

Theological Education and the Church in Our Time*

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President Stanger, members of the Board of Trustees of Asbury Theological Seminary, honored delegates of schools of learning of the Church and the State, respected guests, loved ones, fellow members of faculty, and fellow students in the search for truth: One stands at such a moment, at such a place, with considerable awe and with humble gratitude when one looks upon one's Alma Mater and sees the development that has taken place under the hand of God. When one is called to serve in such a capacity of responsibility, one's heart leaps in response and one gives what one has to offer to Christ, to the theological seminary which is the servant of the Church, and to the Church of Jesus Christ.

The Church of Jesus Christ! This is the Church we love, the Church which nurtured us in our Christian faith, the Church which unites us with all the justified, the sanctified, the holy ones of the ages, and of our own generation. This is our Church, but it is above all Christ's Church, His Body which He loved, for which He died, over which He jealously yearns to see that it has no spot or blemish.

We belong to Christ today. Therefore, we cannot talk responsibly about the Church apart from love of the Church, apart from awareness of who we are—the redeemed, the people of God, the heirs of the Kingdom.

As theological educators, we speak out of this heart of belonging and out of the privileged position of having been entrusted with the Word to teach, the message to proclaim; out of the privileged center from which to speak critically, creatively, and challengingly.

The theological seminary is to serve the Church, but is not the theological seminary community also the Church? This academic community is not alone an academic community. It is a worshipping community. It is a serving and a witnessing community. We are a sharing and a responsible community of Christians. We are a part

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of the Body of Christ. This fact, that we are the Church and at the same time we are a school, has definite implications. We may not assume a spectator posture to the world or to the larger Christian fellowship. Each subject of the curriculum must be taught in relation to the multi-dimensional dialogue that the Church is holding with the world. We dare not teach or live, learn or pray, in isolation because we are the Church in the world. The same questions that need to be asked of the Church in our time need to be asked of the theological seminary; not only the theological seminary, but our own Asbury Theological Seminary.

The seminary experience must not be for the student a three-year stint in Utopia—a Utopia of nice apartments, bookish problems, ready answers from knowledgeable professors; the Utopia of Christian fellowship detached from the world. There must be experienced here the reality of the struggle with evil and the price our Lord paid to overcome it. There must be experienced here the kind of discipline that relates us to the battle that is on for the minds of men in the world, as well as the experience of suffering service. There must be here no conservative obstructionism that is more related to arm-chair theologians than to prophets. We are to give ourselves to a doctrine of perpetual revolution. We serve a Christ who ushers in a new Kingdom. Ours is a community of the committed. There must be a burdened, joyous, disciplined, confident, cross-bearing, victorious kind of living and learning and witnessing in such a community.

What is the nature of the Church that calls for such men?

The Church is the Gospel Community. It does not exist for itself. It exists for the Gospel. The Gospel is the Good News concerning life in Christ. Therefore, the Church exists for its Lord. And the Good News is to the world; therefore, the Church exists for the world.

The biblical Church was never allowed to become static, which is the meaning of existing for itself. In the Old Testament, the Remnant was not privileged after all its trials and purgings to sit down and glory in being the Remnant. God always commanded it to be a servant people to the world. In the New Testament the Christians were not permitted to stand aside and glory in being the community of the Resurrection. The Church was under the constant compulsion of the Holy Spirit to move out to the world. Today, our greatest lesson from the New Testament Church is not to look back to New Testament forms of the Church, but rather to New Testament flexibility as a Gospel community, giving witness to new life in Christ and taking on the servant form of its Lord. New Testament Christians were a community of the resurrection, carrying the cross for the world and pointing to the resurrected Christ who had borne

the sins of the world on the cross. Cross-bearing is the Church's life. Resurrection faith is the Church's source of hope that cross-bearing is not in vain.

Because the Church is the community of the Gospel, there are two basic elements in its structure that I wish to emphasize in relation to responsible theological education, which education must constantly face the inquiry whether or not it is fully dedicated to the whole nature and purpose of the Church.

First of all, the Church is based upon the Holy Scriptures. The Scriptures assure the Church that it is not left to its own devices. The truth that has been revealed to it, its commission, its working instruction, its message, is a given truth, a given commission, a given instruction, and a given message. That which is given is found in the Holy Scriptures. If the Church would see Jesus Christ, it must find Him in the Holy Scriptures. Here in the Word of God the Church is judged. Here it is authenticated. Here it is on sure ground in its witness. Here the Spirit speaks to the Church. Here is its authority. The Church must live by the Word of God or else it will not know its own Lord and will govern itself rather than be governed by the Holy Spirit. In obedience, fidelity, and absolute faith in this Source, the Church has its life, its message, and its mission.

Theological education is charged with the responsibility to give instruction, insight, and leadership to the Church in regard to the Word of God. Theological education must itself center down on the Holy Scriptures. Theology in our time, fortunately, has been released from bondage to philosophy and has centered on the Word of God. But even so, it can be tragically demonstrated that there is a possibility of missing the Triune God who reveals Himself in the Bible, of missing the real message, of missing the real Lord of the Church. As Dean Muelder so well points out in an address entitled, "Theological Education and the Neglect of the Gospel," "There has been a whole generation of talk about the *kerygma* and still we are not saved!"¹ We will ask, What do we do with the *kerygma* besides talk about it?

In a Director's report to the American Association of Theological Seminaries, the question was asked, "Have our students lived with the Bible to the point where they think its thoughts,

1. Walter G. Muelder, "Theological Education and the Neglect of the Gospel," *The American Association of Theological Schools Bulletin*, XXV (June, 1962), 201.

speak its words, and act as children of the Light?"² Insufficient answers are given to this sort of statement and this sort of question. The Church remains in part cut off from its biblical source of life, and the world remains unsaved. We are convinced that sound theological education is centered on the inspired Word of God as absolute authority and does not draw the *kerygma* out of the Bible but proclaims it in the context of the whole Word of God. In fact, the Bible has its own way of resisting manipulation. The Holy Spirit does not, cannot, give life unless the Bible is allowed to speak and unless what is heard is obeyed. As Karl Barth declares:

Rightly or wrongly, in loyalty or disloyalty, the Church may say a thousand things expounding and applying Scripture, but Scripture is always autonomous and independent of all that is said. It can always find new and from its own standpoint better readers, and obedience in these readers, even in a Church which has perhaps to a large extent become self-governing, and by these readers a point of entry to reform and renew the whole Church and to bring it back from self-government to obedience.³

Theological education must so perform its function as a servant of the Church that the Church is made aware that it must live by the Word of God, which means by the Holy Scriptures. Theological educators and students must themselves, if they would see Jesus Christ, be directed and bound to the Holy Scriptures.

The Church in our time is seeking renewal. Preparatory to coming to Asbury, I talked with a prominent minister on the West Coast. He expressed the deep spiritual search that is going on within the Church and pleaded that if Asbury had anything real to offer that we share it with the Church. Across the earnest face of the Church today is written the marks of this longing, this repentant attitude, and search for renewal. Observers of the American scene are indicating causes for the Church's earnestness, stating again and again what one prominent churchman said, "Every serious study indicates unequivocally that the detachment of Americans from the fundamental meanings of the Christian message is almost total, whatever be the pious phrases that people can still repeat."⁴

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2. Charles L. Taylor and Jesse H. Ziegler, "Report of the Directors," *The American Association of Theological Schools Bulletin*, XXV (June, 1962), 69.
 3. Karl Barth, *The Doctrine of the Word of God (Church Dogmatics, I New York: Scribners, 1956)*, 583.
 4. Gibson Winter, "The New Christendom in the Metropolis," *The American Association of Theological Schools Bulletin*, XXV (June, 1962), 8.

There is growing concern for the hollowness of religious activism and the "precarious psychological state of many of the clergy." These and other causes found in our increasingly secular world are bringing the Church to seek renewal.

The Reformation and the renewal of the sixteenth century was a decision for the Scriptures, and conversely it must be declared, a decision for the Holy Scriptures today will mean a new reformation and bring the renewal we seek. The Church can only live by the Word of God.

A second basic element in the nature of the Church which I wish to emphasize is its catholicity.

For early Christians, the term "Christian" and "catholic" were inseparable. The cognomen "catholic" gave fullness to the nomen "Christian." The concepts of "universal" and "wholeness" are here brought out.

Universal—because the Church is not confined to any place, time, or nation, but includes all true believers.

Wholeness—because we are one Church in Jesus Christ.

Thoughts from the early Church Fathers illuminate this. Ignatius of Antioch wrote, "Where Jesus Christ is, there is the catholic Church." Saint Augustine confesses, "I am a catholic Christian." According to Augustine, to be "catholic" meant to be in world-wide communion with fellow believers, whereas to be a "heretic" meant to be content, and self-sufficient in one's own private, local isolation from other Christians and from fullness of truth and wholeness of spirit.

Consider in this connection the comprehensive thought of Cyril of Jerusalem. He affirms that the Church is called "catholic" because it is spread through the whole world, and because it never stops teaching in all its fullness every doctrine that men ought to be brought to know, and because it brings into religious obedience every sort of men, and because it is a universal treatment and a cure for every kind of sin, and possesses within it every form of virtue that is named.

For our purpose, let us grasp the meaning of this by seeing that the catholicity of the Church is both *gift* and *task*.

It is *gift* because the Church receives all of its life and its revealed truth from the fullness of the Triune God. The wholeness that the Church possesses is the wholeness of life and truth which it has by being the Body of Christ. Here we consider those great Christological passages of Paul which inform us that in Him "all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell," that "all things" are "from Him, and through Him, and to Him." It is with this Christ for whom "all things were created" who is "before all things" and in

whom "all things hold together," that the Church is identified. This is a gift in terms of life.

The gift in terms of truth is equally important. In our Christ, the Christ of our Church, is the truth. He is the source and norm of all truth, fulfilling, authenticating, and transforming every genuine human quest for truth.

Catholicity is also *task*. There is the task of allowing the fullness of Christ to be manifest in the Church and there is the task of mission. The grace and love of God are unlimited; the incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection of Christ are for all men everywhere, and Christ is Lord over all things. In depth as well as in breadth we are to be engaged in mission with our world.

The implications of catholicity for us as theological educators are very far-reaching. As one theologian has stated, "Catholicity directs attention always to the *maximal* rather than the minimal as the basis for judgment in the Church."

With this emphasis on the maximal, theological education has the obligation to study the full nature of God and man. To begin with, at least, it has the obligation to direct men's attention in the fullest measure to the guilt involved in human sinfulness. Men must be made aware of the fact of sin, of its depth of penetration in human nature, of the utter intolerance of sin in the universe of a holy God. Human sin must be exposed in all of its historical, social, cultural, personal, and collective manifestations. It must be exposed with all of its resultant distortion of human nature, its tragic division of the human family, and as that which cuts men off from life in the living God, and that which thwarts the vitalistic urge of the universe.

With this emphasis on the maximal, we are called to exercise every faculty and use every spiritual and intellectual resource at our command to comprehend and make comprehensible, to communicate and make communicable, the great Gospel of salvation that redeems us from such sin.

More than this! With this emphasis on the maximal, we are to teach the truth that God wants to do a full and complete work of grace in the human heart. He would make us holy as He is holy. He would make us loving as He is loving. He would impart to us His righteousness and His agape. He would fill us with His Holy Spirit.

With this attention to the maximal, theological education will be aware that all truth from whatever disciplines of learning—from the fields of science, art, and philosophy—belongs to the wholeness which is Christian truth, and we will help the Church to construct a Christ-centered philosophy of life that will give meaning and purpose to all the experiences of modern man.

With this attention to the maximal we will approach our task of training ministers in a radically global manner. Global thinking requires theological treatment and curriculum consideration not adequately given in seminary education. There is in our world today an honest quest for international ethos, for a universal bill of rights and freedoms, for a truly ecumenical Church, for an effective United Nations. Have we, to be specific, accepted the reality of the new ecumenical situation? Are we ahead or behind the ecumenical dialogue?

Then again, in regard to the mighty social urges of our time, have we with the Church left to others the responsibility for revolution? The Church is not to be protected against the threatening incursions of historical change. As the Gospel community, we have an all-important role in history. As Gibson Winter points out, "We are subjects of history rather than objects to be saved from history, for we are summoned to freedom for history by the redemptive Word of divine affirmation of history."⁵ As the Gospel community we proclaim the shape of things to come which gives meaning to history. As Bonhoeffer puts it, "The Church of the Holy Scripture, and there is no other 'church,' lives from the end. Therefore it reads all Holy Scripture as the book of the end, of the new, of Christ. . ." ⁶

And with this attention to the maximal we shall give greater attention to the enlistment of the full human resources within the Church to serve humanity. There is within the Church today a mighty movement of the lay apostolate. In our theological seminaries where a built-in clericalism prevails, we are not giving adequate attention to this new movement. The laity are today rightly assured that their baptism in the Lord is their ordination to witness. In a world where we have more non-Christians today than existed on the day of Pentecost, we need to develop to the full extent this lay apostolate. A cleric-centered Church has fallen into the danger of over-centralization. Authority, service to the community, worship, and many things more are centered in the clergy. Elaborate institutions are developed to carry this out. Organizations that always have to pivot around the clergy, buildings that confine clergy operations, creating a "come to church" ministry rather than a "go to the world" ministry are the confinements of the organization-man-cleric today. For the perplexed and tortured human predicament about us today we need a dynamic and flexible ministry. We need a

5. *Ibid.*, 175.

6. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1959), p. 8.

ministry closely related to the decision-making areas of business, government, school, home, and industrial shop. We need the lay apostolate that the Spirit of God is calling forth today. Are the theological seminaries ready for this? Are they ready to give the training programs that might be required? Are they ready for the new forms of ministry that this might imply?

It is recognized that there exists in a spiritually healthy theological seminary a basic tension. It is that tension which is there because we are both an academic community and a Gospel community, both a school and the Church. As a school, we must give measured, rational, and studied attention to the objective search for truth. This is Christ in us. As a Church we express that quality of all-out agape relationship to the world. This, too, is Christ in us.

Asbury Theological Seminary has always been known as the school with an open end to the world in our evangelistic zeal for the world. We specialize in motivation to this end. We thank God that He has given us this vision and this place of service. We pray that it may increase. But we ask as well that our love may grow in all knowledge and discernment as Paul admonishes us; that we may guard against all isolationist and divisive tendencies in our outlook and servant ministry; that increasingly we may minister to the whole need of man: that we may present the full riches of Christ to every man, "warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man mature in Christ." For this let us toil, striving with all the energy which He mightily inspires within us!

In closing, I wish to raise a number of questions which I trust the Holy Spirit may have placed before us. In a recent address to the American Association of Theological Seminaries, Samuel Miller stated: "The men who come to us now to be trained for the Christian ministry do not begin with faith, they hunger for it."⁷ Our facilities in our theological seminaries are improving. Our faculties are improving. Our curricula are broadening. But the situation of our students is deteriorating.

In a number of the theological seminaries which I have served this past year, faculty after faculty has indicated the insecurity of the student body as they contemplate their ministry.

7. Samuel H. Miller, "The Prophetic Responsibility of Theological Training," *The American Association of Theological Schools Bulletin*, XXV (June, 1962), 220.

Have you as students at Asbury come with this lack of faith? Are you hungering for an assured, personal relationship to God in Christ? Are you able to find it here? Is Asbury Seminary providing you with the necessary confrontation, instruction, counseling, personal care, so that your life is being firmly rooted in Christ? Do you find here that genuine, rigorous discipline that leads to spiritual and intellectual maturation?

Are we as a faculty exercising all wisdom and love to present every student mature in Christ?

Here at Asbury Seminary we are improving our buildings and broadening our curriculum. Just this week we moved in a great air-conditioning unit. This next term we are adding several new courses for student selection. Our new library building will soon be in the process of construction. Is our Seminary, as an institution, too conformed to this world? Are we like many of the fortress churches being built about us, walled-in societies of complacent, happy, contented and satisfied people where the world cannot penetrate and reach us, or even crucify us?

Asbury Theological Seminary is justified as a modern and well-equipped institution, and every dollar spent on buildings, books, and faculty is sanctified *if* all of us who go out as ministers of Jesus Christ from this blessed place will, by the grace of God, live sacrificial lives, giving ourselves at whatever cost to us personally, as suffering servants of Jesus Christ, crucified to the world, not seeking status, or honor, or personal gain, counting all things as refuse for the sake of knowing Christ and serving Him and our fellow man, giving a prophetic, inspired witness to all the cultural, social, intellectual, and spiritual needs of our world.

If this be the end result, Asbury Theological Seminary, its faculty and administration, its benefactors and friends, will praise God and know that truly we are the servant of the Church of Christ in our time.