

Perspectives and Emerging Initiatives

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This document provides a summary of the ways in which the purpose and task of theological education is variously perceived; and offers a brief sketch of the sorts of initiatives that are emerging to accomplish the perceived purposes of theological education.

Perspectives on Theological Education from Contemporary Literature

(See Hough and Cobb, Charles Wood, David Kelsey; Edward Farley; Barbara Wheeler; Robert Banks, and others)

1. Theological education deals with knowledge. In some instances, this is the transmission of an objective body of information and/or doctrine and/or the Christian tradition. In other instances, knowledge is wisdom -- the *habitus* Farley speaks about. The activity of theological reflection is an important part of an educational process concerned with wisdom.

2. Theological education is concerned with the professional development of leaders for the church--with an emphasis on the functions and skills of ministry. Typically, the movement of the curriculum is from theory to practice. In this linear approach, it is believed that the theoretical disciplines would somehow be the theory for the applied or practical disciplines; and that the movement of the curriculum would be from theory to practice. That the theoretical disciplines could accomplish this without some interaction with the applied disciplines is a great mystery. That a series of fragmented theoretical disciplines could provide some coherent theory for the practical disciplines was an inadequate curricular construction. That the practical disciplines could not, in turn, influence the theoretical disciplines a considerable oversight. In most instances the theory and practice dimensions of the theological school have become fragmented and rarely communicate with one another. Students are left to make whatever connections they can.

3. A more subtle distinction coming from the reflective judgment literature and from persons concerned about praxis, is that theological education is reflection on the practice of ministry while one is involved in that ministry. The assumption of a theory to practice linearity is replaced with the assumption that practice can also influence theory.

4. More recently for Protestant schools, spiritual formation, (or Christian formation, or spiritual direction, or spiritual development)--which is sometimes coupled with the term personal formation--is an organizing principle for the curriculum and educational process.

5. Finally, and not as frequently in evangelical theological education, is the view that theological education is the shaping of students= capacities to hear another=s experience and to respond with acts of justice.

Emerging Initiatives in Theological Education

As concern builds over the perceived ineffectiveness and mounting costs of school-based theological education, new ideas are emerging:

Church-based theological education. Reasoning that theological schools are not only dubious centers for ministry development, but that they take students/leaders out of the very contexts where their skills and awarenesses need to be fashioned, the growing church-based theological education movement sees its mission as developing leaders in-context. The more mature expressions of church-based theological education contribute what Ward describes as a dominating ecclesiology within the scholastic approaches to theology. In other words, reflection on the theological meaning of the Church in relation to its institutional expression grounds theological education (as opposed to teaching men and women who can then build a successful institution called a church). Where theology in the seminary tends to begin with abstractions, Ward suggests that many church-based leaders are growing in their capacity to foster theological reflection in relation to the practices of the church and in relation to the question of how God wants his people to respond. Curriculum, therefore, is not “content packed in boxes and delivered to students,” but learning organized around the notion that knowledge must be understood in relation to issues of importance for the church and service.¹ As church-based efforts continue to mature and discover criteria and principles that will guide their practice, church-based models could effectively replace existing seminary models.

The most obvious vulnerability in the church-based efforts is inherent in the tendency to bypass the seminary as a place for equipping leaders for today’s church. But, as supporters of the church-based efforts disparage the seminary, they flirt with the danger of losing the depth and missing the vital questions that a *true community of scholars* brings to the development of the whole people of God. When churches relegated their responsibilities for education and pastoral and missionary development to the schools, the habits, attitudes, and skills required to be a center for theological education were diminished or lost. Then, as churches today discover and complain about inadequacy in the seminary’s product and bypass the schools, they do so with almost no corresponding effort to create new settings and new roles for a community of scholars. A community of scholars *in some form* is desperately needed by churches that tend to base decisions about leadership, organization, and ministry on other than biblically informed principles. However, the community of scholars must not be disconnected from the Church and its mission in the world.

The mobile seminary. In this model a small resident faculty teach foundational courses and several pastors serve as adjunct mentor-teachers. Because students are generally employed they tend to proceed through the program at a slow pace (Sweeney and Fortosis 1994, 76). In-ministry models of theological education. Banks (1999) suggests that theological education is directed to three audiences: the laity, the clergy (or those who lead), and the scholar. The resulting model of theological education is oriented to the whole people of God--not just to the training of a

¹Comments from personal conversation.

ministerial elite, involves learning in ministry, may entail a “coming apart” for a time, and requires a closer relationship between the church and seminary. He places the Bible at the center of the curriculum with other disciplines added as derivative. Study is integrative and collaborative. Faculty and students are together involved in ministry. The movement of the curriculum is toward personal formation, theological reflection, and ministry.

Multiple sectors for theological education. Ward suggests that theological education may split into two sectors: the more academic and longer programs for those churches that feel they need leaders with doctorates; and the more functional shorter programs that will serve the majority of churches. If there is a defensible difference between the sort of educational experiences that are offered for those who are now or who will be pastors and other church leaders, and those who have the gifts of scholarship, the formats of theological education may well be reshaped into three distinct, but mutually permeable categories: *church-based theological education* holistic educationally, concerned with the development of leaders in context, intentional in the inclusion of professional ministers and laity in learning experiences; *apprenticeship of the scholar* men and women with significant gifts in scholarship (to be distinguished from formidable feats of memory), affirmed by the church and connected with the church and society, are brought into relationship with mature scholars in various disciplines who are likewise connected with the church and society; *professional development of the leader*--utilizing his or her context, as well as experiences away from that context to shape capacities and enable reflection on authentic practice.

A variation of this suggestion is that theological education could come to consist of three *movements*: (1) Responsible education initiatives in the local congregation would stimulate adults to reflect on the life of faith in relation to real world issues. (2) When questions emerge that require specialized input, one or more scholars are invited into the process, not to give the right answer, but to introduce knowledge and ideas and new questions into the process. (3) If men and women with particular abilities and interests in scholarship emerge through this process, the church would support their involvement with a community of scholars. The role of existing seminaries could become that of serving the church in developing those who have the gifts of scholarship.

Niche seminaries. As institutions realize that their survival is threatened by trying to maintain a large number of programs, and realizing that passing burgeoning financial deficits onto students is seriously depleting enrollment and creating unacceptable, ministry-threatening financial indebtedness for graduates, “niche seminaries” could emerge, each embodying a particular speciality. Whether this will exacerbate an already fragmented educational effort remains to be seen. Or, theological education may decentralize into mobile centers around the world connected by face-to-face consultations and through technologically mediated networks. Temporary intentional communities could then be created where different configurations of scholars, laity, students, and church leaders would come together in retreat-style settings for 1-2 weeks to engage one or more particular problems or issues.

Communities of discernment. The notion of the seminary as a community of discernment recalls a former emphasis that the seminary is the intellectual center of the church. This notion has a

long history and is not without merit; however, when it is assumed that all the information a person will need must be acquired in his or her degree program, the role of the intellectual center is seen in relation to the number and types of courses offered. Consequently, the number of courses has proliferated to the point where the curriculum is not sustainable as a framework for the development of leaders. Intellectual development understood as merely the acquisition of information is not adequate. Bender describes the intellectual task more holistically and argues that “The fundamental task of our seminaries . . . is the task of discerning the Word and the will of God for our day. I would go further and affirm that the task of spiritual discernment is the fundamental task of the church and that the seminary, being a seminary of the church, shares in this task” (Bender 1997, 179-180). He proposes that the task of discernment is “carried out within a cognitive frame of reference which involves first, the perception that God is acting in human history; second, a lively sense of being caught up in God’s purposive activity; and third, an awareness of the eschatological character of our existence.” Bender qualifies reference to the cognitive frame of reference by describing the task as a task of intellectual reflection, and as a “total response to the God of faith, obedience and love” (1997, 187).² Bender’s continuum of discernment includes two types of activity: critical reflection and purposeful activity which “issues out of the response of obedience to God” (1997, 193). However, in his efforts to describe a unique role for the seminary, he seems to stumble over the distinction between the seminary as the community of reflection and the church as the community of action.

Communities of faith. The specialization of theology into cognitive categories and the distancing of theological education from the church has desperately weakened the Christian community. Wolterstorff, in his discussion of the distancing of university theology from the church, argues for a refashioning of theology in relation to the gospel and the life of faith. “. . . if ecclesiastical and theological interest in doctrine is not directed toward this faith but rather to doctrinal development in and of itself, then it misses life and with it its own real task” (in Volf et al 1996, 131). The task of the church is to awaken a sensibility of God’s presence. “And one of the most important theoretical tasks of theology today is to provide the conceptual clarification necessary for this task, that is, to develop, probe, and critically investigate what *God is present* means” (in Volf et al 1996, 132-133). Theology, then, must not be understood simply as a social science. “And neither can it be a guiding science for some religious system or for the church if it is not first something different and much more basic, namely, *critical knowledge of God . . .*” (in Volf et al 1996, 133).

Wolterstorff defines theology as “sustained reflection about God” (in Volf et al 1996, 36). When does the community feel a need for this kind of reflection and who leads them in it? The theologians? With the fragmentation of theology and its persisting specialization, sustained reflection is virtually impossible. To be fair, the educational structures don’t exist that would bring theologians, students, and church members into a sustained dialogue characterized by

²In 1983, Fletcher reported on a survey of 136 seminary administrators. Of the goals cited for theological education, the most often cited was ATo be a center for theological and ethical reflection to the churches, denominations, and the communities in which seminaries are located@ (102).

mutual respect--a dialogue that would allow critical questions to be asked and examined. Even if the educational structures did exist, Wolterstorff's observes ". . . that the root of the alienation of university theology from the church lies in the modern church wanting the wrong things of its theologians, and that the theologians of the modern academy are often nothing short of heroic in refusing to give the church what it wants--forcing it to ask the questions it *should* ask rather than those it prefers to ask, forcing it to accept the answers it *should* accept, rather than those it would like to accept" (in Volf et al 1996, 37).

This claim of theological heroism presumes (1) that modern theologians are, in fact, aware of the complexity of the issues confronting the church and the theological challenges these present; (2) that churches are actually asking questions of theologians; and (3) that the church cannot ask questions of and present answers to theologians. The notion of theological education as a community of faith is valid only if the community is broadened to include the church. In such a community of faith, theologians and church leaders become partners in the task of theological reflection.