

How to Choose an
**ONLINE THEOLOGY
PROGRAM**



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Pursuing theological education is a wonderful way to prepare for a call to ministry—or to any vocation where God has called you to lead. Graduate studies can help grow your understanding of Scripture and enrich your God-given interests and passions so that you’re better prepared to engage an increasingly complex, global environment. With the growing prevalence and convenience of online options, theological education is more accessible than ever. The expansive reach of online learning also creates opportunities for more diverse, multicultural enrichment in a virtual classroom that spans the globe.

Discerning which program is right for you and knowing the critical components to look for when choosing an online learning experience are key questions you can address with a little bit of research. As online theology programs can differ in their design, we offer this short guide as a resource to help you consider your options, refine your search, and determine the community to which God might be calling you.

AN ONLINE THEOLOGY DEGREE VS. A THEOLOGY DEGREE ONLINE

This word order can make all the difference. You may find that some theology schools offer specifically “online degrees” that are shorter programs, which might affect academic rigor, peer-to-peer interaction, and accreditation. If that’s the case, confirm that these are considered comprehensive enough for your goals. Alternatively, there are schools offering their traditional theology degrees in a new online format—meaning the classes are typically identical to their on-campus courses, with similar learning expectations and teaching professors. These are often the stronger programs in both overall value and reputation. So do the research and ask for advice from professionals in the field. When you graduate from the second type of program, there is no asterisk on your degree—you are a full-fledged graduate of the school and degree program.

QUESTIONS TO ASK:

- What is the reputation of the school and of the degree?
- Is this an “online degree” or a degree that can be taken online?
- If I choose to, can I also take classes on campus?
- When I graduate from this program, what will the degree say?
- What will the program and school communicate about my qualifications?
- What are the differences between this online program and the campus program?

TEACHING FACULTY

Another important step is to find out who will be teaching the courses. Engaging quality faculty can make all the difference. Some online degree programs use facilitators to run courses instead of professors. The professors may have recorded lessons and written some of the assignments, but they don’t engage with the class beyond that. This can create a disconnect between the material and the learning process. It may also indicate a more inflexible or outdated course. A good way to discern the difference is by simply asking questions around faculty engagement with your particular degree of interest.

QUESTIONS TO ASK:

- Will I be learning with the same professors as my on-campus peers?
- Will I be learning with the professors who are named in the course, or with facilitators?
- Did the teaching professor design the course?
- How often do they update the course materials?

CLASS SIZE AND ENGAGEMENT

Find out all you can about the class experience before you sign up for a new program. Class formats can differ even within an on-campus program. Class sizes range from large seminar style classes with hundreds of students to small classes with as few as five students. Although there may be several varieties within a single program, ask what you can generally expect to find. Look for a program that encourages active learning, with both faculty-to-student and student-to-student engagement. You may also want to seek out programs that host small class sizes with dedicated professors in each course. Also be sure to consider the time commitment required for each class.

QUESTIONS TO ASK:

- How large are the online classes?
- What kind of engagement should I expect with my professor and fellow students?
- What does an average weekly schedule look like in an online class?
- About how many hours a week should I plan on dedicating to my schoolwork?

SCHEDULE AND PACING OF COURSES

As you evaluate various program options, it is often attractive to consider degrees that can be completed in the shortest amount of time. Some schools will state that students can complete a degree in a certain number of terms, but closer inspection might reveal differently. Such brevity may only be possible if the classes are available and if you complete the courses at a more accelerated pace. It may also be helpful to see if there is a detailed course schedule or a program plan to plan your course needs. Some programs also allow students to transfer in credits from other schools, enroll in on-campus or hybrid courses, or even take waiver exams.

QUESTIONS TO ASK:

- Are their classes offered with diversity in faculty, availability, and electives options?
- Is there a planned class schedule?
- What is the average pace to graduation?
- Are there options to transfer in credits or waive credits?
- Are there on-campus, hybrid, or intensive options I can take?

STUDENT SERVICES AND STUDENT REPRESENTATION

One of the best ways to get a pulse on a school is by investigating how they care for students outside of the classroom. Check to see how the resourcing and services at your new school support online learners. It is critical to have campus advocates for an online learning community. Schools may have dedicated faculty leadership, designated online centers, or online student representatives in campus leadership. Consider services like access support, writing centers, training and orientations, community groups, alumni networking, career services, and counseling. It is important to keep in mind both your learning support options as well as your student life and community options. These services might seem a bit counterintuitive for an online program, but a good online theology program should meet the unique needs of its online students.

QUESTIONS TO ASK:

- What are the available resources provided for online learners?
- How do these resources compare to the resourcing given to campus-based students?
- Where do I find more information regarding the student support services?

DIGITAL RESOURCING

Consider how the institution will support you with digital resources for your study. Most schools will use a learning management system (LMS) like Canvas or Blackboard. Depending on your preferred devices, these may be more or less accessible or user friendly. Library resources are also critical for advanced study. Many larger schools have extensive physical library collections that may be inaccessible for distance learners. However, more innovative schools are investing heavily into digital library collections and databases to support and resource learners at every distance.

QUESTIONS TO ASK:

- What technology resources will I need for this program?
- What learning management system does this program use?
- Is there training or an orientation available for new students?
- What library resources and research support are provided for distance students?

HELP AND SUPPORT

Now that you have done your research on potential schools and narrowed down your list, you should know what the available help and support lines are for online learners. Many schools provide a dedicated advisor or program administrator for students to consult with. However, if time zones are a consideration, inquire about who will be available to help when you need it the most.

QUESTIONS TO ASK:

- Who is my advisor? How do I reach them?
- Who do I contact for general questions?
- Who do I contact for academic questions?
- Who do I contact for other school related questions?
- Where can I find additional support if I need help?
- What hours can I expect to receive help and how quickly should I expect a reply?

Researching a new online theology program can be an exciting step in your personal and professional development. Through prayer and careful investigation, consider each of the aspects that will go into your online program. It may make all the difference in your learning experience.



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