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Role of Spiritual Development in Theological Education

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The author contends that spiritual development is the primary goal of theological education and such development or formation can be evaluated.

INTRODUCTION

In any discussion on the place of spiritual development in theological education we are in danger of narrowing the term 'spiritual' to refer to a private pietistic: direct relationship between ourselves and God. Evangelicalism has drawn deep from the wells of pietism and rightly so, but we must be more careful to understand spirituality in a way that does justice to the totality of Spiritual teaching. On the other hand, we may so broaden the term 'spiritual' that nothing is excluded, and so dilute its meaning. In order to understand the role of spiritual development in theological education we need to begin by first restating the goals of theological education, and by secondly defining the meaning of Spiritual development.

DISCIPLESHIP GOALS FOR THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

The goals of theological education must focus on the kind of person we expect the student to become. The aim of theological education is to train men and women in Christian discipleship so that they become truly men and women of God. In his statement on the gifts of the Spirit, Paul aptly describes their purpose as "To prepare God's people for works of service so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fulness of Christ" ([Eph. 4:13](#)). In the same passage he goes on to speak of the need for stability to withstand false teaching and to speak God's truth in love, so that as members of one body we may grow up into Christ who is the head.

The marks of discipleship development are many. They include a strong sense of the call of God to ministry, as was the case with both our Lord and Paul, and a call to godliness and holiness of living, so that [p. 127](#) the disciple in humility may be able to say with Paul "follow me, follow my example". We all know from our own student days that the quality of life of the teacher is remembered when the content of what he taught is long forgotten: alas much of it is forgotten within a day after the examination! In his pastoral epistles Paul reminds us of the qualification for being a bishop or elder. He must be blameless, the husband of one wife, one whose children are not wild and disobedient. He must not be overbearing, quick-tempered, given to much wine nor violent, nor pursuing dishonest ways. He must be given to hospitality, be self-controlled, upright, holy and disciplined. He must be able to encourage others in sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it ([Tit. 1:5-9](#); [1 Tm. 3:1-7](#)).

These qualities of lifestyle outlined by Paul are themselves grounded in our Lord's interpretation of discipleship as servanthood, as exemplified in his own life and teaching. We remember that on the evening of the final meal together with his disciples, he took a towel and washed their feet, when apparently they were unwilling to wash each other's feet. His question to the disciples as to who is greater, he who sits at the table or he who serves, He Himself answered with the convicting words, "But I am among you as one who serves" ([Luke 22:27](#)). Some days before this event Jesus had said, "Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be the first must be slave to all. For even the Son of man did not come to be served but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many" ([Mk. 10:43-45](#)).

Another mark of discipleship is growth in the knowledge and wisdom of God. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. Such knowledge is acquired from an intimate relationship with the living Word of God and an understanding of the written Word of God. The disciple is to be equipped as a workman who correctly handles the Word of God (2 Tim. 2:15) and as one who does not distort it nor use it deceitfully ([2 Cor. 4:27](#)). From this reverent fear and knowledge of God the disciple learns to discern the difference between truth and error and between good and evil. He learns to be able rightly to interpret God's message to the people in the context of their daily lives.

Further, the goal of training the man of God is to bring to maturity his missiological commitment to the proclamation of the Gospel, to the nurture of believers, and to teaching in truth and righteousness; the goal is also to inspire compassionate service for the poor and despised and sick of this world, and also for the rich and those with whom we have cultural affinity. This totality of missiological concern is beautifully modelled for us in the life of our Lord ([Mt. 9:35-38](#)). God [p. 128](#) gives to his people the gifts of the Spirit to be exercised in ministry within the church and without in the world.

These gifts are neither to be equated with natural hereditary gifts, nor to be isolated from each other, but to be exercised in relation to each other. The goal of training a man of God is to help him discern the gifts that the Spirit has given him and to provide the context in which they can be fully developed and exercised. Training for ministry is thus a multifaceted process involving the student, the teacher, and the accumulated knowledge and skills of the church, all under the discipling ministry of the Holy Spirit.

The disciple is to be equipped not only as a spokesman for God and one who exercises the priestly and pastoral care of God's people, but as one with discerning wisdom to lead people in their daily involvement in society, work, and leisure, and in responsible citizenship in the nation. He speaks with a prophetic voice for justice and society.

THEOLOGY OF SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT

We will develop our understanding from three theological perspectives. First, mankind was created in the image of God in order to worship and serve Him forever. In creation we share, in a derived and dependent sense, the attributes of God. Man is eternally personal, with a selfhood which is both one and individual, and yet a shared relational self inseparable from others. As George David notes, "The individual and relational selves are two mutually interdependent dimensions of one selfhood or personhood. There can be no relational self without individuality neither can the individual self have a meaningful existence without any reciprocal relationships whatsoever. For, to become a person one has to share in the being of another" (*The Eclipse and Rediscovery of Person*, New Delhi, p.44f). The harmony of the individual self and the relational self between

man and his creator God makes possible man's reflection on his own selfhood and a rational and coherent understanding of all life.

Further, man was created moral, with a capacity to discern good from evil and to obey or disobey his creator. The Law of God which reflects the character of God is written on his heart, and to this Law his conscience bears witness ([Rom. 2:15](#)). Man in the image of God has the gift of creativity in the secondary sense of being able to form from the created world objects of beauty and manifest truth through art, music and words. He has been given stewardship over nature and called to subdue it to the glory of God. Thus our spirituality extends to [p. 129](#) the circumference of man created in God's image when he acts in conformity with the purposes of God.

Secondly, we know from Scripture and our own experience that this image is marred, defaced and all but destroyed. We are sinners in rebellion against God, using our creative gifts for idolatrous purposes and then becoming slaves of our own creations. We are under the judgement and the wrath of God. We live in the realm of evil and the demonic, knowing that Satan is the ruler of this world. Therefore true spirituality means a true response in heart, mind and body to this fallen world. It includes both attitudes and acts of repentance to God and turning from sin, and of faith in God and turning towards Him and His Law. Spiritual formation must involve the development of a critical knowledge of the world, discerning the cultural accretions to the Gospel whether Western, Asian or African. It includes training in steadfastness, humility and courage to stand as persons, families and communities, against the devil and his ways, in situations of hunger, sickness and death, in persecution and suffering and in cases of demonic possession.

Thirdly, spirituality is experiencing the redeeming work of Christ and the recruiting power of the Holy Spirit. As new men and women in Christ we experience the divine shalom, the health and wholeness that God purposes for his people ([Rom. 5](#), [2 Cor. 5](#)). Spirituality is harmony in relationship to our Saviour God in worship, love and submission, in relationship to God's people, in witness and servanthood in the world, and stewardship in relationship to nature. The spiritual self is a point in a triangle of body and mind and psyche functioning through these elements of personhood. The psychiatrist Paul Tournier has so well illustrated this in his work, *The Meaning of Persons*.

In conclusion, we recognize that man created in the image of God must not be confused with man made of the dust of the earth, but neither can these two components of his being be isolated from each other. Spirituality then is the relational centre in all our relations with God, mankind and creation.

In light of such an understanding, it is evident that spiritual development cannot be merely a subject within theological education, separate from other subjects. Rather it must be a perspective affecting the whole educative process. We may distinguish at least four contexts in which such a perspective should be manifest.

Curriculum Content for Spiritual Development

We naturally turn first to the curriculum of theological education and [p. 130](#) begin by recognizing that spiritual knowledge is received through the divine propositional Word of God, through experiencing relational knowledge in the human context, and through inner reflection and interpretation of the knowledge of one's selfhood. We may divide the content of theological education into four general but related areas.'

1. *Biblical knowledge*. Spiritual growth takes place in the acquisition of a cognitive knowledge of Scripture, and in the application and interpretation of Scripture to ourselves and to our world. It begins with our basic attitudes to Scripture itself. There is

often a sharp difference between an evangelical understanding of Scripture as the Word of God and a liberal and radical understanding of Scripture as a human document. This becomes a watershed for our understanding of spiritual development in theological education. If we approach biblical knowledge with the confidence that this is the authentic Word of God, and with the desire to love and obey the law of God, we are conditioned to grow in spiritual maturity through this knowledge. But we are all aware from our own experience, and from that of others, that acquiring knowledge of the content of Scripture is no guarantee of spiritual growth. In fact, it can lead to spiritual deadness and to agnosticism.

To understand the Word of God in its own cultural context and to understand its relevance for the cultural context in which we live is also fundamental to spiritual development. In this case, study of the biblical languages, critical reflection on the problems of biblical introduction and culture, and analysis and synthesis of biblical theology, are tools necessary to this exercise in spirituality. I suggest that more emphasis be placed on learning by heart the Scriptures, not only for spiritual nourishment but also for evangelism. This is especially helpful in situations where memory knowledge is highly valued, such as in ministry to the Muslims. The Union Biblical Seminary in Yavatmal (now Pune) India, requires students to learn by heart 25 verses a term. However, the staff have discerned sharp differences among students in the motivation for memorizing for graduation. Integrity in the use of Scripture is a barometer of spiritual maturity.

2. Culture and Society. Our curriculum usually includes courses on cultural anthropology, general knowledge of literature, history and the arts, the study of philosophy, ideologies, religions and sociology. I suspect some evangelical schools are weak in this area because they do not see its significance for spiritual development in discipleship making. Their definition of spirituality is too narrow. We would insist p. 131 that a knowledge of these component areas of culture and society are fundamental to the process of contextualization and to developing the critical moral faculty of evaluating man's response in society.

3. Applied theology. We might expect in the area of applied theology to have courses on dogmatic theology, personal and social ethics, apologetics, church history, missions and ecumenics. Again spiritual development will depend on the way the subjects are taught and studied and on the kind of contextualized reflections. In each subject there must be an attempt to relate the subject to personal life style and daily behaviour.

4. Church ministries. We normally include courses on preaching and homiletics; pastoral care and church administration, Christian education and the use of the traditional and modern communications media. Here too spiritual formation will take place in the orientation of the subject matter and in relating theory to practice.

The seminar approach to learning and the use of case studies are pedagogical methods that increase the potential for a spiritual orientation in every subject in the curriculum. They open up the possibility for a teacher-student relationship, in which both acknowledge that they are learners in God's school of discipleship. The concept of working with small groups is essential to this approach. Detmar Schunemann summarized educational goals in the prayer of Samuel Chadwick, 'Lord, make us truly spiritual, perfectly natural, thoroughly practical' ('How can we sharpen campus spiritual life?' *Asia Theological News*, July/September 1981, p.8).

Resident Communities for Discipleship

The extent to which a residential theological school is a community for discipleship training determines the potential for spiritual development to take place. Seen as a community of faith, such a school is able to bring the whole of its corporate life to a disciplined lifestyle that reflects the nature of the church itself. The focal point of a residential community ought to be worship. This will be expressed through the personal devotional life of the members of the community, through worship together in chapel services at least once a day, and through informal and planned student meetings for prayer. Days of prayer and meditation, preferably once a term, and special retreats at the beginning of the academic year or with the graduating class prior to graduation, are also important elements in this spiritual development of the [p. 132](#) community. Such a community of faith should include regular counselling programmes involving staff with students, and students with students. Many schools have a weekly fellowship period when a staff member meets with a small group of students throughout a whole year. Counselling also takes place in the homes of staff and students, formally and informally. In this area staff wives may take a major role in spiritual formation. The activities of the community also involve their social life, including student conduct in the dining room, in the hostels, on the sports field, in meetings of the student association, and in other extracurricular activities. These provide training grounds in spirituality. The principle of the whole community functioning through small study and reflection groups opens up possibilities for in-depth relatedness in mutual spirituality.

Local Church in Spiritual Development

If the local church is seen as the baseline for theological training, then any programme of theological education must ensure that a balance is maintained between classroom activity and involvement in the life of one or more local churches. There are many advantages for a student who serves as a student pastor in a local church during his years of training. This ensures that he develops inner discipline in maintaining at the same time both academic study and evangelistic and pastoral ministries, a discipline he will need very much after graduation. Where this is not practical, students should be assigned to a local church for Sunday, and preferably one other day a week, for practical ministry under the guidance of the local pastor and elders. A staff member of the school may also be involved as a resource person. I suggest the ideal is to have classes on four days a week, with two days given to a local church and one for rest, renewal and private study. In some schools it is possible to have a full-time supervisor of practical training, who may also serve as chaplain or counsellor for the whole school.

Many schools focus on concentrated periods of ministry with local churches, often one or two weeks at a time, and during the longer vacations when students are assigned to pastoral ministries. The concept of a year of internship upon the completion of academic training is to be encouraged. We are all aware that the pastoral and teaching care given to a new graduate in his first year or two in the ministry may be as important as the spiritual training in the school itself. A high percentage of failure in the Christian ministry, takes place in the first two years of ministry. Further, the continuing education of [p. 133](#) ministers, especially during the first five years of ministry, through short courses and retreats, is of great importance. If a student's term of training extends to four years or more, then it is highly desirable that he be assigned to a local church or house group or para-church agency for ministry for one year within his total period of training. Group participation in church ministries is also to be encouraged. The Madras Bible Seminary in India expects its student body as a whole to plant two new churches every year and to provide the pastoral care for them.

The World as the Context for Spiritual Development

Evangelicals have pioneered and developed Theological Education by Extension (TEE) as an effective means for training discipleship-makers, who study while at the same time maintaining their secular employment and their ministry in their local church or para-church organization. The value of TEE is that it can be adapted to training for voluntary ministries of many kinds in a local church. It enables a local church to become a bible school. Co-operation between a residential school and a TEE programme is to be encouraged, so that extension students can benefit periodically from the corporate life of an institution, and those in residential programmes can spend periods of study while living in the secular world. TEE must be seen as an extension of both the school and the church.

Some schools, particularly in India, have assigned students to live off campus either in a dense housing estate or in slum hutments for an academic term. Food is sometimes taken from low class eating houses. This identity with the poor in their living leads to new styles of spirituality. Worship without the luxury of privacy, or study in the context of people who are illiterate, brings a kind of praxis into theological education that awakens a new understanding of compassion, an identity with the poor and deprived. Our Lord trained his disciples in the context of healing the sick, feeding the hungry, cleansing the lepers, and dining with prostitutes and tax collectors. The misunderstandings inherent in such ministries become, in effect, agents for spiritual growth in discipleship. Similarly evangelistic teams which for shorter periods of time live in the villages will experience new levels of spirituality. Jesus' instructions for such ministry are very clear, practical and embarrassing ([Mt. 10:1-20](#)).

Many religious cultures idealize the model of the teacher-disciple relationship, where the lifestyle of the guru as well as his teaching is to be emulated and faithfully followed by the disciple. This was our [p. 134](#) Lord's own model of teaching the twelve during his three years of ministry. It was on-the-job training in spirituality, involving teaching, preaching and compassionate service. It ensured a high level of commitment. It stood the test of persecution and suffering. Its implication for today is that the teacher-student ratio should be kept as low as possible and a continuity of personal relationship encouraged between the teacher and the student.

Tools for Evaluating Spiritual Development

Perhaps the most difficult aspect of making spiritual development integral to a programme of theological education is in the area of evaluation. We recognize that evaluating the spiritual growth of a student is inherently subjective and can be easily misunderstood. Yet a theological programme cannot recognize its achievement or lack of achievement in this vital area without some effective form of evaluation.

Evangelical accrediting agencies are rightly emphasizing that spiritual development is an integral part of accreditation, that it is as important as cognitive knowledge and communication skills. The students's spiritual development must be a fundamental factor in determining his preparedness for receiving the theological degree or diploma at the end of his course. The student who has failed in this area of spiritual development should have the granting of his degree or diploma postponed. This is particularly necessary in areas of ethical misdemeanour such as cheating in an examination, mishandling of money, or sexual laxity. Failure in these areas should be approached through pastoral care and counselling. Once such a person is ordained into the ministry he may become a stumbling block to the spiritual growth of others throughout his life. It would be unwise to grade a person in spirituality in the same way as we grade a course.

It would be better to grade him as either satisfactory or unsatisfactory. Unsatisfactory would be considered failure. Many schools offering a three or four year programme enrol students for an initial one or two years. The students then reapply for admission to the final years. This creates the opportunity to terminate the training of those students felt to be unsuitable for the high calling of Christian service.

I suggest that tools for the measurement of spirituality, can be developed which, when taken together, evidence an over-all picture of satisfactory or unsatisfactory training. These include:

1. Self-evaluation questionnaires and reports. Such questionnaires need to be carefully designed and might be completed by the student [p. 135](#) every term. They might be considered confidential to the office of the school, if necessary. The philosophy of accreditation is grounded on the principle of self-evaluation. Likewise the student's graduation begins with his self-evaluation of his spiritual progress during training. While such questionnaires are open to falsification, there are other tools of evaluation which can indicate the degrees of integrity of the student. For example, examination questions may include questions where the student is required to relate his knowledge of the subject to his own life. Again writing up case studies and research projects will reveal as much about the student as they do about the subject of his investigation.

2. Reports on counselling. The school chaplain or staff advisors should meet regularly with the students assigned to them for counselling sessions and reports on those might be compiled. Again, the leaders of student groups or student organizations may be requested to report on their fellow-students' growth, stagnation or decline in spirituality. Further, the pastor and elders of the local church with whom the students have worked, or the supervisor of the field activity, should be requested to fill in an appropriate questionnaire. Such reports may grade the student 1 to 5 with 3 as satisfactory. Compiling these reports over the student's whole period of study, even preparing a graph of each student's progress, will enable the staff finally to grade the student satisfactory or unsatisfactory. Such action should be the action of the whole staff. Thus the degree of objectivity in evaluating the student's spiritual development can be as reliable as the grading of an examination paper. A degree of subjectivity cannot be eliminated in evaluating spiritual development any more than it can be from the system of written examinations.

We may conclude that spiritual development is the primary goal of theological education, that spirituality is an essential element in commending men and women for ministry, and that such spiritual development can be adequately evaluated.

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Manifesto on the Renewal of Evangelical Theological Education

I.C.A.A.