Are Seminaries Biblical?

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Most churches, and probably most Christians, assume that those who serve in the ministry, at least at the pastor level, should have seminary training.

There are some who dare to question this system. Their question is often, Are seminaries biblical? The answer they're often given by seminary advocates is, Does something have to be biblical to be good? After all, cars, indoor plumbing, electricity, and other conveniences that we take for granted are not in the Bible. Even words such as "Trinity" are not in the Bible. But this response of citing general cases is an evasion of the question.

Modern conveniences are not directly related to the Bible, and we might expect that the Bible would say nothing about them. And, while the word "Trinity" is not in the Bible, the Trinity certainly is (see "Why Christians Believe in the Trinity") (https://www.wordofhisgrace.org/wp/trinity/). So, these examples that seminary advocates list are faulty analogies and evade the real question: Is seminary training supported by Scripture?

Seminaries are postgraduate schools that are designed specifically to teach the Bible, biblical languages, theology, leadership skills for the ministry of Jesus Christ, and so forth. Thus, we have every reason to expect the Bible to contain a precedent for seminaries or either explicit instructions or implied directives concerning seminaries. After all, it includes accounts of the ministry of Jesus Christ Himself, His training of His apostles, the apostles' instructions to their disciples, lists of the qualifications of elders, instructions for the meetings of the assemblies, and so forth. Surely, these give us principles that will tell us whether seminaries are a good way to train the Christian leadership.

A Precedent for Seminaries?

Seminary advocates often point out that Jesus, being God in the flesh, needed no teacher. Therefore, we can't say that because Jesus didn't have seminary-like training, that there is no need for seminaries today. This is true. It could be that while Jesus didn't need seminary training, ordinary humans do. Yes, it could be so, but it isn't because
the Bible tells us of people who became Christian leaders without seminary training or even formal higher education.

Did Jesus' apostles need a seminary? Advocates for seminaries say that Jesus' apostles were directly taught by Jesus, and what better teacher could they have had? Jesus' teaching His disciples, they say, was the precedent for seminaries. He may not have had formal classrooms, but Jesus did teach His disciples. Today, since Jesus no longer walks the Earth, we can no longer learn from Him but must send people to seminaries to learn. Is this true?

The Bible contradicts this view and tells us that we can still learn from Jesus. In fact, it tells us that we are in a better position to learn from Jesus than the disciples during Jesus' earthly ministry.

It is true that Jesus directly taught His apostles. Oddly enough, however, the Bible reveals that during Jesus' earthly ministry, His disciples frequently misunderstood what Jesus was talking about and were often clueless. Even though Jesus was right there in front of their eyes and speaking directly to them, they commonly didn't understand Him. That's because Jesus' physical presence wasn't the important ingredient for understanding. The disciples had trouble understanding because "the Holy Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus wasn't yet glorified" (John 7:39).

At various times here and there, God gave these men miraculous bits of revelation (e.g. Matthew 16:15-17). On the whole, however, their minds were yet too carnal for them to comprehend what Jesus was teaching.

Jesus plainly spoke of this very thing: "However when he, the Spirit of truth, has come, he will guide you into all truth, for he will not speak from himself; but whatever he hears, he will speak. He will declare to you things that are coming. He will glorify me, for he will take from what is mine, and will declare it to you. All things whatever the Father has are mine; therefore I said that he takes of mine, and will declare it to you" (John 16:13-15). Until the Holy Spirit was dwelling in the disciples, there were many truths the disciples could not bear. But once they had the Holy Spirit, they could begin to understand.

Jesus also said that He Himself would dwell in His followers (John 17:20-23). This He does through the Holy Spirit. So, it is wrong to say that we need seminaries because Jesus can no longer teach us. Jesus is very much with His people today—more so, in fact, than when He
was physically on the earth. Today, He spiritually dwells within us through the Holy Spirit.

All believers today are indwelt by Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit. This means that, unlike the disciples during Jesus' earthly ministry, we have direct access to the Holy Spirit, Jesus, and the Father (John 16:26-27). We also have the written Word of God at our fingertips. In other words, rather than being at a disadvantage because Jesus isn't physically here, we have great advantages over the disciples when they were physically with Jesus.

It was only after they received the Holy Spirit that Jesus' followers wrote the New Testament that contains the doctrine we Christians need. And they accomplished that feat without the physical presence of Jesus, and they did it entirely without seminaries.

Now, don't mistake me for saying that a person needs no education to teach. I say this because some Christian groups, especially some Fundamentalists, disparage education as somehow being contrary to healthy Christianity. I don't agree. Certainly, there are schools at every level of learning that try to infuse an anti-Christian bias into the minds of their students. But this doesn't mean that there is anything wrong with education per se. I believe that Christians should seek to further their education as much as possible. But there is a difference between education and indoctrination. Extensive, critical reading is one of the best ways to become educated.

Paul speaks of the ability to teach when listing the qualifications of elders/overseers (1 Timothy 3:2 and 2 Timothy 2:24). Paul also tells Timothy that he should be able to rightly divide (orthotomeō—"cut straight," "dissect") the word of truth (2 Timothy 2:15). This requires reading proficiency and a good level of reading comprehension. The apostle John may have been a fisherman, but he was apparently educated well enough to write a lengthy Gospel account and three epistles of significant theological depth. Peter, also a fisherman, wrote two epistles. Nevertheless, they were not seminary trained. Many more men today who are not seminary trained would be able to teach if given the chance.

**Seminaries Train Clergy**

God gives all Christians gifts and responsibilities. Some particularly have the gift to oversee and/or to teach. This does not, however, set them apart from the rest of the body of believers in some entirely
unbiblical category called a clergy. I more thoroughly discuss the clergy in the article, "How Many Offices Are In God’s Assembly?" (https://www.wordofhisgrace.org/wp/servants-1/). Yet, seminaries originated specifically to train clergy. What's more, the clergy seminaries were founded to train were Catholic clergy. Even further, the Catholic Church founded seminaries as part of its counter-reformation. The purpose of the seminaries was to train priests who could argue against the challenges to Catholic doctrine presented by the Reformation.

The "faction" and "heresy" referred to in this quote is the Reformation: "And when in the 16th Century faction and heresy had disturbed the Church and had confounded all things human and divine the sacred Council of Trent devised no more efficient expedient than the erection of Seminaries to check the growing mischief which was spreading about her" (Henry Weedall, D.D., The Origin, Object, and Influence of Ecclesiastical Seminaries Considered, in a Discourse.... [R.P. Stone and Son, Birmingham: 1838] 14).

The Catholic Encyclopedia tells us that ecclesiastical seminaries are "schools instituted, in accordance with a decree of the Council of Trent, for the training of the Catholic diocesan clergy.... This system of seminary education, which has now become an essential feature of the Church's life, had its origin only in the sixteenth century in a decree of the Council of Trent.... Cardinal Pole, who had witnessed the foundation of the German College and had been a member of the commission to prepare for the Council of Trent, went to England after the death of Henry VIII to re-establish the Catholic religion. In the regulations which he issued in 1556, the word seminary seems to have been used for the first time in its modern sense, to designate a school exclusively devoted to the training of the clergy. After the council [of Trent] reopened, the Fathers resumed the question of clerical training; and after discussing it for about a month, they adopted the decree on the foundation of ecclesiastical seminaries. (Anthony Viéban, "Ecclesiastical Seminary." The Catholic Encyclopedia. Vol. 13. New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1912).

Given this information, it can be a somewhat staggering fact that almost every Protestant, Baptist, and other non-Catholic denomination—as well as many non-denominational churches—have established seminaries! Yet, it shouldn't really be surprising given that all of these denominations and churches have either always been or at some point in history become part of the institutional church that is epitomized by the Roman Catholic "Holy Mother Church." The institutional church is not, and never has been, the ekklēsia built by
Jesus Christ; although there are believers in the institutional church, and they are members of the *ekklēsia*.

Further reading: "*Ekklēsia* or Church, Does It Matter?" ([https://www.wordofhisgrace.org/wp/ekklesia-or-church/](https://www.wordofhisgrace.org/wp/ekklesia-or-church/)).

Is my point that Protestant churches shouldn't have taken the word "seminary" that was used by Catholics and used it for their schools? No. That is not my point. My point is that the Catholic Church established seminaries as centralized institutions through which they could indoctrinate young men with official Catholic dogma. These men would then be sent to churches where they would teach the same, uniform doctrine they had been taught. This, it was hoped, would create an atmosphere hostile to individual thinking and prevent the spread of the Reformation. Protestant seminaries did more than just take the name "seminary." They based their seminaries on the same model—centralized indoctrination of young men taken from their local churches who would then be sent out as a special class of Christians called clergy to teach the dogma they had imbibed at the seminary.

This is very far removed from the Spirit-led, physically decentralized, Christ-centered, biblical model; and this is why I have a problem with seminaries.

**The Danger of Unbiblical Authority and Centralization**

Jesus indwells each believer, we all have access to the written Word of God, and we can be exposed to the ideas of other believers through the meetings of the assemblies or—as is often now the case—through electronic and print media. Thus, even if we assume that the purpose of seminaries is to impartially teach the Word of God—and that is a questionable assumption, at best—we can see that there isn't a legitimate need for seminaries. Jesus teaches us directly through the Spirit and written Word. But is there anything wrong with seminaries? I believe there is. Again, even if we assume an innocent purpose behind their founding, seminaries are a danger because of their inherent structure.

Two fundamental problems with seminaries lie in the perceived authority of their teachers and in their centralized organization. These really become one big problem when lots of people gather in one place to be taught by a few authorities. What happens when the sole teacher in a classroom begins teaching unsound doctrine? Can we trust that the seminary administration will catch this and dismiss the teacher?
The record of the past tells us that we cannot. Jesus instructed, "If the blind guide the blind, both will fall into a pit" (Matthew 15:14b). In the case of seminaries, the bad teaching of one instructor can lead many into a pit.

Of Christ's assemblies, the Bible says that two or three are to speak and the others are to judge or discern or scrutinize. The *Apostolic Bible Polyglot* translates the Greek of 1 Corinthians 14:29 literally: "And prophets, let speak two or three, and the others scrutinize!" Is this the way seminary classes are conducted? Do the students have the right to scrutinize their teachers? Do these impressionable young minds even want to do so, or are they awed by the dignity and reputation of their instructors? Are they spiritually mature enough to know when a teaching ought to be challenged? In 1 Timothy 3:6, Paul specifically says that those who are to be overseers in the assembly of God are not to be novices or neophytes (from the Greek *neophutos*—literally "newly sprouted"). Yet, that is exactly what many seminary students are.

Speaking of the spread of heresy, the Bible says, "A little yeast grows through the whole lump" (Galatians 5:9). Seminaries have often become hotbeds of heresy. All it takes is one instructor in a seminary to teach heresy to his students, who then bring that teaching back to the churches in which they are hired, to spread that heresy worldwide.

Never, when listing the qualifications of elders or overseers or servants, does the Bible ever say that people must be, or even should be, seminary graduates or anything that would be a prototype of seminary graduates. Never is such a thing even suggested. Yes, the elder is to hold "to the faithful word which is according to the teaching, that he may be able to exhort in the sound doctrine, and to convict those who contradict him" (Titus 1:9). But this is a gift given by Christ through the Holy Spirit and exercised through study of God's Word, not something earned or learned at a seminary.

Some have pointed out that Paul was taught, in a possibly seminary-like fashion, by Gamaliel. It's true that Paul was taught by Gamaliel, and he pointed this fact out to the mob of Jews to show that he was a devout Jew and well-educated in the Jewish religion, and that's why he "persecuted this Way [of Christ] to the death" (Acts 22:3-4). But he contrasts this with his encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus. Surely, he considered his education by Gamaliel amongst the dung or refuse of confidence in the flesh and the law (Philippians 3:3-8). Paul makes clear that his Gospel did not come from men: "But
I make known to you, brothers, concerning the Good News which was preached by me, that it is not according to man. For neither did I receive it from man, nor was I taught it, but it came to me through revelation of Jesus Christ" (Galatians 1:11-12).

Paul's instruction to Titus implies that those appointed as elders in a city were residents of that city (Titus 1:5). The Bible never teaches that the assemblies should look outside of themselves for elders. Yet, the seminary system promotes this very thing. It takes people away from their local congregations. Youths who have been force-fed worldviews and doctrine and practice by a few professors are then called as strangers before pastoral search committees who will decide, like a corporate human resources team, whether to hire them for the job. The church is a worldly institution that is the opposite of the Scriptural ekklēsia in virtually every way.

**Seminaries Are Contrary to the Centrality of Christ**

In the end, the problem with seminaries is that they are contrary to the centrality of Christ. Like wrong-headed teachings that say we are sanctified by our works, or that we are still somehow under the law, they faithlessly deny the power of Christ. The Bible gives us no other way to learn than to be taught by Christ through the indwelling Spirit and written Word of God. Part of this can include hearing and reading the ideas of other believers whose teachings we have scrutinized. We can then pass this on to others in a way that is also subject to scrutiny. This is the way the Bible teaches us to gain knowledge.

I am not saying that God has never used seminary graduates to teach the truth. I am saying that it is not because of the seminaries but in spite of them that God was able to use such seminary graduates.

Are seminaries biblical? No. The Bible never so much as hints that we are to send people who want to serve the Body of Christ out of their locality to a central institution to learn to be a special executive class of Christians called clergy. Christ taught His disciples, and He teaches us today. The Word of God gives us qualifications for elders, but they do not include seminary training or anything that resembles it.