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# Engaging Contextual Realities in Theological Education: Systems and Strategies

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## Introduction

There has been in recent times a growing interest in understanding the challenges and opportunities faced by theological institutions as they design models and strategies to equip the church to engage the world in contextually relevant ways. Such interest has been enthusiastically welcomed since it supposes the recognition that context is extremely important in the articulation of beliefs and confessions, of mission and identity, of life and practice.

Also, there seems to be in that interest a shared understanding by theological schools and the church that context is crucial in the definition of their purpose for existence. However, it seems that not many theological schools or churches are intentionally

taking into account contextual realities as they design programs, curriculum, or strategies for relevant ministry in the world.<sup>1</sup>

On the one hand, theological education has been animated by a pendulous tension between two extremes: (1) the training of students for the critical exegesis of the biblical text and the formal articulation of theological categories to understand God and his interaction with the world, and (2) the training of students for the practical exercise of church ministries. These two approaches, however, most of the times, focus on the individual accumulation of theological knowledge, or on the development of skills to fulfil church responsibilities to her members. In that approach, students study theology for the sake of theology, or end up learning how to preach, conduct funerals, serve in wedding ceremonies, or how to dedi-

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1 Theodore Brelsford and P. Alice Rogers, eds., *Contextualizing Theological Education* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2008), 1-2.

cate babies to the Lord.<sup>2</sup>

On the other hand, the church seems to have lost its original purpose of making disciples for the proclamation of the gospel, and the relevant implementation of the marks of the Kingdom of God in the world. This situation is expressed today by an inward orientation of the church and her focus on the happiness and wellbeing of her members. Prosperity gospel, schools of prophets and apostles, and a marketing mentality to church life and ministry have captivated the church to social popular trends, moving her away from her call and mission.<sup>3</sup>

The world outside, however, is plagued with structural challenges that demand contextually relevant theological answers. There is in the world today a strong presence of violence, crime, extreme poverty, destitution, and lack of basic human rights. Political systems are volatile; justice is continually compromised, and government initiatives offer only superficial solutions to the pressing problems and demands of local communities.<sup>4</sup>

In the midst of that complex reality the church usually feels inadequate to engage the world with the gospel for two reasons: (1) the challenges of the world seem to her too vast and insur-

mountable and, (2) she is not able to articulate an informed conversation with her local context.

Theological schools also seem to be inadequate in serving the church or in properly engaging the world. They claim as one of their main purposes to serve the church in her ministry to culture and society, but they seldom cultivate a healthy conversation with her or with the world.

To overcome that situation, the church must be able to identify the main challenges affecting her own context, so that she doesn't get lost and frustrated in the midst of many cultural and social demands. She also needs to find ways to meet those challenges with appropriate theological answers. In that process, theological schools can help the church by conducting formal research of her context, providing appropriate interpretation of that context, and designing strategies for engagement congruent with sound theology and relevant application in the world. Theological schools can also help the church by training leaders with contextually relevant programs, curriculum, and systems of learning.

Unfortunately, too often theological schools seem to ignore how to help the church, or how to design programs conducive to a healthy interaction with the world for transformation. Usually, their curriculum and educational systems are adopted or implemented without proper contextualization, and their focus is primarily on the acquisition of theoretical knowledge divorced from any practical application in local realities. With that approach, very often their graduates find themselves without the resources to help the church be relevant in her context.

2 Tracy Schier, *Edward Farley: on the state of Theological Education in the United States*. Interview with Edward Farley, Resources for American Christianity, [www.resourcingchristianity.org](http://www.resourcingchristianity.org)

3 Arturo Piedra, *The New Latin American Protestant Reality* (Journal of Latin American Theology, 2006, 1 no 1) 42-67.

4 World Bank, *Crime and Violence in Central America: A Development Challenge*. (2011), [www.worldbank.org/lac](http://www.worldbank.org/lac)

Despite the assessment mentioned above, there are today signs that point in the direction of hope and excitement, as well as the need to rethink the way theological education is developed in an effort to help the church fulfil her mission to the world. On the one hand, the Lord is very much at work in the world—he is active and present redeeming culture and society through the church and her people.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, new research in education can help theological education to be relevant in the world, as well as avoid some common deterrents to sound training of students.

First, there is a healthy emphasis on the creation of contextual learning environments rather than on textbook-oriented, professor-focused education. Second, there are exciting new studies on how adult people learn when immersed in their local realities. Third, there are new philosophies of education based on taxonomies that focus on integration of different dimensions of life and practice, rather than on cognitive hierarchies in the learning process.<sup>6</sup>

How can theological institutions take advantage of those developments? The answer to that question is contextually bound, but there are universal components that may help to see how

that can be accomplished.

## I Learning Systems Conducive to Intentional Engagement with the World

Any attempt for theological education to be contextually engaged must start with an intentional revision of important elements, such as its philosophy of education and the process that is followed to design programs and curriculum. This revision must also evaluate the role faculty plays in the process of training and equipping students for relevant ministry to the church. This process must come out of an understanding that the church is, in the end, the primary agent of transformation of culture and society, based on a solid theology derived from the biblical text.

### 1. Philosophy of education

Of course, describing a proper philosophy of education is beyond the scope of this presentation. However, there are a few elements that must be taken into consideration for theological education to be relevant in the world today.

First, theological education must be based on the affirmation that knowledge is constructed, not transmitted. New knowledge cannot be just ‘transmitted’ or ‘absorbed’ from one person to another. When students receive new information they must process that information, based on their previous knowledge, before they can try to make sense of it. In other words, they must construct a new perspective of reality by assimilating or adapting that new knowledge to what they already know. Although this process can take place in isolation, the richest learning

5 James D. Hunter, *To Change the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 225.

6 L. Dee Fink, *Creating Significant Learning Experiences: An Integrated Approach to Designing College Courses* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003). Mark Hendrickson, Director of Learning Systems at ProMETA, has adapted Fink's concepts to design ProMETA's philosophy of education, *Transformational Learning* (Greeley, CO: Class Notes, 2012).

experiences occur when new knowledge is socially constructed—when that knowledge is discovered through intentional interaction with the main actors of the context in which that learning is taking place.

This affirmation is of extreme importance for theological education to be contextually transformational, because when education is confined to the individual struggle with bibliographic material, without the corporate assessing of the implication of that material for cultural transformation, its value is very limited.

Second, theological education must learn to avoid the blind adoption of programs and curriculum that serve in one context but are foreign to others. Unfortunately, many emerging theological institutions around the world have yielded to the temptation to borrow programs, philosophy of education, curriculum, and educational systems primarily from schools in the Western world, without proper care for congruence with their local contexts. No doubt these Western schools are worth emulating, but the strength of their success is that they respond to needs and challenges of their own contexts. But contexts are different, they are not static, they are not uniform. Therefore, a simplistic implementation of their systems of education cannot adequately serve in other cultural settings.

Third, a much better approach for theological schools is to base their programs, curriculum, and systems on formal qualitative studies of the realities, needs, challenges, and hopes of their own context. Interviewing church leaders, professional and business people, government officials, university professors, and others will provide accurate

and culturally relevant information of the kind of programs needed to engage culture and society with the gospel. Moreover, a proper discovery of the context would lead to appropriate strategies for engagement.

Fourth, excellent programs and curriculum must help students shape new mental models of reality as well as new ways of interacting with that reality. To help students go through that process, faculty must see themselves as designers of learning rather than teachers charged only with delivering content. The focus, therefore, must be on transformational learning by helping students challenge their current ways of looking at the world, while designing new and innovative approaches to engage that world with contextualized biblical theology.

Fifth, priority must be given to helping students develop a Christian worldview. In a world permeated by disintegration and a gross compartmentalization of truth and life, students must be able to integrate their life with the cosmic and eternal plan of God and his mission to the world. By adopting a Christian worldview students will have a solid platform upon which to build a solid apologetic for the truth of the gospel, as well as a framework for relevant engagement with the world in which they live.

Sixth, contextual theological education must be able to deal with the changing nature of the world and its implications for the ministry of the church. In fact, there is in the world today a tension between *continuous-change* and *discontinuous-change*. Continuous-change is predictable, within a familiar paradigm, and easy to face. Discontinuous-change, on the contrary,

is unpredictable, chaotic, and requires the use of a new set of knowledge and skills to deal with its implications. The recognition of this tension is important, because quite often the church knows how to deal with what is predictable and familiar, but finds herself inadequate when having to deal with what is out of the ordinary, or what requires more than simplistic answers to complex structural problems.<sup>7</sup>

Seventh, theological schools must also learn how to deal with a changing world in their own ministry. As they learn from proper research of discontinuous change in a given context, they must review, evaluate, and modify their programs and curriculum, so that new generations of leaders can be equipped to help the church articulate theological and practical answers to social and cultural problems.

The elements of a philosophy of education mentioned above may be appropriate for cultural and social engagement. However, that philosophy will be irrelevant unless it translates into a fruitful effort to move from just teaching to *transformational learning*.

## 2. Transformational learning in theological education

Transformational learning aims at dismantling traditional ways of thinking by producing a non-reversible shift in the basic presuppositions a person holds as to how the world works. The main goal of that process is to create learning environments in which teach-

ers and students experience a disorienting dilemma that moves them to explore new, and more fundamental, ways of relating to themselves, others, and the world. Moreover, the goal of transformational learning in theological education is to equip students to develop relational experiences with the cultural and social world in which they live.

To accomplish this, students have to establish a personal process of accompaniment with members of their local community. This involves the sharing of life experiences, struggles, joys, pain, and frustration in a corporate search for answers to real-life challenges experienced in that community. Only when students continually interact with 'the other' and its environment will they come to understand the challenges faced by their culture, as well as to be able to design strategies to help 'the other' transform its context on the bases of biblical theology.

The implementation of a transformational learning approach in theological education, therefore, must be integrated along four main components:<sup>8</sup>

### a) Situational factors

Theological education does not happen in a vacuum; students come to school immersed in a reality that shapes who they are, their dreams, challenges, opportunities, presuppositions, and worldviews. Schools themselves live in a real context shaped by culture, local laws, community demands, and even denominational pressures. These situ-

<sup>7</sup> Alan J. Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk, *The Missional Leader: Equipping Your Church To Reach A Changing World* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2006), 6-9.

<sup>8</sup> L. Dee Fink, *Creating Significant Learning Experiences: An Integrated Approach to Designing College Courses* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003).

ational factors like it or not, determine the relevance of the training offered to students, as well as the service provided by schools to the church.

In the majority world, situational factors manifest local corporate challenges. In that context most students are trying to study while keeping a full-time job. Most pastors do not have the financial resources to attend a residential school, or the time to enrol in a formal theological program. Also, in many parts of the Majority World theological schools face the challenge of working in violent contexts that threaten their sustainability and the life of their students. Moreover, many schools in the Majority World rely on foreign missionaries as teachers who bring their own financial support, but when they leave, schools struggle to replace their faculty with local professors.

Situational factors are also important because students who are able to go to seminary, away from home, come to school with a commitment to implement in their culture the content of their education. When situational factors are neglected, students go home with vast amounts of information, but that information is quite often irrelevant and inadequate to engage their world in a transformational way.

#### **b) Learning environments.**

Cultural and social contexts are not an abstract idea; they are present and concrete realities. Therefore, to be relevant in a local setting, schools must design their programs with an intentional interaction with those who are main actors in the life of the church and the world they want to transform. In this sense, teachers and students must see classrooms and local com-

munity settings as learning environments in which to test and implement the relevance of the learning acquired through readings and assignments.

#### **c) Course content.**

Traditionally, course content has been determined primarily by a textbook or a notebook dearly guarded by a professor. While this content may be great reading, its application to real life situations may be very limited, especially when that material has been written to answer challenges and questions pertinent to foreign contexts. Questions of ultimate reality, worldview affirmations, social struggles, pains and joys are locally learned, affirmed, and maintained.

For these reasons, courses must not be based on a blind copy of content developed for foreign contexts. Of course, knowledge is not locally bound; knowledge is universal and can be adapted or extrapolated to different contexts. However, that adaptation and extrapolation must be congruent with knowledge and practices of local cultural setting.

#### **d) Life experiences**

Theological education must be transformational to relevantly engage the world. To accomplish this, theological schools must provide for opportunities in which teachers and students can submerge themselves in the world of those they are to serve. The goal in this process is that students and teachers, from the first day in school, engage in a fruitful interaction with those who have the power and resources to promote transformational changes in their community.



The goal is also for teachers and students to experience the pain of those who suffer because of destitution and poverty, to engage in confrontational dialogue with those who promote evil and degradation in culture, and to identify with those who struggle day-to-day to find ways to answer structural, cultural, and social challenges with the truths of the gospel.

In this sense, theological education is more than just the transmission of information about biblical affirmations. Theological education must point in the direction of producing significant transformations as a witness of God's present Kingdom in the church and the world.

To talk about systems of theological education is a worthy effort. However, those systems must translate into actual design and implementation of strategies for fruitful engagement with local realities. The following section is an attempt to identify contextual strategies conducive to positive engagement with the world.

## II Strategies Conducive to Positive Engagement with the World

There is usually in education a disconnection between methodology and its application, or between theory and practice. That gap can also be present in theological education, unless there is an intentional commitment to integrate theology with context in a mutually challenging interchange. That is, theology must serve as a platform from which to articulate proper answers to local challenges.

One way to bridge that gap is for theological schools to look for as much

knowledge as they can about the world and the church, about their challenges and needs. That process might seem a very difficult one, given the complexity of the nature and structure of both entities. However, it is possible to conduct a hermeneutical study of the world and the church that will help theological institutions in the design of strategies that meet contextual challenges and needs.

### 1. Understanding contextual realities as cultural texts<sup>9</sup>

All of us grow and develop immersed in local cultures and societies. As a result, we are shaped by a set of presuppositions we use to understand the world and navigate our reality. When left unchecked, however, these presuppositions may lead us to wrong impressions about the reality of our local context. Very often, moved by news about terrorism, violence, destitution, or crime, we rush to wrong conclusions about the nature and purpose of the world in which we live. As such, usually our perception of the world does not do justice to its purpose as the context in which God is carrying out his plan of redemption. Also, very often, moved by popular disdain against the church, we end up concluding that she has lost all right to represent God in the world.

To overcome these unjust conclusions, on the one hand, theological education must learn to affirm the value and dignity of the world as a product of God's wisdom in creation. It must also develop strategies to relate to the

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<sup>9</sup> See Kevin Vanhoozer, *Everyday Theology: How to Read Cultural Texts And Interpret Trends* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007).



world in ways that promote transformational changes at all levels. On the other hand, theological education must learn how to redeem the purpose of the church as God's partner in his mission to bring the whole of creation back to himself. This process should also include the development of strategies for the church to produce transformational changes in her local settings.

One way to pursue that learning and design of strategies is to interact with the world and the church from four important perspectives:

**a) Learn from what is being said *about* the world and the church.**

Theological schools must intentionally search for every source of information *about* the cultural, religious, ideological, and other descriptors of the world in which it serves. Bibliographic material, oral traditions, popular conversations, newspapers and reviews can help schools to arrive at informed ideas about the components that shape local cultures and societies.

On the other hand, theological schools should also listen to what is being said *about* the church. That is, how society perceives her ministry and her relevance in the world. Local churches around the world have great respect in society, but in other contexts the church is rejected because of her wrong focus and interests.

While this information may not be enough to arrive at an adequate description of the world and the church, the same is useful to determine what other information would be necessary to understand the world and the church and the context in which they function.

**b) Listen *to* the world and the church**

A second step of interaction with the world and the church is for theological institutions to listen *to* what the world and the church *are* saying with the goal of being able to 'get into their shoes' and listen to their hearts. This process begins with a simple vulnerability to ask the world and the church, 'Tell me your story, your concerns, your values, your challenges, and your message.'

This approach should reflect the experience of the journalist who is not content with just reporting a tragedy, but who decides to live, even if for a short time, with those who suffer that tragedy in flesh and blood. Many times, theological institutions and churches are content with confining their life and practice to the four walls of a building, listening only to their members or students to affirm and sustain their projects and plans.

However, the world and the church are crying out in search for transformation and redemption. The members of our society know that their culture is decadent and in need of transformation. Wherever we look, whomever we talk to, and whatever conversation we hear—all speak of desperation and frustration. Certainly, the global economy is crumbling down; global warming is threatening to destroy the environment; drug trafficking is exploding; large masses of immigrants look for survival alternatives away from home.

These are challenges that cry for redemption and liberation. It is this state of affairs that should move theological schools to engage the world with compassion and commitment, demonstrating the power of the gospel

to transform personal and structural challenges.

As theological schools focuses on the training of transformational leaders in the service of the church, they must also develop a commitment to ask the church to share with them her challenges, confusion, concerns, and struggles to keep fighting for relevance in a complex world. Certainly, the church doesn't have an easy job in the cultural environments of today. The world of the Spirit is confused with the spirit world; fundamental truth is compromised on the altar of tolerance and triviality; and lifestyles are sold freely in the market of individual choices. This state of affairs must move theological education to converse with the church in search of ways to develop tools and strategies to respond to that complex world.

#### c) *Speak for the world and the church*

A third step for theological education to interact with the world and the church must be an intentional commitment to learn how to intelligently speak of their value and dignity. This is the approach that looks for what can be redeemed and affirmed of the world and the ministry of the church. On the one hand, global markets are offering job opportunities to people who otherwise would not have opportunities to get ahead in life; new technologies are providing opportunities for people to get training without leaving their local culture. Medical research is discovering new drugs and procedures to treat diseases, and new means of communications are bringing communities into near contact, with the possibilities of mutual benefits.

On the other hand, we can affirm

that the church is still God's messenger of good news for a decaying culture, thousands of pastors and lay leaders are faithful to God's Word and its demands for life and practice, innovative strategies are being implemented by Christian organizations to fight poverty and destitution, faithful believers are showing the possibility of having permanent and committed marriages, and young people are joining humanitarian efforts to impact the world with the values of the Kingdom of God.

An assessment of the values of the world and the church, as exemplified above, must move us to find ways to speak *for* their dignity as agents that God is using to carry out his redeeming plan in our communities.

#### d) *Talk to the world*

A final step for theological education to be relevant in culture and society is to intentionally raise a prophetic voice in the world. To accomplish this process, programs and curriculum of theological schools must articulate a message of good news in the midst of trouble and crisis, as well as a message of confrontation congruent with the character of God.

Theological schools must also be able to talk to the church, confronting models and tendencies that disfigure its nature and purpose for existence. The prosperity gospel, utilitarian methodologies of church growth, managerial approaches to church sustainability, blind adoption of contemporary approaches to spirituality, and other influences from marketing strategies, or popular culture, must be denounced and confronted with a proper theological understanding of the nature and mission of the church.

## 2. Looking at concrete realities

Since the needs of the world and the church are very complex in nature, theological education must adopt a multidisciplinary approach to learning and serving.<sup>10</sup> Due to historical tensions, education in general and theological education in particular, has struggled with the disruption of the unity of different disciplines of knowledge to deal with reality. Quite often theology has been understood as a separate discipline, with or without any interaction with other disciplines of knowledge. As a result, those serving in church ministries use theology as the main and only source of information to deal with spiritual things.

On the other hand, Christian professionals, business people, university students, and almost any other church member resort only to knowledge provided by their field of expertise when confronted with concrete challenges in life. Usually, these believers don't interact with the biblical text when having to give an answer to social, professional, or personal demands in their field of responsibilities.

Theological schools, therefore, must adopt an integrative approach that takes advantage of knowledge, skills, and strategies derived from different disciplines and fields of research. This process should advocate for the demystification of social sciences, and for a healthy integration of theology and the truth found in other disciplines of human knowledge.

One of my students is a concrete example of how such a multidisciplinary approach to learning is helping her to adequately engage with her world in a relevant way. In a recent assignment she reported:<sup>11</sup>

... I graduated as a Biological Engineer at a local university in my country... Though the main field of my profession is the clinical-diagnostic area, for more than six years I have focused on an environmental dimension. I work under the Department for the Conservation of Lake Amatitlán, with the vision to give back to humanity, as quickly as possible, Lake Amatitlán in adequate conditions for its use and sustainable enjoyment, through appropriate management of its basin. Presently, I am in charge of the Division of Environmental Control, leading a team that is composed of eight professionals that monitor the quality of the water in the whole basin of the lake... Contrary to what I was looking for myself, God introduced me to a program (ProMETA) where, within my context, ministry, church, and 'secular' job I am able to apply directly and immediately each one of the truths I am learning.

... The opportunity to apply this knowledge has not only been in the ecclesial settings. As a government worker, and leading a division, I have been able to put into practice the concepts of leadership and teamwork, applying each truth in different circumstances. The opportunity

<sup>10</sup> Craig Ott, and Harold A. Netland, eds. *Globbalizing Theology: Belief and Practice in an Era of World Christianity*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 16-18.

<sup>11</sup> A. B. S is a ProMETA student who works for the Guatemalan government as an environmentalist at Lago Amatitlán.

to learn different concepts about communication and interpersonal relationships has helped me to deal with difficult people within an environment where politics is more important than the fulfillment of the institution's mission; where corruption is so evident and where there is no fear of God. We have been able to work as a good team and be an example to other divisions in our institution. I have also been able to remember that my mission is to make disciples wherever I am. Moreover, I have understood that working with natural resources and to seek the restoration of a lake is also part of the mission that as believers we have to expand God's Kingdom and to bring all things under his authority.

The above testimony points in the direction of a theological education that equips leaders to relevantly answer structural challenges in corporate culture.

### III Concluding Remarks

To talk about theological education that is contextually engaged is a fascinating topic. Extrapolating from that fascination to the actual design of programs, curriculum, and strategies for proper engagement with the world, however, is a complex and difficult issue.

In this paper I have tried to propose an understanding of the systems and strategies that can help theological institutions interact with the church and the world in relevant ways, with the goal of producing personal and structural transformation of cultural and social contexts. I offer these suggestions with humility, hoping that they may help schools reflect on how their programs, curriculum, or strategies engage their culture and society.

May the Lord help us and our theological institutions to continually evaluate our ministry to the church, so that we may be better agents of transformation in the world, for God's glory and honour.