Calvin Theological Seminary Forum

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SEMINARY & YOU
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WELCOME TO THIS SPECIAL FORUM EDITION.

This publication is offered for two important audiences: first, for the men and women whose hearts are pricked by the Spirit’s prodding as they wonder about theological education in their vocational exploration and discernment of seminary; second, for their wise friends—professors, mentors and pastors— who offer them encouragement, guidance, and affirmation wrapped in prayer.

It is our humble privilege to present the 21st century promises and practices of Calvin Theological Seminary. We gratefully acknowledge the support of Lilly Endowment, Inc. for underwriting this publication.
As both a pastor and now seminary president, I have had the privilege of walking with many who are thinking about seminary. They wonder about finances. They wonder “Is God really calling me?” They may be deeply involved in church life with their own fruitful ministry and wonder whether seminary is “worth” it. Isn’t seminary education just a hoop or hurdle to overcome?

From my own personal journey, I know the life-giving value of a seminary education. I keep a growing list of why seminary education is more than merely helpful – it is vital for church leaders and the church. Here are four of my top reasons for attending seminary:

1. **SPREAD THE WORD**

   Everyone has one solid message or sermon in them. It is their testimony of what Jesus Christ has done for them. But what does a pastor or other ministry leader preach or teach at year ten in the same church? The ongoing work of message preparation for the pulpit or other settings is deepened by theological education and training.

   I still remember getting ready to preach on Sunday, September 16, 2001—the Sunday after 9/11, when terrorist attacks took down the Twin Towers and more. In this time of unimaginable tragedy, what do I say was not a theoretical question. Lament and theodicy (the problem of evil in the presence of a good God) are several of the biblical and theological concepts that helped frame my message that fateful Sunday. Seminary training helped me speak God’s timeless Word in a truthful, time-rooted way.

2. **FACING ISSUES IN MINISTRY**

   Sooner or later, ministry leaders will encounter conflict or crisis or even credibility. But such issues are not new in the body of Christ. Knowing how church leaders before us have faced the same or similar issues and questions can give us wisdom on how to handle such challenges or respond to critics.

3. **EVALUATING “NEW IDEAS” IN MINISTRY**

   Fads come and go, but good ideas for ministry can find their footing by uncovering their rootedness. One of the key books that I read as a church planter was written by Mark Shaw, a missionary who served in Kenya. In 10 Great Ideas from Church History: A Decision-Maker’s Guide to Shaping Your Church, Shaw surveys church history and helps place worship renewal, discipleship processes, and other topics within their historical context. It is a great book because it helps a church leader take the lens of history and bring it to bear on the current context of ministry.

4. **COLLEAGUES – BROTHERS AND SISTERS FOR THE JOURNEY**

   There is an African proverb that continues to shape my life: “If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go with others.” Seminary is a great place to find and cultivate colleagues for the journey. Choosing a community like Calvin Seminary is pivotal not just for the markers of academic excellence like passing a test or writing a paper. It’s pivotal for forging relationships— for finding colleagues from around the world who will cheer you on and lift you up for the marathon of ministry.

   As I walk with people wondering about seminary, I say again and again that our goal at Calvin Seminary is not just for our students to survive in ministry. Our desire is for each person to thrive in ministry. Part of that thriving comes from running the race with the aid that the breadth and depth of seminary education offers—day by day, year in and year out!
Consider the learning community of Calvin Seminary where you can take solid steps to explore and pursue your unique calling to serve and lead in Christ’s Kingdom.

**ARE YOU ON THE JOURNEY TOWARDS SEMINARY?**

**NEW TO HIM**
I did not grow up in a Christian home but since saying yes to Jesus Christ, I want to know his Word and ways better as I sort through vocational possibilities.

**ACTIVE AT CHURCH**
I have been active in a ministry position at my church where my gifts have been affirmed by other leaders. Now I'm ready and willing to hone my skills for leadership, teaching and preaching.

**MISSION EXPERIENCE**
I have had some short-term mission experiences and my heart is passionate for global missions. I want to prepare myself for a long-term global mission assignment.

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**SENSING A CALL**
I was an RA during my undergraduate studies and I am sensing a call to campus ministry. I want a degree that will both ground and grow me for the challenges of higher education.

**REDEEMING POWER**
I heard about Calvin’s prison ministry at Handlon and I am eager to learn more and be part of Christ's redeeming power behind bars.

**VOCA TIONAL CROSSROADS**
I'm at a vocational crossroads, called to leave one profession for the call of ministry.

**HEART & COMPASSION**
I am discovering my gift and heart for pastoral care and compassion so I desire to prepare myself for some type of chaplaincy ministry.

**MISSION EXPERIENCE**
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With tantalizing phrases like these, some may think I'm peddling the new iPhone X. In fact, these are the words the Psalmists use to describe God's revelation to us in the Scriptures. God's Word is a gift to be cherished, they teach us. To meditate on it day and night - studying, savoring, probing, relishing - is to be like a tree planted by streams of water, soaking up the goodness and grace of God.

Perhaps this is why John Calvin referred to Scripture as the school of the Holy Spirit. For through Scripture, all our confused inklings about God are corrected and clarified and our desires are properly directed so that we come to know and love and worship the one true God. It is no wonder that Scripture has held such a prominent place in the Christian tradition, standing as the supreme authority for matters of faith, and here at Calvin Seminary, as the foundation for all our studies.

Of course, recognizing the centrality of Scripture to the Christian life is not to say that the testimony of Scripture is always straightforward or comfortable. Sometimes what we find can be difficult to understand or even deeply troubling. What are we to make, for instance, of the conquest stories in the book of Joshua which speak of the genocide of the Canaanites at God's behest? Or the seemingly uncritical acceptance of slavery throughout Scripture? What now is the function of the Old Testament law for those of us who are in Christ? Are only some laws still relevant while others are not? And if so, how do we know which is which? What does and doesn't the Bible say about human sexuality and what are the implications for today? How do we reconcile Paul's negative comments about women teaching or...
assuming authority over a man with his lavish approbation of key female leaders in the early Church, Junia the apostle and Priscilla who corrected Apollos and taught him about God? And how is it that money and the plight of the poor are the most discussed subjects in the Bible? What does economics have to do with faith?

The truth is, at times, studying the Bible can feel less like an encounter with the God of love and more like a wrestling match with the stranger at the river Jabbok (Genesis 32:22-31)

While the Bible is clear in its overall message, individual texts can confound us, and if interpreted badly, skew our understanding of God and the gospel message. In this sense, the stakes of biblical interpretation are high, not only for our own personal piety but also for our public witness. We interpret before a watching world that has seen the Bible used to encourage love and to arouse hate, to further peace and to authorize violence, to challenge injustice and to sanction the status quo. The question then becomes how do we interpret Scripture faithfully so that our interpretations contribute to a true knowledge of God and the advance of the gospel?

This is where seminary education can help. At Calvin Seminary, we have a rich treasury of resources to draw from to equip us in wrestling with the hard stuff of Scripture. Thus, in a posture of faith seeking to understand, attending closely to the whispers of the Spirit, we read Scripture:

- With a learning community of brothers and sisters from around the world, bringing different perspectives and insights in an environment where iron sharpens iron;
- With the historic creeds and confessions that outline the basic affirmations of the Christian faith and unite us with the Church of all ages;
- With knowledge of biblical languages that not only lend a greater understanding of particular words in Scripture but also give us a window of insight into the culture and worldview of the biblical world;
- With the resources to explore how, within the context of the ancient Near East or first-century Palestine, the biblical text would originally have been heard;
- With time to engage in close readings of biblical texts to consider questions of genre and form, literary context, and the larger witness of Scripture;
- With Augustine and Chrysostom, Julian of Norwich and Teresa of Avila, Calvin, Bavinck, Barth, and Bonhoeffer, among others, gleaning from the wisdom of the great cloud of witnesses that has gone before.

In other words, at Calvin Seminary, students learn that they are not alone in the work of interpretation, that the Spirit is at work opening up the Scriptures to us through the wisdom of the community of saints, both past and present, and through their diligent study of the text.

In the end, the goal is not so much to arrive at the definitive interpretation but to gain enough insight into the text that we might bear faithful testimony in our teaching and preaching, to the God whose steadfast love endures forever, whose mercies are new every morning, and whose faithfulness is great.

There is no doubt that Scripture can be challenging. But like Jacob, at Calvin Seminary we refuse to let go until we have secured a blessing and until we see in the stranger the face of God.
These emerging leaders also know that the church they seek to lead is not immune to chaos. Tomorrow’s church leaders have endured seismic shifts within Christianity itself, including at least:

- Vocal, hard-fought battles regarding foundational questions of human origins, same-sex attraction, marriage, questions of gender and ministry, the authority of the Bible, and more;
- The routine pitting of tradition against innovation, publicly debated matters of faith related to justice, race, and poverty, and an onslaught of commodified ministry resources vying for ministry dollars and attention;
- A swift reshaping of pastoral leadership to include CEO levels of efficiency, expectations of “podcastable preaching,” and leadership of increasingly specialized teams—all while ensuring that attendance and download numbers trend upward;
- The dethroning of Christian faith in the West marked by the reality that growing numbers of missionaries are now being sent to North American from countries around the globe.

All who have lived in the time since 1980 understand that these are complex and challenging times to be an emerging church leader.

Calvin Seminary has been called by God to equip leaders. We have accepted this mission-critical role, setting our sights on equipping every student to love Jesus and others deeply as they give ministry leadership with Kingdom-sized courage, biblically rooted insight, and a strength of character that perseveres for the sake of the gospel.

How does Calvin Seminary go about this important task?

First, we equip emerging leaders to read, teach, share, preach, and deeply live God’s Word. Period.

Second, we seek to equip emerging leaders with critical thinking skills, theological insight, and a worldview that learns hard into cooperating with God’s redeeming work—all soaked in a Christ-like love and grace.

Third, Calvin Seminary believes that even biblical knowledge and critical thinking skills are insufficient to meet the leadership demands of today. Rather, we

\[\text{FORUM: CALVIN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY}\]
We can equip students to be capable and passionate lifelong learners about God and about themselves.

understand that knowledge and thinking skills are most potent when they are deployed by leaders who are deeply committed to cooperating with God’s redeeming work within themselves. Knowing and participating in God’s sanctifying work is the goal of our formation process at Calvin Seminary. This formation process begins by insisting that students live at the intersection of the classroom and real time, real-life ministry. To that end, students in first degree programs (MA, MDiv) are required to dive deep into local ministry through contextual learning assignments. These assignments require students be placed in partner churches/ministries with seasoned vocational mentors. These mentors have a singular focus as it relates to the life of the student: to invest in their ongoing formation.

The formation process at Calvin Seminary is enhanced by another key tool: student engagement in formation groups with peers. Students meet weekly throughout the semester with peers to listen, learn, reflect, and pray about ministry and life. These conversations are guided by formation group leaders who knew the contours of ministry and invite the students to grow and learn together. Another vital ingredient in the formation process at Calvin Seminary is increased levels of personal awareness. In order to achieve this goal, students regularly engage in various means of assessment, including the use of a Birkman Assessment (for strengths), psychological assessments (for holistic care), and vocational assessments.

Calvin Seminary is seeking to combine excellence in academics with deep, thorough ongoing formation. We understand that we will not be able to give emerging leaders all they need to tackle every complex challenge of ministry. However, we are convinced that we can equip students to be capable and passionate lifelong learners about God and about themselves. This ability to know and love God well and to know and love God’s work in each of us is the foundation for our lives, and as such the very basis for the kind of godly leadership that will serve God’s people and purposes in our world God so loves.

GEOFF VANDERMolen
WAKING UP TO OUR OWN CONTEXT

I was in my twenties on a trip to New York when it finally dawned on me what the definition of “downtown” meant. I grew up in the foothills of Northern California, where most people lived in the mountains and traveled down them to run errands in town. Imagine my surprise sitting on the subway heading “uptown” (northbound) to Harlem and realizing that on my return I would be taking the “downtown” train (southbound). I realized that outside my hometown, “downtown” commonly refers to directions on a compass, not elevation!

Likewise, if you were to ask me directions to my childhood home, I could only name one or two streets. It was more common to give directions based on landmarks like tree stumps and dilapidated barns then streets signs. This approach to navigation may seem strange to urbanites, but to those living in rural areas during the pre-iPhone era, typographical features are a lot easier to identify then small street signs.

I suppose if we look back to our childhood, we could all say we grew up with similar peculiarities that outsiders would find bizarre. In our early years, we learn ways of inhabiting the world by imitating others as they navigate their surroundings. We tend to overlook odd or problematic behaviors of the community. Often it is not until we move to a new place or encounter questions from newcomers that the opportunity for self-awareness occurs. It is then that we might learn that our definition of downtown is bound up with our particular context and that our ways of moving through life are less helpful in new geographies.

Theology should be no less bound up with context and geography than navigation, and yet in much of mainstream American Christianity, there is a great deal of naiveté about our cultural embeddedness. We often don’t realize that our language and ways of living are determined by various forces in culture and history and not solely by the Bible.

THE CONTEXT OF THEOLOGY

Typically, when we think about the work of theology, we picture theologians sitting in a library surrounded by books. Books are important tools, but the proper end of theology lies elsewhere. Andrew Walls argues that the primary workshop of theology lies in the life situations of believers or of the church. Theological activity arises out of Christian mission and Christian living, from
the need for Christians to make Christian choices and to think in a Christian way.” The specificity of our geographic and socio-historical contexts shape the questions that we ask. Let me offer a few examples.

John Calvin, a refugee, worked out his theology in ministry among other refugees in 16th century Geneva. Saint Augustine, a mestizo, wrestled with his mixed heritage of African Christianity and Greco-Roman training as the Roman Empire crumbled around him. And the Belgic Confession devoted special attention to the “tyrannized, oppressed, and tormented” of 16th century Protestants in Europe. Something of this heritage is lost when we approach theology disconnected from context. The birthplace of theology should be the lived experience of the Church as it participates in God’s mission.

In Scripture, we find that new events posed fresh theological questions to the Church. We see a vivid example of this in Acts through Peter’s hesitancy to follow the Holy Spirit’s lead to venture into a Gentile’s home (Acts 10:9-22). This act was strictly forbidden among 1st century Jews and yet it was the Holy Spirit who prompted this violation of established purity laws—an act which created no small disturbance among believers (Acts 11:1-3 and 15:1-6). Under the Belgic Confession the last judgment to address prejudices and biases within Christianity and society today.

We also look locally at the story of Grand Rapids, Michigan—a tale of two cities. How is it that a city rated #1 for best places to raise a family by Forbes could at the same time fall just behind Milwaukee, Wisconsin as the worst city for African Americans? This history of redlining and segregation shapes the current landscape of the city and must inform how we approach theology and ministry. It is incumbent upon our endeavor to ask hard questions about ourselves and our context as we seek answers and healing from Scripture.

Theology must serve the mission of God’s people and address the everyday realities of their life and mission.

who prompted the formation of contextual theology?—an act which created no small disturbance among believers (Acts 11:1-3 and 15:1-6). Under the prompting of the Spirit, the early Church was forced to think beyond its Jewish culture and consider what discipleship looked like for Gentile converts in Judea, Samaria and the uttermost parts of the world. Theology must serve the mission of God’s (Jewish and Gentile) people and address the everyday realities of their life and mission.1

THEOLOGICAL FORMATION FOR CONTEXTUAL MINISTRY

Calvin Seminary seeks to form women and men for ministry in the church and society. We do this by helping students understand the message of Scripture and consider what discipleship looked like for Gentile converts in Judea, Samaria and the uttermost parts of the world. Theology must serve the mission of God’s (Jewish and Gentile) people and address the everyday realities of their life and mission.1

THE PROPER END OF THEOLOGY

The very heart of the theological task is to live the Christian faith in our respective contexts. This requires an increasing self-aware and self-conscious engagement with our culture. J.H. Bavinck expresses this point powerfully: “Abstract, disembodied and history-less sinners do not exist; only very concrete sinners exist…” Our task, he argues, is to present the gospel in ways that address people in the particularity of their history and culture.1 This specificity is vital to theology. To that end, theology serves its proper function: fostering the faithful life and witness of the Church in the contemporary world that God loves.

We seek this global awareness without overlooking the beauty and brokenness of our own context. During the fall of 2017, Danjuma Gibson – Associate Professor of Pastoral Care at Calvin Seminary – led a group of students on a trip to Washington D.C. to study African American history and experience the Jewish Holocaust. The discussion of contemporary racism and segregation in America was set within the historical context of slavery and antisemitism. We explored how it was that Christian theology justified the Church’s involvement and complicity in such heinous atrocities and what must be done theologically to address prejudices and biases within Christianity and society today.

Calvin Seminary provided an education that gave me the tools to serve and thrive in my church leadership role.

References:

The church needs leaders but do its leaders need to go to seminary? And if they do, is it important for them to study theology? After all, Jesus’ disciples didn’t attend a seminary. Can’t leaders simply rely on the Holy Spirit’s guidance as the apostles did?

Quick answers: Yes, yes, and no. Not only were the apostles directly taught by Jesus, some of them were even specially inspired by the Holy Spirit to write our New Testament. They had a unique office that was not repeatable. What they taught and wrote is forever the bedrock foundation of our undoubted, universal Christian faith. Authentic Christianity is apostolic.

And here’s what’s at stake in the seminary and theology issue: the authenticity of our teaching and preaching. Seminaries are places where practical skills such as preaching and pastoral care are learned but they are much more than that. God’s people need to be confident that God is speaking to them when they hear a sermon. Troubled persons who come to pastors for soul care deserve nothing but the best spiritual guidance. The church therefore requires certificates of authenticity of its candidates for ministry and a good seminary education is an essential part of the training such candidates receive.

Here’s why. In this new millennium, a multitude of voices clamor for our attention, all claiming to represent true Christianity. God’s people hear conflicting interpretations of Scripture on crucial issues, not to mention the plethora of Bible translation, some with a definite agenda. How should we live as disciples of Christ today when there is such serious disagreement among those who claim the name of Jesus?

There is no escape from the messiness I have just described and I am not suggesting that seminaries are simple cures to the uncertainties of our age. I am only saying that seminaries play a vital role in helping the Church stay faithful to its Lord. Here’s how: Good seminaries teach pastors how to use the original languages of the Bible, thus giving them a facility to assess translations. Seminaries teach church history and especially the history of the church’s interpretation of the Bible and forming doctrines from the Bible. Seminaries nurture students into becoming practicing theologians who work with the wisdom of the church of all ages and places and apply that wisdom to their own ministry contexts.

Conceivably such training could be accomplished by means other than by seminary education and it has so been done in the past, including the first 20 years of the Christian Reformed Church’s existence. In those years, students were taught by gifted pastors. But, the church decided in 1876 that a wise and stewardly use of gifts and resources meant establishing a theological school. In establishing seminaries and appointing professors with specialized gifts and resources meant establishing a theological school. In establishing seminaries and appointing professors with specialized gifts and training, churches exercise stewardship of their resources. And in turn, a seminary’s first responsibility is to be a steward of the apostolic tradition, of the word of God, of the gospel.

That is why the Christian Reformed Church today has its own theological seminary named after John Calvin. For over 140 years, this denomination has generously supported its seminary with significant financial resources as well as faithful prayers and perspectives from across North America and beyond. The faculty of the seminary, in turn, serves the denomination with biblical and theological reflection and advice regarding doctrine, ethical issues, and church life and practice. It’s a solid relationship of mutuality and accountability, all in the cause of Christ’s Kingdom coming in grace and truth.

God’s people need to be confident that God is speaking to them when they hear a sermon.
In our life’s walk following Jesus, we are continually learning through the work and power of the Holy Spirit as we praise, pray, and read His Word. As 21st century disciples, we are all experiencing theological education in one way or another.

For some of us, God’s call is to really know the Bible and to use God-given gifts to teach and preach the Word regularly by leading worship in His body, the Church. For that person, Calvin Seminary is a literal godsend. It’s a place where students can dig deep into God’s Word in community with other students and be taught by insightful, wise faculty—professors who offer a diverse wealth of practical, real-life experiences.

For others of us, there is a deep desire to know the Bible better so we can work in our varied professions (homemaker, teacher, business person, part-time ministry leader, etc.) with more knowledge and focus on helping to transform society for Jesus. Calvin Seminary offers many certificate programs online and in residence that will help fill this need. The programs are even “stackable” so they could lead to a formal degree if desired.

As a volunteer serving on the Board of Trustees from my calling in business, I am excited to recommend Calvin Seminary as a place that provides resources to help us fulfill Jesus’ command to spread His teaching and make disciples of all people. Whether as pastors or lay members of Christ’s Church, Calvin Seminary strengthens leaders to offer devoted hearts and keen minds for Kingdom service—to reach the world for Jesus. As I see it, THAT’S theological education at its best! Won’t you join us?

A formal theological education is not for everyone—that’s for sure! Yet every follower of Jesus should be interested in theological education. As we experience life day by day, we see and learn the truth of God’s Word all around us. Why is there so much brokenness in the world? Why injustice? Why? Why? Why?
Human beings are created for community. The second chapter of Genesis tells us that it was not good for Adam to be alone so God provided him with a “suitable helper.” Unfortunately, in a time where humans are more connected worldwide than any other time in history, feelings of loneliness and isolation are being reported at increasingly higher rates than in past decades. Despite Facebook, Snapchat, Twitter, and a multitude of other social media options, people report feeling isolated and disconnected. They feel alone in a crowded, media-driven room.

In the face of feelings of loneliness, however, the Church offers a message of hope for renewed community in Christ. At Calvin Seminary, we strive to model that renewed community. As one walks into the Student Center and looks around, she will see women and men from over 20 different nations coming together to study and pray and eat and play in this microcosm of the world. Students who are distance learners at Calvin Seminary also find community connections not only in their online class conversations, but also during the weeklong on-campus sessions each semester.

When we are not studying or in class, food turns out to be the magnet for many community events. From donuts after chapel on Wednesdays, to pizza at Town Halls on Thursdays, to celebrating Christmas with food and stories that represent our home nations, to the Chinese New Year celebration hosted by our Chinese students, our community loves to gather around food. Indeed, food even anchors our worship at the end of each semester when we celebrate our unity with Christ and each other through sharing the bread and wine of the Lord’s Supper.

They found a loving, hospitable community to enfold and encourage them in their daily lives. Recently, as he and his family were preparing to return to their home country after completing two programs at Calvin Seminary, an international student from China told us about how difficult it had been for him and his family when they first arrived. They had to adjust to a new culture, a new city, and a new language. It was hard. But at Calvin Seminary they found a welcome.

They found fellow students willing to come alongside them and help with childcare, food, and other needs. They found staff who helped navigate everything from medical appointments to tuition payments. They found professors who were approachable and genuinely cared about them, encouraging this student in his studies and spending time with him to help him succeed. They were even invited into the homes of several faculty for a meal together.

They found a community that prayed for them through difficult circumstances as well as rejoiced with them through joyful moments. In short, they found a loving, hospitable community to enfold and encourage them in their daily lives.

Through formation groups, prayer, worship, and class, Calvin Seminary strives to foster a community of learning that weaves our faith into the fabric of our day-to-day living. Students, staff, and faculty seek to grow together in Christ, reminding each other regularly to clothe ourselves with His virtues (Col. 3:12-14). By so doing, we seek to live honestly and hopefully before the face of God and for His glory.
TOGETHER, WE’LL INVEST IN YOUR CALLING

How am I going to pay for seminary?

Plan without fear.

Will I receive support during seminary?

Study without setbacks.

Will I be financially prepared for life and work after seminary?

Serve without limits.

Calvin Seminary is committed to helping you finance your ministry journey so, in turn, you will be free to:

$1.4 MILLION IN SCHOLARSHIPS ANNUALLY

• Calvin Seminary awards $1.4 Million in scholarships annually, helping to lower the cost of a seminary education.
• In addition to scholarships, many other resources are available, including potential support from your home church and/or denomination.

For residential students: Your on-campus experience is designed with student affordability in mind.

• Seminary housing is subsidized to keep costs lower than other options in Grand Rapids.
• All utilities are bundled into student housing costs to make budgeting easier.
• Financial education programming is available to help students make smart financial decisions.
• On-campus resources provide food, clothing, and other items at low or no cost for qualifying seminary students and their families.

For distance students: Your distance learning program is constructed to maximize your impact and your dollar, allowing you to take courses while also working.

• From the way students engage in class to the design of on-campus intensives, our distance programs allow space for paid work even as you maintain a “full-time” student status for swift program progress and maximum financial assistance.

For all students:

• Our financial aid director is available to work closely with you to promote your financial success during seminary.

Learn more about our community of support: calvinseminary.edu

80% OF MASTER STUDENTS GRADUATED WITHOUT ANY FEDERAL DEBT INCURRED

60% GRADUATED WITH NO INCURRED DEBT OF ANY KIND

• More than 80% of our graduating, first-level master degree (M.Div., M.A., M.T.S.) students graduated without any federal debt incurred at Calvin Seminary, and more than 60% graduated with no incurred debt of any kind.
• There are options for U.S. and Canadian students to obtain loans through Calvin Seminary that are partially forgivable, keeping debt levels low.
to do? The best way to engage these questions is to spend a day at seminary; visiting class, meeting students, and talking to someone like me in the Admissions Office!

The Christian life is one of lifelong learning and discipleship, so it is not surprising that God would nudge us to a place like seminary where we can experience deep learning and spiritual formation. In seminary, classroom instruction, peer to peer learning, structured mentoring, and practical ministry internships all work together to shape Christian leaders in profound ways. Even if you discern that seminary is not where God is leading you, the question of lifelong learning and spiritual formation for your vocation remains. How do you plan to continue your learning and growth?

If you get caught up trying to plan out all the next steps, or if you are not anchored in an active prayer life and ongoing self-examination, it is easy to get overwhelmed, stuck, or simply to be wrong. When sensing a call or searching for a vocation, the important thing to do is to actively investigate and to not be afraid. Repeatedly, scripture warns against worry and fear. Some good questions to ask are: What is God calling me to do next? Who is God calling me to be? Will seminary help me in this pursuit?

In my work, I meet a lot of people who are sorting through their interest and sense of call into ministry. Some are confident that ministry work is where God wants them but they might not know what this means in practical terms. Others experience uncertainty and anxiety. They feel a divine prompting, but wonder, Why would God call me? Am I really called to ministry and seminary? How do I know for sure? Some feel like they are the least likely person to be attending seminary or serving in ministry.

Vocation is a richly loaded term in Christian circles. Put simply, vocation is understood to be literally a calling (or invitation) from God to join in His mission of restoration and making all things new. In this, God points us to specific roles in our families, churches, communities, and workplaces that are all ministry vocations; callings that honor God’s heart for the world.

Understandably, we feel pressure to “get it right” when deciding which vocations to pursue. Human instinct can be to turn to one’s own intellectual or technical prowess. In this thinking, wise decisions come from “smart” people who know a lot. However, in “God’s Wisdom for Navigating Life,” Tim Keller observes that biblical wisdom, as described in Proverbs, is closely tied to one’s heart and character—more than technical competence or strategic ability and smarts. Keller concludes from his study of Proverbs that poor decisions tend to have their roots in disordered desires for money, status, or self-absorption and a need for control and security. So the first step in wise discernment of God’s calling for you should be - through prayer and the help of the scriptures – to search your inner motivations and character. Are you making a vocational decision out of faith or fear, humility or pride, gentleness or power? Be honest with yourself before the face of God about the underlying forces that shape your life choices. Remember, following a call to ministry is not necessarily a more noble or humble path than others. God calls people into pastoral ministry, and He also calls people to steward and fill the earth by creating art, growing food, and starting businesses.

Once you’ve gotten in touch with your inner life, you are more ready to engage in shared discernment and to consult with trusted advisors and mentors in your life. Share how you feel God prompting you and be ready to humbly listen to the wisdom of others. How do they see your gifts and abilities? Do they see promise in you for pastoral ministry? Be ready to also consult with the broader Christian community to gather insight about how to respond to God’s calling for you. In many traditions, it is the Church or denomination that ultimately calls its leaders into formal positions of leadership. This broader Christian community will often include seminaries.

Though vocational discernment begins with a prayerful gut check, it naturally leads to practical questions and decisions related to degree programs and delivery formats, financial aid, and internship opportunities. You can rely on the help of others as you ask, Is God leading me to a door that requires a credential to enter through? What learning and spiritual formation is necessary for me to follow Jesus and do the work I think I hear Him asking me to do? The best way to engage these questions is to spend a day at seminary; visiting class, meeting students, and talking to someone like me in the Admissions Office!

The Christian life is one of lifelong learning and discipleship, so it is not surprising that God would nudge us to a place like seminary where we can experience deep learning and spiritual formation. In seminary, classroom instruction, peer to peer learning, structured mentoring, and practical ministry internships all work together to shape Christian leaders in profound ways. Even if you discern that seminary is not where God is leading you, the question of lifelong learning and spiritual formation for your vocation remains. How do you plan to continue your learning and growth?

If you get caught up trying to plan out all the next steps, or if you are not anchored in an active prayer life and ongoing self-examination, it is easy to get overwhelmed, stuck, or simply to be wrong. When sensing a call or searching for a vocation, the important thing to do is to actively investigate and to not be afraid. Repeatedly, scripture warns against worry and fear. Some good questions to ask are: What is God calling me to do next? Who is God calling me to be? Will seminary help me in this pursuit?
Do you have to have perfect clarity and perfect confidence before you decide to enter seminary?

President Medenblik: I think clarity can grow as you're here. I came to Calvin Seminary as a second-career student; I had already been a practicing attorney. Looking back, I probably did have a call in some ways as a teenager but actually didn't find that confirmation until later through various church communities and through wise words from my wife. However, the contours of that angularity of that call can be explored more fully at seminary.

So seminary can be an exploratory experience as well?

Dean Feenstra: I would say absolutely. Yesterday, I had lunch with some students who are graduating from the distance learning program this spring, and one of the students observed that the journey through seminary was one step at a time. Sometimes we think we've got things planned out, we think it's all under our control, but it turns out that's just an illusion. It's not under our control and so we really go one step at a time in faith and trust God to lead us where the next step goes. I think seminary can be a journey just like that because it's really a journey of faith just like the rest of our Christian walk.

Medenblik: I can relate to that from my own experience. I was exploring in my first year at seminary, but I was surprised to learn that I was surrounded by a lot of other men and women who had the very same journey, and I met men and women on the faculty who understood how to help with that journey.

Feenstra: That's exactly right. I think that we have both formal and informal ways through which some of that guidance happens. An example of more formal conversations is in vocational formation groups. These groups – made up of 6 to 8 current students and a group leader – will explore things like calling. But then there are also the more informal opportunities: talking to people at a town hall event, over lunch in the student center, or during donut fellowship after chapel. Faculty are very open to discussing issues that students wonder about not just about the nuts and bolts of seminary but also about the broader issues of, "Where might God be calling me?".

Do I have to qualify to come to seminary? What if I haven't been to college in 15 years—or never got a college degree? Jul, you said that you had a law background. Certainly, that disqualified you.

Medenblik: Well I usually like to say “from law to grace” to help explain my vocational journey. When I was deciding on a major during my undergraduate studies, I was told you can do anything. So I was a philosophy major; history and English minors. After that, I went to law school. But we've run across prospective students who have engineering as a background, or worked on farms, or even have worked in a church setting before they come to seminary, saying “I want more education.” So it's wide open. We can even encourage those who don't have a bachelor's degree to enroll, as our ATS accreditation allows for exceptions to that requirement in some instances. For incoming students, we would prefer some background in terms of history, philosophy, and English, but it doesn't have to be a bachelor's degree; and we review exceptions on a case-by-case basis.

Feenstra: Yesterday, I was talking to a new student. She is new in our MDiv program. Before seminary she had already written articles and is an active blogger. Though she took a few college courses at a community college, she never got a bachelor's degree. She's loving being at seminary.
What if I’m nervous about the academic demands at seminary?

Feenstra: We have several resources that can help. For one thing, faculty members are always ready and can be available to help. They want to help because they want to see the students in their courses succeed. Our faculty members have office hours and I’ve heard it noted many places that these designated times are the most under-used resource on a campus. In addition to our faculty, we have a number of other resources. For instance, we have a rhetoric center, where students can go to with their papers to be read and then responded to before they submit them, which can help improve writing skills.

One of the joys that we have at Calvin Seminary is that approximately 40% of our student body comes from outside of North America, so it’s a tremendously international community. Because there are many people for whom English is a second language, we have conversation groups where students who use English as a second language can converse with native speakers. We also have made exceptions where if English is the second language, students can have some extra test time when in-class testing occurs, and again, the rhetoric center is available to help students with writing papers in English. Sarah Chun, our international student advisor, is very helpful to international students, beginning with their visa documentation, and continuing support throughout their seminary enrollment.

Medenblik: I think that one of the words that come to mind is the word “engagement.” You could have a tradition that’s engaged only with itself that turns in on itself, or you have one that really does look around beyond itself, that engages in different ways. I think that most faculty members themselves have studied or taught in a variety of places so that they are not simply aware of a narrow tradition but of a broad swath of the Christian faith. We have faculty members who engage in dialogue with Muslims, with Roman Catholics, with any number of other folk in many contexts. A specific example of this is our program whereby faculty members go and teach in a state prison. It’s been one of the ways in which we’ve enlivened our community and faculty by teaching in prison and seeing God at work in a very unlikely place, and finding that we grow as much from teaching in prison as anything that we provide to the students who are in that course in prison. We have had courses in Spanish for the last several years. We have two Spanish language certificates, and we’re in the process of developing an MA that would be taught entirely in Spanish. So we are trying to be rooted but at the same time very open to a wide variety of people and traditions.

What sets Calvin Seminary apart—how do you leaders describe its distinctives?

Feenstra: I think that one of our hallmarks is that Calvin Seminary is deeply rooted in the Christian tradition, and especially in the Reformed branch of the Christian tradition. We are deeply Reformed and reflective. Calvin Seminary comes from a part of the Christian tradition that thinks hard and wants to understand our faith. Faith seeking understanding is what we’re about. But at the same time, we’re not narrow. We’re not narrowly Reformed; we’re not narrow in any way. We train women and men for ministry and affirm women and men in their call. We train people in a wide variety of denominations, not all Reformed. People come to us from many branches of the Christian tradition.

Medenblik: I think that one of the words that come to mind is the word “engagement.” You could have a tradition that’s engaged only with itself that turns in on itself, or you have one that really does look around beyond itself, that engages in different ways. I think that people can find a community here at Calvin Seminary where they will discover and experience friendships with people they might not normally have dialogue with before. It’s a place to broaden and deepen one’s engagement across the spectrum of Christian faith. And this all happens under the umbrella of our mission, which includes the work of forming “church leaders who cultivate communities of Jesus Christ.” While we have this rootedness and focus on Reformed thinking, our engagement looks to be broad because Christ’s Kingdom is broad.

Above all, an excellent seminary – like Calvin Seminary – is a place where you can be formed to see those same qualities of excellence that I promoted among my former students. Here, too, is a community of men and women who are sorting out their callings and wrestling with theological questions. At Calvin Seminary, we celebrate a wide variety of students who enrich us because of their differences: men and women, Asian and Latino, younger and older, zumiez-types and button-downs. They’re all here making up the kaleidoscope of what it means to be the Church. We are in the Reformed tradition which means we are heirs of those great thinkers (like John Calvin) who gave birth to the Reformation. But those who have never heard of Calvin or who come from different traditions can find their home here, too.

When you are wrestling with your own understanding of God’s call to serve Him, few people can understand exactly what you’re going through. But they can understand this in a seminary like Calvin. Such a community is a gift because in it there are so many others – professors and students – who have walked the same road you are walking. The aim of these vocational years in our lives is discovering clarity and confidence: knowing the gifts God has given to us and discovering how those gifts may be used. My hope and prayer for every student who comes to Calvin Seminary is to find the guidance and investments to help you grow in the clarity of call and confidence to follow your unique, Spirit-guided pathway.

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Through all these years, the mission of Calvin Seminary has remained the same.

For more information on Calvin Seminar, visit: www.calvinseminary.edu
Adapted from a benediction spoken by John Claypool in 2004 at Emory University, Candler School of Theology, upon the occasion of the installation of Tom Long as Bandy Professor of Homiletics. In attendance were both Rev. Scott Hoezee, Director of the Center for Excellence in Preaching, and Dr. Cornelius Plantinga, President emeritus of Calvin Theological Seminary and Senior Research Fellow at the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship. Struck by its power, together they assembled it from memory and each has been using it since. You may recognize how it echoes St. Patrick’s Breastplate prayer, 8th stanza. For the rest of story, see: https://worship.calvin.edu/resources/resource-library/neal-plantinga-on-his-god-go-before-you-blessing/

GOD GO BEFORE YOU TO GUIDE YOU
GOD GO BEHIND YOU TO PROTECT YOU
GOD GO BENEATH YOU TO SUPPORT YOU
GOD GO BESIDE YOU TO BEFRIEND YOU

BE NOT AFRAID.

AND LET THE BLESSING OF ALMIGHTY GOD
THE FATHER, THE SON, AND THE HOLY SPIRIT
DESCEND UPON YOU, SETTLE IN AROUND YOU, AND MAKE ITS HOME IN YOU

BE NOT AFRAID
GO IN PEACE. AMEN.