

# EDITORIAL

## The Role of a Confessional Seminary in Theological Education

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"A confession" has been defined as "a formulary which comprises the articles of faith," "a creed to be assented to" as one relates himself to a religious institution.

A confessional school of theology is one that either is committed to an already formalized confession of faith, or which adheres to a system of theological doctrines which can logically be formalized into a confession of the Christian faith. Such a seminary is committed to religious doctrines which are deemed to be consistent with historic Christianity and which are interpreted through a particular theological perspective. These basic doctrines become the springboard of all the institution's theological thinking in its efforts to be relevant. Such a confession of faith becomes the norm for the examination of all else.

The significance of confessional theological education can be seen through four approaches: (1) the purpose of the theological seminary, (2) the predicament of contemporary theological education, (3) the pertinence of confessional theological education, (4) the potential of the theological seminary.

### THE PURPOSE OF THE THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

The fulfillment of the major objectives of theological education assumes a confessional approach to religious truth. These objectives have a twofold relationship: to the church for which the theological seminary exists, and to the theological student himself as he prepares for Christian ministry.

The Council on Theological Education of the United Presby-

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terian Church in the U.S.A. has defined the function of theological education in relation to the Church in these words:

The enterprise of theological education is an instrument of the Church for the furtherance of its mission in the world. It is not an end in itself. Its primary loyalty is to the Church, as the primary loyalty of the Church is to the gospel. It serves the Church in many ways, from the immediately practical to the ultimately fundamental. The tests of its adequacy and effectiveness are in the degree to which it enables the Church more fully to comprehend and more perfectly to perform its mission in the world. Therefore, its function is derived from the nature of the ministry and from the policy of the Church for the conduct of its mission.

The Church bears witness to the eternal word of God, as both Law and Gospel, wherein the will of God is revealed for society as a whole and for the individuals who compose it.

The theological seminary is the member of the Church's body whose chief function it is to study the gospel, the Church and the world, and train men and women for the work of the Church. The administration of a seminary must assemble a staff of teachers who in temperament, training, skill and devotion are competent and willing to assume these tasks, and must enable them to function with reasonable financial security, with adequate educational resources, and in an atmosphere of intellectual and spiritual freedom. The seminary must also be constantly selective of students who apply for admission, that the Church may be worthily served.

The enterprise of theological education exists, therefore, that the Church may provide itself with a sufficient number of men and women committed to the gospel and dedicated to its service, loyal to the Church, and equipped by character, conviction, intellectual endowment and training to serve acceptably in its mission throughout the world. Theological education is thus immediately concerned with the Church's mission which is the projection of the gospel in the life of the world primarily through the life and work of the Church. In short, the whole enterprise of theological education rests upon our Church's concept of the gospel.<sup>1</sup>

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1. United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., The Council on Theological Education, *The United Presbyterian Enterprise of Theological Education*, 1959, pp. 19-21.

In reality the theological seminary is part of the Church, not an institution separate from it. The Church is based upon the Holy Scriptures. Therefore, theological education is charged with the responsibility to give instruction, insight and leadership to the Church in relation to the Word of God. Such authoritative leadership in regard to the Word of God will inevitably assume a confessional stance.

Furthermore, a confessional approach to religious truth is imperative as the theological seminary fulfills its objective in relation to the theological student himself. Dean John B. Coburn of the Episcopal Theological Seminary in Cambridge speaks of this relationship in meaningful words:

The purpose of theological education is to help men and women grow in the knowledge and love of God and man. It is carried on within a community made up of students and teachers who live, study, and worship together. It is in their meeting of one another and of God that theological education takes place.

It is therefore an intensely personal experience. It has to do with a man's growth in understanding God, man, and the Christian faith, and involves not simply the intellect but the whole self.

A man becomes educated theologically in part by the exercise of his intellect; in part by his commitment to God and his fellow men; and in part by his participation in the enterprise to which he belongs—in this case the seminary community. Theological education begins long before he comes to seminary, and continues until the day he dies, but in most cases this intensive three-year formal education is the critical and most important period.

Dr. Charles F. Whiston, long-time participant in the process of theological education and presently Professor of Systematic Theology in the Church Divinity School of the Pacific, declares: "A seminary ought to be a place of repeated deeper and deeper conversion to Christ on the part of students and faculty alike." It may be added that Christian conversion is usually confessional in its theological presuppositions and concomitants.

#### THE PREDICAMENT OF CONTEMPORARY THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

If a confessional approach to theological truth is a necessary factor in the fulfillment of the major functions of the seminary, can it be that the decline of a confessional emphasis is a contributing factor to the plight in which theological education finds itself today?

The predicament of contemporary theological education is summed up by Dean George Peck of Andover Newton Theological School:

"The man who isn't confused about today's developments in religious education and its many implications just doesn't know what he's talking about. . . . You're not in the swim just now unless you're way out of your depth."<sup>2</sup>

Harold Lindsell, writing on "Tensions in the Seminaries," declares: "The supreme problem of the seminaries is theological vagabondage. Few institutions have remained wholly true to their original creedal commitment. Many of them are an unartistic blend of incompatible viewpoints that negate one another and leave the student bewildered and distressed."<sup>3</sup>

President Nathan Pusey of Harvard University, speaking to his own Divinity School, defined this problem in theological education and suggested a solution:

A new kind of humanism seems to be engulfing even recently updated formulations of the faith. To many no creedal formulation now seems possible because, it is insisted, there can be no supernatural reference to undergird such a creed. And if creeds go, what then becomes of the Church?

Uncertainty and doubt remain inside and outside the School, inside and outside the University. Men continue to scorn the older formulations of belief—and rightly so, now as in the past: but now belief itself—professedly—is consciously eschewed. We have all become doubting Thomases.

Can we not now . . . undertake to be a little less luminous in our doubts, to be a little more ready to receive than to resist? . . . Can we who have murmured not learn doctrine?<sup>4</sup>

Walter Wagoner in his study of contemporary theological education which has been published under the title *Bachelor Of Divinity* describes what he calls "the lack of precision" in the theological situation in seminaries today:

Add to this confusion in critical matters of biblical interpretation the related critique of linguistic analysis with its distrust of theological language; add to this also the fact that the theological situation in seminaries today is, at the best, wide open and, at the worst, characterized by a lack of precision. In contrast to the days or to

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2. Harold Lindsell, "Tensions in the Seminaries," *Christianity Today*, XI (May 12, 1967), 789.
  3. *Ibid.*
  4. *Ibid.*, p. 792.

the places in which Barthianism or fundamentalism or liberalism was dominant and well defined, there are now no sharply delineated and all-compelling theological traditions.<sup>5</sup>

Satirically Wagoner points to the effect this has had on the seminarians who look to their theological mentors for guidance: "That the seminarian scarcely knows which direction to look for a favoring wind is equally obvious. As in Beckett's plays, the seminarians often resemble those anonymous characters who pop their heads out of garbage cans to see who or Who is coming next."<sup>6</sup>

Dr. Carl F. H. Henry, Editor of *Christianity Today*, has presented two timely editorials on the predicament in contemporary theological education. These editorials are entitled "Theological Default in American Seminaries" and "Where Are the Seminaries Going?"

Dr. Henry's words are stunning in their realism and penetrating in their analyses:

Many seminaries have become so much the purveyors of abstruse theological speculations, and give so little evidence of a fixed authoritative norm, that they seem to be making themselves theologically dispensable. Contemporary theologizing has become an exceedingly perishable commodity. Doubtless some seminaries remain denominationally or ecumenically indispensable for ecclesiastical objectives. But in a warring age at the brink of self-destruction, when scientists think that 22,300 miles out in space is no place for mistakes, one might wish that the seminaries on terra firma would forego the business of propagating heresy generation upon generation.<sup>7</sup>

Theological education is harried in an age of doctrinal instability and social change. Uncertainty and tension grip the classroom, and many seminarians are inevitably bewildered by it all. Many seminaries communicate no answers.

Seminary fledglings often suffer from a non-faith syndrome. They do not know what they believe or whether they believe at all. The first year of study becomes a quest for faith. Though acutely aware that something is lacking, they are not sure what it is or what they are

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5. *Ibid.*

6. *Ibid.*

7. Carl F. H. Henry, "Theological Default in American Seminaries," editorial, *Christianity Today*, VIII (September 11, 1964), 1115.

seeking. If they find no answers in this quest, they return to secular pursuits. Some seminaries serve their students a theological smorgasbord, offering many choices but failing to set forth an integrated world-and-life view. When institutions teach their students everything without being sure of anything, the students many times withdraw, disillusioned and unsatisfied, convinced that the ministry is not for them. They have no faith, and they have found no message.

Perhaps seminarians suffer the most acute confusion as a result of developments within the seminaries themselves. They listen to professors propagate divergent views, realizing vaguely that to embrace one is to exclude the other. They read about the end of the institutional church and wonder why they should spend time preparing to serve an institution that is said to be already *passé*. They sense that the secularization of Christianity means the end of Christianity and a dead-end street for the clergy. Called upon to influence the power structures and to alter the social milieu, they suffer from feelings of guilt as they try to fit this pattern into the traditional role of the clergy as soul-winners. Under these circumstances, no one can blame the seminarians if they forsake the ministry, misunderstand its primary purposes, or land on the psychiatrist's couch with schizoid symptoms. Who wouldn't?<sup>8</sup>

Confessional theological education offers a solution to the doctrinal instability of many seminary classrooms and to the non-faith syndrome from which many ministerial students are suffering. There must be a new and relevant scholarship based upon a hearty allegiance to the Holy Scriptures, an allegiance that crowds out doubt and releases the light of Scripture to shine through the gloom of an anxious and disoriented age. There must be a recovery of the Gospel of God's grace, made possible through the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. There must be a rendering of the ethical and moral life according to the sanctions of the Word of God.

We should heed the words of Henry P. Van Dusen, president emeritus of Union Theological Seminary, when he speaks of the norm of judgment in relation to theological education:

I shall venture to forecast that history will judge that, in our day, the crucial issue for Christianity was being

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8. Carl F. H. Henry, "Where Are the Seminaries Going?" editorial, *Christianity Today*, XI (May 12, 1967), 812-813.

determined, not in its confrontation with the secular world or renascent non-Christian Religions, nor even in the fulfillment of Christian Unity, but within theological scholarship—at its very center, its fulcrum, upon which all else turns: the clarity of its apprehension of and firmness of its hold upon, Jesus Christ; or, more accurately, of his grip upon it.<sup>9</sup>

In the light of the evidence, dare we merely shrug our shoulders in an attitude of indifference and act as if there were no vital relationship between the plight of contemporary theological education and the decline of emphasis on confessional religious truth?

### THE PERTINENCE OF CONFESSIONAL THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

The Church, the seminary, and the minister are really one. Therefore, the seminary's relevance is to be viewed in relation to its contribution to the effectiveness of both the minister and the Church. A confessional emphasis in relation to theological truth, in turn, is highly contributory to all of this.

Confessional theological education contributes to the maturing of the seminarian's spiritual life. Such maturing in spiritual living is essential in the preparation of a minister. The superlative aim of a theological school ought to be to help students to become men of God. If seminaries are to serve their day they must send forth into the Church's leadership men and women deeply impregnated with and possessed by the remedies for the ills of the Church and the world. More than this, they themselves must, in some significant measure, embody and verify these remedies.

More than thirty years ago John A. Mackay was inaugurated as the President of Princeton Theological Seminary. Twenty-three years later he was asked to speak at the inauguration of his successor. In his address he remarked that on the occasion of his own inauguration he had pleaded for the restoration of theology to the sphere of culture and the life of the Church. Then he proceeded to declare: "At this juncture in human history something appears to me to be even more important than theology. . . . the hour has struck to restore, to reinterpret and to rehabilitate the concept of Christian Piety."<sup>10</sup>

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9. Henry P. Van Dusen, "Theological Education in the Ecumenical Era," *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin*, LVI (February, 1963), 9.
  10. John A. Mackay, "The Restoration of Piety," *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin*, LIV (July, 1960), 49.

Such piety must be incarnate in the life of the seminarian. The student in theological seminary must be a new man in Christ, an individual who has experienced the reality of spiritual change and gives expression to it in daily living. Faith emphasizes both the imperative and opportunity for such personal piety and points to well-marked paths along which it can be achieved.

Confessional theological education contributes likewise to the intensification of the Church's redemptive ministries. The Church has been raised up to spread abroad the truth of the Gospel. Such witnessing to the Gospel becomes the evangelistic activity of the Church, even on a world front. A confessional theological education in its presentation of the truths of the Gospel as revealed in the Holy Scriptures sharpens the focus of the seminarian upon the nature of the Church's task and intensifies his desire to lead the Church in the fulfillment of its divinely-appointed mission.

### THE POTENTIAL OF THE THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

The theological seminary has both the responsibility and opportunity to participate in the renewal of the contemporary Church. Here again the confessional approach to theological truth becomes an incentive and a guide.

It has been suggested that the renewal of the Church depends in large part upon preaching. Vital preaching can inspire the Church to evangelistic activity and missionary endeavors. Vital preaching can cause the Church to become redemptively meaningful to the guilty, the confused, the sorrowing, the fearful. Vital preaching can motivate the Church toward significant social involvement and activity.

It has been suggested, furthermore, that before Church renewal can come through preaching, a renewal must come in preaching and such renewal in preaching is dependent upon the renewal of the preacher. The place to begin a renewal in preaching is with a renewal of the preacher. Here is where confessional theological truths make their impact because spiritual renewal is impossible apart from the preacher's identification with and appropriation of the great evangelical truths of the Gospel.

In his challenging work, *The Trouble With the Church*, Helmut Thelicke calls for a renewal of the Church through preaching which must begin with the preacher's recovery of faith in the living God as revealed by the Risen Christ. If preaching is talking about God, then the preacher has to know whom he is talking about. It is not enough to read about God; the preacher must have personal knowledge of God as He is revealed in Jesus Christ. When Jesus Christ is the Good News in the preacher's life daily then he will be unable to keep that Good News to himself. D. T. Niles described preaching

as "one hungry man telling another hungry man where there is food." As the preacher is renewed within by Christ, his preaching is renewed and through it the Church.

### CONCLUSION

A confessional theological school is dynamically dedicated to the living elements of its spiritual heritage. It seeks constantly to interpret this spiritual heritage for the contemporary age and to witness to the significance of these living elements in conversation with the larger Christian fellowship and with the world. A true confessional position does not self-consciously call attention to those who affirm it, but rather to Jesus Christ and to the Holy Scriptures.

A confessional seminary, because it is an academic community, is responsible for the correspondence of its confession with the Holy Scriptures. At the same time there is concern for the constant renewal and enrichment of the confessional position. With sincerity and confidence such a theological school commends its confessional position to all.

In very recent days Louis Cassels, religious writer for the United Press International, penned a thought-provoking article entitled "Agnostic Pastors." This article deals with the question which comprises its opening line: "Should a man be ordained to the ministry if he rejects, or is agnostic about, some of the basic tenets of the historic Christian faith?"

Mr. Cassels' conclusion is strongly confessional in its implications. His words should provoke us to serious thinking about the nature of effective theological education:

In the privacy of seminary bull sessions, the discussion tends to center around a student's right to be ordained if he wishes, regardless of his private beliefs. Possibly it is time to give some thought to the rights of church congregations, who look to their pastors for spiritual nurture.

Those people in the pews are not just "resources" to be mobilized and used in reform movements, however worthy. They're human beings . . . confused, burdened, troubled, hungry for meaning and purpose in life. In the presence of a pastor's contagious faith, they may grope their way into light. But as Jesus said nearly 2,000 years ago: "When one blind man leads another, both fall into the ditch."<sup>11</sup>

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11. Louis Cassels, "Agnostic Pastors," *The Evening Bulletin*, Philadelphia, Pa., June 17, 1967.