

Wrapping Up and Moving Forward

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[These are reflections I gave for the concluding session of the ICETE 2009 Consultation, having unfortunately had to arrive late and thus not participate directly in every session, though the speakers all kindly shared their papers with me.]

A. A Survey of the Consultation – By Way of Appreciation

During this Consultation we have thought about:

- The biblical and theological foundations and importance of community and relationships. Hwa Yung and Henri Blocher served us a feast of doctrines: of God the Holy Trinity, of the church, and of humanity. We received helpful insights into both negative and positive roots and aspects of western individualism on the one hand and traditional communitarianism on the other.
- The importance of enacting community in theological schools, with Joseph Shao reminding us of the essentially family nature of Christian community and what that can mean in practice in an institution.
- Oscar Campos urged us to take seriously the importance of equipping students for the kinds of ministry that fosters community.
- And who will forget David Baer's image of the concert, of institutions of theological education making music together in four dream concerts: distributed theological education; the harmony of formal and non-formal modes of training; building centres of excellence and ending the practice of everybody trying to do everything in every place; much greater collaboration between academy and church, with a return to the New Testament concept of pastor-teachers.
- Daniel Bourdagné impressed on us the urgency of theological education genuinely serving the church, and avoiding the isolation and distance that so easily afflicts it.
- Looking more widely, Riad Kassis, insisted that institutions of theological education must contribute to the needs of the wider community around them, and send out women and men according to the model of James Bond (that well-known theologian...), thoroughly briefed, trained, resourced and supported.

Unfortunately, I was not able to attend any of the intersect workshop sessions apart from my own, and so I missed not least the major contribution that Michael Schluter and Duane Elmer made to the

Consultation's reflection on its theme. I heard that they were very positive and well-received, but I'm afraid this wrapping-up has to leave them out.

B. Some Further Comments – By Way of Observation

1. We need to extend the biblical framework of our theological warrant

We need to think on the full biblical canvas, as brother Natee Tanchanpong did in his Bible exposition this morning. That is to say, we need to place our work within the whole span of creation to new creation, not only in the framework of serving the church in history. For the church itself is part of God's great project of total re-creation of all things in Christ.

So when we think about the *community* of the church, it is not just as a prototype of the new *humanity*, but of the whole new *creation* in Christ. According to Paul, in Colossians 1:15-23 and Ephesians 1:9-10, all things have been created by Christ, are sustained by Christ, have been reconciled by the cross of Christ, and will be brought into unity under Christ. This cosmic Christology and ecclesiology drives the biblical story and is the heartbeat of the picture of human and creational unity and harmony that will constitute the new creation, portrayed in Isaiah 65 and Revelation 21-22. The community of the church is meant to be a sign in the present of that future glorious reality.

Theological education then, as a community builder, needs to see its role on that size of canvas. Or to pick up the different metaphor of David Baer, the concert we are part of in the tasks of theological education is the concert of all creation (Rev. 5:13). Let's put our work in its widest biblical context, and lift up our heads with thankfulness and hope.

2. We need to be willing to pay the price for a theological education that genuinely cultivates truly biblical community in its ethos and practice.

We have spoken of the requirement that institutions of theological education need to have a family ethos and be true Christian communities, living in the shared equality of the body of Christ. All I want to say is that this is a fine ideal, but it doesn't happen by somebody standing up at the front and verbalizing the desire – “we're all like a big family here.” It is a demanding and costly work that requires long-term, persistent investment of mind, heart and resources. And it has to be an ethos that permeates from the top and is understood and acted on by all staff members at every level.

I speak from the experience of All Nations Christian College, where I was Principal from 1993 to 2001, having inherited the college from the visionary leadership of David Morris and Meg Foote, carried on through Ray Windsor and David Harley. David Morris in the 1960s envisaged an institution for the training of cross-cultural missionaries that would include not only the essential head knowledge of Bible and theology, but also personal and spiritual character formation, and cross-cultural understanding of the demands of practical, self-sacrificial love, humility and servanthood. And he saw that this would best happen in a residential community in which individuals were almost compelled to learn and grow in such things. Here are just some of the features of ANCC as I knew it at that time.

- *The tutorial system.* The teaching faculty were called tutors. Every tutor had a group of 12 students (with a mixture of nationalities, marrieds and singles). The tutor met with the group three mornings a week for a half-hour devotional time, led by them. Approximately once every three weeks each student had a personal tutorial time with the tutor, to discuss academic work and pastoral matters. Once a month the group would engage in some social activity together.

This meant that the staff/student ratio had to be roughly 1:12 – a hefty financial commitment. It also meant that “being a tutor” was a whole-life commitment, not just class-

room time. This affected the kind of people who would be hired as tutors: they had to demonstrate willingness and experience in that kind of inter-personal and spiritual training, not just academic credentials. They had to share in the life of the community and the lives of their students – often in time-consuming pastoral ways. The strength of tutorial group relationships was a tangible feature, and often lasted for many years afterwards.

- *The physical proximity of residential community.* This meant a lot of “rubbing edges” and cross-cultural learning by simply living with about 30 different nationalities. Perhaps an Asian woman and a Dutch woman might be sharing the same room. Both wanted to show Christian love in their relationship. But for one, love meant never saying anything that would cause the other to lose face. For the other, love meant always saying whatever was truthful and honest as she saw it. So the Asian woman saw the Dutch as rude and offensive “She just says what she thinks!”. The Dutch saw the Asian as devious and dishonest (“She never says what she thinks!”). Learning what love means across cultures didn’t have to wait till “the mission field”.
- *Weekly group case-studies on Mission in Practice* engaged the groups in wrestling with real life issues of cross-cultural life and work, through true stories, the use of role-play, and constant virtual self-immersion in the tough issues of mission. Some students later say that these practical sessions meant much more to them when they went out in service than anything they learned in lectures.
- *Tutors were involved with students* in some form of practical ministry in the locality or in London, or engaged with them in reflection and evaluation of their ministry experience.
- *The importance of open homes.* Tutors were encouraged, where possible, to have students in their own homes often. I learned this in my years in India also, at the Union Biblical Seminary. My wife Liz and I were touched when one Indian student, on the day we left after five years working there, said, “I think I learned as much in Auntie Liz’s kitchen as in Dr Chris’s classroom”. We are always teaching something. Some of that teaching (but by no means all of it) happens in classrooms.
- *The avoidance of status, rank and titles.* As far as possible All Nations operated entirely on first name terms. As Principal, I was still just “Chris” to almost all staff and students, without any sense of loss of authority or respect. Where that was just too culturally difficult for some, we were happy with “Dr Chris”, or equivalent, or “Sister Mary”. But the whole point was to avoid distinctions of rank in the body of Christ, whether between staff and faculty, or between teaching staff and administrative or maintenance staff. The whole staff met weekly (from Principal to house-keeper and cooks) for discussion, business and prayer together.
- *A sense of humour.* As a young tutor at All Nations (I first joined in 1982 before going to India), I was struck with the constant laughter and fun in the place. People of all cultures learned to enjoy each other’s jokes, without a hint of racism. Staff teased each other mercilessly, in good humour. I summed it up like this: “We take the job (of teaching and training) very seriously indeed; but we refuse to take ourselves too seriously at all.” Sadly, when I got to India, I encountered virtually the exact opposite of that, and there was little humour except that which was subversive.

Well, I could go on. But the point I am making is that all this did not blossom overnight, nor was it just a matter of idealistic talk. It was a demanding, but immensely rewarding, ethos that had been cultivated over several generations of students and faculty.

3. We need to preserve the balance of physical and virtual community.

As digital and virtual technology expands its scope and generates enormous possibilities, which can be welcomed, let us not imagine that it can replace the importance of sheer physical proximity in human relationships. There is really no full substitute for face-to-face relating - even if it can be extended virtually by many other means, once that physical link is established and remembered.

Paul's letters were a 'virtual' extension of his physical presence in his churches, but not an adequate substitute for it. He still travelled, visited, called church leaders together for a weepy hug, etc. The best forms of distance learning actually recognize this and build some physical community into their learning programmes – as TAFTEE does in India, and as other examples of the same use of individual “remote study” combined with group meetings do.

In the Langham Partnership International, one of our programmes, Langham Preaching, makes great use of seminars and preachers' clubs. These are intensive physical structures. We are sometimes asked why we don't just put everything on DVDs and send them to the ends of the earth, and save a lot of money and staff time. We would certainly be happy to make more use of such digital resources (and intend to), but only as a supplement to, never a substitute for, the physical, relational, hands-on nature of a gathering of like-minded people intent on learning how to handle the word of God together through modelling, teaching, and actual practice.

4. We need greater family courtesy within the international community of theological education.

I return, at this point, to the topic of an earlier contribution I made at the ICETE Consultation in 2006, the problem of the North-South divide. Sadly, for all the talk about trying to raise standards of theological education in the majority world, there is still a tragic brain drain to the north and west. It is comparable to all the talk about international debt. Some westerners feel proud of what they or their governments are doing to help poorer nations with aid, etc. And yet the simple fact is that when trade and aid are put together, the net flow of wealth is still from the poor to the rich.

Similarly, for all the talk about how much we try to invest in theological education in poorer countries, there is still a grievous loss from those countries of men and women, who are desperately needed there, but who get *invited* to the much more comfortable pastures of jobs in the north. I have a friend, a Langham Scholar in Africa, a highly respected professor, who tells me he has lost count of the number of pressing invitations he has had from the States to take up a lucrative post at this or that seminary there. I thank God for his commitment to stay where he is, a commitment which he said he made at the start of his doctoral studies, and has stayed faithful to ever since.

We talk about the “international community” of theological education. But is this the way for a family to behave? For one part of the family effectively to rob another of its scarce resources? Yet again and again western/northern institutions do it, and offer prestigious posts to non-westerners, on the grounds of building a multi-cultural faculty. Is this something that ICETE ought to protest about? By protest, I have in mind something like Nathan's parable to David.

You remember? A rich man with more sheep than he could count takes the poor man's only lamb to cook a meal for a passing guest. We have rich seminaries in rich countries where they have more PhDs in theology than can find employment, yet they take from poor countries men and women who may be among the very few with PhDs at all, or the only one in some institutions. Now of course, I know that there may be positive reasons in some cases; short term arrangements may be mutually beneficial; and let's face it, sometimes the poor man's lamb finds the rich man's pasture just too tempting and wanders off there of its own accord – even if it ends up on the dinner table.

But still, speaking from the experience of the Langham Scholar programme of grants for doctoral study, we find this scenario deeply disheartening, inasmuch as an investment that was intended to benefit some country and enhance its theological education, has actually only served to deprive it of somebody who, had they not been helped to get a doctorate, would have stayed on

teaching there. And we find the collusion of some western seminaries in this also discouraging. Perhaps we need to “forgive them for they know not what they do”. But if they did know better, would they stop doing it?

We need to work more imaginatively at ways to enable genuine exchange and mutuality of faculty and international resources, in ways that benefit the church and its seminaries in all parts of the world, and enable a flow in both directions, rather than imitating the world in allowing money (and who has it) to dictate the destinies of individuals and institutions.

C. For what kind of community and for what purpose are we training people?

Let me step back a moment to more familiar territory (for me). Christians sometimes ask: “What is the meaning and point of the Old Testament law?” But you can’t answer that unless you first ask, “What was the meaning and point of being Old Testament *Israel*?” (for it was to Israel that God gave the law). And that question leads on to ask what was God’s purpose for the world *through* Old Testament Israel. In other words, we have to understand the function of the law in relation to God’s intention for Israel, and we have to understand God’s intention for Israel in the light of God’s purpose for all humanity and creation itself.

Now, likewise: we have all agreed that theological education must serve the church, and that the church must serve the mission of God in the world. But then, what kind of community is the church (the people of God) supposed to be in order to serve God’s mission in the world? And how should we answer that question from the whole Bible (not just the book of Acts, please)? And as we try to answer that question, what kind of training do we then need to offer to those who are called by God to serve and equip the people of God in their ministry in the world?

What kind of community does God want God’s people to be, then? I did a quick mental walk through the Bible, starting with Abraham (a very good place to start), and came up with ten marks. I don’t claim these are exhaustive, but they occurred to me over a few hours of thinking last night, and I share them with you – asking you in each case to go on to ask the practical question: what kind of theological education and what kind of institution delivering it, will be needed to equip those who can foster and lead *this* kind of community.

1. Communities of blessing

Genesis 12:1-3. God called Israel into existence under the promise to Abraham that through his descendants all nations on earth would be blessed. So a fundamental part of our reason for existence is to be agents of blessing, God’s creational and redemptive blessing, on the earth. Blessing is a very comprehensive word – one of the richest words in Genesis. I have discussed it further in its missional dimensions in *The Mission of God*.¹

How can we stir and inspire the vision of God’s people to be a blessing to the nations? What are we doing to amplify Jeremiah’s challenge to the exiles to “seek the welfare of the city” where God had put them (Jer. 29:7)? How can we restore the balance of Paul’s and Peter’s frequently repeated instruction to believers that they are to be people indefatigably committed to “doing good”, alongside our insistence on justification by faith alone? Churches should be, and be seen to be, communities of blessing – with all the joyful overflow that implies. How can theological education foster that?

¹ See Christopher J.H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, and Nottingham: InterVarsity Press, 2006, ch. 6. In fact, many of the themes in the following sketch are developed fully in that book, and at a more popular level in, *The Mission of God’s People* (Biblical Theology for Life series; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, forthcoming 2010).

2. Communities of faith and obedience

Genesis 15, 17, 22. The Abrahamic model is one of trust in God proved by obedience to God. The climactic words of God at the end of the testing of Abraham (Gen. 22:15-18) are as emphatic in highlighting Abraham's obedience as Genesis 15:6 is in highlighting his faith. Arguably, the later passage is the proof of the former.

Paul's careful and repeated definition of his missionary work, then, to bring about "faith's obedience among all nations" (Rom. 1:5 and 16:26), is Abrahamic, covenantal and missional. Paul would have agreed entirely with James that faith without works is dead. He chose to speak only about what Christ had accomplished through him in bringing the nations *to obedience* (Rom. 15:18), not *to faith* – though of course he would have included both – faith's obedience, as he called it.

So churches must be communities that live by faith in God (not in all the cheap alternatives offered in the glittering idolatry of ambient cultures), and to live in obedience to God – the costly discipleship that comes from missionaries paying attention to the Great Commission Line Three – "teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you".

So what kind of theological education will inculcate faith and obedience, by challenging and stretching and testing both? Something, perhaps, more like the way Jesus trained his disciples in both dimensions.

3. Communities of righteousness and justice

Genesis 18:19. The people of God are called to ethical obedience. This key and programmatic verse binds together election, ethics and mission in a single sentence of divine intentionality. God wants to bless all nations (that's what he promised: end of the verse). For that purpose he chose Abraham (election: beginning of the verse). And his purpose for Abraham is that he should be the founding teaching of a community committed to the way of the Lord in a world going the way of Sodom, to righteousness and justice in a world that was characterized by the "cry for help" that was rising up to heaven from the gates of Sodom (ethics: in the middle of the verse).

So the people of God are called to ethical distinctiveness. This has to be, as Leviticus 18:1-3 points out, distinctiveness from the idolatry of empire and military power (Egypt), and from the idolatry of fertility, sex, and prosperity (Canaan).

What kind of "training in righteousness", or "education for justice" as it could be translated, are our seminaries providing, if those who pass through them are to lead the church to be a community walking in the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice?

4. Communities who know the story of redemption.

Exodus and Passover. The people of God we meet in Exodus are people who knew they had been redeemed and could tell you the story repeatedly. Israel was built on its memory. Or to put it simply, they knew the story they were in, and it was the story of God's redemptive initiative of faithful love, vindicating justice and saving grace. *Then*, they were called to be a people who *lived* redemptively in the world of their own social arrangements. Just observe the pervasive influence of the exodus on Old Testament law. The law was built on the story of God's saving grace.

How can we ensure that theological education inculcates a storied worldview in those who go through it? I sigh so often when I hear theologically educated people talk about the Christian faith only in terms of a list of doctrines, but who never seem to grasp the importance of knowing the story we are part of – where we have come from and where it is all leading, from creation to new creation. Why do we reduce the great biblical narrative to a *system* of "things that must be believed", instead of recognizing it as the story that gives meaning to the whole of life and gives hope to the universe and drives the way we should be living in response?

5. Listening communities

So we get eventually to Sinai. And there Israel “heard the voice of the LORD”. According to Deuteronomy 5, they saw no form, but heard God speak. And they were challenged to pay attention to God’s word. To listen. To hear and obey. To read, study and teach it from generation to generation. The ears were far more important in the faith of Israel than the eyes. The eyes were organs of memory “You have seen what God has done”. “What the Lord did to Egypt before your very eyes”. But the ears were organs of constant attention and obedience. “Hear, O Israel...”

Is this not of prime importance now as ever – the need for the church to be hearing the word of God from those who have been trained themselves to listen to it and to teach it? Is this not the key skill that Paul said church leaders must demonstrate before appointment and practise in their ministry?

And yet our saddest observation in Langham Partnership International is that so often the craft of biblical preaching is very poorly taught in seminaries, or not at all. Again and again we ask pastors who come to our Langham Preaching seminars, “But did you not learn biblical preaching at seminary?” (if they were privileged to go to one). And again and again the answer is: “Oh yes, we had a course of lectures on ten different kinds of preaching, but we never actually learned or practised how to preach from a Bible passage as a whole.”

To be utterly frank, there is something scandalous about this. We have all been warned not to keep adding things to the ICETE agenda (as our dear brother Paul Sanders pleaded), but I do long to see this one taken up. What can we do to draw seminaries back to the prime task of training people who love to preach and teach the Bible, and *know how to do it*?

How will the church be again a listening community, eagerly and lovingly hearing the word of God and going out to put it into practice like the wise man in Jesus’ parable, if we fail to provide men and women like Priscilla and Aquilla, able to instruct the Apolloses of our generation for the task of Christ-centred, biblical teaching and preaching?

6. Communities of worship, prayer and the presence of God.

The tabernacle – temple. The story of redemption in Exodus climaxes not in the giving of the law but in the coming of God to dwell among his people. God was in the midst of them, for good or ill, a fact that Moses recognized when he refused to let God send the people forward without the renewed promise of his presence with them (Ex. 32-34).

So we must pay attention to the centrality of worship and prayer in the life of the church, and therefore in the lives of those who are training to teach and lead in the church. So why, then, in so many seminaries, has attendance at community worship become optional, and thereby devalued? Why so little emphasis on the traditional disciplines of personal and group Bible study and prayer?

Of course, we need also to work at making our worship itself more biblical, by recognizing that while it should include praise and gratitude, biblical worship also contains a great deal of lament, protest, grief and pain - all of it being poured out before God, in recognition of his reality, and in longing for his intervention.

I remember a godly old college principal in Scotland, at a meeting of Bible College Principals in the UK, commenting, “We have to get these students into the presence of God. They have to learn to wrestle and seek God’s face in prayer. Sometimes that takes all night.”

7. Inclusive communities

Old Testament law is rich in many things, but one note is sounded again and again – the command to pay special attention to the needs of the poor and vulnerable – those who were weak

socially, ethnically or economically; classically, “the widow, the orphan and the alien”. This could be illustrated from all over the Torah, and of course is a dominant note in many of the prophets also. The great celebration of the law in Nehemiah 8 included the command to make sure that those who had nothing were included in the partying also.

To this we could add the broad stream of *Old Testament eschatology* that envisages all nations coming to be included within the redemptive covenant blessing of Israel, and indeed inheriting the name and privileges and responsibilities of Israel.² It is this stream that leads ultimately to Paul’s mission theology and practice, as described, for example, in Ephesians 2 and 3, Galatians 3, and Philippians 3 - in which all ethnic privilege and division are overcome through the cross of Christ. According to Paul, this lies at the very heart of the gospel itself – not merely an optional extra implication. There is no reconciliation with God without reconciliation between people. There is “one new humanity” in Christ.

So how then can theological education rise to the challenge of racial, tribal, gender and caste dividedness, discrimination and oppression in our world? How, to be more blunt, can it address the presence of these very same things within the academy, including in evangelical seminaries? There is in some places a most tragic disconnect in this area between the gospel we claim to teach students, and the structures and ethos of the institution in which they live and learn. It is bad enough that these things disfigure the churches, but what hope is there for the churches if they go on being led by men and women whose prejudices have not been challenged, let alone eradicated, in the places they learned their theology?

8. Communities of witness to Jesus Christ

We reach the New Testament at last. And there we find that those of the new community that Christ gathers around himself have the same responsibility of being witnesses that God had first laid on Israel. “You are my witnesses” – the words Jesus speaks to his disciples in Luke 24:48 and Acts 1:8, echo God’s words to Israel in Isaiah 43:10-12.

Witnessing includes having fundamental confidence in the truth of the gospel of Christ, to which one bears witness; having a full knowledge of that gospel from the whole of the Bible; and having confidence in sharing it; and being willing if necessary to suffer the cost of such witness. We remember that the biblical word for “witness” (*martureo*) has given us the reality of “martyrdom”.

Theological education, then, surely needs to keep this role of the community of God’s people at the centre of its sense of identity and purpose.

9. Communities of obedience to Jesus Christ

Disciples. That is what we are and always will be. That is what we are commanded to make more of. That is what we must be training leaders to be and to produce. There is no substitute for steady, humble, obedient, Christlike discipleship. The trouble is that some leaders seem to think that such words apply to their followers but not to them. Theological education should deepen discipleship, not tempt men and women to graduate beyond it.

Personally, I think that one of the greatest needs in the global church, especially in its evangelical manifestations, is for repentance, reformation, and return to the way of Christ. And theological education should be leading the way to that by providing the church with leaders who themselves are marked by humility, servanthood and sacrifice. Sadly, it seems that the things that Jesus successfully resisted in his temptations - popularity, greed, power - are the very temptations that his followers seem so often unable to resist. He resisted them with a mind steeped in the

² This is another theme that I have explored in considerable depth in *The Mission of God*, ch. 14.

Scriptures and discerning the will of God. What else is theological education for than inculcating the mind of Christ in the same way?

10. Communities of hope

Revelation 21-22. The end! Or rather, the new beginning. We return again to my earlier point, that we need to set all our efforts in this field in the light of the new creation. In the Old and New Testaments, God called his people to be communities not only of memory but also of hope. What God has already done provides the foundation for what he will assuredly do. God's people live by God's promise. In a world filled with hopelessness and despair, this has to be one of the most outstanding marks of the church – we are a people who know the story so far and know where the story will end, and are prepared and preparing for it.

So let us lift up our eyes to God's future and train people to lead in that single direction. Theological education should produce men and women who are living models of Paul's great trio of faith, hope and love.

Conclusion

As I read back over what I have just written, from memory of what I said on the last morning of our time in Sopron, I hope I have not come across as unduly negative or critical. I seem to have condemned all seminaries! But that is certainly not my point. I know there are many shining examples of seminaries and teachers who are striving to avoid the dangers I have mentioned, and to accomplish some of the higher goals listed in this survey. May the Lord strengthen and encourage all who do, and enable us to fulfil the Bible's own strategy for building the community of God's redeemed humanity.