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A Theology of Theological Education: Pedagogical Implications

Larry J. McKinney

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Introduction

Yale Divinity School professor, David Kelsey, prompted an interesting theological debate on the nature of theological education in 1993 through his book entitled, *Between Athens and Berlin: The Theological Education Debate* (Eerdmans, 1993). The central questions in this book were firstly, 'What is theological about theological education?' and secondly, 'What is the nature and purpose of theological education?'

In addressing these two primary questions, Kelsey looked at two normative models that are at opposite ends of the educational spectrum—the *Athens model* and the *Berlin model*. *The Athens model* promoted the Greek concept of '*paideia*'—the cultivation of the soul, the development of character. This view proposed that the goal of theological education is to develop within students a 'knowledge of God' and the 'formation of souls to be holy'. Using this particular paradigm, it is the teacher's responsibility to help cultivate spiritual growth or piety within students.

Conversely, the *Berlin model* embraced the German idea of '*Wissenschaff*'. This concept promoted orderly, disciplined critical research on one hand and professional education for the clergy on the other. This view reflected a broader movement in Europe to reshape education along Enlightenment principles. With this second paradigm, the teacher facilitates research or critical thinking but is not necessarily a spiritual mentor to students. The German university model was quite opposite to the medieval European university that was tied into the church.

In considering these two extreme views relative to the nature and purpose of theological education, Kelsey considered five different perspectives

Larry J. McKinney *(EdD, Temple University, MA, Wheaton College, BS, Philadelphia Biblical University) is Executive Director of the Association for Biblical Higher Education based in Orlando, Florida. He served as the President of Providence College and Seminary in Otterburne, Manitoba (Canada) from 1993-2001 and as the Vice President for Student Development at Philadelphia Biblical University from 1980-1993. He also serves as Board Chair Emeritus for the International Council for Evangelical Theological Education.*

that were positioned somewhere in between these two bi-polar views.

Kelsey noted that the debate was not focused on the pedagogical question, 'What is the most effective way to teach in theological education?' While recognizing that theological teaching could benefit from pedagogical insights, he suggested that such 'improvement would not necessarily result in better theological education'. Rather, the central question is: 'What is the nature and specific purpose of *theological* education? What separates it from other apparently closely related academic enterprises as distinctly, *theological* education?'

While understanding Kelsey's desire to focus on the nature and purpose of theological education, I do not believe that pedagogy can be separated from theology in discussing the topic. After all, the discussion is about *theological* '*education*'. If appropriate attention is going to be given to the meaning of theological education, pedagogy must be part of the equation. Pedagogy helps to define theological education. On the flip side, I do not believe that the topic of Christian education can be discussed appropriately without including theology. Theology is central not only because it is the content of Christian education, but also because it most directly deals with the presuppositions lying behind Christian teaching.

Theological beliefs provide the very foundation for Christian education or pedagogy. Pedagogy and theology are both key components in defining theological education. The two elements are inextricably linked together. Theological education should be shaped by both one's theology and pedagogy. There are pedagogical implications for theological education just as there are theological implications.

Building upon the argument that pedagogy and theology are equally important in defining the nature and purpose of theological education, this article examines five theological issues that are prominent in debates about Christian education and theological education. They serve to shape one's pedagogical paradigm or philosophy of teaching. They also help to define one's theology. The positions taken on these issues give concrete shape and direction to the way one approaches theological education.

1. Knowledge of God: We must have a metaphysic that recognizes God.

Metaphysics have to do with the questions of ultimate reality. The claim of a Christian philosophy is that this ultimate reality resides in the eternal God himself. Thus genuine theological education begins, proceeds, and ends with the *concept of a triune God from whom everything else derives its existence*. What were we made for? To know God. What should be our primary goal in life? To know God. What is the 'eternal life' that Jesus Christ gives? Knowledge of God. 'Now this is eternal life; that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, who you sent' (John 17:3). What should bring us the greatest joy in life? What brings God the greatest pleasure? A knowledge of himself.[1] 'For I desire mercy, not sacri-

1 J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity, 1973), p. 29.

fice, an acknowledgement of God rather than burnt offerings' (Hosea 6:6).

Knowledge as a Relationship

The knowledge of God being discussed is not an abstract knowledge that comes from academic pursuits, but the knowledge that grows out of a mature relationship. The closest parallel that we can experience to the true knowledge of God is the knowledge of another person that results from a friendship. J. I. Packer put it well when he said, 'Why has God spoken?… The truly staggering answer which the Bible gives to this question is that God's purpose in revelation is to *make friends* with us.'[2] God desires a deep, loving friendship with each of us—a friendship in which each party comes to know and understand the other. A marriage, a courtship, or a deep friendship cannot exist just on feelings. Coming to know another person involves shared experiences, commitment and communication.

A basic assumption in the field of communication is expressed by the formula '*Communication = Content + Relationship*.'[3] Communication normally consists of words that are said (content) and the thoughts and feelings that the people who are involved have about each other (relationship). Knowledge of God or communication with him depends on our grasping content (the Bible and theology) and experiencing a vital relationship with him. Without a reconciled relationship to God that is based on the work of Christ, true knowledge of God is impossible. Conversely, just as a relationship in which lovers or friends never exchange information about themselves is doomed, so too a relationship with God cannot develop merely on feelings of reconciliation. A growing friendship requires an objective understanding of what the other person is like (content).[4]

Head Knowledge vs. Heart Knowledge

Many people believe that religious knowledge comes in two forms: 'head knowledge' and 'heart knowledge'. Head knowledge (knowledge of the Bible and theology) is often viewed as having only indirect impact on one's religious life. Only when this information is internalized does it affect one's life. By contrast, heart knowledge (one's values, beliefs, attitudes) is viewed as very important in a person's daily life. While this popular dichotomy has some limitations, it points to one fundamental principle concerning Christian knowledge: knowing about God must never be confused with knowing God. James 2:18-19 speaks to this problem, 'Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do. You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.' The possession of certain beliefs or facts must not be equated with knowledge of God.

2 Packer, *Knowing God*, p. 50.

3 Em Griffin, *Getting Together* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity, 1982), p. 91.

4 Jim Wilhoit, *Christian Education and the Search for Meaning* (Grand Rapids: MI: Baker Book House, 1986), p. 30.

On the other hand, reliance on heart knowledge, or knowledge based primarily on feelings, can also create major problems. Such knowledge has no frame of reference beyond one's own personal experiences. In the New Testament, the apostle Paul spoke of the spiritual insanity, brought on by following one's momentary feelings, as a mark of immaturity. He exhorted the Ephesians to 'no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning craftiness of men and their deceitful scheming' (Ephesians 4:14). Paul wanted the Ephesians to maintain the stability that comes only by using something more permanent than feelings as a guide for life. Knowledge of and relationship with God are to be based on something more than mere feelings.

True Knowledge of God: Facts, Feelings, and Proper Relationship

Head knowledge and heart knowledge are not contradictory alternatives. In fact, neither of them in isolation represents the biblical conception of religious knowledge. For the Hebrews, knowledge of God meant 'recognition of, and obedience to, one who acted purposefully in the world'.[5] To know something meant to have experienced it or to have observed it in such a way that it made an impact on one's life. Something is known when it becomes part of one, not simply when it can be defined or recognized.

From a biblical perspective, knowledge is both the result of a relationship with God and one of the major factors that strengthens our relationship with him. It is both the product and catalyst of this relationship. Factual knowledge and feeling-based knowledge must be coupled with an experiential knowledge of God. Persons can know God only if they have walked with him, worshipped him, prayed to him—in other words lived as if his existence mattered. This is not to diminish the value of the Bible in the process of knowing God, for the Bible is a necessary and irreplaceable source of information about God. Knowledge of the Bible, however, must always be seen as a means to an end, namely, knowledge of God which can come only through the work of Jesus Christ. Theological education is hollow and meaningless unless educators acknowledge—both implicitly and explicitly—the importance of knowing God deeply and personally.[6]

Briefly returning to the David Kelsey question about the nature and purpose of theological education, the position that has just been developed clearly fits with the Athens model (*paideia*)—we must have an educational process that promotes a personal knowledge of God. Theological education must emphasize the importance of knowing God deeply and personally.

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5 E. Blackman, *A Theological Word Book of the Bible* (New York: Macmillan, 1950), p. 121.

6 Wilhoit, *Christian Education and the Search for Meaning*, p. 35.

2. Centrality of Written Revelation: We must have an epistemology that is built upon Revelation.

Epistemology has to do with the question of the essence of knowledge and how we know that it is true. The claim of orthodox Christianity is that knowledge is found in revelation: natural, living, and written. Theological education should begin, proceed, and end with the concept of divine revelation. Divine revelation is central to theological education.

Without the Bible as the foundation and core of the curriculum in theological education, there can be no true Christian education. An adequate philosophy of theological education must incorporate the basic concept of God's revelation of himself to humankind through the medium of the written Word, the Bible. Because of the sinful, depraved condition of humankind (Romans 3:10-23, Ephesians 2:1-2), God revealed himself in various ways: in creation (referred to as general revelation); in direct revelation (particularly in the Old Testament through dreams, visions, and the spoken word); in miracles; in Christ (Living Word); and in the Scriptures (Written Word), God's supernatural revelation. While the process of revelation is broader than the Bible, the content of special revelation is rooted in the biblical message.

In evangelical theological education, Scriptural revelation is accepted as the Christian's supreme and final authority. The written revelation is central to theological education for three reasons.[7]

Scriptural Revelation is of Divine Origin

Since God has revealed himself in divine, written form, one need not search for a further source of knowledge about God and a means of experience with him. His revelation is divinely inspired by the Holy Spirit (2 Timothy 3:16; 2 Peter 1:20-21), and, therefore, authoritative and trustworthy.

The Bible is the 'given' content, the authoritative norm for theological education. It is essential to any ministry that seeks to teach others God's ways and will.

Scriptural Revelation is the Means of Imparting Divine Life

The Scriptures should be basic to theological education because they are a means of imparting divine life (1 Peter 1:23), and they are the source of Christian nurture and growth (1 Peter 2:2). A valid Christian experience cannot be obtained or maintained apart from valid Christian truth. The Bible is the foundation on which effective theological education can be implemented.

If Christian experience or knowledge of God is sought from sources other than biblical revelation, then theological education is relegated to a humanistic, anthropocentric religious education. In true evangelical theological education, the Bible is the objec-

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7 Roy B. Zuck, *The Holy Spirit in Your Teaching* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1986), pp. 12-13.

tive body of truth to which the experiences of teachers and students are to be related and by which their experiences are to be evaluated.

Scriptural Revelation Provides a Standard

Without the Bible as the foundation for theological education, the experiences of students are impossible to measure. Omit the Bible and the teachers have no basis of evaluation by which to judge the validity of spiritual experiences. Without the Bible, teachers and pupils are left to their subjective, self-imposed standards. But with written revelation as the evaluative standard, students are challenged to come to faith, to live lives of holiness, and to grow to spiritual maturity. Therefore, the place of the written revelation is integral, not peripheral, to a theology of theological education that is distinctly biblical. The Bible is the body of truth that is essential to the transformation of lives, first in conversion and then in the living out of one's relationship with God.

The theological position outlined in this section, that the Scriptures are divinely inspired and serve as the standard for life and godliness, does not imply a mindless literalism. Instead, theological education calls for the appropriation of the plain and common sense meaning of Scripture as normative for thought and practice. The Scriptures are viewed as divinely inspired and Christians are called to discern a biblical agenda in the area of theological education, as in all areas of thought and practice. 'The Scriptures function as the final authority and serve as a grid through which all other truths are examined for their consistency with a biblical world view in mind.'[8]

Perhaps the greatest danger for evangelicals, with a strong emphasis on biblical authority, is that it can lead to dead orthodoxy, a literalism or biblicism emphasizing biblical principles divorced from life. It can also result in an educational practice that imposes truths upon people without allowing them to think seriously about and grapple with the implications of affirming such truths. Such a practice is manipulative indoctrination, and does not result in personal appropriation, internalization, and the transfer of learning to other situations. Such an authoritarian stance in education demands mindless compliance and obedience at the loss of personal integrity and rationality. It reduces the response of living obedience to God to a superficial conformity contrary to a biblical understanding of personhood. Robert W. Pazmino warned that 'a mindless and spiritless focus upon the written Word may not result in vital contact with the living Word, Jesus Christ'.[9]

3. Role of the Holy Spirit: We must have an educational process that is controlled by the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit plays a significant role in theological education. However, educators do not always fully agree

8 Robert W. Pazmino, *Foundational Issues in Christian Education* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), p. 50.

9 Pazmino, *Foundational Issues in Christian Education*, p. 51.

concerning the nature of the Spirit's work in biblical teaching and learning. For this reason, a well-developed theology of the Holy Spirit's role in theological education must be based on all of the relevant biblical passages and themes, and not just a few of special interest. Three primary dimensions of the Holy Spirit's work in the teaching-learning process are identified.

The Spirit and the Teacher

The Holy Spirit acts in several ways to facilitate the work of the teacher. First, the Spirit gives certain persons the gift of teaching (Romans 12:7). Second, the Spirit gradually renews Christians, both teachers and students, from the inside out. The fullness of the image of God is being restored as Christians open themselves to the working of God's grace (2 Corinthians 3:18). Third, a significant ministry of the Holy Spirit in the lives of Christians is illumination. Roy B. Zuck defined illumination as… 'the Spirit's work in enabling Christians to discern the meaning of the message and to welcome and receive it as from God'.[10] This is of special importance to teachers, since it enables them to comprehend and appreciate biblical truth (1 Corinthians 2:12).

The Spirit and the Student

The Holy Spirit's ministry is needed so that the Bible will find application in the lives of students. The Holy Spirit and the written Scriptures work together. 'Bible knowledge in the heart of a Christian must be acted on by the Holy Spirit in order to produce Christian conduct.'[11] The Holy Spirit is not only active in the rebirth experience but also brings spiritual vision, spiritual receptivity, and a desire for service. Furthermore, the Spirit convicts and guides students regarding areas of their lives that need attention.

The Spirit and the Subject Matter

The primary content of theological education is the Bible, but it does extend to other disciplines and other learning resources. For this reason, theological education must be concerned not about the Bible alone, but about the whole of life with which the Bible deals. 'The scope of theological education is the whole gospel and the whole of life in the light of the gospel.'[12]

The Bible was born through the work of the Holy Spirit. Through the inspiration of the Spirit, the writers were able to record a divine message (2 Timothy 3:16; 2 Peter 1:20-21). The Holy Spirit has not abandoned the Bible today. He still speaks through the Bible to the church and the world. In at least three concrete ways the Spirit illumines and empowers the Scriptures:[13] First, the Spirit testifies that the Bible is the Word of God. Second, the Spirit uses Scripture to wit-

10 Zuck, *The Holy Spirit in Your Teaching*, p. 54.

11 Brian Richardson, 'Do Bible Facts Change Attitudes?', *Bibliotheca Sacra*, (April-June, 1984), p. 168.

12 R. Henderlite, *The Holy Spirit in Christian Education* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1964), p. 117.

13 Henderlite, *The Holy Spirit in Christian Education*, pp. 62-63.

ness to and glorify Jesus Christ. Finally, the Spirit acts to give contemporary significance to the message and the events of the Bible.

4. Nature of Human Kind: We must have an anthropology that recognizes that people are created in the Image of God.

The biblical view of human nature runs counter to contemporary approaches to education. The Bible calls us to recognize the 'grandeur as well as the misery of man'.[14] In regards to the biblical view, people are made in the image of God, but they are sinners. They are capable of great sacrifice and service, and yet, apart from Christ, they are unable to please God fully. This view of human nature has no parallel in secular theories of education and is a major obstacle to wholesale adoption of such theories by some evangelicals. The romantic position that children are basically good and the radical position behaviourist notion that persons are to be viewed as machines simply do not square with the biblical witness. Grandeur and fallenness, sinner and yet bearer of God's image—these characteristics create tensions with which education that is truly Christian must deal.

Made in the Image of God

Christians must never think of the fallenness of humankind as obliterating their distinctive mark—the image of God, which is marred but never fully erased. Christ, who was fully human, was also perfectly good. And through God's grace human being can live lives of creativity, harmony, and service, both individually and corporately.[15]

One of the ways that human kind is created in the image of God is the totality of human personality—one's intellect, one's emotions, and one's will. 'So the process of teaching is that of one's total personality transformed by the supernatural grace of God, reaching out to transform other personalities by the same grace.'[16]

Human State of Sin

Sin, however, is the aspect of human nature that requires our attention. All persons are sinners separated from God and standing in need of reconciliation. We must be wary of the notion that one can evolve into a Christian. The image of the new birth depicts radical change, a complete metamorphosis, but it may not be a sudden change. Change and maturity often take time. In fact, theological education is just one type of Christian ministry that helps to promote change and growth. The dark side of human nature precludes a theological education program that will be one-hundred percent effective. Since the educational process places the responsibility for learning and change on the shoulders

14 D. Bloesch, *Essentials of Evangelical Theology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), p. 88.

15 Wilhoit, *Christian Education and the Search for Meaning*, p. 52.

16 Howard G. Hendricks, *Teaching to Change Lives* (Portland, OR: Multnomah Press, 1987), pp. 105-106.

of the students, its outcome can never be assured.[17]

5. Goal of Christian Maturity: We must have a pedagogy that focuses on Christian maturity.

Central to the aim of theological education should be the promotion of Christian maturity. Theological education should seek to enable the Christian to glorify God more fully and to participate more deeply in the life and service of the church. According to biblical teaching, Christian maturity is associated with four basic concepts.

Spiritual Autonomy

The first mark of Christian maturity is spiritual autonomy. Spiritually autonomous individuals have control over their lives and are appropriately self-directed. Without appropriate self-direction, believers cannot mature in their relationship with Jesus Christ. Unfortunately, some church and theological leaders view autonomy as negative, equating it with self-indulgence. Yet how can we surrender out lives to Christ if we do not control them? (Romans 12:1).

Spiritual Wholeness

The second mark of Christian maturity is spiritual wholeness, a quality described in verses such as, 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength' (Deuteronomy 6:5). To be spiritually whole, then is 'to give all that you know of yourself, to all that you know of God'. The critical factor in spiritual wholeness is not knowledge or education but quality of dedication, giving one-hundred percent of self. The apostle Paul summarised his ministry as one that sought to 'present every one mature in Christ' (Colossians 1:28). Christian maturity is possible, but not guaranteed, for those who open themselves to the working of God's grace in their lives.

Spiritual Stability

The third mark of Christian maturity is spiritual stability. This should not be confused with psychological stability. Spiritual stability is acquired over time and grows with proper responses to the opportunities and challenges of life. As a result, it is a characteristic that should increase through one's spiritual journey.

Spiritual Understanding

Finally, the concept of spiritual maturity is linked with the wise use of knowledge. Spiritually mature individuals understand the significant issues of the faith and can use this knowledge to inform their lives and teach others. In contrast, the immature can handle nothing but spiritual milk, 'But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil' (Hebrews 5:14). Mature believers understand the essentials of the faith and are able to work with these truths to shape their lives.

17 Wilhoit, *Christian Education and the Search for Meaning*, pp. 55-56.

Returning once again to the critical question raised by David Kelsey relative to the nature and purpose of theological education, the final position that has just been developed clearly supports the Athens model (*paideia*) as opposed to the Berlin model (*wissenschaff*). In Greek, *paideia* meant a process of 'culturing the soul'. Character or spiritual formation was considered paramount. This developmental process involved the whole person, not just the student's mind. Consistent with Edward Farley's argument in *Theologia*, theological education should promote a 'Christian *paideia*'.[18] This is the reason why evangelical theological education fits better with the Athens model as a normative type of education than the Berlin model. If Christianity is seen as *paideia*, as it has been in ancient traditions, then theological education's goal is a knowledge of God and the formation of a person's soul to be holy.

Conclusion

In summary, theology is crucial to theological education. It helps to determine why (philosophy) we teach and how (pedagogy) we teach. Often theological education has drifted far from orthodox teaching, particularly in regard to the Christian view of human nature and spiritual growth. This drifting is unfortunate, for theological education is lost unless grounded in biblically-based teaching. No matter how much expertise or professional sophistication a theological educator may have, it is of little value apart from an awareness of the essential theological elements that should shape our teaching.

When theological educators understand the importance of growing in relationship with God, the true purpose of the Bible, the role of the Holy Spirit in teaching, the implications of human nature for the learning process, and the essence of spiritual maturity, they will be far better equipped to shape the lives of their students. Without this understanding, theological education is reduced to programs and activities that have no higher calling than to make students feel content about their academic and professional lives.

18 Edward Farley, *Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), p. xi.