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Theological Education: The Glory and The Agony

by Manfred T. Brauch

For those of us who are involved in theological education, both as students and teachers, it is important to be reminded of those core-dimensions which give to this process of preparation for Christian vocation its glory. It is also important to be reminded of the fragmentary nature of the enterprise, to consider its pitfalls and dangers.

In this article I attempt to lift up for renewed consideration and celebration both the glory and the agony of our task.

Theological Education: The Glory

The glory of theological education is centrally related to the fact that it has to do with God. We forget that all too often! We become preoccupied with peddling information; digging through archives; dissecting the human psyche; following ideas and their development across the centuries; analyzing the dynamics of contemporary society; developing communication techniques; oiling institutional mechanisms; and polishing our image for public recognition and applause. All these activities and tasks are an important part of the enterprise. But if they are not consciously, intentionally, and continually related to the central focus of theological education, if they are not energized by a vision of the glory of God, then they become impotent and enslave us in their impotence.

Theological education is centered in the Living God. Not the God of metaphysical speculation or the God of mythical abstraction. Not the God of the philosophers, but the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Not the God portrayed in the endless march of soupy religious T.V. shows, nor the God enshrined in wood or stone. Not the God of glass cathedrals and of magnificent monuments ostensibly created in his honor—but in the God of Holy Scripture; the God who weighs us in the balance and finds us wanting; the God who invites His creation into freedom from bondage to decay, and calls His children to participate in that process; the God who takes us seriously enough to enter into relationship with us, who values us enough to suffer with us, and who trusts us enough to place the world at our disposal. He is the God who calls us to faith and to obedience, to piety and to performance; who meets us in grace and demands from us justice; who confronts us in love and challenges us with truth.

Theological education that is not centered in this kind of God does not deserve the investment of our lives, our energies, our gifts of spirit and our intellect. It has lost its glory and is devoid of the power of the Divine Presence.

The glory of theological education is centrally related to the fact that it has to do with us human beings. The psalmist of ancient Israel put it this way: "What is man that you are mindful of him, that you care for him? You have made him but a little less than divine. You have crowned him with glory and honor." Theology is a "word about God." But since it is we—human beings—who are theologizing, theology is always also about us; it has an anthropological orientation. The questions we ask about God, about his nature and his purposes are not asked out of curiosity. They are not just speculative,

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nor do they emerge out of antiquarian interest. They arise out of our search for meaning, our attempt to grasp reality and to find answers to such questions as: "Who are we? Why are we here? Where are we going?"

The glory of theological education resides in the fact that it seeks to understand human beings not only in the context of temporal relations, but also in terms of an ultimate point of reference, in terms of ultimate values that transcend our own.

Not all areas of human inquiry are so oriented. We live in an age that is dominated by relativism and pragmatism. The concern that pervades the marketplace is not of human value and worth but of utility; not of the quality of human life but of productivity. The question, "What is truth?" is not often asked; rather, the question which dominates is, "What is the profit margin?" In such a climate, human worth is relative, and in direct proportion to particular levels of success and achievement. A recent book, entitled *Winning is Everything and Other American Myths*, sticks a probing knife into the side of this all-pervasive view of life. Theological education must be involved in exposing that myth. Theological education which is not guided by a vision of the preciousness and worth of each human being has lost its reason for being and is devoid of glory!

The glory of theological education is grounded in its preoccupation with a unique historical event. Its focus on the Living God on the one hand, and on the human being as the image of God on the other, is not energized by general religious experience, nor by some peculiar esoteric mysticism, nor by some speculative dogma. Rather, the glory of theological education in a self-conscious Christian community lies in relation to that event in which the divine and human intersect, that event in which the glory of God is revealed in human flesh, that event in which the grace and love of God became fleshed out in the Man Jesus of Nazareth, that event in which God erupted into the dilemmas of human history and experience in His Son, Jesus the Christ, our Lord.

Philosophy has its Platos and Aristotles, its Humes and Heideggers. Science has its Hypocrates and Descartes, its Newtons and Einsteins. They operate on the frontiers of intellectual inquiry. They search the microcosm and the macrocosm for clues to the meaning of life and the operation of the systems and organisms of this universe. They touch truth at innumerable places and bring it into the workshop of our lives. We honor them for their achievements. Our lives are enriched by the fragments of truth which they have seen.

But there is no figure who stands out on the human landscape like Jesus of Nazareth: Jesus the human face of God; Jesus the man for others. According to John, his sole purpose was to "bear witness to the truth." And it is that truth about God and humanity, about life and death, about joy and pain, which is the subject matter of theological education.

Who would have ever thought—looking at a tiny child tucked away in a barn in an obscure corner of Palestine two thousand years ago—that his name would be chanted and intoned, day after day, century after century, in towering cathedrals and tiny shanties? That it would be carried to every

corner of the earth? That it would fill the minds and inflame the hearts of countless men and women, urging them on to fantastic achievements, carrying them on waves of ecstasy up to God's very throne? Energized by the vision of this One, saints like Francis of Assisi joyously and wholeheartedly dedicated their lives to the service of their fellow humans; Bach composed his immortal music; El Greco painted; Bunyan found inspiration for the pilgrim's journey through the wilderness of this world; and Bonhoeffer was enabled to go serenely to his death.

Theological education in a Christian context which is not grounded in the Word made flesh, which does not have its source and continuing inspiration in the God-Man Jesus, has lost its soul and is devoid of glory.

The glory of theological education is further found in its grounding in Holy Scripture, the Magna Charta of Christian Faith. The fact that this book continues to outrank all other human documents on the best-seller lists is irrelevant, since we know

Theological education that is not continually grounded in the Word of Scripture, which does not listen to it, respond to it, dialogue with it, allow itself to be critiqued and judged by it, becomes an exercise in futility! It is like a ship without a compass, a space vehicle without a gyroscope. To the ship without a compass, the glory of the sea can become a treacherous, watery grave. To the space-probe without a gyroscope the glories of a star-studded universe can become a nightmare. Theological education without the guiding and correcting instrument of the Word of Scripture is finally without glory.

The glory of theological education resides in the fact that it is engaged in the shaping of lives for ministry and that it is done in conscious relationship to a people called the church. I cannot imagine a task more glorious than that! I vividly remember how—after I had delivered a series of lectures on the Gospel of John—a student came to me and said: "John has always been my favorite gospel; I have studied it, been encouraged and inspired by it; but I think I heard it today for the first

Theological education in a Christian context which is not grounded in the Word made Flesh, which does not have its source and continuing inspiration in the God-Man Jesus, has lost its soul and is devoid of glory.

that there are many more copies gracing library and other bookshelves than are actually read. What is relevant is the fact that there is no written document which has had a more significant or pervasive impact on the total life of humanity than this book. The words of this book—with all their textual problems and historical and theological ambiguities—have led countless people into encounter with the living Word of God and have thus brought them life and meaning in the midst of death and decay. It is here where the glory emerges!

From the very beginning, the Bible became the source and mirror of the early Church's identity. It turned to the Bible for its self-understanding. Its quest for the proper understanding of the meaning of the divine-human encounter in Jesus of Nazareth was carried on within the parameters of this book. Its collection of the Hebrew Scriptures and early Christian writings into an authoritative canon proceeded from the conviction that here, through the Jewish and Christian experience, they were in touch with authentic and authoritative witness to the nature of God and the meaning of human existence.

Holy Scripture is the cradle in which the Word made flesh continues to be born in our midst. It is, at one and the same time, human word and divine word; breathed by God and uttered by men; word of God in human vocabulary and human vocabulary enveloped by the grace of God. My own experience—shaped during my years as a seminary student and confirmed in years of struggling with the biblical text as a New Testament professor—is that the more I have taken the human dimension of this book seriously, the more it has become for me the vehicle of divine grace.

And yet, there is always the danger of moving to the left or to the right: Of so lifting up the human dimension that we can no longer hear that word which both judges and heals us. Or of so lifting up the divine dimension that the possibility of intersection with our human experience is made extremely difficult. If we begin with the affirmation—as I do—that the biblical revelation is both the result of and the witness to the divine-human encounter experienced in Israel's history and mediated in Jesus of Nazareth, then theological education must be involved in the continuation of this encounter, and always in light of the primary witness to that encounter.

time." To participate in moments of inspiration, in moments of discovery, in moments when the truth you have been struggling to understand and explicate suddenly sets you and others free—that is glory! To participate in a community of students and teachers in the quest for truth, in the struggle to relate that truth to the complexities of our modern era, in the search for better ways to allow the divine and the human to intersect—that is glory!

The ultimate focus of that glorious task is a people called the church, and its presence and ministry in the midst of this world. In numerous seminaries and divinity schools around the country where theological education has increasingly become an academic preoccupation, there is a renewed recognition that theological education which is divorced from the life of the church is devoid of power. In some circles you are not really with it in theological education if you cannot launch upon an incisive critique of the church. Shelves of books have been produced dissecting the weaknesses of the church, faulting it for insensitivity to the needs of society, and belaboring its failure to fulfill its mission. Yet for all the truth contained in that critique, there is no more challenging locus for ministry and service to humanity than in and through the church. A colleague of mine put it this way: "If one wants to be where the real action is, where families live, where children are born, where people suffer and die, where they cry, where they dance, rejoice, sing, and where they hurt, then the church is the place to be." Theological education which is not focused toward the needs and ministry of the church has lost its reason for being, and is devoid of glory.

Theological Education: The Agony

There is a shadow side to all of this; theological education is not only glory. One of the rules in photography is that the brighter and more intense the sun, the darker and more prominent are the shadows. So it is precisely when we focus on the glory of theological education that the agony comes into boldest relief.

The agony of theological education is grounded in the fact that we carry the glory in earthen vessels, that we see through a glass darkly, and that we only know in part.

Even as we attempt to center theological education in God, we become painfully aware of the broken, fragmentary nature of the undertaking. We are constantly tempted to identify our doctrines and definitions about God with the Reality which is God. But, he is always beyond our grasp; he refuses to be confined to our labels; he does not easily fit into our systems; he will not act in ways we prescribe for him!

Even as we focus theological education on the worth and preciousness of human beings, we become painfully aware that our normal impulses militate against that, and we have a difficult time modeling that commitment. Somehow, programs tend to become more important than persons, success more desired than growth, and statistics more valued than relationships.

Even as we lift up the centrality of Jesus Christ in theological education, we become painfully aware of our tendency to domesticate and tame him; to strip from him the rags of the Suffering Servant and shroud him in the glittering robes of triumphalism; to heap up so much historical and critical knowledge about him, that we are finally prevented from knowing Him.

Even as we attempt to ground theological education in the biblical Word, we are painfully aware of the gulf which separates the twentieth century from the time of the writers, and of our faltering attempts to find ways in which that Word can address our time. And so we are tempted to domesticate the book, using it to serve the purposes of our strategies, our agendas, our ideologies and belief systems. Or, we idolize the book, using it as a quarry of eternal truths which we then struggle to understand for our time.

Finally, even as we attempt to focus theological education toward ministry and the church, we are painfully aware of our own continuing participation in the failures and weaknesses of its life and ministry; of our clouded vision about its nature and mission; of our fragmentary understanding of the world to which the ministry of the church must be directed.

We carry the glory in earthen vessels. That is the agony of theological education! But we have no viable options. Indeed, as the Evangelist John recognized in his portrait of Jesus, there is no glory without the agony! Or, more precisely, it is only as we submit to the agony, as we allow it to be the matrix for growth, that we can fully experience the glory.

Theological Implications of the Arms Race

by Carole Fontaine

Those who speak on the relationship of Scripture to any modern enterprise come with a strong sense of their position's ambivalence. On the one hand, they have been radically confronted with words—words whose sacred character has allowed them to be authentically validated in the lives of believers over the centuries.

On the other hand, they know that Scripture's message to believers over those same centuries is conditioned by time. This is inherent in the very nature of language itself. Scripture came into being within a given historical matrix. Hence, it automatically reflects the character of that socio-economic milieu.

The same kinds of cultural conditioning will exist in modern hearers of the Word. Here we deal with especially insidious biases in the form of the basic presuppositions about life which we, the modern readers, bring to the text. This will be true whether we listen for a literal "truth," a sort of cookbook by which to concoct our lives, or for the finely-honed critical detail which sparks a professional's curiosity. Our modern conditioning is especially dangerous simply because, since it is ours, we are less likely to be aware of its influence on our understanding. It is no easy task to "time travel" between the generations without losing one's way.

Yet here I stand as a Christian and a faithful exegete of Hebrew Scripture, calling for the need "to study war no more." I am aware that there are some in my field, who, using the same types of biblical criticism which I employ, might find a very different sort of message coming from Scripture.

Indeed, I suspect we are all too well aware of the picture of the vengeful God of war of the "Old" Testament who is so frequently juxtaposed with the Sunday school portrait of Jesus, the gentle good shepherd. Perhaps all of us have wondered secretly how such a "Father" could produce such a "Son."

Fortunately for most Christians, the dilemma is easily solved by noting that the war god is, after all, located in the "Old"

Testament, that rather embarrassingly thick group of pages right before Matthew. The Old has passed away, and we are governed by what is New. So unless we stumble over an improperly edited psalm as we are singing, we are usually all right in disregarding the strident tones of nationalism, racism, militarism and sexism which seem to blare from the pages of the Hebrew Bible like a trumpet's call to worship in a liberal's worst nightmare.

Yet, one must take a stand on such questions somewhere, to speak to one's world with a voice grounded in the lessons and experiences of past generations of the faithful. It was their encounter with the "Living God" which is, after all, the substance of Scripture. I am well aware of the tendency in my field and in me to become so involved over the proper translation of Armageddon that we are able to forget that we stand on its very brink. I wish I could reassure you concerning the military imagery in the depiction of Israel's God, the "might-makes-right" mentality, and the patriarchal orders that reserve important decisions, decisions which are critical to the lives of all, to an elite few. I wish I could tell you that all these things were cultural borrowings from Canaanite warlords. It is tempting indeed to explain away some of those quaint features in the Hebrew Bible war narratives—such as that of the "ban" or holy war in which all that breathes was to be exterminated as an offering to God. References to "primitive" nomadic cultures in which the virtue of "manly honor" tended to produce especially aggressive codes of behavior as the male ideal might alleviate some of our distress over the text. While many of these observations are valid, and *do* bring us more clarification about the concept of war and its relationship to God and God's people, still the fact remains: The Lord is a Man of War. We read this in Exodus 15.

Israel tells us this when singing of a nation of slaves at its greatest moment of triumph: after the crossing of the Red Sea and the subsequent destruction of the chariots of Pharaoh pursuing the band of fleeing slaves. Throughout both Testaments there is an undeniable witness which insists that God "fights" on behalf of God's people. We know too well the

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