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EDITOR: BRUCE J. NICHOLLS



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An Integrated Approach to Theological Education

Wilson W. Chow

INTRODUCTION

When the proposal was first made in 1974 for the development of an accreditation scheme for evangelical theological schools in Asia, Bruce Nicholls outlined as one of the general objectives for such accreditation:

To develop new patterns of theological training that will effectively prepare students for Christian ministries or church vocations. These will involve new insights in the integration of the academic, spiritual, and practical in theological training, new and relevant curricula, new pedagogical methods, and experimentation in decentralized and in continuing education.¹

The movement towards accreditation in Asia has arisen therefore from a concern with quality in theological education, a quality focused in part in terms of a holistic integrated approach to ministerial training, in terms of a concern not only with the academic but also with the spiritual and practical aspects of leadership formation. In that same year the Asia Theological Association (ATA) held its third theological consultation, during which two papers were read which dealt with the same issue, namely integration in theological training. To be sure, this question had already gained wide attention and had been discussed at length by those involved in theological education, both in the East and in the West, within both evangelical and ecumenical circles. There had been much talk about 'renewal in theological education' or 'excellence in theological education'. All these seem to reflect a dissatisfaction with the *status quo* of theological education, and a quest for improvement. Therefore, as the newly formed global alliance of evangelical accrediting services takes its bearings for its future direction, it is important and appropriate that we should focus our attention on the matter of excellence in theological education, and specifically on the excellence born of an integrated approach to theological education. p. 221 Such goals of theological education, and their implementation, should form important criteria for accreditation.

INTEGRATION IN THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

Preliminary remarks

Theological education should aim at training students to become servants of the Lord in his church and equipping them to serve effectively in the church. As it involves both 'being' and 'doing' aspects, theological training should be people-centered and task-oriented. Excellence in theological training should be measured in terms of the servanthood quality which the student possesses and the effectiveness of the ministry which he performs.

¹ Bruce Nicholls, 'Proposals for the Accreditation of Theological Schools' *Voice of the Church in Asia* (Asia Theological Association, 1975), 101.

Theological education needs also to be biblical and contextualized. The ‘givenness’ in Scripture is normative, affecting decisively both the content and the guiding principles of theological training. But the methods, choice of priorities, and emphases should be contextualized in order to meet the needs and be relevant to a particular situation. The latter calls for innovation in theological education. In order to be culturally relevant, a theological seminary should design its own programmes of training that aim at achieving the goal of integration. In this manner the seminary asserts independence from existing or even dominating patterns of training, while at the same time maintaining a dependence on the Bible and recognizing an interdependence with other programmes internationally.

Seminaries should be different from schools of religious studies patterned after the university model, or even from professional training schools. There must be a functional integration between learning by precepts and learning by experience, between being and doing. The students are trained to be like Christ, to know the Word of God, and to do the work of the ministry. Thus an integrated approach to theological education involves an attempt to achieve these objectives—the ‘be’ goals, the ‘know’ goals, and the ‘do’ goals.

Essential concepts in integration

Such an integrated approach to theological education has its basis in the biblical doctrine of the ‘whole man’. The whole person needs to be trained and developed. As man is body and soul, we should avoid unnecessary compartmentalization. Integration, furthermore, is not an attempt to maintain a balance between the academic, the spiritual, and the practical, as though things were done one at a time. Integration means bringing these aspects together into a whole, and doing them at the same time. Integration also involves totality. In integration no one aspect negates the other, as though the presence of one would imply the absence of the other. It should be mutually permeating. We affirm that theological education *is* academic, *is* spiritual, and *is* practical. Each aspect necessarily presupposes, implies, or contains the others.

The importance of character formation

Theological education must aim at spiritual maturity, which cannot be [p. 222](#) in the abstract but must find expression in concrete forms that are observable and communicable. This is the *being* aspect in theological education. A survey by the Association of Theological Schools (ATS) in North America provides a very interesting and significant indicator for excellence in theological training.² The most significant characteristics or criteria that people across denominational lines were looking for in their ministers were in the following order of preference:

- (1) Service without regard for acclaim. This means the congregation expected their minister, a seminary graduate, to be an individual who is able to accept personal limitations and is able to serve without concern for public recognition.
- (2) Personal integrity. The minister should be able to honour commitments by carrying out promises despite all pressures to compromise.
- (3) Christian example. The minister should be one whose personal belief in the gospel manifests itself in generosity, and in general in a Christian example that people in the community can respect.
- (4) Pastoral skills. People want a minister who shows competence and responsibility by completing tasks and by being able to handle differences of opinion, and who senses the need to continue to grow in pastoral skills.

² D. S. Schuller, et al., eds., *Readiness for Ministry. Vol. I—Criteria* (Vandalia, OH: ATS, 1975), 6–8.

- (5) Leadership. The minister must be able to build a strong sense of community within a congregation, taking time to know the people in his church and developing a sense of trust and confidence between the congregation and himself.

It is obvious that the majority of the criteria deal with the minister's personal commitment and faith. They centre in the minister as *person*. To the Christian public what sort of person their minister is seems to be the most important issue and the deciding factor. Ministerial roles, such as the minister being a perspective counsellor, a theologian, and a thinker, come after the character qualities. On the other hand, the criteria that drew the most severe judgment from both the clergy and the laity did not deal with a lack of any particular skill but rather focused on certain negative aspects of the minister as a person. These included a self-serving ministry, a sense of superiority, immaturity, insecurity, and insensitivity.

Although public opinion may not always be true and accurate, nevertheless here it represents an expectation from the people whom the minister is called to serve. Such an expectation is actually paralleled by the demands of Scripture. These are the biblical qualifications for church officers. So character formation must be a vital and concrete objective in theological education.

NEW MODELS FOR INTEGRATED THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

Proposal for a 'New Seminary'

Positive suggestions as well as attempts have been made to achieve [p. 223](#) the goal of integration. The most noteworthy effort comes in the form of questioning the present dominating model of theological training—residential seminaries and theological schools. These establishments are taken to represent formal theological education that has been institutionalized and academicised, and it is widely felt that this academic setting brings a deadening effect on that spiritual maturity which is vital to ministerial training and vital to the ministry. So, unless there is a radical change, an abandonment of the residential seminary as a model of theological learning, there is little hope of providing sufficient spiritual training to students to equip them to be ready upon graduation to meet the challenges and requirements of the ministry.

John Frame has written a very thought-provoking paper entitled 'Proposal for a New Seminary'. He first mentions several models of theological education, including the 'street seminaries' of Chile, Schaeffer's 'Farel House' in Switzerland, the 'Coral Ridge' system of training in evangelism, the Jesus People communes, even the oldest traditional approach of all—live-in theological education in the pastor's home. Then he makes these bold assertions, 'I propose first that we dump the academic model once and for all—degrees, accreditation, tenure, the works ... The academic machinery is simply incapable of measuring the things that really matter—a man's obedience to God's word, his perseverance in prayer, his self control, his ability to rule without pride, the spiritual power of his preaching in the conversion of men and the edification of the church.'³ In short, Frame thinks that the 'crucial things' to be measured in a man's preparation for the ministry are the traits of a godly character, and these qualities find little room for development in a seminary setup, where emphasis for the student is on writing good papers and passing exams, and for the administration is on recruiting PhDs for the faculty and maintaining respectable degree programmes.

³ John Frame, *Proposals for a New Seminary*.

Frame proposes to establish a kind of 'Christian community' as a place of training, where teachers, students (ministerial candidates), and their families live together. The students begin with menial work around the buildings and grounds, then study formal theological subjects, and participate actively in the work of the local churches. They are under close supervision by the teachers and older students who meet from time to time to evaluate the student's progress in life, skills and knowledge. The student will 'graduate' only when the teachers are fully convinced that he has the character, skills, and knowledge which the Scriptures require of church officers.

John Frame's proposal represents the thinking of many who question the effectiveness of the seminary and the traditional pattern for theological training. The model becomes a focus for concern and a starting point in the pursuit of renewal. p. 224

Proposal for a 'Spiritual Community'

Jonathan Chao is thinking along similar lines when he writes that 'no authentic integration can be brought about by mere programme design, however perfect that might be. It can only be done, I venture to say, by conscientious identification with the life and ministry of Christ and by experiencing the efficacy of that identification spiritually within a community of believers (functioning as the body of Christ) who are committed to the practice of radical discipleship in the manner prescribed by Jesus Himself and the Apostles.'⁴ To Chao, the goal of ministerial training is shepherd formation, whereby one is trained to be like Christ, to think like Christ, and to serve like Christ. He concludes that 'this is a work which no institutional school of higher theological learning can do.'⁵ Rather, he feels that such a spiritual personality formation must take place within a living environment. This means that only when the seminary transforms itself into a living spiritual community, and practises true discipleship, can it bring about the desired spiritual formation, which is a 'work of the Holy Spirit'.

The admirable works of John Frame and Jonathan Chao already provide much meat for thought. No one can carry on discussions of the issues of theological education without first giving serious consideration to their analysis and suggestions. They see something basically wrong with the present system, the seminary establishment, and they are convinced that unless the present model is replaced by a community set-up, it is difficult to bring about any breakthrough.

IMPLEMENTING INTEGRATED THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION WITHIN THE TRADITIONAL SEMINARY MODEL

The discussion so far points to a new and rather radical approach to integration in theological education. It involves a new model of training in places of the traditional seminary model. The degree of its success is difficult to determine now. However, I do not think that models alone hold the key to the issue. Neither am I convinced that a particular model can claim to provide the needed environment or framework for integration to take place.

Given any model of theological training, we are aware of its shortcomings and weaknesses (which we try to reduce or avoid), as well as its strengths and advantages (of which we try to make full use). The following are a few suggestions for implementing

⁴ Jonathan Chao, 'Crucial Issues in Leadership Training: A Chinese Perspective' *Mission Focus* (May, 1977), G.

⁵ *Idem.*, M.

integrated theological education within the context of existing residential theological schools.

Structure

1. Administration. As the concern is for integration of academic, spiritual, and practical aspects of training, there should be a corresponding integrated administrative structure that implements and supervises the training programmes of the school. There is a tendency for different **p. 225** departments or offices within a school to develop and plan their own programmes without overall coordination. Or the academic dean is usually the one who heads up the training programmes, thus making the academic aspect appear to be the most important thing, while the Dean of Students stands on the sideline playing a secondary role. If we are determined to provide a holistic training, we must put equal administrative emphasis on the three aspects.

2. Teaching staff. Wholeness and integration ought to be demonstrated by the faculty. This relates to the example of the faculty members *individually*, as well as the witness of the faculty as a *team*. Very often the presence of faculty members each with his own specialized field of study only results in polarization. But the students want to learn from their teachers by way of hearing and seeing.

Communal Life

A residential school with a live-in situation provides a framework for communal life, and an integrated programme should include communal activities. These are not 'extracurricular' and optional but form a part of the training process. Spiritual formation is more than personal cultivation of piety; it involves participation in the body life of the seminary as a community. All such activities should be planned and coordinated by a director of student life.

1. Advisory system. Both faculty and students need to grow in Christ, and are responsible for the development of spirituality in the school. A group of five to eight students should be assigned to each faculty member, who will supervise their spiritual, academic, and practical progress. The group should meet regularly as scheduled, and the faculty member should also meet the students individually. They should seek 'transparency' with one another.

2. Chapel. The chapel time should not be limited to worship or preaching. It can be a very useful meeting to build a bridge between faculty and students, or to link the seminary to the outside world and the church at large. Mutual sharing of experiences, feelings, viewpoints, and areas of concern during chapel times proves a great blessing both to faculty and to students in my school. The otherwise routine daily gatherings, if thoughtfully arranged ahead of time, can become refreshing and edifying moments. They promote fellowship among members in the school.

3. Activities. Communal activities outside the classroom should be a deliberate part of the programme. These include outings, retreats, days of prayer, spiritual exercises week, and communal meals. Such occasions are necessary to create a solidarity among faculty and students.

4. Evaluation. At the end of each quarter or school year the student should complete a self-evaluation questionnaire with regard to his total integrated development, and the faculty/advisor should also make a similar evaluation of the students under his care.

Academic study

Godly character is necessary, but for a minister it is not sufficient. He needs to be trained in the Word of [p. 226](#) God. The academic curriculum is part of the programme, not the whole. But the 'knowing' aspect should not be minimized or treated as secondary. The students must be trained to know the 'what', the 'how', and the 'why'. Instruction and teaching should be carried out in such a way that the students will (a) be able to know the content of the subject, (b) be able to do independent study or research that leads to further knowledge, and (c) be able to communicate to others what he knows. In other words, it must not be a content-oriented teaching/learning experience, but the development of a spirit of investigation that becomes part of the student's life. Here Christian education does not merely form courses in the curriculum, but provides principles that run through the whole fabric of theological education.

1. Curriculum. In the integration of the curriculum, contextualization takes on a significant role. The curriculum must be biblically centred, and at the same time interrelated and relevant to the needs of the situation. While we maintain a basic core of biblical and theological courses, we should exercise choice of priorities in various areas to make our theological training culturally or contextually relevant. We cannot simply adopt the traditional curriculum of the West, or merely add more courses to it, making the curriculum an almost unbelievable burden. We must rather come up with a new design that is based on research and experimentation. We have to admit that we still have a long way to go. But it is worth the effort.

2. Courses. The individual courses in the curriculum must also be internally integrated, by way of content organization and teaching method. *How* a course is taught is as important as *what* is taught. Not only practical courses but courses in biblical studies can be conducted in a more relevant manner. For example, a course on apologetics taught in Asia should speak to the issues raised by eastern religions such as Buddhism, Confucianism, or (in some areas) by Islam and communism, instead of dealing with traditional problems in the area of philosophy as encountered in the West. Study in church history should be related to contemporary issues, e.g. how should the Christian community treat those believers who in the days of persecution have denied Christ and now seek to be included in fellowship. Efforts on the part of the faculty to improve the quality of a course in terms of content, teaching method, and assignments will help student realize that they are not pursuing mere 'head knowledge'.

Field Work

Field work or practical work should also form part of the student's learning experience, and not merely provide cheap labour to local churches during the weekend.

The director of field education should have a programme for the student's practical work, progressing from the easy to the difficult, under close supervision. Practical work should be made a part of the curriculum, and even be given academic credits, so that a student cannot graduate from the seminary without having satisfactorily complete the requirements in field work. [p. 227](#)

One of the problems that the seminary faces is being out of touch with the churches. Field education is a good means whereby pastors in churches participate in the training of students through their supervision on the field. This needs understanding and support on the part of the pastors, and the director of field education shoulders this important responsibility of standing between the seminary and churches, for the practical work of the students as well as for their placement after graduation.

CONCLUSION

Integrated theological education can be applied to the traditional model of theological training—the residential seminary. But it requires a faculty committed to this task, with an integrated structure to carry it out. It needs an integrated programmatic approach that covers the academic, spiritual, and practical formation of leadership in one whole. The development of such integrated wholeness in theological education is a major step on the road to excellence. And accreditation, properly designed and applied, is one of the best practical means for promoting such integrated theological education. Here then is a worthy task for the new global alliance of accreditation services: to see that the developing accreditation services are indeed pragmatically structured by such a vision of excellence in theological education.

Dr. Wilson Chow, of Hong Kong has been involved in theological education for many years. At the time of writing this document he was the Chairman of the Asia Theological Association. Presently he is the President of the China Graduate School of Theology. p. 228

The Role of Spiritual Development in Theological Education

Bruce J. Nicholls

I. 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 careful to understand spirituality in a way that does justice to the totality of scriptural 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.

A. The Goals of Theological Education

The goals of theological education must focus on the kind of people we expect the students to become. 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 described 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 fullness 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.