
LOVING GOD WITH OUR MINDS: THE VOCATION OF THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION IN THE LIFE AND LEADERSHIP OF THE CHURCH¹

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“I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.” Ephesians 3:18-19

A BAD MOOD ON THE RISE

In a recent sermon, Tom Long, Professor of Homiletics at Emory University, observed that the greatest heresy the Church faces today is not atheism; it is superficiality.² This is not just a problem we face in churches, of course. The dumbing-down of American society in general has been depressingly well documented.³ But superficiality is an especially thorny problem when it comes to Christian faith, particularly for Presbyterians. There is a popular mood on the rise in North America that places an increasingly higher valuation on religious emotion uncritically examined, pious superstitions and sentimentality than on that “life of the mind

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- 1 This essay was originally presented as my inaugural lecture as professor of pastoral theology and dean of the faculty of Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, November 11, 2003. I am particularly grateful to William Greenway, Associate Professor of Philosophical Theology, and Timothy Lincoln, Director of the Stitt Library, for reading this lecture, and offering a number of critical suggestions.
- 2 Tom Long, “A Matter of Depth,” text St. Luke 5:1-11, preached at a service of worship and the installation of the Reverend Scott Black Johnston as pastor of Trinity Presbyterian Church, Atlanta, Georgia, Sunday, October 5, 2003.
- 3 See, for example, Paul Fussell, *BAD or: The Dumbing of America* (New York: Touchstone, 1992). I do not mean to say that the anti-intellectual mood is new. In their groundbreaking 1957 study of theological education, H. Richard Niebuhr, Daniel Day Williams, and James M. Gustafson raised a concern about the prevalence of anti-intellectualist pressure in the culture that both surrounds theological education and pervades many theological schools. “Faculty members,” they write, “who attempt to turn the tide against anti-intellectualism must fight every inch of the way.” H. Richard Niebuhr, Daniel Day Williams, and James M. Gustafson, *The Advancement of Theological Education: The summary report of a mid-century study* (New York: Harper & Brothers, Publishers, 1957),

as a service of God” which has historically been the hallmark of the various Reformed traditions.⁴

Last summer Ellis Nelson brought me an editorial by Nicholas Kristof, a columnist for *The New York Times*. The essay has troubled me more the longer I have thought about it. Kristof reflects on the increasing credulity of the American public, remembering his grandfather, “a devout and active Presbyterian elder,” who regarded the virgin birth as a more or less legendary aspect of the Christian faith and evolutionary theory as a fairly viable scientific explanation of how nature works. Kristof writes: “Those kinds of mainline Christians are vanishing,” and are being replaced by Christians who prove the fervor of their religious convictions by refusing to test them intellectually. He argues that his intention is not to pour scorn on anyone’s devotion, but he is puzzled and worried “by the way the great intellectual traditions of Catholic and Protestant churches alike are withering, leaving the scholarly and religious worlds increasingly antagonistic.” He says he worries, at least partially, because of the conversations he has had with certain “self-satisfied and unquestioning” representatives of what we commonly call Islamic fundamentalism. He writes, “the Islamic world is in crisis today in large part because of a similar drift away from [its] rich intellectual tradition” and toward unquestioning, emotional religious fervor. “The heart,” he concludes, “is a wonderful organ, but so is the brain.”⁵

I share Kristof’s concern. As one who became a Presbyterian because of the Reformed tradition’s belief that our love of God is incomplete unless we love God with our minds, as well as with our hearts and souls, I worry what will become of Christian faith and practice, indeed of what will

197. But, if anything, the tide against intellectual endeavors and against theological scholarship, has only grown stronger since the middle of the last century. In the recent controversy over Mel Gibson’s film, “The Passion,” a profound distrust and disdain for biblical and theological scholarship has surfaced. By painting scholars as guardians of political correctness and revisionists because they have raised concerns about the superficial reading of the gospels, Gibson has said, “Just get an academic on board if you want to pervert something.” Peter J. Boyer, “The Jesus War: Mel Gibson discusses his controversial movie,” *The New Yorker*, September 15, 2003, 67.

4 John H. Leith, *The Reformed Imperative: What the Church Has to Say That No One Else Can Say* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1988), 14.

5 *Ibid.*, A29.

become of the world we live in, if Christians fail to ask tough, deep critical questions of our faith, if we ignore life's deep mysteries and profound complexities, and abandon the curiosity that is unafraid to swim at the deep end of the pool. Today, perhaps more than at any time since the Reformation, we need to recover the proper and distinct role of Christian scholarship in the life and leadership of the Church, and we need a renewed appreciation for the unique vocation of the theological scholar.

The Church has, of course, been at odds with itself over the precise role scholarship plays in its life almost from the beginning. In the Second Century, Tertullian of Carthage asked: "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What concord is there between the Academy and the Church?" Tertullian's answer was, *Not much!* As he says: We have no need for curiosity once we possess Jesus Christ, nor do we need to raise questions having received the gospel.⁶ Apparently Tertullian's disdain for classical learning extended only as far as philosophy and theology, since he clearly was a student of classical Latin rhetoric.

Despite Tertullian's rejection of the role of scholarship in the life of the Church, even a cursory examination of the history of the Church reveals the fact that time and time again renewal, renaissance, reformation, and even revival of the spiritual life of the Church has originated from the efforts of Christian scholarship at least as often as from Christian preaching and congregational ministry. For every renewal movement originating with Dominican preachers and Puritan pulpiteers, with a George Whitefield, a Charles Finney, or a Charles Haddon Spurgeon, there has been an Aquinas, an Erasmus, a Luther, a Calvin, a William Robertson Smith, and a Benjamin Warfield. The Methodist movement is simply unimaginable apart from Oxford University, as surely as

6 Tertullian, "On Prescription Against Heretics," *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325*, eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, reprint, 1980), Vol. III, 247. A twentieth century version of Tertullian's attitude is reported by Robert Frost in a lecture, "Education by Poetry," which he presented at Amherst College. "I once heard of a minister," writes Frost, "who turned his daughter – his poetry-writing daughter – out on the street to earn a living, because he said there should be no more books written; God wrote one book, and that was enough." R. Frost, *Selected Prose*, eds. Hyde Cox and Edward Connery Lathem (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966), 33.

Lutheranism is unimaginable apart from that door of a provincial university Church to which an angry Augustinian professor of Bible nailed his famous theses. Calvinism grew from the same soil of that enlightened humanism which knew the Stoics as well as it did St. Paul, that dedicated itself to exposing superstition as well as corruption in the medieval church. It was the spirit of humanistic scholarship that gave us our critical editions of the Greek New Testament and the Hebrew Scriptures so that God's Word could reliably and accurately be translated into the languages of the people, and it was this same spirit that sought to create in the Protestant Churches a class of pastor scholars to replace an ignorant and complacent clergy that muttered words they did not comprehend over rites they could not understand. Arguably the most exciting renewal movement in the modern Reformed Church, the Great Disruption of 1843, when the Free Church of Scotland emerged from the ashes of aristocratic patronage in the old Established Church, was marked not only by its evangelical preachers, like Thomas Chalmers, but even more by the scholars it produced in its second generation whose teaching and writing introduced to Presbyterian ministers and congregations the new critical scholarship of Germany.

An examination of the church's history not only reveals the perennial nature of this struggle over the proper role of scholarship in the Church, but also its fundamental creativity. The life, leadership, and ministry of the Church have been blessed, the Church's preaching invigorated, its understanding of scripture advanced, its knowledge of its own history enlightened, and its theological heritage deepened, whenever it has held together, sometimes in countervailing tension, the distinct vocations of scholarship and of pastoral ministry: two very different callings (among many others) that through the richness of God's grace have, in a sort of living dialectic, complemented one another in their differences as well as in their commonalities. The lectern and the pulpit represent two distinct, but equally indispensable, vocations in the life of the Church, even as the seminary represents a distinct mission from the congregation in the leadership of the larger Church. Whenever this tension has collapsed, historically, with either side claiming supremacy, independence, or subservience, the Church has suffered. Wherever this tension is sustained, the

Church's common life is deepened and enriched.

In the face of the contemporary heresy of superficiality, I want to review the role and function of theological scholarship and seminary education for the sake of the Church's life and leadership. But I want to do more. I also want to celebrate a unique and indispensable vocation that is under threat from within the Church and without. John Leith, in his 1987 Thomas White Currie Lectures here at Austin Seminary, asked, "What is it the Church has to say that no one else can say?"⁷ Today I want to ask a related question, "What role does theological education play in the Church that no one else can play?"

THEOLOGICAL ROLE PLAYING

E. Harris Harbison, a professor of History at Princeton University half a century ago, in his study, *The Christian Scholar in the Age of the Reformation*, discussed the function of scholarship in Christian traditions. Harbison believed that Christian scholarship, as a discrete vocation, plays three roles in relation to the Church: First, it is responsible to systematically and critically examine the Christian traditions themselves; second, it must seek to relate these Christian traditions to the surrounding secular cultures and traditions, understanding the points of intersection and difference between them; and, third, it should work "to reconcile faith and science, in the broadest sense of the word," respecting the contributions both make to our understanding of God's world.⁸

Harbison observed that Christian scholars, specifically those whose scholarship focuses on theological and biblical studies, traditionally have been "most often occupied with the first [critically and systematically studying the treasury of resources in the Christian traditions, the biblical texts, and teachings of the Christian faith], and least often with the third [reconciling the faith with the various sciences of the contemporary world]." But he also observes those notable exceptions, "the greatest minds, like Augustine and Aquinas," who have been concerned with all three scholarly roles.⁹

⁷ John Leith, op cit. 21-23.

⁸ E. Harris Harbison, *The Christian Scholar in the Age of the Reformation* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1956), 4-5.

⁹ Ibid., 5.

Between the Church's great scholars and the Church, one may find complementarity, mutuality, and harmony, at times. But, there are also checks and balances, conflict and countervaluation. For example, though Thomas Aquinas' thought in time became the very standard of Roman Catholic orthodoxy, in his own day Aquinas was condemned as a heretic by some Church leaders because of his use of Aristotelian philosophy. The relationship between Christian scholarship and Church has always been complicated.

Harbison's understanding of the three-fold role of Christian scholarship brings to mind Rowan Williams' typology of theology, a typology that is worthy of a bit more attention as we seek to better understand the contribution of theological scholarship to the life of the Church. Williams maintains that we need an understanding of theology that discerns its interactive nature in both the larger Church and the theological academy, and that comprehends both the ecclesial and the academic within their larger social and cultural contexts.¹⁰ His typology has the additional benefit of bringing the popular and congregational practices of theology into conversation with the academic.

"Theology," Williams writes, "begins as a *celebratory* phenomenon, an attempt to draw out and display connections of thought and image so as to exhibit the fullest possible range of significance in the language used." For example, the languages of hymnody and preaching and praying, of liturgical movement and iconography, of sacred poetry and music, all function as celebratory theology. Often theological reflection is implicit in the celebratory practices, and remains embedded in the activities themselves.¹¹ When thinking of theology as celebratory activity, most of us would naturally think of a local congregation at worship, singing, praying to and praising God together. These activities are theological inasmuch as they convey specific theological content and

¹⁰ Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), xiii.

¹¹ Theological reflection on a Russian Orthodox icon, for instance, is inseparable from the practice of iconic contemplation, as one sees in Henri Nouwen's profoundly moving study, *Behold the Beauty of the Lord: Praying with Icons*, which holds together meditative prayer and theological reflection. Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Behold the Beauty of the Lord: Praying with Icons* (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 1987).

demand further theological reflection.¹²

The second category of theological activity, according to Williams, is the *communicative*. "Theology," Williams writes, "seeks also to persuade or commend, to witness to the gospel's capacity for being at home in more than one cultural environment, and to display enough confidence to believe that this gospel can be rediscovered at the end of a long and exotic detour through strange idioms and structures of thought." Paul Tillich described this as theology at the boundaries.¹³ For Williams, a communicative theology demonstrates a kind of adventurous faithfulness beyond familiar borders. He explains:

The assumption is that this or that intellectual idiom not only offers a way into fruitful conversation with the current environment but also that the unfamiliar idiom may uncover aspects of the deposit of belief hitherto unexamined. In fact, it involves a considerable act of trust in the theological tradition, a confidence that the fundamental categories of belief are robust enough to survive the drastic experience of immersion in other ways of constructing and construing the world.¹⁴

¹² Williams, *On Christian Theology*, xiv. The category can also include the practices of certain academic theologians whose work maintains an intimate and reflexive response to the performative aspects of faith, such as Hans Urs von Balthasar who wrote his massive multi-volume systematic theology, wonderfully titled "The Glory of the Lord," from a celebratory, aesthetic posture.

¹³ Tillich's communicative theology is seen in his preaching as well as in his more formal theological work. See: P. Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1948), particularly his renowned sermon, "You Are Accepted," which explores boundaries between languages, and his *Theology of Culture* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959). See also: Wilhelm and Marion Pauck, *Paul Tillich: His Life and Thought* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), Vol. 1, 266-267.

¹⁴ Williams, *On Christian Theology*, xiv. The second edition of Karl Barth's epochal *Epistle to the Romans*, engages in activity similar to William's communicative theology, as Barth draws deeply on Franz Overbeck, Søren Kierkegaard, and Fyodor Dostoevsky in his Pauline dialogue. Barth's contemporary Rudolf Bultmann, in his demythologizing of the Bible, engaged the thought of Martin Heidegger in a similar fashion; and the more recent theological work of Fergus Kerr and John Caputo have benefited greatly from their engagements, respectively, with Ludwig Wittgenstein and Jacques Derrida. Tillich, himself, not only spoke across the boundaries of Christian theology and existentialist philosophy, but also established significant conversations between Christianity and the arts, and Christianity and psychology. This sort of theological activity is hardly a

Finally, Williams describes that “probing of what the ‘fundamental categories’ [of Christian faith] really mean,” through what he calls “critical theology.” The term “critical,” in this context, does not mean adverse, or derogatory, or negative. Rather, critical means analytical. Critical theology, according to Williams, refers to systematic, constructive, doctrinal, fundamental, or dogmatic theology. Its concern is to investigate the “inner tensions and irresolutions,” the “continuity and coherence,” and the integrity of the faith traditions themselves.¹⁵ Karl Barth described this, of course, as Church dogmatics. Barth writes: “As a theological discipline dogmatics is the scientific self-examination of the Christian Church with respect to the content of its distinctive talk about God.”¹⁶ Barth means, by using the term “scientific,” that theology in its critical mode, is theology in the “strictest and proper sense of the word,” a discipline which makes use of methodologies appropriate to the critical investigation of its subject matter, thus acknowledging the Church’s duty to criticize and revise its own speech about God.¹⁷ I would add that critical theological activities are not limited to the realm of systematic or dogmatic theology, but include the duty of biblical scholars to critically study the sacred texts, of ethicists to inquire into the ways we construe moral duty, of historians to test sources, and of practical theologians to examine the ways faith is practiced. In the ordinary run of things, we generally think of this last category of theological activity as peculiarly academic in nature, engaged in by scholars with specialized training. But, in fact, all three categories, celebratory, communicative, and critical, have benefited from both scholarly and pastoral attention. Which brings me, at long last, to answer the question, “What role does theological education play in the life and leadership of the Church that no one else can play?”

recent innovation, however. Augustine’s genius lies, at least in part, in the way he re-appropriates via Christian theology the fruits of Platonic thought, as does Thomas Aquinas in his re-conceptualization of medieval Catholic theology in Aristotelian terms. In many ways, communicative theology is particularly open to the contributions of non-academic theologians (both in the Church and beyond) because it explicitly invites cross-pollination.

15 Ibid., xv.

16 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, eds. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975), I.1. p. 3.

17 Ibid., 3. Also note the opening chapter on this subject in Barth’s *Dogmatics in Outline* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1959), 9-14.

A MODEST PROPOSAL

I am instinctively suspicious of ambitious grand designs. As in many things, I am guided here by the sanity of Karl Barth, who distrusted closed systems that might divide our loyalty and enslave us to partisan ideologies which inevitably run counter to the First Commandment, and by Isaiah Berlin, who was always on guard for the kinds of idealism and utopian promises that sacrifice too much humanity on the road to the divine.¹⁸ When I was a pastor, for example, I found great comfort in Loren Mead's wonderful little book titled, *The Whole Truth About Everything Related to the Church in Twelve Pages (If You Don't Count the Introduction and the Conclusion)*, the first chapter of which is titled, "Nothing Works," and the second chapter, "Almost Anything Can Work a Little Better."¹⁹

With this in mind, and taking cues from both Harris Harbison and Rowan Williams, I would like to advance a modest proposal for how we might better understand the roles that theological seminaries and Christian scholars play in the life, leadership, and ministry of the Church. I believe theological scholarship, at its best, functions (1) as the Church's long-term memory bank, (2) as a critical faculty for the Church's self-reflection and analysis of its faith and practice, (3) as a moderator in the Christian faith's dialogue across all sorts of boundaries and divides, and (4) as a provocateur when things in the Church become too settled.

(1) THE SEMINARY AND THE CHURCH'S LONG-TERM MEMORY

One of the most startling things about theological schools and the scholars who teach in them is how long their memories are. Indeed, I have come to believe that it is a distinctive role of seminaries to serve as the long-term memory bank of the Church. And, it is a critical function of seminaries to instill in our students an appreciation for the deep, lasting traditions, legacies, and memories that make us who we are.

¹⁸ I am thinking here particularly of Berlin's essays "The Pursuit of the Ideal" and "The Decline of Utopian Ideas in the West," both of which appear in *The Crooked Timber of Humanity* (London: John Murray Publishers, 1990).

¹⁹ Loren B. Mead, *The Whole Truth About Everything Related to the Church in Twelve Pages (If You Don't Count the Introduction and the Conclusion)* (Washington, D.C.: Alban Institute, 1988).

A few years ago, I had the privilege of sitting in on our colleague, Stan Hall's, introductory course, CM.122 THE CHURCH AS A WORSHIPING COMMUNITY. I suppose I was as surprised as the students when I discovered that Stan began his course by transporting us back to the second century and the early Church's worship as described by Justin Martyr. But I shouldn't have been surprised. When, in my own workshop on Church finance, someone asks me to reflect on stewardship it is not unusual at all for me to begin, not with Dean Hoge's research into contemporary attitudes toward money, but with John Chrysostom's series of sermons on Lazarus and the rich man, preached in the fourth century. Sure, I'll get to Dean Hoge, Sondra Wheeler, Robert Wuthnow, and Douglas John Hall, and lots of other contemporary writers. But I count on Chrysostom to give us that authentic and fundamental perspective about what it means for Christians to speak of money, a perspective that had already endured for twelve hundred years when Adam Smith laid the foundations for modern capitalism. When I want our students to get their bearings on the meaning of pastoral ministry, I know we will eventually get to William Willoman, Eugene Peterson, and Barbara Brown Taylor, but first I want to take us up into the heights and headwaters of Christian wisdom, to the Patristic writers, like Gregory of Nazianzus, who was so awed by the holiness of the pastoral calling that he literally ran for the hills in terror after his ordination, and to George Herbert, whose description of the pastoral office is pure poetry and whose poetry speaks with the resonance of heaven.

The corporate memory of a local congregation in North America is seldom more than a hundred years old. As pastors of suburban congregations know only too well, most of their churches have a memory shorter than that of a ten-year old soccer player.

The memory of Christian scholarship, by contrast, stretches back for millennia. The scholar's conversation partners, on a day-to-day basis, speak across the ages, forming a cloud of witnesses to the faith. Scholars routinely listen to debates between St. Paul and St. James, Anselm and Abelard, Luther and Erasmus. As strange as it may seem, Athanasius is as alive to the scholar as that colleague in the next office

(sometimes even more so). Remembrance is for the Christian scholar an act of reverence, and attending to the multitude of traditions that vie for our loyalty a matter of calling. As my colleague, Bill Greenway, has said so well: "Every age has had those who inspire and sustain our faith in troubled times, those who enhance our joy by articulating [the meaning of Christian faith] clearly and publicly. We would be losing a wonderful gift from God were we through inattention to miss out on the wonderful wisdom contained in the voices of that cloud of witnesses." Perhaps the principal role of scholarship is simply this: to bring memory to life.

G. K. Chesterton once wrote of tradition that it is the extension of the democratic franchise to that most excluded portion of humanity, our ancestors. Tradition, he said, is "the democracy of the dead."²⁰ But, of course, the dead in Christ are alive unto God. And theological scholarship may properly be understood as the Church's permanent lobby group for the cloud of witnesses. As a scholar, it is an act of breathtaking arrogance for us to ignore the saints of the past whose only failing is that they no longer walk among us in flesh and blood.

(2) THE SEMINARY AS A CRITICAL FACULTY

On June 3, 1846, Thomas Chalmers, perhaps the greatest preacher of nineteenth-century Scotland, spoke at a ceremony at which the foundation stone was laid for New College, Edinburgh. He said: "There is no substantial difference between the theology taught at a College, and the theology taught in a Church." However, "in the preparation of ministers... it is necessary that it should be taught in the form of a science, and receive an academic treatment in the hands of academic [teachers]."²¹ Chalmers' comments may be illuminating as much in their inaccuracy as their aptness.

We have tended, at least in North America, to be rather hesitant to describe theological studies as a science, so enthralled are we to a narrow conception of science as a study

20 G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (London: John Lane, the Bodley Head, Ltd., 1908), 83.

21 Bill Shaw, "Dual Identity: Church College and University Faculty," in *Disruption to Diversity: Edinburgh Divinity 1846-1996*, eds. David F. Wright and Gary D. Badcock (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1996), 169.

of physical phenomena by means of controlled experiments, the findings of which must be verified independently by other scientists who repeat the methods and test the results of previous experiments. However, when the word science is used the way Chalmers uses the term with reference to theology, and as Karl Barth and other European theologians have used it, science means a process of rational, critical, and analytical study.²² Theological studies, in their view, are scientific in that they inquire critically into the faith of the Church, attempting through methodologies appropriate to the reality of our subject matter, to investigate, examine, analyze and understand more deeply the rational coherence of our faith.

Our goal is to know God, and to understand more deeply who God is, and who God has created us to be. There is, as Chalmers argued, no difference in substance between the theology taught in a seminary and that taught in a congregation. However, Chalmers understates the value of Christian scholarship when he restricts the role of the scholar to the preparation of ordained ministers. In fact, the entire Church benefits from critical theological scholarship. One may wonder, indeed, whether it was the predominance of an attitude like that expressed by Chalmers which eventually led to the disastrous controversies in the second generation of the Free Church of Scotland, when the work of its most brilliant scholars, Smith, Bruce, and Dods, was seen as a threat to the faith of ordinary Christians. Yet another reminder that sometimes the verdicts of heresy trials have been overturned only when the Church belatedly catches up with its scholarship.

Theological education, as taught in seminaries, is not qualitatively different from the theological education needed by all Christians. As Edward Farley has argued, "Theologia, theological understanding, is the presupposed subject matter and goal of all education in the ecclesial community."²³

²² Thomas F. Torrance, *Theological Science* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), vii-viii, where Torrance explains: "Scientific knowledge is that in which we bring the inherent rationality of things to light and expression, as we let the realities we investigate disclose themselves to us under our questioning and we ... submit our minds to their intrinsic connections and order."

²³ Edward Farley, *Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 176.

Certainly those persons preparing for ministry need a deep grounding in critical studies, and this argues strongly for them to be taught by men and women whose calling is dedicated to and who are schooled in the vocation of Christian scholarship. But it is not only the ordained clergy who can benefit from the constructive, creative, and critical study of their faith. It is an indispensable function of scholarship to remind all Christians that our faith is incomplete if it remains unreflective.

Walter Wyman connects the critical function of theological scholarship to the scholar's historical consciousness, the nurturing of that long-term memory to which I have already referred. Wyman sees the scholar as standing at that point where past and present practices and understandings of the faith intersect, where wisdom is forged from the raw material of life. He writes:

Christian theology may be defined as critical reflection on the meaning and truth of the Christian faith. Its task is both to interpret the Christian tradition and to articulate what it is reasonable to believe in the present. As *reflection*, theology is distinct from the life of faith itself: it is second-order thinking that makes faith its object.... As *critical*, theology raises the question of meaning and truth – how the ideas of faith ... ought to be interpreted and whether and in what sense those ideas may make good their claim to be true.²⁴

The theological educator, according to Wyman, teaches us to reflect critically, to be able to bring careful, disciplined, analytical reflection to bear on the faith of Christian congregations, on the sacred texts that guide us and the practices that sustain us, to listen faithfully to the full range of human developments in politics and law, in philosophy and the arts, and to do so with one eye on the complex web of

²⁴ Walter E. Wyman, Jr., "The Historical Consciousness and the Study of Theology," in *Shifting Boundaries: Contextual Approaches to the Structure of Theological Education*, eds. Barbara G. Wheeler and Edward Farley (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), 93.

Christian communities of faith throughout history.²⁵ This means, of course, that seminaries have a fundamental responsibility to teach those who are called to pastoral ministry and to Christian scholarship.

Joseph Sittler, in his comments on the formation of both scholars and ministers, argues for something that seems (at least, initially) so patently obvious that it hardly requires to be stated. Sittler says that scholars and ministers “should be educated persons.” He means by this that they should be educated, *not merely trained*. “You can train dogs to jump,” writes Sittler. But education is about teaching “the mind to unfold to the multiple facets of human existence with some appreciation, eagerness, and joy.” To be educated, Sittler argues, is “the opposite of being dull.”²⁶

If Sittler is right in arguing that the principal work of ministry is theological reflection, and if Karl Barth was correct when he said that theology requires free persons, then theological education must be more than mere training, and much, much more than indoctrination.²⁷ Theological education forms creative and critical minds courageous enough to question settled opinions, confident enough to call to task hallowed assumptions, and faithful enough to trust God’s hold on us to be stronger than our grasp of God. But, again, such theological education must not be restricted to an ordained clergy. The seminary has an obligation to serve as a center of theological education for the whole Church. However, this does not mean that market forces and the perceived needs even of the Church should determine the agenda of theological scholarship or the curricula of theological seminaries.

There are times when the School of the Church serves the Church best by resisting the Church’s anxieties, its protestations, and even its anger. The duty of theological scholarship to critically examine the faith and practices of the Church throughout the ages and to instill the habits of critical theological reflection among the people of God has a far

25 Ibid., 93. Wyman fruitfully explores Troeltsch’s three principles of historical method, criticism, analogy, and reciprocity in this context, pp. 94-96.

26 Joseph Sittler, *Gravity and Grace: Reflections and Provocations*, ed. Linda-Marie Dellof (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986), 75.

27 Ibid., 49; Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), 417-418.

higher claim on the vocation of the scholar than does the immediate comfort and convenience of the Church.²⁸ Many of the most mystifying academic traditions, such as granting tenure to senior scholars, reveal their true value only in those moments when scholarship is compelled to speak in the face of ecclesiastical structures that would silence the scholar if they could, examples of which range from the trials of Martin Luther to the more recent tribulations of Hans Küng.

(3) THE SEMINARY AS MODERATOR OF CONVERSATIONS

In his magnificent description of the Church as the body of Christ, one body with many members, St. Paul speaks of the varieties of gifts we are given by the same Holy Spirit to carry out God's redemptive purposes in the world. "Now you are the body of Christ," Paul writes to the Corinthians, "and individually members of it. And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret?"

It is, of course, in this immediate context that Paul writes surely one of the most compelling and beautiful chapters in the entire Bible, the great "love chapter" of First Corinthians 13. The chapter is addressed to people locked in a bitter church fight over who is more important, over whose gifts and callings are more godly. Paul writes, "I will show you a still more excellent way." And he does. "If I speak with the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I have nothing." And, indeed, we do not.

Harris Harbison says that the vocation of Christian scholarship is not very exciting, certainly in comparison to that of apostles and prophets. In fact, Harbison is not even sure that the vocation of scholarship should be equated with that

²⁸ Were Luther, for example, to have been effectively silenced by the courts of the Church because his lectures and books called into question the Church's practice of selling indulgences to raise money for its building campaign, it would have been the Church itself which would have paid the ultimate price.

of the teacher which Paul mentions. Rather, Harbison is tempted to think of the scholar as the “interpreters of tongues.”²⁹

I don’t think Harbison is correct in his reading of this text, but I do think his mistake is interesting, because the scholar’s function both within the Church and beyond could well be characterized as that of interpretation or translation – sometimes literally.

Can any of us imagine the language world of today’s English-speaking peoples and their spiritual consciousness without the translation we call the King James Version of the Bible? Today we think of the King James Version as the hallmark of conservatism (it is not called the “Authorized Version” for nothing), but it was a radical departure from the norm in its own time, a daring act of translation, and of what we might now call cross-disciplinary integration. As Adam Nicolson observes in his history of the King James Version, the English into which the ancient Hebrew and Greek was rendered in that translation was an artificial language, a language that could only have been devised by the scholars themselves who translated the Bible. King James English was neither the English commonly spoken nor written in that age or any age, but was a language which could only have been invented by scholars who were more at home in Latin, and who wanted to invest the vernacular with holiness, power, and glory.³⁰

Theological scholarship also performs the function of translator or interpreter in a metaphorical sense by moderating conversations across all sorts of boundaries between languages, faith communities, denominational parties, diverse social groups, cultures, tribes, classes, and academic disciplines. This function, which both Harbison and Williams describe in some detail (this is William’s category of communicative theology), can cause considerable controversy, because it requires theology to learn new languages, to initiate or join in conversations that may not defer to Christian theology’s ancient prestige, and to risk the incarnation of the Word in sometimes radically new thought and language worlds.

²⁹ Harbison, *The Christian Scholar*, 5.

³⁰ Adam Nicolson, *Power and Glory: Jacobean England and the Making of the King James Bible* (London: HarperCollins, 2003), 230-243.

Theology is most vulnerable when it attempts to speak across boundaries, as any scholar knows who has ever attended the American Academy of Religion or tried to participate in Inter-faith dialogue. And we must recognize the risks involved here. Scholarship can look silly at times, when it mistakes fads for trends; worse still, scholarship can appear faithless, when its confidence in new conversation partners takes precedence over its awe in the presence of a holy God. And, yet, the risks are worth running. It is frequently true that we only make significant breakthroughs in understanding when we take the risk of looking foolish or heretical. The Church's understanding of the universe would be poorer today had not courageous scholars embraced and become conversant with the sciences of Galileo and Copernicus in the face of the Church's threats. The Church's preaching would be poorer today had biblical scholars not taken that fateful step of engaging in historical criticism, of asking questions about the sources and the formation of the Bible. The Church's very life would be poorer today had theologians failed to learn to speak across the boundaries of cultures, arts and sciences, psychology and philosophy.

Like a theological Marco Polo, when the Christian scholar traverses the boundaries that separate disciplines and world views, faiths, philosophies, political and economic systems, whatever the risks are run, the scholarly adventure holds the promise of transforming our native ecclesial lands. The Church throughout the world has benefited throughout its history from undreamed-of gifts imported from the unlikeliest foreign places of the human heart and mind.

(4) THE THEOLOGICAL SCHOOL AS PROVOCATEUR

Recently *The Economist* reviewed a new book comparing how Communist era Soviet governments dealt with the arts in comparison with how the arts have been dealt with in the United States. The author observes that for all their revolutionary claims, Soviet leaders were essentially Victorian in their appreciation for artistic achievement: afraid to experiment, unwilling to move beyond realistic representation in the visual arts, and inspiring moralistic fables in literature. Ironically, it has been in the United States that the arts were most revolutionary, and that they flourished. Though many in

the population did not care for the excesses of certain artists, liberty was valued, and the freedom of expression not only stretched the boundaries of the acceptable, but allowed previously unimaginable brilliance to emerge in the arts.³¹

Theological scholarship has tested its friendship with bishops and priests, kings and presidents, as well as the general population throughout the centuries, provoking the larger Church to think new thoughts and imagine new realities, challenging settled assumptions and forcing us to criticize hallowed tenets of faith. And scholarship has played this role since at least the second century. Origen's provocative theology walked the razor's edge of settled orthodoxy, and was sometimes considered heresy. But the leaders of the Church who wrote the Nicene Creed stood on Origen's giant shoulders.

There hangs over most theological schools that take seriously their relationship with the Church a perennial temptation to provide a mere endorsement of the reigning views of various ecclesiastical powers that be. Some Christian denominations, in fact, have guaranteed by constraint that their schools will never challenge the theological or ideological status quo of the Church. Seminaries may find themselves rewarded in the short-term by giving in to this temptation. But the schools that choose this road will only isolate themselves from the rich ferment of ideas and discoveries "in the world in which [the Church's] ministry is to take place," becoming a kind of theological cul de sac. And the school that abandons its scholarly post is destined in time to find it no longer serves God, nor the Church of Jesus Christ, because it has forsaken its distinctive vocation. Like salt which has lost its savor, it has become worthless.

One thing that stands out when considering the various roles theological scholarship plays is that sometimes when Schools of the Church are functioning at their best, their work may go unappreciated in the Church they serve, either because it is accomplished quietly (as when scholars insure that the latest critical edition of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's writings is published for the next generation) or because the work

³¹ "Dancing in the Dark," a review of *The Dancer Defects: The Struggle for Cultural Supremacy During the Cold War*, by David Caute (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), in *The Economist*, Vol. 368, Number 8343, September 27 – October 3, 2003, 83.

annoys us so much (in the grand gadfly tradition of Socrates). The calling of theological scholarship is a discrete and unique vocation. In the Reformed tradition, it is as distinctive as the vocation of pastoral leadership. And when it is not exercised with vitality and integrity, the Church loses.

CLOSING REFLECTIONS ON THE SCHOLARLY VOCATION

For the first couple of years after I came to the faculty of Austin Seminary, I still referred to myself as a pastor. I wasn't, of course. Not anymore. But I wanted somehow to affirm the godliness, the deep Christian character, the devotion required of those who engage in the scholarly vocation. I didn't yet have a vocational vocabulary adequate to speak of my new calling in a way that honored its unique contribution to the life and leadership of the Church. It was some time before I realized I was not complimenting the Christian scholar's vocation by confusing it with the pastor's.

In the "Ecclesiastical Ordinances of the Church of Geneva," John Calvin writes: "The office proper to doctors [of the Church] is the instruction of the faithful in true doctrine, in order that the purity of the Gospel be not corrupted either by ignorance or by evil opinion." From its very beginning, the Reformed Church understood lecturers in theology (and this included a wide range of disciplines) to be "nearest to the minister and most closely joined to the government of the Church." However, Calvin's Church also saw scholars as exerting an indispensable countervailing force on the practice of ministry.³²

While the relationship between these two vocations is, as Calvin himself anticipated, sometimes characterized as providing checks and balances and countervailing forces, this relationship is also, and even more profoundly, a mutual and complementary relationship. Nothing less could possibly be true to the complexity, to the breadth and length and height and depth of God's created world; nothing less could adequately bear witness to that knowledge of the love of Christ that surpasses all knowledge. During those years when I served in a pastoral vocation, I relied on those who had dedicated their lives to the vocation of Christian scholarship to

³² J.K.S. Reid, ed., *Calvin: Theological Treatises* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1954), 62-63.

challenge my thinking and my faith, to deepen my understandings, and to help me challenge the thought and faith, and deepen the understandings of the congregations I served.

A judicatory official recently told me that he did not want pastors who read and study; he wants pastors who learn from their experience. The two qualities are not mutually exclusive. And I shudder to think how impoverished my own pastoral ministry and church leadership would have been if I had only learned from my own puny experience. The writings of scholars like Karl Barth and John Leith, Tom and James Torrance, John McNeill, and Catherine Mowry LaCugna, and scores of others, allowed me as a pastor to learn from the experience, the critical reflection, the deep faith and understandings of thousands of lifetimes of untold generations who together teach us what it means to be and live as Christians. Perhaps, in the end, this is the most important thing, the thing we must remember about the vocations of Christian scholarship and of pastoral leadership. If we hope to prevent the triumph of the heresy of superficiality, we must work together: seminaries and congregations, professors and pastors, respecting our distinct, unique vocations, and exercising these vocations with integrity. We are called to nothing less, so that God's world and Christ's Church may be filled with all the fullness of God.

"Now unto the God who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen."

Ephesians 3: 20

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