



Transcriptions

To Serve the Church: Reform of Theological Education

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Annotation: *Staley Lectures: Reform of Theological Education, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, Hamilton, MA, November 1979.* Beginning with the premise that the task of all institutions within the church is to serve the church, Ted Ward offers a second premise that the most basic criterion for how well an institution is functioning is precisely how well it serves the church. His third premise is that improvement in theological education is as much a matter of theological reform as it is of educational reform.



I speak to you as a servant of our Lord Jesus Christ and I speak to you in concern. I may be a little bit presumptive in the title that I have suggested for this series of lectures, “Reform of Theological Education: A Third World View.” No one speaks for the Third World, certainly not myself and perhaps not even Fidel Castro. I would not speak to you on behalf of the church in the Third World, but the nature of my work as a professional person and as a Christian takes me into Third World cultures and has given me deep associations with a number of situations that are in the church of the Third World, and it is from that framework of experience that I am viewing theological education. In fact, as a consultant and as an educational planner, I have far more experience in theological education overseas than I do in theological education in the United States. It is quite possible that some of the things we will say in this series of lectures may have implications for North America, but I challenge you to consider that I propose to minimize my thumping of the

establishment in North America. With that declaration, later on you may wonder if I have forgotten what I said.

My work as a consultant in theological education began about 15 years ago. It began in the Philippines, as a matter of fact, and I've never been the same since. I've had a relatively short and dramatic lifetime in theological consulting and that lifetime has almost exactly spanned the history of a movement called "Theological Education by Extension." And it is particularly from experiences of that movement and what it has taught all of us, who have been observant, that I wish to speak today. If you please, I'm a sort of educational specialist often perceived as an educational technologist. An educational technologist is a mechanic with reference to matters of learning. I somewhat resent that kind of view of myself. I don't hold it myself; I see myself with different eyes. But among my theological brethren, quite often I am referred to as an educational technologist who came in and was invited in for a short period and stayed for dinner. In fact, as I came in for dinner, I found myself in the middle of theological chaos and possible reformation and had decided, not only to stay for dinner, but to unroll my sleeping bag. I've become, in fact now, a steady boarder in the house of theological education. Many have argued that I have overstayed my welcome, but nevertheless from time-to-time people do graciously invite me to share with them whatever it is that I might have observed during my sojourn, thus, I am here.

There are several premises that underlie my viewpoint and I would share those with you specifically: First, I think it is the task of all institutions within the church to serve the church. Whether it's a parachurch organization, educational institution, or whatever, the bottom-line is "to serve the church." Second premise follows from the first; namely, that the most basic evaluative criterion as to how well the institution is performing and how well its people perform is in terms of that evaluative criterion, how well does the institutional experience fit them to serve the church? My third premise is that improvement, as in improvement of theological education—you can call it updating, you could call it development, call it what you will—improvement of theological education is a matter of theological reform every bit as much as it is of educational reform.

Several assumptions already may be transparent. Number one: That institutions, as part of a fallen Creation, institutions are all flawed, all flawed. Second assumption: That institutional forms and social formalisms are not sacred. They are used by God, yes, but they are subject to change. Third assumption: Basic to all of this is faith in Jesus Christ as my personal Lord, my Savior, and Lord of the universe.

As a scientist, I describe myself as a creational developmentalist committed to the proposition that what we find in social science is an understanding of our God, the Creator, through examination of his handiwork. If we presuppose that he created all and that he created those processes of development that are true of persons and true of social organisms, we can come more closely to understand what he has given in his special revelation, the Word of God, in its fullness as an adequate base for our understanding in social science and in education.

As we think about this relatively simple notion that the issue is "to serve the church," I'm reminded of the cartoonist of old (some of you may not even recall him) but his name was Rube Goldberg. Do you remember Rube Goldberg who was always drawing cartoons of how to do simple things in roundabout ways? For example, a way to get the light out at night after you have gone to bed and have been reading and don't want to get up is to blow out a nearby candle which then, of course, takes the fire out from under a frying egg which then produces a particular set of

forces on a pulley system which then drops a parrot down who squawks and a rabbit jumps forward in great startlement and hits the light switch. I think, in some respects, what we do in institutional education looks an awful lot like Rube Goldberg: we do an awful lot of basically simple things the hard way. And I think that, as a matter of fact, this whole thematic notion of excellence today in formal education has a lot of Rube Goldberg about it.

The issue is not excellence in Christian higher education whether theological education or liberal arts education—despite some of my friends and colleagues in the field of Christian higher education—the issue is not excellence; the issue is service. And so long as we give our primary allegiance to the notion of excellence, we are prone to be very secular in our ways of creating excellent Rube Goldberg ways of getting at important issues.

The backdrop as I indicated, is Theological Education by Extension where we can see something that's been happening very dramatically over a period of just 15 years. In Guatemala it began. Some of the names associated with that first program: Ralph Winter, Jim Emery, Ross Kinsler are fairly standard names now in the field of theological education. People rather well know what they stood for. They had a problem; they had empty schools. They had a problem of a seminary that wasn't serving the church simply because the church wasn't sending people to be trained. And they discovered that, if you take the program across the mountain, you can find that, indeed, there are students over there with need. The discovery, of course, was that those students were somewhat different from the students that they had originally had on their campuses. They were much more students who were already serving the church who wanted help in serving the church better, rather than students who said, by their own declaration, "I want theological education so that someday I can serve the church." And they took one of the Rube Goldberg links out of theological education and began putting the educational emphasis on the people who were serving the church. And, of course, that was one of the great discoveries of the Theological Education by Extension movement.

Some of us who documented that early period found that there are four foundations that can be thought of as "the apologetics" of Theological Education by Extension: One, the demographic: that is, if your educational institution is going to serve the church, it's going to have to be where the people are who need that kind of help.

Secondly, the historical: that is, let us remember that Christianity was born, not out of an Athenian academy, but out of a hillside in the responsibility of an itinerant person who knew the value of nonformal approaches to learning; a man who never built a classroom, never raised money for a dormitory, and didn't even have much of a library, and would *never* in a hundred years have been accredited. Indeed, the history of the church springs out of an approach to education that is functional and in context. Even the great reformers and the reformers of Europe and of England discovered something of that nonformal context in their own approach to the development of pastoral competencies.

There's a third foundation, the pedagogical, raising the question of what sort of education is qualitative education. And, even in our time, we're discovering anew that contextual education is qualitative education. Education that is done in the context of experience is quite often more substantial than that which is done in the abstract, and the foundation that, of course, is most important to theological namely, that education that serves the church is the education of equipping

the equippers, not of creating eligible persons and placing institutional stamps upon their foreheads so that they might be described to the church as having been called by academic processes.

From this sort of an origin in very peculiar kinds of mountain circumstances in Guatemala has arisen a movement that today embraces 760 institutions in 57 countries. I say “today” because the most recent data we’ve got is 1974 and it’s still growing. The data I just gave you were ‘74 data: 760 institutions in 57 countries. How do you interpret this? I believe that it’s far more than a pragmatic adjustment to hard times in missionary education, though it is that. I believe it to be nothing less than a movement of the Spirit of God and evidence of the continuing reformation of the church.

Now let’s just go back a little bit. What was theological education before Theological Education by Extension? I’d like to share with you several open secrets about missionary education; perhaps you’ve heard some of these. They don’t talk much about them because they’re really kind of like the dirty linen of our mission establishment.

First of all, though the salaries of missionary educators are not much, the institution of missionary education, itself, overseas is a fabulously expensive establishment. In a recent NAE consultation, this year as a matter of fact, the Annual Convention of NAE, the Director of CAMEO, Dr. Lois McKinney (CAMEO: Committee to Assist Missionary Education Overseas) made the following statement. I quote: “I know of one seminary in a developing country which invested approximately \$80,000 a year in faculty and staff salaries including those of expatriate missionaries; approximately 2,500 years--\$2,500 per year for each student in residence and the student body averaged 10 per year, and around \$20,000 a year on the buildings and equipment.”

Now, all those figures sound pretty good. “These figures sound modest enough,” she says. “It took \$125,000 a year, then, to keep this institution afloat. During the 25 years it operated, 6 of the seminary’s graduates entered pastorates in the region. The cost, then, of preparing 6 rural leaders for the church was \$3,125,000.” Dirty linen. “The academic-level residents’ requirement,” she says, “often even exclude those who badly needed theological education; that is the more mature leaders of congregations. This establishment is largely unproductive for the church.”

Second piece: Theological education overseas is controlled by missionaries as surely as theological education over here is controlled by clergymen. Not that this is inherently evil, but it does severely limit the perceptions upon which decisions are made. It’s not really in the hands of the church or in the service of the church as biblically defined.

Third of the open secrets: The curriculum of overseas theological education is very little more than a transplantation from American Bible colleges and seminaries. And in this age of contextualized theology, one wonders very much about the lack of contextualized education.

Fourth open secret: theological educators are among the least well prepared of all missionaries. This is largely because the academic strengths of people going into theological education overseas are often so great that those same persons are not required to go through ordinary missionary preparation. So quite often theological education professors, especially those with doctorate degrees—and, by the way, along with MDs, and they have the same exemption—are not required to go through the ordinary process of missionary preparation. Almost every mission board that I know of has an exemption process for anybody with a PhD. And what happens, then, is

that we have oodles of PhDs who end up as missionaries in roles that they are totally unfitted to be able to cope with.

But all of this is not really new. As long ago as 1938, the International Missionary Council made the following statement—lest you think that this is my Johnny-come-lately attempt to raise questions—in 1938, I quote: “Theological Education is the weakest element in the entire enterprise of Christian missions.” And, as a matter of fact, it was not a unique statement; it has been documented by Conn and others to have been characteristic. But to criticize theological education in the mission field is somewhat like kicking a flat tire. It may be far more important and more productive to find the nail or perhaps the flaw in the machinery that produced the tire. Much to the embarrassment of theological education in North America and Western Europe, the past 10 years of experiences in the Third World have revealed many nails and not just a few flaws in the machinery.

Do I paint too bleak a picture? Let me tell you. Just a month ago right now, I was at a dinner party in Ventnor, New Jersey, and I happened to be seated with a gentleman who bent my ear all evening; a magnificent big man from India—Bishop Chrysostom of the Mar Thoma Church, with his great being and his great red cloak to the ground and his great red headpiece. We were quite a sight I'll tell you. I had been introduced to him that evening as a consultant in theological education and he assumed me to have been single-handedly responsible for all that is wrong; ever has been wrong; always will be wrong with the training of all pastors in India. At first, I tried to rebut and say, “That isn't what I'm standing for.” And then, finally, I said to myself, “I should shut my mouth and learn.” And I tell you in truth, I submitted to a tongue-lashing on behalf of you more caustic than the tone of this lecture, by far. I heard, for example, about the irrelevancy of curriculum content to the parish realities in India. I heard about the traumatic inhibiting of poorly educated pastors who would come to missionary-supported theological education and discover that they didn't have the credentials and the adequate background, and they couldn't be helped. I heard about the locking of biblical truth in theological abstractions. I heard about the pulling of pastors into the cities away from their people. I heard about the costly approach to theological education that the church in India now is in no position to sponsor for itself. And, thus, it only succeeds and continues if the Indians concede their need for continuing missionary presence. I got an earful.

I have come to believe that virtually any theological education, outside the context of the local church and its serving ministry, is vulnerable to the head-trip whether that head-trip is being taken by prospective pastors or by laypersons. I learned, through an African experience, that there is a certain dialect that translates theological education as “giving young men the big head.” Could it be that the models of education affect the models of ministry? And could it be that the models of ministry determine the nature of theological education? Without a doubt, part of the problem is the model of education from which missionary educators have emerged.

Jonathan Chow, looking at this from an Oriental perspective, identifies four criticisms of the Western model of ministry as it relates to the problem of missionary-dominated theological education. He says, “Generally speaking, all missions have failed to develop adequate indigenous leadership.” Very sweeping criticism, but one that I would have to agree with. Further, “Development of indigenous leadership is understood only as the transference of responsibility from the missionaries to nationals.” He identifies these factors. “Number one: The Western model of ministry imposed upon the Third World churches is the overall context for the failure to develop indigenous leadership.” In other words, the model of ministry itself, that is visualized out of the North American experience, is largely irrelevant. “Secondly, the Western model of ministerial

training has been a means of preserving that pattern of ministry and, hence, has contributed to the failure to develop more appropriate indigenous leadership styles. Third, the Western form of ministerial leadership recognition (in other words, the way by which we recognize leaders) reinforces the Western-type of leadership and inhibits the development of indigenous forms.” In other words, not only educationally and by model, but also by our inability perceptually to recognize other modes of leadership as being appropriate. And Jonathan Chow, from his Chinese perspective, identifies that one which is a very subtle one. “Four, overemphasis on evangelism and the misuse of Christian schools contributed to the failure to develop solid Christian nurture: the bedrock of indigenous leadership.”

That may sound like a non-evangelical kind of a position, but let me assure you that he does not come from that frame of reference. He is deeply committed to evangelism, but he points out that evangelism, in various cultures, will take on various forms. And if we emphasize, in the missionary context, our notions of evangelism and not put greater emphasis on the nurture of the church, we may, in fact, have the failure as we’ve seen it in the development of leadership.

Now, let’s come back to the academic issues themselves. I believe that one of the matters that Theological Education by Extension has spoken to is the matter of the academic grip on leadership development. God is using the TEE movement to break school’s grip on the leadership of the church. There is no particular biblical ground for using an academic approach to qualifying the ministry of the gospel. There is no biblical ground. If we turn, for example, to 1st Timothy 3:1 to 6, or Titus 1:5 to 9—the place where we know the particular criteria for elder of the church are spelled out the most clearly, basically the same lists—we discover that the issues are not learned issues in the sense of academic learning; they are matters of being; they are matters of behavior and traits: matters like being above reproach, being a husband and one wife, being temperate, prudent, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not addicted to wine, gentle, free from the love of money, etc. We don’t find things like highly competitive, able to succeed in academic scores, having good grades, and all the rest of that stuff. Now you say, “Well, that’s because they didn’t have that in their cultural moment in history.” Oh, yes, they did. Oh, yes, they did. The Greeks had invented all of that and that was one of the big issues in that part of the world: Greek culture being pushed forward by the Roman Empire as the way to go. They had that possibility but, in fact, in the Word of God we find other kinds of criteria.

Now in Titus 1:5 through 9, knowledge does take a little more precise point where we have, for example, “Holding fast the faithful Word.” But notice the issue is “holding fast;” the behaving on it, not just knowing about it. You see, by delegating the selection of pastors to academia, the church de-emphasizes these criteria. Academia is now being supplanted, therefore, and God is moving toward reformation. Dr. Nage [?] of the Lutheran World Federation has recently written,

The classical form of education of pastors at universities and seminaries worldwide is being either supplemented or replaced by new forms of education. Other forms of pastoral training are being tried out in many parts of the world: training by evening courses, correspondence courses, concentrated work from time-to-time with lectures, and to mention perhaps the best-known form of all—education by extension.

And the common denominator of all of those is that theological education is being focused on people *in service* to the church, not *preparing* for service to the church. It’s, again, taking one of the loops out of the Rube Goldberg device.

We find even in descriptions of DMin programs this sort of value being emphasized. Here's a domestic US DMin program description: "The program stresses excellence in *ministry*." And that's a deliberately chosen word in this context to contrast with *educational* excellence. "The program stresses excellence in ministry encouraging students to develop their God-given skills for preaching and teaching, to strengthen the methods by which they serve the needs of their people, and to provide opportunities for measuring the effectiveness of their churches. Our program is for men already in the ministry."

But the old models don't fade away too easily. We find, even now overseas, a tremendous surge toward accreditation. We find accreditation being spoken to, for example, by the AEAM in Africa in these [presumably North American/Western] languages. [The Association of Evangelicals of Africa and Madagascar] Fortunately of the eight major principles, one of them at least does speak to this issue of contextualization and to the issue of reform. [It seems that the US DMin reference was simply inserted into a larger piece that deals with the African context.]

But only one out of the eight; the other seven are every bit drawn lock stock and barrel from North American context. But here is the good one: "The curriculum, as a whole, and the syllabus of each course should not appear merely to have been borrowed directly from elsewhere or to have been developed on an *ad hoc* basis. They should, rather, show signs of deliberate attentiveness to the specific Christian community being served, the specific vocations for which the students are being prepared, and the specific cultural context in which the ministers will serve."

Interestingly, this sounds good, but if you look at the effect of accreditation overall, because accreditation tends toward higher academic standards and it's common knowledge that the institutions in Africa don't have Africans adequate to handle those higher standards by virtue of the Accrediting Association coming down with the notion of higher degrees being the evidence of this, you can see that even the accreditation movement is an attempt by missionaries to retain, even for another 20 years, a firm grip on African pastoral leadership education. Very corrupt.

The ATA—the accreditation manual for residential and non-residential schools: "The Asia Theological Association has one out of four key planks that speak to, what I see as a constructive direction. The general objective is a catalyst in stimulating theological education centers to maintain acceptable academic and behavioral standards which implement innovative patterns of theological training that will effectively prepare students for Christian ministries." Notice the preparation theme. "These should involve new insights in the integration of Spiritual, academic, and practical in theological training, new and relevant curricula, new pedagogical methods, and experimentation in de-centralization, and in continuing education."

The best we've got to say about that package out of Asia is that it's a grab bag. It sounds like, "As long as you do anything innovative, it's probably going to be better than what you've got now." I, for one, am not inclined to think that just any kind of a change is a change for the better.

There is an ambivalence even in World Evangelical Fellowship. I quote from their current document about the topic of theological education excellence. They say, "The equating of theological excellence and patterns of academic recognition is a mistake. Priority needs are recognized for research into the need for human development and social justice in the context of the dehumanizing political, economic, and social structures of society in the theological education

methodology in the context of changing educational structures and methods, curriculum design, and evaluation.”

It sounds a little bit abstract, a little bit obtuse. It isn’t altogether gobbledegook, but it doesn’t come tightly to face with the issue. Most of the pressure behind accreditation is at that level of abstraction and it is a counterforce to what we are otherwise seeing in terms of a contextualization of theological education in Third World churches, much to our discredit. In sum, what have we learned from the past decade of experience in reform movements in theological education? I would like to identify for you five points:

First, (I’m going to give three illustrations of each in the interest of time) the North American approach to theological education is grossly inefficient when translated overseas. One, faculties often outnumber students and the whole program tends to be terribly costly. Second, the wrong people get educated to a great extent. By the way, there’s kind of an insider’s joke that says, The major place to find alumni of theological schools overseas is in the employ of the airlines. And, as a matter of fact, I did one survey in one nation and found that to be true. There were more people in airline employment than there were in the employ of the church, and I don’t mean lay pastors who also work for the airlines. Third, the local church gets very little benefit.

Now, the second observation and its three points: The North American approach to theological education is largely ineffective (first inefficient, now ineffective) when translated overseas. First illustration, young people are educated away from communication with their own people. This is a very easily observed phenomenon. Second, many graduates make little or no contribution to the church. Third, those few who do go into ministry often expect to be served. For example, you hear people saying as graduates of seminaries, Well, where’s my church? The missionaries are supposed to build me a church so that I can pastor it. Where’s my salary? The mission board’s supposed to supplement my salary so it’s somewhat like a missionary’s salary.

This notion of being *served* rather than serving is built-in and becomes part of the ineffectiveness. Third, theological education is deeply flawed by out-of-culture theology. Non-contextualized theology creates very serious problems:

One, theological education debates in theological education transplanted tend to deal with European historical issues in theology when, as a matter of fact, the church in the world today is facing local contemporary issues dealing with spiritism, witchcraft which are prominent issues that are real to the people, and instead their leaders have been trained to deal with the categorical debates coming out of the European reformation. Two, dependency on external imported literature makes the church ever more dependent on the West. Third, the faulty image of Christianity, itself, in Western Christianity gets brought in without contextual criticism. The fourth big problem is that the ghost of colonial imperialism still haunts our missionary institutions. I would say this is true more so in missionary institutions such as missionary theological education than it is true in the church, itself.

First, in these institutions, missionaries still outnumber and, consequently, out vote nationals. Second, so-called national leaders in such institutions, which are now being installed as presidents and deans and so forth, are more often than not hand-picked and carefully manipulated like puppets. Three, the so-called improvements that come along the line, even TEE and accreditation, are seized upon as ways for renewing missionary domination. I don’t know of any mission board that will confess to this, but I know of oodles of missionary boards that will be glad to show you how many

more missionaries they are now able to place because they're now placing them in TEE. Some of us saw TEE as the greatest possible way to nationalize the educational force, but that's not what's happened. The missionaries have seized upon it and have installed more missionaries in the TEE mode. I can show you brochures advertising for people to fulfill this role that say, You don't need to be as well-trained as the theological professor of old because, after all, all you'll be doing is teaching in extension. Now talk about corrupting of a movement. The accreditation thing I've already mentioned is a guarantee because of the inadequate number of high degrees available among national community. I guarantee that so-called well-trained missionaries will have to continue to dominate those institutions in order to keep them up to accreditation standards. Very vicious and largely unrecognized. The fifth: faulty modes of leadership are at the heart of the problem.

First, the biblical standards of Matthew 23:1 to 12 are largely ignored, and I submit that they are largely ignored in a few places that I know of in the United States. Second, authoritarian hierarchical structure is evaluated and it is supposedly improved in response to secular cultural values not biblical cultural values. Three, success itself is venerated more as a quantitative matter than a qualitative matter. It's as if Jesus were assumed to have been saying to people, Well done, good and successful servant.

Samuel Amirtham of India¹ calls for nothing less than a new style of ministry and an appropriate theological education to match. He wants, first of all, a people-oriented ministry; second, a communication-oriented ministry; third, a need-oriented ministry, and fourth, a justice-oriented ministry.

Amirtham, in reference to theological education, concludes: "The rarified atmosphere of theological scholarship must be related to the real life of the churches at the grassroots level. We are consciously attempting, in our ministries, to avoid self-centered pursuit of academic theology and to gear, instead, to training toward the needs of the church."

On this sort of a matter, I agree with a revolutionary conservative, Richard Neuhaus, a Brooklyn pastor: "Seminaries should not educate, then, for service in general, much less for self-fulfillment; and even less to accommodate those with a half-idle interest in things religious. They should educate for the ministry of the church. If the parish, in whatever form is the premise, the program must emerge from that premise. Theological education, no doubt, needs to be re-designed; but, more important, it needs to be re-envisioned and re-impassioned." [Source unknown]

Theological education or Theological Education by Extension, what does it add up to? The bottom-line: "to serve the church." And may the church serve the needy world and the Lord who died for that needy world.

¹ See https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/ijt/25-3-4_197.pdf