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Tensions in North American Theological Education

Bruce C. Stewart

I wonder how Elijah and Elisha planned the curriculum of the schools of the prophets. It would seem that Old Testament Studies had the highest priority, and that the study of Hebrew produced far less trauma for their students than for ours. Did they have a Department of Pastoral Theology? Was their experience in building a dormitory Field Work in Church Building? Was their borrowing of tools an assignment in Pastoral Administration? Is it significant that it took a miracle to continue their programme? One thing, at least, that we learn from this biblical model is the necessity of continually seeking God's help in the successful functioning of a seminary.

In the history of North American seminaries, Andover Theological Seminary was organized in 1808 as a corrective to the liberalism that was developing at Harvard Divinity School. The founding of new seminaries was one approach to tensions, and it has been duplicated many times.

Some ninety years ago William Rainey Harper, the founding President of the University of Chicago, wrote an essay entitled 'Shall the Theological Curriculum Be Modified, and How?' in which he expressed his concern that seminaries should prepare men to relate to and deal with the changing issues of the day and the real needs in the lives of their people. His criticism of Protestant ministers and seminaries continues to have relevance.

Before we look at specific areas of tension it would seem appropriate to cite a contemporary evaluation of the state of theological education. In an on-going dialogue at Andover Newton Theological Seminary, Max L. Stackhouse has written, 'Theological education is in the midst of a series of efforts to define its focus.... On the one hand, what happens in theological education seems too narrow, too self-satisfied, too geared to the maintenance of unimaginative ministries, and too cafeteria-like; on the other hand, it seems so diffuse, without governing vision, purpose, intensity or centre. The various parts do not integrate into a compelling vision of ministry.'[1]

To this we might add the words of David S. Schuller: 'Too many students experience seminary education as a disparate series of p. 43 education hurdles, lacking a centre and adequate integration.... In spite of the fanfare with which institutions greet each curricular shift, suspicion grows that the levels of curricular reform may not have been fundamental enough to touch the real problem.'[2]

In identifying areas of tension in North American Theological Education, I am reflecting the responses of 26 seminary presidents to the questions: 'List some current tensions that concern you in North American theological education today', and 'What is your approach to globalization?'.

THE ACADEMIC AND THE PRACTICAL

[1] Stackhouse, Max L., *Apologia: Contextualization, Globalization and Mission in Theological Education*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1988, p. 15.

[2] Schuller, David S., Editorial Introduction, *Theological Education* 17 (Spring 1981), p. 8.

By far the most cited area is *the tension between the academic and the practical*: between intellectual theologizing and pastoral ministry; between classroom/research competency and relational/administrative functioning; between *theoria* and *praxis*.

Helmut Thielicke illustrates this problem in *A Little Exercise for Young Theologians*. A young man who worked well with youth in his church was led to consider going to seminary so he could develop his service and love for God and people. When he returned home after the first semester, his rapport with his peers was severely damaged; he was critical of their lack of scholarship, and tried to impress them with what 'the latest investigation has produced on the subjects of myth, legend and form-history'. Thielicke continued, 'Under a considerable display of the apparatus of exegetical science and surrounded by the air of the initiated, he produces paralyzing and unhappy trivialities and the inner muscular strength of a lively young Christian is horribly squeezed to death in a formal armour of abstract ideas'.[3]

While he sees this as only a symptom of a more important lack of unity, Edward Farley admits that 'the students' and ministerial graduates' version [of the problematic character of theological education] is that the theological school did not adequately prepare them for the nitty-gritty problems and activities of churchly life, that the academic and the practical were never really linked.'[4] p. 44

During the past fifty years there has been an increasing trend towards relocating the issue of practical experience from the post-seminary period into the seminary itself. Many approaches have been initiated to bridge this gap: internships or fieldwork, case study pedagogies, interdisciplinary courses, and bringing on campus pastors and other church leaders to tell it like it is.

One contribution to this area of tension is the diminishing number of seminary students whose objective is the pastorate. Historically, theological education was to prepare men to serve as pastors; today, a growing percentage of students are involved in or preparing for other areas of service. The M.Div. degree which prepares for the parish ministry has a declining percentage of students (from 79.6% in 1970 to 53.3% in 1987) which may tend to de-emphasize or dissipate practical theology courses.

Responses to this concern vary. Eastern Mennonite Seminary has an exploration in ministry programme in which persons not yet in seminary can test their call to ministry in practical settings. In a less structured way, our seminary along with many others would emphasize the importance of students being involved in ministry before they come to seminary; their effective ministry would lead their pastor or others in the church to encourage them to consider seminary. We would also expect that they would be seriously involved in ministry while they are attending seminary. Here is a vital link between the academic and the practical. Lois LeBar has aptly said, 'Content without experience is empty; experience without content is blind.'

Larry Richards has made a valid observation that 'example leadership reproduces itself. Seminaries train as well as teach. The "hidden curriculum" of the learning setting has a greater impact on the learner than the "content curriculum" which is being taught in the instruction.'[5] This is not to say that students do not learn in the classroom, but their model is a lecturer and not a pastor; therefore, we should not be too surprised if seminary graduates excel in teaching, but not in pastoral care and administration. Richards

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[3] Thielicke, Helmut, *A Little Exercise for Young Theolgians*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962, p. 8.

[4] Farley, Edward, 'The Reform of Theological Education as a Theological Task', *Theological Education* 17 (Spring 1981), p. 93.

[5] Richards, Larry, *A Theology of Christian Education*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Pub. Co., 1975, p. 159.

continues, 'To equip a person for ministry in the Body, that person's training must be like the ministry he is being trained to undertake.'[6] Richards suggests a model in which faculty members serve in local churches and students p. 45 serve and take some courses in the context of the congregation. At Covenant Seminary Donald MacNair actually walked students with him in planting churches as part of the Evangelism Practicum. One of our basic commitments as a Seminary is for our professors to have pastoral experience so that instead of being seen as 'specialists' they can train and teach from the perspective of pastors; they continue to serve in local churches as models for their students in bridging the gap between campus and parish.

PROFICIENCY AND SPIRITUALITY

Somewhat related to the tension between the academic and the practical is the *tension between academic performance and spiritual formation*—between development of professional proficiency and development of spirituality.

At this point Farley calls for a drastic reassessment of direction. He argues that changes to meet both academic and practical demands are merely cosmetic—that the real need is theological—that the increasing multiplicity of departments and specializations has moved the seminaries even farther from their primary task of the study of divinity to alternatives that lack unity and coherence.

By 'divinity' Farley means 'not just an objective science, but a personal knowledge of God and the things of God in the context of salvation. Hence, the study of divinity [theology] was an exercise of piety, a dimension of the life of faith.'[7]

I am not sure that Farley's thesis applies to approaches to spiritual formation which are programmed on many campuses since in most cases spiritual formation is developed as yet another discipline, with classes, seminars, retreats, and the like. However, there does seem to be a growing concern that the minister be a man of God, not merely a competent clergyman—that he would minister to people out of his apprehension of God's grace to him, that he may not be able to say, as Paul wrote, 'Lest when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway' (1 Cor. 9:27).

In *The Religious Life of Theological Students*, B. B. Warfield says that a student of theology cannot be either a student or a man of God; he must be both. He writes, 'I am here today to warn you to take seriously your theological study, not merely as a duty … but as a p. 46 religious exercise, itself charged with religious blessing to you; as fitted by its very nature to fill all your mind and heart and soul and life with divine thoughts and feelings and aspirations and achievements … out of which you draw everyday enlargement of heart, elevation of spirit, and adoring delight in your Maker and your Saviour.'[8]

The basic element of seminary education is the same as any expectation for spiritual growth; it is a life fully committed to Jesus Christ, a life in which personal devotion is a daily anticipation and practice, a life in which joyful obedience is given to God's Word, a life in which selfless service is given to Christ and to his people and for his sake. Such a

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[6] *Ibid.*, p. 160.

[7] Farley, Edward, *Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983, p. 7.

[8] Warfield, Benjamin B., *The Religious Life of Theological Students*. Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., (original date) 1911, p. 9.

lifestyle will permeate Academe, and will focus both study and training in the perspective of ministry to Christ.

OLDER STUDENTS

A third area of tension is caused by *the increasing age of seminary students*. Fewer and fewer students are coming to seminary right out of college. The average age of entering seminary students has increased to 31, and it is not unusual to find students in the fifties. 20–30% of these applicants are second (or third) career people. Most of them are married; most of them have children; most of them are working, at least part-time. This, in turn, means that a rapidly increasing number of our students are part-time students. Resulting tensions include:

a. *Problems in scheduling:* older students may take 4–7 years to complete a regular 3-year programme. Renewing study habits and working part-time reduces the load of classes they can take. Work or family responsibilities may make it difficult for them to attend some classes. North American Baptist Seminary has set up clusters of classes at times most convenient for them.

b. *Need for new courses:* older students may require a wider spectrum of courses or services because of their peculiar interests or strengths or commitments; these new courses and practica will further complicate an already extended schedule.

c. *Problems in recruitment:* older students are more affected by regionalization. Location of home and job are major components in choosing a seminary. To recruit students from a distance, seminaries p. 47 assume additional responsibilities in helping to secure housing and employment.

d. *Demand for credit for experience:* older students may already have experience as teachers, pastors, missionaries, or counsellors, and want graduate credit for it. While there is a general trend in education (both in ATS and on the state level) to give such credit, experience in itself is not necessarily pedagogical. We need to make sure there is proficiency.

e. *Lack of Community:* older students will tend to come to class and then go home without the normal interaction of bull-sessions and social contact with the seminary family. Denver Seminary is seeking to meet this need by scheduling a new approach to chapel and worship in which they can be involved.

f. *Need for more student aid:* older students with larger families have greater financial needs. Scholarship and other student aid programmes need to be expanded so that these students do not have to extend their time in seminary too far.

MISSION AND MARKET

A fourth area of tension is *between curriculum and programmes which are mandated by the school mission and curriculum and programmes which are driven by the market*.

Many seminaries have proliferated programmes extensively in recent years. Tensions arise when new programmes are initiated primarily to attract students or dollars. Leon Pacala writes on this point, 'Of even more serious concern for the future of the enterprise, an increasingly student-enrolment-driven-system will carry with it the temptation for theological schools to concentrate on student numbers to the detriment of concern for the quality and promise of future seminarians.'[9]

[9] Pacala, Leon, 'Reflections on the State of Theological Education in the 80s', *Theological Education* 18 (Autumn 1981), pp. 30, 31.

Other questions need to be faced: Will new programmes require too much of an already over-worked faculty? Will students tend to become mere statistics whose main function is to balance the seminary budget? How does each new proposal fit into the mission statement? The President of Denver Seminary commented, 'We believe we must have a strong sense of mission, and respond to the market only where it p. 48 clearly fits with the mission of the seminary.' The President of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School appropriately points out that faculties and staff need to be educated to the realities of meeting seminary budgets. For the health of the institution, faculty members may have to be willing to increase course loads and advisees.

GLOBALIZATION

Another tension is *in the area of globalization*. It is especially fitting for us to wrestle with this in the context of the meeting of the Lausanne II Congress in Manila.

Tensions develop even in defining globalization. In contrast to those who see globalization mainly as human development or interfaith dialogue, our evangelical seminaries would see its major thrust as obedience to the Great Commission. While we acknowledge that in many foreign countries the Christian faith was and still is identified with Western culture, and that this has caused misunderstandings and problems, we would emphasize the continuing need to prepare people to present the gospel effectively throughout the world, and to train them to have an intimate knowledge of the cultural context and its implications.

While we are increasingly sensitive to this need, many of us are slow to accept the changes in curriculum and programmes which will really prepare someone to serve in the multi-cultural milieu in North America or in the Two-Thirds World. The traditional M.Div. curriculum is already beset with pressure to add new courses to an over-crowded programme without diminishing its basic core courses. Since the Bible is a cross-cultural book with a message to all peoples, seminarians should have cross-cultural courses and experiences along with a multi-cultural perspective which is infused into other existing courses. Many of our evangelical seminaries (Westminster Seminary, Dallas Seminary, and Columbia Graduate School of Missions) are offering degrees in inter-cultural studies; Fuller Seminary and Reformed Seminary have doctoral level courses. ATS challenges us to see that 'globalization is to be a central rather than a peripheral issue in theological education, and that there are hard choices which need to be made in curriculum planning'.[10] We face a tension between our history, which primarily p. 49 prepared ministers for middle-class white churches, and our future, which calls us to prepare people for multi-national ministry.

Within most of our seminaries there is a wide diversity of denominational and ethnic backgrounds among our students. Many of us have faculty from the black or Hispanic communities. Our interaction within these contexts is a natural place to begin to develop appreciation for and understanding of other cultures. In addition we need consciously to plan ways to enable our students to have a world vision so that whether they serve in ministries in North America or throughout the world they will not be bound by a parochial or provincial concept of the church. We should encourage representatives of other cultures on to be on our campuses as guest professors or special speakers. If some of our faculty are able to spend time in another culture, they may be able to bring the flavour of it back with them.

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[10] *Globalization: Theological Education for the Whole Church* (a monograph prepared by the Task Force for Globalization of ATS in 1986), p. 7. See also *Theological Education* 22 (Spring 1986).

Many of us encourage international students to attend our seminaries. This is possibly a learning experience for our students, but I wonder how effective it is for the foreign student. It is quite costly, either for him, his church or the seminary. He is learning in a culture far different from the one where he is preparing for ministry. Statistics show that he has less than a 50% likelihood of returning home after his study in America. Are we doing a disservice to international students and their home churches by encouraging them to come? Some of our seminaries (International School of Theology, Erskine Seminary, Fuller Seminary) sponsor and support extension seminaries in the Two-Thirds World. Would we be aiding students more by helping them to attend seminaries in their own culture?

A number of other areas of tension were mentioned. Yet, like the writer to the Hebrews, I conclude, 'What shall I say more? For time would fail me to speak of …' *tensions between seminary objectives and church expectations, concerns to meet rising costs without raising tuitions unrealistically, the question of inerrancy, issues in the area of feminism, recruiting acceptable numbers and quality of students—including minorities*, and *recruiting and retaining qualified faculty*.

This paper is not to be considered a comprehensive treatment of the topic. But hopefully, it may stimulate our thinking and discussion, and may lead to further study of, and constructive responses, to these tensions.

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Bruce C. Stewart is President of the Reformed Presbyterian Theological Seminary in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. p. 50

Training Asians in Asia: From Dream to Reality

Bong Rin Ro

On 9 July 1989, at the Central Union Church in Manila, the Asia Graduate School of Theology (AGST) held its first commencement for eleven graduates in the presence of over three hundred people. Among these graduates, seven received their Ed.D. in Christian Education and four the Master of Theology (M.Th.) in Biblical Studies. The vision of training Asians in Asia, which many evangelical theologians have dreamed, had become reality in the history of the Asian Church.

PROLIFERATION OF THEOLOGICAL SCHOOLS

Asians are heard to say that if a Western missionary can bring $10,000 from his home country, he can start a new seminary. Consequently, numerous theological schools have