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# Theological Education: Crisis and Renewal

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The institutions of higher learning in the United States of America are undergoing rapid and profound changes. Theological education, for the most part, senses this feeling of change in the air but has been hesitant as to how to move. In many quarters the pressures for change are increasing; a rising sense of uneasiness is building. But the future appears indistinct enough so that those who should be exerting leadership on the level of the local seminary and denomination are pleading for more time.

Of all the issues facing theological education today, I would like to discuss three with you. As the title indicates, we propose to face these issues as crises either already upon us or rapidly moving in on us. Our fundamental stance is one of challenge and hope. Many view the future of seminaries with a chilling sense of alarm. They foresee bleak, hard days in which many schools will sink to levels of mediocrity and others will die. Facing the realism of the problems surrounding us, I still see hope—partially because of the battles before us.

## I. THE CRISIS OF FAITH

The first issue facing professional theological education today has been caused by

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*The author is associate director of the American Association of Theological Schools, Dayton, Ohio. The address was delivered at an academic convocation celebrating the 130th anniversary of the founding of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Nov. 10, 1968. Dr. Schuller received an honorary doctorate from the seminary on this occasion.*

the growing crisis of faith. Every generation has been forced to struggle with the question of belief and commitment, but our day suddenly has been ravaged by the emergence of a world view so radically different from that of the past that an increasing number have difficulty in placing God into the new picture at all—much less in placing Him at the center of that picture.

The seed, which had been developing for some time, was planted symbolically in the spring of 1944 when Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote a letter from his prison cell to a friend. He expressed the conviction that “we are proceeding toward a time of no religion at all. . . . How do we speak of God without religion? . . . How do we speak in a secular fashion of God?” This is the heart of the issue: How does one speak of God? This is the crisis of faith. Behind the questions of the mission of the church, behind technical discussions of how one interprets Scripture, behind concern with structures, behind the agonizing of clergy about their roles in the modern world lies the theological question in its bluntest, crassest form.

Every man has been confronted. Some have been able to rise and affirm a conviction about a living God who remains enthroned—the One of ancient covenant and future hope, the One who in mercy reaches out to man today, the One who rules universes never seen by human eye and yet is confessed as the One who made me and all creatures. A large number, however, are numb. They want to believe;

they want conviction; but they are drained by doubts. It is significant that the most radical of the secular theologians agree that ultimately no amount of verbal clarification can set this disagreement aside. You will recall that Luther said it was a matter, finally, of personal decision; it is a matter that, like dying, every man must do for himself.

The question of God is primary. But there tumble in its wake the questions about the meaning of Jesus Christ for the world, the definition of the role of the church today, and the role of a professional, ordained ministry.

Those who give the answer of radical secularity would answer that the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ have set an evolutionary dynamism within creation. The fox in the Samson story serves as an analogy. A flaming torch was tied to the fox's tail. As it ran, it set ablaze the entire wheat field. In this process of lighting the field, however, it lost its own life. Similarly, they suggest that the world was lighted in the victory of Jesus Christ. In turn the church was given the task of carrying the torch of Christ's victory throughout the world. His victory frees men from all the old superstitions and bondages; secularization is only another word for the effect of that freeing process. Now that this has happened, the church can die; it should collapse into culture, for from this point forward other agencies are better equipped to perform the ongoing tasks. Meanwhile others give an answer at the opposite pole from that of radical secularity. For the most part they see no relation of the Christ event to what takes place in the

world of political decisions, economic movements, or historical processes.

Professional theological education nonetheless must face the reality that many students enroll in their schools for whom there is no clear conviction about the Gospel, for whom the purpose of the church is not clarified, and for whom the question of whether one can yet confess, "I believe in God," has not been answered. A large number of men who enter seminaries today are "searchers." At times one is hard pressed to understand why they come to seminaries in the first place. Apparently they see in them—at least from the outside—a community of faith where some sense of the sacred is nurtured. They come, then, not to study for professional service but hopefully to touch life, to discover truth, to find God. They come to be healed and to find wholeness.

The searchers have caused us to rediscover an old truth. In these troubled, torn men we learn anew the difference between knowledge and faith, between searching and commitment. Some of them have superior knowledge of religion. They may have a growing comprehension of the relationship of the Christian Scriptures to various Near Eastern religions; they may be able to dissect the major concepts of the Christian faith from the viewpoint of linguistic analysis. But they may not be men of faith; they may be devoid of any base that might sustain commitment and service.

The crisis of faith is obvious in theological education. Where, however, lies the point of "renewal"? I would like to test with you an emerging conviction that those schools which have not sharply defined their role and vaguely hope to serve

all men are becoming part of the problem rather than contributing to a solution. May I oversimplify to make the point clear. A school of theology should become a professional school in the same sense that a medical school is a professional school. A man does not enter a medical school in order to study the history of medicine nor in order to be healed. Medical schools are not cold institutions insensitive to human need when they reject applicants who in reality are looking for a hospital. Medical schools are in another business, that of training men to become professional healers. For theological schools this means that applicants must answer the *personal* question before they seek to answer the *professional* one. One does not show compassion when he permits a man to confuse the two questions. It is the conviction of the majority of seminary deans that too many seminarians come asking personal questions about meaning, identity, purpose in life, God, salvation, integrity, and death. As a result a school that seeks simultaneously to educate for a profession and to handle the highly charged existential question of the individual seeking healing ultimately frustrates both groups.

One reason for the disjointedness in theological education today is that seminaries have not defined their primary function. Some look on themselves either as intellectual centers for their churches or as professional schools engaged in training men for the ministry of the church. Students, however, are not primarily seeking what the church represents but are seeking self-knowledge. Never does an institution appear more insensitive and irrelevant than when it gives "institutional" answers to deeply personal questions.

Now the church must indeed be sensitive to these questions that are radically upsetting lives. It must be sensitive to the new concern with meaning over against an older attempt to simply define what happened. Millions are struggling in the crisis of faith. The question for them is not one of knowledge but of meaning. This group is not concerned with manuals of "doctrines," regardless of their sophistication. Their question is not with the "historicity" of any Biblical event. They demand to know what it means. What is the *meaning* of Jesus Christ? What does the Gospel *mean*? What is the *meaning* of the Resurrection? These become priority issues for the whole church. This is not the central task of institutions we know as seminaries.

Finally the crisis of faith demands that a seminary maintain its own integrity. Without this it has nothing to give. Schools currently are striving to preserve some vital connection with their church bodies. Moving across theological frontiers unknown to their constituencies, the schools strain to demonstrate their continuity with the past. Old symbols are reinterpreted until they are forced to convey ideas virtually at the opposite pole of their original intention. But the old symbols are never repudiated. Theological statements are devised that stretch the language to permit both the unreconstructed literalist and the critical developmentalist to affirm them.

## II. THE CRISIS OF CONTEXT

The second crisis confronting theological education arises from the struggle to answer new questions of relationships. How should seminaries as centers of pro-

fessional education be related to the university, to the world, and to their churches?

On the first frontier we must answer the question whether theological education can be carried on outside a university setting. Across the country the conviction is growing that without this relationship modern theological education will be limited if not impossible. It is significant that four years ago when the Lutheran Church in America adopted its master strategy for seminary locus, it agreed that seminaries should be "in close relationship with a lively community of learning, preferably a university." Proponents of this move to universities basically argue that seminaries must move out from any provincial ghettos in which the rapid movement of history now finds us and into the mainstreams of intellectual life. To train men who would minister in today's world, we need students who have been fashioned in the rough-and-tumble of a lively intellectual marketplace. Their contact with divergent strains of thought can no longer come through the safe filter of a denominational teacher interpreting another's ideas, but only through firsthand contact with their exponents.

The crisis arises as one seeks to avoid romanticism and define specific procedures that would assure this result. A significant segment of theological education in this country has always been carried on in a university context. Many from these settings, however, would testify that proximity to a contemporary university may not influence life and study at a seminary to any significant degree. The university itself is undergoing internal struggles to define its functions in American society. Universities themselves know the same re-

lationship from human involvement with which we frequently charge churches and seminaries.

The values of a university setting for theological education remain: (1) presence in the milieu of the graduate professional schools, which are training the next generation of professionals and conducting research on the frontiers of those various disciplines; (2) presence in the midst of a community that has set and maintains standards and criteria for excellence that are much needed in seminary education; (3) opportunity for dialog with other disciplines as an intrinsic ingredient in the practice of theology; (4) access to the resources of large research libraries, scholars of the highest endowment, and the rich offerings of visiting lecturers and performing artists.

The difficulties also remain. Many of the greatest universities see little gain in a relationship with church-related seminaries; they would not grant faculty status to some members of seminary faculties; they fear a reduction of intellectual honesty from men for whom a confessional commitment may be primary. Formal arrangement aside, there still remains the great task of establishing meaningful relationships with departments and persons with whom the dialog can be carried on.

The question of context also demands that we redefine the relationship of our schools of theology to our contemporary world. Our presupposition is that we are educating and forming men who will function as professional ministers in the church of Jesus Christ, who will understand both the mission of that church and the society in which they will be at work. We cannot

rest content with those who simply master a body of knowledge. This academic discipline as such cannot provide ministers who seek to lead a generation into Christian lives of obedience and service in today's world. Such ministry demands leadership that moves beyond a technical grasp of "religion"; it demands an existential understanding of the modern world; it demands that a man personally has learned to live as a man in it.

The average seminarian has not found freedom from a number of "cocoon" that have encased him. Many still are overly dependent on their families financially. Perhaps too many psychologically transfer an immature dependency from home to the church without knowing a sense of independent maturity, of being a man who can make his own way in today's society. Seminarians have lived in the academic cocoon for so long that it has become a world in and of itself. It has its own language, style of life, and values. Seminary students feel slightly uncomfortable in the alien, barbaric societies on the outside. Sadly for many, the result has been one of learning to live with the system that involves the least discomfort to themselves; for some it has meant many years of "schooling" with relatively little real education. The ecclesiastical cocoon may be either violently rejected today or uneasily accommodated to. After many years of dependency one frequently finds a compulsive cynicism about the church and a desire to overthrow her structures.

Two responses are possible. Some schools are moving toward a concept of "field education" that seeks to wed the world and the academic. The process continues to weave between the two poles of

involvement in "worldly" situations and the process of theological reflection on this involvement. The desire is to keep the involvement both *honest*—true to the realities of the world and not tidied up for easy theological answers—and *theologically sound*—dealing with all the depth of Biblical and confessional heritage, utilizing clean methodology, and retaining intellectual respectability. Where equally strong men represent both sides of the endeavor, there seems to be some promise of success. Where one side overwhelms the other, the resulting education is disastrous. One has either an academically trained man (which is never the same as one professionally trained) or a practitioner who possesses no depth to make him more than a technician.

A more dramatic solution is being proposed. Let the seminary focus sharply on professional theological education; let it demand that its students face their fundamental questions of personal identity, Christian commitment, and manhood prior to enrollment. Rather than denying the validity of the existential struggle, it takes it with utmost seriousness and suggests that the place to answer these questions is not in a theological or academic hothouse but in the midst of contemporary society. I sincerely believe that a person first must come to grips with himself as a man before he defines his role as a clergyman—or he will spend his lifetime using his role to answer his own personal needs.

Thus a year or more of involvement in any of the significant contemporary struggles currently taking place might well become a prerequisite for enrollment in schools that propose to sharpen the knowledge and skills of men who have already

proved themselves in areas other than the writing of term papers. Ideally, a man would be engaged in an area where people are bent on social change. Imagine a school composed of men who already possess a personal knowledge of people and modern society, who understand personally the deepest needs and aspirations, the glories and follies of that world, who now are asking the *professional* question of how the Gospel speaks to those realities! Theology could be studied with new vigor because of the added maturity and social realism carried by the students. A new generation of professors — those trained to be teachers of professionals — would need to be developed. While they would possess graduate training, their model would not be the university graduate department. Their ultimate focus would be on the practice of the ministry. Also, they would be men who have known the struggle of social involvement and who are skilled in applying their own particular disciplines of theology to the great human problems of a given period.

The entire world of theological education was rocked several months ago when Dean John Coburn of Episcopal Theological Seminary, Cambridge, Mass., a man who has been pressing for adoption of this quality of theological education, resigned his position. Why? In order to work with young school dropouts off the streets of New York. The man really believes that no one dare enter a classroom to study theology with an eye set on ministry who has not personally struggled and travailed with one of the great issues facing our society, issues such as war and peace and social justice, particularly in our urban areas.

The final context of theological educa-

tion involves the relationship of a seminary to its family of churches and the broader Christian community. The quality of the relationship that exists between Concordia Seminary and its own denomination is unique at the present time. One of the happy features in the development of The Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod was its decision to maintain a centralized pattern of ministerial education. Unlike the LCA, for example, mergers have not created a condition where the combined church body became inheritor of a dozen-plus seminaries. The bonds, therefore are unique. They have produced blessing, and they have created hardship. The church body has contributed one of the highest proportions of support known on the continent. But being locked into a larger educational system has kept faculty and administrators' salaries on a low level. This seminary has developed a program of parochial internships without peer in the nation. But it has failed to move forward imaginatively in utilizing more nonparochial settings as places of training. Until recently Concordia Seminary served as the undisputed theological interpreter for its church body; but it struggles under the most cumbersome system of external, non-faculty control of any institution known in the Protestant-Lutheran family of schools. The path ahead demands a response of continued filial loyalty, but as an *adult* son. A seminary needs a close relationship with a group of churches, but it also needs freedom to perform its task without surveillance. It demands relationships with denominational boards concerned with theological education. Its own board of control and administration, however, must chart its course with special sensitivity to

the rapidly changing demands of professional education.

Today a seminary must also answer the question of how it relates to the broader Christian community. It must respond to the forces within Christendom that seek a greater expression of unity in their common Lord. Curiously, not only confessional seminaries but until very recently the entire enterprise of theological education has been somewhat torpid in actions that express that unity. This is to say that, hopefully, one's response to ecumenical challenges will be made on the basis of one's theology and sense of churchmanship. In too many situations one harbors the suspicion that what propels some people toward increased cooperation is a lack of conviction about the possibility of any unique confessional insights or style of life that is worth preserving, a fear of rising educational costs that threaten to bankrupt the enterprise within another decade, difficulty in adding the type of specialists to the faculty that would be desirable, or a drop in student enrollment that precludes the possibility of quality education in continued isolation. Each of these factors is real and serves as a strong motivator. Somewhere near the beginning of the process, however, we are suggesting that one must ask the theological question. This applies also to those who give negative answers to the invitation of ecumenical relationship.

Some view the idea of several seminaries clustered around a major university from a purely economic perspective. Many more, however, are fashioning an affirmative response from a theological and educational viewpoint. Those for whom the concept "the whole household of God" has begun

to hold special meaning are asking how the resources given to any one segment of God's household might be used as strategically as possible in behalf of the whole body.

Theologically, people are advocating clusters for two diametrically opposed reasons. Some hold that theology has become so panconfessional that the historic confessional labels no longer convey distinct differences; they would further hold that the faster the church can move beyond the ghetto mentality suggested by such labels, the better. A more restrained position, with which more of us would be sympathetic, suggests that one produces the finest exponent of a given position if his training was conducted in a setting where he was forced to define his own stance over against other possibilities.

### III. THE CRISIS OF INSTITUTION

The final crisis I would like to discuss is likely to be dismissed rather abruptly by those under 30; it is the crisis of the institution in theological education. On the national scene two convictions began to grow over the last several years. First, the resources tied up in theological education represented a vast supply of highly trained men, tens of millions of dollars in land and buildings, large supporting staffs, and the fantastic potential of young men who with a degree of trust are spending a part of their lives at these institutions. The twin conviction is that existing patterns are wasteful and inefficient and in the majority of cases offer a level of education that will be more sorely pressed as the future advances. A redeployment of these resources seems called for.

A 2-year examination of the total pic-

ture and an attempt to define alternative patterns for accomplishing the task more successfully pointed primarily in one direction: The emerging pattern of theological education in the next decade in North America will involve significant and large-scale cooperative efforts. Looking ahead 10 years one would project a landscape characterized by a limited number of major centers for the study of theology. These centers will develop about some of the best of the major private and state-supported universities, located in large urban complexes. They will involve "clusters" of confessionally based seminaries, representing several Protestant, Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Lutheran traditions in any given setting.

This pattern is already in development. Berkeley, Boston, and Dubuque have formed functioning consortia. Similar plans are progressing in New York, Chicago, Washington, eastern Pennsylvania, and Rochester. Using a set of criteria that measured various dimensions of the problem, we have been able to identify some 18 incipient centers in the United States of America and Canada. St. Louis is one of these, although not representing the same degree of strength assembled in some areas. It is no exaggeration to suggest that the future of St. Louis as one of the great centers for the study of theology depends to a great extent on the position taken by Concordia Seminary. It represents the strongest resource in terms of faculty, student body, and facilities of any seminary in this three-state region. A leadership role is open to it that it has not fully seized.

There is another option. Independent, autonomous schools will remain. It is to be hoped that a rich variety of models of

theological education will remain. But a new and rising standard will be established. No single school, regardless of wealth or prestige, will be able to match the resources offered by the clusters near the great university-metropolitan centers. No external pressures need be threatened to plead a serious consideration of a vigorous design of theological education that weighs the resources of the entire area. One need only envisage the student faced with the choice between an isolated self-contained institution and a seminary set into the context of other great graduate and professional schools and that offers a curriculum designed to take maximum advantage of the larger educational environment.

We implied a crisis of institutions. At what points? First, the winds of major financial storms are headed toward theological schools. The smaller schools most exposed by lack of adequate resources and constituency are already taking emergency measures. Our estimates suggest that for a seminary simply to maintain its present level of education, its current budget must double again by 1975. As we have analyzed the plans and programs projected by our schools to offer the quality of education they know to be necessary in today's world, budget estimates suggest increases of 400 to 500 percent! Realistically, what would happen if you would seek to *triple* your current budget—within the next 7 years?

Within the past 15 years higher education has received a larger proportion of the national wealth than ever before. Yet financial problems loom ahead so serious in dimension that new financial solutions seem called for. Cost per student has in-

creased sharply; every projection indicates higher costs ahead. Seminaries must operate entirely without government subsidies. As a result the gap between need and actual dollars available for schools ineligible for government subsidies has widened at a frightening pace. Nationally the number of seminaries experiencing operating deficits has increased. While total budgets are increasing, they are not rising at a rate commensurate with consistently rising costs. No significant new sources of funding for theological education have emerged during the last decade.

Institutionally, schools are more aware of the competition for securing good students. Confessional schools have only begun to feel this pressure. In the past one could presuppose the fact that men looking toward service in the ministry of a given church body would enter a denominational seminary. The "new breed" of student demands greater freedom to select a school that offers the highest quality of education. Still in its earliest stage of cooperative work, the Boston Theological Institute now offers some 1,500 students a choice of 775 jointly listed courses taught by a faculty of 250. There is also wide-ranging cooperation with many divisions of Harvard, Boston, and M. I. T. When such consortia include a generous sprinkling of some of the ranking scholars in their fields nationally, one sees the impossibility of an isolated seminary competing in the same league.

The crisis of institution, then, arises in part from the necessity to plan for the future while the future appears destined for continued convulsive changes. One must plan before all the data are in on which the plans are to be based. Will the

trend toward clustering and the movement toward the university represent more than another educational fad? Dare a seminary seeking to train a strong ministry for its church plot a course of relative isolation, with a few peripheral gestures toward ecumenical education?

These three crises, then, loom largest as we seek to plan for the future of theological education. The crisis of faith demands that we be persons of integrity, faith, and commitment. It demands that we continue to define our institutional functions in terms of emerging need. It demands answers to how the Gospel is to be addressed to our age and how the church can minister most faithfully. The crisis of context confronts us with the need to answer the questions of the relation of theological education to the frontiers of knowledge, the relationship of seminaries to their own church body and the larger church. The crisis of institutions forces us to make decisions now about the movement of seminaries toward one another; it presents you with the challenge of steering out into the swiftest waters of the mainstream—with all the challenge and anxiety that this prospect raises. All this must be done as you seek to maintain your unique strengths of the past but cast off any rigidity that will prevent even more imaginative and faithful service in the future.

I trust I have not violated your hospitality by appearing too judgmental or by appearing insensitive to the honor you are graciously bestowing. It is because of my firm conviction about the enlarged leadership role this school is being called on to assume that I have raised these issues on a happy and ceremonial occasion. There

are those who seem most to enjoy sorrowful music, who delight in predictions of doom. We feel no inclination to take our stand with them. When Ortega y Gasset wrote his great dirge for Western society, *The Revolt of the Masses*, he ended with the hope that the final word would not be one of decay and death but that a new marshaling of forces might yet give re-direction to the future.

It is with much greater hope that we survey these three crises confronting professional theological education. For we have tried to indicate where some of the potential for renewal lies. Today we need the power of the Spirit to lift and empower our spirits: "For the spirit which God has given us is not a spirit of cowardice, but one of power and of love and of sound judgment." (2 Tim. 1:7)