

***Being Where? Culture and Formation in Ministry Training
A Response to Being There***

by

Stephen J. Kemp
Director of Institutional Partnerships
BILD International

Being There: Culture and Formation in Two Theological Schools.

Jackson W. Carroll, Barbara G. Wheeler, Daniel O. Aleshire, and Penny Long Marler.
Oxford, 1997. \$35 hardback. 299 pages.

Being There is a massive contribution to the study of theological education. It provides a penetrating look inside the seminary world that is so often taken for granted. The authors have established a tremendous model for the inquiry, analysis, and reporting of research. *Being There* lives up to its subtitle *Culture and Formation in Two Theological Schools*. We get a thorough view of two seminaries and a careful analysis of what takes place with regard to culture and formation.

The four authors (two evangelical and two mainline) conducted a massive research effort at two theological schools over many years for extended lengths of time at each visit. Two of them (the evangelicals) went to a mainline school and the other two (the mainliners) went to an evangelical school. The schools are not identified by name, but are described heavily in narrative form in the first nine chapters. The evangelical seminary is described according to its message, variations, evangelical culture, contests, students, and Covenant House. The mainline seminary is described according to the years of a student's program: encounters, working things out, and resolutions. The last four chapters are analysis of culture and educational formation, including the elements of educational culture, the process of educational and formation, theological perspectives, and educational practice.

In an era when so many books are all data with little analysis or all analysis with little data, it was refreshing to read a book that was so well balanced. Further, the style of inquiry and reporting is admirable. We who know so much seem so unlikely to stop, listen, think, and tell. The patient, detailed observations of the researchers, as well as the voices of the participants themselves, are powerful tools often neglected in the study of educational institutions. Yet, they are also powerful vehicles for the communication of analysis. We are not just reading transcripts of field research. We are presented with meaningful, vivid accounts that make apparent the analysis of the researchers.

The choices to study two schools (one mainline and one evangelical), to send researchers to the schools that were different than their backgrounds, and to write as a team were somewhat unorthodox, but tremendously beneficial. *Being There* is truly a ground-breaking work for the quality of its content, but also the caliber of its authors (one of the four is Daniel Aleshire, Executive Director of the Association of Theological Schools). Hopefully, many other researchers will follow this model, building upon it and next to it. And hopefully, we all will follow its simple model of stopping, listening, thinking and telling.

Being There?

Inasmuch as this volume is a tremendous contribution to the study of theological education, it is still a very limited contribution. Its study of two theological schools allowed for much generalization about ministry training, but must be understood within its limitations. The *there* in *Being There* is restricted to graduate level seminaries. There is no acknowledgment of Bible colleges, church-based Bible institutes, parachurch training programs, or the multitude of other forms of theological education being found in urban, rural, international,

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and global settings. Certainly the ATS orientation of the study merits its focus, but this focus should be understood for what it is. The vast amount of ministry training that is taking place in the world is taking place in educational entities that bear very little resemblance to the two schools studied.

The *there* in *Being There* is also limited to the campus programs of these two schools. Since many seminaries don't have off-campus programs, it is likely that neither of these did. However, since many seminaries do, it is important to note that this study does not even try to provide a research base for analysis of this dimension of theological education.

Because of its focus on campus programs, the *there* in *Being There* also overlooked large parts of the schools that it did study. Theological education does not simply mean the Master of Divinity program anymore. Yet, the study seemed to assume this focus for all participants. Culture and formation may be very different due to the presence of other programs, such as the Doctor of Ministry, Master of Arts, and Visiting Student programs.

There was also a tendency to give great attention to the campus life of the students. However, very little data was reported or reflected in the analysis that took into account the off-campus lives of the students. One wonders how culture and formation can be studied well with such little attention to ministry assignments, internships, and personal church participation. Further, there was scant research done with regard to the home, church, and community lives of the students. The exceptions were several descriptions of the power of church life and spiritual relationships in bringing students to seek seminary training. Yet, one wonders what role these roots play after students matriculate.

The extended treatment of the Covenant House (a unique campus community facility) at the evangelical seminary is evidence of the impact of personal relationships of a few students. But it is also an indictment of research that seems to have ignored the personal relationships of the great majority of students in traditional programs. This is increasingly important with the increase of part-time and commuter student populations. The study acknowledges that some students may not participate extensively in traditional campus life and that they don't have the same experience, but the study fails to analyze the manner and degree to which seminary culture does contribute to their formation in conjunction with the other aspects of their lives. In the broad analysis, the authors have tried to study the cultures of schools without giving enough attention to the cultures of students.

These limitations don't undermine the contribution of the research, but provide a necessary context in which the contribution can be understood accurately. No one has ever worked as hard or as well at actually being there in theological education as these authors. Clarifying the *there* of *Being There* is primarily a call for others to go elsewhere and be *there*. Being Where?

Concerns about several directions of contemporary higher education are raised in the last chapter of the book, "Culture and Educational Practice: A Concluding Unscientific Postscript." These concerns are implied in the book's Introduction. The entire first page is given to the buildings of two traditional campuses. In fact, the first words are "campus buildings." There are good reasons to start with the physical plant, but it is noteworthy that the authors chose not to start with history, curriculum, image, reputation, faculty, leadership, or even mission or purpose. Perhaps they were giving an indication of their own predisposition regarding the shape of theological education. The traditional campus-based seminary is merely a very common manifestation of theological education. It is not equivalent with theological education itself. Hence, I've primarily used the term *ministry training* in order to avoid the increasingly restrictive meaning of *theological education* as represented in this book.

One wonders why the concerns of the last chapter are included at all. A reader doesn't even know whether the two schools studied have components representative of these directions of contemporary higher education. The authors seem to admit the inadequacy of their research base by including the word "unscientific" in their chapter title. However, they also seem determined to trumpet the concerns. In a book marked by an extremely

high quality of inquiry, analysis, and reporting, I was sadly surprised by this departure. The concerns are valid concerns that merit the sort of study done for the rest of the book, but in what way do they belong as a postscript to this book?

Perhaps it is best understood as a dramatic call to further study. These concerns desperately need to be moved out of the realm of unscientific conjecture (apparently linked to personal bias) and into the realm of scientific confidence. *Being There* accomplishes this to a large measure for traditional seminary education, but now it needs to be done for other manifestations of theological education. Representatives of evangelical schools that are interested in non-traditional forms of education should be especially attentive to the concerns as stated in this book since the last chapter of the book was shaped significantly by Dan Aleshire, Executive Director of the Association of Theological Schools.

The fact remains that the largest portion of theological education is not taking place on traditional seminary campuses. Non-traditional programs of seminaries and other types of organizations are already providing the bulk of ministry training. The Bible college movement accounts for far more professional ministers than ATS schools. This does not even include the training provided to non-professional ministers by those schools or the ministry training provided by church-based Bible institutes, parachurch agencies, or other international forms of theological education.

If one starts with the mission of theological education and then looks at the constituency that ought to be served by theological education, it seems apparent that we need an array of various types of schools and ministry training programs and products. The curricular format, as well as the structural format, of each type should be intentionally developed to fit the particular mission of each entity within the theological education spectrum. A monolithic image of how it can be done does not allow one to recognize and benefit from the components of forms of theological education other than traditional ones.

When one looks at the landscape of ministry training in the United States today, one sees an abundance of types of students for whom traditional campus-based seminary programs are not best suited. Campus ministers and associate staff members in churches are among those finding themselves in the midst of ministry before they even recognized the inadequacy of their training. Agencies and churches, as well as the ministers themselves, are turning to ministry training institutions for in-service training of their staffs. Professionals in other fields are wanting to supplement their other training with theological education, either for transition into professional ministry or to make them more effective in lay ministry. Poverty-stricken Christians in urban, rural, and international regions of the world are experiencing the blessing of God in their ministries, but recognize that they are not adequately equipped for their roles.

In an ideal world, the cost of being there may be "worth the undeniably high costs" (as concluded by the authors for the two schools in this study), but we don't live in an ideal world. If these undeniably high costs have to be maintained, then theological education has become the property of the elite who control the wealth. It also runs the risk of becoming an opportunity only for the fortunate. To decide for all people what the cost of theological education ought to be is to deny the appropriateness of their personal stewardship and their organizations in making decisions. A traditional seminary campus program is a valuable thing, but whether it is worth the financial and emotional cost is an individual matter. For most students, the financial cost is much more than tuition. It includes displaced income, loss of vocational status, equity, and often the cost of living in an expensive area. The emotional cost includes the immeasurable impact of uprooting one's family, leaving a church and community, and living in transition for several years. It is worthwhile for traditional forms of theological education to be available, but to assume that they are worthwhile for every student is boldly presumptuous at best and oppressively elitist at worst.

Furthermore, all of this is happening under the assumption that traditional campus-based training is the best way to provide theological education. In ministry training, it seems that the burden of proof is on those who suggest that there is a better place than the church, home, and community for formation. These are the

institutions created by God for the development of His people. Unless theological education sees itself as the tool, not the master, it runs the risk of jumping to conclusions about how formation takes place. To leave a student's pastor and spouse largely out of a theological education is to treat that education like it is just another academic field. Educational efforts that seek to integrate real life learning laboratories are clearly the best ways to ensure development. Perhaps there is much to be said for allowing a student's home, church, and community life to remain intact during theological education. Of course, both traditional and non-traditional forms of ministry training need this exhortation. Development doesn't happen well by accident. In theological education, it happens most reliably as the result of well-designed curriculum that integrates many components that are necessary for effective learning.

In the final analysis, the big question raised by *Being There* is "*Being where?*" Traditional campus-based seminary education has a track record that includes much success. However, most of us live and serve in contemporary North America. If our institutions are going to be true to their missions, they must take seriously *where* they understand formation to take place. When the attention shifts from the culture of the schools to the culture of the students, one finds that the concerns about non-traditional education become rays of hope for the effective accomplishment of the missions of our schools. If we stop insisting on students being *there* and give more attention to *where*, we are well on our way to greater effectiveness in ministry training. It is now time for Christian distance educators to step forward, examine the evidence thoroughly, and clearly present the findings.

May God bless our efforts to His glory.

Here are some excerpts from *Being There*:

"The most responsible response to the question posed to us is, we think, to list several considerations that educators should take into account as they shape the programs and policies of their institutions. These considerations are quite general, which is fitting given the great variety of specific problems and issues that particular institutions face that we cannot possibly address from the limited based of our research. At the same time, these considerations reflect strong convictions about education that we have formed or had reinforced in the course of our research. There are three items on our list, and in all three cases our perspective pulls against some strong contemporary educational tides. Therefore, though we cannot produce firm recommendations, educational designs, or rules for educational practice, we hope that our general views will receive a serious reading from those who do." (pp. 269-70)

"1. The culture of educational institutions plays a powerful role in how students are actually shaped, but institutional culture is not easily changed or manipulated." (p. 270)

"2. Faculty dominate the students' experience of their school. The greatest surprise of this study to those of us who conducted it, all of us teachers or administrators in universities or seminaries, is how different the school looks to students than it does to us." (p. 271-2)

"3. Formative education requires prolonged and intensive exposure to an educational institution." (p. 274)

"All three factors just discussed, . . . make us anxious about several directions in contemporary North American higher education. We have mentioned two: a preoccupation with outcomes and a tendency to view faculty as manageable labor. Both are linked to a larger development: All kinds of institutions, not just the seminaries we studied, are struggling with costs. . . . One response to the crisis has been decentralization -- the creation of small educational extension centers that offer instruction to students who live nearby and commute to class. . . . A second development has been efforts to reduce the cost of education to students by changing the pace of programs. . . . Accelerated programs have not caught on in theological education, but shorter programs have become prevalent." (p. 275)

"The other notable change of pace has been the trend to part-time study." (p. 276)

"Simultaneously, higher education and theological education find themselves on the leading edge of rapidly shifting information technology . . ." (p. 276)

"All of these developments are well under way. Based on what we have learned in this research, however, we worry about what may be lost in too rapid or complete a shift to new forms."
(p. 276)

"Extension education, which moves one element of the school -- the teacher -- to a site convenient for the students, limits the range and variety of contacts the students have with the institution's culture. Those who design extension programs do try to build in some devices for contact among students beyond class sessions, but given what we have seen of the complexity of culture and the difficulty of creating and changing it, we wonder whether programs that offer such limited opportunities for encounter with teachers, students, and institutional ethos, will have the formative power of those that envelop the student with an array of experiences. Similarly, shortening or accelerating programs seems to us likely to limit the depth and amount of educational formation that occurs. Part-time study, especially if accompanied by full-time work, may make it difficult for the student to focus on both formal learning and all the unprogrammed opportunities that school life provides. We also have doubts about 'virtual' education. We are not opposed to technology; however, teaching and learning by computer and various video technologies cannot, we believe, duplicate the intense and various experiences available to a student who physically attends a school. In summary, few of the new forms and technologies seem to us to deliver the full benefits of actually being there, on location at school, in its buildings, with its various populations, for long enough periods of time to learn what the school has to teach: the ways of life and worldviews as well as information and technical skills. We do not think that residential education is the only acceptable option. If those devising new forms were to find ways to duplicate or improve on the processes that we have mapped that are a function of being on site, our concerns would dissipate." (pp. 276-7)

Postscript:

I am currently working on a research project that explores the distance learning curriculum of evangelical theological education institutions according to David Kolb's experiential learning model, as well as the role of primary social relationships (church, family, jobs, etc.) as real-life contexts for learning in God-given learning communities.