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Instructions for Preparing an Interactive Review

Doctor of Ministry

An "interactive review," as defined for this purpose, is a very specific type of article prepared precisely according to the following criteria:

1. The interactive review is two (8 1/2 by 11 inch) pages in length. The text is to be single-spaced and must be either an 11 or 12-point standard font. One-inch (2.5 cm) margins should be provided on all sides of the paper.

2. At the top of the first page, give your name and state the facts of publication of the book or article in standard bibliographic form.

3. The first half page presents the message, or burden, of the book or article. The message should be stated in terms sympathetic to the author and without explicit or implicit critique.

4. The second half page presents an evaluation of the book or article. Identify its strong points (what did you like about?), the weaknesses you observed, why these strengths/weaknesses are important, and recommend who should (or should not!) read this article or book.

5. The second page is given to reflection on the book or article. What lessons can we learn from this author? How were your views confirmed? How have you changed as a result of this reading? What do you want to do differently (or help your church do differently) in the future? (Note: special attention should be given to the clarity and depth of reflection.)

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The Role of Theology in Theological Education

by Robert W. Ferris

Source: Elmer, D.H., and L. McKinney. 1996. With an Eye on the Future: Development and Mission in the 21st Century - Essays in honor of Ted W. Ward. Monrovia: MARC. Chapter Eight. Used by permission..

Throughout this century theological educators have vacillated between an uneasy acceptance of the incumbent approach to ministry and periodic reviews of the nature of their craft and calling. Despite shifts in secular culture and theological rhetoric, seminary curricula at the end of the twentieth century retain a recognizable continuity with that of the first North American seminary, founded in 1803. This curricular conservatism, and the assumptions on which it is founded, has been examined in major studies of American ministry education published in 1934 (Brown and May) and in 1956 (Niebuhr).

Currently, the nature and shape of ministry education are under review again. This round, which has been the most sustained and has produced by far the most extensive literature, was launched in 1983 by the publication of Edward Farley's *Theologia*. David Kelsey articulated the driving question of the current debate, however, when he asked, "What's theological about the theological school?" (Kelsey 1992).

Kelsey raises a fair — and important — question, one to which evangelicals owe a response. A biblical response to Kelsey's question, furthermore, can resolve ambiguities that contribute to dissatisfaction with current models of seminary education and that diminish the effectiveness of our theological schools. Before grappling with the role of theology in theological education, however, we must clarify the task of theology and the role of theological education in the church.

The Task of Theology

Central to any discussion of the education of the church's leadership is our understanding of the task of theology as a discipline field. Farley (1983) argues that *theologia* — the knowledge of God — was the task of theological education until the early eighteenth century.

With the spread of Enlightenment thinking in Europe, this deductive (predominantly Platonic) approach to theological studies was challenged by the inductive (Aristotelean) methods that were proving so productive in the natural sciences. Thus, the attention of theologians shifted from theologia to theological science — or, more specifically, to theological encyclopedia, the rational distinction and affiliation of theological disciplines (Farley, 1983, 49).

When challenge was raised to including a chair of theology among the professorships in the University of Berlin, Friedrich Schleiermacher argued that theology pursues a historically situated scientific method in establishing theological truth (Hough and Cobb 1985, 2). This argument for theology as science drew deeply from the streams of the encyclopedia movement, and Schleiermacher's *Brief Outline* on the *Study of Theology* (1811) unleashed a flood of theological encyclopedias within European theology (Farley 1983, 73).

Antedating Schleiermacher and with growing strength following him, the encyclopedia movement set forth a fourfold curriculum for theological studies. Bible, church history, dogmatics, and practical theology defined the curriculum for clergy education in Germany, in the rest of Europe, and in North America.

Schleiermacher's casting of *theology-as-science*, combined with this fourfold distinction of discipline fields, has engendered two devastating effects within theological education. Farley (1983) contends that the fundamental flaw in clergy education today is a fragmentation of theological studies. Rigorous pursuit of the four discipline fields has left theological education without a unifying center. With ongoing scholarly investment, furthermore, the disciplines continue to fragment into ever more discrete specialty fields. It is no secret that biblical and theological scholars orient themselves much more toward members of other faculties who share their specialty field than to colleagues on their own faculty. As a result, theological students are left to invent unifying theories of their own or, more commonly, to live in a fragmented world of theological disciplines and understandings.

A second destructive result of viewing theology as science Farley terms "surfeiting." Farley describes this effect in unmistakable terms.

> In disciplines whose subject matter is more or less fixed — for example, an ancient text — and in disciplines where there has been a surfeit of investigation, there is still a moving horizon of inquiry, but the focus is always on new methods to interpret that more or less fixed material. A book of an ancient canon or a famous literary figure from the past can be psychoanalyzed, deconstructed, psychohistoricized, structuralized, and phenomenologized. But the neomethodologies give scope only to a kind of artificial ingenuity whose subtleties grow more implausible with each new analysis (Farley 1988, 49).

When a speciality field is surfeited, scholars have only two lines of recourse: They can pursue ever finer strains of minutia, or they can apply new hermeneutics to the study of their fixed subject matter. Both avenues of research serve only the interests of the scholarly guild; practically, they are sterile. Yet this effect of the pursuit of theology-as-science is everywhere evident in American theological societies and seminaries at the end of the twentieth century.

The pursuit of theology-as-science — as its own, self-justifying end — cannot avoid the twin consequences of fragmentation and surfeiting. If theological studies are to recover wholeness and significance, another conceptualization of its task must be recognized.

Within historic orthodoxy and contemporary evangelicalism, an alternative understanding of theology's task emphasizes the articulation and ordering of biblical truth. As a revelational faith, biblical Christianity proclaims a message from God. The clear and orderly presentation of that message has been seen as the task of the theological sciences. Thus Erickson defines theology as,

> that discipline which strives to give a coherent statement of the doctrines of the Christian faith, based primarily upon

> the Scriptures, placed in the context of culture in general, worded in a contemporary idiom, and related to issues of life (Erickson 1983, 21).

Most evangelicals endorse this emphasis on message — "the doctrines of the Christian faith" — and conceive the task of theology (at least in part) as providing a coherent statement of this message. Revelation as inscripturated in the Bible, however, is not rationally ordered; much of the Bible is narrative history. While this history, and the message it bears, is consistent, it is not systematic. Herein lies the task of *theology-as-message*: to provide a clear and orderly presentation of the revealed message, primarily in the biblical text.

That God chose to set revelation in history rather than in creed or theological disposition, however, should not be overlooked. Since human rationality has its origins in God, God certainly could have revealed and inspired the ultimate statement of divine truth, rationally ordered and indisputably clear. That he did not, that he chose instead to give us a history of revelation, reflects God's intention that truth should be situated in life.

The pursuit of theology-as-message does not preclude situating truth, clarified and ordered, in life. Too often however, evangelical theologians have lost their way, producing works that obscure truth rather than clarifying the divine message. When we seek truth in abstraction, rather than truth in life, the goal of theology-as-message is forfeited even as the task is pursued. This should not amaze us, since pursuit of truth in abstraction, whether orthodox or heterodox, is indistinguishable from Schleiermacher's promotion of theology-as-science. In both cases theology becomes an end in itself, a self-justifying activity.

The solution to this tendency, clearly, is to reassert the biblical primacy of truth in life. As we clarify and order the biblical message, our theological task never is complete until we have specified the implications of the truth we handle for our lives and the lives of our students or readers.

A third understanding of the task of theology begins with the life situation of the reader. The role of the theologian, thus, is to bring to the biblical text questions arising from the social-historical context in order to determine the Christian response to that context. While liberation theologians have been the most explicit in advocating an understanding of *theology-as-engagement*, this view of the theologian's task neither originated with liberation theology nor does it require the Marxist assumptions characteristic of that movement. Indeed, orthodox and evangelical Christians always have brought to the authoritative Scriptures questions of truth, morality, and spirituality. As orthodox Christians brought questions to the Bible and found there the guidance they sought, communities have been ordered, governments have been established, legal codes have been framed, principles of Christian living have been clarified, and churches have been organized.

The modern missionary movement has sensitized us to the critical role of cultural assumptions and perspective. Although the biblical message does not change from culture to culture, the questions brought to the Bible by persons from different cultures vary widely. Contextualization, therefore, entails pursuit of theology-as-engagement, bringing to the Bible the questions that arise within a specific cultural context, and articulating the Bible's answers in ways which communicate within that culture. The differences among our Western theologies, Asian theologies, African theologies, and Latin theologies lie not in the *source* of the answer we proclaim — otherwise our theologies would not be Christian — but in the questions we bring.

In Titus 1:9, Paul stipulates that a church leader "must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it." Here, too, we see that the proper task of theology is clarification and articulation of the biblical message ("encourage others by sound doctrine") and engagement with challenges arising from the sociocultural context ("refute those who oppose it [truth]"). Thus, biblical and theological studies are rigorously pursued, but always with an eye to shaping character and equipping for ministry.
Whereas theology-as-science has proven to be misleading and sterile, evangelicals find both theology-as-message and theology-as-engagement to be fruitful and necessary understandings of theology's task. The theologian must listen to the Bible to clarify and order the expression of its message so that its implications for life and godliness are clear. Theologians also must listen to the historical-social cultures in which they live. The theologian must take to the Scriptures the questions of truth, morality, justice, and spirituality that arise from our cultures in order to declare God's authoritative truth to our communities. Thus, theology-as-message and theology-as-engagement are twin aspects of an evangelical understanding of theology's task.

The Role of Theological Education in the Church

If evangelical theological education in American currently reflects tragic confusion about the task of theology, our understanding of the role of theological education in the church is similarly fractured. The first American seminaries were established for the preparation of clergy, and contemporary seminaries without exception continue to profess that purpose. Nevertheless, Niebuhr's proposal that the theological school be viewed as an "intellectual center of the church's life" (1956, 107; cf. Gustafson 1988) is widely embraced by seminary faculties. Unfortunately, a tension between the intellectual and the equipping functions of seminary training commonly exists in our theological schools. Some even reserve the term theological education for the intellectual functions, while assigning the designation *ministry education* to the less prestigious task of clergy preparation (Dyrness 1993, 42).

Niebuhr's suggestion that *the theological school* functions as *an intellectual center of the church* can be useful or destructive, depending on one's understanding of the task of theology. When this view is wedded with the pursuit of theology-as-science, the seminary is indistinguishable from a graduate school of religion, spinning out and testing theological theories of negligible interest or significance to the church or to church leadership. Indeed, some evangelical seminaries today owe their irrelevance directly to this combination of understanding.

Theological education need not be irrelevant, however, even when the seminary is seen as an intellectual center of the church. When seminary faculties focus their efforts on the pursuit of theology-as-message and theology-as-engagement, the intellectual contribution of the theological school sustains and feeds the church and its leadership. Instead of occupying itself with arcane interests unique to the guild, attention is directed toward re-articulating the biblical message in contemporary language and idioms. Instead of re-arguing debates of the past or dignifying unbiblical scholarly proposals with serious response, effort is directed toward

an apologetic engagement of sociocultural realities and the spirit of our age. Our seminaries serve well as intellectual centers of the church when focus is given to contemporary communication of the biblical message and sensible apologetic challenge to unbiblical assumptions in our culture.

Even more central to an understanding of the role of theological education, however, is a proper appreciation of *the seminary as the church's center for clergy education*. It has become expected in some quarters to decry the distinction between clergy and laity in the church. It is not necessary to defend clerical dominance or lay passivity, however, to acknowledge the functional importance of recognized leadership within the church. Acts and the epistles, especially the pastorals, make clear that a vigorous, recognized leadership functioned within the apostolic church.

The passage most often cited to support the ministry of all believers is Ephesians 4:11-12:

> It was he [Christ] who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up.

Clearly, the work of ministry belongs to the saints — all those whom Christ has made holy. The gifts of the risen Christ to his church are individuals; apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastor-teachers are mentioned, but the list may not be exhaustive. In the light of this list (as well as the New Testament evidence mentioned above), it is difficult to conceive a case against the exercise of church leadership.

As significant as the existence of leaders within the church is the role designated for these special individuals. Their task, as given by the risen Christ, is to "equip" the saints. The term used *(katartismas)* means "to set in order" or "to prepare for use." Church leaders do not assign or distribute special gifts to believers, this is the work of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12:7-11). Gifting alone, however, does not prepare believers to employ their gifts in the practice of ministry. The missing element is equipping; church leaders must "equip the saints for the work of ministry." Effective service — building up the body of Christ — is the combined effect of the Spirit's gifting, the church leaders' equipping, and the saints' labor in ministry. Thus, church leaders are equippers who prepare Christians to use their spiritual gifts in ministries to the congregation and to the non-Christian community, both local and global.

The focus here is the leaders' role in equipping believers for fruitful service. We might ask, however, about the equippers themselves. If the saints are gifts, yet require equipping to be effective, it is reasonable (by analogy) to recognize that equippers also must be equipped for their equipping ministry. It is the Word, the inspired Scriptures, that God uses to shape our lives and to minister through us to others. Knowledge of the Scriptures, however, is not a spiritual gift. Neither is the most gifted teacher-discipler exempt from learning how his or her equipping gifts are most effectively used. Equippers themselves need to be equipped. This is the role of the seminary as the church's center for clergy education.

The seminary's role as intellectual center of the church is integral to its role as center for clergy education, and vice versa. As seminary faculty interpret the biblical message to our age and engage the issues of our culture with biblical challenge and response, church leaders are provided models for the use of Scripture within their own ministries. The task of theology does not exhaust the task of the seminary; equipping has other dimensions which must be pursued, as well. Positioning theology (understood as message and engagement) within clergy education, however, restores clarity and focus to the task of theological education.

First and foremost, then, the seminary is the church's center for clergy education, equipping those God has chosen and gifted to equip his saints. As essential aspect of this equipping task is careful instruction in theology — not losing itself in pursuit of scholarship for its own sake, but interpreting the Christian message into our socio-cultural context and exposing unbiblical assumptions and dogmas of our age. In doing so, the seminary functions as an intellectual center of the church, but always within the larger context of clergy education.

Theology and Theological Education Today

When our inquiry into the role of theology in theological education shifts from theology to observation, we find two distinct models extant among evangelical seminaries in America at the end of the twentieth century. Some embrace the task of *equipping the church's leadership as the seminary's central mission*. Without minimizing their role as the church's intellectual center, these seminaries focus attention and energy on equipping church leaders.

The faculties of these seminaries embrace a holistic understanding of their task. Since the biblical qualifications for congregational leadership emphasize Christian character and ministry effectiveness (skills), curricular priorities are given similar weighting. Attention to biblical and theological studies is not diminished in these seminaries, but it is directed toward equipping for ministry leadership.

These seminaries recognize that character cannot be taught; it develops when the truth of God's Word is met by obedient faith in the life of the believer. Although ministry skills may be taught, the dynamic of effective ministry never resides in human expertise. (Only as the Spirit of God empowers the Word of God are spiritual victories won; the most skillful minister is only the channel through whom God's power flows.) Nevertheless, accurate knowledge of biblical truth is requisite before God can convey that truth to others through us.

The alternative model champions *theological education as distinct from equipping for ministry*. Emphasis is placed on the theological school as the intellectual center of the church, not with a wholesome focus on theology-as-message and theology-as-engagement, but as a home for theology-as-science — for theological studies as ends in themselves. Because the seminary's role as center for clergy education cannot be totally ignored, the commitment and engagement of the faculty is torn in two directions.

In some cases this schizophrenia regarding task and mission is institutionalized by dividing the seminary into two discrete units — a school of theology and a school of missions. This is a troubling — and troublesome — development.

As we have seen above, when the task of the seminary is identified with theology as an end in itself, theological education cannot avoid the twin consequences of fragmentation and surfeiting. To retain wholeness and significance, theology must be pursued in the context of ministry — in interpretation of the biblical message and

in dialogue with non-Christian elements of our culture. Focus on ministry provides a needed discipline on the pursuit of theology. Creation of a school of theology separate from a school of missions liberates biblical and theological scholars from this essential discipline.

Surprisingly, perhaps, separation of a school of missions from a school of theology can be equally harmful to the ministry and missiological disciplines. Freed from the constraints of careful engagement with the biblical text, instruction for church and mission leadership tends to emphasize strategy and methods. Often this leads to an uncritical dependence on the social sciences. The social sciences bring helpful perspective to equipping for ministry when their assumptions and findings are biblically tested. This biblical scrutiny is easily slighted, however, when theological and missiological faculties are structurally insulated in separate schools. The ministry and missiological disciplines suffer when they are undisciplined by careful biblical and theological studies.

Institutional structures may facilitate or hinder the integration of theology and ministry, but they also can be deceiving. Within seminaries divided between a school of theology and a school of missions, either or both units may seek to pursue an integrated model of theological education. A school of theology may intentionally locate theology within a context of ministry, or a school of missions may intentionally focus the theological foundations of ministry. Similarly, ample evidence exists that an undivided seminary structure is no guarantee of an active and productive integration of theology and ministry. An undivided seminary structure offers a more natural context for realizing curricular integration, but intentionality is crucial.

When intentionally and actively pursued, a focused commitment to equipping the church's leadership avoids the pitfalls of isolation. By placing theology within the context of ministry education, the unity of the seminary's task is preserved. Theology, rigorously pursued as message and engagement, is disciplined by its focus on ministry and by its ongoing dialogue with ministerial studies. Likewise, studies in ministry and missions are informed and disciplined by their ongoing dialogue with biblical and theological studies. Theology and missiology never occur in separation; constant dialogue is maintained.

When this dialogue is interrupted, whatever its confessional stance, theological education is less than Christian.

Conclusion

We now are able to address directly Kelsey's question, "What's theological about the theological school?" Our answer is, everything! Theology is central to the mission and task of the theological school, not because theology is pursued as an end in itself, but because every aspect of the seminary's larger task — equipping for ministry — is theologically informed. Locating theology within the context of equipping for ministry affords a useful wall against pursuit of theology-as-science while, at the same time, counteracting dangerous tendencies toward over-dependence on social sciences in ministry and missiological training.

Intentional integration of theology and ministry in theological education is both biblical and prudent. Isolation of theological and ministry studies distorts our understanding of our task, with destructive effect on the church and its leadership. Theological educators, in America and around the world, need to preserve, pursue, and exploit this biblical integration.

Note

1In adopting the term theology-as-science, I do not intend to question all of the qualities associated with scientific activity. The quest for an over-arching understanding of the discipline field and commitment to rigorous pursuit of appropriate tasks clearly are legitimate and important. My focus, rather, is on the self-justifying assumptions which often attend scientific research. It is theology pursued as an end in itself that is in view here. It is true that Schleiermacher's case for a chair of theology at the University of Berlin also turned on an argument for the professional preparation of clergy for the state church. The churchward orientation implied in this assertion, however, is barely evidenced in the ensuing development of German theology. Today, for many on our Western seminaries faculties, the pursuit of theology-as-science — theology as its own, self-justifying end — has thoroughly overwhelmed any engagement with communicating Christian truth in the realities of parish ministry.

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