

IS SEMINARY PART OF YOUR CALLING?

Sitting at the feet of Jesus might mean getting a degree

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I had zero intentions of ever going to grad school.

In my mid-30s, college was a distant memory, and the thought of pulling together enough time, focus, and mental energy to sit down and write a paper sounded like signing up for voluntary torture. “Ugh, school again? No thank you,” I blurted out to my friends when the topic of an advanced degree came up. As it turned out, my protests were misplaced. This year, after four and a half years of taking classes on the side while working full-time, I graduated from seminary with a master’s degree in theology.

When I stumbled on the degree description online, it felt exactly like love at first sight. My brain, heart, and spirit all lit up in recognition: This is for you. While this wasn’t part of my own plan for my life, I see now the threads God was drawing together—moving me from a longtime pew sitter to small-group attender, then into small-group leadership, and then into mission trips and beyond. Seminary became a natural fit for me because God had slowly been shaping me into a leader, with all the patience and care of a gardener with a bonsai tree. My unexpected theology degree has been better than anything I could have imagined for myself, and it compels me to suggest that if the idea of going to seminary has been quietly tapping at the door of your brain, even if it doesn’t quite make sense—maybe especially if it doesn’t quite make sense—you should go. Just go. Or, if the thought has never crossed your mind, let it cross your mind. Because while seminary is absolutely not a requirement for God to use you in the world, it cracks open the scope and breadth of how God can use you. It blows apart the limits you might have imposed on yourself.

WHOM SHALL I SEND?

Every woman’s seminary story is different. Shannon Dunn is a married mother of two kids under three and is working toward completing a master’s degree at Fuller Theological Seminary, while also working full-time co-directing her church’s preschool. She has had to take some time off for the births of her children and other busy seasons, which means that it might take her the full ten years the school allows for degree completion. “God’s call was clear that I would go to

seminary and be some type of pastor someday, but he never gave me a timeline,” she reflects. “Being patient is active. I am actively waiting on God’s plans for his call on my life to be fulfilled. And if that’s not till I’m 50, that’s okay. In the meantime, he is maturing me, training me, and preparing me for the future.”

Dunn acknowledges the real challenges of all the roles she must play, remarking on the awkward experience of having to leave class to go pump breastmilk in a public restroom. When the going gets tough, she states, “I remind myself that I am following God’s call and that my children will benefit from me being an example of following God even when it isn’t easy. I want my two girls to see their mom do whatever it takes to follow after the call God so clearly spoke to her.”

Dr. Naima Lett heard and answered the call to seminary twice—she has a master’s from Dallas Theological Seminary and was the first woman to receive a Doctor of Ministry in Preaching from Talbot School of Theology. In her first year of both seminary and marriage, her husband was diagnosed with stage four Hodgkin’s Lymphoma, and she found herself commuting between his chemotherapy appointments and her classes. “There were many days when I did not know if I was coming or going. Everyone from the president to the professors to the students came alongside and surrounded us with tangible acts of love when we needed it the most,” she reflects.

Now co-pastoring the church she and her husband planted in Beverly Hills five years ago, Dr. Lett notes that the biggest barriers she’s experienced in her quest for education weren’t the money or time, but rather other Christians—including pastors—who didn’t believe women should preach or pastor. After a conversation about ordination, she recalls, “Our pastor insisted that I get a doctor of preaching degree, and then revealed that he did not believe women could preach after I was midway through my first semester.” She had to complete her preaching assignments outside of her local faith community and find support elsewhere. Lett adds, “Ministry does not happen in a vacuum. If God calls you to seminary, he will provide everything that you need to complete the journey. Our part is to say ‘yes’ and proceed one day at a time.”

OBSTACLES GUARANTEED

These kind of stories can be inspiring: “If these women can face their obstacles, so can you!” But they can also generate a sense of shame for not being able to do

what others have—and Lord knows women get enough guilt from Pinterest about everything they're not doing. I don't share these stories with you to shame you into action, but rather to demonstrate how God shows up in the lives of the people who started with just one step forward in the direction God was calling. If you feel a call toward seminary, this is your encouragement not to focus on the finish line, but simply the first step.

Of course, there are obstacles. Obstacles can be circumstantial, as some women set their vocations aside in order to care for family and never pick them back up again. Seminary itself can also present obstacles, as it has been a pretty exclusively male space until recent decades. Even though there's been progress, women still face many more barriers than men when it comes to getting theological training. You've probably experienced these barriers. They can be as subtle as a lack of encouragement, or a mislabeling of pastoral or leadership gifts as something else—for instance, telling a teen who demonstrates a natural understanding of Scripture that she'll "make a great pastor's wife someday." I know women who have experienced active and open discouragement as they have pursued a pastoral path.

In spite of all the possible hindrances, women are answering the call. At the seminary I attended, I met women from all walks of life—women with young kids, grown kids, and no kids; married, never married, divorced; fresh out of college, and in their 30s, 40s, and 50s. Some were simultaneously working in ministry, and some were not. There was no singular way God had called any of them. All of them were smart, inquisitive, creative people who loved God, Scripture, mission, and the church. Yet, I know there were women who were missing from those classrooms.

In her research on women in seminary, Sharon Hodde Miller discovered that one of the most powerful pulls of seminary for women is the depth of learning. Miller writes, "Christian women want to study the Bible, learn the languages, and better understand theology." God can use this kind of learning in absolutely anything you do, whether that's as church staff or in a conversation with your 14-year-old. There is no downside to God's daughters getting degrees.

JESUS ISN'T PRACTICAL

We live in a world where logic and good sense is encouraged in all of our decision-making, and I wonder sometimes if that isn't one of the biggest barriers to the

movement of the Spirit. For what in the Bible could be described as logical, and where has the movement of God ever been practical? Think of Abraham and Sarah, laughing giddily at the news that they would be senior citizen parents. Picture Mary, a young woman just going about her business, visited in the night by an angel who informs her she's going to become supernaturally pregnant with the Savior of the world before she gets married. And then there's Jesus himself, who in word and action defied both logic and practicality in any way we might humanly define it. Yet, in spite of these stories we know in our bones, we so often lean on the practical when it comes to our own lives. There's stewarding what you've been given, yes—but there's also burying it in the ground so that nothing is ever at risk.

Whether God's purpose in your theological education becomes immediately clear or turns out to be veiled for a time, I suggest that what some people (or your own brain!) might tell you is too difficult, a potential waste of time or money, or too big a risk, is in fact exactly the place that God might be sending you. Maybe he is calling or has already called you into ministry as a vocation or perhaps your degree will be used in less obvious ways. Personally, even if I never get another job in paid full-time ministry, I cannot tally up all the ways my education has changed my life. It has deepened my faith and brought great nuance and brilliant color into my understanding of God. Ministry, service, and church are forever changed for me. My relationship with the Bible has sprouted wings. Vocationally, it has expanded and opened a new realm of possibility that was so far away from my five-year plan that it had never crossed my radar.

It's easy to tally up the costs of going, but consider the costs of not going. In five or ten years, will you regret that you never started? Will going to seminary be a wistful "I wish ..." when you're older? If God is beckoning you toward seminary, be encouraged. Know what the sacrifices are, but don't sink into them—for they may derail you from the undeniably challenging but abundantly rewarding path God is trying to guide you towards. And sister, the church and the world need you to be as expansive a disciple as you can possibly be.

Amanda Fowler has a Master of Arts in Theology from Fuller Theological Seminary, and after 13 years in Los Angeles has just relocated to her home state of Michigan. She is in the process of discerning what life and ministry look like in a place with winters.

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