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THE QUEST FOR COOPERATION, RENEWAL AND RELEVANCE IN THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION[1]

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Cooperation

The need for international cooperation in theological education cannot be over-emphasised, given the variety of traditions and models in operation today. The international scene has become confusing, chaotic and competitive. There are claims and counter claims of superiority/inferiority, effectiveness/ineffectiveness, relevance/irrelevance for the various traditions and models. Therefore it has become a matter of major importance to find a basis for cooperation in the field of theological education.

We must not forget that each of our approaches to doing theological education, as well as the underlying philosophy, is time-bound, and therefore subject to becoming outmoded, archaic and irrelevant. Our claims and our measures for success are also relative to particular contexts. These factors alone should be enough to impel us towards seeking cooperation in theological education. We need one another and the perspectives we each have to offer the other.

The primary goal of each model or approach to theological education is to attain some measure of effectiveness and relevance to the needs of the Christian community. The claims and counter-claims for effectiveness and relevance are usually based upon assumptions of the variant theological traditions. It is important that we take note of the fact that different models and approaches in theological education have underlying theological assumptions and biases. Furthermore, we could be classified in this respect not only by our theological traditions but also by the regions in which we are located. In seeking cooperation, it is therefore not enough for us to address the differing models and approaches for theological education; we must also address the underlying philosophies, assumptions and biases, if we are to foster better cooperation among ourselves. Otherwise these factors may unwittingly become a primary hindrance to cooperation and unity.

The quest we need is not, therefore, for a greater variety of methods or approaches in theological education. Nor are we called again to assert our theological distinctives. Rather our quest should be for an adequate basis for cooperation in the field of theological education. We need to achieve a

common theological understanding of our task and a unity of purpose in that task. We need to secure an agreed theological standard for gauging what we are doing practically in the field of theological education. Instead of competing, or claiming superiority for various approaches, we need to exchange views and share experiences, we need to understand one another and learn from each other.

Amidst the variety of theological traditions and methods, we nevertheless have a common task and a common purpose which we need to articulate. This will require that we take a hard look at our various theological assumptions and biases, our ideologies and hypotheses. No doubt these can serve as useful motivating factors which propel us and our traditions to excel, and which help us to forge our theological distinctives. However, these same factors are also at times obstacles towards cooperation among theological educators.

It is time for theological educators of the evangelical persuasion throughout the world to lay aside negative approaches and criticisms of one another and to turn positively towards ways and means of coming together in unity of purpose and cooperation, towards the enhancement of theological education in our world today.

As we face the challenges of cooperation in theological education, we will need to undertake the following tasks:

1. Address the proliferation of theological traditions, models, approaches, and philosophies in theological education.

2. Define our common task and purpose amidst the multiplicity of models and approaches.

3. Develop an adequate theological basis for inter-continental cooperation in theological education.

Theological Renewal and Relevance

Theological renewal and relevance have increasingly become normative goals in theological education today, whether among the older traditions or among the newer ones. With the older traditions, the issue is that of renewal, the desire for self-reformation so as to be current and up-to-date. For the newer traditions, contextualization becomes the focus of attention as a means of achieving relevance. But too often these goals are pursued by a given theological tradition merely in order to carve out for itself a distinctive name in the field of theological education. It is important to examine the reasons why theological traditions seek renewal or relevance. Some reasons may not be genuinely theological or spiritual but merely sociological. A tradition may embark upon the quest for renewal or relevance out of fear that it might otherwise go out of business.

The older traditions sometimes disagree with the newer traditions of theological education over the importance of contextualization. Although contextualization as much as renewal is aiming at the innovative use of theological methods for relevance and effectiveness, sometimes contextualization is given an unfair critique by the older traditions. The war of words between the older traditions and the newer ones has been one of the major factors impeding our march towards cooperation in the field of theological education.

Theological renewal and contextualization should not be pursued without good theological grounds for doing so. On what theological grounds should we seek for renewal or contextualization in theological education? A model or approach can be said to be outmoded, irrelevant or ineffective when it is adjudged deficient in meeting the needs of the church and society. This could however imply many things: that the method used might have outlived its usefulness; that the philosophy behind the method is no longer useful or relevant; that the theological tradition is no longer attractive, or has less prospect of commanding theological respect; or that the theological or philosophical assumptions underlying the tradition are no longer tenable.

As we face the quest for theological renewal and relevance, we will need to undertake the following tasks:

1. Reassess our theological traditions, methods, models and philosophies in the light of modern challenges within our given contexts.

2. Make some necessary changes and adjustments in our various theological traditions, whether old or new, in order more adequately to address the needs of both the church and society.

3. Evaluate the effectiveness and relevance of the given traditions and methods in theological education within each given context.

Church-School Dichotomy

Theological educators need also to examine critically both the historical development and the theological implications of the dichotomy frequently apparent between the church and the theological school. This requires that theological educators define more carefully the place and role of the church in theological education, and equally the place and role of the theological school within the church. The dichotomy between the church and the theological school has become in the present time a serious theological issue. Instead of being complimentary and supportive of each other, they are becoming belligerents.

The unfortunate pattern of dichotomy is bound up with an apparent differentiation of roles in process between church and school. It is a historical fact that theological schools are products of the church. After centuries of growth and development, a differentiation of roles has emerged between the church and

the theological school. Each has increasingly assumed for itself a peculiar role to play in doing theology. In consequence, a state of rivalry and competition has developed over the question of who has a rightful monopoly on the art and practice of theology. The position between the two has almost become that of the church *versus* the theological school.

There has also been an increasing lack of cooperation between the church and the theological school in the actual art of doing theology. The fact that the church does send personnel and resources to the school for purposes of theological training, or the fact that the theological school does groom and develop personnel for the church does not nullify what I am saying. The question has become which institution has the rightful prerogative in doing theology.

The church may criticise the theological school for doing theology in a way that is often irrelevant both to the historical and to the immediate experience of the church. The school may be producing a theology that is heavily theoretical without the practical touch based on the experience of the church. The theological school is also accused at times of encouraging theologians who are critical of the church in its historical traditions, theology, and practices. In consequence the school may be blamed for the founding of independent churches which can become protest movements against the traditional and mainline churches and their theologies.

Conversely, the theological school may at times criticise the church for being too traditional, doctrinaire, and oriented towards the past, with the result that it is unable to meet the needs of modern man. The church's theology and religious experience are sometimes labelled as archaic, outmoded and irrelevant to the needs of the day. Alternatively, some churches may have jettisoned the wealth of historical traditions usually associated with the church, including orthodoxy, liturgy and worship styles and the wealth of historical experience, and thereby invite the censure of the theological school. Such churches may then become too modern, and in consequence represent nothing more than a disenchanted, non-conformist, free movement cut off from its historical roots and focused instead upon an immediate personal, existential experience. In such cases, the question is not of "right theology" but of "existential theology." The proliferation of the "Holy Ghost churches" in Africa in many cases come out from this sort of theological background.

The failure of theological educators to articulate clear definitive roles for both the church and the theological school has over the years led to an unhealthy differentiation of theological roles. This however, does not necessarily mean that the theologians of the church or those of the theological school do not have a clear idea, vision, or mission regarding their institutional roles. It is only that each has its own and thereby tends to go its own way, doing its own thing.

Both the church and the theological school are liable to fall into one of two extremes: doing theology by the measure of orthodoxy and tradition, or doing theology by the measure of personal experience as a protest against tradition. Both isolationism and adventurism are productive of many fallacies and pitfalls in doing theology, whether for the church or for the theological school. The glorification, isolation and further differentiation of the roles of the church and the theological school in doing theology seriously endanger the unity of Christ's body in doing theology. The roles of the church and the theological school should be worked out and experienced as complimentary.

The problem of the dichotomy between church and theological school, and the dangerous differentiation of roles, require that we undertake the following tasks:

1. Examine the historical development of theological education, especially the differentiation of roles and the dichotomy between the church and the theological school.

2. Evaluate ares of strength and weakness in the assumed roles for each, and the theological implications of the dichotomy, together with the resulting competition, isolationism, and assertions of autonomy in doing theology.

3. Work to integrate the roles of the church and the theological school in the field of theological education.

Regional Models and Approaches

Theological education today has become increasingly regional in outlook, and it is important that we examine the implications of this regionalisation. We can indeed move from the worship of models and approaches to the worship of regionalism in theological education, or we can move from traditional theological identities to regional identities.

I must draw attention to these regional patterns because they can develop their own mind-set about theological education. Regional perspectives have their own biases and assumptions which may contribute either positively or negatively to theological education. I will divide the world of theological education into three broad regions, namely, the Third World region; the North American-British region; and the Continental European region. The primary purpose for doing this is to underscore the need for cooperation in theological education across the whole geographical spectrum of theological education.

A. The Third World Region

This region is represented mainly by the theologians of Latin America, the Caribbean, Asia and Africa. The overriding focus in doing theology is theological contextualization. In this region, much attention is given both to

the *method* of doing theology and to the nature of *theology* itself. The means of doing theology, that is, the method, models, and approaches are to be made appropriate and relevant. Theology itself is to be made more understandable and relevant. The art of making theology relevant requires training in theological skills and development of theological resources. The theological educator has to become skillful in the art of theological discernment, innovation, creativity, and adaptation. The context within which theology has to be applied assumes greater importance, in terms of its world view, social values and social structures.

With these major emphases in mind, the theological practioners usually refrain from using wholesale the older theological models and methods, but instead adapt these, or else invent and develop their own. This theological mindset usually produces highly active and vocal pioneers and apostles in the field of theological education. Some of these theological activists pursue this bent as a means of making theology accessible and acceptable to the peoples of the region, while others do so from a spirit of protest and pride over against older theological traditions.

What features prominently in this region is the yearning for theological and church leadership training. The means for doing so rely heavily upon the types of theological practioners, and the models and methods used and the available resources. The founding of new theological schools is usually based upon the desire to experiment with a new theological method or model or philosophy. Sometimes such developments appear critical and unaccommodating to the older traditions and this posture makes it quite difficult for cooperation in the field of theological education.

B. The North American-British Region

This theological region is represented by English-speaking North America, Great Britain, Australia, and New Zealand. The recent emphasis in this region has increasingly been on renewal of the older theological traditions and institutions. The desire to reform and renew theological traditions and to make them relevant to the contemporary society has received much attention. Most advocates of theological renewal of this region stress the need for theological adjustment to the modern conditions of the industrial society. Theological traditions, methods, approaches and assumptions are being critically analysed and evaluated.

The major stress here is to convince older theological traditions and institutions of the need to develop a sensitive heart and a listening ear both to the needs of the older theological traditions and institutions and to modern industrial society. A concern for sensitivity to the needs of the Third World region has also been evident. This dual concern for adaptation to the theological needs both of this region and of other regions has preoccupied the minds

of theological practioners of this region. As a result, new methods and approaches to theological education are being formulated. Theological apostles of change and renewal are growing in numbers in this region.

Also new products need new markets, and hence the overriding emphasis of putting the new manufactured models and methods for theological education on sale to other regions. Putting such products on sale to other regions is sometimes the cause of competition, resentment, and suspicion among theological practioners, thereby creating difficulties for cooperation in theological education.

C. The Continental European Region

This theological region is represented by continental Europe and to some extent by the Afrikaaner society of South Africa. This region has three basic emphases: theological retreat, theological reinterpretation of the older traditions, and a search for theological identity or status.

The theological retreat is a movement away from traditionalism, either out of suspicion or out of a desire to flee into a world of "theological asceticism". This retreat from much older theological traditions controlled by the state or national universities or state churches has often found expression among European evangelicals in efforts to found small and obscure seminaries and Bible colleges. This is indeed a search for new theological identity or status in the midst of much older resentful traditions.

Theological reinterpretation of the older traditions is also evident as emphasis is placed upon a "Christian world view", led by Dutch theologians. Secularisation of the industrial society and of Christendom itself is to be overcome by the new understanding and interpretation of the Christian world view. The theological retreat into the world of small things, the isolation, is to strengthen the search for a new theological identity and a new Christian status within the much older classical theological context.

The major contributions of this region to theological education are in its search for new theological identity, status, and freedom, and the reinterpretations of classical theological traditions. The benefits of these instincts need to be incorporated into theological education today.

D. Regional Biases and Assumptions

The regional analysis of theological education today helps underscore that certain regional assumptions and biases do indeed influence how theology and theological education are understood and practised. Distinctive regional characteristics do sometimes generate competition and suspicions that militate against cooperation.

What is both necessary for us to do as theological educators who come from these various regions, and also essential for the better health of theological education, is to focus attention on some of the assumptions and biases which are liable to inhibit our efforts at cooperation. Our use of different methods and approaches in theological education in itself is not the cause for our lack of cooperation, but perhaps our biases and assumptions, our claims of superiority in what we are as theological educators and what we are doing within our theological traditions and regions, do hamper cooperation.

I now wish in the remaining sections of this paper to state briefly how we as theological educators can develop some practical approaches in forging cooperation.

Resources for Theological Education

The present acquisition, development and utilisation of theological resources reflects very much the need for cooperation in theological education today. How theological resources are shared among theological educators, and among various traditions and regions, must become the focus of careful reflection. By theological resources I mean the human resources (administrators, teachers and students), facilities (buildings, equipment, furniture, libraries, textbooks), finances, and curricular models, indeed everything that is necessary for doing theological education.

In terms of resources for theological education, some regions are more advanced than others, and this is why cooperation between regions has to be cultivated. For the sake of clarity, let me divide the world of resources for theological education into two broad areas, namely: the traditional North American-British and Continental European regions on the one hand, and the Third World on the other hand. Resources for theological education in the former regions are far more advanced than for the latter. The former are in a position of having an abundance of resources for theological education, and are also capable of exporting those resources. The Third World region in contrast has far less developed resources and is easily susceptible to a careless importation of resources.

The fundamental question therefore before theological educators of all regions is how best to help the less advanced areas to develop their own resources, and how best to help them import resources in a manner that does not inhibit growth. Since the indiscriminate importation of resources must generate legitimate fears, how best can such resources be developed locally? This is the challenge before theological educators internationally today. And this requires cooperation and unity of purpose among traditions and regions in the development of such resources for theological education. Our concern should be not only how to create and acquire these resources but also how to apply and adapt them strategically across the spectrum of regions and tradi-

tions. This however requires our possession of theological wisdom in the search for effective cooperation. It is only by this means that we can successfully assist one another in the quest towards renewal and relevance.

One practical way of achieving the goal of sharing between geographical regions and among diverse theological traditions would be by cooperative research on the whole question of resources, how they may be effectively acquired, developed and utilised in theological education. For example, variant socio-economic or socio-political values can act as hindrances in the development of such resources in various regions. The cooperative identification of such impediments could help to us in making better judgments in the application of shared resources. What to do with such obstacles or how to overcome them could be the focus of combined research.

And when we discuss resources for theological education, we must come at last to curriculum. I would like to focus more particular comment on this critical resource.

Theological Curriculum

All talk about renewal and contextualization is at bottom a discussion about theological curriculum. The curriculum incarnates philosophies, methods, assumptions and bias. It also reflects the degree to which relevance or renewal is being sought.

There are many approaches to curriculum development, especially in respect to the quest for theological renewal and contextualization. This aspect of the question is not my major concern here. Rather at this point I am interested in what theological educators do with whatever curriculum they might have developed, and especially how that relates to our quest for cooperation in theological education.

What we do with theological curricula can enhance our cooperation with one another or can tear us apart. As I see it, we can do two things with curriculum. On the one hand we can develop it ourselves and export it wholesale; on the other hand we can import it wholesale or with adaptations. This involves transactions between regions and between traditions, and the influence of regional or traditional assumptions on curricular exportation and importation. The call for theological cooperation seeks critically to assess and correct such influences. Theological educators today have to address the question of exportation and importation of theological curricula. The sharp reaction of certain regions or traditions to such transactions between regions and traditions is usually directed against the operation of theological paternalism within the transaction.

I have observed with great satisfaction that there is an increasing move away from paternalism to partnership and cooperation in the field of theological

education and in the development of appropriate curricula. It is no longer necessary to dispute over whether curricula can be developed locally. Already we have seen great strides in this area, especially in some Third World regions where the emphasis is upon self-effort and contextualization. But if this in turn becomes a drive towards seclusion or isolationism, then the results will not be healthy. Theology, no matter how good it is, should not be done in seclusion or isolation. It requires to be ventilated, cross-examined and shared. This principle is sufficiently important that I would like to elaborate on it briefly in conclusion.

Universality of Theology

Theology seeks to proclaim a Universal God who transcends His created universe. This universal principle in theology, as defined by biblical Christology, offers the basis for our cooperation in theological education. Reducing theology to a particular context has the danger of producing parochial theology, and of ignoring the need for theology to transcend contexts.

In addition, when parochialism, relativism and contextualism become ultimate and exclusive commitments in theology, we are in danger of losing a theological basis for our cooperation across traditions and regions. Neither context nor tradition should be absolutised, for they are only ways of interpreting and expressing theology, and are themselves subject to fault and defect. It is when we are working in cooperation that we can evaluate critically our own existential positions. Through shared experience and exchange of views we can be able to see the defects of our various regional and traditional perspectives. If we do not have a universal principle permitting us to judge our regional and traditional theologies, then we are doomed to relativism, traditionalism and contextualism, and our theologies become only parochial expressions.

The task before us today as theological educators is that of using the biblically-defined universal principle of theology to address and assess our theologies, our traditions and our contexts. We need to reflect in this light on what we are doing in theological education and in theologising within our regions, comparing and contrasting the variant methods and approaches across the spectrum. And we also need in this light to examine critically our theological assumptions, biases and hypothesis through cooperative interaction.

Our quest for theological renewal and relevance will come to fruition if we will cultivate theologically-based cooperation in theological education. This is where we need God's wisdom. "If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously, to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him" (James 1.5). It is my prayer that in our day theological educators from different backgrounds, traditions and regions will be able to find a basis for sharing, for cooperation and for unity of purpose in our common quest for theological renewal and relevance.

ENDNOTE

[1]Adaptation of a paper delivered to an international gathering of theological educators in July 1989 in Manila, Philippines, during the Lausanne II International Congress for World Evangelization.