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Doctoral Study

Understanding how the programs differ

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by D.A. Carson

There are four distinct doctoral programs—each quite different from the others. The lowest level academically is the Doctor of Ministry (D.Min.). It is really a professional standing, not an academic degree. It is designed to encourage people in ministry to hone their skills, sharpen their thinking, widen their reading and broaden their understanding—both theologically and practically in their ministry as pastors.

Then there's the Doctor of Missiology (D.Miss.) program and the Doctor of Education program. Both are leadership/research degrees. The aim of the Doctor of Missiology program is to prepare people for work in cross-cultural contexts. The Doctor of Education (Ed.D.) program, of course, involves work in the field of education—administration, planning and so forth.

The most strenuous degree program is the Doctor of Philosophy (or Doctor of Theology, in some institutions). I am deeply convinced we need more people with Ph.D.'s training for our pulpits. I've sometimes urged students to go to Cambridge University in England for a Ph.D in New Testament because I know Cambridge has several churches with first-class expositors—great models for students who become infected with a vision.

This type of training (the Ph.D.) exposes you to literature and forces you to think your way through it. A work may attempt theological synthesis and evaluation or be a detailed work on a very narrow text. Ideally, it will train you to think. And God knows we need people who think in pastoral ministry—though many of these graduates become teachers.

Program Requirements

The Doctor of Ministry program is completed in 10 separate units while you continue your ministry. There's a pre-course hurdle for each of these units that usually takes about three months to complete. Then there's a week of concentrated lectures and discussions, followed by post-seminar homework. You do this

10 times. And finally you complete the program with a project.

The Doctor of Education and Doctor of Missiology programs require mostly on-campus coursework and seminar work. When you are choosing a program, talk to students in a similar program. Listen to what students in the various programs have to say. By all means read the handbooks and get the course descriptions, but talk to the products of all the study—the students.

A Ph.D. program depends for its value on the school. Most institutions have programs that take a minimum of three full years to complete, but it's frequently longer while you work to complete your dissertation. If you are thinking about a Ph.D. in biblical or theological studies, you have two decisions to make before you choose a school. First, are you going to study in North America or are you going to study abroad? And second, are you going to a confessional school or to a university?

Ph.D. Programs

The typical program in the United States and Canada involves students in a lot of coursework and seminar work up to the level of the major comprehensives. This big hurdle guarantees the coverage of many different disciplines. It is followed by a dissertation. In contrast, the European model immediately plunges into research. You may take coursework or you may work on your own—depending on what you need for your research project, but there are no prescribed courses. There are strengths and weaknesses to both these models of education.

The North American model guarantees a certain breadth which often prepares you better for teaching. On the other hand, the dissertations here tend to be more mundane and predictable—not as well-researched or critically reflective. The European model tends to produce dissertations that reflect a great deal of focused interest on fairly narrow subjects. It assures better training in reflective thinking and better command of primary sources, secondary literature and so on. But it also succumbs to a tendency to know more and more about less and less. Some students do better at structured programs like the ones North America offers. Others (better at being inventive and free to probe) thrive on the European model. It's basically a question of knowing yourself.

The second question involves a choice between a confessional and a non-confessional program—between coursework at a Christian school that specializes in biblical degrees or at a large university.

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Again, you win something and lose something in each environment. A university setting gives you a great deal of interaction with people who disagree with you. Ideally, this can help you to think—to sharpen your responses when you hear what the “other side” has to say. At the same time, it puts restrictions on what you can learn. You’ll have to focus on something that’s “acceptable” to the world or else spend a lot of time defending something that isn’t. Evangelical institutions allow you to be creative with biblical and systematic theology. The disadvantage is that if you aren’t careful, you may become absorbed with a lot of “in-house” talk.

It’s also a question of knowing what you are trying to do after you have completed your education. If you feel called of God to serve in a theological college or seminary in the third world and want a Ph.D. before you go, you may need to enlarge your biblical synthesis, as well as your research and discipline. The confessional school may be a decided advantage. As in most things, look for a critical fit before you decide. †

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