

Challenges to Theological Education Today

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The topic assigned to me is “Challenges to theological education today.” I am afraid that, as I thought about this topic, I decided that the greatest challenge before me is to try to say something helpful on the subject within the scope of 25 minutes or less. So, allow me to move directly into the subject.

We are all aware that there are many challenges facing theological education today. Students who used to choose a school on the basis of denominational loyalties, theological orientation, and academic standing now are increasingly making that choice on the basis of location and ease of access. While online learning is here to stay, we still do not know what it will eventually mean in terms of pedagogy and curriculum, nor in terms of enrollments. Probably the most obvious challenge is financial. There are many theological schools under serious financial stress, some to the point of crisis. Schools that a few decades ago seemed to have their future assured have seen their endowments depleted. Some have had to sell part of their campus. A school that held one of the most important theological libraries in the nation has had to invite a neighboring university to take charge of it. The oldest free-standing theological seminary in the nation has sold its campus and joined Yale Divinity School.

Yet, although I shall briefly return to the emerging financial challenges, this is not the greatest challenge. Indeed, the present financial difficulties are mostly due to a different and deeper challenge, the demographic challenge.

I do not need to dwell on census data that show the degree to which the entire nation's population is changing in terms of culture and ethnicity. We all know that the typical seminary student two decades ago is becoming less and less typical of the society in which we live. This is leading seminaries across the nation to develop programs specifically designed for ethnic and cultural minority students. While most of these are seeking to address Hispanic students, there are also programs for Korean-Americans, for Vietnamese, and others. I need not tell you that any institution that does not address the radically changing ethnic and cultural demography of the nation will soon find itself becoming less and less relevant. (Actually, I could mention several that are already in that situation. And –even more alarmingly – some that seem to be quite unaware of what is happening around them!)

And yet, as I look at the entire picture of theological education in this country, I would say that even this is not the greatest challenge.

That challenge is not so much in the demography of the population at large as it is in the demography of the church. Briefly stated, with the main exception of the Roman Catholic Church, the churches that have traditionally required an MDiv for ordination are not growing,

and most of them are declining in membership. Furthermore, the membership of many of these churches is much older than the population at large –which would seem to indicate that the crisis will not abate any time soon.

Thus, the first challenge that must be pointed out is the need to redefine the mission of educational institutions that have long been serving a church population that is diminishing. Think for instance of a denominational seminary that was founded to produce pastors and leaders for a denomination that now needs fewer and fewer pastors. If that institution does not widen its field of service, it will soon find itself either with fewer students or with a growing number of graduates it cannot place.

Then, there is the greater challenge that, just as traditional denominations no longer have the monopoly among church members, traditional seminaries accredited by ATS no longer have the monopoly on theological education. While the churches that have required or expected an MDiv for ordination are declining in membership, those that do not require it are growing among the population at large, but even more so among ethnic and immigrant minorities. I do not know the statistics, but I would expect that even in a city with a vast number of educational institutions such as Boston, the number of Latino and Latina pastors with an MDiv are vastly outnumbered by pastors who have never been to seminary. If Boston is similar to the rest of the nation, many of these pastors will have studied at a non-accredited Bible institute.

Thus, when we speak, as we do tonight, of “the challenges to theological education,” we must begin by redefining the subject itself, for the theological education offered by seminaries and schools of theology is no longer the theological education of many pastors and church leaders who are in active ministry.

How then can a seminary respond to these new challenges? Obviously, there is always the typical response: “We are accredited and they are not.” This may make us feel good and superior, but it does not respond to the challenge, and will further marginalize us.

Then, there are a number of alternative actions, each leading to new opportunities and new challenges.

The first of these—and one that is becoming increasingly common in ATS schools—is to develop two-year Masters programs for people who are already in ministry and whose ministry itself leads them to seek further education. There are many such people—pastors who have been serving for years without much formal theological education and now feel the need for study. One reason why many seminaries are developing such two-year Masters programs is that they are a means to augment their enrollment without requiring great changes in course offerings. One can easily admit into a two-year Masters program a pastor who did not go to seminary and seeks further study. That pastor is then placed in what are mostly the same courses that MDiv

students are taking. As I look at ATS statistics, it is clear that many schools are following this path.

Such two-year programs for people already in ministry are growing, not only because they are fairly painless for educational institutions, but also because they do meet a need, providing theological education for many who feel the need for it.

And yet, I fear that many schools that have taken this very commendable path have not realized the new challenges that will emerge from it. Allow me to mention two of them.

First, there is the pedagogical challenge. Most of our courses have been designed for people preparing for ministry, usually through an MDiv degree. People already in ministry can certainly benefit from such courses; but they are not designed for them. One cannot teach homiletics to a recent college graduate who has only stood at the pulpit on an occasional youth Sunday in the same way in which one teaches homiletics to a pastor of a large church who has been preaching for twenty years.

At present this is seldom a problem, for students enrolled in a two-year Masters program are generally grateful for the opportunity to study. But as their numbers grow, they will begin demanding a different curriculum and a different pedagogy. I see very little reflection on most schools of theology as to what this will mean not only for their pedagogy and their curriculum,

but also for their faculty recruitment, evaluation, and development. I also see very little reflection on how these Seminaries are to relate the numerous grassroots, non-accredited venues for theological education.

And finally, I return to the matter of financial challenges. If the trend I have just described continues, this will have serious difficulties for development and fund-raising efforts. Most seminaries have cultivated a pool of donors that are the main source of funding for annual budgets as well as for endowments. For generations they have developed that pool mostly by stressing the need for pastors and other church leaders for their own denominations or particular constituencies. People are told to support their denomination's seminary because it produces leaders for their denomination. To a lesser degree, non-denominational and interdenominational schools have also appealed to a particular segment of the church and of society, promising mostly to produce leaders for that segment—or perhaps also for different churches and constituencies overseas, but not next door.

Now, as the student body changes, as a growing portion of a graduating class represents other ethnicities, cultures, social strata, and denominations, it will become increasingly difficult to raise funds on that traditional basis. The money is still mostly in the same hands. But the manner in which that money has been raised will have to change drastically.

All of this may sound like a rather gloomy picture, one that should lead us to a pessimistic view of seminaries and their future. But in God's providence a challenge is also an opportunity for greater and more venturesome obedience. The challenges I have just described—and many others that could have been mentioned—are not merely the result of forces alien to the life of the church. They must be seen as also and above all a call from God to renewed obedience and a new future.

I can illustrate this point by referring to the two main challenges that I have just mentioned.

The challenge I have just been describing has to do with the need to raise funds with a different message. This challenge is a call to widen the educational task of the seminary, so that development and fund-raising campaigns are also part of an educational program that is not limited to our students, but also to the many believers who have traditionally supported us. Imagine a development office that sees its work as actual theological education—a theological education of potential donors, so that they may see the call of God in a future that many consider threatening, but is actually the future from which God is calling us.

Then there is the challenge of new programs of theological education emerging everywhere—in coalitions of local churches, in regional offices, and even in church basements. This challenge is a call not to stand on our privileged academic position to discredit such programs, but to embrace a view of theological education not as something that is done in seminaries, but rather

as a continuum of believers loving God with the mind –a continuum that begins with catechesis, includes various programs of leadership training, some of them leading to seminaries, and all going on until the deathbed. Can we begin thinking of theological education not merely as something that happens in seminaries, but rather as an entire ecology of education that certainly has an important but not exclusive place for seminaries? What would happen if instead of considering all those various programs that are emerging as inferior to ours we sought to see the hand and the call of God in them? A seminary that does this has no need to fear the future.

This event and what it celebrates, and the long history of this institution offering pastors in the city an education to which they would not otherwise have access, lead me to hope that this is indeed one of the places where believers and leaders in theological education are beginning to see the challenges of our times as opportunities in which we may catch a glimpse of the glorious future promised in the vision of John at Patmos: “After this I looked, and there was a multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes, and peoples, and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb.”

So be it. Amen.