

Are seminaries necessary for the well-being of the church?

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The perspicuity of Scripture is a wonderful thing. God, in His infinite goodness, has provided a revelation of Himself in Holy Scripture that is capable of being understood by all who will read it. The ability for all men and women to personally read, comprehend, and apply Scripture, which in turn develops a life marked by growth and maturity in Christ Jesus, has been an essential element for a healthy church since the days of the Reformation. It is largely for this reason that reformer Martin Luther uttered his famous words at Worms, "Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise!"

The church must be careful not to waste the gift of Scripture's clarity. Since all believers are capable of understanding the teachings of the Bible, regardless of their educational history or theological experience, then one of the critical roles of the church is to get people digging into the Word, teaching them how to study the Bible and how to apply it to their lives. The church needs to embrace the importance of mentoring with the Bible as the central player in all discussions. Bruce Metzger in his book "Tell the Truth" argues that one-on-one mentoring and discipleship has tragically become an area overlooked by many churches today. Thus, there is great benefit to the church in the Bible's accessibility to all people and the ability for all to understand.

And yet not all will understand at the same level. I have a 4 month old son and an 18 month old daughter. On occasion they will watch a program on television designed to engage their minds in a creative learning experience. My 4 month old loves the program and enjoys the music, the colors, the puppets, and the overall feel of the show. My 18 month old loves all those things as well, and yet is able to appreciate on a broader level the interaction and story the puppets are conveying. Both are receiving the message, but one is receiving it more fully.

This is why seminaries are necessary for the well-being of the church. The perspicuity of Scripture does not negate the need for those whose well of understanding runs deeper than others to teach and bring along fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. That deeper well is best made possible by a formal theological training from a solid seminary that teaches the whole counsel of Scripture. When you consider the unnerving words of James as he writes about the power of the tongue in James 3:1, there is an implied responsibility that teachers in the church need to equip themselves as best as possible. While the local church is a fine and critical starting place, it is not the final means of fully equipping teachers and pastors for their most effective service in "making others wise for salvation" and "training [them] in righteousness." Our faithful servants of old in church history, especially in the 16th and 17th centuries, would have been concerned about today's primary means of theological education and training; that being Sunday School. Although there is certainly great benefit in Sunday School and its design, it is nevertheless a system where laypeople, who are largely untrained, are responsible for correctly teaching the doctrines of the Bible to the church. In this way, there is more often than not a fairly low standard for depth of understanding and practical outworking.

So, while affirming that a seminary education does not provide a greater sense of "worth" to a teacher or pastor, and while affirming that understanding Scripture is not dependent on a seminary classroom, the overall health and spiritual growth of a local congregation is best served by those who are continuing to learn and grow both in their theological maturity and in their practical, daily ministry involvement. Those elements are best nurtured and developed through a seminary education.