

Learning at Jesus' Feet

A CASE FOR SEMINARY TRAINING

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REFORMED  THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

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LEARNING AT JESUS' FEET: A CASE FOR SEMINARY TRAINING

At some point in their walk with Jesus, many Christians ask whether they should attend seminary — either to earn a degree or just to take a few courses. I've been teaching in seminaries for thirty-five years, and I've done some thinking about this question. In this pamphlet, I'll encourage you to go to seminary if you can, and I'll try to help those who are seeking guidance for this important decision.

First of all, what is a seminary? A seminary is, of course, an academic institution that teaches knowledge and skills needed for Christian ministry. By “ministry” here, I mean both the official ministries of the church and ministries independent of churches: “parachurch” campus ministries, missions, mercy ministries, etc. But seminary also offers opportunities for anyone who wants to explore God's Word in depth. Most seminaries offer master's programs that are open to people who are not called to full-time ministry, and they offer “special student” status to people who just want to take a course or two, to deepen their knowledge of Scripture.

So a seminary is not just for professionals, not just for those who are seeking a credential for ordination. Its purpose is broader than that: it is a place for people to study God's Word together. And, since Jesus is the Word made flesh (John 1:14), to study in seminary is to study at Jesus' feet.

What a time it must have been, when Jesus shared His words and heart with His disciples (students) for the three years of His earthly ministry! They saw His compassionate healings, marveled at His

miraculous power, listened to His word, saw His glory (Matt. 17:1-13), and were humbled by His servant-leadership (Matt. 20:25-28, John 13:1-20). But these great events left them perplexed on the fundamental questions: who was Jesus? Why did He come?

Jesus had often told them that He was to die, as a sacrifice for sins (Matt. 20:28, John 12:33, 18:32), but they did not understand (Mark 9:31-32, Luke 8:33-34). After He was raised, however, there was a mysterious meeting between Jesus and two disciples on the road to Emmaus. The disciples had treated reports of His Resurrection as wild rumors. But “beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, [Jesus] interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself” (Luke 24:27). What a time that must have been! Now they saw that Jesus' resurrection was not a wild rumor, but a divine necessity (verse 26). It not only did happen; it had to happen, so that God could save us from our sins. Afterward, the two disciples said to each other, “Did not our hearts burn within us while He talked to us on the road, while He opened to us the Scriptures?” (verse 32; my quotations are from the ESV).

Luke, who tells us about this mysterious meeting, tells us also that Jesus appeared to His disciples “during forty days... speaking about the kingdom of God” (Acts 1:3). During this time, Jesus evidently taught the whole body of apostles, as He had taught the two on the road to Emmaus, how the Old Testament Scriptures pointed to Him. Afterwards, when the Holy Spirit came upon the church in Acts 2, Peter, and later other disciples, began preaching and teaching the Old Testament in a very different way from the Jewish teachers: everything pointed to Christ! Certainly the apostles had learned from Jesus, during the forty days, how to read and teach the Bible.

Seminary is something like those three years and those forty days. In many ways, of course, it is different. Jesus didn't need to teach His disciples how to read Hebrew and Greek. He didn't need to teach them post-canonical church history, because at the time there wasn't any. Nor, most likely, did He give reading and writing assignments. He knew their hearts, so He knew how much they had learned. And although He didn't give letter grades, He regularly evaluated their progress, often negatively. To the two on the road to Emmaus, He said, "O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken!" (Luke 24:25).

Nor, of course, did Jesus charge tuition in any formal way. But the disciples and Jesus shared expenses and the generosity of supporters in a common fund — managed, unfortunately, by Judas Iscariot, (John 12:6, 13:29). Seminaries also must have money to survive, and they too live from the contributions of students and the generosity of supporters, mostly the latter.

Of course the main difference between Jesus' teaching and a modern seminary is that most seminaries require college degrees for admission. Seminary, therefore, is not for everybody. It is for those who are intellectually prepared to learn from Jesus at a scholarly level. Does Jesus, then, restrict his teaching to academic types? Certainly not. Jesus today teaches people of all ages, nationalities, educational backgrounds, and socio-economic levels. He teaches through sermons, Sunday schools, missionaries, evangelists, TV and radio ministries, the internet, personal Bible study, and through godly families teaching their children. But He also teaches His church through the discipline of academic courses, and seminary is one place to get teaching at that level.

This is not to say that everything in seminary is abstract and theoretical. Seminaries also teach preaching, counseling, evangelism and church planting, subjects we call "practical theology." And seminaries usually require students to do "field work," getting experience in actual ministry, with evaluation. Further, seminaries try their best to maintain a Christian community, where people love and support one another through prayer, communal worship, counseling, and modeling Christ. Seminary, of course, is not the church. Students, like all Christians, should turn to the church as their main place of worship and nurture. But a good seminary will understand that Christians should nurture one another wherever they are, so that even an academic institution, if it is Christian, should be a community of love. So even with tuition and exams and papers, the essence of seminary will be sitting at the feet of Jesus. We learn from Him as He teaches us through His brothers and sisters.

So I ask you to consider the privilege of sitting at Jesus' feet. Once when He lived on earth, Jesus visited His friends, sisters Mary and Martha, in the town of Bethany. Martha was preoccupied with serving her guests, but Mary "sat at the Lord's feet and listened to His teaching" (Luke 10:39). Martha was upset that Mary was not helping. That seemed to be a legitimate complaint. But Jesus surprises us by commending Mary. She had "chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her" (verse 42). Now normally sisters should help one another out in household tasks. But this was a special occasion. If the Lord were to come to your house, would you want to miss anything? Martha was doing a good thing by working to serve Jesus and her other guests. But she didn't quite understand what she was missing: the eternal Son of God, teaching in her own living room!

Don't miss the opportunity to sit at the feet of Jesus. Many other things are important, such as housework, employment, and ministry itself. But we all need to take time away from it all to meditate on the Word.

Facing the temptations of Satan, Jesus said, quoting Deuteronomy 8:3, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Matt. 4:4). We need to understand that the Word of God is every bit as important to us as food and drink. It is God Himself speaking to us, the words that He has breathed out (2 Tim. 3:16). Without it, we die. But blessed are those who delight in the law of the Lord and meditate on it day and night (Psm. 1:2). They are like trees planted by the streams, who bear fruit and prosper in all they do (verse 3).

So the only question remaining is, how will you sit at the feet of Jesus? Personal Bible study is one way, and God honors that. Listening closely to your pastor's sermons is also a good thing. Attending Sunday school classes and going to Bible conferences will take you still further. But if you have the academic background for more advanced study, and you have opportunity, shouldn't you take advantage of that also? Just think what it would mean to be able to read God's Word in its original languages. Imagine spending several years, getting a systematic survey of all the teachings of the Bible and learning how to communicate them persuasively to this dying world. And imagine getting resources for continuing education — tools that will enable you to continue studying God's Word in depth for the rest of your life.

Think about the relationships that can develop at seminary: with learned and godly professors who will become friends and mentors

for life; with other students, with whom you'll compare notes. Friends you make at seminary tend to stick closer to you than high school and college buddies. You often meet your seminary classmates in church meetings, common ministries, or just traveling around. (Evangelical circles, for better or worse, are a small world.)

In the process, you'll also learn a lot about yourself. You'll probably be surprised to find out how much you don't know about God's Word, and that will teach you humility. You'll learn more about your spiritual strengths and weaknesses, where you are gifted and where you are not. Thus you'll be better able to pinpoint the place in the kingdom where God wants you to be.

Let me now deal with seven problems people often raise about going to seminary:

1. Can I afford it?

As I said earlier, seminary is not free. Jesus and His disciples also needed funds to support themselves. But God supplied their needs, and in my experience God has supplied the needs of most people who want in a serious way to attend seminary. Sometimes He does not, for His own various reasons. And for some it is certainly a financial stretch. But that shouldn't discourage those who really want to study God's Word at seminary level. The tuition can look expensive, but a careful look at financial aid, loan programs, and work-study opportunities can considerably reduce the sticker shock.

2. Could seminary be a spiritual danger to me?

This objection is not as strange as it may sound at first hearing. For some, seminary can be a trial of faith. One can become so immersed in academic assignments, papers, technical terminology, Hebrew paradigms and such that he comes to feel far from God. I've addressed some of these concerns in another pamphlet, *Studying Theology as a Servant of Jesus*. Seminary does require a devotional discipline to match our academic discipline, but that challenge, on the whole, is a good thing. And what most students find is that once we face that challenge, the academic and the devotional merge in a wonderful way. The dry periods tend to be at the beginning, when you are struggling to master the basics. But when the theology of the Bible starts to come together in your mind, when you start to see the overall shape of it, your academic study will feed your soul. In the end, sitting at the feet of Jesus cannot be anything other than uplifting. Further, as I mentioned earlier, a good seminary will seek to help students who are going through dry periods, by being a Christian community.

3. Will seminary reduce my effectiveness?

Sometimes, it is true, people go to seminary and they come back speaking jargon, making fine distinctions that nobody can understand, looking down their noses at folks who have less education than they (but who may be more mature in the Lord) generally making nuisances of themselves. Such people are ineffective, even detrimental to the work of the Lord. It is a shame that people like this are found at seminary and at graduation get unleashed to afflict the church. For what it's worth, let me say that at our seminary we continually warn our students against this sort of thing (see the

pamphlet noted under #2, for instance), but it does happen. I would say, however, that these theological nuisances would probably be nuisances even if they hadn't attended seminary. If seminary does not sufficiently deter their pride, at least it probably has the effect of knocking them down a notch or two, showing them a few things that they don't know. And it may also plant some seeds of biblical self-image that may provoke later reflection. But seminary doesn't do away with original sin. Only the grace of God in Christ can do that. So your planning for seminary should include a lot of prayer — not only for finances and academic success, but also for your relation to God, that the power of the Word that you study will get deep into your heart.

4. Is it right to leave my present ministry in order to go to seminary?

Every Christian has his own ministry, right where he is — perhaps as a Sunday school teacher, an elder or deacon, a church staff member, a parachurch worker, or simply one who seeks to witness for Christ on the job. Sometimes you can continue such ministries even while you are at seminary. There may be a seminary in your local area where you can schedule classes that don't interfere with your current labors. There are also some seminaries that have distance education programs in which you can stay home and take classes by tape or webcast. But often students have to pick up stakes and move to a new place in order to attend seminary. Is it worth it?

I can't address every situation of this kind. But I think that in many cases the answer is yes. What you learn at seminary can make you a far more effective Sunday school teacher, campus evangelist, or on-the-job witness than you were before. It can make you a better

support to your local pastor. And it can qualify you for an even larger sphere of ministry, and that will be good for the kingdom of God.

Your present ministry may be vital in the lives of many people, as you lead them through the spiritual battle. But a spiritual warrior, like a literal soldier, must be well trained and equipped. You should ask whether you are now able to use the sword of the Spirit, the Word of God, well enough to deal with the enemy. Some time at seminary may make you far better able to continue your ministry at a later point in time. And as for now, remember that if God is calling you to seminary, He is sovereignly able to care for those you have been ministering to.

5. But I have opportunities for training with my church or ministry organization. Isn't that sufficient?

For some people it may be. And I would hope that someday, somehow, seminary-level training might be available through every local church and ministry organization. But, as of now, most of them just aren't at that point. In most cases, seminary training takes you to a whole new level of understanding, beyond local ministry training.

You might think that you can get this level of understanding just by reading books by seminary professors. But if you go to seminary, you'll be studying with the people who write the books. You can ask them questions, which will help you not only to get answers, but also (and more important) to learn how they think. You'll get frameworks, paradigms and ways of bringing Bible truth together that just aren't available elsewhere. Consider these examples:

- a. Do you understand the covenant? Jesus came to put the “new covenant” into effect. But what is the new covenant, and how is it different from the old? When we present the Gospel, we teach people to believe in Christ as their personal “Lord and Savior.” But both Lord and Savior are covenantal terms. Lord is the name of God that designates Him as the head of the covenant, and Savior tells us what He does in that office. I've written an 850-page book, *The Doctrine of God*, to show that covenant Lordship is the key to what the Bible says about God and about Jesus. Do you know what covenant Lordship means? If not, are you sure you can present the Gospel as the apostles did? You can learn about this in seminary — at least in the seminary where I teach! I don't know where else you can study this doctrine in depth.
- b. When the apostles were filled with the Spirit to evangelize the world, they presented Jesus as the fulfillment of the Old Testament Scriptures. As Jesus taught the two disciples in Luke 24, the apostles proclaimed from the Old Testament that the death and Resurrection of Christ had to happen. It was not just an accident. So they preached that anyone who really believes the Old Testament must believe in Jesus. Can you do that? That's a basic part of preaching the Gospel, according to Scripture, but almost nobody knows how to do that today. After His Resurrection, Jesus taught His disciples how to do it (Luke 24:27). You can learn how to do that at seminary, and maybe nowhere else.
- c. Do you understand how Jesus fulfills the Old Testament offices of prophet, priest, and king, and what difference this makes to church government and to your personal Christian life? Do you understand why the church is so important to God, as His

people, the body of Christ, the bride of Christ, and not just a collection of individuals? Learning about this can revolutionize your mission strategy and the priorities of your own life. But where can you study this in depth other than in seminary?

- d. What about just reading and teaching the Bible? Can you imagine how much richer your teaching could be if you could read Scripture in the original languages and learn how to interpret the Greek and Hebrew texts? You could learn the basic grammar from going through a book. But you need also to learn idioms and literary styles. You need to learn about the literary genres in the Bible. You need to learn the difference between synonymous and antithetical parallelism, and where the emphasis falls in a chiasmic structure (note: it doesn't fall at the beginning or the end). Well, I don't know where you can learn this sort of thing except in seminary.
- e. How much do you know about the history of the church? It's true that Scripture, not church history, is our final authority. But it's also true that "those who don't know history are doomed to repeat it," and "we should not try to re-invent the wheel." Many of the heresies appearing today are just repetitions of heresies that have appeared before in church history. Many of our questions about worship, nurture, and evangelism have appeared before as well. It's good to know how the church dealt with these issues in the past. Sometimes they've been wrong, sometimes right. But we need to be able to avoid their mistakes and to build on their achievements. Where can you get that kind of knowledge other than in seminary?

6. But isn't it better to prepare for ministry while doing ministry?

Yes it is. That is why every seminarian should be involved in ministry while he is at seminary. That is why field work is a requirement in most seminary curricula. There should be a regular dialogue between what you learn in class and what you do in ministry. Your studies should help you to minister, as God drives the Word into your heart and increases your effectiveness. And your ministry should help you to ask good questions in your classes and to tailor your program to be relevant to your ministry. You should not think of seminary as a time-out from ministry.

But of course if you go to seminary you will probably spend less time than you do now in actual ministry. You will have to make time for your classes and assignments. I think that for most of us this temporary change in priorities is a good thing.

Remember the biblical metaphor of warfare. A soldier should always be ready to fight for his country. But good soldiers need periods of training, even classroom instruction, to be at their best, ready for the more difficult challenges. The disciples experienced that training at Jesus' feet. They ministered with Him and served Him. But like Mary of Bethany, they sometimes just listened, as when Jesus took them away from the crowds for time alone with Him (Matt. 8:18, 13:36, 14:22-23). And for forty days they listened to Jesus' teaching, waiting for the fullness of the Holy Spirit, before they went on to the great ministry to which God had called them. Remember also that the Apostle Paul spent three years in Arabia and Damascus before he met with the other apostles to begin his missionary labors (Gal. 1:17).

7. But is God calling me to seminary?

God's calling can sometimes be spectacular, as when Moses met God in the burning bush and when Paul met the Lord Jesus on the road to Damascus. Isaiah's calling in Chapter 6 of his prophecy is another case in point. But often God's calling is spectacularly unspectacular. In 1 Cor. 7, Paul tells the church, "Only let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him, and to which God has called him" (verse 17). Some, when God called them to believe in Christ, were single, others married, some Jews, some Gentiles, some slave, some free. Those were their callings. I doubt that many of them had dramatic encounters with God, telling them what to do with their lives. Their calling was simply to serve God in the place where they were.

So at one level, your calling is to serve Christ wherever you find yourself. That doesn't mean you can never do anything different from what you're doing now, though Paul tells the Corinthians generally to avoid major changes in their lives (such as marriage), due to "the present distress" in Corinth (verse 26), (perhaps persecution or famine). Your calling may well change, for any number of reasons. But don't wait for a dream, a vision, or a sign from heaven. Look prayerfully at your gifts and opportunities, and see how you can best serve the Lord. That will be His calling for you. And that calling may well include seminary.

I hope you will consider what I've said prayerfully and that you will search the Scriptures yourself to determine whether what I've said is true (see Acts 17:11). Not all of you should conclude that seminary is the right place for you, but I believe many of you should. I think it would be a great benefit to the church, and to the lost, if many more Christians attended

good seminaries. That would do much to reduce the appalling ignorance and immaturity in many Christian circles, which brings such discredit on the name of Christ.

Most of all, I want you to have the burning heart that the two disciples had when the risen Christ explained the Scriptures to them (Luke 24:32). I want you to have, at the deepest possible level, the sense that Jesus Himself is speaking to you in His Word, revealing His secrets, renewing your mind, showing you how to love as He loved. Seminary is not the only place where you can experience that burning heart. But at seminary you can sit at Jesus' feet for several years, immersing yourself in His Word, and thereby getting to know Him personally. If God opens this door to you, you will have a tremendous privilege, one open to few other Christians. I have never known anyone who was not profoundly changed by his seminary experience, most of them very much for the better. I pray that God will help you in making this decision and that He will open the door to bring you to seminary, to sit at Jesus' feet.

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