



Into the Future: *To Discern Without Dichotomizing*¹

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Today's academic world emphasizes bits and pieces. In much of the scholarship of our time, "crisp thinking" has replaced "clear thinking" just as reasoning has supplanted wisdom as the major motive. The metaphors of human mind and thought are now commonly based on electronic computers; we talk fluently of bits and pieces, databases and domains, input and output. The result is a simplistic model of the universe and a demeaning vision of the nature of humankind. Nevertheless, it is comfortable. Perhaps because it plays into so many of the characteristics of fallenness, it is easy for people to fall into mechanistic habits of thought and action.

A Small View of the Creation

Computer metaphors and experiences with computers tend to increase a black-or-white view of things. The rudimentary component of the computer's capability of "remembering" is as dichotomistic as a light switch: within the computer a bit of information is either on or off, a yes or a no. Binary, they call it. For the Christian and for the future of Christian theology, the dichotomistic habit is a menace. In the dichotomistic mind there is no gray, no in between, no maybe. If you can pose the issue just so, you can reduce it to bits of information, each of which represents a clear-cut binary position. It may be fun to be so certain of everything, but it tends to close off further inquiry and the re-examination of faulty conclusions.

Given the concern for ultimate truth—God's truth—it is only natural for theological scholarship to seek a convergence on specific propositions. Add the fondness for words and for writing that is carefully inbred among scholars and the result can be elaborate word-games that ultimately evade the difficult issues of the confused and complex social environment. Surely theological scholarship among Christians has not fallen to such a level of impotence, but to discount the possibility is a disservice to the church.

Within the scholarly traditions we learn to reduce the boundaries of our intellectual territory to some manageable scope so that we can possess it and defend it. Never mind that many important ideas and great concerns are distorted in the process. The tendency to split things along arbitrary lines and to deal with the slivers of important issues that lie on my side of these arbitrary lines assures my claim on the comfort zone of my own narrow expertise.

This pattern within modern science and scholarship in general has even older roots in other aspects of human society. Hierarchical government and management, for example, are based on the fact that power can be derived and maintained by segmenting an organization or even a nation into rudimentary blocks of narrowly defined responsibility and controllable slices of subordinated authority. Bureaucracy gets its bad name from the contrast between autocratic idealism and the inevitable bungling that accompanies top-down management.

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The church was never meant to be managed in such a manner. The New Testament images of vine, family, and body are sometimes misunderstood as divisions of labor and commitment to narrowly defined and isolated specialization. Rather, the metaphors represent intense interdependence and community participation. One way to account for the relative impotence of many churches today is to understand the damage done by an image of the pastor as a hierarchical delegator whose narrow expertise in theological and spiritual matters is conceded by “the people.” If the pastor is the head of the church in terms of ultimate authority, what happens to Christ? If the church concedes to the pastor the responsibility for initiating and managing spiritual growth, what happens to the spiritual vitality of the people?

Nurturant Leadership

So much depends on the pastor’s acceptance of a role within the faith community that is altogether nurturant but nevertheless results in a minimum of dependency on such a figure. The misunderstandings that produce congregational lethargy and stalemated spiritual development can sometimes be traced to poor theological education of the pastor, but even more often they result from poor theological education of the congregation. Pastors must deal with the fact that many natural factors in our society work against people’s willingness to accept their rightful responsibilities within the church. Part of the pastor’s mission is to teach and guide in such a way as to help the people of God emerge into a co-laboring interdependency. Sometimes it is easier, far easier, for the pastors simply to do what the people want them to do—doing for them, carrying the whole spiritual load, allowing the people of God to become a passive audience—fulfilling roles painfully characteristic of today’s society.

Even for those of us who ought to know better, the dichotomizing habit is insidious. Especially if it has resulted in a narrowing of our attention so as to exclude what are rightfully the tasks of all Christians, the value of our ministry, especially within the general society outside the church, can be less than God intends.

Conscientization of a Dichotomizing Christian

Almost twenty years ago a worldwide group of younger leaders of the church met with some of the elder statesmen in a memorable experience called Seminar 70. Of the hundreds of seminars, workshops, and conferences in which I have participated across my forty years as an educator, this event stands out for two reasons. Seminar 70 was unusual in that the line between those who were giving and those who were receiving was almost invisible; indeed, my memories of Francis Schaeffer, Joe Bayly, and many other saints now departed who were with us in Seminar 70 focus on their listening and interacting with younger people—not hiding behind their own proclamations but acknowledging openly the concerns and puzzlement we all felt in that troubled era. I had been part of the group that planned the event, encouraged and pushed as we had been by Joe Coughlin, but my “up front” responsibility during the more formal part of the program was minor. Seminar 70 was intended to facilitate a variety of spontaneous interactions and small-group discussions. The people who came together were all prepared to give and to receive; it was not just to be a round of speeches and sermons. We planned the gathering that way and, by the grace of God, it worked.

We had purposed to note major issues and particular interests that would arise during plenary discussions and move them into follow-up seminars. The role of the seminar leaders was to encourage informal gatherings in order to draw out understandings and insights from the participants. But because some of us were professors, we fell into the academic discourse model from time to time. In one such moment something happened that changed my life.

After a plenary session on the second day of Seminar 70, I was asked to convene an informal group of about fifteen men and women whose concerns about the implications of communication research had emerged during plenary discussions. We retreated to a circle of oddly assorted chairs in the ample lobby of an old lodge there in the Pocono Mountains of northeastern Pennsylvania. I recall vividly the group around me as I sat on the floor with a sprawl of newsprint sheets and several marking pens. We were intensely engaged in my favorite professional activity, erasing the line between theory and practice.

By that time in my career as an educator I had become something of a crusader against the human tendency to create false dichotomies. In terms of social science and the helping professions I was working against the tendency to separate theory and practice, convinced along with Kurt Lewin that nothing is more practical than sound theory. And as a Christian I was vigorously campaigning for the “priesthood of all believers.” This latter concern had grown out of my odd history: Presbyterian, Baptist lay ministry, and marriage to a Wesleyan who took Wesley seriously. Nothing distressed me more within the church than pompous pastors who placed themselves above the rest of God’s people by virtue of their education and pastoral status.

These predispositions in science and in matters of the faith were brought to focus in one memorable moment. Sitting cross-legged on the floor at the center of this little circle of younger and older brothers and sisters in Christ, just after I had drawn a diagram detailing some findings of recent research on the use of audience feedback to reshape message, I leaned back, hands spread wide on the floor behind me, and asked, “What does this suggest to you?”

Our group was “on a roll,” and I was eager to see the momentum continue and increase. It all seemed so worthwhile—so important. My mind was racing ahead. Then it happened.

“I wonder . . . I wonder . . .” It sounded more like a reflection of the soul than a preface for profound proclamation, but every eye in the group turned toward Ed Clowney. His only contributions to the lively discussion up to this point had been active eye contact with each contributor in turn, accompanied by an occasional warm smile. He was among a group of people who loved him and valued his ideas, but he hadn’t said much, so the attention he received was as to an overdue sage.

Ed slid forward from his almost trapped position in the soft lounge chair, brought his hands together in a gesture that intensified his warm but intensely fixed stare, and fervently asked, “*I wonder, Ted, what are the theological implications of feedback theory?*”

Until that moment I had always enjoyed my conversations with Ed Clowney. But just then it seemed that he was fulfilling some of the worst characteristics of my stereotype of the theologian. His question seemed trite, irrelevant, and given the gist of the discussion, nonsense. Surely its only purpose was to derail the substance of the discussion and capture the attention of the group for some sort of diversionary homily. Theologians were good at it: taking a conversation in their own direction, ignoring the purposes and agenda of the people around them, finding ways to pull others into topics and experiences that were unreal.

Through careful examination of the dialogues recorded in the Gospels, I had become convinced that Jesus never behaved this way; His remarkable capacity to begin where others were concerned and to stick with their agenda had become my model. And now in this moment of intense dialogue no less a person than this brilliant professor-administrator was deviating from the example provided by our

Lord. From my viewpoint, Clowney's feet of clay were crumbling. My reaction was disappointment tinged with anger. Theological implications of feedback theory? What a question!

Some part of the momentary frustration was due to a pastor during my youth who used his knowledge of Greek and Hebrew to impress and amaze our little congregation with his scholarship and, at the same time, to remind us of our own inadequacy in matters of the Bible. He was a sincere man of God, of that there could be no doubt; but in my emerging consciousness of the importance of the Bible in my life there was something offensive about being told, on the one hand, that reading the Bible is important but, on the other hand, I could not really trust what I was reading without his corrections from the Greek.

Since 1963, I had been increasingly involved in consultative ministry overseas among missionaries and other ventures of Western assistance. Through these experiences I had discovered something of the bad name that academic theology had created for itself among the emerging churches of the post-colonial nations. These were people who said they wanted Bible schools, yes, but theological schools, no—less because of their awareness of the differences of approach and curriculum but more out of a passionate preference for the practical simplicity of the Bible over against the convoluted and arcane abstractions of academic theology. It was during this period that some of the Christians of other nations became brave enough to urge irrelevant missionaries to go home; no small part of that controversy raged around the issues of a theology more concerned with Western history than with the hurts and hearts of contemporary people.

The matrix of my sense of frustration at Dr. Clowney's question seems reasonable even today. But the anger of that moment was only a flash. I knew better than to let it show. So far, at least, this had been a voluntary gathering of people to deal with a subject in which I had reasonable expertise. It was my audience and my agenda, and it would take more than a diversionary interruption by an academic theologian to derail it—if I could just keep my cool. So I pulled a trick from the professor's handy bag of tried-and-trusted tactics. I kept myself aloof from his question by reason of academic domain and returned his question unanswered.

"Dr. Clowney, I am a social scientist. You are a theologian. You have asked a theological question. Thus I propose that *you* provide us the answer. What, indeed, are the theological implications of feedback theory?" I must confess to a tone of sarcasm; I recall my slowly articulated "DOC-tor Clowney . . ." as I sought to belittle what I saw then as his attempted diversion from the "real stuff" of science. During that period of my own development I was rather hard on people who "spiritualized" problems rather than trying to deal with them more concretely.

Feeling a bit smug and more than a bit superior, I awaited his reply. But the wait was short. Homing in like a torpedo, his simple reply exploded in my mind with devastating accuracy. "Ted," he began slowly with a disarming sense of personal intensity that I came to realize was totally sincere, "I am a Christian. You are a Christian. Therefore I propose that it is *our* question. What, indeed, are the theological implications of feedback theory?"

It is *our* question! This learned theologian had invited me into what heretofore I had seen only as being *his* domain. Suddenly the inconsistency of my own complaint rose up in judgment against me. The ground upon which we stood in this conversation—indeed in life itself—is not and never had been legitimately divided by scholarly qualifications and categories of disciplines. As Christians we all should wrestle with theological questions. The quality and substance of that wrestling will depend to a

great extent on our responsible handling of the Word, but to engage theological questions is reserved neither to the educated clergy nor to theological scholars. Like it or not, their domain of expertise belongs to all of us. Ed Clowney had just invited me in.

One Layman's Awareness

His invitation changed my life. Biblical and theological studies, formerly an a-vocational hobby and side-interest, became central to my scholarly pursuits. Theological literature and theological dialogue were no longer optional; they were necessary. I have invented more and more ways to involve my own students in Ed Clowney's question: "What are the theological implications?" More to the point, I began to reason with a specific concern for the centrality of God in all matters. My worldview shifted. Formerly my walk with Christ and my care for the Word of God had raised such questions as, "What is the spiritual aspect . . . ?" and, "But what does a biblical view add . . . ?" My questions, in personal terms and in my leading of classes and seminars, began to shift toward God as the starting point and toward spiritual realities as being more than merely an "aspect." Reflections on truth now required theological underpinnings. And through it all I came to confess that I had been trapped in the worst dichotomy of all: the presumption that spiritual matters and natural matters can be considered separately.

Healing the Ultimate Dichotomy

The major danger in the lives of Christians is theological-philosophical dualism: the tendency to separate things spiritual from things natural. The misguided attempt to separate life into sacred and secular leads into a downward spiral of intellectual and moral inconsistencies. The line between sacred and secular may serve as a convenient basis for compartmentalization, but the line is not consistent with the way God has created His universe. The practical effect of imposing unnatural distinctions that are inconsistent with reality is deception—self-deception in this case. Because of sin the universe is divided in ways God did not intend, but to hold such distinctions as absolute belittles God's redemptive purposes. It ultimately results in the compartmentalizing of one's life and consciousness into contrasting sectors wherein separate sets of values and personality characteristics are played out. Thus even a relatively small tendency toward this dualism constitutes a serious threat to integrated spirituality.

Drawing lines where they are not appropriate also provides spurious justification for extra-biblical and non-biblical contrasts; for example, consider the hierarchical line drawn between clergy and laity. Although a sound biblical case for this distinction is hard to make, it seems pragmatically valuable. It justifies passivity and dependency among the non-ordained while keeping high the ego-image and the distinctive authority of those who have been granted the privilege of status.

In my second career as a member of a theological faculty, I see even more clearly the destructive effects of needless dichotomies. My old nemesis, theoretical versus practical, rears its ugly head time and again in the rhetoric and logic of theological professors. They busily draw lines between one another; some are concerned with practical theology, others are concerned with theology. The implication of the latter is never that it is mere theology but, instead, that it is *real* theology.

Surely discrimination is an important aspect of scholarship, but I have encountered few fields where compulsive line drawing seems less valid than in theology. One must come to wonder at this willing acquiescence to categorical distinctions in which some parts of a field are not held to be accountable for their practical effects. The fractioned fields of academic theology are a reflection of intellectual and scholarly reasoning in which the needs of the church are hardly reflected. A revolt of the churches

could lead to substantial relocation and transformation of academic theology into forms more appropriate for the twenty-first century. As I read the signals, more and more churches are asking for those qualities in the leadership and human relationship skills of their pastors which the seminaries have long undervalued. They are asking for the whole people of God to participate actively, not just the theological intellectuals. They want to move out of their passivity as sermon audience into renewal and substantial impact on the communities, society, and the world. And if the needed competencies are not substantially more forthcoming from theological schools, churches themselves will take on the job, becoming part of the new trend toward pastoral training within the churches.

By now many a layperson has heard the insistent voice of Edmund Clowney and others who have echoed his concern for a whole effort of the whole people of God to grasp the whole of human experience in light of the whole counsel of God: *"I am a Christian. You are a Christian. Therefore the theological questions are our questions."* This declaration is revolutionary. Its timeliness is now clear. Changes are on the way. Institutional realignment, curriculum reform, and even certain kinds of institutional decline and replacement are well begun. If it works toward bringing alive the zeal of the people of God, it will be worth the pain.

Discernment as Wisdom

Ed Clowney's question: "What are the theological implications of feedback theory?" represents the master paradigm of biblical wisdom: discriminating between the merely mechanical and the essentially godly meanings of human knowledge. This sort of drawing of lines is theologically enlightening and spiritually fulfilling for a Christian in a scholarly profession. Without it, in reference to feedback theory in the study of communication, for example, we see merely the mechanistic and manipulative possibilities for more expeditiously getting a message across. For some purposes this application has merit, for others it is hellish. How much more important it is to contemplate the motives and the marks of the Creator in the feedback process: His image-bearing creature is designed to be an active partner in the shaping of meaning, not just an automaton receiving declarations in "high fidelity." The natural person asks of science, "What can we use it for?" The godly person asks, "What does it tell us about God and His work?"

It is ironic that within certain traditions, the formal study of theology has fallen into the grip of the scientific presuppositions. Cultural shift itself may offer adequate explanation. Ours is the age of science and thus the age of empirical rationalism; all human inquiry is motivated by the quest for closure on the practical. This observation would explain a theology more concerned with unified conclusions and proofs for current biases.

Modern science is unified by its fervent commitment to a singular view of human inquiry, disciplined by empiricism, rationalism, and experimentalism. Not only are the so-called hard sciences devoted to this narrow core of presuppositions, which discourages intuitive and revelatory sources of truth; even the study of human experience and performance is delimited by this composite of naturalism and objectivism. The social sciences have emerged full-blown as an extension of this unifying scientific method. Especially in the study of the individual person through modern psychology one finds the presumptions of prediction based on the assumption of an essentially deterministic view of man. In other words, the major reason for science of this sort is less a matter of enjoying the majesty of the infinite Creator than it is a quest for knowledge as a source of power. Thus the bottom line has become, "What can we use it for?" Even among Christian scholars this self-centered and manipulative question has become a more common motive.

Perhaps the explanation for an intensively closure-oriented academic theology lies deeper. Could it be that the craving for instrumental power, so commonly offered as the engineering validations of today's sciences, may have infected the motives of Christian theology? Is it possible that *knowing how*—how to handle Scripture, how to tell people what they need to know, how to evangelize, how to grow in numbers, how to avoid sin, how to maintain an image of godliness, and, in sum, how to please God—has become the new reason for theology? This compulsion to *know how* seems an evident motivation underlying the technical emphasis evident in the procedures and much of the graphic and conceptual material in the conservative sector's parachurch activities in youth ministry, evangelism, and missions.

The qualitative gain that comes from discerning in non-dichotomizing ways came back to me again in Malawi. In that relatively small country where David Livingstone so long ago broke into the Dark Continent, there lives a traditional story dismissed by historians but kept alive because the Malawian Christians want to believe it. Whether or not it was true of Livingstone, it is surely true today in the attitude and behavior of many evangelizing Christians. In fact, it seems to be at the heart of their outreach to Muslims. They claim that the secret of Livingstone's success was his style of entry into the predominantly Muslim communities of what was then called Nyasaland: he held high his Bible and proclaimed in a loud voice, "I come to bring you the Book—the Book that tells you of the God you know!" His dislike and fear of Islam was of the sort that the Apostle Paul felt for the idolatry of Athens. But well aware of the value of bridges across which the Gospel can move into a needy society, Livingstone chose to seize upon the tenuous link between the professed worship of "the one true God" as revealed through Mohammed and the triune God as revealed in the truth of Jesus Christ. There is more to be gained by keeping the drawn lines low than from raising them into impassable dichotomistic barriers.

Discernment for the Twenty-first Century

Some of God's people see the future through the image of the so-called superchurch. Others still see a great hope in the "electronic church." For these sets of Christians the future of the church seems to depend on being able to reflect point by point the common culture of the times and thus to compete for the attention of today's viewers. Given this outlook, the church must be a place of superior entertainment and lifestyle-gratifying experiences. Quality is thus measured in the aesthetics of a gourmet plastic culture and in the attunement to felt needs of people more than to the voice of God. Whereas it can be asserted responsibly that God is capable of using mass media and entertainment-style worship to bring glory to himself, the risk of the church's becoming centered on persons rather than centered on Christ seems formidable. If the church drifts off its Christological centerpoint, theology becomes of concern only for the select few, and the clergy-laity gap becomes acceptable. In such a situation it is an easy step to the assumption that God doesn't expect us all to take our spiritual sustenance firsthand.

Other Christians note the vitality of little clusters of the faithful here and there—house churches and informal networks of the fellowships and assemblies spreading everywhere. Their image of the church reflects an awareness of Christianity as a distinctive counterculture. From this viewpoint the future of the church is less a matter of passivity than of active outreach spiraling outward from intense centers of spiritual commitment.

One should not compare a good example of one of these manifestations of the church with a bad example of the other. We still live in a fallen world, and the perfect church is yet to come. There are

good superchurches and poor superchurches, good small-group fellowships and poor small-group fellowships. The task is discernment, not dichotomization.

Regardless of one's image of the church in the future—whether large groups or small groups, big buildings or no buildings—the vitality of the church will be related to the following factors:

1. The people of God as co-laborers in interdependent, sharing communities—not as private clubs of independent, self-centered, competitive individuals (“carry each other’s burdens.” [Galatians 6:2])
2. A Christ-centered fulfillment of the Gospel—not a separated sector within society, isolated because of social status and self-righteousness (“good news to the poor.” [Luke 4:18])
3. Worship of God in word and deed, intellectually informed by the Bible and emotionally responsive to the works of the Spirit (“in spirit and in truth.” [John 4:24])
4. Humility before God as undeserving sinners—not prideful in our erudite wisdom and effective works (“through the grace of our Lord Jesus . . . we are saved.” [Acts 15:11])
5. Relating and reaching, bringing people to Jesus Christ—not drawing lines but drawing people! (“I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some.” [I Corinthians 9:22])