

THE PRACTICE OF THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION—SIX ESSENTIAL ADJECTIVES

I find it very hard to believe that I have been involved in theological education in the Canadian province of Ontario for twenty-five years—and eight years beyond that if I count my time as a student at Wycliffe College. Twenty-five years is long enough to form some definite convictions regarding the way theological education should be done and long enough to have tested these convictions to see whether or not they are practical. I have also functioned in a variety of roles, from junior professor—when I first started in the autumn of 1982 at Central Baptist Seminary, then here in Toronto—to principal—where I am currently bringing to a close my tenure at Toronto Baptist Seminary. As such I feel I have some experience, fallible though it is due to my limitations as a human being and as a Christian, to back up these convictions.

In what follows, I have organized my thoughts around what I consider to be the six essential adjectives in the practice of theological education—confessional, missional, ecclesial, spiritual, academic and doxological.

CONFESSIONAL

The day in which we live is not friendly to confessions. In particular, there is a reading of Baptist history that asserts that Baptists have primarily been committed to liberty of conscience and have thus eschewed the use of confessions since confessions all too easily bind the conscience. Confessions, though, are deeply rooted in the life of the church, going all the way back to the apostolic testimony in Holy Scripture.¹ To be sure, they do not stand on the same footing with the infallible Word of the living God. Nevertheless, as summaries of Scriptural doctrine—both primary issues and secondary matters—they are helpful for setting the parameters within which Christian teaching must take place.

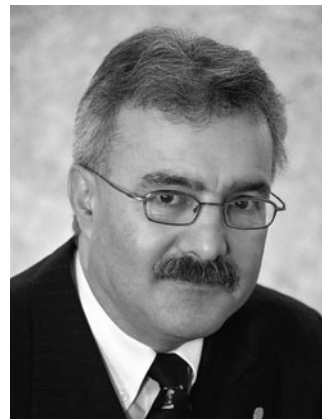
Seminaries are called, first and foremost, to be places where biblical truth is taught and handed on. In a sense Jesus



expects nothing less. In Matthew 28:19-20, our Lord gave specific command to His followers that they had to be about the business of teaching all that He had commanded them, not adding to His commands and teaching or omitting His instructions because they might be onerous, but faithfully teaching all that He taught and all that He commanded.

Similarly, in 2 Timothy 1:13-14 and 2:2, the apostle Paul instructs his friend Timothy to pass on the faith—which he clearly understands to be a body of doctrine—to “faithful men,” who in turn can teach others. To depart from essentials of the faith in order to satisfy our western hunger to be “original” is not faithfulness, but heterodoxy (see 1 Timothy 1:3).

A seminary must be confessional then and committed to the passing on of biblical truth to all who study within her walls. In turn,



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Students need to commit themselves to an “all-round ministry,” to use C.H. Spurgeon’s term, in which preaching and mentoring, discipling and simply loving God’s people are all seen as a part of leading God’s people. In particular, it needs to be stressed that the goal of preaching and teaching is to make men lovers of God and other people.

those who teach must be committed, without mental reservation, to the school’s confession and be seeking to have their minds shaped by the infallible Word. This also means that Christian theology, both systematic and biblical theology, needs to have a significant place in a seminary’s curriculum.

MISSIONAL

Matthew 28:19-20, to which reference has been made above, is something of an iconic text for Baptists, since embedded in it is what we call the Great Commission, namely, the command to make disciples of all of the nations of this earth. If that is central to our Lord’s intentions for the church, it must be central to the seminary.

The school must cultivate a missionary spirit. Students need to be challenged and encouraged to think globally about the spread of the gospel to the ends of the earth and what role they can play in that spread. There needs to be courses on missions and, if finances permit, short-term missions trips planned that can give first-hand exposure to the mission field.

Moreover, home missions should not be neglected. If there is no passion to reach the lost across the street with

the good news, it is unlikely that there will be any real passion to go to the other side of our globe to evangelize.

ECCLESIAL

Seminaries exist to serve the churches and thus they need to be owned by the churches. It is noteworthy that all of the leading theologians in church history down to the middle of the nineteenth century—apart from a few like Origen (c. 185-254 A.D.), the remarkable Bible exegete from Alexandria—were pastors. Theology and theological education was inextricably linked to the life of the church. The current separation of the theological academy and the church that prevails in far too many sectors of Western Christianity is neither healthy nor biblical.

This means that the men who are called to teach in our seminaries should be men with pastoral experience—they are after all training pastors and future leaders of local churches—and not only gifted academics. They must share the same passion for the church that our Lord exhibited. As Paul puts it in Ephesians 5:25, Christ loved the church and died for her. So seminary teachers must be men who love the church.

Regrettably some seminary professors appear to be men in love first and foremost with academics or with teaching itself. While such might fit in university religion departments, they really should not be in seminaries, where men are being trained to be lovers of the people of God. One of the great challenges in educating seminarians is thus to help them realize that being a pastor or leader in a local church has to be about more than enjoying preaching or public teaching. Students need to commit themselves to an “all-round ministry,” to use C.H. Spurgeon’s term, in which preaching and mentoring, discipling and simply loving God’s people are all seen as a part of leading God’s people. In particular, it needs to be stressed that the goal of preaching and teaching is to make men lovers of God and other people (1 Timothy 1:5).

Courses, therefore, in pastoral ministry and homiletics need to be given. But there also needs to be hands-on mentoring in local churches. Ultimately, one learns these aspects of pastoral ministry through their practice in the context of a local church.

SPIRITUAL

In the last ten years or so I have become more aware of how odd seminary education can be. We give courses in Bible and theology, historical theology and the biblical languages, all with a goal of helping the students become “ministers of the Word” (Luke 1:2). But the apostles knew themselves to be called to the ministry of the Word—and to prayer (Acts 6:4). But to judge by the way that we evangelicals have omitted spiritual formation and courses in prayer from our theological curricula, it appears we have assumed that the

latter—prayer—can be picked up by osmosis! Seminaries need to be about the business of teaching spiritual disciplines and spiritual formation, and helping men and women grow spiritually. One of the prerequisites for ministry in the Apostolic Church was, after all, the fullness of the Spirit (see Acts 6:3, 5).

ACADEMIC

We do not want forget the place of piety in the life of a seminary. But nor should we think that piety can replace academic excellence. It is not a case of either—both are needed. Baynard Rush Hall (d. 1863), who was the principal of the first state seminary in Indiana from 1824 to 1831, where he taught ancient languages, has a fascinating anecdote that reminds us of the importance of learning. In a partly autobiographical work, *The New Purchase*, Hall describes the visit of an itinerant preacher to a rural Indiana community in the 1820s. The meeting took place in a room of a neighbour's house, below which some pigs and geese had been gathered for shelter in a sort of basement. The itinerant preacher employed a chair for a pulpit, which he would thump now and then in order to emphasize his points.

“Thare’s some folks, howsomever,” he began, glancing at [Hall] and his family, “What thinks preachers must be high larn’d, afore they kin tell sinners as how they must be saved or be ’tarnally lost: but it ain’t so I allow—(chair thumped here and answered by a squawk below)—no, no! This apostul of ourn what spoke the text never rubbed his back agin a collige, nor toted about no sheepskins—no, never!—(thump! thump! squawk and two grunts)—Oh, worldlins! How you’d a perished in your sins if the fust preachers had a stay’d till they got sheepskins. No! no! no! I say, give me the sperit.”

Hall concluded by noting that he and his family always returned from such meetings convinced that an educated ministry was not so great a curse as some thought it to be!


In downplaying learning we lose sight of the implications of what Jesus called the “first and great commandment” (Matthew 22:38) for intellectual study: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength” (Mark 12:30). In making this statement, Jesus was citing the *Shema*’ from Deuteronomy 6:5, that foundational confession of God’s ancient people. Jesus’ words faithfully follow the Septuagint’s rendition of this verse with one notable addition: the Lord Christ adds the phrase “and with all your mind.” To build a case against anti-intellectualism on this addition would be taking far too many liberties with the



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text, but the inclusion of the various aspects of human nature, probably to stand for the human being in his or her entirety, and the repetition of the word “all” surely indicate that God claims the whole person for Himself. God has made each of us to love Him with the entirety of our being: with our affections, with our wills and *with our minds*.

DOXOLOGICAL

Finally, seminaries must never forget that the ultimate goal of all of their doings is the praise of God and the glorification of His dear Son, our Lord Jesus. We study and teach, participate in chapel and fellowship over lunch, file applications and answer telephones ultimately for this greatest of reasons: that the Triune God might be adored and glorified. 

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1 See, for example, 1 Corinthians 12:3; Ephesians 4:4-6; 1 John 4:1-6.