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Accreditation and Excellence

Emilio A. Núñez, C.

INTRODUCTION

This paper is practical rather than theoretical. It is to a large extent the product of personal observation and experience in the field of theological education in Latin America for the last forty-three years. It is also an expression of hope for better times to come in the ministry of training servant-leaders in close fellowship and cooperation with the church and for the church in Latin America, to the glory of God.

We are not called by the Lord to mediocrity in our lives and ministry, but to strive for excellence. The New Testament is clear in regard to the character, conduct, and Christian service of those who have a position of leadership in the Church: excellence is the goal established for them by the Lord. The servant-leader has to be blameless and effective in his life and ministry ([1 Cor. 4](#); [2 Cor. 4](#); [2 Tim. 3](#); [1 Pet. 5:1–5](#)).

Theological education has therefore to be a pursuit of excellence. Accreditation can help in the effort to achieve such a goal.

CONTEXTUALIZATION

Theological education does not take place in a social vacuum. Consequently, excellence has to be related to cultural and social context.

In Latin America our theological education has been, generally speaking, an imported product. The underdevelopment in many of our countries is economic, social, political, *and* theological. We have depended on foreign sources and resources for our theological education programmes. In the past, there was a conscious or unconscious effort to reproduce in Latin America that which typified North American theological education. Theology was merely a translation of the original English. Most of the teachers were Anglo-Saxons. Money came from the North, and the methodology used came from there too.

The phenomenon of dependence is closely related to the lack of contextualization. Contextualization is the attempt to let the biblical text speak in a relevant manner to the needs of people within their own [p. 269](#) culture. It is the interaction between the Text and our cultural context, without distorting the words of Scripture and without reducing its authority.

In Latin America the number of training programmes in Bible and pastoral studies is increasing, but the multiplication of these programmes does not necessarily mean improvement in theological education. In some cases all we have is multiplication of duplication, and foreign dependence is still evident. One of the questions to be asked for accreditation purposes should be: to what extent is a particular training programme progressing toward contextualization? Theological education has to be contextualized, but the accrediting agency has to contextualize itself as well. It has been said that to apply without any adaptation Western standards of accreditation would mean the perpetuation of colonial patterns. If accreditation is based on the academic entrance requirements, the academic degrees of the faculty, the ratio of faculty to students, the curriculum structure, the teaching methods, the number of books in the library, and campus development, among other things, very few theological schools in Latin America would qualify for accreditation. (On the other hand, we should not minimize the importance of Western accrediting standards if we want to relate ourselves to the international theological community.)

It is not an easy task to establish accreditation standards for theological education in the Spanish speaking world. There is a variety of training programmes at different academic levels, but precisely because of this complex situation, we urgently need some standards of accreditation if we are really looking for excellence in our educational efforts.

Our emphasis on contextualizing training programmes is in need of clarification. Missionary paternalism and colonialism belong to the past, but a negative and anti-biblical nationalism would deprive us of the benefits of interacting with other cultures at the international level. We need to relate ourselves in one way or another to the worldwide evangelical community. There is no room for provincialism in a world which is becoming smaller as a result of modern means of communication. There is no room for cultural arrogance in the presence of a church which is growing faster in the Third World than in countries that have traditionally been leaders in the missionary movement.

Above all, the New Testament teaching in the Body of Christ is a powerful incentive for fellowship and cooperation at the national and international level. All of us are in need of the encouragement and advice which comes from our brothers and sisters who belong to other cultures. The church universal has much to teach us on theological education. We have to learn one from another in the spirit of humility and love.

THE PURPOSE OF THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

Our context of excellence has to take into consideration the main purpose of the different training **P.270** programmes. For example, there is a vast difference between a programme designed to exalt elitist values and a programme oriented to holistic leadership training in the service of the church. There is a vast difference between an educational programme that over-emphasizes immediate results in evangelism and church planting for numerical growth, and a programme dedicated to the holistic mission of the church.

We assume that theological education is not an end in itself. It is only one of the means available for accomplishing the missionary mandate given by the Lord to his disciples. In Latin America, as everywhere in the world, all the programmes of theological education claim to be at the service of the Kingdom of God; but in practice they differ one from another in several respects.

First there are training programmes that place a high premium upon *academic achievement*. The academic aspect of theological education does need to be emphasized in Latin America. In a consultation on new alternatives in theological education sponsored by the Latin American Theological Fraternity two years ago in Quito, Ecuador, the conclusion was reached that we also need a programme of higher theological education at the doctoral level to train those who will later train theologians for the church. Another conclusion was that theological education at all levels, the doctoral programme included, has to be closely related to the local church.

In the past, theological education was used to preserve traditions, to maintain the *status quo*. At the present time, higher theological education is being used in some places to serve the purposes of a leftist political ideology. Higher theological education is necessary to meet on biblical grounds the ideological and theological challenges of a society in the process of transformation. Sociology and politics are becoming prominent in the Latin American theological community. It is fashionable to affirm, for example, that theological education has to take sides with the poor in their struggle for liberation. It is also said that theology should be made by the poor. In this case, the poor would not be the *object* but the *subject* in the process of theological reflection. What is not usually explained is that the theology made by the poor would be in subjection to the political left.

It is misleading to say that higher education is not necessary for underdeveloped countries. Liberation theologies are captivating the minds of many Latin Americans who live in extreme poverty and social injustice. We need to train the theologians who will lead the church in the midst of very difficult times, but evangelical higher education has to be dedicated to the task of edifying the church and disciplining the nations. 'Ivory tower' theologians isolated from the church and its mission are not required. We need highly trained theologians who as a gift to the church are deeply committed to the Lord and his Kingdom.

A second group of schools have as their main purpose that of *training expositors of the Word of God*. This purpose is in keeping with our fundamental evangelical conviction that the Bible is God's written revelation, the **p. 271** highest rule of faith and practice for the believer in Christ. We certainly need more Bible scholars and Bible expositors in the Two-Thirds World. A training programme especially dedicated to teach the Word of God has to be evaluated on the basis of this purpose. However, we cannot avoid asking whether the study of the sacred text is made in isolation from the social context of the interpreter. Are the teachers and students doing biblical theology in response to our Latin American reality? Are the students trained to proclaim the Word of God in a relevant way to the Latin American people? To contextualize our message does not necessarily mean underestimating the theology we have inherited from almost two thousand years of

Christian reflection, but it is an indispensable part of our task to make the gospel relevant to the new generations. This is precisely what our predecessors did in their own times.

Third, in recent times, there has been a new emphasis on *numerical growth*. There is a biblical basis for this emphasis; but statistics should not take place of holistic growth. We need both quality and quantity. In theological education the most important element is not a large number of students, but the quality of the programme and the quality of the graduates. Excellence depends on quality.

For a holistic theological education, both the teachers and the students need to be convinced that the mission of the church is much more than leading people to make a public decision for Christ. It is to make disciples, namely, people deeply committed to the Lord Jesus Christ; people eager to follow him, to learn from him, to imitate him, to serve him, and if necessary to suffer and die for him.

For a holistic theological education, both the teachers and the students have to be concerned about personal and social needs. Men and women do not live in a social vacuum. They belong to a family; they are members of society. Excellence in theological education in Latin America cannot be achieved apart from a deep interest in the total needs of both the individual and society. If theological education is considered to be at the service of the holistic mission of the church, accreditation cannot overlook the social dimension in the purpose of any training programme.

An overemphasis on numerical growth may seriously affect our programmes of theological education. In order to educate the largest possible number of our brothers and sisters for effective Christian service, it is not necessary to downgrade our academic standards. Excellence must be the goal at all levels of the education process.

In addition, there is in Latin America a functional concept of theological education, which says that a training programme is excellent if the graduates are able to get immediate and sensational results in evangelism and church planting. Any consideration of academic achievement is of secondary importance. Generally speaking, this emphasis has been one of the distinctives of Latin America evangelism; we have been encouraged to do, not to think theologically. There seems to be in the evangelical mind a dichotomy p. 272 between doing theology and 'doing the Lord's work'. Some of the leaders of functionalism are so pragmatic that they would like to see our seminaries changed into schools of practical training for evangelism and church planting. At the same time, these leaders offer degrees in theology.

There is a need, of course, for more training in evangelism, Christian education, and pastoral studies and worthy efforts are being made to meet this need in Latin America today; but theological reflection is also indispensable for Christian service, both inside and outside the church.

Fourth, *conferring degrees for academic prestige* is becoming quite popular in Latin American theological education. It is expected that an academic degree will give respectability to the messenger of the gospel. Humanly speaking this idea is good. In Latin America, as in other parts of the world, we admire academic achievements; but it is possible to emphasize academic degrees to the extent of making theological education a cause for derision.

A degree of theology is supposed to be a testimony of serious requirements maintained by the institution or programme conferring such academic recognition. An academic degree is supposed to be a testimony of intellectual discipline and hard academic work on the part of the student. Short cuts should be avoided. Serious students, who really have a call from the Lord to get the best possible training for the ministry, will give more importance to the content and methodology of the training programme than to

the resulting degree, although they realize that a degree is a necessary credential for functioning in some areas of Christian service.

In Latin America we may already be in danger of conferring 'cheap degrees', under the pretext that the country in which we are working is underdeveloped; or we may take contextualization as an excuse for our lack of seriousness in theological education. But the academic standards established in other latitudes to confer degrees in theology should not be overlooked if we want our graduates to be respected by the worldwide evangelical community, especially if we believe that they deserve academic credit in theological institutions abroad.

Contextualized accreditation may help Latin America to avoid the problem of 'cheap degrees'. We are thankful to the Lord for theological schools in Latin America which are seriously working at the graduate and post-graduate levels. The problem is with people who desire to possess a degree in theology at the lowest possible cost.

Finally, there are schools that hope to achieve a balance in their training programme *by emphasizing both academic achievement and practice*. Their main purpose is to provide a basic training in Bible, theology and pastoral studies. They hope that their graduates will use their seminary education in their particular ministry. The ideal of making a basic educational contribution to meet different needs in the church has prevailed in many of our traditional programmes of theological education. Strong emphasis has been given to helping the students [p. 273](#) grow spiritually. Academic achievement, as well as the use of their own skills in Christian service, is expected from them. The educators want the students to be informed, formed, and transformed in the educational process.

Theological education has to be diversified because there is in the Body of Christ a diversity of gifts, a diversity of vocations, a diversity of ministries inside and outside the church. For instance, the new national missionary movement in Latin America creates the need of specialized training for the young people who are unwilling to cross cultural barriers to reach the unreached with the gospel of Christ.

THE METHOD OF THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

One of the most important questions in theological education is that of the *methods employed*. There is a place for a variety of methods, especially if theological education is diversified to meet different needs inside and outside the church. In secular education in Latin America a methodological revolution was started by the Brazilian educator Pablo Freire, and his influence is also felt in theological education. His book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is well known by both Catholic and Protestant educators all over Latin America and abroad. His ideas permeated the document on education resulting from the Second Episcopal Conference held in Medellin, Columbia, in 1968. Freire's fame comes especially from his literacy method. He is able to teach adults to read in a few weeks, but he is also inclined toward the political left. His literacy method is a means to awaken the political conscience of proletarians and peasants on behalf of revolution. This is one of the reasons for his popularity among people who are enthusiastic about changing our social structures.

Freire repudiates what he calls 'banking education', by which the teacher reduces his role to deposit digested knowledge into the mind of the student. In 'banking education' the teacher has the monopoly of knowledge. He is above the student in a vertical relationship with him. Freire proposes a horizontal relationship with the student in a 'dialogical' and liberating education. The *magister dixit* principle is set aside. The teacher is not above the student, but at the same level with him, engaged in a meaningful dialogue. The teacher is not necessarily communicating truth, but discovering it in the teaching and

learning process with the purpose of liberating the student intellectually, socially and politically.

Whether we like it or not, Freire has made a disturbing impact on the methodology of education, with his belief that anthropology is the place to start theological reflection and the education process. Roman Catholic educators, for example, have not been immune to his ideas. We may detect his influence in the new emphasis on 'theology by the people'. According to this emphasis, theology is not to be made by bourgeois theologians *for* the people; the people *themselves* have to be deeply involved in doing theology. Gustavo Gutierrez says that authentic liberation theology will be written by the poor when they have a voice to p. 274 express freely their own thoughts and feelings.

But there are also evangelical educators who in one way or another are under the influence of Pablo Freire. Some of us insist that we have already a body of doctrine to communicate faithfully. We have to teach what we have received from God's written revelation. We are not searching for spiritual and saving truth. We believe that the Lord Jesus Christ is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. We believe that according to the Lord Jesus Christ the Word of God is truth. We are supposed to invite our students, under the ministry of the Holy Spirit, to search for revealed truth in order to communicate it to others; and we do not want to play the game for a political ideology, whatever this ideology may be.

At the same time we have to admit that much of our traditional methodology in theological education has been pure indoctrination, 'banking education', feeding the minds of our students with predigested food; and in many cases we have not gone beyond the stage of indoctrination which is necessary in training servant-leaders for the church. However, as educators we have to lead our students to the stage of evaluating theology; they have to become mature enough to exercise a critical attitude in subjection to the Word of God, under the ministry of the Holy Spirit, to evaluate different systems of thought. Then we have to lead the most capable students to be creative, to do biblical theology in response to their own needs, and in response to the needs of their own people, inside and outside the church. Contextualization has to lead us to this stage in the educational process. Excellence has to depend also on our willingness to evaluate our own methods in a critical and creative response to the challenges of today.

THE OUTCOME OF THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

In the eyes of church and society, excellence depends also on the performance of the graduates in their respective field of ministry. Dr. Louis McKinney has said, "There seems to be general consensus that data on educational outcome provides the most convincing evidence of educational quality."¹ But performance is also related to spiritual gifts, natural talents, special vocation, and opportunities to serve. Training is, of course, exceedingly important; but it is not the only factor in a successful ministry.

The standards for excellence in ministerial performance are primarily in the Word of God. Excellence is much more than attracting multitudes to church on Sunday morning. Excellence is related also to the contribution made by the graduates to the holistic mission of the church. This means that not all of the graduates will serve as evangelists or pastors: some of them, or many of them, will be deeply involved in other ministries of the church.

¹ Lois McKinney, 'Serving the Church in Cultural Context: the Role of Academic Accreditation'. A paper presented at the World Evangelical Fellowship Consultation on Accreditation, 17 March 1980, London, England.

And so we have seen that excellence [p. 275](#) depends on several factors. These include the purpose of theological education; the contextualization of its contents and method; the performance of its graduates; and the contribution made by the training programme to the holistic mission of the church.

ACCREDITATION ENTITIES

‘Self accreditation’ is not enough. Someone else has to evaluate our work; we are accountable to God and to our fellow human beings. And so the accrediting agency comes into the picture. But there are other entities that may have a say on the quality of our educational efforts, and two of these are the church and the national government.

Accrediting churches

In this context, by ‘the church’ we mean the local church, the church as a denomination or ecclesiastical body, the church as the evangelical community at the local, national, regional, and worldwide level. In one way or another theological education is under the scrutiny of the church.

The testimony of the church is of the greatest importance because we claim to be at the service of God’s people in our ministry. When we are closely related to the local church, we constantly receive advice, encouragement, and even admonition from our brothers and sisters in Christ; but we need to remember that they have their own criteria for evaluating theological education. For instance, many evangelical churches in Latin America have *activism* as their main standard in determining the value of a particular training programme.

There are cases in which the most capable members in a local congregation are asking for renewal in theological education. Unfortunately, these members are in the minority in most local congregations and denominations.

The church may be either an incentive or an obstacle for renewal in theological education. How far we educators will limit ourselves to the patterns established by the church is a matter that has to be decided in a spirit of prayer, humility and love.

We are in need of the spiritual, moral, ministerial, and financial support of the churches. We cannot carry on our ministry in isolation from them. Yet at the same time we feel the responsibility of providing leadership to the evangelical community. In a sense, we are not supposed to go *behind* the churches, but *ahead* of them, helping them to interpret the signs of the times in the light of the Word of God, under the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Especially in times of crisis, the churches may look at the educators for a sense of direction in the midst of uncertainty and confusion.

It is true that we are training ‘followers’, because our students have to follow the Lord Jesus Christ, and they are supposed to be able to work with others in subjection to authority. All of us are in one way or another under authority. But we are called to train *leaders* as well, not just *followers*. We prefer to speak of servant-leaders, but the fact remains: they have to lead the way in their place of ministry, going ahead of, not behind their brothers and sisters [p. 276](#) in Christ. To train servant-leaders is a serious responsibility before the Lord, before the church, and before society in general.

Our task is to help our students be aware of personal, ecclesiastical and social needs in order that they may communicate the Word of God in a relevant way to both church and society. Our task is to educate the church in the process of educating ourselves and educating our students. Both the church and theological education are in need of renewal; but we must not wait for the renewal of the church to open our hearts to the work of the

Holy Spirit for our own renewal and the renewal of theological education. It is possible that the Lord wants to use *us* as instruments of renewal for *the church*.

Accrediting National Governments

We are rejoicing in Latin America that some theological schools now have the recognition of their respective national governments. This is the case, for example, with the Evangelical Seminary of Lima, Peru. Two of the universities of El Salvador in Central America are evangelical. There is a school of theology in the university of the Assemblies of God. There is also a school of theology in the Universidad Mariano Galvez in Guatemala City. Government accreditation is a great blessing, especially in countries where the vast majority of people profess to be Roman Catholic. We have to pray for the leadership of those schools which are officially accredited to confer degrees in theology. We have to pray that our colleagues may have the wisdom that they need to respond adequately to the expectations of church and society. However, we have to realize that recognition by the national government is not in itself a guarantee of excellence in theological education, whether from the standpoint of biblical standards or from the criteria of evangelical accrediting agencies. It simply underscores the need for an evangelical accrediting association in continental Latin America.

Accrediting Associations

In a paper written for the International Consultation on the Renewal of Theological Education, held in Malawi in 1981, Dr. Paul Bowers summarized the essential ingredients of accreditation: *quality, credibility* and *collaboration*.² We need these three ingredients everywhere in the world. As we declared at the beginning of this paper, the Lord has not called us to be mediocre in our lives and ministry, but to strive for excellence.

We have also suggested that we need recognition within the local and denominational church, within our social context, and within the international theological community. We need this recognition not to build up our own ego, nor just to enhance the professional reputation of our school or training programme; if we want recognition, we must be willing to evaluate ourselves in the light of accrediting standards. We will search for excellence to be more effective in our service to the holistic mission of the church. p. 277

Accreditation has been a means of promoting evangelical cooperation—that is undeniable. One of our greatest needs in Latin America is to express the unity we have already in Christ. There are at least two ways in which we may express this organic unity: namely, fellowship and cooperation. There is no room in the New Testament for churches isolated from other churches. In a variety of ways the apostle Paul motivated churches to have fellowship with one another and even to help those brethren in distant places who were in financial need. The Council of Jerusalem is a great example of fellowship and cooperation under the ministry of the Holy Spirit. In theological education we have much to receive from, and much to share with, our colleagues at home and abroad.

To train servant-leaders for the Church is a gigantic task. If our Lord does not come soon, we are training servant-leaders last years of the twentieth century and for the first decades of the new century. We cannot do it by ourselves. Our training programme cannot meet all the needs there are in theological education. And we can lose the ability to evaluate ourselves, if we try to do our job apart from other educators who are accumulating experience in their particular field of ministry. Rather than competition we

² Paul Bowers, 'Accreditation as a Catalyst for Renewal in Theological Education'. A paper prepared for the International Consultation on Renewal of Theological Education, Chongoni, Malawi, 1–4 September, 1981.

need collaboration in the pursuit of excellence. A case in point is the need to provide training in cross-cultural missions for the young Latin American people who have dedicated themselves to serve the Lord in another culture. Shall we establish two or three independently-functioning missionary training centres in Guatemala City (for example), or shall we combine our efforts to meet this need in a more effective way to the glory of God? It is not duplication we need, but collaboration, in the Lord's work. An accrediting association may help us achieve excellence, recognition, and cooperation for the benefit of theological education, to the glory of God.

In conclusion, we may talk about the renewal of the church and the renewal of theological education; but what about our own renewal as educators, as servants of God? The renewal must start in us. We need to be transformed by the renewal of our mind to be agents of renewal in theological education today.

It is possible to say that there is a renewal for practical sanctification, for a holy life in the presence of the Lord as a testimony to the church and the world; and there is a renewal specifically related to our own ministry. To be renewed in theological education may mean, in the first place, that experience by which our minds are opened by the Lord to a new perception of the biblical standards for the training of servant-leaders in the service of the church and a new perception of our ecclesiastical and social reality. This perception demands relevance and contextualization. When our minds are renewed by the Holy Spirit and his Word, we are able to re-evaluate courageously our educational programmes. Most of all, we are open to changes, even radical changes in what we are all doing for the Lord. To be renewed is in this case to acquire a new mentality, a new way of perceiving and confronting [p. 278](#) reality, to the glory of God and the furtherance of his gospel on earth.

It is obvious that renewal in our ministry has to be a never-ending process, as practical sanctification is also progressive. The opposite of renewal is stagnation, but how can we be stagnant if the Word of God is constantly exhorting us to be renewed in our minds ([Rom. 12:1-3](#))? How can we be stagnant in a world which is in the process of rapid and radical change? In theological education we need both renewal as a *transforming experience* in a given time and place, and renewal as a *never-ending process* in the pursuit of excellence. May the Lord help us to achieve our goals, to the glory of his name!

Dr. Emilio Núñez of Guatemala City, Guatemala is now formally retired although he does some part time teaching at SETECA the major theological institute in Guatemala City. He is regarded by many as the foremost theologian of Latin America. [p. 279](#)

Accreditation and Renewal

Ken R. Gnanakan

The Manifesto on the Renewal of Evangelical Theological Education has done well to admit that evangelical theological education today stands in need of a renewal—‘a renewal in form and in substance, a renewal in vision and power, a renewal in commitment and direction’. Just at the right time it reminds us that ‘there is now emerging