

# Studying Theology as a Servant of Jesus

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*A mind for truth. A heart for God.*

## STUDYING THEOLOGY AS A SERVANT OF JESUS

After thirty-two years of seminary teaching, I may be pardoned for having accumulated a lot of grandfatherly advice for theological students, especially for those who are beginning their course of study. Some of it may be helpful to you (I address you as a young theologian) as you begin this important new phase of your life.

Seminary is, in many ways, a very positive experience. Your thinking will be stimulated beyond what you ever imagined. I've never known a graduate of any seminary whose thinking was not greatly influenced by his seminary work. You'll make some terrific friends, meet a number of people to whom you'll turn all through your life for counsel. You'll experience some formative times of worship, discussion, fellowship, and play.

Still, there are a lot of perils in the road toward ministry. Some students expect, at least subconsciously, that theological study is like a summer camp "mountaintop experience," in which everything seems to motivate you almost effortlessly toward spiritual growth. Students with that romantic notion tend to be gravely disappointed, for they discover that theological study can be a major spiritual trial. Much about seminary can be a great blessing, but make no mistake: Satan is particularly interested in attacking those who are studying God's Word intensely. And in addition to financial difficulties, intellectual problems, and juggling responsibilities of family, study, church and job, there is the problem of the sin within your own heart.

So it's important to get started with a good orientation, to which end I hope this essay will be of some help. Of course there is no guarantee that reading this paper will keep you out of danger. I am very much aware of my inadequacies as a theological pastor. I've given this advice to many students, and I've been dismayed and humbled to see how many of them have fallen into the precise errors I've warned them about. And even if I were a perfect teacher, that wouldn't be enough. The sin within us leads us to resist even the best, and best-formulated, spiritual counsel (see Prov. 1:20-33, and many other passages in Proverbs). There is a biblical place for teachers and counselors, but, in the end, only God, by His Word and Spirit, can make us obey; only He can open our ears and hearts to the counsel He provides us. I can only pray that the Lord Himself will work through this essay, together with the counsel of other pastors and teachers, to set you on a wise course.

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### 1. Theology is a Spiritual Task

The term theology scares people. It sounds formidable, esoteric, abstract, technical. Further, many of us have suspicions about the discipline-- that it is perhaps irrelevant to our walk before God, or, even worse, a sort of human presumption. How can we dare to think of "grasping" the living Word of God and stuffing it into an intellectual system? Thus was I warned about theology during my youth; and, although I now think the objections to it can be answered, I'm glad I was warned. We should all be a little suspicious of academic theology, because, studied in the wrong way, it can get mixed up with some unhealthy ways of thinking.

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<sup>1</sup> This teaching is the *didache*, the *didaskalia*, that Paul talks about in his Pastoral Epistles. So this definition of theology has a direct biblical basis.

The best way to define theology, in my view, is as the application of the whole Bible to the whole of human life. Theology is not an attempt to articulate our feelings about God (Schleiermacher), but neither is it merely an attempt to state the objective truth, or to put the truth in “proper order” (Hodge), for Scripture already does those things perfectly well. Theology is, rather, teaching<sup>1</sup> the Bible for the purpose of meeting human needs. It answers human questions, tries to relieve doubts, applies texts to life-situations.

The broadest term I know to describe everything theology does is the term “application;” hence my slogan, “theology is application.” Of course, the term “application” is susceptible to some misunderstanding. It has suggested to some a type of theology that abhors anything “theoretical” and focuses only on the “practical.” So let me say here that that is not at all what I have in mind. Theoretical work in theology is very important. My only concern is to point out that even the most theoretical sort of theology falls under the label “application.” For why do we develop theological theories, after all? Only because they address real questions people have on matters of spiritual importance. So theory is part of application.

So this way of looking at theology does not elevate the practical over the theoretical in any general way. On the other hand, neither does it elevate the theoretical over the practical. Theoretical and practical questions are on a par with one another, all fair game for the theologian.

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<sup>1</sup> People often say to theological students that “doctrine and life should not be separated.” True enough. But what exactly does that mean? What are doctrine and life, and what is the actual relation between them? They should be “unseparated,” but there are many ways in which two things can be separated or unseparated. “Chalk should not be separated from a blackboard.” Does that mean that the chalk should be glued to the blackboard? That the blackboard should be made of chalk? That the blackboard is not truly a blackboard unless chalk is present? That you should never talk about a blackboard without saying something about chalk? Or, simply, that neither chalk nor blackboard is useful unless the other is available? So in talking about doctrine and life, we need to gain some clarity on the questions we are asking. And we need to ask why it is that we often feel a tension between the two, and how bringing them “together” in a biblical way alleviates that tension. Those are the questions I am discussing in the text at this point.

I also resist the notion that theory is somehow the basis of practice. A much more biblical view is that Scripture itself is the basis of both theory and practice, and that, under the authority of Scripture, theory and practice serve one another.

Similar considerations bear on the question of the “relation of doctrine to life.” We are sometimes inclined to say that, “doctrine is the basis of the Christian life.”<sup>2</sup> That’s a true statement, if by “doctrine” we mean the teaching of Scripture itself. But if “doctrines” are human theological formulations, human understandings of biblical teachings, then they are not the singular basis for the Christian life. Rather, doctrine and life are correlative; each feeds the other.

Certainly, doctrine (defined as the work of godly teachers of the Bible) contributes much to the Christian life. But in some ways, according to Scripture, the Christian life is prior to doctrine in this sense. As Jesus told Nicodemus (“the teacher of Israel,” John 3:10), you can’t even see the kingdom of God unless you are born again (John 3:3), that is, unless you have new life from God (cf. 1 John 2:29, 3:9, 4:7, 5:1, 4, 18). You cannot be a teacher unless God has given you new life. Through that new life, God gives you a “willingness to do His will” that enables you to know the truth of Jesus’ teaching (John 7:17). Note that here a change of life is prior to a change in intellectual orientation, a change in doctrine.

Note also how the Apostle Paul tells us to find, test, and approve the will of God in Rom. 12:1-2: by making our bodies living sacrifices, renouncing conformity to the world, being transformed by the renewal of our minds. Again, a change of life is what brings insight, doctrinal understanding. Compare in this respect 1 Cor. 8:1-3

(where love and humility are indispensable prerequisites to knowledge), Eph. 5:8-10 (where living as children of light leads us to find what God's will is), Phil. 1:9-10 (where love gives insight), Heb. 5:11-13 (where ethical maturity prepares us to benefit from doctrinal teaching about Melchizedek).

So theology is not self-sufficient. It depends on the maturity of your Christian life, as the maturity of your Christian life depends on theology. Growth in grace will make you a better theologian, and becoming a better theologian will help you grow in grace. There is a "spiral" relationship between the two. When you become a Christian, you usually get some elementary theological teaching, a great help in getting started in your walk with the Lord. But then new questions arise, and you go back to Scripture and theology, and you get more advanced answers—sometimes to the same questions you had as a spiritual babe. But your greater maturity enables you to understand and appreciate teaching of greater depth. And that teaching, in turn, helps you to grow more, and so on.

This is why, in the New Testament, the qualifications of teachers (1 Tim. 3:1-7, Tit. 1:5-9) are more spiritual than intellectual. Paul mentions "aptness to teach" and "sound doctrine," but his qualifications for elder-teachers are mostly ethical: "above reproach, the husband of but one wife, temperate, self-controlled," etc. The application is obvious: If you want to become a theologian, you must be a godly person. That principle applies to the most academic and theoretical of theologians, as well as to the practical theologians (like most of you) who preach sermons, lead Bible studies, nurture other believers, and witness to the lost.

Indeed, the relation between theology and the Christian life is even closer than that. It's not enough to say that theology and life are two things that reinforce one another. Rather, it's important to notice that theology is part of the Christian life: a part that, to be sure, is crucial to the well-being of the other parts. Theology is one of the things we do as believers. So, like all other things we do, we should do it to the glory of God (1 Cor. 10:31). It is part of our service to Christ. So we must do theology in a way that is acceptable to God. Just as there are divine commands about worship, honoring parents, murder, adultery, theft, etc., there are divine commands about theology. Theology, both in its content and its method, must be subject to Scripture.

Scripture has much to say about theology, about the business of gaining spiritual wisdom and knowledge. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (Psm. 111:10, Prov. 9:10) and of knowledge (Prov. 1:7). The wisdom of the world is antithetical to the wisdom of God (1 Cor. 1-2). God's written Word is the standard for spiritual knowledge (Deut. 6:6-9, Psm. 119:9, 11, 1 Cor. 14:37, 2 Tim. 3:15-17, 2 Pet. 1:19-21).

Here we must be counter-cultural. Nothing is more absurd to the modern or postmodern mind than the proposition that an academic discipline should be subject to biblical norms. The major opinion-makers tell us that thought must be autonomous, secular, that science, history, art, even the study of religion, be religiously neutral. But our Lord tells us that we must serve Him with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind. The contrast, and the conflict, could not be more clear.

<sup>3</sup> For a more thorough discussion of "theology as application," the relation of doctrine to life, and that of obedience to knowledge, see my *Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1987), especially 1-100.

Indeed, for the Christian, not only theology in the narrow sense, but all other academic disciplines as well, must be subject to Scripture. When we study history, or science, or literature, or politics, we must presuppose the truths of God's Word; we must ask in each case how Scripture applies to these disciplines. So it should be obvious, though it does not go without saying, that theology, too, is subject to Scripture.

So theology is part of our discipleship. It is a part of the Christian life that nurtures all the rest of life. And as part of life, we should carry it out in obedience to Scripture. In these ways, theology is a spiritual task.<sup>3</sup>

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## 2. The Word of God is Dangerous, As Well As Edifying

Theology is a study of the Word of God. That is obvious in the case of your courses in Bible and Systematic Theology, but it is no less true in areas like preaching, counseling, and church history: for in those disciplines too, your professors will seek to interpret and evaluate their subjects according to biblical standards. So your seminary course will amount to a saturation in Scripture, the written Word of God.

This study can be a great blessing, of course. All the riches of wisdom and knowledge are in Christ (Col. 2:3), and we learn of Him in Scripture. "Oh, how I love your law! I meditate on it all day long," says the Psalmist (Psm. 119:97). "How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!" he says in verse 103. The Scriptures are "useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly

equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:16-17). Their message is "the power of God unto salvation" (Rom. 1:16), "living and powerful" (Heb. 4:12). Where else can we find what we need for ministry and for our life with God? With Peter, we exclaim, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life" (John 6:68).

But the Word can also be dangerous. As the Word is the power of God to salvation, it can sometimes also bring condemnation. God commanded Isaiah to preach the Word, but told him it would not bless its hearers:

Be ever hearing, but never understanding;  
Be ever seeing, but never perceiving.  
Make the heart of this people calloused;  
Make their ears dull  
And close their eyes.  
Otherwise they might see with their eyes,  
Hear with their ears,  
Understand with their hearts,  
And turn and be healed (Isa. 6:9-10).

Jesus quotes this passage in connection with his own parabolic teaching (Matt. 13:13-15 and parallels), and Paul quotes it as he turns from unbelieving Jews to the Gentiles (Acts 28:26-28). We know that often in biblical and later history, many people have heard the Word of God without benefit to themselves. Rather, hearing it

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<sup>4</sup> Scripture does not oppose mind and heart, though it does oppose heart and lips in Isa. 29:13. (Even this is rare.) In Scripture, the heart is not the seat of emotions, as in modern romance, but rather the central core of a person's being, what the person essentially is. The mind is part of that, not something opposed to it. Mind, too, in Scripture, is a term somewhat broader than our term intellect. It is the faculty for deciding as well as for thinking and reasoning.

<sup>5</sup> The Reformed have often been known for the quality of their scholarship, to the extent that other branches of the evangelical church have often depended on them. Perhaps we (and I speak as a Reformed confessionalist) have been a bit too prideful about our scholarship, indeed about our supposed intellectual superiority to other Christians. That kind of boasting is never appropriate, but in my view it is less plausible today than it ever has been.

has hardened them, provoked them to greater sin (Rom. 7:8-13). They respond to it indifferently, or even with hostility. So they pile up to themselves greater condemnation. And on the last day, the Word is their judge (John 12:48).

Why do I raise this issue in an essay about theological study?

Because it focuses our attention on one great danger of theological study. Your very immersion in the Word of God can be a blessing, or it can be a curse. If you hear the Word in unbelief or indifference, and respond to it that way over and over again over several years, you will be much worse off spiritually as a result.

Two important applications:

1. Make sure that you are a Christian, before you enter seminary. That sounds strange, I know. Why would anyone enter seminary without being a Christian? But I've known some seminary grads who have testified that they went to seminary unconverted and didn't come to know Christ as Lord and Savior until God reached them in their seminary studies. People come to seminary for all sorts of reasons; not always to study as servants of Christ. Occasionally these are converted while in seminary, but I suspect that some never do experience God's saving grace, and the seminary experience only increases their condemnation.

Remember that you do not become a Christian by being baptized, by being a member of a church, by orthodox doctrine, or by good works. The Pharisees were righteous by many doctrinal and practical measures, but Jesus condemned them.

None of us are good enough to measure up to God's standards. So we cannot save ourselves. Salvation is a gift of God, the gift of Jesus' perfect righteousness in place of our sin, which He bore for us on the Cross. We receive that gift through faith alone, by trusting Jesus as Lord and Savior. If you have not received Jesus by faith, now is the time to do so. "For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). Then, and only then, can you say that you are a Christian.

But if you go to seminary without Jesus, you are headed for spiritual disaster.

2. In your seminary studies, never treat God's Word as a mere academic assignment. Even when you are parsing Greek verbs in an assigned passage, listen to what that passage says. Hear it in faith, with a disposition to obey. With young Samuel, say "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening" (1 Sam. 3:9). If you hear God's Word indifferently, (a) you will lose the blessing of it, (b) you will form or reinforce a bad habit that will lead to other lost blessings, and (c) at worst, apart from God's grace, you will be hardened against the truth. It will come to mean less and less to you.

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### 3. Theology Demands Rigorous Thought

The motto of Reformed Theological Seminary is "a mind for truth, a heart for God." The study of theology involves both of these. In

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<sup>6</sup> In regard to the history of doctrine, I seem to need to make this point over and over again: the history of doctrine in itself never settles any theological issue. You cannot solve the problem, say, of the mode of baptism, merely by reciting what the Church Fathers, Luther, Calvin, and others thought about it. Protestant theology is based on the sola Scriptura principle, which means that biblical exegesis is the only ground for doctrinal conclusions, however helpful it may be to learn from the teachers God has raised up in the past. Arguing that a particular view is true solely because it has a noble history is an instance of the "genetic fallacy" in logic: the supposition that the truth of an idea is grounded in its origin.

the previous sections I addressed our heart-relationship to God. In this one I shall focus on the “mind for truth,” which, of course, is an aspect of “a heart for God.”<sup>4</sup>

One important implication of the spirituality of theology is that theology deserves our best intellectual effort. Notice that intellectual rigor is not something alien to spirituality, but part of it. What I say in this section is an application of what went before. God calls you to serve Him with the mind, as well as heart, soul, and strength. If you are unwilling to accept God’s standards in thought, can you rightly claim to be accepting His demand in “all of life”?

How hard do you think God wants you to think about His Word? When you read a difficult passage of Scripture, do you think He wants you to jump at the first interpretation that pops into your head? Or do you value Him enough to work hard at it until you get it right? Are you willing, as a servant of Christ, to work your way through the difficulties of ancient languages and cultures, principles of communication, indeed of theological mysteries, until you know what God wants you to teach His people?

Paul tells the Thessalonians to “test everything” (1 Thess. 5:21). He wants them to be like the noble Bereans who “examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true” (Acts 17:11; compare Deut. 18:20-22). Peter wants us to have an answer to everyone who asks us a reason for our hope (1 Pet. 3:15).

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<sup>4</sup> Perhaps I’ll be permitted to express here two pet peeves that are somewhat related to the above discussion: (1) the student who gets C’s at seminary and barely passes his ordination exams, who then decides that God has called him to become the theological conscience of his denomination. He then proceeds to discover heresy under every bed, wearying the church with ill-considered accusations and sloppy thinking. Please ask God to give you a realistic view of your own gifts and calling! (2) the student who gets A’s at seminary, earns his Ph. D. in theology, but can’t get a teaching job, perhaps because of his abrasive manner. He then decides he has been rejected because the churches and seminaries have become unorthodox, and he unleashes intemperate and poorly reasoned critiques against them that do no justice to his intellectual gifts and bear all the marks of sour grapes. Please ask God to give you a realistic view of your motives!

I confess to some concern about the quality of thought in the evangelical community and specifically in the Reformed branch of evangelicalism.<sup>5</sup> In my view, much that passes for theology today (both academic and popular) is not very cogent. The problem begins, of course, in the student years. Students expect to study hard if they go to medical school or law school. But they tend to have a different attitude toward theology. They often expect theological studies to be easier than medicine or law or other graduate programs. Why? Perhaps in the back of their minds, they figure that Christian teachers ought to be easier on them than secular teachers (misunderstanding the nature of Christian love and gentleness). Or they think that because theology is a spiritual discipline they shouldn’t have to think hard about it (misunderstanding, as we have seen, the nature of biblical spirituality).

Please put those notions out of your heads. A Christian, called to study the Word of God, may give to that task nothing less than his best. That is true, (1) because the Christian must do every task laid before him with all his heart (Col. 3:23) and in the name of the Lord Jesus (Col. 3:17), (2) because of the importance of the subject matter (God’s own Word) and (3) because of the nature of the ministry. Think of it this way: your ministry begins in your student years. You are shortchanging the people to whom you will minister (now and in the future) if you fail to work hard at your studies. You don’t love God’s people if right now you fail to prepare good spiritual food for them.

If you try to minister to people without a solid knowledge of God’s Word and an ability to apply it to human needs, you are worse than a physician who treats people in medical ignorance. Worse, because the consequences can be eternal.

Thinking as such does not distort or deny the Word of God; sin does. The anti-intellectual too often focuses on only part of the problem, the depravity of the intellect, minimizing the effects of sin in other areas of life. On the other hand, in doing so he overlooks significant God-given tools of sanctification and thus loses the full impact of the Word upon him. But one with a fully biblical concept of theology will use all these means to apply the Word to God's people. We should use to the fullest all the tools of learning: linguistics, archaeology, reason, imagination, logic, and so on.

Through such theology we will become more obedient, and through obedience we will become better theologians. If theology is a confrontation with the living God in His Word, then we dare not bring before Him any less than our best. To do so is sinful complacency, arrogant pride.

### **Some implications:**

1. Don't be surprised if you feel a bit overwhelmed at the seminary workload and the difficulty of study. And don't be resentful, either. Seminary is, of course, a graduate school, and the work is appropriately more difficult than college work. Further, your professors take seriously what we have been discussing, the special importance of careful thinking in theology. Here are some practical suggestions for those who are feeling acute academic pain:
  - (1) Consider reducing your course load. It might, for example, be especially helpful to avoid taking Hebrew and Greek the same year. In some cases students should consider extending their programs beyond the standard two- or three-year periods.
  - (2) Form study groups to discuss the material. Share the pain.
  - (3) Talk to your

pastor, faculty advisor, or Dean of Students; don't just go away mad. (4) Give yourself some remedial studies in the basics. Read the Westminster Confession and Catechisms. Get some texts in the theological disciplines written for laymen or even for new believers.

2. Try to understand that the study of theology at the seminary level is probably unlike anything you have done before. You may be experienced in arguing theology in dorm-room bull sessions; you may even have fairly good background in the Reformed confessions and catechisms, although that is rare these days. You may, like an increasing number of students, have studied the development of doctrine through the history of the church. Nevertheless, when you study theology at seminary, you will be expected to conform to a higher standard of intellectual rigor and theological depth.<sup>6</sup> Your old answers will not necessarily be sufficient any more.

Nothing is less attractive than a first-year seminarian (or even graduating seminarian, or even retiring professor!) who thinks he knows everything. Believe me, you don't. You probably have very little idea how complicated the questions are, how many facets of them need to be considered.

Take one step at a time. Be content to take a lower seat for the time being. Don't be arrogant with your fellow students with whom you disagree. Scripture tells us that we ourselves will be judged by the standards we apply to others. Don't act like the great expert on difficult and controversial issues like exclusive psalmody, the regulative principle, confessional subscription, theonomy, supralapsarianism, common grace, infant communion,

<sup>6</sup> B. B. Warfield emphasizes this in his article, "The Religious Life of Theological Students," in John E. Meeter, ed., *Selected Shorter Writings of B. B. Warfield*, (Nutley: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1970), I, 411-425, an article that young theologians should peruse.

apologetic method, etc. It is best not even to make up your mind on such matters until you have sympathetically considered all sides. Open yourself to the possibility of change. There is far too much cocksureness in Reformed circles, too many easy answers to difficult questions. Let us not be guilty of so trivializing the gospel of Christ.<sup>7</sup>

3. Make every class, every assignment, an occasion for thoughtful reflection. For example, think about your reading assignments. Sounds obvious, I know! But one of the main difficulties of students is that they just do not know how to read very well. The advent of TV and cassettes, the decline of standards in high school and college, the general decline in Christian scholarship (#1 above) have made it difficult for us to teach through reading assignments. Yet an ability to read thoughtfully is an utter necessity for a well-informed ministry. If you don't know how to read well, you had better learn. Your professors will expect you to learn a lot of things through reading alone. This is the nature of graduate study. Don't expect them to explain all the readings in class. Class sessions will supplement your readings, not duplicate them. If you have reached the graduate level and cannot do this, then you must work — on your own time — to remedy that incompetence. We cannot teach reading at seminary; we must presuppose it as a propaedeutic skill required for the ministry.

You should also spend time meditating on your reading. Read prayerfully, asking God to help you react properly to the truths and falsehoods in the texts. Read analytically and critically — asking good questions, finding out why the writers say what

they say, why they say it in one way rather than another, why their views are right or wrong. Don't just learn what the authors say: use their thoughts as a stimulus to your own.

The same advice bears on class lectures. Lectures, like readings, require thought. You cannot do justice to a lecture if you think about it only when it is given and before the examination. Take your notes home with you and analyze them as if they were a reading assignment (above, #4). Meditate; pray; search the Scriptures to find if the lecture is true (as Acts 17:11).

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#### 4. Priorities

So far, theology sounds like an incredibly taxing business — demanding a constant, intense spiritual involvement, that involvement including painstaking scholarship. Who is sufficient for these things? Not you or I. By the grace of God we can make progress toward the goal of real theology, but we shall never achieve it in this life. Our sin and frailty will always bring us short of the goal. Can we be satisfied with less than perfection? In one sense, no: to be satisfied with imperfection can mean that we cease striving and thus lose sight of the goal altogether. But in another sense, yes: for to insist on perfection can mean that we expect something God has not promised — perfection in this life.

We must, therefore, take our sin and frailty into account. Sanctification is not an instant achievement, but a gradual process. Often we must fight one spiritual battle at a time, knowing that there are other enemies to be conquered later. Even as creatures, apart from

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<sup>7</sup>Some seminaries, of course, are ministries of particular churches. But most are not.

sin, we cannot obey all of God's commands simultaneously. We cannot pray, preach, study Scripture, feed the hungry, counsel the afflicted, etc., all at the same time. We must, paradoxically as it may seem, postpone obedience to some divine commands in order to obey others.

At some times we must parse Greek verbs (to the glory of God!); at other times we must put our Greek verbs aside and pray. People sometimes say that we must not "dichotomize" between, say, studies and devotions; and they are right in some senses of that tricky word "dichotomize." It is true that prayer should not exclude study nor vice-versa; it is also true that each ought to enhance, not detract from, the other. But it is not true that prayer and study are the same thing, nor is it true that we never have to choose between the two. We do have to decide often to do the one and to stop doing the other; and if that is "dichotomizing," well, in that sense we must indeed dichotomize.

All of this means that we must make a conscious attempt to achieve a balance — to find some place in our life for every command of God, to the exclusion of none. We must decide what must be done at a certain time, what must be postponed until later, what demands a lot of time, what demands only a little, etc. Each of us must have a scale of priorities.

The top priority, at seminary as everywhere else, is the glory of God. Others are dictated by Scripture to all uniformly: each of us must spend some time in prayer, some time in the Word, etc. "To obey is better than sacrifice" (1 Sam. 15:22): such passages indicate

priorities we all must observe. But other priorities vary from person to person. Sometimes they are a function on one's calling (cf. Acts 6:2). Some are functions of one's particular spiritual strengths and weaknesses (cf. Matt. 19:21).

What about you? You ought to have high standards in theology — high spiritual standards, and that involves high intellectual standards. But this does not mean that you must give all your waking hours to study. You need to do other things as well: to eat, to drink, to exercise, to make friends, to care for your family, to be a good church member, to visit the afflicted, etc. You will have to balance your theological work with your other responsibilities; else you will be a disobedient and therefore poor theologian.

And there may be still other responsibilities, stemming from your particular calling: a church job, a street preaching ministry, a part time "secular" job. You will have to balance out these responsibilities too.

Students have sometimes said, "God has led me to seminary, and therefore He expects me to make the best grades possible." Then they put all else aside and bury themselves in books until graduation. This is simplistic and dangerous. No one ought to give himself exclusively to study. The amount of study you do will depend very much upon your calling and your spiritual condition. If you must sacrifice your other responsibilities or your spiritual growth in order to earn an A, then you ought to renounce the A and work for a lesser grade — or, better, forget about grades and learn what you need for your distinctive ministry. And if that is "dichotomizing," then we must dichotomize.

<sup>10</sup> Phillipsburg: P&R, 1995.

<sup>11</sup> For an interaction between myself and a "movement" Van Tillian, see Mark Karlberg, "John Frame and the Recasting of Van Tillian Apologetics," *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 9:2 (Fall, 1993), 279-296, with a reply by me.

<sup>12</sup> It is, of course, not always easy to distinguish what differences should be tolerable and which not. Usually the church's Confession provides a working criterion; but churches should not regard their Confessions as infallible; only Scripture is that. For more reflection on this subject, see my *Evangelical Reunion* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991).

<sup>13</sup> Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962.

You must also make decisions among the various types of study. I do not believe that everyone ought to give top priority to my own courses. If you choose, for good reasons, to work for A's in New Testament and only C's in my systematics course, I will respect you for that (and give you the C you deserve!).

Remember that your seminary years are not only a preparation for discipleship. They must themselves be a time of discipleship. They are not a hiatus from the Christian life. During these years you will and should have somewhat different priorities from those you will have later on. But even as a seminarian, you have a responsibility to do things other than study. You are a Christian first, a student second.

Although your priorities will and should differ somewhat from those of other believers, there are some things that every Christian should place high on his agenda. Particularly important are the means of grace: the Word, the sacraments, and prayer. These are necessities for every believer, but it is especially important to mention them here since theology is a spiritual task. How can you be a theologian and not have an intense desire for the presence of the Lord? You cannot even see the kingdom of God without the Spirit (John 3:3, 5). You cannot understand the Word without the Spirit's illumination (1 Cor. 2:12-16, 1 Thess. 1:5). So you must make time to pray: as an individual, in your family, in the church. Seminary chapel services and prayer groups are valuable too. They provide further opportunities for worship and teaching, which are good in themselves, but which also do much to unite the seminary community as brothers and sisters in the Lord and reinforce the purpose of the community in serving Jesus.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> See especially 38.

The crux: at the beginning of your seminary career, decide what your priorities are going to be. Correlate your gifts and needs with the biblical norms. Make sure there is room in your schedule for all your responsibilities: to God, family, church, job, studies. Make sure that at seminary you will grow spiritually. Satan is very active at seminary. Confrontation with the Word of God is a dangerous business (above #2). Do not underestimate the perils. Determine now to establish good devotional habits. Get established in a sound church. (Church-hopping is a terrible evil: you cannot properly function in the body of Christ, you cannot bear the burdens of others or find others who can knowledgeably bear yours, if you church-hop.) Find some way to witness for Christ. Be helpful to fellow students. Meanwhile, busy as you have become, you may have to tolerate some imperfection in your seminary achievement. But, strange as it may seem, God requires a certain tolerance of imperfection; for to be a theologian, you must be other things as well. To be a theologian, you must be a godly person.

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## 5. Moral Standards

Godliness always means keeping the commandments of God's Word (John 14:15, 21, 23). As you prepare for positions of leadership in the church, Satan will make you a particular target of temptation. Just as you engage in physical exercise to care for your body, you need to think in terms of vigorous exercise in godliness (1 Tim. 4:8, Heb. 5:11-14). Don't assume that sanctification will come easily once you are in seminary. It will continue to be a struggle.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 39.

Increasingly, people will look to you as a godly leader. Look into your own heart. You know that you are not as good, not as spiritually mature, as people think you are. Don't be swayed by the praise of others. Hear the Word and the Spirit driving you to repentance and greater discipline.

Satan's war against the church's ministry has often focused in the sexual area. Many pastors have suffered setbacks, even shipwreck, because of failure to guard their heart against sexual temptation. This battle is most intense during one's youth, but it continues throughout life.

A position of authority as a teacher, preacher or youth leader, will likely increase your attractiveness to the opposite sex. You should take special precautions to "treat younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, and younger women as sisters, with absolute purity" (1 Tim. 5:2).

Godliness always involves some sacrifice of personal freedom. God's commandments aren't burdensome, but they often call for sacrifice. One of those sacrifices we must make when we are called to positions in leadership in the church is the burden of having to be, not only a godly person, but a godly example to others (1 Tim. 4:12). That means that you must be concerned, not only about God's standards, but about appearances. People today are suspicious of church leaders, and they are not entirely wrong in this. You will have to earn their trust. And false charges on moral grounds are not unheard-of. A good rule is to make sure that your conferences with young people and people of the opposite sex are open to witnesses,

beyond suspicion. Finances are also a major subject of concern. Make sure that your financial affairs are thoroughly honest and beyond suspicion.

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## 6. Interpersonal Relations

A great deal of your preparation for ministry will result, not from formal instruction, but from informal contacts with professors and fellow students. The Lord wants us to make the best possible use of these. Seminaries are not churches,<sup>9</sup> but they must seek to be Christian communities where biblical standards govern relationships.

Resolve from the beginning to follow the biblical law of love, to help make your seminary, not only a theological academy, but a community of brothers and sisters who love the Lord and one another. Let's have this ambition: that our neighbors, like the first century pagans who observed the young church, will marvel at the love we have for one another.

Concretely: often students can help students more effectively than a professor can. Be open to one another's needs. Don't let anyone get left behind, friendless, frustrated. Keep the Golden Rule in mind. Try to build up, not tear down. Don't speak unless your words are edifying (Eph. 4:29).

Criticism of one another and of professors will sometimes be necessary; but do it in a godly way. If you have a serious criticism of someone, don't murmur behind his back. Talk to him, as our Lord requires in Matt. 18. Don't gossip. Take your problems to people who can act on them and fix them. Trust your brothers and sisters; act on the assumption that they want to be faithful to God just as you do.

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## 7. Partisanship

Paul warns, especially in 1 Cor. 1-3, about the danger of factional battles in the church. In my opinion, this is a great danger in the seminary community also. Students sometimes get excited about some idea or movement (sometimes based on the thinking of a professor, sometimes not) and will look down their noses at anybody who doesn't share these ideas, or the emphasis, or jargon of their movement. Even when the ideas in question are not resolved in the Reformed confessions (or when they are peripheral to the confessions), the partisans often take them to be virtual tests of orthodoxy.

In the early chapters of my Cornelius Van Til,<sup>10</sup> I have rebuked this kind of "movement" thinking among my fellow Van Tillians.<sup>11</sup> There have been many movements of this kind in American Presbyterianism, over views of the millennium, the incomprehensibility of God, Dooyeweerdian philosophy, the place of the law, styles of worship, the place of confessions, the place of tradition, the existence of divine grace before the Fall, the nature of biblical covenants, the place of biblical theology in preaching, the role of general revelation in counseling, paedocommunion, the length of creation days, and so on.

The usual pattern is that (1) Someone proposes an idea. (2) He and others form a party to defend that idea and to insist that it must be a test of orthodoxy in the church. (3) Someone else attacks the idea and assembles another faction to condemn the idea as heresy. (4) The controversy wastes hours of time in Christian churches and organizations, and at worst destroys them. (5) Without any

resolution, people get tired of the discussion, and they go on to debate something new.

I suspect that most of these controversies should have been aborted after stage (1). When someone comes up with a new-sounding idea, most of the time it is best just to talk and think about it for a while, searching the Scriptures, tolerating various opinions on the subject. There are, of course, some views that are genuine heresies that cannot be tolerated in the church. But I don't believe any of those are on the above list. That list, rather, provides examples of differences of opinion that ought to be tolerated within the fellowship of the church.<sup>12</sup>

And there are some "issues" that are just a waste of time. Remember what Paul says in 1 Tim. 1:1-7 and 2 Tim. 2:14-16. Not every theological issue is worth discussing. Some are really nothing more than "godless chatter."

During your seminary years, you may be tempted to join such a theological party. Resist the temptation, please. You simply do not know enough to go around accusing one another of unorthodoxy on these sorts of matters, and if you did know more, you would not join the controversy. You can learn from people who have different points of view and emphases on controversial matters, and you should. Don't dismiss any of your teachers or classmates merely because they fail to reinforce your partisan prejudices. Keep an open mind, a teachable spirit.

James warns us against the dangers of the teaching vocation (3:18), because teachers use their tongues, and the tongue is a dangerous weapon, difficult to control. Know-it-all theologians, like the court

prophets and the Pharisees, regularly incur God's wrath in Scripture. Learn truth, wisdom, and gentleness, before you go off on your high horse to do battle with those you consider ignorant.

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## 8. Theologians and the Church

The above admonitions also bear on the relations of theologians to Christians not trained in academic theology. Helmut Thielicke is much preoccupied with this issue in his *A Little Exercise for Young Theologians*.<sup>13</sup> I am not sympathetic with the main thrust of Thielicke's concern. He is worried about the seminarian who returns to his home church and pridefully dumps on the people all the theories of the unbelieving Bible critics. Thielicke advises the student, not to reject those theories, but to hold back until he is more mature spiritually, until he can present these unbelieving theories in such a way as not to cause offense.<sup>14</sup> Well, in my view, these critical theories are spiritual poison and should not be taught as truth in the church, even by the most otherwise mature teachers.

But along the way, Thielicke makes some valid observations that apply equally well to young theologians who uphold the infallibility of the Bible. For even students unaffected by such Bible criticism often have a way of dumping their new theological knowledge on congregations in a way that is unwelcome and unedifying. It is unbecoming, certainly, for a twenty-five-year-old seminarian to berate a sixty-year-old elder, for example, because the older man holds an outdated interpretation of a Bible passage. There is something prideful about a student (this is a true story, from years ago) who stands and reads thirty pages of Vos's *Biblical Theology* to a congregation of working people with ninth to twelfth grade

education. There is something wrong when a first-year seminarian believes that he must (in the most incomprehensible jargon) lay on his adult Sunday School class all the latest theories about the use of Hebrew prepositions.

Such students lack the perspective of seeing theology as a spiritual task. Theology is application. If it doesn't edify, it is worthless. It is not information for information's sake. It should never be a vehicle of intellectual pride.

"Simple believers" often know God better than many learned theologians. Many who lack formal theological training are better elders and deacons than any young seminarian could be. They may know less about academic theology than the young seminarian, but they may well know more of what's important, in greater depth and perspective, and better how to apply it to life. If the young seminarian wishes to rebuke such an elder, he should take 1 Tim. 5:1 to heart. More likely he should not rebuke at all until he learns something of the gentleness and grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.

But even more important, the young seminarian should be humble enough to learn from those who have walked with Christ for many years, who have matured through fighting the spiritual warfare. This kind of learning can be just as important as classroom learning in preparing a young theologian for ministry.

All of this is an exhortation to students to recognize your own immaturity, how much you don't know, how much you need to grow. You might deceive yourself about this, partly because at seminary you are learning so much technical stuff of which the simple believers are ignorant. Being able to read Hebrew and Greek,

and to speak of covenants and supralapsarianism and the rest might lead you to think (quite wrongly) that you know God better than the simple believers. But Thielicke illustrates well how somebody can have a lot of knowledge, while lacking knowledge of the most important sort:

Before the young freshman has really looked at the cornerstone of the biblical story of salvation, for example, the story of Creation and the account of the Fall, before he has come to know the Alpine peaks of the divine thoughts in their majesty, he is made familiar with the mineralogical analyses of that stone. But anybody who studies geological formations on maps and graphs, and learns mineralogical formulae from a set of tables before he ever climbs the Alps, is hardly in a position to comprehend at all what the Alps are.<sup>15</sup>

The simple believer may well know the theological Alps, in some ways, better than the seminarian mineralogist. The young theologian, for all his necessary immersion in technical theology, may well need to know God much better than he does, before he seeks to edify his fathers and mothers in the Lord.

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## 9. Conclusion

I don't mean to discourage anyone. The second paragraph of this essay indicates something of the joy that is part of theological study, and I hope nothing else I have said negates that.

But I have sought to put up some warning signs. To summarize: theology, as the application of God's Word to human life, is a spiritual task, and, as such, requires you to have a close walk with

God and a willingness to do theology His way. Otherwise, the study of theology can be a danger to your soul. One thing God demands from you is hard work in your studies, a thoughtful interaction with His Word and His world. But He also expects you to make room in your schedule for your other responsibilities, to develop a system of priorities that gives you time for a rich devotional life and enables you to serve others in your family, church, workplace, and in the seminary community itself. Jesus' law of love should prevail in that community, and that (plus a realistic assessment of your own level of knowledge) can necessitate tolerance of some positions that you don't agree with. It also requires patience with others who have not achieved your level of technical knowledge (who may, nevertheless excel you in knowledge of what is most important).

I have tried to search my own heart-motives in writing this essay. I have tried to write out of love for God, for His church, and for the young seminarians I have spoken to here. If I have written anything untrue, or contrary to that spirit of love, I pray that God will negate the effect of it. And may He richly bless you as you embark on this exciting journey. May He use you "to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ" (Eph. 4:12-13).



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