

FOREWORD BY  
JOHN PIPER

HOW TO  
- STAY -  
CHRISTIAN  
- IN -  
SEMINARY



DAVID MATHIS &  
JONATHAN PARNELL

*“How to Stay Christian in Seminary* should be placed in the hands of every first-year seminarian. It provides a much-needed balance as they navigate the beautiful but treacherous waters of a seminary education. I plan to use this powerful little book with great profit for my students in the years ahead.”

**Daniel L. Akin**, President, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary

“Mathis and Parnell here contribute to a small but important stable of books that everyone thinking about attending or already enrolled in seminary should read. Studying theology is not an intellectual game, nor is it simply what you have to do to receive credentials. It is, rather, the project, both art and science, of living to God in intelligent, affectionate, and obedient response to God’s Word. The seminary is no ivory tower but a crucible in which Christian wisdom and spirituality are tested and refined—not only, or even primarily, by exams, but by the vital tests of everyday life. *How to Stay Christian in Seminary* alerts students to the real curriculum that undergirds degree structures: the pedagogy of the triune God that aims at forming the mind and heart of Jesus Christ in students and disciples.”

**Kevin J. Vanhooser**, Research Professor of Systematic Theology, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

“For seminarians who have heard seminary will dull your faith, here is great advice packed into a small space. Don’t let the size of this book fool you. It is filled with solid-gold counsel.”

**Darrell L. Bock**, Executive Director of Cultural Engagement, Howard G. Hendricks Center for Christian Leadership and Cultural Engagement; Senior Research Professor of New Testament Studies, Dallas Theological Seminary

“David and Jonathan are wrestling with a serious problem here, and they give biblical advice that is full of grace and full of Jesus. Very concise, too, and that, too, is a virtue. Anyone thinking about going to seminary will benefit greatly by spending some time with this book.”

**John M. Frame**, J. D. Trimble Chair of Systematic Theology and Philosophy, Reformed Theological Seminary, Orlando

“This book makes me angry and sad—because I wish it had been written years earlier. As I read it, I can see faces of people I love who wrecked their lives in seminary, and I wish I could go back in time and hand them this volume. Some of them lost the faith. Some lost their families. Some lost their integrity. The Devil wants to bring down ministers of the gospel, and he usually erects the demolition scaffolding in seminary, when we’re too occupied with Greek flash cards to see the shadow of the pitchfork on the wall. This book, by brilliant men of God, can help you lay out a war plan. Read it, and fight.”

**Russell D. Moore**, President, The Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission, Southern Baptist Convention

“Written by two men fresh from the trenches of theological education, this little volume is sure to help the new seminary student navigate the pitfalls of misplaced priorities, overcommitment, undercommitment, and decentralization. It is full of grace, truth, and wisdom, all the while keeping Jesus right at the center of everything. I dare say it may even help to soften the crusty interior of those of us who have spent more than a few years serving in the context of theological education for the church.”

**Miles V. Van Pelt**, Alan Belcher Professor of Old Testament and Biblical Languages; Director, Summer Institute for Biblical Languages, Reformed Theological Seminary, Jackson, Mississippi

“I am exceedingly grateful to David Mathis and Jonathan Parnell for writing this helpful book. They touch on an issue of great concern in theological education, and on a topic of great concern to me personally. So much so, I wish that every seminary student in every seminary in America would read this insightful book and apply its teachings to their lives.”

**Jason K. Allen**, President, Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and College

“This is a book I have composed in my head many times, but never actually wrote down. Now I discover David Mathis and Jonathan Parnell actually wrote it down, and did a better job than I would have done. It is a guide to not only survive but to thrive in seminary (or any college or graduate program where you study theology).”

**Don Sweeting**, President, Reformed Theological Seminary, Orlando

“Seminary students are called to live all of life before the face of God with application to their lives and future ministries. This devotional way of living means drinking deeply of both gospel grace and gospel truth with humble awareness of their dependence on the Holy Spirit inside and outside of the classroom. I highly commend this insightful book as must reading for present and prospective seminary students to gain this biblical perspective on seminary training. I would encourage seminary students everywhere to re-read this book at the beginning of each semester and pray that God would use this resource to help them take hold of Christ and his heart for their seminary experience.”

**Mark Dalbey**, President and Assistant Professor of Practical Theology, Covenant Theological Seminary

*How to Stay Christian in Seminary*

Copyright © 2014 by David Mathis and Jonathan Parnell

Published by Crossway

1300 Crescent Street  
Wheaton, Illinois 60187

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Cover design: Tyler Deeb, Pedale Design

First printing 2014

Printed in the United States of America

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Trade paperback ISBN: 978-1-4335-4030-1

Mobipocket ISBN: 978-1-4335-4032-5

PDF ISBN: 978-1-4335-4031-8

ePub ISBN: 978-1-4335-4033-2

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### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Mathis, David, 1980–

How to stay Christian in seminary / David Mathis and  
Jonathan Parnell.

pages cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-4335-4030-1 (tp)

1. Theology—Study and teaching. 2. Spiritual life—Christianity.

I. Title.

BV4020.M36            2014

248.8<sup>92</sup>—dc23

2013019479

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Crossway is a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

VP            23   22   21   20   19   18   17   16   15   14  
15   14   13   12   11   10   9   8   7   6   5   4   3   2   1

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# INTRODUCTION

## Seminary: Life or Death?

DAVID MATHIS AND JONATHAN PARNELL

Seminary is dangerous. Its gospel fragrance proves life-giving to many. But for others—far too many others—its aroma can lead to death (2 Cor. 2:15–16). Seminarians whose hearts grow cold and dull not only leave the ministry; many leave the faith, and show themselves to never have been truly saved (1 John 2:19). We’re not playing games here.

And we’re not just talking about liberal seminaries when we warn of this danger. Of course, it’s perilous to have professors playing fast and loose with the biblical text and Christian theology. But even the best of evangelical, confessional seminaries can be spiritually dangerous places, not mainly because of the administrators at the top or the teachers at the front, but because of the sinners in the seats.

However well the seminary as an institution does in contending for the truth once delivered to the saints (Jude 3), it can’t keep “evil” outside its walls. It’s too late. Evil has already broken the seal and penetrated the fortress into your seminary experience. It came in with you. The deepest danger comes in your heart, whose condition carries more influence than the doctrinal fidelity of your school. It is your heart that is “deceitful above all things, and desperately sick” (Jer. 17:9).

Regardless of the theological pedigree of your handpicked

and respected seminary, you, the theological student, face danger.

### **BIG HEADS, LITTLE HEARTS?**

We could flesh out this danger in many ways. For starters, there's Helmut Thielicke's angle in his 1962 classic, *A Little Exercise for Young Theologians*. Simply put, students' heads often pick up on theology faster than their hearts and lives.

Seminary is a special season of preparation when you are presented with a veritable buffet of information. It's typically good information, mind you, precious information. But just because you can pile heaps of tasty food on one plate doesn't mean you can swallow it down easily. And just because you can force it down doesn't mean it will be nourishing. If you stuff your head full of more than your heart can digest, you will not be well.

Thielicke says the fundamental problem for seminarians is that intellectual accessibility exceeds spiritual capacity. Capturing the plight of far too many students, he writes, "He has not yet come to that maturity which would permit him to absorb into his own life and reproduce out of the freshness of his own personal faith the things which he imagines intellectually and which are accessible to him through reflection."<sup>1</sup> In other words, *the seminarian can say a lot of things he can't live.*

What's at stake in this situation? The church is soon to suffer. Fathead theology students parachute into local churches, where they model an insidious detachment between truth and love. With a subtle attitude of "smarter than thou," this kind of

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<sup>1</sup>Helmut Thielicke, *A Little Exercise for Young Theologians*, trans. Charles L. Taylor (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), 12.



seminarian spews God-talk isolated from faith and acts more like a mercenary than a member of the body. He may actually resemble more the Serpent than the Servant. “Such a person nevertheless has not comprehended a penny’s worth of what it means to live on the battlefield of the risen Lord.”<sup>2</sup>

### ERNEST CHRISTIAN, MEMORIZING PARADIGMS

D. A. Carson gives another angle on the danger in the introduction to his book *Exegetical Fallacies*, notorious among students and pastors for how skillfully it exposes our bad interpretations. Simply put, Carson says the necessity of distancing yourself from your subject of study can be perilous when you’re studying the things you most deeply believe.

Names changed to protect the guilty, Carson tells the story of “Ernest Christian,” who was converted as a senior in high school, grew by leaps and bounds through a campus ministry while in college, sensed a call to full-time ministry, was affirmed by his local congregation, and “headed off to seminary with all the earnestness of a new recruit.”

But at seminary, the story followed a path all too familiar to many of us:

After Ernest has been six months in seminary, the picture is very different. Ernest is spending many hours a day memorizing Greek morphology and learning the details of the itinerary of Paul’s second missionary journey. Ernest has also begun to write exegetical papers; but by the time he has finished his lexical study, his syntactical diagram, his survey of critical

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 29.

opinions, and his evaluation of conflicting evidence, somehow the Bible does not feel as alive to him as it once did. Ernest is troubled by this; he finds it more difficult to pray and witness than he did before he came to seminary.<sup>3</sup>

Carson goes on to explain how a good seminary must teach its students to distance their subjective thinking from the more objective meaning of the biblical text so that they might be shaped by the Scriptures rather than impose their own notions on the text. Such a learning process “is difficult, and can be costly.” But it need not prove destructive, even if “some steps along the way are dangerous.”<sup>4</sup>

Carson’s exhortation is that students “work hard at integrating your entire Christian walk and commitment.” Don’t partition your devotional life from your academic pursuits. Instead, approach your studies devotionally. Be intentional to keep your mind and heart together rather than allowing them to be separated. Carson concludes with this warning: “Fail to work hard at such integration and you invite spiritual shipwreck.”<sup>5</sup>

## A TRIAL OF FAITH

Theologian and longtime professor John Frame also warns about the danger. In an article titled “Learning at Jesus’ Feet: A Case for Seminary Training,” Frame addresses seven objections, framed as questions, often raised against seminary. The second is, *Could seminary be a spiritual danger to me?* “This objection is not as strange as it may sound at first hearing,” says Frame. “For some, seminary can be a trial of faith. One can become so

<sup>3</sup>D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1996), 23.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*

immersed in academic assignments, papers, technical terminology, Hebrew paradigms and such that he comes to feel far from God.”<sup>6</sup>

So seminary can be dangerous. But neither Frame, Carson, Thielicke, nor we think this should keep you from it. Frame continues:

Seminary does require a devotional discipline to match our academic discipline, but that challenge, on the whole, is a good thing. And what most students find is that once we face that challenge, the academic and the devotional merge in a wonderful way. The dry periods tend to be at the beginning, when you are struggling to master the basics. But when the theology of the Bible starts to come together in your mind, when you start to see the overall shape of it, your academic study will feed your soul.<sup>7</sup>

## **DON'T BE DETERRED**

So, in penning this short book, we don't aim to deter you from seminary. We both have been beneficiaries of deeply enriching seminary experiences. Our desire is to help you be aware of the danger and appropriately sobered by it. We want you to face the challenge in earnest and see your faith strengthened, deepened, enlivened, and enriched by seminary, not shipwrecked.

Our hope is not to steer Christians away from seminaries, but to help those studying at seminary, or preparing to do so, in their expectations and approach to this season of life. If anything, we think, with Frame, “it would be a great benefit to

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<sup>6</sup> John Frame, “Learning at Jesus’ Feet: A Case for Seminary Training.” Accessed online at [http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame\\_articles/2003Learning.htm](http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_articles/2003Learning.htm).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

the church, and to the lost, if many more Christians attended good seminaries. That would do much to reduce the appalling ignorance and immaturity in many Christian circles, which brings such discredit on the name of Christ.”<sup>8</sup>

### KEEPING THE HEART

Back to your heart. The heart is, after all, the “noble faculty of the soul,” as the old Puritan John Flavel says in his little 1668 book, now titled *Keeping the Heart*.<sup>9</sup> Most generally, the heart refers to the inner man, and most importantly, a person’s everlasting state depends upon its condition. Therefore, the “one great business of a Christian’s life,” claims Flavel, is to do heart-work, which he later explains as preserving the soul from sin and maintaining sweet communion with God.<sup>10</sup> And if this is true for the Christian life as a whole, it is just as true for the Christian in the season of theological training. We have some heart-work to do in the pages ahead.

In *How to Stay Christian in Seminary*, we’re hoping, God helping us, to do precisely that—to help you stay Christian as you train for Christian ministry. We want to help you “keep the heart”—and to develop the heart from which you’ll minister. We have seven ways in mind, each an outworking of the basic premise that what believers learn about God must affect the way they live. Put most plainly, we believe the key is intimacy with Jesus within a gospel-shaped community.

Chapter 1 is about what it’s all about—the glory of God.

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>John Flavel, *Keeping the Heart: How to Maintain Your Love for God* (1668; repr., Ross-shire, Great Britain: Christian Focus, 2012), 14.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 16.

Chapter 2 addresses why and how you should be in awe at God's grace to you in Christ. Chapters 3 and 4 tackle Bible reading and prayer, those important personal means of grace. Chapter 5 envisions a faithful manner of study and ministry, reminding you that equipping doesn't mean getting strong. Chapter 6 focuses on the priority of the family. Chapter 7 is an appropriate grand finale as we celebrate the supremacy of Jesus toward which everything is trending. Lastly, steadying the whole project, the conclusion wraps it up by getting at why *today* matters.

Our prayer is that serious students of the Bible not only will avoid spiritual shipwreck but also will thrive in the disciplined study of the Scriptures, making the most of theological education now for the good of the church tomorrow and for the joy of their souls forever.

## SEMINARY IS EXHILARATING . . . AND DANGEROUS.

Seminary can be thrilling, with the potential to inspire and equip church leaders for a lifetime of faithful ministry. But it's not without its risks. For many who have ignored the perils, seminary has been crippling. But with an extra dose of intentionality, and God's help, this season of preparation can invigorate your affections for Jesus.

*How to Stay Christian in Seminary* takes a refreshingly honest look at the seminarian's often-neglected devotional life, offering real-world advice for students eager to survive seminary with a flourishing faith.

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"Don't let the size of this book fool you. It is filled with solid-gold counsel."

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**RUSSELL D. MOORE**, President, The Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission

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