree or not? I recommend four main ingredients in an intentional plan of preparing for ordination. And I assume that such a plan will take you several years. That’s one of the reasons why licensing is three years long.

First, you must engage in serious reading. You must read Scripture—carefully, unhurriedly, systematically, intentionally. This kind of reading is study. And you should read the whole Bible this way at least once during your licensing period. Get a Bible-reading schedule and walk through the Bible for yourself, noting its themes, teachings, and connections. Write down your thoughts. That’s a good way to help ensure that you truly know what you think you know. In addition to the Bible you must read theology by various authors—well-chosen articles and a few books, probably including a one-volume systematic theology. This will help you refine your own thinking (gained from your first-hand reading of Scripture) and will show you how Christians have interpreted the Bible differently down through the centuries. Gaining this perspective will be invaluable for your council and for your ministry of preaching and teaching.

Second, you must reflect. You must think over, mull over, ponder what you read—both Scripture and human theological writings. It’s not enough just to read; you must digest what you read. This deepens and broadens your understanding and helps you put it into words. It gives you confidence in your own convictions. Your council will not be interested in your quoting of other authors. They want to see your own convictions born of your own clear thinking.
Third, you must interact with others about these things. Some kind of learning community—the pastoral staff at your church; a licensing discussion group; you and an individual mentor—is necessary for massaging the truths of our Statement of Faith and gaining clearer understanding and clearer connection to life and ministry. Talking over theology with others (not for kicks but for serious understanding and application) tests your ability to put your thoughts into words and to connect your views to real life. It also enhances your perspective as you hear insights from others. I venture to say that this is the piece missing from most pastors’ preparation for ordination. And it often shows.

Here, in light of these recommendations so far, I want to pause and ask if you have an advocate in your church for your ordination process. Do you have someone “in your corner” who understands the importance and benefits (church-wide!) of your investing significant time in reading, reflecting, and interacting with others about Biblical-theological truth and how it should shape life and ministry? Making these things a reality in your already challenging schedule may depend largely on securing an advocate—the church chairman, the elder chairman, your senior pastor, some other influential leader—who will help make time for you to invest yourself in this pursuit and who will hold you accountable to be a good steward of the process.

Finally, I highly recommend that you visit an ordination council early in your licensing period so that you get an idea of what it’s like. It will help you in your expectations, and take much of the mystery out of it. Similarly, I recommend that approximately one year into your licensing period you gather a few fellow-pastors (especially from our district credentialing network) and hold a “mini-council.” Have them ask you questions based on your licensing paper (or ordination paper if you’ve already written a draft). They should hold you to an ordination standard as they do this. The feedback you get from them in such an exercise will be extremely helpful to you.

The Key: Your Outlook on the Process

What I’m describing here is a pretty tall order. What will sustain your commitment to the process? I think the biggest factor is how you look at the process. Regard it as a choice opportunity for personal development. Look at it as a structured pathway (in the hands of the Holy Spirit) for definite progress and growth in your own life and in your ability to minister to others. Think about it. How is your preaching and teaching presently? Is there room for greater depth and surgical effectiveness? Think about your approach to evangelism. Is there room for a broader Biblical perspective in your conversations with unbelievers? Think about your counseling. Is there room for a more incisive use of the Scriptures in the lives of those whom you are shepherding? Think about your ministry overall. Is there room for greater theological nourishment of it? Think about your own personal devotion to Jesus Christ. Is there room for greater closeness to him as you meet him in his Word? Tackle the process with your eyes on him. Pursue him as you pursue ordination. Take aim on the Master as you take aim on mastery.

*Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved,*
*a workman who does not need to be ashamed*
*and who correctly handles the word of truth.*

2 Timothy 2:15 NIV