

THE TREASURES OF SEMINARY

LAURIE COPELAND¹

Receiving a Reformed seminary education is an indescribable privilege. If a military academy exists for Christians, perhaps seminary is that setting. Years of rigorous studying, preparing for exams, reading weighty textbooks, writing long papers, and attending lectures are a costly sacrifice; but it is not labor done in vain. Acquiring knowledge renders a reward. “For the gain from her is better than gain from silver and her profit better than gold. She is more precious than jewels, and nothing you desire can compare with her” (Prov 3:14-15). To obtain knowledge is more valuable than precious jewels and will place a garland upon your head.

Seminary’s central role is to prepare godly men for the ministry of the Word and sacraments, but also serves another purpose. According to Presbyterian scholar J. Gresham Machen, “Christian scholarship is necessary to the preacher, and to the man who in whatever way, in public or in private, endeavors to proclaim the gospel to his fellow men.”² A theological institution remaining faithful to orthodox Protestantism equips the student for every good work. “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim 3:16-17). In my seminary studies, I learned the importance of proper teaching. “Buy truth, and do not sell it; buy wisdom, instruction, and understanding” (Prov 23:23). There are many Scriptures describing the need for the study of the Scriptures. “Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth” (2 Tim 2:15). “Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so” (Acts 17:11). Seeking knowledge is a noble charge.

In my studies of biblical interpretation, I learned the value of becoming acquainted with a variety of subjects in the application of Scripture. Seminary teaches the necessity of understanding the orthodox doctrines, the study of the ancient creeds, and church history. Discovering the importance of doctrine, I learned its purpose in the proclamation of the gospel and for giving a defense of the truth. Christianity is not merely a way of life, but as Machen describes, Christianity is “a life founded on a doctrine.”³ Learning these doctrines has taught me the difference between the law and the gospel. A variety of subjects constitutes a seminary education. Through the studies of the orthodox creeds, I learned the teaching of Scripture. Machen defines creeds as, “Summaries of what the Bible tells us about the facts and promises upon which Christian experience is based.”⁴ Creeds also serve the purpose of refuting heresy.

¹ Laurie A. P. Copeland (M.R.S. 2008) maintains an active internet web ministry. She also teaches a women's class at the Hillcrest Presbyterian Church in Seattle, Washington, in addition to discipling several women and children.

² J. Gresham Machen, “Christian Scholarship and Evangelism,” in D. G. Hart, ed., *J. Gresham Machen: Selected Shorter Writings* (P & R Publishing, 2004), 137-138.

³ J. Gresham Machen, “Christianity in Conflict,” in D. G. Hart, ed., *J. Gresham Machen: Selected Shorter Writings*, 564.

⁴ J. Gresham Machen, “What is the Gospel,” in D. G. Hart, ed., *J. Gresham Machen: Selected Shorter Writings*, 132.

The term creed comes from the Latin term *credo*, meaning simply “I believe.” We observe several creeds employed throughout Scripture: “Simon Peter replied ‘You are the Christ, the Son of the living God’” (Matt 16:16). “Thomas answered him, ‘My Lord and my God!’” (John 20:28). Learning the creeds allows me to witness to others with an accurate understanding of what the Bible says. In my testimony of Christ, I am able to recall particular subjects from the creeds and questions from the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, which aid me in declaring the gospel.

A Seminary education includes reading the writings of authors from nearly every era, beginning from the first century through the present. Reading various books for each class, I found most of the authors to be enjoyable. Of those, John Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion* continues to be a resource that I employ in my witness to others. Finishing the first edition when he was just twenty-six, Calvin furnished a magnificent theological masterpiece. Beginning with the notable prefatory to the King of France, Francis I, Calvin presented an earnest request for the Protestant faith. Calvin wrote the *Institutes* with the outline of the Apostle’s Creed; the work consists of four books, and in its several editions reflects Calvin’s lifetime work. Commonly known for its remarkable logical structure, Calvin’s message is clear and brief, a benefit to any reader. Learning that nearly all knowledge is comprised of two elements, knowledge of God and of self, Calvin demonstrated that arriving at the knowledge of God largely comes through a sight of one’s own sin in light of God’s holy majesty. Reading some of the works of the church fathers such as John Calvin, Martin Luther, B. B. Warfield, Charles Hodge, A. A. Hodge, John Murray, and Cornelius Van Til, I am supplied with answers to refute the misinformation of modern Christianity. Becoming acquainted with notable authors and classic books is the result of a quality education and is further useful in my witness and presentation of the gospel.

With the ability to reach over fifty English-speaking countries, my education permits me to minister to people from various countries via the internet, through websites and email. Receiving email from all sorts of groups around the world, people are able to utilize my web links as a resource. Although the creation of a new website is in progress, my education has contributed to one of my older sites, which continues to witness the truth of Jesus Christ. With the ability to proclaim the gospel to the ends of the earth, the internet is serving to reach countries where the dominant religion is Muslim and to places where the name of Christ is unknown.

Answering questions and providing encouragement to those I meet has become more effective because of my theological studies. In my witness to Christ, I am better equipped to proclaim the gospel and defend the faith. I am more suited to interact with other religions and even cults in my preparation to make a defense to anyone who asks me for a reason for the hope that is in me (1 Pet 3:15).

Christian scholarship through a seminary education provides a reward greater than any earthly treasures. The study of Scriptures and pursuance of knowledge renders an imperishable crown. My experience in seminary was one of the most joyful experiences in my life and is now being fruitful and effective in my life and ministry. God’s Word is faithful to all generations (Ps 119:90).