

Graduate Charge: The Church Has Seen It All

Dear graduates,

Congratulations on all your work. Well done for completing your programs and certificates on time and with success. I know how challenging attending seminary can be, especially given our busy lives, full ministry schedules, and other ongoing commitments. I am extremely excited for you, and it has been a joy getting to know each of you better. I can't wait to see how God will continue to use you.

Unprecedented Times?

Now, it would *seem* that we are living in unprecedented times. And, in several ways, we are. Nobody alive, at least, has gone through a global pandemic and had our lives so interrupted by a disease that continues to wreak havoc on our personal freedoms, health care systems, economies, jobs, schools, and churches.

As you step back and assess your own role in the midst of this pandemic, my charge to you is to stay reminded of and to draw from the wellspring of wisdom that a seminary education seeks to instill.

What do I mean?

Educational Trinity: Bible, Theology and Church History, and Practical Theology

Well, you know that a seminary education involves many different disciplines. Just to generalize—and not to get into too much detail—seminaries are largely divided into an educational trinity: (1) Bible, (2) Theology and Church History, and (3) Practical Theology.

As you attempt to discern how God would like to use you most during this current Covid-19 crisis, I want you to remember that the church is no newcomer to crises, to pandemics, to disasters, to economic breakdowns, to intellectual questioning, to fear, nor to anything else that we are currently experiencing.

To draw from a well-known quote from Ecclesiastes, “There is nothing new under the sun.” The Church has seen it all.

The Bible

Let's turn, for a moment, to the Bible: the first and most foundational discipline that you study in seminary. Well, the gospel of the Scriptures is that the Bible has got you covered. It offers insight, hope, prophecy, exhortation, and wisdom amidst every possible scenario.

Plagues, famines, wars, calamities, health crises. The Bible has seen it all.

- Genesis 12:10 says, “There was a famine in the land.” And guess what happened? God eventually delivered Abraham and Sarah from harm.

- Ruth 1:1 says, “In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land.” And guess what happened? God eventually redeemed an entire household, whose ancestry passed through David the King to Jesus the Savior.
- Acts 11:28 says, “One of the prophets, named Agabus, stood up and through the Spirit predicted that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world.” And guess what happened? God eventually brought the entire Roman world under the authority of the Christian faith.
- Habakkuk 3:5 says, “Plague went before the Lord; pestilence followed his steps.” And guess what happened? God eventually saved Judah from harm’s way, with verse 12 confirming, “You, oh God, came to deliver your people, to save your anointed.”
- Esther says in Esther 8:6, “How can I bear to see disaster fall on my people? How can I bear to see the destruction of my family?” And God what happened? God eventually delivered the Israelites from the wickedness of Haman’s plot to destroy them.
- John 11:1 says, “Now a man named Lazarus was sick,” and we are told several verses later that he died. And guess what happened? God eventually brought him back to life—four days after he had died.
- Jesus says in Matthew 24:6, “You will hear of wars and rumors of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come.” And guess what will happen? God will eventually deliver the human race through the testimony of Christ.

Theology and Church History

What about the second major discipline taught at seminary: Theology and History? It, too, has seen it all.

- In the third century, during the so-called Plague of Cyprian, when a deadly pathogen akin to Ebola struck the Roman world, Christians stepped up. Dionysius wrote that Christians “did not care about the dangers, took charge of the sick, and attended to their every need,” leading to an explosive growth of Christianity.
- In the fourth century, when the church was hit hard with a theological controversy capable of dividing the body of Christ, it proclaimed in the Councils of Nicea and Constantinople that there is one God in three persons: Father, Son, and Spirit, and that the Church waits longingly for Christ’s return. This is the basis of the church’s beliefs and we still enthusiastically profess it to this day. In that same century, Emperor Julian, the last pagan emperor of Rome, wrote an entire book about Christians, complaining, “Christianity has been heavily advanced through the loving service rendered to strangers, and through their care for the burial of the dead. It is a scandal that there is not a single Jew who is a beggar, and that the godless Christians care not only for their own poor but for ours as well.”

- In the fourteenth century, at the height of the Bubonic Plague, when up to a half of all Europeans lost their lives, the church was actively serving, writing, and exhorting. Although Emperor John VI wrote that “No words could express the horror of the disease,” a mass movement arose across Europe that turned people to God. Writing in the year 1349, when the plague was at its height, the Dominican friar Henrich of Herford chronicled that “one would need to have a heart of stone to be able to watch [all the people humble before God] without tears.” Also writing at this time was Gert Groote, one of the founders of the Modern Devotion movement, which taught: “Always be ready and live in such a way that death may never catch you unprepared. Many die suddenly and unexpectedly, for ‘at what hour you know not, the Son of Man will come.’”
- Then there is the 1918 flu, one of the most destructive global pandemics of all time, plaguing the world for two years, killing tens of millions. But in the wake of the tragedy, Christian leaders descended to the first International Missionary Council in Jerusalem and the term “world Christianity” was coined. Writing about the international council, Francis John McConnell explained: “Whereas most conferences on world Christianization have been predominantly composed of representatives from Western Christianity, the aim at Jerusalem was to keep fifty-one percent of the delegates...” from non-western regions. And the result? Church growth across Africa, Asia, and Latin America, in particular, has skyrocketed, with these regions now containing the largest populations of Christians anywhere in the world.

Pastoral Theology

Finally, what about the last major field you study in seminary: Practical or Pastoral Theology? It also has seen it all.

- For starters, amidst all of the plagues, disasters, pandemics, and crises, the Church has stood strong and never refrained from doing one thing of primary importance: worshiping. At the heart of what is called liturgics is the simple fact that the church has been steadfast in what it does every day of the week, and more than twice on Sunday: Corporately in the liturgy, whether the congregants are in attendance or safely at home, the Church prays, praises God in songs of worship, administers the sacraments, and preaches the gospel. As Christianity’s very first pastor—the apostle Paul—says to a Timothy, a young pastor under his care, in 2 Timothy 4: “In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: Preach the gospel; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction... Keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry.”
- In the sixth century, the first ever recorded example of bubonic plague appeared in Europe, which at its height was killing 10,000 people every day in the Byzantine capital of Constantinople. The Byzantine chronicler Procopius wrote, “During this time there is a pestilence, by which the whole human race was coming near to being annihilated... It has spread over the whole world, always moving forward and traveling at times favorable to it.” Writing in the aftermath of the plague, however, in which a third of Romans were

killed, pastoral ministry in the Church continued on, with perhaps the most pastoral of all Christian popes—Gregory I—writing the most influential pastoral manual of all times: *The Book of Pastoral Rule*, where he took pastors to task, arguing that: “If pastoral leaders refuse to accept a position of spiritual leadership when they are called, they forfeit the majority of their gifts since those gifts were received not for themselves, but for others.” And: “Every pastor should be ‘heard’ as much by their deeds as by their words.”

- Finally, in 1527, when the Bubonic plague reappeared in Wittenberg, Germany, the home of Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformation, Pastor Martin Luther wrote an entire treatise called “Whether One May Flee from a Deadly Plague,” which offers much guidance about our current situation. Among many other things, Father Luther writes that “Those who are engaged in a spiritual ministry such as preachers and pastors must likewise remain steadfast before the peril of death...For when people are dying, this is when they are most in need of a spiritual ministry that strengthens and confirms them by word and sacrament.”

In conclusion, although time doesn’t permit us to exhaust all the wisdom that the subject matters you have studied these past semesters are drawing from, it is my dutiful charge to encourage you to regularly return to the deep well of insight and guidance that is swirling inside the Bible, in Theology and Church History, and in Practical Theology.

When you feel overwhelmed, insufficient, and just plain confused, turn to these wells of wisdom and drink fully. Be encouraged by the fact that they have seen it all, and they can’t wait to guide you for the duration of your ministry.

May God bless each and every one of you!