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Accreditation as a Catalyst for Renewal in Theological Education

Paul Bowers

Within the larger discussion of the renewal of contemporary evangelical theological education world-wide, it is my particular contention that such renewal is properly integral to the accreditation mandate, and that accreditation is a key practical means for implementing that renewal.

This is not a prevailing notion. Renewal is often looked upon by traditionalists in theological education today as alien to the legitimate concerns of accreditation. And accreditation is in turn being treated by radicalists in theological education today as renewal's latest enemy, a tragic reinforcement of the very problems which make renewal so imperative.

I propose that both perspectives are in error, that properly conceived accreditation both should be, and also can be, a catalyst for renewal in theological education world-wide.

I do not make this proposition as one with theoretical expertise in the areas of accreditation and educational renewal. While I respect those who have these qualifications, my own professional training lies elsewhere. Like most theological educators today, I approach the issues of accreditation and renewal in theological education as a consumer not a technician, as one whose orientation has been gained by usage in the field rather than by detached analysis in the laboratory. I am conscious of the limitations this involves, but presume that the impressions which such practical engagement yields are not without worth for the larger discussion today.

Let me develop the proposition at hand by attempting to analyze in turn its two central foci, first *accreditation* and then *renewal*.

I. ACCREDITATION

A. Ingredients

In Third World theological education today we are, in large measure, launched in accreditation movements the inner structures or essential ingredients of which we have not paused to analyze. We have familiarized ourselves with the externalities of accreditation, with standards and p. 238 with procedures and with modes for administering these. But we need also to address ourselves in lively discussion within our movements to the internal issues as well. Here I intend only to make a beginning by way of developing my main proposition. If we ask about the essential internal ingredients of accreditation—at least as represented in our recently emerging accreditation movements within evangelical theological education internationally—then let me suggest for your consideration that these ingredients are three in number, namely: quality, credibility, and collaboration.

1. *Quality*. The primary ingredient of our accreditation is a concern with quality, a concern which we believe to be rooted in biblical expectations. As Christians we are, in whatever we do, to do it well, to do our best, for the Lord. The Lord expects it, he deserves it, and he demands it. Not least therefore in theological education we are to pursue excellence, because of whom we serve. Sincerity, spiritual warmth, public reputation or internal satisfaction are not enough. We are under obligation to engage in regular

disciplined self-examination both with regard to direction and with regard to attainment in our theological programmes. We are under obligation to distinguish mediocrity from quality, in order to pursue and achieve the latter.

Accreditation has gained such a ready foothold in evangelical theological education around the world in recent years not least because it in part answers directly to this specific biblical mandate. Accreditation is centrally focused on quality. It defines quality, and it encourages and reinforces the attainment of this quality. To ask what is quality in theological education, and to ask how we may motivate and reinforce its attainment, is to ask the central questions of our accreditation movements. Our various standards and procedures represent pragmatic answers to these questions; whether they represent final answers is another matter, and a matter we do well to consider.

2. *Credibility*. If quality is the primary ingredient of our accreditation, credibility is its fundamental partner. The very word, ac-creditation, bears reference within itself to this ingredient. Extract credibility from accreditation and we do not have accreditation. Indeed in many parts of the world it is this ingredient, focused in terms of recognition, which seems often to be the principal attraction of accreditation. Theological schools feel themselves increasingly gripped by a need to secure recognition, from within their sponsoring church constituencies, from within society at large, and especially from within their academic marketplace, in order to facilitate admission of their graduates to advanced studies, proper job placement, local financial and moral support, and open doors for ministry and proclamation.

It is a concern not without its dangers, but also not without biblical warrant. The early Christians were of course taught to be governed not by the values and opinions of the world but by the word of the Lord and his judgment on their lives, but they were not thereby encouraged to ignore or disregard responsible external opinion and judgment, p. 239 whether from within the body of Christ or from without. The apostle Paul laid down the general mandate: 'Take thought for what is noble in the sight of all' (Rom. 12:17). A specific qualification of Christian leadership was respect from among the general public (I Tim. 3:7). If anyone did suffer from ill-repute they were to be sure, the apostle Peter admonishes, that it was not in fact deserved (1 Pet. 4:15,16). 'A good name' the Old Testament taught, 'is to be esteemed more than gold' (Prov. 22:1). In similar style the modern theological school dares not function as its own self-sufficient measure, in disregard of external perception and opinion. A school owes it to its members and to its constituency to seek to be understood and trusted beyond its own walls, within its wider context of sponsorship and service, and to accept the healthy disciplines that this implies. That is not the last word on credibility, nor my last word here, but it is an important word. Quantity that is not also accompanied by credibility will soon find itself serving no useful purpose.

Accreditation has gained a ready foothold in theological education around the world in recent years not least because it is intentionally structured to respond to this need. For in the psychological laws which dominate the marketplace of credibility and reputation, externality plays a pivotal role. And such externality is of the essence of our accreditation processes. For example, if you were to ask me about the quality of the school where I teach, and I responded that it was good, you would rightly feel assured of little more than my loyalty to my school. But if someone from outside that school gives you a similar report, it has a different impact. And if more than one outside person so reports; and if they base their judgment on notions of quality externally established; and if they arrive at this judgment through procedures externally set and monitored, then your own positive impressions about the school are compounded and compounded again. Accreditation is deliberately designed to operate in precisely this way. To ask how modes may best be

devised for winning and nurturing external recognition of the quality of a particular programme of theological education is to ask a central question of our accreditation movements. Our systems represent pragmatic answers to that question; whether they represent the best answers is another matter, and one worthy of our attention.

3. *Collaboration*. There is a third basic ingredient of accreditation, in addition to quality and credibility. The tendency to go off and found one's own independent operation, so characteristic of the western evangelical world, is not in fact the New Testament pattern. There it is community and cooperation, team work and collaboration, mutual enrichment and edification, which form the normal pattern. We seem to be witnessing an era when theological educators are proving more and more alive to the need for just such mutuality. They are realizing that there are things urgently required in theological education which can best be cared for collaboratively, and they are ready to engage in such endeavours. p. 240

Accreditation has taken hold in part not least because it answers so readily to this sense of need. Our accreditation at its heart is a joint undertaking. The standards are arrived at by consultation among a wide cross-section of theological educators. Our evaluative procedures are always carried out as team operations. Accreditation survives indeed only where there is a willingness to help others and to be helped, where there is an openness to cross-pollination and mutual reinforcement. When we ask how we may most usefully collaborate together for the enhancement of theological education, we are asking a fundamental question of our accreditation movements. Our various associative devices represent pragmatic answers to this question; we do well to examine whether they are the most fruitful ones.

If therefore we should wish a short definition of accreditation as it has emerged in our movements, a definition focused in terms of inner ingredients, then I should say that such accreditation is: a collaborative effort among programmes of theological education to achieve and demonstrate a quality that is credible.

B. Tensions

Before passing on to consider renewal and its relation to accreditation, there is one aspect of this internal analysis of accreditation which, I believe, requires closer comment. There are important segments of opinion in evangelical theological education today which tend entirely to ignore the role of credibility in such education. And there are other important segments of opinion which tend to treat credibility in practice as the paramount concern.

At the grass roots level of theological education, especially perhaps in the evangelical Third World, the achievement of recognition for programmes of theological education easily becomes the ruling policy, not to say at times an all-conditioning fixation. It is a road fraught with temptations not always easily recognized or controlled. The peril implicit in the desire 'to be like unto the nations round about' is by no means restricted to Old Testament times. There are prices asked in the marketplace of recognition which are too high to pay for those committed to the lordship of Christ, and one could wish to hear more voices where it counts sounding an effective alarm in this regard.

But among specialist theoreticians in theological education, especially in the evangelical First World, critique and evaluation proceed with often complete disregard for the legitimate need among theological programmes for credibility and recognition. In these circles credibility in theological education is a conspicuously absent issue. If it does by chance intrude itself, it is treated merely as a perversity. Would that some honest soul within these ranks would put an ear to the Scriptures, and to the ground, and begin to deal more reasonably and realistically with this earnest concern from the grass roots levels.

In contrast to these two approaches, our accreditation movements embrace the search for recognition, but only as it is attached and led by a search for quality. It is of the essence of accreditation that it is not merely p. 241 an image-enhancement operation, engineering public endorsement as an end in itself. Accreditation does seek to achieve public endorsement, but only for a quality that has been priorly determined to merit such endorsement. If recognition is to be had only at the expense of quality, of a biblically controlled notion of quality, then we must forcefully reject such a tendency, and ensure that we are not found, even unintentionally, facilitating it.

But it is also at the heart of what accreditation is all about that it does not seek merely for quality; accreditation seeks a credible quality. We reject the casual disregard and vilification of this legitimate concern. Where credibility is made paramount, theological education will run askew; but where it is ignored, theological education will shrivel.

It is the special role of accreditation to attempt to deal with both of these dangers constructively. By its nature accreditation can look neither complacently on a good teacher who has failed to secure recognizable credentials, nor complacently on a well credentialed teacher who has failed to develop teaching skills. It can look neither complacently on poor financial patterns which somehow pass an audit, nor complacently on good financial patterns which are not subjected to the disciplines of a regular external audit. Accreditation cannot look complacently on a library of two hundred well-chosen, well-used books, nor can it look complacently on a library of ten thousand poorly-chosen, poorly-used books. It is the peculiar challenge of our accreditation movements to occupy this point of tension sensibly and creatively, both in our formation of standards and in our application of those standards, seeking to serve both the need for quality and the need for credibility.

II. RENEWAL

A. New Opportunities

Where then does renewal fit into such a landscape? Perhaps we should begin by asking what we actually mean by renewal. Over the past two decades within the evangelical world a lively, highly audible critique has emerged of theological education as traditionally conducted, and a whole agenda of renewal propositions has been forcefully aired. Since among those involved the preferred terminology varies, let us agree to use the word 'renewal' only provisionally, leaving open the question whether another term might not serve better.

In large measure the lively critique to which I have just referred has arisen from within the new movement for theological education by extension, and has been directed against the defects of traditional residential systems. Yet in more recent years this too easy distinction in assigning praise and blame has perceptibly blurred. On the one hand TEE, with time and experience, has discovered vexing problems inherent in its own systems. And on the other hand large portions of the TEE-generated approach to theological education have been fruitfully adapted for residential programmes. It is my own impression that right now the larger portion of the renewal agenda has already attained acceptance among a fairly broad sweep of p. 242 theological educators throughout the evangelical world. I wonder if those who have been most energetic in pressing the renewalist cause have yet recognized this achievement. There is something new here, an opportunity waiting to be grasped and built upon. Let me indeed urge upon you the notion that, with regard to the renewal agenda, between open-minded traditionalists and level-headed radicalists there is now far more common ground than is realized. Rather than continuing to pursue the older patterns of aggressive confrontation, it is time to capitalize

on this newly emerging consensus constructively. And here is where accreditation fits in; for our accreditation movements already stand at the juncture point of this new development. Here, perhaps, still largely unrecognized, the open-minded among traditionalists and the level-headed among radicalists have already joined hands, and seized accreditation as an exceptional instrument for effectively implementing the renewal agenda.

And none too soon it has been. Perhaps the gravest defect of the renewalist cause has been its general failure to communicate with the grass roots levels of already existing systems of theological education around the world, in a manner productive of change. So taken up in its own programmes of consultations and workshops, of publishing and research, it has not everywhere perceived this failing, taking its promotional activity for substantive achievement. In short, the renewalist has thought well but devised poorly, fashioning no broadly effective mode for pragmatic implementation.

As we all know, one does not move people merely by convincing them of their faults. Positive change begins to take place only where there is an effective combination of incentives to change. And accreditation is nothing if it is not just such a combination. To put it crassly, and far too simplistically, accreditation peddles recognition in exchange for the achievement of quality. It does not always require as demanded, nor deliver as promised. It is a finite operation, fallible in its judgment and ragged in its application. But all the same accreditation represents a classic example of the carrot-stick incentive mechanism. And it does work. It speaks a language understood at the grass roots and trades in commodities recognized and welcomed there. It does not settle for mere assertion, but goes on to stimulate, prod, encourage, and entice. And change, genuine change, has in fact begun to appear.

That is why accreditation has been seized upon by open-minded traditionalists and level-headed radicalists, operating in concert, as a singularly practical catalyst for achieving the renewal agenda. New times are upon us and new opportunities.

B. The Renewal Agenda

I have referred repeatedly to the renewal agenda. What then is this agenda? Everyone would answer differently, according to particular convictions and experiences. Let me offer a brief sampling of what I take to be that segment of the agenda which has achieved broad consensus among evangelical theological educators internationally.

1. *Contextualization*. The renewal p. 243 agenda is concerned that theological educational curricula be designed with deliberate reference to the cultural context in which the student will serve, rather than be imported from overseas or arrived at in an ad hoc manner.
2. *Outcomes measurement*. The renewal agenda is concerned that theological programmes continuously review the performance and attainments of their graduates, in relation to the stated objectives of the programme, and modify the programme in that light, so that actual outcome may more closely fit stated intention.
3. *Ministerial styles*. The renewal agenda is concerned that through the theological programme students should be moulded to styles of leadership appropriate to their biblical role within the body of Christ, becoming not elite professionals but equipped servants.
4. *Integrated progamme*. The renewal agenda is concerned that theological programmes combine spiritual, behavioural, practical, and academic objectives

into one holistic integrated approach, rather than focusing narrowly on cognitive and academic attainments alone.

5. *Field learning*. The renewal agenda is concerned that students be provided with guided practical field experience in precisely the skills which they will need to employ in their work after completion of the course, rather than being introduced to these skills only within a classroom setting.
6. *Spiritual formation*. The renewal agenda is concerned that theological programmes deliberately seek spiritual formation, rather than leave this to evolve privately and haphazardly.
7. *Churchward-orientation*. The renewal agenda is concerned that theological programmes orient themselves not in terms of some personal or traditional notion of what should be done, but pervasively in terms of the needs of the Christian communities being served.

This list could go on; the area of consensus is more extensive than this. But if even this abbreviated version of the renewal agenda were implemented in current theological education, so far are we generally from these patterns that their achievement would look like a full scale revolution among us, and we would all be the richer and more effective for it.

C. Reactions

When one speaks of a wedding of such an agenda to our newly emerging accreditation movements, reactions arise from two different camps. On the one hand, the traditionalist says that these things may or may not be good, but that they are not part of accreditation. To wed the renewal movement to the accreditation movement is to mix alien operations. And accreditation must not allow itself to be taken over or diverted by every prophetic cause out to change the world. We are not in the business of revolutions.

On the other hand, the radicalist asserts that accreditation merely reinforces and encourages the bankrupt p. 244 patterns of the past, which continue to do so much damage to the cause of Christ and his church. The eagerness for recognition too easily passes into a perverting lust, and accreditation by catering to such tastes contributes directly to this perversion. Instead of recognition, we should be focusing on excellence. And instead of defining excellence in terms of books in libraries and credentials in hand, of buildings constructed and credit hours earned, we should focus on ministerial styles and spiritual formation, on outcomes measurement and contextualization.

There is important truth in what both these camps assert, which we do well to heed. And at the same time, I make bold to suggest that, over against these reactions, accreditationalists have something important to say too, which our friends in these camps would do well in turn to heed.

To the traditionalist, we wish to say that the issues of the renewal agenda are not in fact alien to the inner concerns of accreditation. Every one of the renewal issues is focused precisely on the question of quality in evangelical theological education. Accreditation concerns are *not* being commandeered; they are being properly extended and deepened. The agenda for renewal represents a substantive contribution to the central focus of accreditation on quality.

At the same time, we need to heed the traditionalist concern that we keep our bearings in the midst of heady new causes. The renewal agenda does not cover everything there is to cover in the area of quality, nor does it cover the most primal. I say that with emphasis and care. To put it simply, what does not exist cannot be renewed. However important nutrition may be, the first thing a starving man needs is not a tract on nutrition. In other

words, sheer existence and survival is the primary level of achievement in any quest for quality. I do not believe our professional theorists in theological education have any adequate notion of just how subsistent the lives of most grass roots theological schools and programmes are. If there are no yams to be had for the student dining room, if there is no petrol to be had for the TEE motorbike, it is meaningless to talk of outcomes measurement and integrated education. We must not let ourselves be misled by those schools which, praise God, have risen well beyond the subsistence level in theological education, the Yavatmals and Ogbomoshos, JTS of Jamaica or CGST of Hong Kong, a Scott in Kenya or a Vaux in France. These are *not* the norm. Anyone closely familiar with the broad sweep of Bible schools and theological colleges throughout the evangelical Third World knows that the large majority are daily preoccupied with, and often overwhelmed by, the mere struggle for survival, for achieving the merest minimals of normal operation. Most of these schools recognize very much that they are not where they ought to be, even in the most basic features of a viable programme of theological education, and they welcome guidance and help. Accreditation is designed to respond first and foremost to this level of need, to help them in what we might call the p. 245 survival level of the quest for quality. If we fail here we fail miserably, and we must heed the traditionalist call not to be mesmerized by vaulting dreams of what could be, while failing to aid in what is.

To the radicalist, we wish most firmly to suggest a second and a more responsible look. The newly emerging accreditation movements are not inherently inimical to the renewalist cause. Indeed they have already materially embraced and furthered the renewalist cause, and represent not only a potential ally, but an urgently needed one. In so far as the theoreticians of renewal have lacked a pragmatic strategy of implementation, accreditation represents one of the best opportunities currently available for bringing the renewal agenda into transforming contact with the grass roots of evangelical theological education.

So far the radicalist reaction has rarely gotten beyond rejection, and (I choose my words carefully) a blind rejection, of the new accreditation movements. A new enemy has been spotted in the woods. No fresh reconnoitering has been deemed necessary. It is time rather to blast away with the old standard ammunition at the old standard spots. Indeed an attack of this sort has already developed among missiologists in the evangelical First World. It has so far only partially reached print, but its outlines have become evident in papers being read at consultations, and lectures being given in leading educational centres, with full-scale public visibility only a matter of time.

And one must say, seriously and with sadness, that so far for the most part the reaction has been culpably ill-informed and unconstructive. Anyone engaged in the accreditation movements would be taken very much aback at the inexcusable caricatures being purveyed. I do not know what advantage is being gained by anyone. And since in the cases I have in mind, which can be readily documented, it is transparent that even minimal homework on our movements has not been done, one despairs of finding a route for positive communication, much less constructive collaboration. Perhaps in our accreditation movements we have moved too far too fast for these folk to keep pace. Perhaps the notion that we could enter into fruitful dialogue and even common cause is too radical. Perhaps we must be patient and wait while an orthodox radicalism of the 1970s reinforms and reorients itself with regard to the new times and new opportunities of the 1980s.

Nevertheless, we need to heed the radicalist concerns. Their alarm at undisciplined quests for recognition should be embraced. Even within the most respected citadels of evangelical soundness the temptation lurks to pursue recognition in careless disregard of biblically-determined quality. Yet few among us have spoken out on this pressing danger.

We need also to heed the radicalist concern that focusing only on traditional norms of quality is subversive of genuinely effective theological education. If it is true that a starving man does not initially need a tract on nutrition, it is also urgently true to say that once this man is on his feet he ignores the aid of the nutritionist at peril of a recurring pattern of starvation. The p. 246 renewal agenda is not merely for those who have a taste for it or who can afford to dabble in it. If nutrition is not the front line of an attack on famine, it is the necessary follow-up if a cyclical recurrence is to be prevented. Once the yarns have been bought and the petrol found, once the audits have been scheduled and the library books acquired, once the programmed texts have been duplicated and the leaking roof repaired, if the incentive is not there to go on to questions of renewal, then schools and programmes will become too quickly trapped in an endless fixation on these operational details, and the true and weightier goals of their programme will never be achieved. If renewal is not implemented within our programmes of theological education, with or without the help of our radicalist brothers, we have failed in our central commitments to quality.

In summary then, to traditionalists we say that accreditation *should* be a catalyst for renewal in evangelical theological education world-wide. And to the radicalists we say that it *can* be effectively so.

III. CONCLUSION

And in conclusion what can we say to the accreditationalists, to ourselves? We must say that a statement of capability is one thing, and that performance is another. It is easy enough to say that we endorse the common ground of the renewal agenda as part of our mandate. It is easy enough to say that accreditation is a viable mode for implementing this agenda at the grass roots level. Both of these statements I believe to be true. But can we then go on to assert that indeed our newly emerging accreditation movements in international evangelical theological education are catalysts for renewal? It is a sobering question.

Perhaps the most appropriate answer would be that we have sincerely tried, but that we could certainly do more and better, and that we recognize a pressing responsibility to do so. There is work to be done. Let me make several suggestions in conclusion, intended merely to stimulate thought on what could be done.

1. Capitalizing on what I have suggested is a large measure of consensus on the already significant examples in our midst of positive innovation and renewal in evangelical theological education, by producing and promoting a series of simple pamphlets highlighting achievements such as the pioneering ThD programme at ATS in Manila, or the pace-setting incorporation of TEE principles into residential patterns at BEST in Bangui, to name only two.
2. Let us take practical steps to focus wide attention on the already significant examples in our midst of positive innovation and renewal in evangelical theological education, by producing and promoting a series of simple pamphlets highlighting achievements such as the pioneering ThD programme at ATS in Manila, or the pace-setting incorporation of TEE principles into residential patterns at BEST in Bangui, to name only two. p. 247
3. Let us inaugurate a special commission mandated to evaluate our own accreditation movements for their degree of involvement and effectiveness in promoting renewal, and then let us humbly and voluntarily submit our various movements to such external assessment, for our own greater good.

4. Drawing on all the expertise available, let us initiate a special joint international research project, to study in depth the more complex and difficult aspects of the renewalist agenda, where assertion of need has proven easier than actual implementation—such as the call for an emphasis in accreditation on spiritual formation. How do you write an effective standard for such a focus, and how do you undertake to measure its attainment?
5. As we all too well know, and perhaps too well represent, most people are given leadership roles in theological education not because of any particular training in the field of education, but because of some academic attainment in the field of theology. As a result most of us are not adequately equipped for this vocation in which we are called to bear responsibility. Let us therefore fashion a series of special seminars, designed for the top levels of international leadership in evangelical theological education, to bring such leadership effectively into appealing contact with the renewal agenda, with its rationale and with its practical implications. Let us design for ourselves and our fellow leaders a first-class learning experience of this sort, tapping the best expertise available, and then let us lead the way in humbly and cooperatively exposing ourselves to this experience.

Let us open ourselves and our newly emerging accreditation movements to renewal, so that we may in turn become effective mediums for an urgently needed renewal in evangelical theological education worldwide, for the sake of our Lord and the establishment and edification of his church.

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The Future of Theological Education

Robert W. Ferris

The topic of this article lends itself to development in either of two ways. One could undertake an exercise in futuristics, spinning out various scenarios and their implication for theological education. Such an approach can be extremely helpful, and others have developed it thoroughly (Hoke: 1978). The alternative strategy would be to focus on theological education—its task, process, structures and controlling values—and derive from these a sense of direction for the period immediately before us.

Sometimes insight springs from unanticipated contexts. In a technical discussion of brain function, neuropsychologist Karl Pribram touches on processes related to linguistic and cultural understanding.

> To man's view of himself the biologist's position has at least this much to offer. The mystery of man is biological and shared with other complex organizations which are never comprehended in their totality but only in [sic] piecemeal. Man's brain is so constructed that piece by piece he apprehends the whole through the operations of coding and recoding. Languages, verbal (linguistic) and nonverbal (cultural), are constituted of these