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Theological Education: Holy Calling to Scholarship

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When I became the Principal of the Scottish Baptist College in January 1994, one aspect of the vision that I shared with the Search Committee was to integrate “godliness with good learning” - holding head and heart together.

Ray Anderson defines the ‘Soul of Ministry’ as “forming leaders for God’s people.”¹ In our contemporary context, the training of leaders within the church has often stressed the issues of professionalism, management and organisation. Sometimes (not always) this has led to a neglect of spiritual formation, acquiring skills and expertise rather than developing grace and godliness. As vital as administration and techniques might be, pastoral leadership is never to be defined by their acquisition. David Ferguson has commented that “the tendency [in theological education] to allow models of research excellence and professional training to dominate our curricula militates against the possibility that the study of theology might actually contribute to our sanctification.”² Even as evangelicals, we have not always emphasised the importance of the relationship between belief and behaviour or orthodoxy and orthopraxy. At various times, and in different contexts, we have stressed one over against the other. Yet, theology and spirituality, doctrine and life, belief and behaviour belong together. Calvin’s Institutes of the Christian Religion were essentially an exposition of spiritual theology. Thus those who are involved in theological education “must think of themselves as spiritual directors,”³ and reclaim the truth that theological education is much more than gaining intellectual knowledge and includes the “skill of living well.”⁴

This model of theological education may presuppose a believing community of scholars and students who are not only learning together in lectures and tutorials, but also praying and worshipping together. As more and more theological education is taking place in the context of secular faculties, and within the structure of university validated courses, we must be careful not to lose the cutting edge of spiritual formation as the foundation of effective ministry. In the context of universities where the majority of religious studies students are not believers – some of which may be Buddhist, Islamic or pagan – the vitality of spirituality demonstrated in the lives of Christian students will often speak more effectively of the gospel than theological convictions.

Von Balthasar argues that by the end of the 13th century, Western Christianity saw “the disappearance of the ‘complete’ theologian...the theologian who is also a saint.”⁵ Whereas Anselm’s *Proslogion*, a theological treatise that plumbs the mystery of God’s existence, was set in the form of a deeply moving prayer, the rise of the ‘Schools’ led to a more analytical and speculative theological enterprise. The connection between mind and heart began to fade.

We need a spirituality that is theological and a theology that is spiritual. Theological reflection and spiritual renewal are, ideally speaking, intended to be a seamless whole. Theology was always meant to be more than an intellectual exercise, a matter of belief and behaviour, of heart and of head. A theology that is not intimately related to spirituality will inevitably become removed from the realities of daily discipleship and life in the world. On the other hand, spirituality needs theology so that it doesn’t descend into a narcissistic quest for personal fulfilment, and so that some sort of theological criteria of evaluation and interpretation can be given to our experience.⁶

Richard of St. Victor stresses that it is useless to know about God unless we have a passionate longing for him, because “it is vain that we grow in riches of divine knowledge unless by them the fire of love is increased in us.”⁷ Similarly, Henri Nouwen speaks of the “future of Christian leadership” and calls for “seminaries and divinity schools...to become centres where people are trained in true discernment of the signs of the time. This cannot be just an intellectual training. It requires a deep spiritual formation involving the whole person – body, mind and heart.”⁸ When we recapture such a vision of theological education as the spiritual formation of mind and heart, we will truly be ‘forming leaders for God’s people’ within the twenty-first century. Bernard of Clairvaux is cited as saying “there are many who seek knowledge for the sake of knowledge. That is curiosity. There are others who desire to know in order that they may make themselves known – that is vanity. But there are some who seek knowledge in order to serve and edify others. And that is love.”

I have discovered that secular universities are not reticent in accepting courses on subjects such as spiritual development involving students in using a spiritual journal, going on a silent retreat, developing contemplative prayer experiences, as well as exploring the historical roots of classical spirituality. A tutor must learn not only to share his knowledge but also an honest interpretation of his own spiritual journey that will enable students to develop their own patterns of spirituality. In the context of evangelical theological colleges we ought to enable students to learn insights from different continents and theological traditions other than their own. Many Protestants are beginning to discover the classic texts of the long, diverse and fruitful Catholic spiritual tradition. We should be willing to learn from the ‘base Christian communities’ of Latin America who emphasise the need for social justice, the quiet mysticism of Asia, the silence of much Catholic spirituality and the joy and vibrancy of Pentecostals and Charismatics with their expectancy of the ‘surprising work of God.’

Open Theological Approach to Scholarship

In my own formal academic experience I have valued the challenge of intellectual rigour, academic integrity, a commitment to what Anselm called “faith seeking understanding:” to stretch students’ minds and horizons; to enable them to think through issues of faith and discipleship, using the best tools of scholarship that are available to us. This must involve encouraging students to be life-long learners, pushing them to seek to discern the length and breadth and height and depth of God’s revelation that comes through an engagement with the minds and hearts of God’s people from all Christian traditions, so that our understanding of biblical truth is always growing – for “God has yet more truth to spring forth from his holy word.”

This paradigm of education will go beyond a pedagogical model of filling our students’ minds with information, but will encourage independent research skills. Doing so will enable students and ministers, when faced with questions not discussed within a classroom setting, to be able to resource themselves and be self-feeders working through issues on the anvil of their minds and hearts, relating their discovery of truth to the lives of those to whom they minister.

Contextual Theology

The Lausanne Covenant⁹ challenges churches to be “deeply rooted in Christ and closely related to their culture.” Our own postmodern culture is crying out for a compelling presentation of the gospel of Christ that makes connections with people in their daily living, offering a message of hope in the midst of despair. Yet, if the church is to communicate the good news of Jesus to a society that is becoming increasingly ‘post-Christian,’¹⁰ we must express it in ways that are meaningful. This will involve ministers in a pattern of initial and continuing education in the concepts and context of our world, engaging in a critical analysis of the times in which we live so that we understand the way people think, the perplexing issues they are grappling with and thus apply the good news of God’s love to the lives they are living. In this way the church will be able to engage in “the prophetic and missionary calling that is the fundamental task of the followers of Christ.”¹¹

We need to equip women and men for the future leadership of the church, enabling them to follow Paul into the ‘market place’ of our own communities and ‘try to convince’ our contemporaries by ‘speaking out boldly, and arguing persuasively about the kingdom of God’ so that the unreached peoples of Britain ‘hear the word of the Lord’ in a way that makes sense. Although the issue of ‘relevance’ can be over-emphasised, the question of how we relate a curriculum of theological reflection to the issues of our contemporary culture is one which cannot be avoided. Indeed the strict disciplinary boundaries which continue to dominate theological education make it all too possible to become engrossed in the theological enterprise for its own sake rather than for the sake of the *missio Dei*. Throughout our theological studies we need to make connections with the needs of the church and the lostness of the world.

For example, although the biblical message is that ‘all have sinned’ and that ‘Christ died for our sins’ the way in which different words are used for sin makes us realise that the awareness of the basic human predicament will change from age to age and so will the particular emphasis we make in our presentation of the message of the cross. This does not mean reducing the message of Christianity so that it becomes palatable to human taste. Rather, we should allow Christ crucified

(understood through the various models of atonement) to be seen as the reality which men and women need to know within their hearts. And this understanding will be possible because contact points have been made, bridges have been built, between the message of the first century and the lives of people in the 21st century.

Once again, a university-validated course should incorporate courses on evangelism and mission that include the opportunity for hands-on experience in church and community of sharing the Christian faith. Placement modules that encourage students to visit the church in different parts of the world will encourage students from the west to see that the Christian church can still be strong and vibrant in its witness.

Public Theology

A visit to Edinburgh will normally include a sightseeing trip down the Royal Mile, the road that leads from Holyrood Palace to Edinburgh Castle. Just below St Giles, the kirk of John Knox there is the old market cross - the place where people used to meet to gossip, to hear public proclamations, to witness public executions, to buy and sell their goods. Looking East you can almost catch a sight of the Royal Palace. Looking west you can see the back door to the new Scottish Parliament. Looking south you walk a few yards to the Law Courts. Looking North you are face to face with the City Chambers. Right in the heart of Edinburgh - old and new - the market cross is positioned at the heart of the city. Theology needs to be positioned there too.

One of the dangers of theological education within faith communities such as seminaries and colleges is that we engage in the in-house language of a ghetto that has few lines of communication open to the outside world. David Tracy speaks of the importance of affirming "the authentically public character of all theology."¹² In the arena of public debate, locally, nationally and even internationally, we have the opportunity, indeed the obligation to witness to the truth of the gospel and its impact on church and culture. Such witness requires confidence that our talk about God can contribute to what is going on in our world and to the pressing issues of justice facing people of societies today.

In a postmodern culture with a morally fragmented context - often celebrated by society - the church today faces a religious pluralism and DIY spirituality, not so different from the Gnosticism of the ancient world in which our faith was born. Christian theology must be careful to avoid any dilution of our true convictions - presenting them in humility, mindful of the church's not-always-glorious past which lives on to dog our steps, but confident in the nature of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

One of my favourite groups of people within our own spiritual heritage are the Anabaptists - part of the Radical Reform movement in Europe. They believed that the church was the present realisation of the kingdom of God within society, a representation of the coming of God's kingdom to this world, a symbol of hope. This did not mean that Anabaptists were introspective, seeking only the renewal of the church. Political, economic and social goals no less than religious and theological ones were advocated.¹³ They brought the critique of scripture to bear upon the existing economic arrangements in Europe which they said were exploitative, advocating a better way of life through their own communities which became prototypes of a more just society. They have been described as a "radical liberation movement within church and society."¹⁴ Not only were Anabaptists moved by the needs of individuals within society, but they endeavoured to seek the transformation of society through presence and evangelism. Their communities were 'outposts of the kingdom' which proclaimed the vision of a more just society, where God's rule would be embraced. They realised that the kingdom of God challenged the patterns and structures of public life as well as the lives of individuals. They did not believe that economic and social issues were peripheral to God's kingdom but rather that the whole of life should be regulated by the norms of the kingdom of God. Anabaptists were convinced that the church had a responsibility of social concern for the needs of those within and outside of the family of God. For Anabaptists there was no dichotomy between the spiritual and social needs of humankind. They shared a broad vision of what constituted the mission of God in church and culture.

Pastoral Theology - rooted in the life of the Christian community

In one sense pastoral theology exists in the academy to affirm that all theology is practical - related to the life of discipleship. To teach theology without encouraging application is, it seems to me, irresponsible and unintelligible. Andrew Kirk maintains that 'Theology to be theology, must have a personal dimension oriented to the present: that is, to personal, openly declared preferences involving engagement and commitment, including solid identification with the Christian community.'¹⁵ For the credibility - and audibility and visibility - of the gospel the local church will be the key. Traditional Evangelicalism has been strong in the production of abstract thought-forms - doctrine, theology, creed, principles - but it now needs to see the connection between theology and ecclesiology so that in an age of non-commitment the people of God may see the vitality of the local congregation as a means of their spiritual pilgrimage.

This will mean that within the curricula, we should include the opportunities to experience placements within the life of the local church, para-church organisations and the local community. Such practical experience will enable students to see the integration of theological study and practical experience, thus enriching the student's experience of pastoral life, widening the student's understanding of human needs within society and the way in which the Christian faith is relevant to the whole of life, seeking to develop practical skills related to ministry in the local church and surrounding community.

Theological education must enable the future leaders of the church to understand the challenges that we face at this particular moment in human history, critiquing our failures, as well as providing guidance as to how we might recover our vision and be renewed in faith, hope and obedience to the purposes of God for His world.

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