

EVANGELICAL REVIEW OF THEOLOGY

VOLUME 3

Volume 3 • Number 2 • October 1979

**Evangelical
Review of
Theology** p. 160

Accreditation as Improvement of Theological Education

by MARVIN J. TAYLOR

THE ASSOCIATION of Theological Schools (USA) Long-Range Planning Committee has been studying the future of the Association across the past several years. Among the tasks which it undertook was an examination of member seminary expectations for the agency. Foremost among them, as is indicated in the ATS Constitution, is "to promote the improvement of theological education." The primary means by which this is to be accomplished is accreditation. Hence it seems both appropriate and timely to discuss the interrelationship between the two.

Accreditation means many things to different persons. To a student choosing a school to attend it provides one indication of quality based on peer institution evaluation of a particular seminary. For a donor it provides some assurance that a potential donee is a responsible educational enterprise worthy of support. To a denomination considering candidate preordinands it gives evidence about the quality of education that a person has received. To an administration and faculty it indicates publicly the educational quality of their school as measured by the commonly accepted standards held by the entire national, international, or regional group of similar institutions. Accreditation is surely all of these—and more too. It is not just an achievement; it is also an opportunity.

REVALIDATION FOR QUALITY CONTROL

Fortunately accreditation is not permanent. It requires revalidation from time to time. And this is both proper and useful. Perspectives about quality theological education are not static. One need but explore the successive bulletins published by ATS since it began accrediting activity in 1936 to appreciate the considerable dimensions of that change. The standards have gradually evolved as the experience of "quality control" has matured. Even the notion that accreditation is not permanent emerged from P. 295 the experiences of the Association with its member schools. From 1936 to 1966 "once accredited, always accredited" prevailed. But the Association came to realize that this assumption may have actually had a negative rather than a positive effect on quality. An institution strove mightily to pass muster with its peers, to be entered on the accredited list of member institutions. Then pressure for this achievement relaxed. No further demonstration was expected; no more reviews planned, unless a school fell on hard times in some dramatic way. The kinds of self-analysis appropriate for initial review were no longer mandated by the Association, and it was easy for a school to relax its former vigilance about such matters.

In 1966, on recommendation of the Commission on Accrediting, the Association adopted a policy of decennial review. Each institution would be expected to repeat the

accreditation process at least once every ten years. The commission just completed that second round of reviews for long-time accredited members during the past biennium and initiated the third round with the first few. In 1972 new Procedures were adopted which broadened the scope of accrediting activity, bringing under additional review (between decennial dates) any new degree program which an accredited member decided to propose. By curious coincidence this new accrediting expectation overlapped exactly with the burgeoning of D. Min. programs, and a large number of theological schools have received these “focused visits” since 1972. They are in no sense full institutional evaluations. Advance documentation is confined to the single new offering, but the entire institution has to prepare itself for this limited dialogue and demonstrate that its total resources are adequate not just for the additional effort but also for continuing without weakening the former programs. Since most institutions seem interested every few years in reassessing their offerings and often elect to augment them, accreditation has become a frequent occurrence rather than a rare experience.

These accrediting occasions are thus apparently inevitable for all ATS members which seek initial or continued inclusion in the official list of accredited schools. How does this relate to the improvement of theological education, the primary purpose for which ATS exists? [p. 296](#)

AN OPPORTUNITY FOR SELF-EXAMINATION

The fact that an accrediting visit will take place is an opportunity in several different ways. It is an opportunity presented to the particular school of theology to re-examine what it is about in the conduct of its work. Useful self-studies require substantial investments of personal and institutional energy. They presume that a school will start from the beginning, exploring its basic goals and objectives, its understandings of ministry for which persons are being prepared, and the adequacy of its programs when measured in the light of these foundational presuppositions. It moves forward to resources, their adequacy in both quantity and deployment. And it leads finally to some serious, tough-minded attention to educational outcomes. How well do the graduates do in the ministries for which they have been prepared? Institutions which invest themselves seriously in engagement with these issues are inevitably the better for having done so. This would be true even if no accrediting visit were to occur.

But there is always the problem of motivation. Since possible loss of accreditation is seldom seriously considered at the time of a decennial visit, and faculties are usually already as busy as they think necessary, accreditation is often seen as an unnecessary and unwarranted external intrusion in the ongoing life of an institution whose credibility is not in question. “Why do we have to do all of this for them?” is an occasionally heard lament. And that is always a difficult question for a Commission on Accrediting or an ATS staff member to answer. It is certainly true that any respectable school of theology has already been examining one or more of these issues as it pursues its daily tasks. And the first step in preparing for an accrediting visit (unfortunately often overlooked) is to assemble all of the ongoing and recently completed studies, reports, and accomplishments and in their light to discover what remains to be done to complete the picture. But the problem of intrinsic motivation needs to be resolved. Unless the personnel of a theological school view the accrediting activity as an opportunity for the improvement of education in their school, there is little likelihood that such improvement can result. Genuine improvement cannot be forced externally; it can only be willed and brought about by internal commitment to making the process an [p. 297](#) occasion for improvement.

This fact places a special burden on the administration of the school. It receives all of the contacts with the accrediting agency. It interprets the meaning of ATS accredited membership to faculty, students, trustees, alumni, and other constituents. Hence the president and dean have a unique role to play in generating or engendering motivation of a positive kind. Without administrative support for the accrediting review process, it can seldom eventuate in an occasion for the improvement of theological education.

The scheduled accrediting visit is also an opportunity for ATS staff, the accrediting visitors, and the commission. And it is entirely possible for an institution to invest itself fully in the accrediting process and still be denied the maximum opportunity for improvement because of the failure of one or more of the external ingredients in the process. Staff must consult wisely in ways that are designed to be of maximum assistance to the particular institution. These legitimately vary from school to school, and staff must be sensitive to that fact and not be bound slavishly to standards or procedures which are not helpful. On behalf of the commission, staff must select visitors who command the respect of the institution and function as wise evaluator/consultants to the school being visited. These persons must exercise their function skillfully, preparing a report which not only speaks to the juridical issues of standards but also consultatively and helpfully to the seminary about the findings of their investigations. And finally the commission must read the report both in the light of the standards and the needs of the institution and take such actions as will serve both the best interests of the Association's concern for "quality control" and the individual school's commitment to improvement.

Institutions anticipating an accrediting review have a unique opportunity to use the occasion constructively. Every educational enterprise at any particular moment has a series of issues which are timely, even urgent for its life. The accrediting process can be the time for addressing these issues within the overall pattern of the seminary's purposes. When the issues have been carefully clarified and appropriately treated in self-studies, the visiting team can be selected to complement these concerns. This brings [p. 298](#) the accreditation process into sharp focus on the items of greatest importance, thus enhancing its intrinsic value.

When all of these things work together, accrediting can be an occasion for the improvement of theological education. But do not fail to note the multiple nature of the formula for success. Each ingredient is crucial, and its import should not be underestimated. The process of accreditation is an opportunity for self-analysis and peer/consultative evaluation and judgment which can significantly enhance the quality of ministerial education on a seminary campus. [p. 299](#)

Doing Church History at the Local Level

by PATRICIA J. HARRISON

*Reprinted from Theological Education Today June 1978 with
permission*

SOME EXCITING things are happenng in History today. Once the subject was equated with wars, treaties, events of great political and economic importance, and VIPs. Today it is