

The Future of Theological Education and the Renewal of the Church

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With William Blake, I take as my text Numbers 11:29. "Would to God that all the Lord's people were Prophets".

Exemplum Docet

A man in early retirement has decided to bicycle across the continent, starting with his rear tire in the Pacific, down in San Diego next to Coronado Island, and finishing with his front tire in the Atlantic by Provincetown. The trip he makes is in memory of his son who died two years earlier. Father and son did much cycling together, and after two years haunted by demons, Dad cycles with a hope of exorcism. He stops on a Sunday morning in the little town of Onega, Kansas. He is, in no particular order, tired, lonely, bereft, empty, needy, hopeful, utterly clear about his own mortality and his existential location, east of Eden. A Methodist, he goes for worship to the Methodist Church. A smallish congregation embraces him. The ordered service enchants him. The minister's prayer restores him. An hour of worship:

*To Quicken the Conscience by the Holiness of God
To Illumine the Imagination by the Beauty of God
To Open the Heart to the Love of God
To Devote the Will to the Purposes of God*

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In the heart of the continent, his heart has been warmed. In form and content, the sermon is one of the finest he can recall. A brief note in the bulletin tells about the minister. The cyclist calls his wife from the road that evening. With a gratitude that sometimes replaces our more native human sense of entitlement, he describes the wonderful service, the preacher's heart and mind and wisdom and concludes, as the cell phone fades: "Of course, I shouldn't be surprised at that, I mean the true excellence of her healthy, vocal leadership. I remember the Bishop saying at a conference that seminaries are developing healthy voices for a new age." The future of theological education will bring renewal to the church by developing healthy, vocal, excellent spiritual leadership.

Divine Delight

I met for the winter semester with my Greek class last week, about this time. I asked them about "the future of theological education and the renewal of the church." This dozen students, resembling Galatians 3:26–28, had much, and much good to say. Black and white, female and male, Presbyterian and Baptist, liberal and conservative, gay and straight, right brain and left, intuitive and deductive, greek geeks and struggling c's, the class is a hologram of the future. This is what Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite meant, recently, when she described theological schools as "places that preserve the important open space in which to integrate great issues". As they mulled the question, I reminisced about the fall term, and the beginning grammar, and three points of discovery we enjoyed together.

Their issues I listed in the key of d: "diversity, debt, distance, degree, disciplines, debility, dialogue." But my mind retraced their eager study of the autumn.

We read together Matthew 9:9ff. "Go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.'" I cautioned my colleagues not to assume they already knew the meaning of the verse. After all Matthew did say, go and *learn*. Perhaps, just perhaps, more than Hosea is here. In this crucial passage Matthew describes what caused him to have been forgiven and what effect that had. The nature of the event itself he hides from us. The cause of his forgiveness is inclusion in a new movement, a new community, a new society. This brought Matthew—aha!—to the experience of mercy which *delights* God. We hear 'I desire mercy' as an

imperative, a command to do. But Matthew meant something else (an insight informally proffered by Frederik Wisse many years ago.) Go and learn he says, θέλω: I . . . desire, want, enjoy, take pleasure in—mercy. This is not first about what we do, but first about what God loves. Mercy. Do you know God to be a pardoning God? If there is enough space and generative probity in our teaching, we will allow ourselves to discover and to be discovered by Another Reality. The Divine, who delights, who delights in mercy. I listen for voices that translate the tradition into insights for effective living. The future of theological education will bring renewal to the church through healthy voices that announce the divine *delight* in mercy.

Christ at the Center

My students went around the table making their lists regarding theological education and the renewal of the church. “I looked up *praxis* in my dictionary and did not find it . . . integration is always a personal, though not individual project . . . who will address spiritual formation? The seminary, the church, the denomination, who?. . . there is too much separation between the church and the school . . . no, there is not enough: seminaries need churches like fish need bicycles, and vice-versa . . . who will attend to the nature of call?. . . Seminary is lonely.”

I admit my mind wandered a little, back to November when we came upon Galatians 2, and its remarkable announcement of the πίστις χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ.

I cautioned us not to assume that we already knew the meaning of the phrase. Such a phrase carries power and danger, particularly in a time like ours that slides, in some places, toward a unitarianism of the Second Person of the Trinity. How are we to translate? An objective genitive, «faith in Jesus Christ»? Or a subjective, authorial genitive, «the faith of Jesus Christ»? What is the basis for salvation? Human faith in Christ or the faith of Jesus Christ, that is his faithful death? We divided about equally, no bad thing. But all left a little less certain, and, oddly, a little more confident.

I listen for voices that resound in the affirmation before the question, “Are we lovers anymore?” The future of theological education could bring renewal to the church through healthy voices that

announce the faith(fulness) of Jesus Christ, who loved us and gave himself for us.

Spiritual Sensibility

We had gone over the ninety minutes, but the discussion raged on. I noted that a friend of mine had listed eight issues for leaders of Schools of Theology: the burden of taking initiative, the weight of accumulated grievances and inappropriate expectations, telling the story and knowing the mission, competing constituencies and contradictory expectations, building a board that cares (but not too much) and caring for a board (but not too much), MONEY, cooperating with others, finding the time for self-care.

My mind, though, careened back toward December, when we translated Matthew 25. The students were by that time reciting their own warning not to assume but to learn and grow. They paused before the word for “least.” As you have done it to the least of these my brethren . . . ἐλαχίστος. It means the littlest, the most diminutive, the smallest of the brothers and sisters. Could this be a baptismal moment? Is the reference, at least in part, to children? As you have done it to the littlest of these in my family, you have done it to me? These infants—hungry, thirsty, powerless, imprisoned in infancy. We wondered. The world does not lack for wonders, as Chesterton said, but only for a sense of wonder. Delores Williams had been with us the week before, bringing a wondrous womanist reflection on the least, and on need, and on the wilderness. I listen for voices that remember the least, last, lost.

The future of theological education may bring renewal to the church through healthy voices that announce a spiritual, preferential option for the poor as a means of renewal for the church.

Three Practical Footnotes

First, a healthy, vocal leadership, clergy and lay, depends on a regard for faculty. Faculty provide height. I remember visiting Lou Martyn, 10 years out of seminary. He offered me a noon libation, and said, among other things: “We have tried here to keep heaven a little higher.” Frost’s poem on the Star comes to mind:

*It asks of us a certain height
 So when at times the mob is swayed
 To carry praise or blame too far
 We may take something like a star
 To stay our minds on and be staid*

All Frost's star says, you remember, is "I burn." So, faculty need the freedom to burn, to produce the spiritual blaze Solzhenitsyn said the world expects, to generate, to be creative, to take the full responsibility for creative freedom and to "burn." (Douglas John Hall's 12/02 article in *Theology Today* winsomely underscores this point.) Party of rigor, party of responsibility, all. Burn. In my view, such lofty freedom to burn serves one central lordly goal: to live as examples for vocal leaders, healthy preachers, who themselves, Sunday by Sunday, will become common as sagebrush, and then be set on fire by the Holy Spirit: 1) To earn a Ph.D. in Theology is very difficult. 2) To struggle to publish, through all the disappointments, necessary early on, is more than hard. 3) To endure the burden of community, the inevitable clash of views in a "small town," takes courage. (Isaiah Berlin's motto is mine, to live in a liberal openness of spirit, but in a way that "softens the collisions.") In short, for faculty I hope for more "space."

Second, a future, healthy, vocal leadership in the church needs students who are debt free. One of the saddest patterns to have developed in our Canadian and American churches in the last 20 years is the pattern of joking reference to the Wesley question at ordination, "are you in debt so as to embarrass yourself?" This is hardly a laughing matter anymore. We need to produce debt free graduates who are then free in ministry to boldly go where no one has gone before. Some responsibility for this lies with our students, but more lies with our systems. Out of debt such graduates are free to provide the depth that the soul seeks in the ground of being.

Third, a future, healthy, vocal leadership in the church needs administrators in the schools of theology who by nature build community. The Bible is freedom's book, the pulpit is freedom's voice, the church is freedom's defense. Faculty freedom and student freedom deserve and require the disciplined and responsible liberty of a village green, an open space for communal life that breathes with the spirit of liberty. We choose to work in a school of theology because we affirm its mission. Administration is a ministry all its own, and it has

to do with the crucial work of building spaces for freedom. What faculty bring to height, and students to depth, an administration provides in breadth. The administration is not the enemy!

Voices for a New Age

Some of the work of invitation and recruitment (primarily the province of the church) does fall to the schools of theology:

Who will come forward, out of another generation? Who will step up to preach the Gospel, to administer the sacraments, to lead the church, to care for the hurt, to speak for the poor, to provide the “unity and continuity of the church through the ages”? Where are the best and the brightest, the wisest and most sensitive, women and men of imagination and who will stand sentinel and herald the dawn of a New Creation of love and light? The pulpits of our church are not safe, easy places, not happy refuges for weak, unbalanced or needy folks. Jesus came not to be served but to serve. We need the finest top 5% of another generation earnestly to listen, to consider whether God is calling them into the ministry. Where are those men who could do anything, from engineering to medicine to law to business, who will gladly consider all things loss that we may Jesus gain? Where are those women who could command excellent compensation, roles in more lucrative cultural leadership, and high places in public and private realms, who will gladly take up the cross that we the crown obtain?

The twenty-first century is spread out before us, full of potential for grace and also for disgrace. Where are those young voices that will submit to the maturation of two decades—minimum time to train for real preaching—in order to prepare to quicken the conscience of a new era? Where are those young hearts, still freshly covered with the morning dew of idealism and hope, who will turn away from competitive gain and turn toward the promise of community? Where are the lovers, the dreamers, the seekers, the pioneers who could take the old world of the church and make it young again? And what are we doing to imagine and construct an ethos in which the expectation is that, sooner or later, our best and brightest will fill our pulpits?

What kind of person do you want to see coming up the path, in the rain, while you sit waiting inside on the hour of your husband’s death? What kind of man do you hope to hear speaking from the chancel, on the Sunday after your bombshell diagnosis is given? What

kind of woman do you truly desire to perform your daughter's wedding, counsel your son after a moral failure, help your community assess a call to arms from Washington, listen as you change careers, or offer prayer at the last breath?

We may want to answer that set of questions a full generation before we need an embodied response.

Do we want a healthy pastor? Then perhaps the churches could consider a decent health plan, one with teeth in it. Speaking of teeth, one with dental care.

Do we want an educated pastor, one for whom education is a value along with love? Yes, we remember that Wesley said, "learning without vital piety is like a jewel in a swine's snout." But Wesley, an Oxford Don, was the greatest champion of education. An educated pastor, who values a real and good education, will want the same for her children and family. Are we ready as a denomination to compensate our clergy so that their children can attend college?

Speaking of children, do we want to make any space for children in our ministerial families? Children are costly and difficult. Early Methodism excluded children, women, extended families, and made space, in ministry, for a man and his horse. But today Bishops tell us that a young couple with children is just what every church wants. Fair enough. Are we willing to provide the housing, salary, pension, benefits that will make space for a young couple that loves their children?

Do we want an emotionally balanced pastor? Then perhaps we can see the value of support systems, denominational and therapeutic, to address this desire.

Do we want a pastor with a global outlook, an ecumenical perspective, for whom the whole world is a parish? Then, perhaps, allowance should be made for travel, for study, for sabbatical, for writing, for growth.

Would to God that all the Lord's leaders were preachers! I listen for the voices for a new age!

David Mamet had some interesting things to say, a while back, to actors, dreamworkers in the theater:

Write for yourself . . . be an artist. . . . Teach yourself some perspective so that you are not at the mercy of the current fad . . . study voice and movement . . . learn the difference between the beautiful and the attractive. . . . Make yourself the expert . . . love the theater and learn about it and strive to improve it and create a

new profession for yourselves. . . . Train yourself for a profession that does not exist. . . . That is the mark of an artist—to create something which formerly existed only in his or her heart. (*Writing in Restaurants*, 141).

Some of this could help budding preachers too.

The future of theological education will bring renewal to the church by developing healthy voices for a new age, excellent spiritual leaders who announce the divine delight in love, the faith of Jesus Christ who loved us and gave himself for us, the spiritual preference for the poor.

As we began, so we end with Blake:

*And did those feet in ancient time
Walk upon England's mountains green?
And was the holy Lamb of God
On England's pleasant pastures seen?*

*And did the Countenance Divine
Shine forth upon our clouded hills?
And was Jerusalem builded here
Among these dark Satanic Mills?*

*Bring me my Bow of burning Gold:
Bring me my arrows of desire:
Bring me my Spear: O Clouds unfold!
Bring me my Chariot of fire.*

*I will not cease from Mental Fight
Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand
Till we have built Jerusalem
In England's green and pleasant land.*