THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION AND TODAY'S MISSION OF THE CHURCH*

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However one may wish to define theological education it is in the final analysis in one way or another related to the life of the church.

If theological education is for the training of ministers as over against the idea of a seminary being essentially a center of theological learning, then an understanding of and participation in the mission of the church as it is currently existent, is vital. Theological education has to do with the nurture of men and women whose business in life it will be to help people see their immediate pain and joy in the light of an ultimate meaning. In the pulpit today as always, theology is not a matter of simply translating ancient ideas into modern language but it is involved in pursuing ultimate problems as they appear in contemporary forms. In the foreword to The Purpose of the Church and its Ministry the author suggests that one of the three special considerations for the study made of theological education was "the feeling that theological study does not sufficiently consider the changes that have taken place in human thought and behavior in the course of a revolutionary century."1 Such consideration is vital if the message is to be proclaimed, "and not merely tossed like a stone."2

This fact has also been brought home to me in a personal way. While in the process of decision-making regarding the invitation of the Board of Trustees to become the Acting President of the Seminary, which would involve leaving my post as Minister of Evangelism, I was struck by the concern of some that I should "leave evangelism." In all fairness it should be mentioned that consciously they were expressing the feeling that it could be questionable procedure for a person who had won acceptance in one place of service to leave it for a post where one has not demonstrated, by previous service, equal acceptance. But what came through so often in terms of feeling, if not in actual information, was the impression that I would be "leaving evangelism" in the sense of

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moving away from the thrill of the battlefield to the boredom of the barracks; that the work of the seminary was not really involved in the business of the church; that it was a kind of "cousin" at least "once removed" from the mission of the church. If there was one single factor that challenged me above all others to accept this herculean task it was to put the lie to that kind of careless, deadly thinking.

THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH

In speaking of the mission of the church, I assume that the church is by now generally aware of the necessity for distinguishing between what was formerly called "missions" to what is now understood simply as mission. One of the thrills of the work in evangelism was to see this healthy concept spread from the study of the pastor to the level of the average parishioner in many a congregation. Mission is not a special function of a part of the church. It is the whole church in action. It is the body of Christ expressing Christ's concern for the whole world. Peter puts it plainly when he says, "You are . . . God's own people that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light" (I Peter 2:9).

But each successive generation must focus on the meaning of the present moment in the purpose of God. In the biblical understanding, history has meaning. "It is not a treadmill where events move fast but actually stand still. History is not like a vehicle caught in the mud, with motor roaring and wheels spinning but making no progress." The world is a moving target: today's analysis of the situation is obsolete tomorrow.

Then what are some of the forces that shape this present moment in the mission of the church? Obviously, the list is descriptive rather than exhaustive.

We need first to recognize the fact of general, rapid, and deeply significant social change. Such change may be episodic, resulting from some such event as a war, depression, or disaster; or technological, the results of new discoveries, inventions, and processes which alter ways of working and living; or ideological, the results of new philosophies and altered ways of thinking and changing standards of value; or demographic, the result of growth, distribution and characteristics of population. The tempo of change varies from time to time and from place to place so that it is not uniform for all fields of interest, but the church must be prepared to deal with a social situation vastly different from what it was yesterday.

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4The author is indebted in this and the following paragraph to an incisive discussion of the problem in The United Presbyterian Enterprise of Theological Education (1959), pp. 31-47.
The probability is that change will be continuous, drastic and always unpredictable. Even more necessary than adapting present methods of church work is the crucial necessity of training future ministers to analyze and adapt their program to situations which cannot now be envisioned but which are certain to be different from those currently being experienced.

In the background of these profound changes are factors that have made them possible. New concepts of the nature of the universe, the meaning of space and time, new sources of power, and the possibilities of human achievement in each of these areas. These forces have worked together in a complex manner to produce a new type of world culture in which there is to be found a sense of deep ambivalence: crass materialism and ethical irresponsibility on the one hand and at the same time a much higher degree of spiritual aspiration. Thus the church faces the opportunity to permeate the culture of our time with the gospel as it relates to the most basic issues of human survival.

The growth and distribution of population is one of the major forces shaping mission today. The sharpest change in the occupational distribution of the population is the proportional and actual decrease in the number of agricultural workers. This, it seems to me, has real implication for a church membership which has traditionally been located in rural, small town settings. Less than half of all gainfully employed persons are "in production" while more than half are in the service, clerical, managerial, professional and related fields.5

The population continues to be increasingly urbanized. Nearly one-half of our population lives in the 157 largest urban areas while a fourth lives in the twelve areas which have over a million people each. These cities tend to become increasingly diverse in race and culture. While nationally the rate of growth of non-white persons approximates that of white persons, in cities as a whole it is more than double and in inner cities five times as great.6

Underlying many of the problems faced by the Christian church today is the subtle change that has taken place in its relationship to the world in which it lives. Christianity was an imperial power, a counter-kingdom which occupied ground. So it was seen by John Cardinal Newman in the nineteenth century.7 In that day he seemed to be right. Christianity occupied specific ground. There were Christian places. There was a Christian civilization, the West. Laws were passed in its name and hymns celebrated its power and glory among the kingdoms of men.

5Ibid., p. 35.
6Ibid., p. 35.
Until the fourth century Christianity apparently did not need a place. Our Lord's advice to a would-be disciple was that "foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests but the son of man has no place to lay his head" (Luke 9:58). The Apostle Paul described the people of God as a colony whose homeland was in heaven (Phil. 3:20). But with the coming of Constantine, Christianity settled down. The Roman Empire bore the name Christian. And so the world continued for more than a thousand years.

Today the "displacement" of Christianity is everywhere apparent. The gaunt figure of shuffling refugees is a symbol of the age. Supreme Court decisions, the threat of Communism and the phoenix-like rise of old religions all remind us that the Christian faith has its lot in a world of displacement. All of which is not to say that this is a post-Christian era but it does speak of the possibility of a post-Christendom—a placid, ground occupying Christianity. What is needed in men and mission today is a real mobility and freedom to move in the middle of the world as Jesus did.8

Thus the target moves. The answers of yesterday become the problems of today. Such is the mission of the church. Basic needs and ultimate issues remain. But the face of the problem changes, necessitating an approach appropriate to the day.

**THE RESULTING THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION PROBLEMS**

Undoubtedly, some of the uncertainty caused by such a changing scene has given rise to the dagger-like charge made by the Dean of Boston University School of Theology who said, "80% of our present seminary curricula are obsolescent."9 We may want to take serious issue with this statement in terms of the degree of obsolescence but none of us would assume that such a rapidly changing social scene does not present real problems for theological education.

The first of these problems has to do with the understanding of the minister's role. In a careful analysis, H. Richard Niebuhr points out that the confusion resident within the church regarding the nature of the ministry is reflected in the uncertainty of both the ministers and the schools which train them as to a clear-cut, generally accepted conception of the office of the ministry. This has not always been the case. There have been periods of the church's history when there was a definite conception of the ministry which gave to those who filled the office and those who

8For a thorough discussion of the problem the reader is urged to consult Marty, *op. cit.*

trained them for it a standard by which to judge their work. This was true in the Middle Ages. The Pastoral Rule of Gregory the Great formulated and disseminated the theory of the minister as the pastoral ruler. This was a concept which was not arbitrarily imposed upon the churches but grew out of their needs at the time. The minister as priest, although strongly supported by the authority of the Roman Church and its Council of Trent, was not necessarily legislated into being. The law simply formalized the standard that had risen out of traditional origins under the influence of experience and needs current at the time. At the time of the Reformation the minister was seen as fundamentally the preacher of the Word. This was modified in the days of pietism to the conception of the minister as an evangelist. Characteristic of each of these periods was a clear conception on the part of those who exercised the ministry as well as those who trained them for their task as to what was expected of them.

This cannot be said of the situation today. We are all familiar with the Blizzard studies, the impassioned concern of Joseph Sittler's "The Maceration of the Minister," and the embittered cry of the seminary professor whose contacts with graduates indicate to him that they are not doing what he has trained them to do. "Visit the man," Sittler says, "some years later in what the man still calls inexact his 'study' and one is more than likely to find him accompanied by the same volumes he took with him from his student room. And filed on top of these are momentos of what he is presently concerned with: a roll of blueprints; a file of negotiations between the parish, the bank and the Board of Missions; samples of asphalt tile and a plumber's estimate."

As a result, we find ourselves uncertain in deciding between an image of the minister built on theory and an image built on practice. An image built solely on practice is subject to severe limitations. The average church conforms to a stereotype of form and structure. Since the ministerial candidate is produced by this church, he keeps before him a picture which does little to help him be critical of it. When he enters the service of the church he adjusts to the existing pattern. Furthermore, because he does so many different things varying widely in spiritual significance and is subject to so many varying pressures it is difficult for him to arrive at a point where he sees his ministry in terms of a unified spiritual exercise. The point is that such an image drawn solely from the things a minister is called upon to do may have some utility as a guideline for the training procedure used in the development of professional skills but will lack the central, unifying spiritual meaning of the ministry.

12Ibid., p. 698.
Nonetheless, to look at the ministry from a purely theoretical viewpoint is also to produce a distorted image. It may be an ideal image but it has little real value if it does not take into account the actual circumstances of the minister's work in the church. There is sheer frustration inherent in a conception of the ministry as it ought to be while ignoring the reality of what the ministry in fact is. Although some of the program and organization of the church may be traditional, there is much that is currently valid. Such validity must be recognized in any image of the ministry. When such validity is recognized, then theory will illuminate practice and together they will provide the basis for the understanding of a spiritual, unified ministry. Richard Niebuhr suggests this emerging new concept of the ministry be entitled "pastor director." Perhaps so. Nonetheless, the reluctance with which this designation has been received is an indication that ministers and churches need yet to find a unifying spiritual concept so that theological education may be properly focused to produce such ministers.

Another problem confronting theological education has to do with the matter of general practice in the ministry versus the specialist. Franklin Littell complains that "almost the last generalist in a society of highly specialized services, the clergyman is increasingly confined to those areas where a maximum of verbal facility and a minimum of specific knowledge can still function: family affairs (the 'rites of passage': baptism, marriage, burial), local politics and the happy hunting ground of individual counselling." Everywhere there is an increasing call for a more diversified ministry. In a recent study conducted by the American Baptist Convention it was noted that 68 per cent of their ministers are serving as pastors of local churches. In a similar study made by the United Presbyterian Church it was revealed that 60.1 per cent of their ministers were serving as pastors and stated supplies. That an increasing proportion of ministers are finding their ministry not in the services of a local congregation but in some specialized need of the church as a whole becomes increasingly evident. The American Baptist Convention noted in 1962 that approximately 5 to 10 per cent of its ministers served in multiple staff situations; 8.8 per cent were either overseas missionaries or in some special phases of the home mission program; 4.2 per cent were full-time Christian

13See the report of the Council on Theological Education of the United Presbyterian Church in the USA, *The United Presbyterian Enterprises of Theological Education*, 1959, pp. 1-6, to which the author is indebted.
14Niebuhr, *op. cit.*, pp. 79-94.
education directors in local churches; 3.2 per cent served as military or institutional chaplains; while 15.8 per cent were under the general category of special service of the executive secretary type.\textsuperscript{18}

The problem for theological education with a strong desire to be relevant to the church's mission is readily apparent. Increasing diversification means that a single concept of the minister becomes difficult to maintain. Theological education must, as a result, give consideration to several factors. First, that the work of the ministry is not performed in a social vacuum. It must take into account not only the immediate circumstances under which people live but the characteristics of the culture of which they are a part so that what is said and done may have relevance for the people involved. Secondly, there needs to be the recognition that the ministry necessarily involves many different functions, each of which is an exacting technical discipline which must be nonetheless firmly rooted in an understanding of the nature of the church and the substance of the gospel. Thirdly, there must be achieved by the graduate a safety minimum of essential working skills. Since diversification is constantly increasing, no education can hope to provide for all the varying skills that will be needed in the years ahead. Therefore, there ought to be an emphasis on the development of a diagnostic and analytical capacity for the understanding of the variant factors which must be taken into account.

Diversification has some serious complications for curriculum. Niebuhr points to the problem as being fourfold.\textsuperscript{19} The first has to do with the goal of theological education. What is the conception of the minister's role today? Secondly, the curriculum suffers from overloading as a result of maintaining standard subjects, the desirability of adding new disciplines and the proliferation of traditional studies. "During the course of the last two or three generations the theological curriculum has been 'enriched' like vitamin impregnated bread . . . it impresses the observer as a collection of studies rather than a course of study."

In addition, there are the problems arising from the tendency to prescribe a rigid course of study for all students and the resulting loss of unity caused by so many specialized courses. This was listed as one of the three special considerations that gave rise to the demand for a study of theological education since "the curriculum is no longer a course of study but has become a series of studious jumps in various directions."\textsuperscript{21}

Thus, any attempt to share meaningfully in the mission of the church as it is seen today raises serious problems for theological education. There

\textsuperscript{18}Report by the Committee of Seventeen, \textit{op. cit.}, p. A11.
\textsuperscript{19}Niebuhr, Gustafson and Williams, \textit{The Advancement of Theological Education} (New York: Harper, 1957), pp. 80-82.
\textsuperscript{20}Niebuhr, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 98, 99.
\textsuperscript{21}Ibid., p. viii.
are many more but these must be reckoned with in any attempt at improved ability to educate.

SOME SUGGESTIONS BEING MADE

We come now to the last concern of this paper. Granted that the face of the church’s mission continues to change and that this poses obvious problems for theological education, what is being suggested as a means of meeting these problems and preparing men for such a ministry? What are some of the answers being suggested by those living on the cutting edge of the problem?

There is first of all the suggestion that we think of seminary education as mission rather than practice for mission. One wonders if the charge that a seminary campus tends to become casual about the urgency of the gospel’s proclamation is not due in part to the fact that it does not see itself as actually a part of the mission but rather believes itself to be involved in a drawn-out rehearsal for the play which begins on ordination day. It is for this reason that the Niebuhr study emphasized the theological school as “the intellectual center of the church’s life.”22 This is to suggest that the theological school is not the church in its wholeness but as an intellectual center it is part of the body. As other parts of the body have their function so does the theological seminary. It is not simply in the business of training people who will then participate in the mission but it is itself participating in the mission by training these people.

But there is another matter which is closely related. For theological education to escape a sense of aridness and impracticality it must be more than bi-polar—consisting only of teachers and students. If students are not personally involved in the study of theology they are not yet studying theology but the history of ideas or, worse still, looking into ancient documents. The point is that the theological community must be formed not only by faculty and students but by the subjects of their common inquiry. Unless theological education is seen as part of the church’s life and not merely as reflective of it, the danger is that it soon becomes a reflection on reflections. As Niebuhr suggests, the point is not that we learn by doing but that we do not learn the meaning of deeds without doing.23 One’s doing must be a form of learning also.

We talk about “field work” whereas in reality it is church work. Involved is the careless suggestion that this is not really the same as what the student will be doing two years hence. We have our students teach Sunday School because they may have to organize Sunday Schools themselves some day; we have practice preaching because some day these men

22Ibid., p. 107.
23Ibid., p. 128.
will be called upon to preach the gospel and be the instruments of moral instruction to countless numbers. When our work is viewed so, the danger is that the recipients involved actually become secondary in importance and means to an end. A spiritually healthy community sees itself as always engaged in ministry rather than practicing for it. Education for the ministry must surely be to some extent an education in the ministry.

Reuel Howe suggests that lay people be chosen to be part of the worshiping congregation when class preaching services are held so as to make for a less unreal situation. Perhaps the reason that so many of us must confess our early sermons to be impersonal and abstruse is because we learned to preach in a situation where gospel and mission were not the first concern of the hearers. Not until one has had the courage to ask an average layman what he actually heard in the sermon just preached will he ever seriously think about the matter of being understood.

Granger Westberg makes this same complaint when he says, "We have taken over, without too much criticism, the European university pattern of theological education which prepares a man essentially to become a lecturer in theology and not a parish pastor." He then proposes an extensive, forty-four month plan in which clinical experience and classroom lecture are skillfully combined. Actually going beyond the idea of the year of internship, the plan suggests that the internship be parcelled out over a forty-four month period rather than occurring late in the student's seminary stay. "Because the clinical aspects of the intern year have proven so vital in the teaching process," Westberg feels, "we ought to use the basic ideas of the internship more effectively throughout the entire four year period. Why limit the student's clinical experience to only one church and why isolate the clinical experience from the seminary?"

Unless theological education is seen as very much involved in mission both in attitude and activity, it becomes vulnerable to the harsh criticism of a university president who said, "I have the feeling that most theological seminaries require their students to spend three years learning how to answer the kind of questions which nobody is asking."

The question before any educational institution is: How can we do a better job? In the study sponsored by the American Association of Theological Schools, the study staff decided that "the greatest defect in theological education today is that it is too much an affair of piecemeal

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25Fred Hoskins at Chicago Theological Seminary has used lay people in this manner with real profit.
26The Lutheran Companion, June 6, 1962, p. 5.
27Ibid., p. 18.
28Ibid., p. 18.
transmission of knowledge and skills, and that, in consequence, it offers too little challenge to the student to develop his own resources and to become an independent lifelong inquirer, growing constantly while he is in the ministry.”

The old idea of the teacher as one who knows his field and merely tells others about it is inadequate for the task of today. It is a temptation to put too much faith in the use of words and too little in the language of relationships. Something more than agenda orientation and transmission is needed if we are going to play a significant role in the church’s mission today.

This is not to decry the lecture method as a means of teaching. Because a doctor has found a new remedy does not mean that he immediately discards all the others. But it does mean that we see the lecture method as a method rather than the method. An exclusive use of the lecture method often does fail to educate. This is not to say that dialogue is on the side of the angels. It means, rather, that the teacher who is communicating is dialogic in that his communication serves the principle of dialogue by whatever method he uses.

The dialogic teacher is alert to the meanings that his students bring to the moment of learning. He is sensitive not only to what he plans to bring but also what they bring out of their living and learning. He does not view them with condescension. He recognizes himself to be a resource person who uses his knowledge, wisdom and skill to help students formulate the proper questions and then correlate the meaning of their lives with the meaning of the gospel. He cannot make these correlations for the students. Ultimately, the question is whether the teacher sees himself as a companion to the student in search and inquiry or understands himself to be a “retail distributor of intellectual and spiritual commodities.”

If there is need for dialogue between student and teacher, the same need exists between the teacher and his colleagues of the faculty. Reuel Howe suggests that “theological education becomes more effective when the theological curriculum is departmentalized, at least to the point where communication occurs across departmental lines.”

The dangers of a competitive, rigid departmental structure are two-fold. First, the mastery of the materials in a given area seen as an end in itself fragments the future minister’s understanding of the living form

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20Niebuhr, Gustafson, Williams, op. cit., p. 209.
30The author is indebted to Reuel Howe, op. cit., pp. 137-140 for this discussion of the dialogical teacher.
31Niebuhr, Gustafson and Williams, op. cit., p. 209.
of the gospel. Secondly, the so-called practical disciplines have a tendency to develop pseudo-theologies of their own while the classical academic disciplines become culturally irrelevant and semantically distant. “There is something to be said for keeping the lines clear, for concentrating on sheer skill and method in some parts of the curriculum and on the traditional and normative elements of Christian faith in others. But this does not gainsay the fact that theological education is at its best when connections are made between past and present, idea and actuality, ends and means, worship and work.”

Before we leave the matter of the improvement of teaching in theological education something should be said regarding the possibility of additional training for the faculty as teachers. Much emphasis is being laid on the scholarly competence of these men but too little attention is currently being given to the equipping of teachers with educational skills. It seems an almost tragic waste of concern to note a person with great knowledge frustrated in his attempts to share it meaningfully in the classroom.

Some have suggested that scholars getting their doctorates should spend some time taking work in pedagogical theory. Apparently such proposals have not been received favorably since the would-be scholar sees them as distractions from his main pursuit. Perhaps it would be better to suggest that young teachers be encouraged to spend summers or a part of a sabbatical year in schools of education. By that time they will have encountered some of the problems of education and would be better prepared psychologically to receive proffered help.

Only this past summer, Dubuque Seminary at Dubuque, Iowa, followed a third, promising alternative. The entire faculty boarded a bus for a trip to the Michigan State campus at East Lansing, where they spent several days exposing themselves to current methods of teaching appropriate to seminary level education.

Although the problem of student recruitment does not currently concern us as a denomination in terms of the number of applicants, we should be ill at ease with reference to the general quality of applicants. Probably because of an unusual loyalty to the church or a basic pietistic nature which has held the ministry in high esteem as a possible vocational choice we do not have a lack of applicants some churches have experienced. But we do share the concern of other seminaries at the point of the intellectual ability of the student applicants.

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34 See “Seminary Faculty Goes to School,” The Presbyterian Life, July 15, 1963.
What can be done? Certainly a faculty and board able courageously to maintain high academic standards is bound to have an effect on the college work currently being done by the students who intend to apply for admission to the seminary. The student must now understand that the requirements for admission are taken seriously by the institution.

In addition the recruitment of students needs to be re-evaluated. There is the growing impression that we are not meeting the student with the challenge to the gospel ministry at the proper age level. By the time potential theological students have reached the college level, many of them have already made vocational choices in favor of other disciplines and occupations. Possible evidence of this may be found in the fact that many are entering seminary at a later age after an unsatisfying experience in another field. If our recruitment efforts were aimed more at the high school level, some of this later shift might not be taking place. Also, since psychologists tell us that a high percentage of young people are today making vocational choices at the junior high level, it would only seem natural for seminaries to concentrate more on the high school age bracket than we presently do. This is particularly essential since theological education does not enjoy the benefits of mass communication or popular acquaintance such as science, law or medicine.

Earlier we raised the problem of the over-loaded curriculum. With more and more skills needed to carry on an effective ministry and heavier demands placed on an already taxed faculty, what can be done to alleviate this pressure?

One answer would be to lengthen the course of study. Instead of the present three-year course, the course would be lengthened to four years. However, there are some serious problems inherent in this suggested procedure. To begin with, it does not really get at the basic question which involves a philosophy of education and professional training. It simply keeps on adding more patches to our already much-decorated garment. By what reasoning might we assume that a four-year course might not be replaced by a five-year course? And so on. But there is a more serious problem. To add an additional year of study means a reduction of the number of candidates for the ministry by one-third or the demand to increase the financial cost per student by one-third. With the pressure of the churches on the seminaries to produce needed ministers as well as the age-old problem of financial support, the four-year program poses some real problems, especially so since it does not offer any lasting solution to the problems of the over-loaded curriculum.

The internship escapes the second criticism but has some shortcomings as we noted earlier. Also, it reduces the number of graduates by one-third.
However, in the internship so much is determined by the supervisor under whom the student works. Under some a student might be able to grow in many ways while under others it might be a wasted year. Except for programs carried on in smaller, more intimate denominations over a long period of time, the control of the internship becomes difficult.\textsuperscript{35}

The AATS study committee suggests that a summer school program be instituted for seminary graduates.\textsuperscript{36} The program would provide for correlation of actual experience with theoretical understanding. The complaint of students that their seminary work was abstract is often more because of their own inability to be concrete. (The oft-heard remark, "We never got that in seminary" ought not to be interpreted to mean that the student was never given it.) Summer school, attended a year or two after graduation, could supply a correlation of theory and practice not always achieved in B.D. study. In addition, facilities normally not used could be provided without additional cost. There would be fresh sources of personnel available usually not as abundant in other seasons of the year. College teachers, missionaries, hospital chaplains and other highly qualified people could be brought in to make for a strong summer program. The summer school program could then deal with the areas where curriculum pressures are most apparent: the parish minister's duties and specialized ministries.

Theological education faces many problems as it seeks to relate itself meaningfully to the mission of the church. This is part of the cost of living. Dead organisms are neither related nor burdened with problems. But to the extent that it is able to so relate itself, it will receive the plaudits of a church which by necessity is very much a part of the world's history and which exists for the sake of the world.


\textsuperscript{36}Niebuhr, Gustafson and Williams, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 220, 221.