

School of the Spirit

Whether you're thinking about heading to seminary, earning a new degree or simply taking a few Bible classes for fun, here are the fundamental questions to ask before making your decision



The apostle Paul prayed that our love “may abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment” (Phil. 1:9, NASB). If you are thinking about going back to school, the Holy Spirit (who is your *real* Teacher), may be stirring you to expand your spiritual and mental horizons. God is always challenging us to increase our knowledge of Him and His Word and to pursue excellence in all we do for Him. Because I oversee a distance learning program at a Christian university, I am frequently asked by prospective students what educational route they should embark upon. Similarly, you should ask yourself some questions before you decide which direction your pursuit will take. Here are the most important questions I advise that you consider:

1. What is my ultimate, long-term goal?

Do you want to obtain a degree, ministerial credentials, counseling credentials, increase your Bible knowledge, grow spiritually, become equipped for ministry in a local church or something else? After you determine your long-range goal, you can begin to plan suitable short-term steps to work toward it. For example, if you want to become a state-certified counselor, you would normally need to seek a residential master's degree in counseling from a state-approved graduate school. If you want to learn how to counsel effectively as a layperson in a church setting, that level of training may not be necessary.

2. If I want to be licensed or ordained as a minister, what kind of schooling should I obtain?

That depends on the school or organization through which you want to be credentialed. If you are under a particular denomination or ministerial organization, find out what their educational requirements are and what type of schools or training they will accept.

If you are seeking to be licensed through a local church, inquire at the church. The pastor and church leaders can help you learn what is required. Most church organizations prefer that you obtain a degree but often provide a path for training if you are not able to pursue a degree.

Be aware that educational institutions do not usually grant ministerial credentials unless the school is part of a ministerial organization.

3. What are the differences in education offered by seminaries, colleges and Bible schools?

A college or university offers various majors and minors and includes many general-education courses such as English, history, math, science and so on, whereas a Bible school or college usually offers courses only in Bible, theology and ministry. True seminaries in the U.S. are graduate-level programs that offer a Master of Divinity or similar degrees. A Bible institute usually doesn't offer a bachelor's or master's level program.

4. Should I pursue a Master of Arts or a Master of Divinity?

A Master of Arts is usually a two-year program specializing in a certain field, such as theology, biblical studies or missions. It sometimes requires a thesis and is often the route to a doctorate. A Master of Divinity usually requires a longer study program with broader preparation for vocational ministry in a variety of areas.

5. Should I pursue a Doctor of Ministry or a Ph.D.?

For local church ministry, the Doctor of Ministry (.) is the main professional degree. If you want to teach in a college or seminary, you can with a ., but teaching opportunities are limited. . programs are based on a Master of Divinity, but leveling courses can make up the difference. A Ph.D. is usually based on a shorter Master of Arts in a related field, but the doctoral studies are usually longer and more intensive than for a .

6. If I am not seeking a degree, then what is my best course of action?

First, consider that while you may not want a degree now you may decide to pursue a degree later. In that case, it would be good to take courses that will transfer to a degree program.

If getting a degree is out of the question, you may want to consider a certificate program. For this you will receive a certificate after completing a required number of courses in a particular field—for example, a General Theological Studies Certificate, Biblical Studies Certificate, Lay Counseling Certificate, Christian Workers Certificate and others.

Second, how much do you want to learn? Do you want just basic ministry training or Bible knowledge? Then basic correspondence or online studies may be sufficient.

If you want to dig deeper and get the most you can or want to be challenged intellectually and spiritually, then you may need to take a higher level of academic study. Pursue the kind that can be transferred to a degree program, such as ORU's online Bible Institute program.

7. What are the advantages of going to an unaccredited school or Bible college?

Unaccredited schools usually can provide a good basic

education at a much lower cost than accredited Bible colleges or seminaries. They often offer shorter practical courses not available in higher academic settings.

8. What are the disadvantages of unaccredited schools?

Coursework from unaccredited schools usually cannot be transferred into accredited schools such as Oral Roberts University, Wheaton College, Asbury College, Regent University and so on.

Beware of schools that grant degrees for little cost; remember the old adage, "You get what you pay for." If it is cheap, it usually is not worth your time.

Many students decide later to enroll in an accredited degree program, only to find out that the coursework they completed and the money they paid were wasted because the credits are not accepted.

Unaccredited schools often do not hold the same academic standards as accredited schools, so you may not get the same level of education by opting to attend an unaccredited school.

9. Can unaccredited programs provide financial aid?

Federal financial aid is normally available only for degree programs in nationally recognized accredited schools, although some non-degree programs may occasionally qualify.

Other sources that may be applicable if the non-degree programs are transferable could include Veterans Affairs (VA) or GI benefits and employee tuition-assistance plans. Some schools can make arrangements with a Tuition Management System to pay for courses over a period of time.

10. Are all accredited schools the same?

It is vital to understand that a school may claim to be accredited, but that does not mean the accreditation that it

holds is considered a valid or nationally recognized accrediting agency.

Scores of accrediting agencies can be found on the Internet, but fewer than 20 are nationally recognized, only three of them Christian accrediting agencies. Nationally recognized accrediting agencies are approved by Council on Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) or the U.S. Department of Education (USDE). For a full listing online, see.

11. What are the usual criteria of academic credit acceptance at nationally recognized, accredited schools?

It is normally required that instructors have a nationally recognized accredited master's degree, usually in a related field. In what is called the "Carnegie contact hour system," a minimum of 12.5 instructional contact hours per credit is normally required (a three-credit course would require at least 37.5 instructional contact hours). For a junior college level, reading requirements are usually 100-200 pages of academic reading per credit hour, 200-300 pages per credit for bachelor's level, 300-500 pages per credit for master's level.

12. What courses should I take?

What is your area of interest or need for training? If you want to focus on biblical studies, you could begin with Old and New Testament Survey and Hermeneutics (biblical interpretation), then other courses such as Life of Christ or Poetic Literature of the Bible.

For theological interest, start with a basic course on Introduction to Theology or Bible Doctrines, then Church History. For practical ministry training you might want to start with a course on ministry and leadership development or spiritual formation, followed by training in counseling, teaching the Bible, sermon preparation, evangelism or missions. A balanced approach especially provides a broad range of training in all three areas of biblical, theological

and practical ministry studies.

13. What characteristics should I look for in a school?

Is the training sound and theologically balanced? Examine the school's statement of faith. If it does not have one, ask for one or find out what its core values are.

Although it is good to be challenged by other viewpoints than your own theological background and experience, you want to be sure the school does not teach strange doctrines. Study its website carefully. If it does not have a website, it is probably a transitory or even untrustworthy school, and it would be best to avoid it. Is it important to you whether the school reflects charismatic or Pentecostal viewpoints? Also, make sure that the school's claims are valid. For example, some schools have claimed an affiliation with Oral Roberts University that we have not sanctioned.

The teacher and missions leader Dr. Costa Deir, who also held five earned doctorates, once said, "It is good to be highly educated; it is better to be educated from on High, and it is best to be both." I encourage you to pursue a course of study in which you can have both—the best education you can receive from the best in Spirit-filled scholarship.

At ORU, Dr. Thomson Mathew, dean of the College of Theology and Ministry, issues this challenge to us: "Seek the highest level of thinking for the deepest level of spiritual experience."

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Find Your Niche

Not sure what to study? One of these areas could be right for you.

- **Restoration** – courses on counseling, healing and inner healing
- **Word** – knowing the Word (courses on biblical studies); interpreting the Word (courses on theology, hermeneutics, biblical languages); sharing the Word (courses on teaching the Bible, sermon preparation, evangelism, missions)
- **Faith** – courses on faith, theology, church history, spiritual growth, biblical men and women of faith (prophets, life of Paul, etc.)
- **Character** – courses on spiritual formation, discipleship
- **Prayer** – courses on prayer, meditation, devotional life
- **Spiritual Warfare** – courses on spiritual warfare, cults, world religions, apologetics (defense of the faith), church history
- **Spiritual Discernment** – courses on warfare, church history, theology, cults, hearing the voice of God; “Wisdom Literature” of the Bible such as Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes
- **Specialized Ministry Skills** – courses on ministry and leadership development, counseling, church planting, missions, worship, church administration, youth ministry, children’s ministry, cell groups
- **Equipping Others** – courses in leadership training, discipleship/mentoring