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# TSF BULLETIN

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# EDITORIALS

*(Opinions, options, and olive branches)*

## MAINLINE THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION: A LOSS OF FOCUS

By Clark H. Pinnock, Professor of Theology, McMaster Divinity College.

The unifying center has fallen out of non-evangelical theological education, according to the spring, 1981 issue of *Theological Education*, the semi-annual publication of the Association of Theological Schools (the accrediting agency for most seminaries in North America). With astonishing candour Edward Farley of the Divinity School at Vanderbilt University acknowledges that mainline theological education is trapped in a *cul de sac* because the basis on which it used to rest has been shattered. We would do well to take note of what he says both because it confirms the recent evangelical view of the matter and because it may present new possibilities of dialogue in the future.

It seems, according to Farley, that the traditional seminary curriculum has rested on belief in the infallible authority of the Bible. Therefore it was founded upon scriptural teaching, and went on to explore the development of doctrine and confession, issuing in instruction concerning the preaching of the gospel and pastoral care. There was a common understanding about the content of the Christian message, and all the various segments of the encyclopedia contributed to its explication. The Bible gave the content of revelation. Passages were exegeted often from the original languages. Church history looked into the historical roots of one's denomination. And all of this was related to parish and missionary life. In short, traditional theological education has focus, coherence, and direction.

But it does not have any of these things any more, says Farley. Why not? Simply because its basis in the authority of the Bible has been shattered. The traditional pattern has been undermined by the negative impact made by some aspects of critical historical study. The foundation stone of the whole edifice has crumbled and the whole structure is giving way. There is no sure knowledge of divine revelation to study and apply any more. There is no material for normative systematic theology and no need to defend the faith. The authority formerly thought to underlie the whole enterprise has been relativized and dissolved away. We have no longer an infallible divine teacher in the Scriptures, but only a cacophony of human voices. Therefore the members of the faculties are less like an orchestra playing the same concerto as an orchestra tuning up with each playing his own cadenza at odds with his neighbors.

The result is what Farley calls "the dispersed encyclopedia." Chaos would be another word for it. One does not study theology at seminary, but encounters a multiplicity of subjects and methods which do not hang together. There is no longer a paradigm of unity holding things together, but only increased specialisation and distance. The faculty is made up of scholarly specialists owing allegiance to their independent sciences and guilds. If one is seeking for a unified view of the Christian message and mission, the result is non-sense. There is no rationale or common understanding running through the program. Coherence is lost.

The effect of this dismal state of affairs on various people is predictable. Students experience theological education as a miscellany of courses, unintegrated with each other and often at odds. Each course has to do everything since one cannot de-

pend on any other course building on it. Students naive enough to expect what laity generally still assume, namely, an integrated education into the glorious mysteries of the faith, are sadly disappointed and disillusioned. When they turn into graduates, they find very little to use because seminary was mostly an introduction to a variety of scholarly endeavors. What are they to do? They could try to continue the research interests of their professors, but then that is not what ministry is about. They are forced to close the book on these technical studies and discover some practical help in ministry wherever they may. They quickly learn that the tentativeness and questioning spirit so natural in the seminary goes over like a lead balloon in the congregation, where curiously enough people still expect the pastor to believe the gospel. The new system works a little better for faculty insofar as it allows them to get on with their research and writing, which has its own rewards. But even they get lonely because the distance between their scholarly discipline and the next one is so wide. Some even feel badly that their competence has to be measured as a specialist rather than a theologian. The faculty find themselves as dispersed as the curriculum itself. All and all it is not a pretty picture which *Theological Education* paints.

The only answer that emerges from this quarter is sociological. One can try to get some unity back by choosing to stand in a church matrix and work as if that tradition were true. Bracket the truth question and pretend to be good Presbyterians and Baptists. The difficulty is that this gives the appearance of playing a game, since the principle of secular criticism is still lurking there. Deciding to be a Lutheran is not quite the same as standing on the Word of God, though I suppose it is better than nothing. Can we find our unity in "praxis" (the latest in-word)? Not really, since what that means is as unclear and diverse as theology itself, everything from gay liberation to political insurgency. The crisis really is a deep one. Strong witnesses to Christ can only come out of a system like this by accident or by drawing on their own resources. The future of the churches saddled with theological education like this would not seem to be bright.

Without wishing to be triumphalist in any way, I think the evangelicals have a good solution to this problem. There are still in our great seminaries, like Fuller, Gordon-Conwell, Trinity, Westminster, Dallas and many more, faculties and student bodies of considerable size whose confidence in the authority of the Bible and whose belief in a confession of faith (howbeit often of an exclusive sort) remains strong. The unified paradigm has not been shattered and the rationale has not vanished. While it is true that many issues in soteriology and eschatology which formerly would have been settled are left open, the substantial core of confessional Protestant belief remains strong and vigorous. Not an academic matter only, these schools are also in close agreement about the "praxis" angle, promoting world missions, church growth, and social justice in decent proportion. Evangelical theological education with all its faults and growing pains would seem to represent hope in this situation we have been describing. There are dozens of institutions where students can encounter a unified vision of faith and a focussed concept of the mission of the church.

There must be no pride about this however. "Let any one who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall." There is no guarantee in stone that says an evangelical seminary will always be sure of these things. A good school can go bad, and a bad one can become good. We ought simply to be thankful to God that a sound witness exists in the midst of a great deal of declension. Furthermore, we owe it to our colleagues in the mainline stream to explain to them how it is we are able to keep our confidence in the theological center when they do not see it. If we do not try to do that, they can only suppose that we hold to our faith blindly and have nothing substantial to offer them.

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