

ARTICLES

The Changing Shape of Theological Education at Asbury Theological Seminary

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The faculty of Asbury Theological Seminary has been engaged in a far-ranging discussion on the shape of theological education. The present ferment in curriculum studies across the country, and the inauguration of the new Master of Divinity degree, replacing in many institutions the Bachelor of Divinity degree, has partly accounted for the interest in special studies this year. The rapidity of cultural change, the profound re-examination of every aspect of the life of the Church, and the call for new ministries everywhere has been a major spur to increased curriculum studies.

The basic purpose of Asbury Theological Seminary to provide a "well-trained, sanctified, and Spirit-filled evangelistic ministry" remains unchanged. This is one of the most highly-conceived statements of purpose for the training of the ministry that has ever been declared. The faculty and administration find it stimulating and challenging. The privilege to strengthen this purpose, to interpret it for a new day, and to take advantage of the rich association with other theological seminaries in their self-studies has given us unusual motivation at this time. We are directed from an inner compulsion that Asbury Theological Seminary fulfill the role of catalyst in the process of matching theological education to the new demands of the Church and the world.

It is well to recognize from our own self-understandings that we experience real tensions in regard to the catalyst's role and the problems related to change. We look at our present success in attracting students, our present vitality and surge of development and we say,

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Why should we change? Does not our present success prove that we should stay by traditional ways?

In response to this question it must be said that a part of our present success in the attraction of students is due to student expectations that Asbury Theological Seminary is a school which is alert, aware, and progressive and will provide an education for a ministry that is relevant. The students want a school that has built into it this role of catalyst in today's Church and world. Frankly, our student body is impatient with our deliberate scholastic slow pace in updating our curriculum and teaching methods. The atmosphere of change is here; we are obligated to act soon.

Another aspect of tension for us related to change is our image as a school ordained to create islands of permanence in billowing seas of change. If by this it is meant that we take an unswerving stand upon a theology based upon the kerygma, then it is of course upon the kerygma that we stand. But the problem here is the use of the word "stand." An unswerving theological and biblical position must not be confused with a compulsion to maintain traditional methods of education. The commitment to relevance and the necessity to keep up-to-date in theological education is definitely consistent with our conservative theological perspective. The very spirit of the kerygma is dynamic; it speaks of God who has proven Himself, in the biblical story, as the Living God of History, a history whose present is always changing to make way for the future which is coming. Such a point of view is no shallow gesture to the spirit of the times; it is a recognition of the very spirit of Christianity.

Asbury Theological Seminary has a responsibility to be in the vanguard of progressive theological education. Some of the distinctives which have been given to us place this responsibility upon us.

1. We have always worked under the dynamic of an evangelistic concern. By this we mean the transformation of persons, of groups, of communities, of power factors, of social structures, of churches, of worlds. We train a ministry with this dynamic.

2. We strive for the constant renewal of the Church. Today we might even go so far as to say that the greatly-heralded phrase, "The renewal of the Church," has become an inadequate slogan. We need a revolution in the Church and we need a revolutionizing Church. The ministry and the manner of its preparation is central to the realization of this goal.

3. Under the tutelage of the Holy Spirit we mean to take Jesus Christ seriously. What this will do to the ministry, to theology, to the Church, to society, and to the world is indeed radical.

4. We affirm a concept of continuity in history. We take seriously the past, the present and the future. Acceptance of continuity indicates that God has been in the process, is now in the process, and

will be in the process. He is the Lord of history. This is an affirmation of faith which becomes a basis of confidence for change.

5. We believe in the Bible. The Scriptures are increasingly the witness to sanity in our world—to the reason for morality, to the meaningfulness of life, to the fact of human freedom, and to the ground for hope—all of which are essential to progressive thinking and living. On the basis of the Scriptures, we can do telic thinking and holistic thinking—we can set patterns for change, expect power to fulfill them and have confidence in the outcome.

6. We believe in Christian perfection. Biblical goals for man in all his being and his works are to be realized.

These distinctives say something about the methodology of theological education as well as the kinds of ministers produced. The faculty of the Seminary in its study is working out some basic considerations for future programming.

THE THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY AND ITS RESPONSIBILITY TO THE CHURCH AND THE MINISTRY

We are preparing men for the Church—not for a movement. Asbury Theological Seminary at this point in its history stands in a very responsible position to the organized church. By the organized church, we mean the Methodist Church, the Free Methodist Church, the Wesleyan Methodist Church, the Evangelical United Brethren Church, and whatever particular churches our graduates enter to serve. Our student body usually represents over thirty denominations. The ministers we train serve specific denominational churches. We train these ministers from a position within the evangelical movement. We also train these ministers from a "confessional" position. We recognize that the evangelical movement has sometimes stood aloof from the organized church. We recognize furthermore that our confessional position has often been held in splendid isolation. We must relate our stance to our task. No theological seminary, denominational or otherwise, with any self-respect is going to be dominated by the human institution of the church, but it does need to graduate loyal, obedient, creative servants of the church. These will be men faithful to their church who are catalysts within their church.

A letter from a recently graduated student of the Seminary illustrates this point. He is entering a church not traditionally evangelical. He is not going into it to stand over against it, but to work within it. He speaks of his love for his church. He speaks also of his concern to stay within the mainstream of the evangelical movement, and then he states, "At this point I suspect that God has a real ministry for me *within my church.*"

We are also to prepare men to understand and to serve the needs of the whole Church of Jesus Christ. The ecumenical dimension is a

particularly difficult dimension to achieve in the preparation of a minister, but it can be reached. A letter from another graduate of this year expresses this achievement: "I want you to tell President Stanger and my good professors that I feel richer, more Christian, more evangelical, more ecumenical, more universal than when I came here."

Special consideration is being given to the varied kinds of ministries that our graduates will enter. There are many traditional ministries. There is the traditional congregation chained to the status quo which in many cases is the deadening position of crying for the "status quo ante." But there are also ministries within very vital traditional congregations. There are traditional missionary, evangelistic, Christian education, music and chaplain ministries. There are also teaching ministries and a variety of other ministries which the Church has been carrying on throughout the generations. Most of our graduates will enter traditional ministries. How are they to do this dynamically and effectively?

There are also new ministries. We hear much about "new ministries" in the Church today. What are these, how valuable are they, and how does Asbury Theological Seminary relate to them? These are ministries, first of all, to new kinds of congregations—congregations that are not confined to the four walls of the churches that stand on the corners of smug suburbia. These are congregations that define themselves in terms of mission. Minister and people alike in these congregations are searching for what it means to be in the Church in this generation. They will not always conform to traditional patterns. They are trying to bring Christ into the major decision centers of politics, big business, industry, education.

There are what might be called "enabling ministries." A minister in such situations is known as "the man behind others." He is a minister who puts his laymen on the forefront. This is a different ministry from the clergy-centered church ministry. What does it mean to have an enabling ministry to others? How are men prepared for this? There are also ecumenical ministries and ministries to the inner city and other new ministries as wide as the range of life—creative ministries, all of these.

We ask ourselves, Does our curriculum prepare men for such ministries? Can preparation be accomplished by adding new subjects to the curriculum, or must this be done by means of new approaches in our teaching? What is the relationship between the Seminary curriculum and the fulfillment of traditional ministries dynamically and new ministries creatively?

A classroom in which the professor relates to his students on a highly authoritarian basis does not prepare men for dynamic traditional ministries or creative new ministries. Such a classroom pro-

duces a minister who will in turn pontificate from the pulpit, hide behind his authoritarian image, but never really expose himself to his people. The classroom must produce a ministry that is a ministry of men with others—a man who can share his life and expose himself to others, and a man to whom others will expose themselves. This is learned through a technique found in the classroom. A few new subjects in the curriculum are not the answer. A dialogical relationship in the classroom and an atmosphere of searching together will assist such development.

Our confessional stance adds to this process a glad expectancy. It adds the responsibility to search for the profound inner correspondence of our confession with the Scriptures. It creates the necessity to interpret our confession for our times and to witness to the significance of these elements in conversation with the larger Christian fellowship and with the world. It calls on us as a learning community to constantly seek the renewal and enrichment of our confessional position. This thoroughly enhances the educational process.

THE THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY RENEWING ITS ACADEMIC IMAGE

The major innovation in theological education may appear to the outsider to be the change in degree nomenclature. The change of the degree title from Bachelor of Divinity to Master of Divinity is indeed a significant change. It is a pledge of significant improvements in standards for the training of the ministry. It is considered a more fitting degree title for the educational experience achieved by the student of theology today.

The American Association of Theological Schools, in approving this change, set about justifying it in a very systematic and conscientious way. It created ten major checkpoints by which seminaries could determine their own excellence of standard for the training of the ministry. On the other hand, it gave an option to all seminaries to retain the B.D. or to change to the M.Div. It was correctly felt that this new degree did not necessarily indicate a sudden new standard of theological education. All seminaries having conscientiously required certain standards of work were considered of a high enough quality to grant a Master's designation, even if they wished to retain the Bachelor's designation.

At the present time, approximately fifty per cent of the seminaries accredited by the American Association of Theological Schools have changed the degree title. It is probable that eventually this will be the normal nomenclature.

It is proper to emphasize that the course of study is still considered a professional course in preparation for the ministry and not

an academically-oriented course as such. The jealous guarding of the professional aspect of the training of the ministry shows a high degree of concern on the part of the churches that we have men who are ministers rather than men who just know a great deal about religious subjects. Basic new emphases in the curriculum are indeed gratifying; they are even more significant than the change in degree title. Our Seminary is in the process of the following developments related to the new emphases.

1. The core program of basic required courses is to be retained. This assures a genuine balance in the total preparation which a student should have. However, a reduction of the size of this core is under consideration in order to make it possible for a student to have a wider range of flexibility in his elective courses and in the initiative that he himself takes to shape his own course of study. To make possible the shaping of the course of study, consideration is also being given to the creation of functional majors. Students desiring to enter either the pastoral ministry or the teaching ministry, the missionary ministry, or some one of the other specialized ministries, may have the opportunity to shape their course toward such a functional major.

2. An overall reduction in student load is under consideration. The principle behind this major move is to make opportunity for depth study. This would be accompanied by a greater degree of tutorial treatment and relationship between the professor and the student in order to see that depth was genuinely accomplished.

3. A strong emphasis upon an integrative curriculum is becoming manifest, governed by the concern that all disciplines should be more closely related—that there should be a greater homogenization of the disciplines in the mind of the student. Techniques for accomplishing this are several: team teaching, dialogue sessions for professors to better understand one another's discipline, and the creation of certain patterns within the curriculum—such as courses that draw together disciplines in integrated sessions, and the focusing on student ministries within the framework of the whole curriculum.

4. A greater concentration on the individual student is being accomplished by a number of procedures. Our present twelve to one ratio between students and faculty is very good. Each student has an advisor. The advisee-advisor relationship is set up for intense personal attention to the student's academic, spiritual and professional needs. We are working on ways to measure motivation and maturation for assisting the individual development of the student.

5. Considerable attention is being given to methods of classroom presentation. The proper balance between lectures and seminars and colloquia, the use of team teaching methods, the reduction of the size of classes, and numerous techniques are important means

of attaining the major emphases which have been set out as objectives.

6. Field education has a new blueprint for major attention. It is felt that men in studies learn by also being in concurrent ministry. It is felt that members of the faculty have a responsibility to follow through from the viewpoint of their own discipline to the very communication of that discipline. When faculty follow through to this extent they get a feedback of ideas to assist them in their course preparations. The entire field education program is to be integrated into the curriculum so that every aspect of the curriculum has some kind of clinical expression.

THE THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY AND THE NEW CONCEPT OF STUDENT

Such a concept of the process of education calls for a new concept of student. He must be willing to expose himself to the training of his whole person. This exposure to such a treatment of his whole person does not come easily. We have many students who consider that the ministry consists largely of giving out a certain amount of abstract truth to the world. The incarnational aspect of the ministry is central.

The student must also have a new sense of responsibility to personal initiative and quest. He must make a conscious effort to integrate his studies and to think holistically. He needs to relate his undergraduate work to his ministerial preparation and his theological understandings to all other intellectual disciplines. He must take greater responsibility for his own education and the shape of it. He must be aware of relating learning and ministry to the shape of the world so that he will have a relevant ministry. There must be a new concept of the student to match the new curriculum.

The Asbury Seminary Student Body recently made a serious self-study. A thorough student questionnaire was prepared. Attitudes and opinions on the curriculum and teaching methods were sought. Some conclusions from the student body are of real value in shaping a curriculum. The majority favored the following:

- greater flexibility and freedom in course planning
- reduction of the core program
- a chance to enter into greater depth in their subjects rather than to cover such a broad range of subjects
- more realistic measurement of student achievement and development

- more individual attention based on advisor-advisee relationship and student-teacher dialogue
- emphasis on the inductive rather than a deductive method of presenting Asbury's distinctives
- more internship opportunities and concurrent ministry with their studies.

The students overwhelmingly affirmed that they are making at Asbury Theological Seminary an informed and critical appropriation of the Christian faith, that they are achieving a grasp of contemporary Christian thought and its engagement with the culture of our time, and that they have a faith to share with this generation.

THE PRODUCT OF THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

Who is the minister we are graduating? What essentially characterizes this servant of God and the world?

He is a man in Christ. In his theological education he has learned to be Christological in his thinking, Christo-centric in his theology, and Christ-like in his ministry. He has the mind of Christ, the faith of Christ and the servanthood of Christ.

He is a man for others. He knows the burden of the Cross, the cost of discipleship. He knows that love is the way. His training has assisted him to carry a theological conviction through to its ultimate conclusion—the gift of one life for another.

He is a man with others. His sensitivity training sets him free to share and to expose himself. He ventures into dialogue engendering mutual respect and honesty. His fellow man exposes himself in his presence, for the true self is revealed in relationship. In reconciling man to God he is himself reconciled to his fellow man.

He is a man behind others. Chosen by God and man to administer the sacraments and the Word, he does so as a servant of the servants of God. He seeks out the gifts of the Spirit among God's people and enables them to express these. His people are in the forefront and he is behind them, supporting their life and service.

He is a man "turned on." Inspired, he inspires others. Aflame, he sets a flame in the hearts of others. He is light and salt to the earth. Mature himself, he strives to bring all men into maturity in Christ. He works with all the energy Christ mightily inspires within him. Sanctified, his "self" is not in the way. Filled with the Holy Spirit, he commends Christ to all men with such authenticity that many gladly enter the Kingdom.