

SO YOU'RE THINKING ABOUT GOING TO SEMINARY

An Insider's Guide to Seminary

Derek Cooper



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Introduction

You're Going *Where*?

“So,” she said, “are they, like, going to make you wear a suit and tie each day to class?” That was one of the first questions someone asked me immediately before I went away to my first semester at seminary. I was twenty-one, a little timid because I didn’t have any formal training in theology, and praying silently that her question wasn’t based on something that was actually true—you know, like, facts! Some of you may be thinking: *Well, that solves it. I am not going to seminary if I have to wear a suit and tie or some fancy skirt.* But before you twist your hair in a knot, you should know that I have never attended a seminary that required students to wear suits or fancy dresses. In fact, I seem to remember some strange behemoth of a man who insisted on coming to school each day without his shoes! That is the beauty of North America: there are as many seminaries as there are types of people. And it is the very purpose of this book to find the right seminary for you—with or without shoes.

Welcome to this Book

This is a very important time in your life, and I hope—should you decide to attend seminary—that it will be one of your life’s most rewarding experiences as well. As you will learn as you read through this book, there are many decisions that you will have to make about seminary—even before stepping one foot onto campus. It is my hope and prayer that the information contained in this book will be informative, accessible, useful,

and encouraging. However, before we begin discussing the particulars of seminary, I would like to briefly offer a few comments about the nature of this book and what it hopes to accomplish.

The Approach of This Book

This book represents my experiences with seminary as well as information that I have gathered over the years through books, catalogs, individuals, and websites. It's a personal book in that it was largely inspired during the years that I have spent either attending or teaching at seminary, during which I learned much about seminary that I believe will be of use to you. However, my experiences may differ from your own experiences and those of others. I therefore will explain how I have approached the task of writing this book, and what I hope to accomplish by doing so.

First, this book is necessarily very general. It is not possible to consider all the specificities that arise from the hundreds of seminaries in North America or the many thousands of people who attend them. Accordingly, although I get quite specific at some points, I paint seminary in broad strokes and in ways that anyone who is considering seminary—regardless of theological affiliation, location, or program—can understand. For this reason, it is important to take what I write with a grain of salt. Throughout the book I use words like “generally,” “typically,” and “usually.” These are meant to be taken seriously—at a “typical” seminary, such and such will usually be the case—which means, of course, that it will not always be the case for other seminaries and other individuals.

Second, I didn't write this book as an official in the seminary world. Rather, I wrote this book in a very personal way. Although I attempted to be as accurate as possible in every way, this book is not authorized or officially endorsed by any seminary institution or governing agency. Such agencies have previously publicized and continue to publish their own official studies, which are readily accessible to those who are interested, and I don't intend to compete with them. Instead, as the title of the book attests, this is an “insider's guide” to seminary—written by someone out of his own experiences and reflections, and not with the express purpose of publishing a formal or official study on seminary education. It is for those who think that smiles, and an occasional laugh, may accompany “just the facts.”

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 or governing agency.*

Finally, this book doesn't favor or disfavor any particular tradition. I have done my best to be factual and favorable when speaking about specific seminaries and denominations. I don't wish to portray any seminary or institution in a negative way. Nor is it my intention to endorse any particular tradition or institution. I simply share here my experiences and thoughts on seminary in the hope that they will be of benefit to you. When I refer to a specific seminary, denomination, or institution, I do so because I respect it and believe it noteworthy. I have tried to make references to as many different seminaries as possible—with regard to geography, size, theology, and so forth—so that schools and denominations of many kinds may be reflected. Because I hope and pray that people of all backgrounds and traditions will make use of this book, I want that diversity to be reflected in the schools and traditions that I mention. Throughout the book I include the website address of each seminary referred to. I do this both as a learning device for you—to encourage you to locate and navigate these websites for yourself—and as a way to cite where I have gathered specific information.

The Context in Which I Wrote This Book

In this book our discussions about seminary will direct us at times to questions of theology and different theological traditions. For this reason, I think that it's only appropriate to inform you of my theological background, so that you may understand from what context I write. Of the three major divisions of Christianity that we will discuss below, I am in the Protestant tradition. Specifically, I have been involved in what are sometimes called mainline as well as evangelical churches and seminaries. As a result, my experiences and reflections will inevitably reflect my involvement with the Protestant tradition. I assume that many of the readers of this book will be affiliated with the Protestant tradition, simply because well over half of all seminaries in North America accredited by the Association of Theological Schools (www.ats.edu) are Protestant, and the majority of seminarians are therefore Protestants.

My interaction with the Protestant tradition does not mean, however, that I ignore or disfavor other theological communities within the Christian church. On the contrary, I have endeavored to incorporate as many

Although I am writing as an individual in the Protestant tradition of Christianity, this book is intended for anyone interested in seminary—of any Christian tradition.

different traditions into our discussions as possible. In this context, I will speak about both Catholic and Orthodox churches and seminaries alongside the extremely diverse Protestant churches and seminaries. Theological traditions of all kinds will be reflected and discussed.

Why I Wrote This Book

Deciding whether or when or how to go to seminary is easier said than done. I've been a student at several different seminaries over the years—a practice I don't necessarily encourage—of varying location, size, prestige, and theological affiliation. I have visited dozens more, and I have friends who have attended various other schools throughout North America. What I have learned has led me to conclude that attending seminary comes at a great cost. And, as I have recently completed my seminary education by way of a doctoral program, I understand only too well how each seminary has made an impression on my life and ministry—and, quite frankly, my wallet. I have written this book to keep you from making some of the mistakes that I have made, and to answer (as best I can) every question that you might have about seminary. I have tried to leave no seminary stone unturned. Specifically, I have considered the following when writing this book:

- Going to seminary requires a great deal of effort, money, prayer, and thought. It will affect the rest of your life. The decision to attend seminary—as well as where and how and when—must be an informed one and made carefully.
- No one wants to attend the wrong seminary. Although there are many schools that you could attend, only certain ones are appropriate or advisable for you.
- Before going to seminary, you must first understand its purpose and whether that purpose corresponds to your professional objectives. Seminary is not for everyone—on occasion, not even for those going into the ministry.
- You need to be informed adequately about what to expect before you begin your first day of class—with regard to coursework, degrees, time limits, financial obligations, and other similar items.
- Locating, researching, applying to, and visiting seminaries are costly and timely endeavors. It is essential that someone who has been there before accompany you on this journey.

Is This Book Right for You?

This book is right for you if you are seriously considering seminary (or merely curious) or if you are already in seminary still facing career choices. It is an encyclopedia for seminarians, to be read through entirely or used as a reference tool. I have taken nothing for granted and have even included a glossary of theological terms.

Let's begin exploring seminary!

*A student who attends
seminary is called
a "seminarian."*

1

Learning about Seminary

Seminary and Conversations

I remember the expressions on their faces vividly. It had happened many times before, but this time it happened when my wife and I were on vacation. In the midst of a conversation with the couple we'd just met, the inevitable question arose: "So, what do you do for a living?" In response to this common question, my wife answered first, that she is an elementary school teacher—at which everyone nodded approvingly. Everyone loves an elementary school teacher. And then I answered: "I'm a seminarian; I go to seminary." This response is usually met with two expressions, both of which come in succession.

The first response is blankness. If I were to say that I'm a doctor, for instance, people would immediately picture me with a stethoscope around my neck, checking somebody's heartbeat. Or if I were to say that I too am an elementary school teacher, people would picture me reading a book to eager children or helping them with their math problems. But the word *seminarian* does not compute; instead of a vibrant picture forming in their brains, they see a blank screen. And then I notice the second expression forming after a few moments: confusion. They don't want to ask some of their initial questions, because they want to be polite. However, the series of questions they want to ask—but manage to do so only with their faces rather than with words—are the following: *Aren't seminaries where priests*

go? And aren't priests, like, single? And why is a priest holding what appears to be an alcoholic beverage?

Orientation to Seminary

In these opening chapters we will learn what seminaries are, why they exist, how they relate to other professional and graduate schools, and why

Seminaries are postgraduate schools that offer students training in theology and church- or ministry-related professions.

you may or may not need to attend one. In this first chapter I define seminaries, and I talk about some of the differences between seminaries today and those of previous generations. I also note some common careers for students who graduate from seminary.

One of the first things that you need to learn before going to seminary is that it doesn't necessarily resemble the picture that Hollywood may paint of it. I distinctly remember watching a movie in which seminary was represented as a place that looked like a historic castle, where people were constantly in prayer and walked around all day reading their Bibles. Although this representation was not completely wrong—people who attend seminary occasionally do walk!—most seminaries in North America are not housed in historic castles, or filled with students dressed in holy garb with their hands clasped tightly in prayer. They are full of regular people in regular places. Granted, these people generally pursue holy lives, and theological schools often maintain specific places of worship and prayer; nevertheless, most seminaries resemble other university graduate schools and are not readily distinguishable from them.

Seminary in the Twenty-First Century

Theological education has changed considerably over the past few decades, from the traditional classroom full of men wearing ties and slacks to the contemporary classroom full of women and men dressed in shorts and sandals. Although there still are many traditional schools available to you—if that is your persuasion—it is not necessarily your parents' seminary any more. This is because seminary education, like everything else, has evolved with the changing North American culture. Seminaries in the twenty-first century differ in many ways from seminaries of the twentieth century—which is one reason why a guide to seminary is now necessary.

A hundred years ago, the decision to attend this or that seminary was relatively easy—largely because there were so few choices. The culture at that time was different as well, in that many churches were much involved in deciding where a prospective minister would attend seminary. Although certain denominations and churches are still involved in the process of deciding where a student will attend seminary, the culture in North America today often militates against this. This is partly because North Americans are barraged daily with hundreds of options with regard to every imaginable question: What kind of coffee do I want today? Where do I want to buy it? Do I want it with whole, 2%, or skim milk? The diversity of options available in the wider culture is no less apparent when it comes to deciding where to attend seminary. There are hundreds of seminaries in North America, and there are thousands of students each year who are considering in which schools they will spend the next several years of their lives. It can be a very difficult decision to make.

Seminaries today are diverse. Some are highly traditional, while others are equally innovative. Some student populations are mostly male, while others have a balance of women and men.

The Origin and Evolution of Seminary

Seminaries today in North America naturally have a good deal in common with the first seminaries in Europe and the United States. Today these schools still offer students training in theology and ministry-related teaching, and the methods of instruction are not completely different from those of previous generations. However, there have been many important changes as well. In contrast to the first European seminaries in the sixteenth century, and the first American ones in the nineteenth century, seminaries today are professionalized, standardized, and accredited. They have come to

Seminary at a Glance

Word Origin: The word *seminary* stems from the Latin word *seminarium*, which evolved into the Middle English *seedbed*. From there we got the word *nursery*. Therefore, seminaries are—metaphorically speaking—nurseries of theological instruction.

History: Seminaries were formed in the sixteenth century to educate those destined for Christian ministry in the Catholic church. However, the current model for theological seminaries was mostly created in early nineteenth century America by Protestants. This new form of seminary encountered immediate success. At the end of the twentieth century, seminaries witnessed a dramatic increase in the number of women, second-career individuals, and other nontraditional students.

Today: Seminaries are postgraduate schools of Christian instruction that require a bachelor's degree (in any field). Seminaries train women and men for vocations related to the church and ministry—as well as other professions. In this book we will concentrate on Christian seminaries. Currently, there are more than 250 seminaries accredited by the Association of Theological Schools (ATS).

resemble most every other professional institution in North America, such as law schools and medical schools. Seminaries today are also larger, wealthier, specialized, and more technologically advanced.

Diversity of Students

Perhaps one of the most distinct ways that contemporary seminaries differ from more historic ones has to do with the intentions of students today. It's become increasingly popular these days for people to attend seminary (as with law school) for various nontraditional reasons. Many no longer attend simply in pursuit of the traditional career path of becoming a pastor. In fact, it's not uncommon nowadays to go to some type of professional school when uncertain about what you want to do for a career.

“There was a time when seminaries saw theological education as focused almost entirely on professional ministry. Many students now want to enrich themselves with a seminary education but not necessarily aim for ordained or professional ministry. In most seminaries, this group represents 25–30 percent of students.”

*David Hubbard
(Former president of Fuller
Theological Seminary)*

I personally know many people who have attended seminary who eventually ended up in careers very different from what they had originally envisioned. They entered fields in business, pharmaceuticals, law, government, painting, and so on, instead of professional ministry. What is interesting, though, is that none of them ever regretted attending seminary. And although I do not necessarily recommend that path to you, it is comforting to know that seminary graduates are capable of finding careers not directly tied to the church. Seminary, in this respect, is no longer just for prospective pastors.

Careers Available for Seminary Graduates

If seminary is not just for pastors or priests any longer, who else is it for? What occupational opportunities are available for people who graduate from seminary? There are essentially two extreme answers to this question. On the one hand, a seminary education could result in practically any profession imaginable. I have had friends who ended up in positions ranging from painting to pharmaceuticals after graduation. I also know a woman who intentionally entered seminary to become a businessperson! She attended seminary so that she could offer a strong Christian witness to her colleagues in the corporate world.

On the other hand, however, it's important to note that seminary prepares individuals for very specific professions. Principally, it prepares students

for the pastorate or full-time Christian ministry. In this way, it is exactly like every other professional school. Just as medical schools train students to become doctors, so seminaries train students to become ministers, missionaries, Christian educators, and so forth. Therefore, any student who attends seminary expecting to enter a career other than that of full-time Christian ministry or education does so at his or her own peril. It would be like attending law school to become a restaurant owner.

With that in mind, it is important to isolate some of the career paths available for seminary graduates. I naturally don't take into account at this moment all of the professions that seminarians may enter—for that, see chapters 13 through 16—but I include some careers that many graduates pursue. As you will see, most of these careers are very specific. But it is really up to you to decide whether you will take the traditional path upon graduation or whether you are led to apply your seminary education in a novel way.

Although it is impossible to say with certainty, I foresee that seminary will attract even more students in the future who will apply their educations in unique ways—due in part to the changing culture and technology.

Many seminary graduates these days are actually pursuing occupations that seemingly have little to do with the education they received in seminary. They are applying their seminary educations in non-traditional ways.

Common Careers for Seminarians

- **Pastor/Priest:** Profession for those who work full time at a congregation—whether as a senior minister, associate minister, youth minister, or teaching minister.
- **Educator:** This is an excellent career for those who want to teach at Christian institutions—whether at the seminary, university, or secondary-school level.
- **Missionary/Church Planter/Evangelist:** Seminaries train missionaries, church planters, and evangelists for Christian ministry domestically and internationally.
- **Chaplain/Counselor:** A chaplain is essentially a pastor outside of a church, for instance, in a hospital or the military. A counselor frequently works in a Christian organization—though not always.
- **Administrator/Leader:** Some people attend seminary to become administrators or leaders at organizations or institutions—specifically Christian ones.
- **(Educated) Layperson:** This is essentially a person who is educated theologically, but who continues to work in a secular profession. More

and more individuals are attending seminary these days for the spiritual and theological enrichment; in this respect, their career prospects are quite varied.

- **Other:** Depending on your calling, creativity, and specific seminary degree, you may have countless career opportunities before you.

Seminary at a Glance

Purpose	To prepare students for a career in ministry or another related field
Requirements	A bachelor's degree from college and an interest in ministry
Length	Typically two to four years depending on the program and person
Structure	A combination of classwork, practical components, and field work
Career Prospects	Minister, teacher, missionary, counselor, layperson, and other

Seminaries Are like Automobiles

Although I have mentioned many common careers available to seminary graduates, there are still many other professions that I will discuss throughout the book. There are probably just as many career opportunities open to seminarians as there are seminaries, and it is one of the express purposes of this book to help you find that right seminary. If you think about it, choosing the right seminary is like finding the right car. Just as cars come in various shapes, costs, and styles, so do seminaries. On the one hand, it does not make much difference which type of car you choose: they all work the same way and are specifically designed to get you from place to place. On the other hand, which car you choose to drive is of great importance. Whether you buy an up-to-the-minute, fully loaded, red Porsche for \$50,000 or a used Kia for \$500 (the going rate for my 1997 Kia Sephia) significantly alters your life, your wallet, and your ability to actually get to your destination. So it is with choosing a seminary.

When it comes down to it, people's preferences for cars are just like their preferences for seminaries. My father-in-law, for instance, is a dedicated Ford man. If he were to buy something else, he would be out of his comfort zone and most likely would later regret his decision. To make sure that such a scenario does not happen to you, I have taken it on as my mission

to help you find that right car, that right seminary. I can help you with this because I have test-driven many seminaries. I have driven the really fast ones, the family ones, the innovative ones, and the traditional ones. I have wrecked more than one, and I have even enjoyed driving a couple of others. I have owned a convertible, and I have probably even driven a station wagon. I have been down every seminary road imaginable. And I want to share that experience with you. So sit back, put on your seat belt, and enjoy the rest of the ride!