



Should I go



to Seminary?



Guy M. Richard

*Should I go to
Seminary?*

—

Guy M. Richard

Reformed Theological Seminary
Atlanta, Georgia

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	7
CHAPTER 1	
<i>What does God want me to do?</i>	11
CHAPTER 2	
<i>Will seminary be worth it?</i>	23
CHAPTER 3	
<i>How should I approach my studies?</i>	31

Should I go to Seminary?
© 2025 Guy M. Richard

Published by
Reformed Theological Seminary Atlanta
1580 Terrell Mill Road SE
Marietta, GA 30067
770-952-8884
www.rts.edu/atlanta

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise—except for brief quotations for the purpose of review or comment, without the prior permission of the publisher, Reformed Theological Seminary in Atlanta.

Introduction

I meet a lot of men and women who are considering going to seminary. As a general rule, these men and women genuinely love the Lord and want more than anything else to be used mightily of Him in their lives. They want to impact the world for Christ, and they are wrestling with what that will mean. Many of them are zealous to see men, women, boys, and girls come to faith in Jesus Christ. Most have a high regard for the church and strong desire to see God's people nurtured and cared for as they make their way to heaven through the ups and downs and joys and successes of life. Some of these prospective students are teaching Bible or religion classes at a local Christian school. Others are currently serving in ministry in some capacity. Still others are working in secular jobs but wrestling with what God would have them to do for the remainder of their lives.

In each of these cases, as I have found, these men and women are asking the same basic question, "Should I go to seminary?" They generally have different things in mind when asking it, however. Some are looking at the question in terms of direction. They are trying to discern if God wants them to go to seminary or if He wants them to do something else altogether. For them, the question, should I go to seminary? is a matter of discerning what God wants them to do and where He wants them to serve. Others, however, are wondering whether seminary will be worth the resources that are required to finish a degree. They are looking at the question in terms of return on investment and are generally asking it this way: what will seminary do for me? Or, what will I get out of it? They want to know if seminary will be worth the sacrifice, hard work, and cost that will inevitably be required to graduate.

My goal in this booklet is to answer these questions. Much of the counsel that I offer in attempting to do so will be based on my own experience. Twenty-seven years ago, I made the decision to leave a secure and well-paying job to go to seminary and to train for pastoral ministry. I was working for my dad's company at the time, and the plan was for me to learn his business and take over the company. Deciding to go to seminary was for me, and for my wife, therefore, a decision to walk away from a future that we knew would provide financially for all our needs. My wife and I already had an eighteenth-month-old son, and we were expecting our second child within the first academic year. Where would the money come from to pay our bills and to put food on the table?

I remember being so nervous to talk to my dad about this that I asked him to go for a run with me. I was convinced he would think that I was being irresponsible. After all, I had a wife and a family to provide for. My dad wasn't a Christian at this point, or, if he was, he was so newly converted that I assumed he would look at my dilemma with a much more worldly perspective. I asked him to go for a run so that I wouldn't have to look him in the eyes and so that I could speed up and get away in the event that he got really angry with me.

Things became even more acute when, just a few days before I had been planning to talk with my dad, he called and told me that my mom had been diagnosed with cancer. He asked me to put my house on the market and to make plans to move to New Orleans. He was going to retire early in order to spend more time with my mom. The business, as he said, was now mine. This was totally unexpected. My immediate thought was: "Oh no! How can I even think of leaving the business under these circumstances?"

All of these factors, quite understandably, made me nervous about how the conversation with my father would go. That's why I asked him to go for a run. I didn't know how he would respond given the newness of my mom's diagnosis, and, if he didn't respond well, I didn't know how I would handle that in turn.

In my experience, the real life circumstances of men and women who are thinking about whether or not they should go to seminary are just as com-

plicated as what I have outlined from my own life. All of us face challenges that complicate this decision and put our question about starting seminary into a different light. If there is one thing I have learned, however, it's that there is never a perfect time for anything. If we wait until everything in our lives is just right before getting married, we'll never get married. If we wait for circumstances to be ideal before we start having kids, we'll never have a family. Something always comes up. Something always gets in the way.

What led to my decision to leave my dad's company and to start a new chapter? What factors brought me and my wife to make this momentous decision? That is what I will be sharing in this booklet. My prayer is that it will be helpful to those of you who may be in a similar situation and who may be asking similar questions.

I owe thanks to Ligonier Ministries who asked me to write two articles in the spring/summer of 2025 under the title of "Should I go to Seminary?" These two articles form the seedbed for this booklet. The original content can be found on Ligonier's website, along with other articles and books I have written. That original content has since been expanded to become what is presented here.

CHAPTER 1

What does God want me to do?

Most of us have faced decisions in our lives that have prompted us to ask, what does God want me to do in this or that particular situation? Does He want me to marry Jamar or Justin, or Tori or Tiffany? Does He want me to take this job or that one? Does He want me to serve Him by teaching Sunday School or Bible study or by working in the nursery? Does He want me to give money to this ministry or to that one?

The decision to go to seminary is in the same category as these kinds of questions. In each case, we feel like we are standing at a fork in the road. How can we discern which path we are to take? It would be nice, in situations like these, if the Lord would do for us what He did with Moses when He appeared to him in the burning bush. It would be nice if God would tell us exactly what He wanted us to do. That would certainly have made my conversation with my father much easier when I was considering going to seminary. There wouldn't have been any need for me to be nervous. How could my dad object or even raise concerns if I had been able to tell him that God had appeared to me in a burning bush and commanded me to go to seminary? It would have made it much easier for me to raise the necessary financial support as well.

But, alas!, with the closing of the canon of Scripture, God doesn't typically work that way any longer. Whereas God "spoke" to our forefathers "at many times and in many ways," He has spoken to us "in these last days" in and through His Son, "whom he appointed heir of all things" and "through

whom also he created the world” (Heb. 1:1-2). How are we, then, to discern what He wants us to do? We are to rely upon the general principles of His Word and the godly wisdom of trusted counselors in order to make the best decision that we can, knowing and believing that, whatever we decide to do, God will work “all things...together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose” (Rom. 8:28).

GENERAL PRINCIPLES OF GOD’S WORD

Many “fork-in-the-road” questions that we face in our lives can be clearly and quickly answered by reference to the plain teaching of God’s Word. If, for instance, I am wondering whether or not I should cheat on my taxes or on an exam in school, the Bible plainly tells me that the answer is a resounding no. God doesn’t want me to steal or to lie (Ex. 20:15-16). If, on the other hand, I am wrestling with whether or not I should marry someone who isn’t a Christian, the Bible gives clear counsel on that too (1 Cor. 7:39; 2 Cor. 6:14-16). And if I am wondering whether or not I should find a local church in which to worship every week, the Bible has much to say here as well. We know that God doesn’t want us to cheat on our taxes or on our exams; He doesn’t want us to marry a non-Christian or, maybe even, a less-mature Christian; and He doesn’t want us to skip out on weekly worship. We know these things because He plainly tells us as much in His Word. He also tells us that He doesn’t want us to get divorced (Matt. 19:3-9; Mal. 2:16), to murder someone’s reputation (Matt. 5:21-26), or to seek revenge when someone sins against us (Matt. 5:38-42; Rom. 12:19).

Other questions, however, are not quite as clear. The Bible, for instance, doesn’t tell us which Christian we should marry. It doesn’t tell us which church we should attend. It doesn’t disclose which job we should take. And it doesn’t specifically answer the question we are considering here: should I go to seminary? But just because the Bible doesn’t specifically answer these kinds of questions doesn’t mean that it has nothing at all to say that will help us in formulating an answer. There are general principles in

God’s Word that inform every answer to every “fork-in-the-road” question we are faced with. Let me give an example of what I mean. The Bible may not guide us to the exact person we should marry, but it does give us a picture of what we should be looking for in a future spouse: namely, he or she should be a person of the opposite gender; should love the Lord with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength; should exhibit the Christ-like character that we see so manifestly displayed in its pages; should be overflowing with generosity; and should be using his or her gifts to serve the Lord in some capacity. That may not tell us the exact person we should marry, but it does narrow down our choices significantly.

The same thing is true in regard to our question about attending seminary. The Bible may not definitively answer that question for us, but it does give us general principles that will inform our decision. We will look at a few important ideas here.

1. Areas of giftedness.

The Bible teaches us that God has given a variety of gifts to His people. The Body of Christ isn’t simply comprised of one member that fulfils one overarching function. Like the human body, it has many different members all fulfilling different functions for the good of the body. “If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose” (1 Cor. 12:17-18).

Our bodies need eyes, ears, noses, hands, feet, arms, legs, fingers, and toes. We need internal organs that aren’t visible to the naked eye. We even need “unpresentable parts,” as the apostle Paul calls them, that “are treated with greater modesty” (1 Cor. 12:23). We must have a variety of members doing a variety of different things. If our eyes don’t function as eyes and instead try to be ears, our eyes will suffer, because they won’t be functioning as God made them to function. But every other member of our bodies (and our bodies as a whole) will also suffer, because they now have to get along without the help of eyes to see. If our legs decide that they don’t want to be legs anymore, and instead want to be ears, our legs will suffer and our entire body

will suffer as well. If you have ever broken your arm or leg or seriously hurt your back, you know exactly what I am talking about. Every other member is forced to compensate for the loss of one member that is not functioning the way its supposed to. And the same is true in the Body of Christ. The church (which is the Body of Christ, see Eph. 1:22-23) must have a variety of members each doing what God intended them to do. Otherwise, both the members and the body as a whole suffers.

That is why Paul urges us to use our gifts within the context of the local church (Rom. 12:4-8). But we can't use our gifts if we don't know what they are. The best way to discover our areas of gifting is not by taking a spiritual gift test (although those may certainly be able to help) but by trying many different things within the church and asking for feedback from the rest of the body. If we think we might be an eye, we should try to function as an eye within the church. The body will let us know very quickly if we aren't an eye, and we can move on to try something different.

Once we understand the ways in which God has gifted us, we gain a better understanding of the kinds of ministries that God has established for us to do, for the good of the body. And this information is incredibly helpful for discerning whether or not you, or someone you know, should go to seminary. If, for instance, you see in yourself the gifts of prophecy—what we would call preaching today—(Rom. 12:6), teaching (Rom. 12:7), exhortation (Rom. 12:8), leading (Rom. 12:8), evangelism (Eph. 4:11), or wisdom and knowledge (1 Cor. 12:8), you should strongly consider going to seminary. These are gifts that seminary is designed specifically to enhance. But they are also gifts that suggest particular spheres of service in the local church that seminary focuses on developing.

2. Desire to grow in faith and Christian character.

The apostle Peter commands all Christians to “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Pet. 3:18). One of the things this means is that all believers should exhibit some amount of desire to grow in their faith. We should all want to know our Bibles better and to know the God of our Bibles better too. We should all want to grow in our likeness

to the Lord Jesus and our ability to exhibit the fruit of the Holy Spirit. But some of us, in the Lord's providence, are more zealous to do these things than others of us are. Some of us just can't get enough of God's Word, no matter how much time we spend in it. Some of us are so hungry to grow and to learn, it's all we want to spend our time doing.

When I was considering whether or not I should go to seminary, I was spending a great deal of time each morning studying God's Word, so much so that I organized my daily schedule around it. I was listening to sermons in the car as I drove. I was reading every book or Bible study that I could get my hands on. I even started learning Greek so that I could read the New Testament in its original language. These things became so preoccupying for me that my wife had to remind me that I still needed to be faithful with my other obligations, like taking out the trash, doing the yard work, or helping out with the housework. I was so motivated that I began neglecting my other responsibilities.

If that sounds familiar, then you should seriously consider going to seminary. That isn't to commend neglecting our other responsibilities. It is simply to recognize that this kind of zeal for God and for His Word are pointers toward seminary. They are like the flashing indicator light in our car that tells us we are running low on gas and need to fill up. An insatiable desire to grow in grace and knowledge is an indicator that we should go to seminary, and not just any old seminary. They are indicators that we should go to a seminary that will cultivate these desires and enhance our Christian growth, a seminary that will not only seek to inform our minds but will touch our hearts as well—a seminary that will seek to do what RTS's motto says, namely, to inculcate “a mind for truth, a heart for God” within all its students.

3. Desire to teach and edify others.

God, in His goodness, has given the church certain kinds of ministers or servants “to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God...to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ”

(Eph 4:12-13). These are apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers. If you have within yourself a desire not only to grow in grace yourself but to help others to do the same, then you should give serious thought to going to seminary. Helping others to grow in their faith and in their knowledge of Christ necessarily involves an element of teaching (whether formal or informal). Seminary is specifically intended to help equip teachers so that they are ready for the opportunities that God will bring their way.

4. Desire to embrace a period of preparation.

In Galatians 1:15-19, the apostle Paul recounts how after the Lord “reveal[ed] his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles,” he didn’t immediately start preaching the good news. Instead, he “went away into Arabia; and returned again to Damascus.” It was three years later, according to Paul’s own testimony, that he finally made it to Jerusalem and met with Peter and James, the Lord’s brother. Now, we don’t know for sure when Paul left to go to Arabia and when he would have returned to Damascus. It seems likely, given Paul’s testimony in Galatians, that he would have left Damascus immediately after his conversion to Christ, which takes place in Acts 9:1-19a. It also seems likely that the events of vv. 19b-22 don’t take place until after Paul returns from Arabia.

This would mean that Paul doesn’t begin his preaching ministry right away. Some amount of time passed between his conversion and call to preach and his taking up that charge and actually beginning to do so. We don’t know exactly how long this would have been. It could have been the full three years that Paul mentions in Galatians 1. Or it could have been a slightly shorter amount of time. The point is that Paul believed his ministry of proclaiming Christ to the lost was so important that he needed time to prepare. And while we don’t know exactly what Paul was doing in Arabia and Damascus before he began preaching, it seems obvious that he was meeting with Jesus. That is Paul’s whole argument in Galatians 1. He received his message from Christ, not from any human being, whether apostle or not, and got this message before he ever consulted with any other person.

While Paul was in Arabia, therefore, he met with the Lord, and the Lord equipped him to be able to return to Damascus and “proclaim...Jesus” and “confound...the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Christ” (Acts 9:20, 22). When we remember that Paul was a Pharisee, educated “at the feet of Gamaliel according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers” (Acts 22:3), we can guess that much of what Christ would have revealed to Paul in Arabia was exactly what He disclosed to His disciples after the resurrection: “beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself” and “opened their minds to understand...everything written about” himself “in the Law of Moses” (Luke 24:27, 44, 45). In other words, Jesus equipped Paul for his future ministry, and Paul explicitly tells us that he takes time for this preparation before he ever started preaching.

We tend to minimize the importance of preparation today. We do this in at least two ways: one, we seek to get as many workers as we can into the harvest as quickly as possible, and, in doing so, we overlook or de-prioritize the importance of preparation; and, two, we prioritize our current ministry over our preparation, because we are convinced that action is better than inactivity. In regard to the first, I would point out that a desire to send workers into the harvest is a tremendously positive thing. We certainly don’t want to lose that. But if our urgency precludes or minimizes preparation beforehand, we are not only out of step with Paul, but we are also overestimating our own importance and underestimating the tremendous weight of responsibility that is on the shoulders of all who proclaim the good news. James reminds us that “not many” should seek to become teachers, because “we who teach will be judged with greater strictness” (James 3:1). The weight of the responsibility of telling others about Jesus needs to be maintained as a balance to our desire to send workers into the harvest as quickly as we can. We need to remember that if those workers are not adequately prepared, they will do more harm than good.

In regard to the second way we minimize preparation, I would remind us that preparation is never inactivity; it is practice that ensures optimal performance when it counts most. We wouldn’t dream of sending our kids into

a baseball or football game without any practice or preparation at all or with just the minimum amount of practice. No, we invest in private coaches and summer camps, sparing no expense to give our kids the best opportunity to be successful when it matters. In sports, we understand that the will to succeed is only as important as the desire to prepare. But, for some reason, in the church, we minimize this reality, or we Christianize it.

We minimize preparation because, as someone once said, we grossly overestimate what God will do in one year and grossly underestimate what he will do in twenty. In other words, we fail to see that God ordinarily works very slowly in people's lives. So we believe that ministry today is far more important and more urgent than ministry in five years or ten years.

But Paul didn't share these tendencies. He believed in preparation and sought it before he embarked on his preaching ministry. That's how important his ministry was. It demanded preparation. Do see ministry that way? Do you desire preparation? Do you have a desire to go to seminary? Do you have a desire to study and to grow in your knowledge of the Bible, theology, and church history? Are you interested in the idea of spending the rest of your life teaching or writing about the things of the faith? Do you look forward to the opportunity to shepherd God's people through the ups and downs of the Christian life and to walk with them as they pass through "the valley of the shadow of death" (Ps. 23:4)?

These are a few of the questions that I was asking myself many years ago as I was wrestling with what God wanted for me. I can remember reading my Bible one morning and coming to the realization that I wanted to spend the rest of my life studying God's Word and teaching it to God's people. If you sense these same desires within yourself, then you ought to consider going to seminary. Having such desires is a necessary first step in evaluating what God would have you to do.

But what if you are unsure of how you feel? Then I would encourage you to take a seminary class to see whether or not you like it. Take it in person and for credit if you can. This will give you the fullest picture possible of what it will be like to be a student and of what it will take to finish a degree. Do you enjoy the assigned reading and the research? Do you look forward to

the lectures? Do you come alive when discussing the class material with your classmates or your friends and family? And, perhaps most importantly, does the class make you want to take another one?

GODLY WISDOM

Alongside the general principles of the Word, godly wisdom is indispensable in discerning whether or not someone should go to seminary. What advice can other Christians give us to aid us in making this decision? Do they see the same things in us that we see in ourselves? How did other men and women who chose to go to seminary before us make their decisions to go? What things did they find most helpful in making their decisions?

We spoke a lot about our desires in the preceding section. But here it needs to be said that desires alone are not enough. For many years as a kid, I had the desire to play professional football. I studied the game, I watched it all the time, and I played it as much as I could, even if it meant playing by myself. I even had some external confirmation from classmates and friends who would tell me how fast I was or how good my hands were or how difficult I was to tackle. But that was in 5th and 6th grade! And a lot happened—or didn't happen, in my case—after that. I am not playing professional football today. I didn't even play in high school. In spite of the fact that I wanted to play, I just didn't have what it takes to do so. There is an old saying that goes like this: "you can't put in what God has left out." That is certainly true for me. God didn't give me the size, speed, strength, or talent to play professional football. Anyone who really knew the game knew that that was the case. It didn't matter how much I wanted to play; it didn't matter how good I thought I was; I walked away from the sport knowing that God wasn't calling me to it. The counsel of others around me helped me to see this clearly for myself.

The same thing is true in regard to our question about seminary. Desire to go to seminary or to preach and teach alone is not enough. It's not even enough to have one or two others tell you that you should go. You need the

collective wisdom of those closest to you and those who are serving alongside of you in the church. You need the counsel of others who understand the game—who have played it themselves—and know what it takes to make it. This, along with the internal desire, is what it looks like to be called by God.

I would encourage you, therefore, in the first place, to talk to those who know you best. If you are married, ask your spouse. If you have kids, talk to them. Ask your parents and your closest friends. Ask them what they see in you. Do they see a desire to study the Bible and to teach it? Have they noticed an uncommon ability within you to understand, apply, and communicate the Word of God? Do they see a gift for making difficult Bible passages easy to understand? Have they witnessed a tenderness within you toward God's people? Or a knack for sharing the gospel with others?

This was one of the most helpful things for me in my own journey. My wife and close friends all told me that I should go to seminary. Whenever I taught Sunday School or led a Bible study, people would come up to me afterwards and encourage me to go. My pastor was instrumental in this process as well. He had obviously been down the road I was considering. He encouraged me to test my gifts, to put myself out there and to try different things to see how God's people responded. So, I started teaching 11th grade Sunday School at my church. I taught with another friend of mine. He immediately told me that he thought I needed to go to seminary. Several young people in the class told me the same thing too. I started going to the hospital to visit people and calling on church visitors in their homes. I became the president of my Sunday School class and took on responsibility for the spiritual direction of the group. I began leading a Bible study as well. In each context I kept receiving feedback from God's people that indicated they perceived I was gifted in these kinds of ministries and should consider going to seminary. The collective testimony from all of these sources was confirmation of what I was already feeling within myself. It helped me to see that I wasn't crazy for thinking of leaving a well-paying job with a great future in order to go to back to school.

If you are sensing a desire to go to seminary because the general principles of God's Word have led you to that point, and if those around you

are encouraging you in this direction as well, then I think you should go. You don't have to have everything all figured out before you do. God will answer all your questions in good time. And He will use your classes, your classmates, and your professors to do it. You also don't have to have every detail sorted out before you start. God will provide for you as you move forward. Pray, and step out in faith. Ask largely or, in the words of the psalmist, "open your mouth wide," because the Lord promises that He "will fill it" (Ps. 81:10). Take Him at His word. Walk by faith and not by sight. And, as you do, my prayer will be that our great God and King will use you mightily for decades to come, all for the praise of His glorious grace.

CHAPTER 2

Will seminary be worth it?

Attending seminary obviously requires a lot of resources. It requires significant time resources, in the first place. All of our degrees take multiple years to complete. The M.Div. at RTS—our main pastoral ministry degree—requires almost as many hours as an undergraduate degree at a four-year university. Even our shortest programs require twice as many credit hours as many MBA programs do. But our degrees are not just long. They are also quite challenging. I have had several attorneys who have taken my classes and have told me that their RTS classes have been among the most difficult courses they have ever taken at any level. What is more, seminary students will usually have to complete these course requirements while juggling many other commitments—family, work, church, and friends—which are all competing for their time and attention.

Seminary, in the second place, also requires significant energy resources. Each class will have a significant amount of assigned reading that needs to be completed (we average around 400 pages per credit hour per class), papers that need to be written (almost always at least one per class), and tests that need to be studied for and taken. These things come on top of the other demands for a student's energy, things mentioned above like family, work, and church. When a student is juggling these other responsibilities, their seminary studies usually get squeezed in at the end of the day. That's the way it was for me anyway. After working and going to class during the day, and

sometimes into the evening, I would spend time with my wife and kids and, only then, would I give myself to my studies. I didn't want seminary to take me away from my wife and kids. I didn't want to put my other relationships on hold for 3 or 4 years. That usually meant that I only slept 3-4 hours each night before the alarm went off early the next morning, and I had to do it all over again.

In the third place, seminary also requires significant financial resources. Tuition and books can quite obviously place additional stress on an already-stressed budget. At RTS we strive to keep our tuition as low as we possibly can for this very reason, and we raise money from generous ministry partners to make up the difference each year. What is more, almost all of our students are receiving financial aid. They cannot afford even the lower amount of tuition that we charge. That is a product of a number of factors: one, the cost of living has escalated dramatically over the last 5 years, while salaries and wages have simply not kept pace; and, two, most prospective students are either currently serving in ministry or soon will be, and ministry positions historically pay significantly less than most secular jobs do. As a result, most of our students don't have extra room in their budget to pay for tuition, books, and extra gas money to get to campus for class and back home again several times a week.

Given the costs involved in going to seminary, how can anyone know if it is worth the investment? What exactly will seminary do for you? How will it help you in your future ministry? Will it be worth the time, effort, and sacrifice that it will require?

I can't pretend to answer these questions definitively for every person out there. But I can share with you what seminary did for me. That will hopefully be enough to help you evaluate whether or not it is worth your time, energy, and sacrifice. Before I get to that, however, let me first say that I understand just how demanding this journey will be for all who are considering it. When I started in seminary, I was married with one young child and another on the way. We had just moved into an old house that desperately needed to be renovated. I was working full-time at a local church as a ministry intern (making around 90% less than I had been in my secular job). And

I enrolled as a full-time student taking 12 or more hours every semester. So, I know firsthand that seminary will be a challenging time for everyone who chooses this route. I didn't sleep much. I didn't have a lot of extra time. We didn't have much extra money. But I can confidently say that it was worth every sacrifice I made. Let me tell you why. Quite simply, seminary prepared me for a lifetime of ministry like nothing else could. It gave me knowledge and wisdom, a platform for ministry, incredible growth, well-roundedness, and a network of relationships that I have been relying on ever since.

1. Knowledge and wisdom.

One of the things I loved most about my time at RTS—yes, I too am an RTS graduate!—is that the curriculum focused primarily on English Bible and theology. I got more hours of Bible in my degree (not counting theology, history, languages, etc.) than some schools have in their entire degrees. When we take Greek and Hebrew requirements into consideration—a must for anyone who feels called to communicate God's Word to God's people—RTS requires as much as five times the Bible requirements of many other seminaries. And in terms of theology, RTS offers as much as four times what many other seminaries require. These things are in addition to the 10 elective hours in our degree program, which can be taken in Bible classes, in languages, or in theology.

What this means is that, when I graduated, I knew the content of my Bible better than most seminary graduates. I knew what I believed and why and could communicate it simply and plainly. Many students are tempted to cut corners at this point and to choose a seminary that offers the bare minimum. I am so thankful that the school I chose offered me more. The knowledge that I received has been invaluable over the years to my preaching, teaching, and writing.

It is possible that I may have been able to pick up many of the things I learned in seminary on my own, given enough time and the right resources to guide me. But seminary gave me the opportunity to glean from years and years—even decades—of study, reflection, and experience on the part of many different men and to do so in a fraction of the time it otherwise would

have taken. I was able to stand on their shoulders and to see farther. I didn't have to reinvent the wheel. I could borrow and build upon the knowledge base of those who had gone before me. As a result, the church received a higher quality minister, a better trained shepherd, a more knowledgeable leader than they would have otherwise. This is one reason why I regularly say that as the seminary goes, so the church of the next generation goes. What I mean is that the church of tomorrow will only be as strong, as faithful, as mature, as courageous, and as gracious as the seminaries who are training its leaders. Without seminaries, each generation is forced to start over, to reinvent the wheel for themselves. And, when that is the case, the church suffers.

2. A platform for ministry.

In an essay entitled "Meditation in a Toolshed," CS Lewis argues that there are things in our lives that cannot be scientifically or objectively defined. They must be experienced in order to be fully understood. Take love for instance. Scientists can observe love in a married couple in a laboratory and can watch what happens in their brains and in their bodies physiologically. They can describe what they see, but they will only be able to describe it physiologically until and unless they experience it for themselves. The same is true of pain. It too must be experienced in order to be fully understood. The words of the scientist who describes love and pain without ever experiencing them will ring hollow to all who really understand what they feel like.

A similar thing can be said of all who attempt to minister, especially at a younger age, without going to seminary. These individuals come across like scientists who attempt to speak about love and pain without experiencing them. Seminary gives us credibility. It gives the people we are ministering to the reassurance to know that we have been through a comprehensive course of training and have passed it. We wouldn't dream of submitting ourselves to major surgery at the hands of someone who never went to medical school or who went to a substandard one. Why would we think that a "physician of the soul," as pastors and ministry leaders used to be called, should be any different?

Seminary has given me a platform for a lifetime of ministry. It has given me the credibility I have needed to speak into people's lives, even from a young age. It has given every sermon I have preached and every book or article I have written a measure of credibility as well, because my credentials accompany me everywhere I go and are listed on everything I write. Not many of us would listen to a speech on the human body that was given by someone who has no qualifications whatsoever other than that they are interested in the subject. And if we did choose to listen to it, we would probably put less stock in what is said than if the speech-giver had graduated from a prestigious and reputable medical school. Reputations matter. Credibility matters. Platforms matter. Without them, we are simply another voice among many clamoring to be heard.

3. Incredible growth.

Seminary was also a time of incredible growth for me. I had never before received so much Bible teaching in so compressed a period of time in my life. For most of my time in seminary, I heard 5 or 6 sermons every week in addition to my classes in which the Bible was expounded and to the other sermons I listened to as I was driving in my car. As a result of sitting under so much rich exposition, I grew like wildfire. I can still remember many occasions, both in chapel and in class, in which God was dealing with me powerfully in and through His Word. I had never experienced anything like it before and haven't experienced anything like it since.

But seminary also gave me access to students and professors who personally aided in my Christian growth. Most, if not all, of my professors had served or were serving as pastors. That is actually another of the strengths of RTS. We typically only hire men who have pastoral ministry experience, because we believe it takes pastors to train pastors and ministry leaders. As a result, the men who were shepherding me knew how to come alongside of me and to encourage maturity in me.

This was not just my experience in the classroom. I sought out most of my professors outside of class and asked them to go to lunch with me regularly. I wanted to hear their stories first hand and to understand what

motivated and animated them. I wanted to hear about their experiences in ministry and about their hardships and failures as well. Much of what I learned during these lunches has remained with me to this day. Some of the lessons I have repeated over the years to my own students, precisely because I have found them so helpful.

4. Well-roundedness.

Seminary also gave me a well-roundedness. In other words, it exposed me to a variety of professors and students who were all different than I was. Some of my professors and fellow students had tremendous hearts for the Lord; some were intellectual giants; and some were the godliest people that I have ever known. The variety of these influences helped me to not be lop-sided in my Christian experience. Since it is true that we become like what we are around, I am thankful that I was around such a variety of influences. It has made all the difference in my ministry over the years, and seminary provided this opportunity for me.

5. An invaluable network.

Besides all these things, seminary has also given me a network of friends and associates to call whenever I have needed help or guidance. When the church I was serving was destroyed in Hurricane Katrina, I relied on this network. When the same church needed to do a capital campaign, I relied on this network. And when we were faced with our first major discipline case in the church, I again relied on this network. No seminary can possibly teach its students everything they will ever need to know for a lifetime of ministry. Our degrees would have to be three or four times longer than they already are just to come close to fulfilling this charge. No, seminary gives us the tools that we need so that we can spend the rest of our lives learning and growing and building upon what we have already received. One of the biggest tools it gives us is a network of friends and associates who can help us when we get stumped.

The contacts I made during seminary have also provided many writing and speaking opportunities for me over the years, in addition to new ministry

opportunities. The three ministry positions I have served in since graduating from RTS have all come to me as a result of the network that I established while I was in school. Many of the conferences and preaching opportunities that I have been privileged to participate in have come to me as a direct result of the network I established in seminary. This is another one of the most important things seminary does for its students.

Seminary education has never been more important than it is today. That is because the Christian worldview, which has long been the dominant worldview in many places around the globe, is no longer dominant. For almost 250 years, the Christian worldview has held sway in my home country of the United States. But that is rapidly changing. Some would say that it has already changed. The point is, given where we currently are culturally, we need, like never before, men and women who are better trained for ministry than they ever have been. If there was a time when seminary was not worth the investment, that day has long since passed. Ask any other seminary graduate who is actively serving in ministry. My guess is that he or she will confirm at least many of the things that I have shared here.

CHAPTER 3

How should I approach my studies?

Okay, so you have decided to go to seminary. What should you do now? Yes, you should certainly sign up for classes and begin chipping away at the requirements for your degree. But how should you go about doing this? How should you approach your studies? Should you try to go part-time and take one or two classes every semester? Should you focus on taking as many online classes as you can, because you think they will be more flexible than traditional in-person classes? Should you quit your job and devote yourself to your studies full time? Or is there some middle option that would work better than everything else?

Some students try to take one or two classes every semester. They frequently have secular, high-paying jobs and families that are depending on them. They believe that God is calling them to seminary, but they also realize they have many other responsibilities that they need to juggle. These students usually end up taking a large number of classes online, because they find them to be the most convenient for their schedule. Online lectures are easier for them to squeeze into their already busy schedules without having to take away from their other responsibilities. They have found that taking one or two classes every semester is a manageable load. They can grow and gain the benefits of seminary education without impacting the flow of their schedules and without significantly sacrificing their standard of living.

The downside of this approach, however, is that these students usually end up taking 10-15 years to graduate. Because they are squeezing seminary in among their other responsibilities, they frequently find that there is now less time for their other responsibilities. This inevitably begins to wear upon them and upon their families. The pressure builds and the stresses mount until the student either stops taking classes or makes some other kind of important life-change. Ten to 15 years in this pressure-packed situation is a long time to wait before regaining some semblance of normal. What could be manageable for most people for a handful of years becomes unbearable for many students and for their families. What is more, the heavy emphasis on online classes isolates students and removes them from the classroom. It minimizes their interactions with their fellow students and their professors and, thus, limits the network-forming opportunities that they have. This functions as a demotivator for students actually finishing their degrees. They feel disconnected and stressed, pulled in too many directions. It's a recipe for disaster.

Some part-time students are working in ministry, which tends to offer them more flexibility and the potential to avoid many of the pitfalls outlined above. But far too frequently these students are not convinced that theological preparation is necessary. They see it as a nice option, something extra that will help them in their ministry if and when they are able to take advantage of it. So, they again try to add their studies into an already full schedule. They choose not to cut back on ministry or to take advantage of the flexibility it offers. And, once again, when push comes to shove and everything else in life gets to be too much, seminary is usually the thing that gets dropped.

Some students, however, choose to leave their secular jobs. They take on ministry opportunities but limit them to a supplementary role. They see seminary as an end in itself, a chance to invest in their future ministry effectiveness. So they jump in with both feet and complete full-time course loads every semester. They may well sacrifice financial security, short-term ministry success, and comfort to do this. But they feel called of God to do it, and they know that seminary is where God wants them to be. They know that they are making an investment that will pay dividends for the rest of their lives.

Whatever kind of student you will need to be is between you and the Lord. I have added this chapter not to make anyone feel bad about themselves and their circumstances, but to get all students to thoughtfully consider how they will approach their time in seminary. I realize that each person's life is their own. Each of us will need to make the decisions that we believe will be best for us and for our families. But I don't want anyone simply to slide into one of the categories I have just outlined. I want each student to consider for themselves what option is best. To that end, I have several points of counsel that I'd like to share with you as you work through what seminary will look like for you.

1. If possible, go full time.

Not everyone has the opportunity to go full time, but, if you can, I would certainly recommend it. Oftentimes the obstacles that are keeping us from going full time are things that we have put in our own way: we like our current standard of living and don't want to downsize or we've worked hard to get where we are and don't want to lose that progress. Bottom line in these cases is that we aren't really convinced that God wants us to go to seminary, or we aren't really convinced that seminary is necessary for our future ministry.

If you are in the first camp, you may well benefit from going back and reading chapter 1 again. Once you've done that, you should consider exploring your own desires more fully and then putting yourself in as many ministry situations as possible that will allow as many counselors as possible to speak into your life. The only way any of us can be certain of God's calling in our lives is to balance our inward desires with external confirmations.

If you are in the second camp, you would probably benefit from reading chapter 2 again. No one that I know of questions whether or not medical school is a good investment for doctors. I've never heard of anyone even thinking about serving as a physician or a surgeon without first devoting significant time and resources to their training before they ever begin. Part of the reason for this, no doubt, is that the government won't allow doctors to practice without being trained and then certified. But part of the reason is

also because we readily understand how complex the human body is and the ailments and injuries that we are susceptible to. We know doctors cannot be effective without significant investment in preparation.

But what does it say about our view of ministry, the value of the human soul, and the complexity of the spiritual ailments and injuries that we are susceptible to that we think ministry leaders don't need an equivalent amount of preparation as do medical doctors? We know we can't do medicine without preparation, but we think we can do ministry without it. We have lost sight of the weightiness of our task, the significance of the human soul, and the responsibility entrusted to us as leaders in and among God's people (see, e.g., James 3:1; 1 Cor. 3:10-17; 4:1-2; 2 Cor. 5:18-21). And the church suffers the most because of it.

If you know that God wants you to be in seminary and that seminary is a necessary investment in your future effectiveness in ministry, then what is holding you back from committing to being full time or close to it? Let me challenge you to trust God and to step out in faith. Walking by faith (2 Cor. 5:7) means that you and I will not always see the way forward. That's walking by sight. Are you concerned about finances? Remember that our God owns all the gold and all the silver (Hag. 2:8). He owns the cattle on a thousand hills (Ps. 50:10). His arm is not too short (Isa. 59:1). Are you worried about what you'll have to give up? Remember that the Lord and His steadfast love are "better than life" (Ps. 63:3). Remember too what Jesus said to those who had left everything to follow Him:

Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands...and in the age to come eternal life (Mark 10:29-30).

No one worries about what future doctors have to give up in order to go to medical school for four years full time and then do a residency program and possibly a fellowship or two after that. They know that the financial rewards they will reap in the future will be well worth the sacrifices they have had to endure. How much more for those of us who are training for ministry.

We sacrifice not for a financial reward that lasts only for a lifetime but for a spiritual reward that will last forever.

When I went to seminary, I was privileged to receive a paid internship at a local church that was specially designed to work around my class schedule. I was required to work 20 hours a week during the school year—which allowed me to schedule classes during the day in the fall and spring—and then 40 hours a week in the summers—which allowed me to get a little break from year-round classes and to focus for a short season on ministry work every year. I know I worked a lot more than what the church required; that's the nature of ministry. But that too was good training for me. Learning to say no to good things is a skill that every ministry leader needs to appropriate. The salary I received for this work wasn't tremendous, but we made it work as a family of four. Granted, we did have to sell our house and downsize our standard of living considerably. But the Lord provided in very visible ways for our needs.

So many of us never see the Lord provide visibly for our needs because we never really have any needs. We live our lives walking by sight. We know where the money is going to come from to pay for the things we need. But when we step out in faith, we have to depend on the Lord to provide for us, because we don't usually know where the money is going to come from. I am not talking about being foolish. I certainly wouldn't recommend anyone to buy a house they know they can't afford. We had most of the basics, like our mortgage, food, water, electricity, and gas taken care of, but we didn't have extra money for clothing, for eating out, for home or car repairs, and for tuition and books.

During my third year in seminary the transmission in my car went out, and we needed \$2600 to replace it. We didn't have any money to put toward a new transmission, because everything I was making was going toward our monthly necessities as a family. So my wife and I prayed and gave the issue to the Lord. And over the next couple weeks, God provided \$2600 for me to get the new transmission. The money came from many different people and was given in many different ways. I walked into church one day and found a handwritten note in my mail slot with \$300 in cash paperclipped to it. I

received a note in the mail from someone who had recently heard me preach at their church. The note thanked me for my ministry and attached a check for \$400. I went running with a friend who lived around the corner, and while we were running he told me that God had laid me and my family on his heart, and he wanted to know what he could do to help. I told him about our transmission problem, and he immediately gave us \$600.

We got to experience God's visible provision for our needs on a number of occasions in seminary. Why? Because we needed Him. We had stepped out in faith not knowing where the necessary funding was going to come from. We did so, because we believed it was what God wanted us to do. Our inward desires told us that, and these desires were confirmed by the testimony of many in the church. But most of us never experience God's visible provision in our lives, because most of us don't put ourselves in a place of dependency. We walk by sight and not by faith. Going full time in seminary is a great way to practice walking by faith. Is it easy? No it is not. Is it worth it? Yes, a million times over.

There are other benefits to being a full-time student as well. The closer you are to being full time, the more you will get out of your seminary experience—all others things being equal. You will build better and stronger relationships with your classmates. You will cultivate closer relationships with your professors. You will graduate in the shortest time possible. And you will oftentimes get better financial aid as well, because donors like to give to help students who are committed and motivated. In Atlanta, for instance, we have several full scholarships that are reserved exclusively for those students who are full time or almost full time. If a seminary is able to provide on-campus housing for its students, that too is usually prioritized for those who are full time.

2. Take more classes than you think you can handle.

No matter the benefits, some students just will not be able to go full time. Uppermost in my mind here are those students who come from churches in a specific cultural context that tends to have incredibly high expectations for them. These churches typically expect students to work as though

they aren't students and don't have any other obligations at all. They hold ministers and the ministry in such high regard that they believe ministry candidates should have their mettle tested. It is an arduous rite of passage that they are convinced protects the church from men who aren't really called by God. Students from this particular context are often forced to take a lighter load in seminary just to survive. There may well be other exceptions to my comments about being full-time, but this is one that readily comes to mind.

For those who just can't go full time, for whatever reason, my counsel is always to take more classes than you think you can. Rather than limiting yourself to only one or two classes every semester, a load that you know you can handle and still get an A in every class, I always encourage students to take three or four classes. I do this for several reasons.

First, we tend to rise to the level of the expectations that are upon us. When the expectations are low, we don't stretch ourselves. We don't have to. We can meet low expectations without really trying. Real growth comes from being pushed beyond what we think we can handle. One of my favorite quotes—it's one that I keep taped to the bookshelf in front of the desk in my private office—is from Henry Drummond, the 19th century Scottish evangelist. The quote goes like this: "Unless a man [or woman] undertakes more than he possibly can do, he will never do all that he can." This means that students who only take the course load that they know they can handle will never reach their potential. They will leave money on the table every time.

Second, taking more classes also allows students to graduate more quickly than they would otherwise. As we have outlined above, seminary is a difficult season in life. Why would anyone choose voluntarily to prolong this season of hardship? What is more, we have actually found that the longer it takes someone to finish a degree, the less likely it is that they will actually graduate. Something always comes up to get in the way.

Third, taking more classes than you think you can handle will put you into a situation in which you will learn important life lessons. You will not be able to do all the work that every class requires (if you can, then you're not taking enough classes). You will have to make decisions about which assignments you will complete and which ones you simply won't be able to.

You will have to learn how to say no to good things. This is an important lesson for ministry, because ministry will always demand more of you than you can handle. If you can't learn to say no to good opportunities, you will end up losing your health, your family and friends, and possibly even your sanity. Taking more classes than you think you can handle puts you in a place where you have to learn this lesson while you are still in seminary.

Once when I was a student nearing the end of a semester, my pastor (and boss) stopped by my house. When I answered the door, he must have been able to tell by the look on my face that I was overwhelmed with papers and preparation for final exams. He shared something with me that I have never forgotten. It wasn't original to him. He got it from a mutual friend of ours in Scotland (and I'm sure that mutual friend got it from one of his mentors, and so on). He said, "Sometimes something worth doing is worth doing poorly." When I didn't understand what he was trying to tell me, he explained by pointing out that sometimes we don't have the time to do our best work on something. If we had all the time in the world or if this was the only project we were working on, we could take our time and do our absolute best. But when we are busy, we just don't have the time to give. We should still do our best, but it will not be our absolute best; it will be our best under the circumstances. Compared to our absolute best, it will be a poor job, relatively speaking. But sometimes a "poor" job is all we can do, and the project is too important for us to wait until we have the opportunity to do our absolute best. Thus, sometimes something worth doing is worth doing poorly.

On three different occasions when I was serving as a pastor I had three funerals in one week within the congregation. Each of those funerals required time with the family beforehand, planning and coordinating the funeral and graveside services, and preparing a new sermon. Each time, these things came in addition to my normal weekly responsibilities: two Sunday sermons to prepare, two Sunday worship services to plan, a Sunday school lesson and three Bible studies to get ready for, and my regular administrative and pastoral counseling obligations to fulfill. If these weeks had come after I had been serving in ministry for 15 years, it would probably have been considerably easier to manage, but, as it is, they came within my first few

years of ordination. I didn't have time to do my absolute best on everything. Some of the sermons or Bible studies got far less preparation than I would have liked. It was good for me to stand up before people and do a "poor" job (less than my absolute best). In each case I was grateful for the lesson I had learned in seminary that sometimes something worth doing is worth doing poorly.

When you take more classes than you think you can handle, you are putting yourself into a situation where you will not be able to do your absolute best. You will have to be okay with a "poor" job. You will have to learn the lesson that I learned in seminary. If you only take what you know you can handle, you will be forced to learn this lesson much later in life when you are finished with seminary. But I want you to learn it earlier, when the stakes are much lower. Take advantage of this learning opportunity while you are in seminary. Your future self will thank you for it.

3. Take the long view.

Far too many students have a short-term outlook. They think about what is "best" for today rather than what is best for five or ten or twenty years from now. This can manifest itself in at least two ways in students: one, they are oftentimes tempted to choose a seminary that requires less—sometimes much less—over one that requires more; and, two, they frequently give priority to online classes over in-person classes. I want to talk briefly about each of these.

I have a friend who went to a different seminary, one that is relatively unknown and that only requires a fraction of the classes that many seminaries require. A few years ago, this friend told me that he is embarrassed about his choice of seminary, and he wishes that he would have gone to RTS. He was even considering coming to RTS to get the same degree he got previously elsewhere.

My point in telling this story is not to convince you that RTS is the only good option out there. It isn't. There are several quality seminaries around that are seeking to hold their standards high and to do what is in the long-term best interests of their students and the churches that they will

serve. My point is to try to convince you to take the long view when choosing a seminary. It is easy to allow tuition price or the length of a degree to sway you. Don't. This friend of mine wishes he wouldn't have. He wishes he would have given more attention to the quality of his education and how well equipped he would have been for ministry down the road.

Most of us would not choose to have a surgical procedure of any kind at the hands of someone who took the cheap and easy route through medical school (if that was even possible), someone who only had a third of the credit hours in their course of study as other doctors had. Why would we think that cheap and easy is more acceptable for pastors and ministry leaders? Why do we think that seminary preparation is less critical?

But the same thing applies to online classes too. Most of us wouldn't want a doctor operating on us who only took online classes at his or her medical school. We almost universally recognize the benefits of in-person education over online. So why do we find it appealing in seminary? Because it is easier and more convenient. We are prioritizing the short-term benefit over the long-term payout. We need to remember the example of my friend and make decision so as not to have regrets.

I do not, in any way, want to minimize the sacrifice and costs that are involved in taking in-person rather than online seminary classes. I understand that it costs students more time, money, and effort to drive to campus each week for class, when they could just sit at home and not have to deal with the traffic or spend the extra money on gas. And I acknowledge that a few online classes here and there aren't going to alter the quality of someone's education significantly. What is more, I know that some students, because they live a long distance from any seminary campus and aren't able to move any closer, are facing a choice between online classes and no classes at all. I understand all these things. I just want to encourage students to take as many in-person classes as they possibly can. It is better for students and churches alike.

For those of you who have to take more online classes than you would like, there are things that you can do to improve the quality of your education. You can try to build a relationship with the professor of each class and

to ask questions whenever you can. You can form a cohort of friends (even electronically) who can all take the same classes together and discuss the content among yourselves. You can ask the professor for additional reading assignments that will help you fill in some holes that may be created by the format of the class. Even if you read these things after you finish the class, it would still help you immensely. You can listen to the lectures again several times after the class is over just to refresh your memory or to pick up things you may have missed.

Whatever you decide and whatever you need to do to make seminary work, let me encourage you to focus on more than just filling your mind with content. If seminary was just about the content, we could give you a flash drive with all the lecture notes and be done with you. I wouldn't be trying so hard to convince you to come to campus and to build relationships with your professors and fellow students. Seminary isn't simply about filling your mind. It's about reaching your heart and changing your life as well. Real and lasting impact in ministry doesn't come merely from what you know. To be sure, what you know is important. But it takes more than that to have influence over the long haul. Real and lasting impact also doesn't come from talent alone. No doubt, talent is important too. But the world is filled with talented people who make no real impact upon anyone. Real and lasting impact in ministry comes from Christlikeness. The more like Christ we are, the more of an influence we will have in the lives of others.

I am reminded of the words that Robert Murray M'Cheyne wrote to a friend of his who was preparing to minister among the Jews living in Germany in the 19th century. The friend was giving himself to learning the German language and other things that would enable him to minister effectively. M'Cheyne challenged him to focus on more important matters in his letter, which is dated October 2, 1840. It reads as follows:

I trust you will have a pleasant and profitable time in Germany. I know you will apply hard to German; but do not forget the culture of the inner man, I mean of the heart. How diligently the cavalry officer keeps his sabre clean and sharp; every stain he rubs off with the greatest care. Remember you are God's sword, His instrument, I trust a chosen vessel unto Him to

bear His name. In great measure, according to the purity and perfection of the instrument will be the success. It is not great talents that God blesses, so much as great likeness to Jesus. A holy minister is an awful weapon in the hand of God.

Seminary, at its best, helps you to focus on “the culture of the inner man,” to give heed to the heart and not just to content or talent, because it “is not great talents that God blesses, so much as great likeness to Jesus.” My hope and prayer is that your seminary experience will do just that, to the praise of our great God and King.



Reformed Theological Seminary
Atlanta, Georgia