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THE CALLING OF THE THEOLOGICAL EDUCATOR IN AFRICA TODAY¹

Tokunboh Adeyemo

The story is told of a dialogue which took place in heaven after the ascension of Jesus Christ. The angel Gabriel asked the Lord, "Now that you are here, who shall continue the propagation of the Gospel on earth?" Jesus replied, "The band of twelve apostles whom I left behind." To which Gabriel responded: "Suppose they fail, what then?" "There is no other hope, but they will not fail," answered Jesus.

The reason Jesus knew that the apostles would not fail is because he had made them something, not just taught them something. "Follow me," he said, "and I will make you . . ." Both then and today Christ's call is always first and foremost to be, and only then also to do. Character comes before career, as Christ equips his followers to complete His mission in the world. In order to accomplish this goal our Lord employed the method we call "discipleship." This word comes from the same root term as the word "apprenticeship," a method of training commonly used in traditional life on this continent. Discipleship is an investment of one's life, time, and resources into others with a view to an on-going reproduction. Jesus Christ was more than just a teacher; he was a disciple-maker par excellence.

I see the calling of theological educators in Africa today as following in the footsteps of Christ: making disciples. We are called not merely to inform our students, nor simply to impart knowledge, but rather to reproduce Christ in them as Christ is reproduced in us. We are called to make disciples, to serve with God as agents of transformation.

"Follow me, learn of me, abide in me." These are some of the aspects of the pedagogical construct used by Jesus Christ to describe his theological educational programme. Knowing that the most effective way of training is by association, he did not call his disciples to the confinement of a classroom, nor to a set of do's and don'ts. He called them to himself. Their lives were infected by his life. Such prerequisites for Christian leadership as self-denial (Luke 9:23), cross-bearing and love of the brethren (John 13:34,35) were taught by personal example. The same applies to such spiritual exercises as fasting, giving, praying and serving. Jesus did not belong to the rank of teachers who say, "Do as we say but not what we do."

Christ's concept of leadership runs contrary to that of the world. "The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and they that

exercise authority upon them are called benefactors. But with you it shall not be so. He that is greatest among you, let him be as the younger, and he that is chief as he that serves. For who is greater? He that sits at meat or he that serves? Is not he that sits at meat? But I am among you as one who serves" (Luke 22:24-27). Jesus lived with his disciples as a servant leader. Do we as theological educators do the same with our disciples, our students? Are we servant leaders?

A famous leader in the United States once said: "Some men see things as they are and ask why? I see things as they could be and ask why not?" Theological educators in Africa today, as they see the inadequacies of the churches about them, should be challenged to look beyond the "why?". Rather we should be looking at what could happen, at what our churches could become if we disciplined godly leadership for them. And we should ask "Why not?" If our programmes of theological education were patterned after that of Jesus Christ--making disciples, then indeed "Why not?"

I want to develop this thought along three lines. Our calling as theological educators in Africa today should be: (1) to train men and women of God, (2) to train practical men and women of God, and (3) to train knowledgeable men and women of God.

1. TRAINING MEN AND WOMEN OF GOD

While I was at teacher training college I was given hints on how to teach better. In addition to several hours of mock teaching at school with our classmates, each student teacher was required to do several weeks of teaching practice in regular elementary and secondary schools. This training was designed to make a student into an effective teacher. Later on I discovered that this was not limited only to teacher training colleges. Similar practical training is of course also a requirement in the fields of medicine, engineering, agriculture, and technology.

But when I was a student in Bible college, nobody taught me how to become a man of God. Many students pass through our seminaries and Bible colleges without knowing how to become men and women of God, and so they do not become such persons. I strongly question the assumption that each student's spiritual life is his or her own business. Such an attitude and practice in our theological schools is unbiblical. For our students to be agents of life transformation, their lives must first be transformed. And it is certainly our calling as theological educators to spare no endeavour to see that this can happen.

I was told recently of a francophone student from Madagascar who went to study theology in Europe. At the end of his training, though he had gained academic knowledge, his former discipline in godliness and true biblical spirituality had evaporated along the way. In tears he tore up his certificate and threw the pieces at his professors, saying, "I came here in the Spirit. You gave me letters, but killed the Spirit. Another friend, currently involved in Christian ministry, shared with me that he

had gone through three years of training in a Bible college without knowing the dynamics of the Christian life. He said, "It was not until I joined this particular para-church organisation that I began to come to grips with such doctrines as forgiveness of sin, filling of the Holy Spirit, the centrality of God's Word and a consistent Christian walk." How sad!

In Christ's memo on discipleship, popularly called the High Priestly Prayer, the first thing he said that he did for his disciples was that he manifested God's name to them. Jesus revealed God's attributes to the disciples by his words and deeds, God's purity and power (John 17:6). He said he also prayed for them, and we know that he did. We are not surprised therefore to see that when the time came for his disciples to sort out their priorities, they chose prayer and ministry of the Word (Acts 6:4). They were trained in Christ's school of godliness.

One way of checking whether our theological institutions are achieving their set objectives is to find out how our graduates are doing. Unless we train them in godliness while they are with us, they may not be godly after they leave us. In his training programme Jesus Christ gave priority to disciples becoming men and women of God. Whether in the wilderness or on the mountain, on land or on sea, he taught his disciples by his own personal example to that end. He gave priority to the Word of his Father and totally depended upon the power of the Holy Spirit. He exemplified a life of prayer, of purity and transparency, and had compassion for the lost and love for humanity. He was identified with sinners, publicans and tax-collectors. He knew how to be in contact with people without being contaminated by them. Where there was hatred Jesus sowed love, where there was darkness he brought light and, when persecuted, he prayed that his torturers might be forgiven and converted. This is godliness at its most sublime level.

After three years of seminary education at the feet of their Master, the disciples were told: "Go and make disciples of all nations, teaching them to observe all things I have commanded you." He did not say, "Go and convert." He moulded them from ordinary fishermen and tax-collectors to become spiritual men of God. These are the men who turned their world upside down.

We need today such godly men and women, lecturers and professors in our seminaries and colleges who will be able to say (to paraphrase the apostle Paul), "You know that from the first day that I came into Africa, after what manner I have been with you at all seasons, serving the Lord with all humility of mind and with many tears and with trials, by the lying in wait of my countrymen; and how I kept back nothing that was profitable unto you, but have shown you and have taught you publicly from house to house, testifying both to the expatriates and also to the nationals repentance towards God and faith towards our Lord Jesus Christ" (Acts 20:18-21). It is my prayer that God in his mercy may make us people of vision who as theological educators will reproduce men and women of God.

2. TRAINING PRACTICAL MEN AND WOMEN OF GOD

Criticizing theological education in Africa, Mr Ntwasa of South Africa has stated: "The most positive contribution our seminaries have been able to make is that they have enabled students to become sufficiently competent to study abroad. But as creative agents of change within the church imbedded in the South African socio-political situation, they have largely failed." Maybe he is exaggerating, but I do believe that there is an important element of truth in what he says. Thinking along the same lines, Nicholas Agyemang of Ghana says, "What the church in Africa needs is the respect of the society in which she is called to serve. To this end there should be a change of emphasis in theological education in Africa. Ministers need increased ability to face everyday issues and situations." What these men are saying echoes the cry of many in the church in Africa today regarding the need for church leaders who are practical-minded.

The apostle Paul in his challenge to the Ephesian elders in the passage I quoted earlier said, "You know that these hands of mine worked to pay my own way and even to supply the needs of those who are with me. And I was a constant example to you in helping the poor, for I remembered the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive'" (Acts 20:33-35). A tentmaker, a fisherman, a carpenter--men who knew the pain and dignity of hard labour. Men in touch with the reality of rugged life. Men who did not give up even when they were tired, exhausted and sick. Practical men with a message that was not only powerful but also true to life. These were the men of New Testament times. They had learnt the secret of contentment with much or little, with a full or a hungry stomach, in plenty or in want. No wonder their messages were always penetrating and effective. To their audience they were real "flesh and blood" people.

How sad that in the curricula of many of our theological schools you can search in vain for courses that address practical issues. We feel that topics like psychology, ethics, marriage and the family, current affairs and the like belong to the secular world. So when members of a congregation get into difficulties, our graduates must send them to secular counselors and psychiatrists--who supply them with ungodly answers for their problems. How can ministers know how to mourn with those who mourn, if they spend all of their time within the confines of their seminaries

engaged only in intellectual theologization. We must learn to be practical and down-to-earth.

Concluding his article on practical ministers, Mr Agyemang says, "For Africa it is better to have persons who can do things with their hands than to have people with heads swollen with theories but with incapable hands." As John Stott constantly reminds the students at the London Institute for Contemporary Christianity, the purpose of the Institute is not to produce tadpoles, creatures with big heads but lean hearts, hands

and legs. Tadpole graduates have heads filled with theories, but their hands and bodies are paralysed when it comes to being practical and showing compassion.

3. TRAINING KNOWLEDGEABLE MEN AND WOMEN OF GOD

I salute the men of Issachar who understood their times and knew what Israel should do (1 Chron 12:32). What a combination! Since independence, Africa has been undergoing some serious tests in nation building. Our leaders have discovered that nation building is not that easy. It takes more than just slogans to build nations. As a result our national leaders are looking everywhere for help in policy-making and programme development. The question is, can the church help?

I recall that on the eve of Ugandan independence in 1962, the then President Milton Obote remarked that had it not been for the revolutionary teaching of the church, Uganda would not have achieved its independence when it did. He went on to plead with the church not to sit back and congratulate itself while the new nation took its own course without guidance. John Stott has reminded us that the church serves as the conscience of the nation and gives to the nation biblical principles from which policies can be made and programmes tailored. We are to give to the nation not directives but direction. One wonders how serious Obote was in making that plea, and how seriously it was taken by the church leaders, given the situation since then.

Our theological programmes should therefore be training grounds for those who can shape national policy and destiny, whether they be pastors, Christian teachers, evangelists, administrators or Christian professionals in general. It should be recognized that the most influential profession in Africa today is still religious, and by this I mean any profession that has any connection with any religion, whether it be Christianity, Islam or African traditional religion. Religious professionals are still the most influential people in our continent. Probably this influence is a carry-over from the traditional African world-view, where reality is perceived, analyzed and interpreted through religious lenses.

I came across a remark in support of this made by an evangelical brother, Dr Marini-Bodho of Zaire. He wrote, "In Africa the chiefs were not in conflict with the magicians, the soothsayers and people who foretold the future of the chiefs and of their society. On the contrary the chiefs liked them and this is still true today. The chiefs, and even our modern leaders, like people who have contact with the gods." How very true. When leaders are looking for help, in Africa they still look to religious people.

That takes me back to Christ's teaching on discipleship. One word that occurs more frequently than others in this chapter is the word "know." It occurs about seven times, describing the curriculum of Christ's theological programme. At the end of the course Christ could say of his disciples, "They know you, because I have made you known to them, and will

continue to make you known" (John 17:26). The expression used in Greek is a powerful one. Literally the word could be translated: "I have exegeted you before them." I have revealed you, interpreted you, made you known to them, by the sharing of my very life with them. He said to Philip, "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). True knowledge begins with knowing God. The first question that I ask myself as a theological educator is, "Do our students who pass through our hands know God as a result of our revealing Him to them through our own lives, or do they only know about God? Do our words and deeds in and out of the classroom manifest Christ? Do our students desire to be like us because we are like Christ?"

Secondly, Christ's disciples knew their world. The Master also exegeted the world before them. He taught them that their world was a godless one which hated the truth, persecuted the righteous and would eventually crucify Him. Jesus taught them that it was a world loved by God, and that one day the world would believe because of Christ's prayer and the testimony of the apostles. It is imperative that our students, like the disciples, not only know God, but also know the world. This will require that our curricula include courses not just in Bible but also in the African world-view, African religions, African history (both ancient and modern), African economics, and African politics.

If we are going to penetrate society and have the influence that our Christian members should have, we need to mobilize all of our available resources at all levels. We need knowledgeable men and women to translate the Bible into local languages, to produce Bible commentaries, Christian novels, scholarly journals, magazines, and all forms of Christian art. We need Christian writers, artists, journalists, musicians, poets and, above all, theologians and solid Bible expositors. As theological educators, we are called to produce "men of Issachar" for our generation in Africa, knowledgeable men and women who understand the times and know what should be done. May the Lord make us adequate to our high calling as theological educators in these days in Africa.

ENDNOTE

¹Delivered as the keynote address at the ACTEA All-Kenya Conference of Theological Educators, held at Limuru, Kenya, in June 1988.