

Some advice to a young Christian theological student

I read theology as an undergraduate and since then spent a year with UCCF / RTSF and I have had two stints as a student at a theological college. Now I'm a vicar but I think of myself as a Christian theological student still, of course!

Here are some things I have found helpful / might say to others / my younger self. Naturally some of this is do as I say not as I did or even do. Maybe something here will be of use to you or those you seek to support.

Pray most days, both about your studies and what you have been learning, and about other things. Pray for other people and for "the real world."

Read the Bible lots. Read things you are not studying or teaching. Think about it. Read fast and slow, long and short.

Go to church. Learn humbly. Resist the temptation to be in critique mode. Say thank you. Encourage. Serve in some practical way. Help out with Toddlers or make the coffee. Sing. Be quiet.

Don't show off your new knowledge. A little knowledge is dangerous. You should come to realise how little you know. Rarely does anyone need or want to hear about the original Greek or Hebrew!

But look for opportunities to teach. Having to teach something will really help you to understand it and to expose where you don't.

It is really worth paying some attention to study skills: how to read and take notes and write an essay and revise etc. Writing essays and passing exams is a bit like a game and you should learn how to play it. You should also actually try to, you know, learn and grow, not just get that First or complete the course satisfactorily.

Few books and good is better than many bad books. Some books deserve to be read slowly, fully and often. Read some old books. Where you can, spend some time in the originals. Summaries of Luther may not do him justice. If your essay is on Nehemiah, read it repeatedly and don't depend on the Study Guide to Nehemiah.

Some books can be gutted and skimmed. Look at introductions and conclusions, headings, summaries etc. Spend an hour with a book. Which parts if any deserve to be read in greater detail? Quite likely there is a law of diminishing returns.

Try to be aware of useful (and academically respectable) reference works e.g. Bible Dictionaries, Oxford Handbook.

Perhaps consider keeping a note book or blogging or Tweeting. Especially note things to follow up.

It is not at all surprising if you have many unanswered questions. If your liberal tutor beats you in arguments over the dating of Daniel, it does not mean he is right.

Consider your choice of papers carefully. Do you prefer exams or not? Should you try your hand at longer essays / research? What do you already know and where are the gaps? What are your interests? What will be most useful in the long term? If you care about grades, what is likely to be easiest / most successful for you? What could you most easily learn about yourself later and where would you really benefit from a tutor or class? Are you overloading yourself with Greek, Hebrew, lots of technical philosophy and history papers you know nothing about?

If you can, learn languages as well as you can as early as you can. Practice them often and keep them up.

If you are studying at a liberal or secular institution, you might major in subjects that have less spin than others – arguably, e. g. history rather than biblical studies. Will your tutor let you pick any of your tutors? Is there an evangelical you could ask for? Could you pick a subject for the sake of the teacher?

You should expect to do some extra work if your reading list is all liberal. What evangelical scholars could you read? Find a book with a good bibliography / useful footnotes.

Have regard for the tradition of the church. Almost always, someone will have thought about this stuff much better than you before. Some will make the mistake of despising or ignoring this.

Aim for both depth and breadth. Over-specialisation can be a problem in theology. The biblical studies and the systematics department really need on another. The OT people and the NT people need to talk! Philosophy and history would often help. Think about how your studies might join up and relate. Pay some attention to the history of interpretation, doctrine and philosophy. Seek out introductions and overviews. And also think about application. Why are you learning this stuff? What difference will it make to you or to the life of the church?

Consider adopting one or two pet subjects such as a favourite Bible book or theologian.

Don't underestimate the value of plodding. Lots can be done in half an hour most days.

Build a useful library.

Talk to your pastor. Consider seeking out an older wiser theologian. If you are a first year, a third or fourth year or graduate student could be a great help to you.

Don't take yourself or your studies too seriously.