

Voices: Letter to a young ministry student

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Ah, back-to-school time. Sometimes, children in my church ask me what grade I'm in. I tell them I'm in the 18th grade and watch their eyes widen.



Jake Raabe I am in my second year of graduate school, working toward my master of divinity degree at Truett Theological Seminary. I have my bachelor of arts degree from the University of Mary Hardin-Baylor with a double-major in English and Christian studies.

Looking back fondly

This time of year always makes me nostalgic about starting college six years ago. Lots of excitement accompanies this time: moving away from home for the first time, starting a new life in a new city, being considered an “adult” for the first time and so on. For students pursuing a religion degree, a unique kind of excitement exists.

Going to college as a church member studying for some type of ministry is a great experience: one leaves with a sense of support and encouragement by their church community that I can't imagine any other type of student feels. (Well, at least if you're a man. If you're a woman, I imagine you get

less encouragement and more bad exegesis of 1 Timothy 2 and second-guessing of your life ambition).

At the same time new religion, theology, and ministry students feel encouraged by their congregations, a suspicion of higher education pervades American Evangelical churches. In the weeks before I left for college, I often heard, “Don’t let education ruin you.” When I graduated college and was preparing for seminary, I heard a similar sentiment: “Don’t let seminary ruin your faith.” Seminary/cemetery jokes ensued as well. As excited as churches are to see their young men (and, in some fortunate cases, women) begin training for ministry, a real fear exists that education will somehow “corrupt” them.

Blessed is the theology student

I understand this impulse, and, frankly, I think it’s at least partially our fault as students. As a young theology student, I forgot how lucky I was. I forgot that, given the chance, almost any member of my church would have switched places with me. What follower of Christ wouldn’t jump at the opportunity to spend four years of their life devoted to the study of God, God’s word and the Christian community throughout history?

You—the person going to study Christianity for the sake of ministry—have no idea how lucky you are.

You’ll get to spend hours, days, weeks, months and years in contemplation of difficult subjects. You’ll do this with resources—books, professors, assignments and so on—that those in your congregation don’t have. You will change your mind on important issues as a result of your studies, and your congregation won’t understand why because they don’t have the same time and resources as you.

You’ll find new ways of reading biblical texts and thinking about God, and you’ll forget just how long and painful getting to that point was. And, for

that reason, you may resent your congregation for not thinking the same way as you or immediately adopting the new insights that you spent months and years developing. You'll get frustrated, thinking of them as "close-minded fundamentalists" for believing something you may have believed three months ago. They'll become equally frustrated, thinking you're "another student turned liberal by <insert college>."

Evangelicals have a reputation for being "anti-intellectual," and it's probably earned. But religion students certainly don't help the case by forgetting our privilege, in being able to study in the first place, and by expecting those around us to immediately change their minds on ideas we wrestled with for months before becoming comfortable with those ideas.

Be slow to anger and quick to listen

How do we in the study of religion combat this idea that education is a bad thing? I believe we do so by remembering that whatever we do or study, and whatever our career aims are—pastoral ministry, nonprofit work, religious academics—we do what we do in service to the church.

The point where we find ourselves frustrated with the church or feeling like it's holding us back is the point where we have forgotten why we do what we do.

I'd like to close with a quote from Helmut Thielicke's "A Little Exercise for Young Theologians," a transcript of the first lecture he would always give to his introductory theology classes at the University of Hamburg:

If the theologian, however, does not take seriously the objections of the ordinary washerwoman and the simple hourly-wage earner ... surely something is not right with theology. ... The church has the prior right to question us, even if it does not and cannot understand the details of our work; for we are pursuing our theological study in its very midst as surely as we are members of that church.

Young religion students, enjoy the road ahead! But never forget that you do what you do in service of the church. That's what I wish I would have known six years ago, so learn from my regrets.

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