

Whom Do We Serve? Engaging the Ecclesial Dimension: Theological Education that Empowers the Church

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Tension Between Church and Theological Institution

Let me begin by sharing with you something in our context that can be disturbing as much as challenging. Recently, two fast-growing mega-churches of the same denomination in Hong Kong decided to establish a Bible school respectively. The denomination happens to have a theological seminary strongly committed to the evangelical faith. Two other mega churches are offering seminary-type courses to train their members, stopping short of becoming Bible schools. In fact, the trend of mega churches establishing their own Bible schools started about fifteen years ago, when a fast growing and highly mission-minded cell-group church started its own school to train evangelists and cell group leaders to cater for the need of the cell group movement in Hong Kong. Some of these churches were not hesitant to show their disaffection with the traditional mode of theological training. Ironically, senior pastors of these churches, teachers of the Bible seminaries they founded, are all products of traditional seminaries.

For years there have been complaints about seminaries being all too academic, paying too little attention to practical relevance to pastoral ministry, to mission, and to spiritual formation. Seminaries, they say, often fail to turn out effective pastors for effective ministry. Their curricula are out of touch with the vitality of church life in worship, in spiritual nurture, in helping Christians to practice discipleship in the workplace, in enhancing mission commitment. Seminary professors, they say, are also out of touch with vital issues that ordinary Christians or the church as a whole face every day. They are expected to train leaders; instead, they produce for the church certified professionals armed with fragmented theological ideas and lifeless Biblical interpretative tools honed for critical discourses among scholars who have no interest in the Bible as the Word of God. Seminaries are expected to be the "nursery" or "seed-bed" (*seminarium*) for nurturing spiritual leadership, but they have become "broken cisterns and exhausted wells", for their heavy academic curricula and critical approach manage only to dissipate the spiritual vitality and enthusiasm that young seminarians originally have.

However, seminaries have their complaints about the church too. Many evangelical churches have become a mere ensemble of ministries driven by strategies for growth. They have been infected by a logic prevalent in the market. Whatever that works to bring people in trove into the church will be "sanctified". The nature of ministry has quietly metamorphosed. Pastors are expected more to assume the role of a manager than that of a spiritual leader and teacher of truth, with performance indicators set by lay-leaders who are themselves professionals. It is the *techné* of growth, interpersonal skill, and administrative capability that have become definitive and valued over faithful exposition of the Word of God. Parallel to phenomenal growth in some evangelical sectors, there are worrying trends developing that may prove to be detrimental to the church in the long run. Theology

is being marginalized, worship is becoming more and more centered on entertaining worshippers and seekers, Christian tradition is being truncated if not disregarded altogether, preaching is being reduced to entertaining story-telling, and communion of the saints reduced to cell group dynamics. No doubt these churches are able to draw people to them, but what they draw is often nothing more than a constant stream of religious consumers in and out of assemblies with no sense of being the Body of Christ. Some theologians would point out that many mega churches are in fact no church but assemblies of individuals worshipping adjacent to one another. Theological schools may indeed have failed to cater for the needs of sustaining such dynamic of growth, but should they be doing so? In the long run, colluding with such a trend can only aggravate the serious crisis already in the church. The church, if it continues to be obsessed with the *techné* of growth, is in danger of being undermined at the very core of her being. In fact, the church should have herself to blame too for the lack of a new generation of dynamic pastors. She herself has the irreplaceable responsibility to nurture, call and prepare lay persons for ministry before sending them to seminaries; instead, she expects seminaries to train leaders for her consumption without covetously guarding her authority to select worthy candidates from her congregation for training. A significant tradition is in fact being lost here. The church sees herself more as an employer rather than a gardener for whom the seminary is her seedbed for growing leaders for ministry.

The church would however retort. A church that does not grow is a lifeless church. Seminaries have failed to bring up a new generation of dynamic pastors who are purpose driven for the Kingdom. They have failed because they follow too closely the university mode of education. Their whole curriculum is modeled after that of universities. They first follow universities in pursuit of *theroia* as universal science, turning what should be ministerial training into a science of religion. As universities are becoming more and more like polytechnics with the focus on professional competence, seminaries follow suit, forgetting their unique mission of being the teacher of truth for the church. So, they should not blame mega churches taking back theological education into their own hands, so as to train ministers within the ecclesial ministerial context. Seminaries have failed to engage the ecclesial context seriously. To reinvent themselves, they should "de-universitize", that is, disengage from the university mode of education, which has become radically secularized and professionally oriented.

What is being unfolded here concerns the state of theological education as much as the state of the church. The two reflect the two sides of the same problem. What exactly is the problem here? The problem lies in something foundational. Under the impact of the globalization of market capitalism, which is the major driving force for secularization and for the dominance of functional rationality, a whole new cultural milieu is being unfolded before us. The church and its teaching arms, viz., theological schools, are challenged in the most fundamental way. It is the identity of the church as the church and theological institutions as the teacher and leading voice of the proclamation of the Word of God that are being at stake.

Toward a Foundational Understanding

Before we discuss what theological education for the church should be, we need to go back to the basics. What is the church? What is theology? What is theological education? These basics may sound like clichés but they need to be revisited because we stand at a point of history where boundaries are being erased, fundamental concepts reinterpreted beyond recognition, and truth being "perspectivized". We cannot even assume we have a common language here. Or, putting it in another way, if theological education is to serve the church, we need to know the nature and mission of the church that we are serving.

What is theology? Earth, in my view, provides by far the most insightful and relevant understanding of evangelical theology. Theology, according to Earth, is a science. What sort of a science? It is a science of critique (which means "investigation or test"). But a critique of what? It is a critique of the proclamation of the church, to examine and test whether it is faithful to the Word of God. "The primary task of the Church is to proclaim the Christian gospel, and theology functions first of all as a test and a corrective to measure the integrity of this proclamation."¹ Theology has a vital role to play only if the church takes the proclamation of the Word of God to be vital to her identity. For a church that ceases to proclaim the Word of God, theology is deemed to be irrelevant and therefore obsolete. Turning it around, if a church is doing good business in bringing people to

assembly and yet has no use of theology, let it beware. It may have ceased to truly proclaim the Word of God without knowing it. Yet, theology can only be worthy of its task for testifying to the faithfulness of the church when it moves and has its being in the life of the church, the life of proclaiming the Word of God.

As the Word of God is nothing but the Word Incarnate, being faithful to the Word of God necessarily means being faithful to the world for whom God gave His only Son. So, the proclamation of the church, if it is faithful to the Word, has to be relevant to the human condition and prophetic against ideological constructs that oppress and distort humanity. Theology in its critique of the proclamation of the church is inevitably a critique of culture, not only culture that is "outside" the church, but also culture that has been integrated with the life of the church. Culture that captivates humanity can hijack the church as well, unless she is faithful to the Word of God. Theology is the critical reflection of the church in her reaching out to the world, showing it a new life that is completely different from its old way. When the church colludes with the world, being in danger of losing her distinctive identity, theology should bring prophetic critique to the church.

In this light, theological education should be structured in such a way that it serves to cultivate the self-critical awareness of the church in the light of the Word of God.

Positively, theological education should serve to cultivate the capability of the whole church to expound the Word of God as gospel for the world. It is only when the Word is so expounded that it truly is the Word Incarnate. When the Word of God is expounded merely for the self-definition and self-justification of the church (as in the case of hair-splitting doctrinal debates), it will no longer be the Word of Life, but becomes words of human traditions. In this light, theological education should prepare the church to listen to the Word of God while listening at the same time to cries of spiritual desperation from the world, so that the Word is to be expounded as gospel for the world. Therefore, the world—its cultural constructs and spiritual condition—has to be the medium in and through which the Word of God is to be articulated. **Because of that, the world has to be incorporated as a significant part of theological curriculum.**

What is the church? It sounds rather ridiculous to ask such a simple question in this distinctive congregation of church leaders. However, if theological education is to get it right, it has to put this question before it all the time. Integrating perspectives of Moltmann, Küng and Ray Anderson with my Reformed heritage, I would venture to define the church as an **Eschatological Charismatic Covenantal Eucharistic community.**

The church is first and foremost called by Jesus Christ to be an eschatological community. It has the Kingdom of God as the ground of her existence and the *telos* for its realization. The church not only exists in the light of the *eschaton*, it is both the witness to and the manifestation of the reality of the *eschaton* here and now. The coming transformation of the world is being revealed in and through the church as the first fruit of transformed humanity. The church exists for the manifestation of the Kingdom of God, and her ministry is always Kingdom ministry, working for the expansion of the reign of God over the world. As an eschatological community, the church is history-driven. She should have a deep sense of history, being conscious of the fact that it is part of a big historical movement in which the power of darkness will be completely defeated, and God will rule supreme over the created order. The church is both the instrument as well as the manifestation of such historical movement. The church should see herself as a historical movement and not an institution, and she should be making history without ceasing. Any sign of sedentarization is a sign of corruption.

The church is a charismatic community. As promised by Christ, all the power and spiritual gifts have been given freely to the church by Christ through the Holy Spirit for the service of the Kingdom. The church is not only called to serve the Kingdom, she is empowered and facilitated by the Holy Spirit. The reality of spiritual gifts has to be taken seriously both for the life of the church and for the Kingdom. They have to be identified and coordinated in such a way that the church functions in unity as a body. The church as a body is a structure of spiritual gifts, and not to be mistaken as a structure of authority.

The church is a covenantal community. It is a community where the reality of God's covenantal love is being manifested through human relation in the church. The church is a community where self-centeredness is being overcome, where a person's being as being-with-others-and-for-others is to be

experienced, nurtured, exercised, and realized. Covenantal humanity is humanity restored to its original mode.

The church is a eucharistic community. Eucharist is celebration, but a very peculiar kind of celebration. It is a celebration of the sacrificial death of God Himself. Eucharist in Christian worship expresses the deepest gratitude of the Christian community to God as much as a solemn commitment to practice sacrificial death for the world. As a Eucharistic community the church celebrates the giving of her life to the world. She is to commit to live for the redemption of the World.

Theological Education for the Church

Theology ought to test whether the church is proclaiming the gospel of the Kingdom and whether the church herself is part of the historical movement toward the *eschaton* when the reign of God is complete. Theological education with such a theological focus should aim to inculcate in whole church an awareness of the historical movement toward the *eschaton*. There has been too little eschatological awareness in our theological education, and theological reflection on history as the arena where God and His people act to bring forth His Kingdom can hardly be found in theological curriculum. In fact, any such attempt would appear to be an embarrassment to scholarship. Church history has been taught and studied in the most sterile way. Many seminaries teach church history as a series of church events or development of theological ideas. How has the church been interacting with the world or moving history of the world? That should be our interest in history. Ten years ago, our curriculum revision had "Church History" replaced by "The Church in History". The idea was to help our students see how the church has been a transforming force in the world and how the world has been shaping the church. However, old habits die hard, despite our wish, "The Church in History" is still being taught as "Church History". Well, whether we believe it or not, history does have directions. For several centuries now, history is moving toward radical secularization on a global scale. The church needs to understand the driving forces behind such a movement in order to discern how our proclamation of the Word of God may become part of God's action in turning the tide. The eschatological vision of reality brings hope and judgment together. The preaching of the gospel of redemption and transformation inevitably brings prophetic judgment on our cultural trends. Theological education fails if it does not help the church maintain her prophetic edge. The lack of cultural reflection in Biblical studies, in theological discussions, or in pastoral explorations explains why the church is becoming more and more incapable to respond to cultural trends that are detrimental to humanity. Churches even flirt with, toy with and collude with certain cultural fads without knowing the dangerous implications.

The problem with theological schools does not lie in its emphasis on scholarship, rather, it lies in the lack of a sense of history of theological education, and therefore the lack of a sense of purpose or mission of theological scholarship. When liberal humanism is running wild in our culture, resulting in the emptying of all moral substance of laws in our society, what do our biblical scholars have to say about the Biblical concept of law in response to all this? There have been endless studies on historical or exegetical problems that are totally irrelevant to what is happening in our culture. Why? It is due to this lack of eschatological, historical, and prophetic sense in our theological enterprise.

The church is a community with enormous gifts endowed by the Holy Spirit. Have these gifts been taken seriously and put to use for the Kingdom? Or any sheer mentioning of "charisma" would raise fear associated with the charismatic movement? Are we merely paying lip service to the work and power of the Holy Spirit or do we truly believe that the Holy Spirit is always ready to empower us to serve the Kingdom? In what way have our theological schools helped the church understand the nature, allocation, identification, confirmation and coordination of these gifts in the Christian community? How may the exercise of these gifts from the Holy Spirit be subjected under the authority of the church as a whole? How can obedience and freedom work together in the exercise of these gifts? There seems to be little in our theological curricula reflecting on the charismatic dimension of the church. How have our theological curricula helped the church amplify and maximize these gifts for the Kingdom? Theology with an analytic frame of mind would find no language and categories to deal with charismatic experiences, let alone talking about the use of spiritual gifts for the Kingdom. The simplest way of course is to brush it off. It is time for theological educators to take the reality of the church as a charismatic community seriously.

The church is a covenantal community. How can our theological seminaries help educate our pastoral leadership to nurture covenantal awareness and commitment within the church? Ironically, theology, whether it be Biblical studies or dogmatics, has been a lonely business. More often than not, theological reflection or Biblical scholarship bears the mark of individualism symptomatic of our age. That is why our theological endeavors are fragmented. Theological seminaries are rarely a team of unified purpose and mission. Theological curricula are rarely integrated, and there seems to be little interdisciplinary effort. When theological endeavors fail to reflect the covenantal life of the church, theological students can hardly develop a covenant[^] orientation for their future pastorate. This however is vital, for the exercise of covenantal love among the .people of God is the antidote to narcissism prevalent in our culture. If the church as a new humanity fails this, she loses her distinctive character/The training of covenantal communal life has to be part of our theological curriculum. How can it be written into that? Theological educators like us have to think hard on this.

The church is a Eucharistic community. Christians appear to the world to be a strange bunch of people. They celebrate death, yes, the death of their God. It is this strangeness that speaks powerfully to our human condition. This celebration of sacrificial death is in fact a radical distinctive character of the church. In the Eucharist the church affirms herself to be a self-giving community, a sacrificial gift to the world. The church fails when she is inward looking and overtly concerned about her own welfare, her rights, or her enterprise as a successful institution. How does the church cultivate such Eucharistic outlook among the people of God? The issue here is much deeper than debate about liturgy or the bread and the wine in the Eucharist. It is about life that reflects the self-giving death of our Lord Jesus Christ. In what way has our theological education attempted to inculcate such Eucharistic mode of life among our future pastors? Have not our theological schools put too much effort cultivating professional competence at the expense of this? What sort of curricular arrangements can achieve cultivating a spirit of celebrating the giving up one's self? Has this not in fact become a lost tradition that seminaries need desperately to recover?

Theological Education in the Global Context

Setting the church, theology and theological education within the present global context, what challenge do we see? The global context we find ourselves is a context where market capitalism and its inseparable twin, liberal humanism, have become the dominant force in shaping our culture. They are foundation shaking in that they are uprooting the most basic moral and spiritual values common to humanity. The world is being transformed right before our eyes. In fact, a new form of humanity is emerging.

What does globalization of market capitalism mean? It means that the logic of operation, sets of rules and assumptions for the proper functioning of the market are being implanted everywhere in the world. The hyper-secular liberal humanism in vogue today in fact serves as the ideological tool to clear all religious or moral values for the unfettered operation of the market.

Adopting market capitalism means adopting the following core principles and assumptions:

1. Man is driven by self-interest.
2. Serving the interest of the individual will eventually benefit society as a whole.
3. Competition is more rational than collaboration and cooperation.
4. Human progress is to be measured by economic productivity and increase in market values.

Once these principles and values are globalized, wherever the market is, moral values will become marginalized. Functional rationality becomes the norm of the day, and efficiency becomes the highest virtue. The only concern for economists is how to stimulate wants to create consumptions so as to sustain the so-called economic growth. People are driven by market dynamics to consume, resulting in a consumer culture. As the consumer personality emerges, satisfying one's individual desires takes priority over social values. Within such a cultural framework, economics has become a religion. Its article of faith is "that the entire world is driven by self-interested economic rationality. People do things because these actions offer them greater positive benefits than the cost incurred."² Market fundamentalists like those of the Chicago School of economics would unashamedly exclude non-market values. As George Soros points out, "Market fundamentalists have transformed an axiomatic, value-neutral theory into an ideology, which has influenced political and business behavior

into a powerful and dangerous way...the idea that some values may not be negotiable is not recognized or, more exactly, such values are excluded from the realm of economics."³ The implication, as Soros sees it, is that "our contemporary society seems to be suffering from an acute deficiency of social values... Market values have penetrated into areas of society that were previously governed by non-market considerations...."⁴

Inseparable from the globalization of market capitalism is the globalization of the liberal humanist concept of freedom. Isaiah Berlin's "Two Concepts of Liberty" and John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice* can be considered as the two most powerful essays in shaping the idea of freedom in our culture.

Berlin defines freedom as negative liberty, i.e., freedom from constraints or interference imposed on the individual whether by society or private persons, even for the sake of realizing the common good, which is preconceived by society as a whole. To avoid any possible encroachment of the state or collective ideology, the idea of the common good has to be shunned. Liberty conceived in such way is liberty with no definite moral discrimination; it is a liberty of indifference. Rawls follows Berlin's line of defense, but brings back the Romantic ideal of selfhood with radical autonomy. Freedom is defined as freedom for each and every free agent to exercise his/her rights to define the good for his/herself within the boundary of justice, which also means the categorical defense of such freedom for all. Freedom here can no longer be accused as empty, for it is no longer merely "freedom from", it is also "freedom for", it is freedom for realizing the ends defined by the individual exercising his/her autonomy. Nothing is pre-given as the authentic nature of being human except one's autonomy to define the ends for oneself. The self with its autonomous will defines its own essence and the good. The autonomous self is the Alfa and the Omega of all values.

These two trends are not just out there in the world. They are like virus infecting the Body of Christ, subverting what really matters to us, changing the life pattern of Christians, thus reshaping the landscape of religious life. What is more overwhelming, it is radically secularizing our culture and making it a radically narcissistic. All the deconstruction, pluralism, relativism, and pragmatism of our age have something to do with these two trends. Many Christians are confused amidst all these. The church proves inadequate to have an effective pastoral response. Sporadic revivals here and there, or successfulness of a few mega churches to draw people to them, are merely the winning of a few battles in the midst of losing the war.

To confront these two trends, we need to radically review how theology is being done and how theological education is being structured.

With little sense of history, Biblical scholars and theologians are absorbed into their issues that do not really engage the world. The world is too glad to be left alone unchallenged. What theologians should be doing is fighting for the life and mission of the church amidst these foundation-shaking challenges. The mode of training our future theological professors has to be changed. If indeed economics is so fundamental in shaping modern life, why has there been so little theological reflection on economics? In the last decade, how many Ph.D. theses have been written on theology of economics or on the Biblical order of economy? If liberal humanism is so devastating to our traditional moral values and affecting our family life so deeply, why are evangelical theologians not engaging Rawls or Berlin? What about Biblical and theological response to the modern concept of justice or laws or rights? Theologians and Biblical scholars need to break out from the ^comfort zone of their expertise and enter into interdisciplinary search and research, even if it means sacrificing the respect of being an expert in one tiny area of scholarship. What about market place theology in vogue these days? Is it merely theology for equipping lay persons for witnessing Christ in the work place or it means something much more fundamental? What about business ethics? Is it about ways and means of doing things that bring good business in the long run, or is it about the radical Christian way of doing business, come what may?

If theology and Biblical studies is not willing to enter into public discourse, it will become marginalized in our culture. If theological education does not prepare future pastors for such public discourses, they will not be able help their congregations to critically cope with these challenges in their life.

With the onslaught of functional rationality and narcissism, moral commitment is put to the most severe test. If the battle is to be won, not only do Christians need to outthink liberal humanists, they

heed to outlive them (as historian T.R. Glover puts it) with their covenantal Eucharistic mode of life. The training of character and communal life-style has to be given prominent place in theological education. The introduction of spiritual mentorship and pastoral apprenticeship into the curriculum has to be seriously considered. Such a strategic move would have implications to the whole concept of excellence. Here, theological schools have to draw the line between themselves and universities. Perhaps even the whole concept and approach of accreditation may have to be reconsidered.

With these, I appeal to this conference of theological educators to review boldly the content and approach of theological education for the church and for the world.

¹ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/1, trans. G Bromiley, (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1975), 82f.

² Robert Nelson, *Economics as Religion*

³ Cf. George Soros, *The Crisis of Global Capitalism—Open Society Endangered*. London: Little, Brown & Co., 1998, p. 43.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 73.