

CULTIVATING GODLINESS IN SEMINARY

By Nathan A. Finn

When I was preparing to enroll at Southern Seminary to begin my M.Div. studies, more than one person counseled me to not allow my zeal to fizzle while in seminary. While some of that counsel probably reflects my membership in a tradition that is still somewhat suspicious of theological education, I suspect that many other aspiring seminarians in other traditions have received similar advice. And for good reason—each of us know of someone whose faith withered in seminary, even in orthodox seminaries. By God’s grace, I really believe I loved Christ more when I finished seminary than when I started, in part because I attended two fine seminaries, but also because of some steps I took to try and cultivate godliness during seminary.

I want to share some strategies for cultivating godliness while in seminary. It is my hope that these suggestions may help some seminary students to stay close to the cross and grow in their faith while pursuing their theological education.

- Join a good local church. At Southeastern, we begin encouraging students as early as New Student Orientation to join a solid local church and become actively involved. My criteria for a good local church include several factors: gospel-centeredness; adheres to sound doctrine; expositional preaching ministry; evangelistic; sees itself as a servant to the community; cultivates gospel community among members; is hesitant to allow new members, including seminarians, to immediately exercise leadership responsibilities (especially teaching).
- Join a good church-based small group. It does not really matter if it is a home group or a Sunday School class (or both) so long as it focuses on building gospel community through life-on-life discipleship, sound teaching, accountability, and outreach. In my opinion, the best small groups at least occasionally share meals together and are not by design limited to only one age group. Some seminarians will prefer groups and churches that are “seminary-heavy,” while others will benefit from groups and churches that have less of a seminary presence. (As an aside, lots of seminarians are looking for a mentor. I am convinced that if you join the right church and involve yourself in the right small group, much mentoring comes naturally through gospel-centered, life-on-life relationships.)
- Make personal devotional time a priority. It is tempting for every seminarian to substitute class work, especially edifying assignments, for personal devotional time. Don’t succumb to this temptation! Spend regular time studying, meditating upon, memorizing, and seeking to apply Scripture. Spend regular time praying, both for yourself and for others. When you have to go a few days without personal devotional time, try to block out an extended time that you can recharge through Scripture reading and prayer. I recommend using a Bible reading plan to read through the entirety of Scripture during the course of a year (there are many good plans out there). I also recommend having at least one good study Bible close by; I recommend the *ESV Study Bible* or the *Reformation Study Bible*.

- For married students, make family worship a priority. This may seem a bit awkward at first, especially for those who did not grow up in families that prioritized this discipline or for married couples who do not have any children. But press on—this is one of the most important things you can do to cultivate godliness while in seminary. Read the Bible together, pray together, and sing together. If you have no children (we did not at the time) or if you have older children, I recommend working through D. A. Carson’s *For the Love of God* (2 volumes), which includes daily devotions based upon Robert Murray M’Cheyne’s classic Bible-reading plan. You can find the latter in numerous places on the internet.
- Share the gospel with unbelievers, especially unbelievers with whom you are building a personal relationship. If you attend an evangelical seminary, chances are you will take a class or two that requires you to engage in personal evangelism. But in addition to whatever curricular requirements you might have, try to share the gospel with others as often as you can. Consider participating in your local church’s outreach ministry. Volunteer with other area ministries. Build relationships with lost neighbors, co-workers, and/or others with whom you come into regular contact. If you are in an urban area, try street preaching. If you are near a university, assist with a campus ministry. The sky’s the limit, but do something to impact lostness, even while you are a seminary student.
- Commit to read at least one edifying book each semester in addition to whatever books may be required. I know this is tough for some students, especially those who read slowly. A good seminary overwhelms you with reading! But it is well worth your time to spend even five or ten minutes a day reading on a good book that has nothing to do with class. Some of the books that I think would be helpful along these lines include Paul Miller’s *A Praying Life*; C. J. Mahaney’s *Humility*; Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s *Discipleship* (older editions were titled *The Cost of Discipleship*); J. I. Packer’s *Knowing God*; John Piper’s *Future Grace*; Greg Gilbert’s *What is the Gospel?*; Sinclair Ferguson’s *The Christian Life*; Don Whitney’s *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*; any book by A. W. Tozer or Jerry Bridges. (Note: If you read any of these books for a class, read a different book as your “extra” edifying book—no cheating!)
- For those who aspire to be pastors, also read at least one good biography and one good book about pastoral ministry each semester. My favorite biographies are Courtney Anderson’s *To the Golden Shore: The Life of Adoniram Judson* and George Marsden’s *Jonathan Edwards: A Life*. As a general rule, the older a biography (especially of a pastor or missionary), the more edifying it is—and the purpose here is edification, not academics. Good books on pastoral ministry include Charles Bridges, *The Christian Ministry*; Charles Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students*; Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor*; Tom Ascol, ed., *Dear Timothy*; John Armstrong, *Reforming Pastoral Ministry*; Curtis Thomas, *Practical Wisdom for Pastors*; Collin Marshall and Tony Payne, *The Trellis and the Vine*; D. A. Carson, *The Cross and Christian Ministry*.
- In addition to your local church and the seminary’s chapel, listen regularly to good preachers. Podcast preaching that will give fire to your soul and shape your own preaching. Listen to good conferences (most of the good stuff is free) and be encouraged by pastors and others who are

on the front lines of gospel ministry. If you can save up the limited financial resources at your disposal, try to attend at least one good conference a year in addition to the conferences hosted by your school. By the way, a good seminary will host good conferences that will help you grow in godliness and inform your own approach to ministry.

If approached in the right way, seminary can be a key means of sanctifying grace in the life of a student. It is my hope that the Lord uses seminary to shape you, not only vocationally, but unto godliness—he was faithful in my own life in this regard. I pray these suggestions might be one of the means he uses to conform you to the image of the Lord Jesus Christ during your seminary years and beyond.

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