THE FUTURE OF THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION
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Introduction
Seminary education has become an important part of the fabric of church life in American and western Christian culture. It has come to be expected that any person’s call to the ministry will eventually result in that person attending a seminary to prepare for local church service. Even with this expectation, seminary represents different things to different people. For some, it is a place to receive the credentials necessary for ministry. Others see seminary as a place to study the great ideas of religion. In my opinion, the best seminaries represent training academies to equip men and women to fulfill their calling in the service of the local, New Testament church.

Education equals progress is the mantra for many people in the modern western world. This mantra incorporates the ideas of many in theological education as well. Seminary education has become such an important part of the basic fabric of church life that the call to ministry is seen as the admission process to a theological seminary.

Though prognostications about the future of anything are precarious, this article will examine some possibilities and eventualities based on the writer’s several decades of experience in higher theological education. The future of theological education may not be ideal, but compelling forces are shaping the current theological-training landscape. The opinions in this article are based on the observations of the author and may, in some cases, be anecdotal in nature. Nevertheless, these observations are based on over twenty years of experience as a faculty member and administrator in accredited, theological higher education.

Why theological Education?

In Acts 6 the pastor/teachers of the congregation in Jerusalem faced a problem that detracted from what these leaders considered their main duty—prayer and the ministry of the word. In response to this, a system was put in place to protect the praying/preaching priority. Though seminary was not part of this story, theological education should have the same priorities—protecting the emphasis on the payer-life of ministers and the proclaiming of the Word of God. Once the solution had been proposed and the congregation approved, the Bible says that “the word of God kept on spreading; and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith.”

So we see not only that the objective of the ministers was accomplished but also that the work of the Lord prospered. The measurement of the work’s prosperity was an increase in evangelism. So if we were to take these ideas and enumerate them we would see a template for theological education.
(1) A Priority on Prayer in the Life of the Minister.

Because prayer is often viewed in simplistic terms the belief that significant resources should be allocated to its refinement can easily be dismissed. Nevertheless, fervent effectual prayer is an acquired skill. Prayer is not complicated to understand but it requires spiritual discipline to carry out.

(2) The Ministry of the Word.

The phrase “ministry of the word” reflects marvelous focus. The Word of God effects change, not the philosophical outpourings of the human mind. A seminary should focus on the content of Scripture and not be lured by the false chimera of incorporating a religious philosophy as the mark of thorough religious training for ministers. Simply put, a measurement of a seminary’s effectiveness should be do their graduates know the Bible, not just know about the Bible (its background, culture, etc.)? No indictment can be greater than that ministers of the Gospel of Jesus Christ should lose their confidence in the Word of God and their focus on the Word of God while in graduate theological education.

Any formal study of the Word of God should build a confidence in the nature and authority of the truth revealed from Heaven. The view that the Bible is inerrant, without error, represents an essential foundation in any seminary education. Schools that abandon a high view of Scripture lose their biblical authority and merely become indoctrination centers bent on conforming their graduates to the worldly philosophy of compromise. This loss of mandate results in the dilution of confidence in the truth of God.

Beyond a belief in the Bible is a submission to the truths that it teaches. This submission must take place on the part of the institution and be promoted to and passed on in the lives of seminarians. A biblical world-view means that the Scriptures are authoritative for the personal life of the minister which is then passed on to each member of their congregation.

Finally, the content of Scripture must be thoroughly absorbed by the student in a theological context. Understanding a few biblical themes is no substitute for a comprehensive knowledge of each book, chapter, and verse of the Bible.

(3) An Emphasis on the Practical

True seminary education should also focus on practical training in ministry. This approach may seem to deemphasize the academic portion of seminary life since some people think a seminary is merely an academic institution. However, the end product of seminaries must be to train God-called ministers with a practical knowledge of local-church ministry.

This type of practical approach requires a unique type of faculty. These professors must be credentialed in their fields and experienced practitioners of their crafts. Furthermore, they must possess the ability to communicate their information and experiences in a way in which students can incorporate the lessons into their own ministry skill set.

Various terms and phrases are used to describe the passing of the torch from professor to student. The mentoring concept provides an adequate
description of the transference of proper ministry from one generation to the next. In the largest sense this transference is part discipleship, part leadership modeling, and part indoctrination. Effective ministers must be nurtured, encouraged, challenged, and given relevant experience during their seminary course of study.

**Stress Points in the Theological Education Climate**

(1) The Numbers Game

Most theological educators have their ideal of what theological education should look like and produce. The recipients of that education, local churches, and ministries also have their ideals of what the educated seminarian should look like, act like, and believe. Students have their own sets of expectations for what the seminary experience should produce in their lives. However, a number of factors limit the achievement of the ideals of the seminaries, the students, and the local church ministries. These limiting factors can include the prevailing cultural climate, economic pressures on both student and institution, and the challenge of credentialing.

In many discussions of the status of seminaries today two factors receive immediate attention: students and money. This discussion stems, in part, because of a prevailing western culture of equating numerical growth with success. Because of this cultural view, it is an easy leap to equate enrollment growth with God’s blessing on the theological institution. Growing enrollment is considered divine and declining enrollment is thought to be cursed. To continue enrollment growth some institutions feel the need to redefine their purpose and broaden the net, so to speak, in attracting students. This pressure is so pervasive that some thoroughly biblical institutions move from training saved and called individuals to enrolling a multi-religious student body in the name of ministry. The move from specialization to generalization is given spiritual labels to authenticate this change, but the fact is that if the traditional, or core, student base was growing, the institutions would never have made the change.

Money. The American educational system has become dependent on external financial supply. In many cases it is unrealistic to think that students could self-fund their theological education. The astronomical costs the school feels obligated to pass on would be out of reach for all but a select few. The American government has stepped in with loan programs that help the student to mortgage their future so that the school does not have to mortgage theirs. Some of the costs imposed on institutions are because of the need for accreditation and the encumbrances that institutional credentialing involves. The building programs of some institutions almost resemble an arms race between neighboring nations. The facility that one school has today must be replicated by the competitor school tomorrow.

Schools that are funded by tuition dollars realize one inescapable truth: more students equal more money. This truth is yet another point of pressure to redefine the mission of theological education. What once was the purview of Christian colleges--broad, Christ-centered education--is now the domain of
theological seminaries. Ministry training is now just an option on the ever-growing menu of studies at the seminary of your choice. By trying to be relevant to all people, seminaries risk becoming irrelevant to their original intent.

(2) Theological Drift
The traditional foes of conservative theological education have been theological drift and the loss of a fervent spiritual climate. Modern pragmatic stresses may do what liberalism could not—redefine theological education. In fact William Clebsch, in his book *Sacred to Profane in America*, postulated that Christianity in America was excellent at beginning institutions, but was unable to hold on to them and eventually lost their work to secularism.3

(3) Political Correctness
An increase in politically-correct ideology is the opening salvo in the war on theological education that is ongoing in the West. With many faith-based schools dependent on federal monies, no need will exist for persecution to alter their mission. The very threat of government defunding will be enough to drive the school out of business or out of the ministry. Other schools may survive longer, but the need for credentialing (accreditation) will be the next blow to fall. Surrender your views or surrender your credentials will be the choice. The few institutions that survive these hammer blows may be so transformed as to be unrecognizable in today’s academic milieu.

My assumption is that pastor to pastor will become the final model of theological education. It will not be efficient and maybe not as effective. Some leaders who are great at local church ministry are not natural teachers and trainers.

Ironically, the last of the Bible-believing theological educators may need to operate in a clandestine manner. Passing the torch while guarding the window will be very much like the early church under Roman persecution. So the end may well look like the beginning. The shape of training will not be influenced by convenience or pragmatism but by the need to survive, evangelize, and see that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is carried to the ends of the earth, regardless of the cost or consequences.

Finally, true theological education has a passion and a practice for personal evangelism. The founding President of Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary, Dr. B. Gray Allison, has said, “I learned a good bit about evangelism from Dr. Roland Q. Level, president and professor of evangelism at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary (NOBTS) when I was his student.” Allison, who is president emeritus and professor of church history, evangelism, missions, and homiletics at Mid-America continued, “I served as his teaching fellow and caught something of his spirit. Since that time, I have been trying to teach others how to witness. I have had a burden to train others since that time, which was in the early 1950s”.4

If the heartbeat of Gray Allison is perpetuated in theological education, seminaries will have a bright future regardless of the circumstances.

For an excellent treatment of this subject see the documentary film *Ivory Tower* produced by paramount Studio for Cable News Network, Inc., 2014.
