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The New Curriculum at Western Seminary

ELTON M. EENIGENBURG

I. The Need for a New Curriculum

The cry for the revision of curriculum is heard everywhere in academic circles today. We are living in "new times," and new times demand new ways of doing things. We have not revised our curriculum at Western simply because of this demand. But it has at least caused us to examine what we have, what we are working with, and to raise the question whether we do not, after all, need a new curriculum. Our last revision was made in 1960, and while it included some welcome changes, it was not an extensive or radical revision. Some of the clamor for improvement has come from our own students—and we promised them that we would look into the matter. Some of the more thoughtful students made some good criticisms!

What are some of the faults and limitations of the curriculum we have been using? One of the faults noticed particularly by students is the rather large amount of duplication of course materials which has taken place. Two or three teachers may give instruction on the same subject, each being unaware what the others are doing. While our staff knows in a general way the range of course materials each one is responsible for, it is difficult to know these things in detail. Supposedly a new curriculum plan would take care that such duplication does not take place, except, of course, where it would be profitable to include it in the plan for special emphasis.

A more basic limitation of the old curriculum is the tendency of each teacher to develop the studies relating to his particular department into a self-contained unit. In time there are almost as many such units as there are teachers. Understandably, each teacher takes pride in the academic area in which he is specially competent, and he adds to that his own special way of going about things. Even in his own area he will favor some things more than others, and these will carry a primary significance in his course presentations. The result is hardly a "team effort" on the part of the whole faculty. It is more like a group of small teams, each with its own signals and goals in mind. Supposedly a new curriculum would attempt to develop one faculty team with one set of understood signals and goals.

Another fault that needs to be mentioned is the basically static character of the old curriculum. Some courses of study have a way of creating their own sense
of movement, due to dynamic elements in the subject matter. But other courses are simply where they are because they ought to be taught to the theological student. They contain elements of theological or biblical knowledge which he ought to know. There is little sense of the course materials being a meaningful part of a forward moving complex of interrelated studies on the march to a goal. Supposedly a new curriculum would accent the intrinsically dynamic character of all the studies in a total program which is addressed to the student as the things he ought to know and understand before he enters upon a ministry in the world in behalf of Jesus Christ.

Another difficulty with the old curriculum is that it requires a student to take five or six courses in a quarter's program. He must encompass 144 credit hours in nine quarters, or an average of sixteen hours a quarter. Courses are three credit hours each, requiring five-plus courses a quarter. Students have often complained of having to break their time and energy into too many separate compartments in order to get everything in. Supposedly a new curriculum would resolve this problem by unifying studies in such manner that in the typical quarter the student can concentrate on three main areas, biblical, theological, and pastoral, with the three being as closely related to each other in content as can be reasonably done.

Part of the problem with the old curriculum is found in its bearing and influence upon the student it is supposed to be training. If the curriculum represents a number of departmental studies standing alongside one another, with the whole lacking in unity and meaningful interrelationships, he may well be confused. If parts of the curriculum wear a static appearance because they appear to be occupying necessary space, but don't seem to be going anywhere in particular, he cannot be expected to become dynamically related to these areas of knowledge. They become just something that must be learned in order to get one's degree.

Above all, if the total curriculum does not strike his imagination as being, in its totality, the dynamically conceived and executed body of theological knowledge which is indispensable to a genuine preparation for ministry, he will tend to find his inspiration and challenge elsewhere. He may also develop strong individualistic tendencies because he has no dynamic, compelling doctrine of the church of Jesus Christ. Not a few have followed this course, contributing to the decay among us of the presbyterial principle, and to the unfortunate rise of congregationalist attitudes.

It is apparent that a revised or new curriculum must seek not only to remedy the ills which have been cataloged above, but it must also seek to wear a wholly new face. Some improvements can be made by attacking the specific faults and limitations, but when it is recognized that these faults are largely the necessary products of the structure itself, it cannot be doubted that the cure is going to have to be much more radical in nature.

Over the past ten months or so the faculty has addressed itself to this set of problems. They have developed, through a whole series of meetings and proffered plans, a new curriculum which they believe both solves the old problems and pre-
sents a strikingly new attempt to present a program of theological education which will challenge deeply both faculty and students, to say nothing of the church at large. In the following paragraphs the elements of the new curriculum are set forth.

II. The Basic Idea of the New Curriculum

The foremost factor in the theological curriculum of a seminary of the Reformed Faith is its deeply biblical and Reformed character. This is in line with our ancient principle that we are “Reformed according to the Word of God.” The new curriculum lays a major emphasis upon this factor, and its function in the new curriculum may be said to be pervasive. The study of the Hebrew and Greek languages will have stronger emphasis in the new curriculum than in the old, and what is highly significant, much of that study will be applied directly to theological topics and themes which are under study in other departments at the same time.

The student will have to pass an examination in the Greek language during his senior year of college, or failing this, to take a concentrated eight-week summer course in Greek. When he enters the seminary he will be able to put his Greek to use in some small ways. Emphasis will be laid in his first year with us on applying his knowledge, rather than in learning grammatical rules. He will continue to study the latter inductively, as part of his work of interpretation.

All junior students will study the Hebrew language for nine course hours in their first quarter, so that they also can begin to use the language interpretatively as soon as possible. Besides the direct study of these languages in the first year, the junior will carry a heavy concentration of “biblical studies” in English Bible, but with a liberal use of the knowledge of the languages, again in day to day interpretation.

Throughout his second year, and in the first quarter of the third year, the student will use his Hebrew and Greek alongside his study of the theological development of the church, supplying the biblical knowledge and understanding so necessary for a grasp of that historical development. Thus he will no longer study exegetically books of the Bible as things in themselves (except in elective courses), but as a continuing commentary in the biblical languages on the great ideas and themes which have been significant in the church’s development.

The specifically Reformed element is emphasized both in the above concentration on biblical studies, and in the applying of a Reformed critique and point of view to the ongoing study of the church’s history and theology. Thus the Reformed point of view is not reserved for the period of Reformation studies, but is applicable wherever it is relevant to the studies at hand. For example, when the doctrine of man which developed in the fourth century in the conflict between Augustine and Pelagius is studied, the Reformed appraisal of the ideas then current will be apropos. When the ethics of monasticism is examined, the Reformed critique of such ethics will be in place.
In addition, large units of direct theological study have their place in the new curriculum, units which will analyze in detail the specific Reformed understanding of the ideas of Christ, God, man, sin, salvation, eschatology, etc. But each of these will come under study in its appropriate place, that is, where it became a topic of consuming interest in the church’s development. Thus, the first elements of the doctrine of Christ are presented in the study of the early church, precisely at the time when this doctrine was the major interest in theological debate—a time when the church’s basic Christology was set. So with the other themes of systematic theology.

The new curriculum will have an organic character. Each of the parts of the whole will have a meaningful relation to the other parts. We have held before ourselves the image of a body, composed of many parts, but each of them making its own contribution to the unity of the whole. The basic pattern for this organic unity is history in its natural development, first that of the Bible itself, then that of the Christian Church. All study materials are related as meaningfully as possible to this core.

Just as each body, whether that of an individual or of an institution, has a history or biography, so the new curriculum is a body of living materials which takes into account the factor of growth and movement toward a goal. Basic to this is our Christian conception of God’s purposes coming to realization on the historical plane, moving on to his triumph in the culmination of the historical process. The curriculum reflects the character of God’s ongoing program and tries to be a faithful reflection of it. Thus the element of unity is provided, and in addition, comprehensiveness and the dynamic quality.

III. Description of the Curriculum Plan.

The description of the new curriculum plan can be summarized briefly in the following manner:

1. Each of the three fields of study—biblical, theological, and pastoral (Christian Ministry)—receive a proportionate share of the 116 required hours (117 hours was required in the old curriculum). Biblical studies will have 44 hours, the theological field (The Church in the new curriculum) will have 42 hours, and the field of Christian Ministry will have 30 hours. The student will also be required to fulfill seven unit requirements in the “field education” area of Christian Ministry. Three of the seven are “built into” the curriculum as observation program, preaching activity, and concurrent field education. The other four may be selected from the internship program, summer field education, or may be an additional four units of concurrent field education.

2. In the junior year the student concentrates heavily on Bible, both in the original languages and in biblical studies. The latter includes a comprehensive analysis of the English Bible, with such use of the original languages as may be profitable. The principles of biblical introduction and interpretation which formerly were separate courses are dealt with inductively in this part of the program, and they will continue to be studied throughout the second year and the first
quarter of the senior year in the biblical studies which are paralleled to the study of The Church.

3. The pastoral studies (Christian Ministry) which are required in the first eight quarters are in part presented in team teaching, with an occasional turn to a single teacher when the subject matter requires it. The biblical field will also engage in some team teaching, where the subject demands it. Whether a team or a person is doing the instructing, the entire staff of a field will remain in constant contact with the progress of studies. In this way each teacher not only contributes what he can, but overlap and duplication tend to be avoided.

4. The area in the curriculum called The Church combines the teaching materials of the theological field (systematic theology, historical theology and church history, philosophy of religion and ethics). The time span encompassed is from 100 A.D. to the present. Each of the teachers enters the presentation of materials where he is the specialist. The professor of missions will also enter this span of studies from time to time. Thus four teachers will be presenting the courses under The Church rather than one. As explained above, the biblical field will carry on exegetical and biblical theology studies parallel to The Church, exploring themes which are relevant to those under discussion and study in The Church.

5. Each student will have the privilege of electing twenty-seven hours of study in the second and third quarters of the senior year. By this time all of his required work will have been completed. It is expected that by this time, also, he will have a fairly clear idea as to what type of ministry he would like to engage in. He can therefore choose his electives, which will be three-hour courses on the old model, to help him prepare adequately for a specified type of ministry. It may be possible to accredit work done at other institutions and which provide a measure of preparation for that ministry.

6. The Master of Christian Education program will fit nicely into the B.D. program. The Christian Education candidate will be required to follow a two-year schedule (as before) in which he takes all the course work of the B.D. candidate except preaching, and studies involving the use of the original languages of the Scriptures. The M.C.E. candidate also elects a limited number of courses which are directly helpful to him in his special kind of preparation.

7. The Master of Theology candidate will follow as before, a directed program in elective offerings. He does not become involved in the new curriculum for the B.D. and M.C.E. candidates.