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# Towards Excellence in Theological Education?

Roger Kemp

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When I became secretary of the International Council of Accrediting Agencies (ICAA) in 1989 I was immediately lobbied by people staking their claim for what they thought was a forgotten method of theological education. They believed the association had ignored their pleas for recognition of TEE— theological education by extension. In their enthusiasm for such a method, they assumed ICAA was interested only in institutional theological education. In this paper I am not going to debate the rights and wrongs of that particular situation. I am glad to say that nothing was taken too personally, and all involved remain friends. The debate is about what is considered to be good theological education—or in a word—excellence. What I want to do is reflect on what I have found to be the key issues in this debate, from my involvement in evangelical theological

education for the past twenty five years.

I begin by reflecting on a conference in 1993 sponsored by ICAA. The theme of the conference was 'Affirming the Spectrum—Doing Theological Education Together'. I have re-read the paper I gave at the beginning of the conference and, while it sounds a little naïve (which could well have been true), it does sum up the thinking of the evangelical leaders with which I had contact at the time. I quote some of my paper to show the thinking of the time....

One of the most strategic but also one of the most misunderstood areas of ministry in the church today is theological education.... I may be wrong but I believe this would be the first time at an international level (at least in evangelical circles) such a variety of expressions of theological education are represented in one conference.... I trust we do not let the

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moment pass without taking the opportunity made available to each of us to step outside our particular area and take a good look at the wider scene of theological education.... Affirming—to see that theological education is a single business with many facets, rather than many businesses each doing their own thing... We have many things to learn from each other so let's be teachable....

It is obvious there was a danger of people taking 'sides' and ignoring the benefits of other approaches to theological education. One of the biggest issues which made it difficult for closer coordination was the fear that accreditation supported institutional-type theological education and yet had nothing to offer the extension-type programmes. This of course was denied at the conference and has been on numerous occasions since. Indeed, accrediting agencies have endeavoured to show as much by providing accreditation standards for extension programmes. At the Bangkok conference it seemed nothing was going to indeed 'affirm' the spectrum. In some ways the delegates went away from the conference even more cynical of theological education done in ways other than those of which they were advocates. It was a shame but that was the situation then. My honest belief is that there were (and may still be) those who, for whatever reason, had their own agendas and that is what prevented any closer appreciation or cooperation with people of different views.

Having said that, there were some good papers presented at that conference and I still refer to them from time

to time in my teaching. One in particular stands out, because it highlighted the issues very clearly. It had to do with the basics of theological education. The paper was presented by Bob Ferris, who described what he thought was 'quality' theological education. He put aside what he called the 'general' approach which for him was to (wrongly) equate quality purely with the reputation of specific institutions. He proposed a different way. 'A more useful approach to defining quality in education entails examining issues of philosophy and theology on which educational programs are built.' He was saying that it is all too common for theological educators to concentrate on the *methods* of teaching, rather than the *outcomes* or *foundations* of theological education. For his part, Bob Ferris was strongly advocating recognition for extension theological education (TEE) as being just as viable a means of theological education as institutional type training. He went on to advocate an accrediting process which reflected the context in which the training was done, while at the same time it maintained biblical standards. He wanted to steer clear of proposing standards which were 'imposed' from abroad (viz. the western institutional standards) onto training programmes elsewhere.

So the debate had several facets, including the merits or otherwise of institutional theological education as against some other means, but also the

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1 R. Ferris, 'Strategic Flexibility in Accreditation Programs'. A paper presented to the 1993 conference of International Council of Accrediting Agencies in Bangkok, July 1993

need to recognize the fundamental right of local training programmes to establish their own approach.

But what is the real issue in regard to excellence in theological education? To me it centres on several important issues.

### Relevance

By this I mean matching theory with practice—making sure that theological education is balanced. Some things never change. I remember the hue and cry which we made as students doing theological training in the late 60s and early 70s, to those who ran the college—most commonly to the principal. It was all about what we thought was the irrelevance of what we were learning. For example: ‘We are never going to use this in pastoral ministry—why should we study Hebrew?’ Although we were given good explanations at the time, I am sure we weren’t convinced. We were crying out for more subjects to do with counselling or pastoral care, because that is where we were hurting at the time. Of course students still make similar comments today. The issue remains at least in part one of relevance. And regularly I still read articles or hear someone at a conference speak on the issue. I cite several to indicate that it has never been too far below the surface in the thinking of theological educators generally.

*Post and rail:* The ‘post and rail’ approach describes theological education as being like a fence. There are several interpretations of this model. I interpret it this way: the posts refer to the method of theological training, while the rails represent the theory and practice. The posts (methods) link

together the theory and practice. It is this which makes for good theological education. The fence would be very lopsided at best and totally inadequate at worst, if there was only one rail. Theological education which ignores either the theory or practice of the curriculum is in a similar state. Of course the ‘posts’ can be made of anything. That isn’t the important issue. What is important is that the top and bottom rails are somehow linked. So whether it be institutional or extension methodology which is used—the theological education fence is useful only when the linkage is made.

Jim Plueddemann has had a profound effect on evangelical theological education in one way or another. In a paper on this model, Jim talks about ‘top-rail’ and ‘bottom-rail’ theology.<sup>2</sup> Top-rail theology is that which emphasizes the ideal while the bottom-rail emphasizes realism. The paper eloquently goes on to describe various implications of the model for theological education. There is one statement which illustrates the point I am endeavouring to make. ‘In order to promote excellence in theological education, teaching methods must do three things: they must teach important knowledge, stimulate quality experience and compel critical interaction between knowledge and experience’.

### Outcomes

*Winning the war:* At the Bangkok conference in 1993 Mike Henderson pre-

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2. J. Plueddemann, ‘The Challenge of Excellence in Theological Education’. A paper presented for ICAA in Kenya in 1987

sented a paper which I still find useful. He described the way that General McArthur operated in World War II. When asked why he was so successful in his military campaigns, General McArthur said that he was about 'winning the war' not simply 'training soldiers'.

What Mike was getting at in his paper, was the importance of focusing on the end product (what we would call 'outcomes' today), rather than methodology. In other words he was saying there was value and significance in all the methods—as long as they were actually achieving a previously accepted goal! The implication was that most of us were concentrating too much on 'our' *method* rather than a commonly accepted goal. It is a pity that at the time we didn't take more notice of what Mike was saying. If we had listened more closely to what he said we (those in ICAA) could have led evangelical theological education to greater things. Unfortunately there are still too many theological educators today who are happy to 'train soldiers' rather than 'win the war'. Perhaps it is because they do not know what war they are in, so they simply go through the motions of teaching the same subjects year after year with little or no relevance to actual ministry or context.

I have come across some such programmes. Yes, there are training programmes operating which teach the same subjects today that they did twenty to thirty years ago, and there is very little, if any, difference in the way they are taught. One wonders if they are achieving anything beyond giving out pieces of paper to students after three or four years of training.

At a conference of the European

Evangelical Accreditation Association (EEAA) in St Léger in November 2003, Derek Tidball of London Bible College touched on this issue when he challenged theological educators present to 're-engineer' their programmes. This involves asking some basic but significant questions such as 'who am I trying to teach?', 'what am I trying to teach them?', 'why am I teaching them?', 'how can I measure the effectiveness of my teaching?'. In other words we ought never to assume that the way we have taught in the past is sufficient for teaching today.

*A gracious revolution:* Jim Plueddemann gave the annual lecture for the Centre for Evangelism and Global Mission of Morling College, Sydney, Australia, in 2000AD. He entitled his paper 'Agenda for a Gracious Revolution'<sup>3</sup>. He was talking mainly about the approach to missions in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but he included in the paper outlines of several models of theological education which have relevance to the point here.

First there is the *factory* model, which sees theological education as a processing plant. There is a cartoon which depicts this well. In the middle there is a drawing of a factory, and on the left side there are a number of individuals in line, entering the factory. Each one is different. On the right hand side of the factory there is another line of people coming out—all exactly the same. The factory of course represents

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3 J. Plueddemann, 'Agenda for a Gracious Revolution', address given at the annual lecture of Centre for Evangelism and Global Mission, Morling College, Sydney Australia, June 2000.

the theological training programme. It is as if the programme is cloning each student to a model which it sees as *the* ultimate in theological training. 'It places high value on precision, quantitative goals, predictability, efficiency and control. It causes planners to set goals that can easily be measured. They want to know exactly what the final result will look like, when it will be accomplished and how much money it will cost.' Other wags talk derogatorily about the 'sausage machine' model—as if theological education was somehow like making sausages! Plueddemann reminds us of the dialectic in the debate by stating that to focus on this method is to ignore the more important goals of character, discipleship and holiness.

There are those who would defend such a system, because they see theological education as almost entirely a matter of gathering knowledge—bits and pieces gathered along a production line—so equipping a person for ministry.

Then there is the *wild flower* model. This is an approach to training which has come virtually as a reaction against the factory model. It emphasizes the intuitive aspect of learning. Personal experience, emotions, signs and wonders, spiritual warfare, inner healing and demon mapping are all part of the process. In other words the training is centred on the experiential rather than the cognitive aspect of learning. Little is planned or organized. Time limits are vague as are measurable outcomes. Like wild flowers, those involved flourish for a time, but because there is little solid foundation upon which training is based, wither quite quickly.

Finally, and most appropriate, is the *pilgrim* model. Theological education here is seen as a journey. There is a goal which is aimed for, and, along with others, the path is taken to reach it, sometimes having knowledge imparted and at other times experiencing growth with others.

## Process

Plueddemann's last point raises a further issue—that theological education is more a process than an event. This, it seems, is where the emphasis is focused at this time. In February 2000, Mike Wicker presented a paper at a global conference on theological education at Oxford. The paper was entitled 'Transformational Learning Theory in Leadership Development and Training'. The paper focuses on various styles of leadership, and how best to train people with those styles. Wicker says transformational leadership 'occurs when one or more persons engage with others in such a way that leaders and followers raise one another to higher levels of motivation and morality'.<sup>4</sup> He goes on to describe transformational leadership process. It consists of four phases.

The first phase is awareness-analysis, during which questions such as 'what are my assumptions about leadership?' and 'what am I trying to accomplish with my leadership approach?' are asked. In other words this is where the real context is

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4 M. Wicker, 'Transformational Learning Theory in Leadership Development and Training', a paper presented at a Global Consultation at Oxford Centre for Mission Studies, England, February 2000.

analysed. The next phase—alternatives—looks at various approaches to leading. The third phase is decision-transition phase, in which decisions are made as to possibilities of change. Because ‘transition is the heart of the transformation process’, this is crucial. It is where leaders begin to change attitudes, values and ideas—what we would otherwise call education. It involves an integration of knowledge and emotions—trying to meet a balance between the two, not unlike Plueddemann’s pilgrim model. The final phase is action—where new ideas are put into practice. This is the outcome of the transformation which a person has undergone.

What Wicker is implying is that this model ought to be considered in theological education. ‘An analysis of effective life-changing leadership development is needed in order to connect the constructivist theories of transformational learning and leadership.’ It seems to me that this is yet another way of answering the basic questions about excellence in theological education. And that brings me to my conclusion.

### Renewal

In the late 80s there was a kind of paradigm shift in theological education, under the banner of ‘renewal’. It was a recognition that it was time for theological educators to re-think the way theological education was accomplished. There is no doubt that the changes in missionary theory and practice resulting from the contextualization debate of the 1970s was influential in this. It was a period of changing ideas, and The International Council of Accrediting Agencies (ICAA)—now

called the International Council for Evangelical Theological Education (ICETE)—led the way in applying these new ideas to theological education. In 1990 it published the ‘Manifesto on the Renewal of Evangelical Theological Education. I have a vested interest in this document, having been part of the editorial board which produced it, but nevertheless I believe it still contains the essential issues which I have mentioned above.

The manifesto consists of twelve issues which ICETE recognizes as being of vital importance for the renewal of theological education. They range from contextualization, churchward orientation, community life and strategic flexibility in areas of leadership roles, academic levels and education method through theological grounding, equipping for growth, and the development of a Christian mind and servant spirit to cooperation and integration of programs, instructional variety and continuous assessment.

Without going into detail of these issues, it is clear that taken as a whole, the Manifesto addresses the matter of ‘good’ or ‘excellent’ theological education. Indeed whether the discussion is about relevance, outcomes or processes, the manifesto addresses them in one way or another. I sometimes say to people—albeit with tongue firmly in my cheek—that all we need in theological education is the Manifesto and the Bible. By heeding both we are assured of excellence in theological education.

However, it is interesting to note that the Manifesto is still regarded as a significant reference point for discussions on theological education. In practice, it means that ‘renewed’ theologi-

cal education focuses on the person rather than the programme. As theological educators, we are preparing people for particular ministries, not simply fulfilling the academic requirements consisting of class hours, assessment details and reading lists. I have heard several times at college graduations that 'even if a student has gained distinctions in academic work, unless we (the college) have brought that student closer to God, and developed his/her spiritual life, then we have failed in our task'. It sounds very pious and worthy. But it is true. In my cynical moments I think we sometimes say it because it sounds good, and it is difficult to refute, but deep down we know that the piece of paper presented is probably going to be more use than all the well-meaning piety on the evening.

But that is to miss the point. The piece of paper ought not to be given *unless there is evidence of a growing relationship with God* indicated by various factors such as a deepening of spiritual understanding and effectiveness in dealing with people. That is what renewal is all about. And in reality most worthy training programmes have changed significantly in recent years to reflect such attitudes. And it works at any academic level. I will mention just two examples with which I am familiar.

### Zambia

The first is in Zambia at a place called Malambanyama, some 110kms north-east of Lusaka. Under the auspices of the Northern Baptist Association of Zambia (NBAZ) a training programme has been set up to reflect the church context. The area was evangelized

over twenty years ago and today there are over 75 village churches in the area—amongst the Lenje people group. With such growth a training programme was needed to guarantee continued leadership. In 1999 the Malambanyama Biblical Leaders Training Centre (MBLTC) was established. The programme takes potential leaders from the village churches and provides an integrative balance between theory and practice. A series of intensive courses is run each year whereby the students come to a central location (Malambanyama) for four to six weeks at a time—three times each year. The times are spaced so that there is no interruption of the work in the fields in their villages. An 'academic' foundation is the basis, but each subject is taught by a practitioner and with the local church in mind. The vernacular is used and everything is related to the context. The students bring their own food and live in conditions which are the same as the village. Between the intensive 'block' courses, the students return to their village churches and practise what they have learned. In addition, the MBLTC superintendent travels around the churches to provide encouragement and further input to the students. The students graduate after a certain number of courses have been taken, and an assessment is made of the spiritual growth of the student over the two-years of training.

The programme is not accredited—because there is no need. The most important thing is that the students are prepared for ministry in the churches—that is the only accreditation required. One of the great things about the programme is that all the



students are well known by the local churches. So much so that when they graduate, the students are almost guaranteed to find a church in which to serve either full time or, most likely, part time. The training was established to meet the need of the churches—not some set of regulations set down from outside the area. And the needs are being met.

### Australia

The other example is the development which has taken place in theological training within institutions in Australia in the last fifteen years or so. In that time there have been some huge changes to the content and method of accredited theological education. The accreditation agency with which I am most familiar is the Australian College of Theology. However, the changes have generally not come ‘from above’ through the ACT leaders, but ‘from below’—the colleges themselves. One of the big changes was the introduction of the Bachelor of Ministry degree in the early 1990s. Its focus is ministry, not intellectual theory (which the Bachelor of Theology tends to do). Subjects are semesterised and more electives—almost all in the pastoral/ practical area—are available. Experienced-based learning is part of the degree whereby students can reflect on their spiritual journey in the context of small groups. Mentors are appointed to become involved in the personal development of the students.

The best colleges appoint lecturers who are practioners of their field as well as having an academic knowledge of the material. The emphasis is on outcomes rather than programmes. What

is more—the lecturers are made aware that students learn more from them as Christians than they do as professional teachers. To that end various opportunities are given for personal interaction between the lecturer and students, through small groups, informal meetings and social gatherings, as well as in churches. It is now a familiar comment by graduating students that what they appreciated most about their time at college has been the interaction with lectures, rather than the content of the subjects.

I am not saying that either of the above programmes is perfect, nor that they are the only ones involved in renewal. Obviously not. But I make the point that there is no excuse these days for theological education to be done badly. There are plenty of resources and examples to guide those involved in developing excellent training programmes, so that the church of God will have servants who are prepared both adequately and appropriately for the ministry in which they are involved.

### Conclusion

The debate as to what is ‘good’ or ‘excellent’ theological education will no doubt continue. I have had the privilege of being part of it for a number of years. The point I want to make is that the ingredients for good theological education are with us—and have been for some time. Other documents discuss these matters, but the Manifesto probably brings them together better than any other document I know. What we as evangelicals need to do is simply practise the principles enunciated. In the words of the Manifesto... ‘this we must accomplish, by God’s grace’.