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EXPECTATIONS ABOUT YOUR SEMINARY EXPERIENCE

Dearest Students in the Son of God,

Someone once said to me, ‘Seminary never prepared me for what I faced in the ministry.’ In his case the minister had been trained at a very sound seminary, so I wondered what he meant. I never felt that way about my own seminary (which was not Reformed Theological Seminary, but another biblically-sound seminary). What I learned was that this man was lamenting his situation out of a different set of expectations for ministerial education and preparation. And in this sense, I would argue that one should know the right purpose of a seminary education.

Your seminary is literally a seedbed for pastors (and for missionaries and others, but primarily, by virtue of the RTS charter, we are about training future pastors). Seminary must be seen in a more comprehensive way than merely by what you receive



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in the classroom. Of course, bringing that about will involve initiative by the seminary administration and faculty as well as enterprise by each student and cooperation with a local church. When this matrix of learning centers is brought together and seen as 'my seminary experience', then it should provide most (but not all) of the training one needs to begin pastoral practice according to the Scriptures.

Think of how seminary is similar to a medical school. Medical schools do not necessarily provide internships and residencies. They teach anatomy, they teach physiology, they teach the basics of medicine. In a similar way, a seminary provides the future pastor with grounding in the Word of God through Old and New Testament studies. The future pastor immerses himself in the Biblical languages because he will yet stand between God and men and women, boys and girls, with the Word of God. He will be the primary interpreter and expositor of the Word for the flock (within a plurality of eldership, but nevertheless the pastor is given this enormous role).

Since the pastor will be the repository of the sacred stories of God's dealing with the church, he must be grounded in church history. Because he is the caretaker of the hymnody and liturgy of the church he should be well taught in the theology of the worshipping life of the church. Among these and other things the seminary will teach the student about role relationships in the church and Biblical solutions for peacemaking.

In medical school, the study of anatomy alone cannot prepare a physician to begin his practice, so we must not suppose that the study of theology alone will prepare a man to practice as a pastor. He needs internships and he needs residency under a master. It is here that the student and the seminary and the church must seek ways to accomplish this critical component of pastoral preparation. While a student at a seminary will have to



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go through many hours of practical training, this cannot replace the week-to-week cycle of life in a local church.

A student in seminary needs to walk behind a senior pastor as he goes through his week. The student needs to see the pastor's work in staff meetings and in dealing with issues involving the administration of parish life. He needs to learn when he is with the pastor in deacon, session, or vestry meetings and how he governs through plurality and in meetings with others who are church leaders. Thus through sermon preparation, funerals, weddings and vigils with families waiting for loved ones to die, the future minister of the gospel completes his seminary preparation.

So, dear student, this is your residency. It will be as important as your theological training. There is no room to speak of one being more important than the other for an effective ministry in the future. Paul wrote the Pastoral Epistles and in them we find theological concepts and pastoral-theological implementation and pastoral approach to problems in the church. And so concept and praxis must be wed together in your education.

Therefore, soak up the glorious teaching you are receiving. Enjoy the relationships with your professors and with other students. Those days are meant to prepare you for a lifetime of ministry. But alongside your studies you must initiate a program of residency in which the theology gets its legs. Or as I have put it on several occasions, the funnel of ministry is filled with the entire theological encyclopedia. At the narrow end is a little girl in your congregation who is struggling with her faith, or an elder who is unhappy with your direction in evangelism, or a widow who is in pain as she approaches her first Christmas without her mate of fifty years. And there you are: their pastor. You are the one they look to for a word from God. At those moments, at the narrow end of the funnel, it must all come together. And to do that in your ministry you will need to have been well prepared.

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(I have not even touched upon your devotional life! I will save that for another letter.)

I believe that if you follow this approach, dear students, you will never look back and say, 'Seminary did not prepare me for the ministry.' Indeed, you will be blessed by your investment and prepared for a lifetime of ministry.

Commending you to Christ and the Gospel of Grace, I am

Your servant,
Mike Milton.