

# The Voices of Experience: Theological Education Reviewed from "The Field"

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When projecting this issue of *The Asbury Seminarian* devoted to theological education, the editorial committee thought it well to consult alumni of Asbury Theological Seminary as to their evaluation of the education received at this school. Accordingly, inquiries of this nature were sent to representative alumni. The selection was made from alumni who had graduated within the past twenty-five years. An effort was made to select those alumni who would be fairly representative of the whole. Of course, no scientific accuracy can be claimed for this rather informal poll. Even so, some very helpful responses came from twelve of those to whom the request was directed. Of these twelve, seven were pastors, one was engaged in theological education, two were women engaged in Christian Education, and two were missionaries. Those who responded did so with alacrity, and the replies give evidence of thoughtful evaluation. The poll was taken with the realization that the only justification for the investment of personnel and money in this seminary is what is being produced by alumni. The respondents have rendered a real service in their evaluation.

It should be borne in mind that in most cases the evaluations were related to personnel at the time during which those questioned were students. During the last twenty years there has been a change in teaching personnel and a change in the curriculum. Many of the respondents indicated their awareness that deficiencies which they had experienced while students have since been corrected in curriculum offerings.

Three main questions were asked of these representative alumni.

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First, they were asked what courses in the seminary were most helpful to them, and second, what courses were least helpful. Third, they were asked for suggestions for improvement. In most cases the respondents wrote that the most helpful courses were in the fields of Bible and Counseling. Most of them appreciated the theological offerings of the curriculum. Several testified that their own personal faith had been strengthened as a result of the campus life and the related classroom work. Several pastors found courses in church administration very helpful in addition to courses in counseling. A few listed Greek as among the least helpful courses, but an equal number endorsed such courses.

Among the courses the alumni found least helpful were certain courses in philosophy; they felt that the subject was dealt with too superficially or did not provide sufficient acquaintance with contemporary philosophers and theologians. Several expressed disappointment with the Christian Education courses, which they felt were mostly theoretical and failed to offer enough laboratory techniques. Several expressed appreciation of Preaching courses, but many wished more attention had been given to Practice Preaching. A few had experienced a lack in courses on church administration. Several felt that they should have had more help in these practical areas. Negative criticisms centered around the opinion that in some courses students were given too dogmatic an answer, with too little opportunity for student participation and quest for answers. Many, after indicating areas in which they had a negative reaction, gladly acknowledged that the situation had been corrected since they left.

Suggestions for improvement were most helpful. One respondent felt that there should be a greater clarification in respect to New Testament introduction and in classes in which contemporary issues of theologians would be studied. A need was felt by some for more thorough instruction in sermon preparation and especially in the areas of speech and delivery. The need for emphasis upon prayer and the devotional life was stressed by some; others indicated the need for greater emphasis upon the church in society. In both these fields several courses in the curriculum have been added. Some felt that there should be more supervised field work to supplement strengthened offerings in the field of church administration. Several saw room for improvement in a greater and more positive presentation of contemporary religious thought. Several felt that a more positive presentation of alternative views would have been helpful. One respondent was distressed that views with which faculty members disagreed were dismissed with anathema, as hardly worthy of notice. Some felt that the answers they received were oversimplified and failed to do justice to other points of view. Those who expressed such views were matched by those who affirmed without qualification

that their training served them in good stead when buffeted by the theological controversies of the world. At least one respondent felt that there should be greater opportunities for fellowship between faculty and students outside the classroom. Nearly all expressed appreciation for the spiritual vitality they experienced on the campus.

In summary, one may conclude from these replies that the areas in which the Seminary during the last two decades has been relatively strong are Biblical studies, especially English Bible, and Counseling. Areas in which greatest disappointment was felt were Christian Education and courses related to contemporary religious thought. Several pastors felt the need for more help in church administration. One of the most significant replies came from a Midwest pastor. He voiced the opinions of others in addition to his own, and he was particularly articulate and emphatic. He said that he was not aware every day of his seminary training, but he was fully aware of the steady undercurrent which it provided, keeping him steady in times of stress. He believes that this basic training often unconsciously enables him to respond adequately to the situation. He reports further that though he does not know the answers in many cases, he knows where to look for them as a result of his training here.

One respondent mentioned Christian art, an area in which the school has yet to make significant advances. The survey drives home the thought that it is important not only for the teacher to be well informed concerning the past and contemporary theological issues, but that the manner of presentation is equally important. It seems clear that the most effective presentation will not be one in which opposing views are dismissed with dogmatic assertions. Rather, the issues must be discerningly and constructively exposed and the student helped to make his evaluation and decision. This, of course, should come as no surprise; nevertheless, this additional reminder is constructive and should be of help in the months ahead.