

Why a Seminary Education

by
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In our current day and age, many people question the need for a classical seminary education. In fact, many seem to think that a seminary education is at best an extravagance, and at worst irrelevant and harmful. Many denominations are under pressure to adopt new educational models for the seminary, claiming they are more advantageous to the student, more beneficial to the churches, and better suited to our modern way of life. It would be wise, therefore, to examine the reasons for the historic seminary as an institution.

1. The classical seminary education has a long history and tradition. Tradition is very often a repository of accumulated knowledge about what works. Seminaries are designed to be seed beds for the formation of pastors. We know that seminaries in the past have produced great men of God; men who have been faithful ministers of word and sacrament; and men who have been vigorous promoters and defenders of the faith. Lutherans respect the past, and understand that traditions should not be done away with lightly. The question, then, is if anything has changed that makes the seminary system irrelevant in today's world.

2. The design of the standardized seminary curriculum is a product of many centuries of forming and educating pastors. The content of the curriculum is based upon the scriptures, and is the result of centuries of study by great men of God. The curriculum provides a broad-based professional education for men called to the ministry of word and sacrament.

The pressure to water down the curriculum or cut short a student's course of study is always present. Each student has their own challenges, and each situation is different. These challenges and differences provide constant pressure to make exceptions, to lower standards, and to reduce expectations. The advantage of a seminary system is in its inertia, in its adherence to strict standards and the slow pace of change. The seminary will gradually adapt, but is not whipped about by the vicissitudes of life.

3. The seminary serves a ritual function as a rite of passage. These rituals are like a journey, with a leave-taking, a passage, and an arrival¹. The less metaphoric and more precise description is that a systemic rite of passage would consist of a preliminal phase, (the rite of separation,) the liminal phase, (the rite of transition, where liminal means threshold,) and the postliminal phase, (the rite of incorporation.) In this context, seminary serves as a complete rite of passage, consisting of the leaving of the old life, the transition, and the incorporation into the new vocation. When a group of people pass

¹ These references are based on Arnold van Gennep's book, *The Rites of Passage*, as described in Frank C. Senn's Book, *Christian Liturgy*, p. 9.

through a rite of passage together, they experience *communitas*, a spontaneous, immediate and concrete communal bond.

4. The seminary provides a structure within which students learn to live in community. This is especially relevant in western culture with its radical individualism and egalitarianism. The seminary is a world within the world, a semi-cloistered, structured environment where men learn to live out their calling in community. The seminary process of pastoral formation gradually introduces men to ministry, allowing them to make mistakes without becoming total failures in the beginning endeavors and making a shipwreck of their faith, and even their life. When a student experiences difficulties in ministry, someone is there to absolve, to advise, to commiserate and ultimately to push the student back out into life. This teaches men to rely upon each other and upon God.

5. The seminary provides an environment where a student is exposed to a wide variety of professors. Just as no scripture is of any private interpretation, so too is pastoral formation too important to leave in the hands of any one man, or even too few men. Without direct access to our apostolic fathers, education provided through a wide variety of gifted men with varying fields of expertise, interests and experience provides a reasonable assurance of a broad and deep education, leading to properly formed pastors prepared for the ministry of word and sacrament to the body of Christ.

6. The seminary provides access to an academic research library. Such a library is both difficult to procure and expensive to maintain. The rapid expansion of the Internet has made a wide variety of resources available, but the quality and veracity of these resources is questionable. Utilizing the resources of an educated faculty and a trained library staff, the seminary can be very intentional in the development of their collection, giving access to research materials that would normally be unavailable any other way.

7. The seminary provides a setting for faculty to pursue their professional interests. Besides teaching within their fields of expertise, they are able to develop greater expertise in those areas. They have the time, the incentive, and the resources at their disposal to research and publish in their areas of expertise. The students benefit from the faculty's ever-deepening and ever-broadening expertise. Likewise the church benefits from the publication of books and essays on the wide variety of issues before the church.

Having developed these rationales for the existence of the seminary system, we should also point out a major difficulty. The institutional structure of the seminary has been described as a money-guzzling machine. The costs of procuring and maintaining real property, educational assets, and salaries for faculty and staff are quite high. It may seem that other models of education can deliver similar results at least cost, and with a smaller infrastructure. We should therefore examine these models and see if they prove to be cheaper and educationally comparable to the seminary system.

Alternate Models

One model is that of **Vocational Education**, where someone learns by doing under the watchful eye of a mentor. This model would seem to have some scriptural validity; the

O.T. prophets had their disciples, as did Jesus. But proponents of this model, pointing to the scriptures for validity, are falling prey to a legalistic Biblicism. The idea that pastors can adequately form new pastors is fundamentally flawed. First, simply being called and ordained to ministry does not make one the equal of an O.T. prophet or apostle, let alone an academician. Second, we know of only one case from scripture where the student exceeded the master, (Elisha was the student of Elijah.) Students typically know less than their teachers; disciples rarely excel their masters. Using this model would result in the gradual dumbing down of the pastorate. Although vocational education is cheaper in monetary terms, the cost of an inadequately educated and trained pastorate is incalculable.

Another model is that of **Education by Extension**, sometimes called satellite schools, where the students meet at locations dispersed around the country for short, intensive courses of study. Often this is combined with varying degrees of independent study and distance education. In its pure form, (no independent study or distance education, and offering an accredited degree,) this educational model has some advantages. Students and their families may prefer this model, as it allows them minimal disruption of their lives while they are studying for the ministry. It also minimizes the cost to the student, as they don't have to pay the expenses of moving to a new location and the attendant loss of income. The satellite seminary maintains the historic curriculum, and the instructors, being academicians, are qualified to teach their course of instruction. The question, then, is how this model compares to the traditional seminary.

While better than the vocational educational model, the extension model still falls short. The student body is limited and may change with every course. The opportunity to live in community likely does not exist. Students are exposed to a more limited pool of instructors, generally one at a time. The lack of exposure to a wide variety of gifted men with varying fields of expertise, interests and experience is problematic, and cannot provide an assurance that the education is both broad and deep. Another difficulty is the reliance upon short, intensive courses of study. Subjects that require changes in behaviors are best learned through long-term instruction, reflection and/or practice,² and behaviors are unlikely to be affected by intensive bursts of study. Also, the opportunity for serious academic research is lacking. The instruction is generally limited to the assigned texts and what is available electronically. The opportunity to follow the derivation of an idea through primary source material is simply not available without access to an academic library.

Before discussing the independent study and distance education models, we should take a moment to discuss the **Cohort Model**. In the cohort model, a group of people begin a program of education together, and stay together until completion. They are treated as a unit, a cohort, and hopefully experience *communitas*. In the cohort model, courses are taught in short, intensive bursts, combined with independent study. They also may rely on a number of practicum, where the students learn by doing, under the supervision of a professor/mentor. The cohort model thus minimizes the disruption to a member's family,

² Examples of subjects poorly suited to this style of education are Homiletics and Pastoral Counseling. The traditional model entails instruction, practice and correction, repeated several days a week, for many weeks.

encourages the development of community, and incorporates the best of independent study and vocational education.

The cohort model is best used to produce academic degrees rather than professional degrees, because the cohort model suffers from some of the same shortcomings as the extension model. Students are exposed to a more limited pool of instructors. The reliance upon short, intensive courses of study is a problem for subjects intended to produce changes in behavior, which are best learned through long-term instruction, reflection and/or practice.³ Behaviors are unlikely to be affected by intensive bursts of study, (although they may be changed through a generous practicum program implementing the intensives.) Also, the opportunity for serious academic research is lacking. The instruction is generally limited to the assigned texts and what is available electronically. The opportunity to follow the derivation of an idea through primary source material is simply not available without access to an academic library. In addition, the cohort model sometimes uses computer assisted learning, a modern form of distance education, so the problems with distance education, (expressed below,) would then apply to the cohort model.

Finally, we should discuss the related concepts of **Independent Study** and **Distance Education**. Independent study in this context is different than a vocational education or mentorship model. It is also different than the independent study used on a college campus, where a student studies and meets on a weekly or bi-weekly basis with a faculty advisor. Instead, we are talking about a situation where a student performs a significant amount of study on his or her own, outside the college environment, and rarely meeting with an advisor or mentor. Distance education takes place outside the academic institution, and course materials, lectures and assignments are delivered by some means to the student. The student studies the materials on their own, completes the assignments, and by some means interacts with the instructor and, sometimes the class. Modern distance education is usually performed over the Internet, with varying degrees of synchronous and asynchronous communications. In some programs, a student is required to spend a certain amount of time on campus.

The advantages of distance education for the student are that a student can take classes wherever they are and whenever they find the time. Distance education creates a minimum of disruption to a student's life, and can deliver specialized course content to regions without an institution of higher learning. Distance education opens the door to personal growth and advancement for people who are unable to attend a traditional institution of higher education.

Despite the advantages to the student, distance education, (along with independent study in the distance education model,) has some major flaws when used for a seminary education. For example, distance education does not build community. Students who have taken distance education classes report they cannot remember the name of a single one of their fellow students, and have neither the means to nor the interest in ever

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contacting them again. Likewise there is very little personal connection between the students and the professor. The human connection that occurs during face-to-face contact is lacking. The students and the professors do not get to know each other except through whatever communications channel they use to deliver course content and provide classroom communications. The totality of communication is missing, and therefore the course content is neither fully delivered by the professor nor fully received by the student. The student does not have access to the full range of academic resources, and must rely upon course content and whatever is available at local libraries and online. The depth, breadth, and quality of this material is less than ideal.

Distance education is expensive to develop and deliver. Whatever the mode of course delivery, the institution has to hire additional staff and build additional infrastructure to support distance education. Since distance education has different requirements than a residential program, the seminary can leverage only select portions of its existing infrastructure. Delivering quality distance education requires additional funds beyond those raised for the residence programs.

To put it bluntly, distance education delivers a lesser quality of education. This is not to say it does not have its uses in some circumstances, but to rely on it as a primary, secondary or even tertiary mode of education is a mistake. To use distance education in a seminary, where we are not only educating men but building their character and changing their behavior, is a mistake.

Conclusion

We not travel the path of least resistance. We must not settle for second best. We must not run uncertainly, but strive for mastery, always pressing forward for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus. The classical seminary education is still the best way to transition a person into a lifelong calling of selfless service to the community of faith. No other educational model comes close.