

The Anomaly of Theological Education: Institutions Serving an Institution

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Abstract

An exploration of the relationship of the church to its serving institution: the theological school. Factors related to leadership development, the nature of the church in relation to the schools, and lifelong learning are discussed. Reprinted from the Foreword to *Theological Education Matters: Leadership Education for the Church*, by Linda Cannell (Chicago, IL: Morgenbooks). Accessed at www.amazon.com.

The church is more than an organization. It is a body of people; biblically it is identified as “the body of Christ.” It is a community of faith, a collective of those committed to a belief. But the church is often mistaken as an organization, and as such, it is assumed to be represented by one or more institutions of education, especially because it is associated with training academies of many sorts: Bible schools, ministerial seminaries, theological schools, divinity schools. Whether such schools are *served by* the church or are intended *to serve* the church is one of the most confused issues in all of professional education. Exploring this issue and identifying the historical and philosophical roots of its confusion are the driving motives that have led Linda Cannell to write this book.

Although the church can be classified sociologically as an institution, it is more metaphysical than this term suggests. Biblically, the church is identified with the qualities of personhood as “the bride of Christ.” This metaphor’s distance from the realm of organizational structures and management is dramatic and surely intentional. The special relationship of Christ and his followers is identified in the vocabulary of relationships. The intimacy of this relationship is revealed in its special form of affiliation. The church is a family, not merely a membership organization.

The church functions within two domains: the physical universe of human relationships and the spiritual realm of eternal and transcendent truth. Great care is required to reconcile the ways and means of the differing value systems of these two domains. The difficulties in maintaining such reconciliation are especially evident in matters of leadership and in the ways and means of developing leaders.

Dealing with the physical universe requires accepting the importance of information. Those who lead—whether at the level of supervision and management or at the level of planning and evaluative judgment—must know the basic stuff of the job. They must be prepared through appropriate modes of experience so that they know the skills, understandings, and roles needed to fulfill the job. They also must be carefully oriented to the social and emotional context of the job—inspired and motivated to fulfill their appointed role in the organization, to represent faithfully the ethos of its purposes.

Whether this need to know is a matter of memorizing facts or of developing complex reasoning and spiritual maturity in order to make appropriate choices and judgments (some of us believe the latter is the preferred outcome), it seems to call for some kind of educational intervention. Leaders of the church must *know*, they must *do*, and they must *become* in order to be exemplars of the values, style, and social-emotional orientation demanded for the tasks, management, and purpose-fulfillment of the organization.

Thinking of job requirements and necessary competencies in terms of learning tasks, however, leads to several dangerous habits. First, it leads to the presumption that skills and knowledge are the only sorts of qualifications that are important to establish qualifications. (What about character traits and moral judgment?) Second, it exalts the qualities of a person that can be assessed through objective testing. Testing objectively justifies a piecemeal mode of teaching that dehumanizes our development and growth processes. (Is it enough to assess the stuff on information shelves and to come up with scores for the skills that a person possesses?) Third, it overlooks the human quality of interrelationship. A person is not simply the sum of what is remembered and what can be done with that information. (Do fragmented facts and catalogs of information add up to a fair representation of one's personality, style, sensitivities, and being, a true assessment of the person?)

Such a tendency to oversimplify, to dry out, and to objectify in cold and inhuman representations leads educators today to warn against excesses of the objective testing movement. The resultant conflict in this domain is just the tip of the iceberg of the current dissonance between school and church.

The Question of Values

Institutions of one sort can effectively serve institutions of another sort if their values are consistent. When any institution, the church, for example, is served by another institution, a school, for example, the similarity of their purposes and values will determine the worth of the service. If the purposes and values are different on any significant issue, the service will be weakened, quite possibly invalidated. In the business and financial world, banking institutions can serve business institutions well because banks and mercantile institutions share the same competitive values and profit-making purposes.

On the other hand, the likelihood of conflicting purposes when medical and pastoral personnel are called upon to serve military purposes is accommodated by setting them apart as noncombatants; this status is formally recognized by the Geneva Convention. These humanitarian specialists are dedicated to different purposes from those of soldiers and military commanders: *saving lives*, a high value of most religions, stands in contrast with *ending lives*, which is the immediate purpose of modern warfare.

Conflicts between the fulfillment of higher moral values and the possibility of doing possible damage to those values is a matter of concern to most honorable institutions and organizations. For this reason, most universities are constantly on guard lest their research facilities be used for immoral or dishonest purposes.

My attempt to connect issues of selection and training of pastors to matters of warfare and immorality may seem strained. But to the extent that theology (the study of basic sources in religion) involves one institution (the church) entrusting itself to another institution, schooling, to be the developer of its leaders, the parallels are clear. Perhaps it should be stated more boldly: *the church has not consistently been well served by the schools and school-like institutions to which it has delegated the responsibility to prepare its own leaders.*

The church, as understood by Christians, is itself an odd case among the religious institutions of human societies. The church of Jesus Christ is far more than a New Testament manifestation of the synagogue of the Old Testament. It is far more than a temple or place of worship (a mosque, for example). Yes, *church* (Gr. *ekklesia*) occasionally denotes a place of worship, but more often—and more substantially—the term denotes an assembly of followers of Christ, whether in a place or on the move. Always the distinction is illustrative of a common commitment to God through the crucifixion, death, burial, and resurrection of this glorified and ascended person, Emmanuel, God with us.

The purpose of this body of people, the family of God, whether in whole or in a specific place, is always the same: to perpetuate Christ's call to humankind. *Repent and be baptized*. It is not an organization, surely not a club or a collective of delegates to a meritorious organization. The distinctives of the life and motives of Jesus were intensely personal: truth, hope, compassion, faith, forgiveness, gentleness, and mercy. These values are difficult to embody; even those who are sincerely committed to Christ find themselves engaged in a lifetime of challenge and inspiration. A common trait of Christians is that they accept the futility of self-improvement toward the goal of becoming Christlike and give themselves over to the grace of God and the work of the Holy Spirit.

Who Chooses the Leaders?

Leadership of this assembly, the church, was not left to chance. It was charged to carry out its purposes under the guidance of the Holy Spirit as leaders were identified, equipped, and gifted specifically for the offices and services of the church. This process borders on the mystical, although deliberate decisions and choices are illustrated in numerous biblical examples.

Selecting and preparing leaders to enable the church to carry out its ministry, as established by Christ and the apostles, is a responsibility charged to the church. Nowhere in Scripture is this task assigned to another agency or institution. Thus each theological school must accept its accountability to the church, lest it become a potential source of dissonance. All churches and organizations of churches do not see this matter alike. Various arrangements are made to assign the labors and responsibilities of educational tasks. Some scholars underestimate the importance of harmony on these matters. Others are intolerant in their insistence on assigning *sole* authority to the local church or to the institutions of the denominational affiliation.

For some, it is a matter of convenience and management: the special work of preparing and certifying pastoral leaders is a service *to* the church, not primarily a responsibility *of* the church. Such a view allows that the tasks of selecting and preparing leaders can be delegated to specialized institutions of pastoral education and training—schools. This reasoning has long-standing acceptance and support, although it seems inconsistent with New Testament teachings and practices. In recent years, as schooling has become more concerned with technology than with philosophy and history, important questions are being raised about its appropriate role within the church.

Because of the worldwide growth of the Christian church and the diversities and dissonances arising in various cultural situations in which the church is emerging, understanding the shapes, forms, and diverse formation of church leadership requires careful examination and reflection.

Schools for Developing Leaders

Three factors are linked to the presumption that the church needs schools.

1. *Christians identify themselves as the people of the book*. While this self-description is not absolutely unique to Christianity, it would be hard to find a more likely claim by a more self-aware group. In Old Testament Judaism, tracking God's dealings with his people, in an era much less familiar with writing, God provides Moses with carvings in stone to explicate his law to his people. In modern times there has been an unbroken chain of expository writings that document God's guiding hand in human history. The Christians' great book, the Bible, has served to stimulate and initiate the creative spirit of missionaries and inventors. "Bringing the Word" requires two things: a bringer and the book. *Bringers* are first identified in the Old Testament as prophets, and their role is fulfilled in the New Testament as "Apostles." This book, the Bible, has been the focus and the calling of uncounted generations of scribes, translators, and copyists.

This emphasis on the book may have led to a fundamental distortion within Christian doctrine and practice. The preoccupation with the written text has led to a perpetual discourse about textual accuracy. The concern itself illustrates the dilemma: either the text is an accurate representation of the truth or it is not. Indeed, but the issue is in the meaning of “representation of the truth.” When loyalty to the text is exaggerated beyond the truth itself, we become vulnerable to bibliolatry. In defense of the Bible’s presumed inherent linguistic precision, all sorts of campaigns are mounted in which the issue becomes accuracy of translation rather than a search for inherent evidences of *God’s* consistency. It is quite a leap to think of a printed book as Word in the same way we think of the divine Person as Word. The apostle John speaks of the latter when he says of Christ, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God....The Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth” (John 1:1–2, 14). The cause of Christ would be better served by book-centered scholarship if it were fulfilled in light of the teachings of the Epistle of James (e.g., James 1:22, 27; 2:14, 18, 26; 3:13; 4:17).

2. *Loyalty to a school fulfills the human pride in affiliation.* Human cultures generally discriminate between appropriate and inappropriate ways to identify oneself as an affiliate of a religion. Christians, especially, are sensitive to displays of pride and superiority in the name of Christ. It is assumed to be more seemly to take pride in the schools that have been instrumental in one’s religious development and to substitute glorification of the academic realm for glorification of the religion. Thus symbols of academic achievement are deemed acceptable where symbols of spiritual development would be inappropriate.

The prestige of an outstanding theological seminary or university is marketable; it has value in establishing the worth of the degrees that the institution grants. By no means is this a recent phenomenon. To have studied with the “right” mentor and to have partaken of the intellectual aura of a “great” scholarly community have apparently been venerated since earliest times. Today, however, competition is exaggerated beyond a school’s claim of excellence, and excellence is converted to values of the marketplace. To be “the best” has worth on the secular balance sheet, and to have degrees from the best schools increases one’s prospects for a large salary.

In many ways, academic experiences can shape the student’s philosophical and moral character. For those who understand this, there is more than a touch of sadness when we consider the sorts of schools students tend to prefer. Respect for biblical authority maintained by a school commonly seems far less important than prestigious reputation and the pragmatic value a school provides by sending its graduates on to even more prestigious institutions. Those of us engaged in international education have seen many sincere international Christians put such an institution as Harvard Divinity School at the top of their list simply because of the reputation of Harvard University.

The secularizing tendencies in the church and its leadership spread steadily into all sorts of matters. Preference for academic excellence over spiritual depth is surely among the most serious of these. Closely related, the preference for “book learning” over experience and application leads a person (or a congregation) into habits of personal isolation and disdain for practical applications of truth.

Accreditation is assumed to provide safeguards against deviations from purpose and from excellence. Modern accreditation has a strangely mixed parentage. Among its more admirable intentions is the sustaining of academic quality through standardization of courses and degrees. In its earliest days, American-style accreditation emerged from the complaints of registrars in frontier universities that they needed protection from increasing numbers of poorly educated rural high school graduates. Accreditation was originally more concerned with the quality of applicants than the quality of the institution.

As often happens despite best intentions, the methods employed for judging quality and making preferential choices have led to a contradictory extreme: the most apparent consequence of accreditation has become the suppression of innovation in favor of maintaining the status quo, no matter how antiquated or ill-advised. Commonly, the very exalting of excellence is itself over structured in such a way as to suppress any changes that would make an institution unique. Thus a vicious circle results in which the quest for excellence is discouraged.

3. *The human thirst for learning seems more manageable and easier to fulfill when it is regimented.* Church architecture reflects the Roman lecture hall and the Greek amphitheater rather than honoring Jesus' own fondness for seated circles of people, as in the synagogues of his day. We learn to think of church as a big space where all but one or two people sit staring forward in rapt attention as one person interprets a text and promulgates conclusions.

Rarely do we see the preaching and teaching style of Jesus practiced by leaders in the church. For example, Jesus *stood* respectfully while reading the text of scripture but *sat* among the other worshipers to engage in discussion of the text (see Luke 4:16–21). It would not be wise to make such a detail a core value, but neither should it be overlooked. Walking together, eating together, and sitting together, always accompanied by talking together in a dialogic manner, are not the images that first come to mind when Jesus is identified as a great teacher or preacher. But details within the Gospel descriptions of Jesus' interactions with his followers, along with evidences of his tendency to invite himself into social situations with others, suggest a persistent habit—indeed a remarkable style—not just several coincidences. Jesus emerges as an artist—a skillful, warm, compassionate specialist in adult education. The twin maxims that are attributed occasionally to my own style and habits as a facilitator of learning are not mine; I learned them from Jesus: *Learning is lifelong. Learning is collaborative.*

When teaching is scheduled, boxed, structured, “presented,” and over organized, it is reduced to a *thing*. Teaching must struggle to free itself from such habits, customs, and limitations so that learning may occur. Learning, at its finest, is a lively encounter with some intriguing aspect of life. Thus learning is the extending of one's thoughts and understandings to encounter, discover, and blend one's past with the unfolding present, thus enabling an active involvement in the shaping of a creative future.

This sort of learning is not a mechanical response to managed and manipulated stimuli. It is not simply arrangements of habit displayed in sequences that satisfy curricular inquiries. Learning is not only responses to questions; it is creation and appreciation of questions. Valuing the human thirst for learning, I have come to reject any manageable, regimented, easy-to-fulfill series of lonely learning tasks. Learning works best when it occurs as part of a community's experience. I learned this from Jesus: *Learning is a lifelong engagement that is collaborative.*

Thirst for learning is an important trait of human life. It should be encouraged and nurtured. Within the teaching-learning ministries of the church, our task is to facilitate—to help it happen. To stimulate and challenge. To nurture and encourage. To be resonant chambers that enable the strings of the discoverer's violin to transform from squeaks and scrapes into an unfolding promise of heavenly melody. The work of Jesus Christ in this troubled world needs disciples who are motivated to serve the church in collaborations that fulfill his purposes. Thus the church may become an institution served by other institutions, allied in God's purposes.