

Some Thoughts About Theological Education

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These are challenging days for the Christian church. Times are changing. A massive shift has already occurred in world Christianity.⁴⁷ There are now more believers in the so-called Third World than in the Western nations. This is reflected in the Church of the Nazarene with 55% of total international membership now found outside North America. Rapid growth is happening in many of the churches outside of North America and Europe. The new believers will need pastoral care. Churches will need to be organized and led.

The challenge of the great cities of Asia-Pacific faces us today. The Christians of the rural areas are moving in large numbers to the cities.

However, the great cities of the region remain largely under evangelized. Most of our current pastors and church leaders do not have the education, training and strategies and skills to successfully penetrate the large diverse city populations. A shift in worldview and new understandings about urban mindsets and ministries must be gained by a new generation of leaders. This will require a new grappling with the urban challenges with good theology. It will be a working out of our theology on the anvil of urban metropolis. God will call men and women of faith to arise to this great challenge, but they may be different in some ways from the past, and they may find new ways to minister in the present situation.

⁴⁷See Philip Jenkins in *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2002, for a comprehensive discussion of the current situation. You may also consult Tom Sine in *Mustard Seed versus McWorld: Reinventing Christian Life and Mission for a New Millennium*, London: Monarch Books, 1999; see especially chapters 4 and 6.

Who will fill the pulpits and assume the leadership of the growing number of churches in the rapidly growing areas of the world like Asia-Pacific? How will these potential leaders be educated? What is the future of Christian theological education in the Asia-Pacific region? Given present structural and financial limitations, it will not be possible to meet the challenges to supply a very large number of educated and trained ministry leaders. New ways and means may need to be found to educate large numbers. Basic assumptions may need to be re-examined.

Bruce Nicholls has pointed out the basic assumption of much of theological education, though in perhaps a different direction than we must first think — namely ministries focusing on Sunday worship to the neglect of the rest of the week, and to the neglect of the non-churched community. He says:

Traditionally our theological schools have trained students for direct church related ministries with a focus on Sunday worship. This is essential . . . But an emerging horizon is to train men and women for the market place _ Monday to Saturday. This calls for the integration of the sacred and the secular ... Theological Education must expand its frontiers to the "*whole world*", to the whole of the needs of society. This demands an integrated worldview and a theology of the market place... we need to recognize the integral relationships between evangelism, church growth and the lifestyle of the Christian Community.⁴⁸

There are many cutting edge ideas for integration of theological education into a more holistic model which touches life in its many dimensions. Among these new bold approaches is the inclusion of the Master of Business Administration degree program within the seminary setting.

⁴⁸Bruce Nicholls, "New Horizons for Theological Education in Today's Changing World". *Journal of Asian Evangelical Theology*, Vol. 11, numbers I & II (June, December 2003), 63-64.

Another example is the development of Christian communication degree programs. These programs seek an integration of solid theology with these commercial and technical studies. Christian communications is a area of study that Asia-Pacific Nazarene Theological Seminary has helped to pioneer at the graduate level. This is an exciting and potentially powerful pursuit in terms both of integration and effectiveness in penetrating today's marketplaces of ideas.

We should ask a question beyond the new bold approaches. We should ask a more basic question: what kind of theological education will prevail in the new century? Will there be a balance between practical application and academic rigor and research? Will evangelism and ministry practice be central concerns of the seminary or minor subjects? What *kind* of theologian is current theological education producing?

Gailyn Van Rheenan, a former classmate of mine, has raised several of the questions that we need to confront in current theological education:

A recent study of the local church and missions led me to examine what we are doing in theological education within the Christian academy. Are we adequately equipping students to minister in congregations who are themselves either in need transformation or who are transitioning as God works within their fellowships? Are these students spiritually formed to be Christ's ambassadors? Do they have compassion and understanding of the lost? Do they have training in evangelism? Do they envision how god uses the local church to evangelize the world? Are they prepared to equip local Christians for such redemptive ministry? Do they possess basic strategy tools to guide and empower their congregations to open new areas of the world to the Gospel?

Generally the answer to these questions is "No." Students graduating with M.Div. degrees are theologically and textually astute but missiologically naive. A graduate student from one of our graduate schools confided that "Classes at

my graduate school prepare us to enter into scholarly dialogue but not into practical ministry." Another said that his graduate education had provided foundations to find answers, the ability to do research, and a network of people. Only after he left the graduate studies and entered ministry, however, did he develop a passion for evangelism, a method of outreach fitting his personality and style, and the understandings to use small groups for nurturing and evangelism. Aubrey Malphurs in *Planting Growing Churches for the 21st Century* concurs, saying that "it is discouraging to examine the catalogs of some Christian colleges and evangelical seminaries for classes and field work in the area of evangelism. Unfortunately, studies and field work in this critical area are sadly lacking" (Baker 1992, 60).⁴⁹

Church leaders are looking to graduates of theological schools to be able to effectively lead the churches in practical ministry, to evangelize the lost, to disciple the believers. Some curricula is constructed in such a way that a *future* potential for application is anticipated, but this is not based upon an enhancing of current skills and knowledge demonstrated and honed in practice.

Much of modern theological education seems stuck in an older "classical" educational mode built around a core of systematic theology, history, and biblical exegesis. In this mode lecture and theory predominate. The influences of the "normal" or practical education movement seems to have had little influence on the seminary. An overhead projector or Power Point presentation may make its way into the theological classroom, but too often "learning by doing" has not. Is it possible that too often our end product is a student who can discuss certain theories, perhaps even much theology in terms of writing and research, but is unable to practice theology in the local church or in the marketplaces of the community?

⁴⁹Gailyn Van Rheen, *Reflections on Theological Education*, n.d.

There is a need to revitalize theological education with a missiological concern bringing evangelism and missions strategy to bear upon the ministerial task. The aim should be to have a theology that is missiologically involved, and a missiology which is theologically driven – a synergism between the two. The result should be a dynamic ministry.

Reflection upon the past can be helpful. Theoretical models have their place and can assist understanding. Scholarly pursuit of theology is important. However, interaction of theology with the present world is necessary if we are to remain relevant and effective. The real life and vocation of the believer must be fully engaged. Richard Muller has noted:

Without denying the need and the place for theological scholarship, it must also be recognized that the scholarship itself is finally responsible to the faith, the life, the vocation, is not lessened in importance because it fails to maintain contact with a mass of scholarly literature.⁵⁰

There are always stresses and strains resulting from interaction. The pull and push of competing ideologies, and the urgency of the immediate seem to always be with us. Every society influences the shape and function of theological education. Examples might include the arrangement of seats in a classroom in systematic rows - an influence from the industrial revolution; dropping language requirements – a demand of American students; the shortening of necessary credit hours for graduation – influence of economic factors. The list could be very long indeed. Sometimes there is little if any serious reflection upon or interaction with the influences of society. This ought not to be. Stanley J. Grenz argues that we must engage our present societies from a distinctly Christian worldview and with a Christian evaluation. He argues that theological education must go beyond merely inculcating doctrinal formulations of the past to nurturing thinking Christians – to

⁵⁰Richard A. Muller, *The Study of Theology: From Biblical Interpretation to Contemporary Formulation*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991, 145.

challenge them to take seriously the theological discourse that is both overt and covert in our modern cultures.⁵¹

It is important that we carefully reconsider that ethics is vital to theology. Theology does not stand alone as some esoteric pursuit, but must always be integrated with practice, with life, with our vocations. This is particularly important for many who live in Asia whose traditions are ethically based. In the case of China, it has been noted:

A doctrine without practice implication is sometimes inconceivable for the Chinese audience. Usually the theologian gives up this job and the devotional writer picks it up, and thus a gap exists so often between theology and spirituality. This is neither the approach of the apostles nor that of Christ. The book of Romans features the intense didactic teaching which is fundamental to Christian belief and yet the latter part of the book is composed of practical guidance which weighs one-third of the chapters . . . Such a Pauline theological method shall be borrowed by the contemporary theologians. Until the theologian makes his audience understand his doctrine and also know how to live out that doctrine, he has not reached the ending point of his theological work, and for the Chinese audience, they will be disappointed.

Who should attend the seminary? Some are in seminaries who perhaps should not be. The reason lies with the motivation and call. Some simply may have no call from God to engage in pastoral ministry, for instance. There may be, instead, prestige and/or educational attainment as motivation. Some may seek advancement socially, and for those from very low economic status the temptation may be for financial gain as well. These kind of motivations are

⁵¹Kim, Dae Ryeong, *The Role of Pop Culture in Theological Education: Grenz' View*, March 12, 2002, http://www.suite101.com/article.cfm/christian_gospel_culture/90126.

hardly adequate. Somehow students thus motivated need to be discouraged from entering theological schools. While there may be potential, the seminary should concentrate upon "enhancing gifts that they [the students] already exercise."⁵² We must encourage those already using their gifts for ministry to hone their skills, deepen their spirituality, and increase their knowledge base.

John Wesley certainly made a wonderful contribution in the field of theological education. Though he was educated at Oxford in the classics, he practiced even there a strenuous regime of practical Christianity with rigorous devotions, self-denial and service to others. During his Oxford days he had joined with others in what became known as the "Holy Club" to pursue not only a holy life through meditation, scripture, prayer, and fasting, but also through ethical application through deeds of mercy, charity, and justice.

Preaching the gospel in the fields to the masses of poor came later at Bristol through the influence and encouragement of his friend, George Whitefield.⁵³ He put into practice a very practical theological education for his itinerant preachers, combing reading of the Christian classics in edited form with constant preaching of the gospel in the field. This is something he learned along the way through experimentation, trial and error. Wesley was able to raise up a whole generation of effective leaders for the Methodist movement through this methodology.

His concern was always for making the gospel understood for the common people. To this end Wesley found the class meetings to be useful. They were established, both as a means to teach the faith to the believers, and to help the believers to become spiritually grounded so that they would be sound representatives of the work of the faith and thus propagate that faith to unbelievers. The class meetings were an essential foundation to Wesley's view of what we now term "theological education". "Not only did they [the class

⁵²Eddie Gibbs and Ian Coffey, *Church Next: Quantum Changes in Christian Ministry* (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 2001), 102.

⁵³See *Works of John Wesley*.

meetings] have a specific format; they were grounded in solid theological principles . . . with a view to their application in practical discipleship."⁵⁴ His aim was a practical theological education that had practical application in daily life. It would be well for us today to re-visit the essentials of Wesley's understandings and approaches.

Timothy Smith wrote an analysis of Nazarene educational work and its Methodist antecedents some years ago. In it he offered some warning which I would like to repeat here: "Shame upon all who would train a generation of young people to call themselves educated Wesleyans and assume their entitlement to affluence and worldly success . . ." ⁵⁵ The pull of affluence and worldly success is certainly a reality we must recognize. This is something we should take to heart and beware of as we proceed with theological education here in Asia-Pacific and elsewhere. The potential for the problems are certainly with us. We must be keenly aware of the challenges facing us and yet be authentic Christ-like persons with compassion, integrity, servanthood lifestyles, and holy joy.⁵⁶ It is our challenge as educators to be persons of this type, and to produce graduates from our schools who have firm commitments to these qualities.

Let us be encouraged to catch anew a vision for theological education that is grounded in both solid biblical theology and practical discipleship. If we do not apply our theological learning to practical discipleship, what is the result? A sterile religiosity? A dead orthodoxy? We do not need mere institutions – not even theological ones! We need communities in which authentic faith and learning are combined. We need the people of such

⁵⁴David Lowes Watson, *The Early Methodist Class Meeting: Its Origins and Significance*, Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1985.

⁵⁵Timothy Smith, *Nazarenes and The Wesleyan Mission: Can We Learn from Our History?* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1979), 47.

⁵⁶See Richard S. Taylor, *Miracle of Joy: Hope and Promise for Troubled Times*, Revised Edition, Kansas

communities to integrate perfect love with all of life. Consider well the call of Timothy Smith:

We need . . . a community of shared faith and understanding in which faculty members are invited to knit their lives more closely into the fellowship and service of a denomination renewed in the graces of perfect love. Lay leaders and pastors not associated with the colleges [and seminaries] should respect and seek in their own lives the integration of faith and reason that biblical religion calls for, that our colleges [and seminaries] stand for, and that our forbears so beautifully affirmed.⁵⁷

⁵⁷Timothy Smith, *Nazarenes and The Wesleyan Mission: Can We Learn from Our History?*, 47.