

# WHO IS A THEOLOGICAL EDUCATOR?

**Scott Cunningham**

*There is no greater enemy of theological education than poor theological education. Whenever someone who completes his or her theological education is found to be morally unfit, incapable of ministerial skills, deficient in his or her knowledge of biblical truth, or poor in interpersonal skills, there is inevitably a poor reflection on theological education. Development of poor theological education is often due to poor thinking and definitions of theological education. This article helps clarify the parameters of a truly biblical form of theological education which will prepare capable, godly leaders. Dr. Scott Cunningham originally presented this paper at the ECWQA Theological Educators' Conference in Jos, Nigeria, 31 July to 1 August 1997.*

## THEOLOGY AND EDUCATION

Perhaps the most obvious approach to take in answering the question "Who is a theological educator?" is to analyse the term by breaking it down into its constituent parts. We could, therefore, focus on the meaning of the word "educator" and then its qualifying term, "theological". There is some initial value to this approach for at least we can thereby arrive at some definitional boundaries to our discussion.

Webster defines "educate" as "to develop mentally or morally, especially by instruction." This points us in a helpful direction for education is viewed as possibly an integrative process. It can focus on the development of the mental (or intellectual) aspects of the student, and it can focus on the moral (or spiritual). I would add a third possible focus: the practical. Indeed, for education which can be described as "theological" this is not an either/or proposition, as

---

**Dr. Scott Cunningham** is the Administrative Secretary for ACTEA (Accrediting Council for Theological Education in Africa). He is also Lecturer in New Testament Studies at ECWA Theological Seminary, Igbaja (Nigeria). Dr. Cunningham earned his BA from Texas Christian University, Th.M. and Ph.D. from Dallas Theological Seminary.

Webster suggests, rather it is both/and. Theological education must be integrative. It must focus on the development of the student's intellectual, spiritual, and practical formation. That is, we are concerned with knowing, being, and doing: what we want our students to know, what we want our students to be, and what we want our students to do.

The *Manifesto on the Renewal of Evangelical Theological Education* underscores this understanding of theological education under the heading, "Integrated programme": "Our programmes of theological education must combine spiritual and practical with academic objectives in one holistic integrated educational approach." And then we are reminded of what is one of our greatest faults as theological educators, "We are at fault that we so often focus educational requirements narrowly on cognitive attainments, while we hope for student growth in other dimensions, but leave it largely to chance."

It is at this point that we see one of the most significant distinctives of theological education in contrast to other types of education. A teacher of history may only focus on the cognitive aspects of his student's development. His purpose is to inform, and the pedagogical emphasis is on transmitting a body of knowledge and information. The teacher of medicine is justifiably concerned not only with communicating a body of knowledge, but also with the use of that knowledge in the development of practical skills. In this case there is a merger of the theoretical and the practical. But it is the theological educator, above all others, who is concerned not only with the communication of a body of knowledge and the development of the practical skills - those of Christian living and ministerial function - but also of the formation of the student's spirituality and his character. There is a joining of the head, the hands, and the heart, as the proper and necessary concern of our training as theological educators. The result will be leaders of the Church who follow in the steps of David, the shepherd of Israel, who is described as one who led "with integrity of heart" [the character], and "skillfulness of hands" [the practical] (Psa 78.72).

To qualify education as "theological", we mean that it is related to theology, the science and study of God. It would be a misperception, however, to believe that this kind of education is "theological" only because it has the study of God as its content of instruction. Rather, it is theological because its philosophical underpinnings and its goals are theo-centric, in addition to its content.

The theological nature of our task has at least three aspects corresponding to three important features of sound evangelical theology. **First, theological education is biblical.** Its content is based on the primary source of man's knowledge of God, the divinely inspired Word of God. This is not to deny

the positive benefits of drawing from other sources of information such as the social sciences. But, when we do, we recognise that its truth is measured against the unerring Word of God, and all that is truth is God's truth given by His general revelation.

**Second, good theological education is contextual.** It is aware of, sensitive to, and responds to the culture in which it is being conducted. The theological educator must always have one eye on the world of the Scripture and the other on the world of his students; one eye on the text and the other on the context. The unchanging truth of God is clothed in the garments of changing culture, communicating in the contemporary idiom of the educational context.

But it is not simply a matter of communicating timeless truth in the language, concepts, and thought-forms of our context; contextual theological education must also respond to the challenges and questions of contemporary society. Much of our theological education today goes to great lengths to answer questions that neither our students nor our churches nor our societies are asking, and the questions that desperately need response are ignored or are treated superficially, leaving our students, and ultimately the Church, to look for answers in other places, having concluded by our silence that we don't know where to find them.

**Thirdly, good theological education is practical.** I have already made the point that it must be an integrated process incorporating a balance of both the theoretical and the practical. A number of the subjects in the normal theological curriculum are easily made practical, such as preaching, counseling, evangelism and church planting. However, to say that theological education must be practical goes beyond preparation for ministerial duties. It must be related to the spiritual lives of the students. Theology is not something that is only memorised for an examination, or only believed; theology is also lived. Theological education, therefore, must be related to the students' spiritual formation and behaviour as Christians. And this must be done deliberately and consistently, not only in a course on Spiritual Life. In short, good theological education should facilitate sanctification.

We propose, then, that it is the intersection of these two great disciplines, education and theology, which give the theological educator his identity and distinctive task, one that is integrative – touching the intellect, spirit, and skill – and one that is biblical, contextual, and practical.

## A BIBLICAL EXAMPLE OF A THEOLOGICAL EDUCATOR

A further way to answer this question of the identity and characteristics of the theological educator is to do so through an inductive approach, particularly through a study of biblical examples of those we might agree fit into the category. Undoubtedly, it would be a fascinating and profitable study.

Jesus' training of the Twelve would be an obvious starting point. "For everything that I learned from my Father, I have made known to you" (Jn. 15.15). Moses not only is a receiver of the God's revelation in the Law, but he is its expounder (Deut. 1.5) and teacher (Deut. 6.1). As the law has been once revealed, his concern now is that it be transmitted to future generations. The great confession of Judaism, the *Shema* ("Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one"), including the command which Jesus calls the greatest commandment in the Law (Deut. 6.4-5; cf. Mt. 22.37), contains nothing less than a call for the practice of theological education in the family and society:

These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up (Deut 6.6-7).

This concern for the transmission of spiritual truth, in which the learners then become the teachers, was a central feature of the ministry of the apostle Paul. "And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others" (2 Tim. 2.2).

Perhaps not so well known as Jesus, Moses, and Paul, but equally informative, is the example of Ezra.

Ezra's ministry took place during the time of the return of the Jews to Jerusalem from years of exile in Babylon. Nehemiah, his contemporary, was concerned with the reconstruction of the temple and the city walls. Ezra's concern was the restoration of the people and the worship of God. When Ezra returned, he found that the Jews who had preceded him were already opening themselves up to idolatry through intermarriage with the unbelieving neighboring peoples.

Ezra is described in terms that should characterise every theological educator: "For Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach his statutes and ordinances in Israel" (Ezra 7.10). In the Hebrew text Ezra's whole-hearted devotion refers to the three tasks of studying, doing,

and teaching the law. Here is a three-fold progression which the theological educator dare not neglect. One cannot really teach what he himself does not know and understand. Second, the knowledge that one gains from the study of Scripture is applied first in the educator's own life. And only then, as a final step, it is taught to others.

The first task, then, to which Ezra was devoted was studying the law. The Hebrew word used means "to seek" or "to enquire" and is most commonly used in this verbal form in reference to seeking after God Himself, as it does a few verses earlier (6.21). Ezra continued in active research and investigation of the Word of God. In contemporary parlance, Ezra doesn't depend on his old notes from his seminary days to teach his classes. A good teacher is, at the same time, a good student. Ezra is described as a man who was "skillful [RSV]" or "well-versed" [NIV] in the Law of Moses (7.6), and "learned in matters concerning the commands and decrees of the Lord" (7.11). Later Jewish tradition had such high regard for Ezra's learning that it was believed that God revealed to him seventy other books which contain "the spring of understanding, the fountain of wisdom, and the stream of knowledge" (2 Esdras 14.47).

Ezra's knowledge of God's law results first of all in his own obedience to it. He is not like the man James describes who looks at himself in the mirror and goes away forgetting what he looks like, but rather is the one who "looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it . . ." (James 1.25). Ezra's practice of the law is demonstrated in his exemplary character, demonstrated in his godly thankfulness for success (Ezra 7.27f.); his prayerful dependence on God for protection (8.21-23); his grief at the sin of the people (9.3f.); his deep humility and repentance before God (8.5-15); and his brave confrontation against that which was wrong (chapter 10). Ezra can confront the sin of others and exhort the people to "do His will" (10.11) because he himself has obeyed.

Finally, Ezra is one who teaches God's Word to God's people. Later, in the book of Nehemiah, we see Ezra standing before all the people reading the Book of the Law and his Levitical assistants "instructing the people in the Law...making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read" (Neh. 8.7f.). The 'NIV Study Bible' footnote observes that rabbinic tradition understands this to mean that the Levites translated the reading of the Hebrew Scriptures into Aramaic, the people having lived in exile so long they had forgotten Hebrew and adopted the Babylonian language. In any case, the text clearly gives the idea that there was an explanation in order that the people could understand and apply the law to their situation, which they immediately did through the keeping of the previously neglected Feast of Tabernacles.

Who is a theological educator? One like Ezra, who studies the law of God, practices it himself, and then teaches it to others.

### WHO IS A THEOLOGICAL EDUCATOR?

Perhaps we are now ready to give a more systematic definition. I would propose that a theological educator is a servant of God who forms (i) the people of God with the knowledge of God for the purposes of God (ii) and to the glory of God.

#### A Servant of God

The author chooses the terminology of "servant" to describe the theological educator because a number of its connotations in the Scriptures broadly coincide with ideas that we have already seen and which should be emphasised in defining the role of the theological educator.

**(i) The servant is one who owes his allegiance to another.** We have noted that Ezra had set his heart on the law of God. If theological education is theo-centric, then the theological educator must also in his service own no other master but God.

**(ii) Servanthood has to do with obedience.** The theological educator not only obeys the law of God which is the fruit of his own study (like Ezra), but he also carries out his ministry in obedience to the divine command to teach others (Deut. 6.4-9; Mt. 28.20; 2 Tim. 2.2).

**(iii) Many of those we see in the Scriptures as fulfilling the role of the theological educators are called "servants of God", particularly in their prophetic function of speaking the words of God.** This would include Moses (2 Kings 21.8), Joshua (Jos. 24.29) and Paul (Gal. 1.10).

**(iv) The role of the theological educator is not an elitist position.** Just as all the people of God may be called "servants" of God (Isa. 65.9; Rev. 2.20), so may all to some measure fulfill the role of theological educator in their families, communities of faith, and societies.

#### The People of God

Biblically speaking, instruction in the knowledge of God has as its proper focus the entire people of God. The command to Ezra was that he should teach "any who do not know" the laws of God (Ezra 7.25), a command which was fulfilled in his ministry (Neh. 8.1). Deuteronomy, which is really a piece of

theological instruction, was intended to be perpetually read to all the people of Israel (Deut. 1.1; 31.11f.). There is particular concern that the revelation of God should not dead-end with the generation that was its initial recipients; it was to be passed down from generation to generation (Exod. 12.24-26; Deut. 6.7; 11.19; 31.13; Psa. 78.1-8; 145.4). Similarly in the New Testament, all disciples are to be the focus of instruction in the commands of Christ (Mt. 28.20; Acts 2.42) so that the entire body of Christ might mature (Eph. 4.13-16). What Paul receives, he passes on to others (1 Cor. 11.23; 15.3), a pattern which results in the perpetual transmission of the knowledge of God (2 Tim. 2.2).

This emphasis on the entire *laos* of God as the focus of theological education does not invalidate the singling out of a smaller group within the wider body for special attention. Examples of such a concentration in Scripture would include Moses's band of assistant judges (Exod. 18.15-26), Elisha's school of the prophets (2 Kings 6.1-7), and, of course, Jesus's training of the Twelve (Mt. 13.11).

However, such a narrow focus only has meaning within the wider perspective of the theological education of the entire people of God, for its primary purpose is not the establishment of a class of professionals, but the instruction of all the people of God in the knowledge of God (Eph. 4.11-12). We must constantly be on guard against an ivory-tower practice, remembering that theological education must be of the church, through the church, and for the church.

### **The Knowledge of God**

We have already maintained that if the *theos* in "theological" education means anything, it means that the content of our instruction must be the knowledge of God and his relation to the world. For the evangelical theological educator, the self-revelation of God in Scriptures and their witness to Jesus Christ are given a central role. This point need not be belaboured. As we saw in the ministry of Ezra, there is an obvious emphasis on the written Law of God as the witness to the spoken words of God through his prophets and the record of his acts of Israel's redemption. It is the Holy Scriptures which are able to make one "wise for salvation" and are "useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3.15f. – a concise, biblical definition of theological education). A similar stance is taken with respect to the primacy of the gospel, *i.e.*, the teaching of Christ and about Christ (Mt. 28.20; Jn. 14.21-24; Acts 10.36-43; Rom. 1.1-4).

### **The Purposes of God**

The theological educator fulfills the purposes of God in at least two ways. The Word of God as it is taught and applied accomplishes the divine purpose of personal renewal and transformation. Israel was urged to keep the law which Moses taught "so that it might go well with you" (Deut. 4.1,40; cf. 5.33; 6.1-3), a wellness defined in association with blessing in the promised land. Ezra's reading of the law resulted in confession of sin, worship of God, and the enactment of a self-imposed covenant to follow the ways of God (Neh. 8--10).

This linkage between the applied knowledge of God and personal transformation is no less evident in the New Testament. For Paul, the goal of his labour of proclamation, admonishing, and teaching the word of God is that "we may present everyone perfect in Christ" (Col. 1.28). Knowledge of God's will, wisdom, and understanding are to result in a life lived in a manner worthy of the Lord and pleasing him in every way (Col. 1.9-10).

This goal of individual transformation finds a corollary in the corporate growth of the Body of Christ. The maturing of the Body of Christ until it reaches the fullness of the stature of her Lord is a result of the gifted individuals in the Body doing the work of theological education, equipping others to do the work of ministry (Eph. 4.11-16). It is as the Body matures that it will be able to carry out its witness to the world of God's redemptive work in Christ.

### **The Glory of God**

If the penultimate goal of theological education is personal renewal and participation in the purposes of God, then the ultimate purpose is, as it should be for every work of humanity, the glory of God. This doxology is not simply something which we tack onto the end of the process by Christian custom. The glory of God really is the heart of the matter, and is a reflection of the theocentric nature of our task. Peter's doxology at the end of his second epistle explicitly associates the results of theological education and the glory of God: "But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and forever!" (2 Pet 3.18).

And that is the heart-felt cry of every true theological educator, *sol/a gloria deo*.