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THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION AND CHARACTER*

Keith Ferdinando

Theological educators of all people should be aware of the critical importance of character in the preparation of those who will lead the people of God. Of course, character is important in any area of training: laziness, dishonesty, arrogance are likely to cause problems in most walks of life. But in theological programmes an unbalanced emphasis on the academic dimension of training may mean that concern for character is sidelined. The following brief reflections on four biblical passages seek to suggest *why* character should be a central concern – perhaps *the* central concern – for any serious programme of theological education.

1. BECAUSE THIS IS WHAT JESUS INTENDED (MATTHEW 4:18-20)

1 Training fishers of men

The assumption with which this article begins, is that the purpose of theological and biblical training should be the same as that of Jesus – indeed, that if we were looking for a theology of theological education, we should probably start with his approach to the training of the twelve. In very brief terms his understanding of theological education is set out in the call of Simon and Andrew: he called his disciples in order to train them to be fishers of men. ‘Come, follow me ... and I will make you fishers of men.’

Dr. Keith Ferdinando teaches at the Faculte de Theologie Evangelique au Rwanda in Kigali, and is AIM’s Theological Education Consultant. He has an MA in history from Oxford University, and a BA and PhD in theology from London Bible College (now London School of Theology). He has served in Africa since 1985, largely in theological education and for much of the time in the Democratic Republic of Congo (formerly Zaire), as well as a brief period at Scott Theological College in Machakos, Kenya. He is author of *The Triumph of Christ in African Perspective* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1999).

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The phrase is simple but rich in meaning. Jesus trained the twelve – his students – to prepare them to engage in God’s mission in the world, a mission directed to the redemption of lost human beings. Accordingly, all authentically Christian training should have the same nature. Thus, despite the fact that our contexts are very different from that of first century Palestine, what is done in every sort of biblical or theological training programme should bear more than a passing resemblance – in intention, method and content – to what Jesus did as he taught his disciples, and we should make every effort to bring our various programmes into line with God’s purpose as it is seen in the mission of his Son. In short, our aim as theological educators must be missiological, just as that of Jesus was: there is, as Carson says, a ‘straight line from this commission to the Great Commission’ at the end of Matthew’s gospel.¹

Thus, if we are not preparing men and women to take part in God’s mission, then we are missing the point. This does not mean that they are all necessarily going to be evangelists or missionaries in the general sense of those terms, but that they are all going to be involved in one way or another – and as their primary objective – in facilitating the mission of God’s people. The content and method of programmes of theological education should therefore reflect that fundamental concern.

2 Following Jesus

Training fishers of men meant following Jesus: ‘follow me and I will make you fishers of men.’ The notion of *following* a teacher was a distinctive one, for it was not a metaphor that was used at the time of those who studied with a rabbi.² In the contemporary culture disciples attached themselves to teachers, and Jesus is exceptional in calling the disciples he wanted, rather than having them seek him out.³ Moreover, his approach to teaching them is novel. Rabbis used a rather formal teaching approach and, while Jesus did use formal teaching, his followers were also to learn from experience – observing and imitating Jesus, following his itinerant lifestyle,

¹ Carson, D. A., *Matthew*, in F.E. Gaebelein (ed.), *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. VIII (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984).

² Guelich, R. A., *Mark 1:1-8:26*, (Dallas: Word Books, 1989), 50.

³ Kapolyo, J., ‘Matthew’ in T. Adeyemo (ed.), *Africa Bible Commentary* (Nairobi: WordAlive Publishers, 2006), 1117.

joining in his ministry and closely relating to him. It was a 'holistic' experience – a training that embraced every aspect of their lives.⁴

Consequently that implied not just hearing and learning from his words – although they did that too – but following the life he lived, and bearing an increasing resemblance to the sort of person he was. He modelled what his disciples were to become – they were to be like him, and so to follow him in a very literal sense. Paul brought that implication out explicitly: 'Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ' (1 Cor 11:1). Following was not just about walking behind him, nor about learning his teaching in a purely cognitive sense, but about living the sort of life he lived and having the sort of character he had.

3 Character traits of Jesus

Evidently at this point the scope of discipleship becomes huge. Many aspects of following Jesus are indicated in the gospels, but we might notice just three.

First there is a spirit of dependence on God. It is an attitude – a character trait – of humility and trust. It is evident, for example, in Jesus' strong life of prayer, which is seen most clearly in Gethsemane. It comes through again very strongly in words he uses in the gospel of John: "My food," said Jesus, "is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work" (4:34); 'I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does' (5:19). It is vital that training somehow communicate this for the disciple is sent out as Jesus was, with the same characteristics of dependence and humble submission: 'as the Father has sent me, I am sending you' (John 20:21). Education, sadly, can produce the opposite spirit: the higher the qualification, the greater the danger of pride and self-sufficiency. It is therefore vital that we constantly remember the dangers of intellectual pride – 'knowledge puffs up' (1 Cor 8:1) – the besetting sin of the student and, indeed, of his teacher. It would perhaps be no bad thing if the words of Paul were put up over the doors of our institutions: 'For who makes you different from anyone else? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?' (1 Cor 4:7).

Second, there is a spirit of compassion, which is seen in Jesus' attitude towards the crowd (Mat 9:36). Crowds can be seen in different ways, many

⁴ Collinson, S. W., *Making Disciples: The Significance of Jesus' Methods for Today's Church* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2004), 37.

of them negative, but he saw them as 'harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd.' Moreover, this was true of him even though he well understood the fickleness, incomprehension, and even unbelief of those who came to him. There is no truly Christian ministry without compassion towards those whom we serve, but there is the danger of a judgemental and censorious attitude, especially for those relatively well-versed in the Scriptures. This was the pitfall of the Pharisees: 'this mob that knows nothing of the law—there is a curse on them' (Jn 7:49). Unless compassion characterises our students, we risk producing Christian Pharisees.

Third, there is a spirit of service and sacrifice. Jesus' own words indicate something of the nature of his relationship with his disciples: 'I am among you as one who serves' (Lk 22:27). They were not chosen to be his personal servants as could be the case with the rabbis' disciples; rather he served them and, in so doing, gave them an example (Jn 13:13-15).⁵ And the disciples were specifically called to a life defined by the bearing of a cross: 'if anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me' (Mt 18:21-25). There is again a contrast with the rabbinic schools which valued security,⁶ and Jesus therefore warned would-be disciples about the cost of following him (Mt 8:20-22): it was not like being the disciple of some other teacher. And then he modelled the cross-shaped life before his disciples. The constant New Testament testimony is that the gospel advances through the suffering, the human weakness and pain, of its servants. The danger is that theological students may see their education and qualifications precisely as the means to avoid suffering and to be served – the pathway to a desk in the church administrative offices, to respect and veneration, maybe even to relative wealth in whatever form. Theological education – our own institutions – should not be a ladder to ease but a gateway to suffering.

4 Method

Jesus did not simply teach these things verbally but he modelled them, so that disciples could *in practice* follow him. Of course, he did teach – he used words, he told stories, he drew implications – and so should theological educators. But Jesus' students saw him visibly depending on the Father in prayer; they saw him sharing his life with those who came to him, and ministering to them, even when tired and seeking rest; they saw –

⁵ Collinson, *Making Disciples*, 20 ('Students of the rabbis served them as slaves ...'), 36.

⁶ Collinson, *Making Disciples*, 51.

and experienced – him wash their own feet, and they were with him when he was opposed, insulted, mocked, and crucified.

Teachers always model: their lives necessarily speak to their students. The vital thing is to know what they are modelling. By their attitudes and behaviour – towards colleagues, students, work, the church and so on – they and their institutions teach an invisible curriculum; for better or worse they display a character which will powerfully impact their students with perhaps lifelong effect. Whether they will or not, theological educators are shaping character as Jesus did, but perhaps not always in the same ways.

Character is important in training, because it was important to Jesus; and it was important to him because it was vitally and organically linked to the task for which he called his disciples – the mission of God. It is those who reflect something of the character of Jesus who can fish for men. And if we are not training others for that purpose, what are we doing it for? It should be our central concern that our students are followers of Jesus, and so become fishers of men.

2 BECAUSE THIS IS WHAT TRUTH SHOULD PRODUCE (ROMANS 12:1-2)

Character should be a critical concern in theological education because exposure to truth ought to produce transformed lives – renewed character. Exposure to truth is in fact a dangerous thing. When the gospel is preached it brings life to those who respond, but for those who reject it their situation is made even worse for, to rebellion, they have added the refusal of God's grace in Christ. Similarly, for believers opportunity increases responsibility. Jesus indicated this: 'From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded' (Lk 12:47-48). So those who have had great opportunities to learn from God and grow in understanding, are accountable before him for their use of such opportunities, and for what they have become as a result. The same principle is reflected in what James says about teachers: 'Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly' (3:1).

This means that our students, constantly exposed to the word of God, are accountable for what they do with it – or, perhaps more accurately, for what it does with them. They have a responsibility to ensure that it accomplishes in their lives what God intends, which is far more than merely head-knowledge. On the same basis, their teachers have a responsibility to make certain that their students understand that, and to facilitate the process. In short, character is important in theological training, because renewed character – changed persons, and not just increased knowledge –

is what the word of God is intended to produce. If students can sit for years at a time studying the Bible and Christian theology, and there is no consequence in terms of transformation – and indeed, if there may even be change for the worse – then there are serious problems, perhaps with the programme, or the teaching, or the students, or even maybe the teachers themselves.

Paul's words in Romans 12:1-2 should help us to reflect on this issue. We can identify three main steps in the argument.

1 Living sacrifices

Firstly, Christians should offer to God the worship of whole lives: 'to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship'. The gospel leads to a new creation, one that expresses itself in the believers' joyful sacrifice of themselves to their creator and redeemer—which is where their real joy and satisfaction lie, and which constitutes their *truest worship*. It is not a matter of Sunday services or of singing choruses, but a reality that embraces the whole of life in every sphere in which the believer lives.

This is absolutely fundamental, but such 'living sacrifices' emerge in response to what Paul has been saying throughout the preceding chapters. Thus the text is prefaced by the word *therefore*: it is the knowledge that Paul's readers have absorbed from Romans 1-11 that should lead them to offer themselves as sacrifices. Furthermore, their response is based on God's mercies – 'Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy....' These are the mercies that Paul has been expounding throughout those chapters and which are the very content of the gospel. Thus Paul's long exposition of human sin, of justification and sanctification, of assurance and the work of the Spirit, and his discussion of Israel and of the inclusion of Gentile believers among the people of God—all this should bring serious readers of the letter to offer themselves as living sacrifices.

The focal point, then, is that knowledge of God's mercies should so penetrate hearts and attitudes that bodies – whole persons –yield themselves up as sacrifices to him. The Roman Christians – and all later readers – having absorbed the teaching of this letter, are responsible to live out its consequences. The entry of truth into their experience thus changes their reality – it puts them in a new place existentially, so that they are no longer what they were before. It is not just about information – not just that they have acquired another epistle to put in the church library – but the terms under which they live have radically changed, for they are now so much more responsible before God to live in conformity with the truth that

he has revealed. Truth should not just inform minds, but it should lead to the total consecration of lives as God intends it to do. It should impact character – hearts, motives, attitudes, dispositions. And if that is not the case, then it has been seriously misunderstood and misused.

2 Transformed minds

Paul goes on to point to a further, but related, consequence, which begins as a negative: 'And do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world ...' The word *and* is missing in the NIV translation but is a vital link with the preceding thought. The positive worship of God ('to offer your bodies as living sacrifices') entails also a negative, namely non-conformity to the world – an ongoing refusal to go the world's way. The same idea is present throughout the New Testament. In 1 Peter 1:1-2 for example, Peter makes just two primary points which then significantly inform the argument of the whole epistle: believers are people who are chosen by God and who therefore become strangers in the world. Consequently they are to live as strangers (1 Pt 1:17; 2:11), in conscious and ongoing refusal of the world's mind and practice.

But such a refusal of conformity does not just happen, and so Paul goes on: '... but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.' The expression is clearly important: transformation into non-conformity is a question of minds. There is a basic assumption that we are, in a sense, our minds – what we live emerges from what we think. It is the content and disposition of the mind that fashions character and so determines action. Rather like computers, what is put into the mind determines more or less what comes out. So, Paul implies, our minds have been programmed to act in conformity with a fallen world and with the old pre-Christian nature. Human beings 'go with the flow', adopting the worldview and habits of their cultures, which themselves reflect the fallenness of those who have constructed them. They follow 'the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air' (Eph 2:2). If that is to change minds need to be renewed – to be reprogrammed. Old patterns of thought must be replaced by new ones. There needs to be a Christian mind – a character change – such that believers think, and so act, 'christianly'. The problem is that so often this does not happen. 'The Christian mind has succumbed to the secular drift with a degree of weakness and nervelessness unmatched in Christian history'.⁷

⁷ Blamires, H., *Recovering the Christian Mind* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1988), 9.

Paul does not say how the renewing of minds should happen. Essentially of course, like every aspect of the believer's sanctification, the renewal of minds is the work of the Holy Spirit, whose purpose it is so to transform men and women that they are changed into the image of Christ. However, at the same time change will not occur in the absence of intentionality on the Christian's part. Thus, here they are commanded – 'be transformed'; the imperative necessarily indicates that they are not simply to be passive and expect transformation to take place independently of their own intention and involvement. Rather they are to be actively engaged in it by putting into their minds those things which will promote change and produce a Christian worldview, a new set of assumptions, values and ambitions. And that implies the steady assimilation of the word of God. The Scriptures themselves stress their own efficacy in changing people. Jesus taught that the truth sets free (Jn 8:32), releasing men and women from the slavery of ingrained sinful dispositions (Jn 8:34); the truth of God's word sanctifies – 'sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth' (Jn 17:17); and it 'penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart (Heb 4:12). To put it another way, if minds are to reflect God's mind, then God's thinking must be put into them.

Thus, Paul is consolidating what he said in the first verse. There the truth should lead to the worship of a sacrificial commitment to God the redeemer; here it should lead to renewed minds that make such transformation a reality. In both cases truth should not simply *inform*, but *transform*.

3 Testing and approving

But there is a third point. Renewed minds make renewed judgements: they 'test and approve what God's will is ...' Minds exist for thought, and those that are renewed by God's Spirit and word are able to make judgements that reflect his wisdom and righteousness. God does not give his people volumes of detailed commandments to live by: there is no Christian *mishnah*. Rather he creates godly renewed minds with which they may think. The result is an obedience that flows from transformed character, rather than from compliance with a set of rules.

4 Conclusions

All of this brings us back to theological education. Teachers teach and so they address minds, but what happens to those minds? They may simply be pumped up with knowledge, or they may be stirred to worship, non-

conformity, and transformation. Is the consequence of training that our students are able to discern 'what God's will is'? There are some clear implications.

First, theological education must imply the humble seeking of God's grace for both teacher and student. The transformation of minds is fundamentally the Spirit's work, and prayerful dependence on him is vital if that is to take place. Paul's writings are repeatedly characterised by doxology and prayer; they breathe a different spirit from that of the detached and rationalistic investigations of the university. And in the same way staff and students must develop the habit of a reflective, prayerful, doxological approach to study.

Second, there must be an intentional pursuit of character transformation about the teaching of theology. Teachers cannot of course produce or guarantee transformation, but they may hinder it—or facilitate it—by the way in which the task is approached. Programmes, courses and lessons must be prepared with the ultimate goal of mind-renewal. The word of God itself should never be simply an object to be studied in a detached way (as we shall notice later), but rather received as what it is: God's own speech to men and women – to be reflected on, ingested and submitted to.

Third, transformation is about Christian character – about wisdom – and not about Christian rule-keeping. True theological teaching therefore pursues an understanding of God's perfect will, rather than a preoccupation with the quantity of material covered. Paul frequently invites his readers to engage intelligently with what he is writing, and to think it through for themselves. So he writes to the Corinthians, 'I speak to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say' (1 Cor 10:15), and to Timothy 'Reflect on what I am saying, for the Lord will give you insight into all this' (2 Tim 2:7). He wants his teaching to do more than just furnish a mental database. And in theological education this means constantly raising with students the 'so what' question: 'how should we then live?'

Finally, and returning to where we began, teachers do their students a disservice if they are not made aware of the responsibility not to be hearers (and note-takers!) only, but to let the word have its effect in their lives. If that fails to happen, it means that the truth remains sterile, and those who have received it are worse off than if they had never heard, 'from everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded ...'

3 BECAUSE THIS IS WHAT MINISTRY REQUIRES (1 PETER 5:1-14)

Theological educators train students to engage in Christian ministry of one form or another. The qualifications and competences that they may need are no doubt innumerable but, whatever the ministry may be, character is vital. Towards the end of his epistle Peter raises the issue with the elders of the churches he is addressing.

A great concern in the letter is to help believers respond to the persecution they face, and the longest section (3:13-4:19) speaks about the problem of sufferings endured for the sake of Christ. Following that passage a brief paragraph (5:1-4) begins with the word 'therefore' – a word omitted from the NIV but significant nevertheless: '*therefore*, to the elders among you I appeal as a fellow elder.' In it Peter answers this question: in the light of the trials that believers face as believers, what sort of people should their leaders be? The health of the people of God depends in great measure on those who lead them, and that the more so as they face all the problems that attach to living as Christians – as strangers – in the world. And for such leaders to be effective, the issue of character is vital.

1 Appeal

Peter grounds his appeal to the leaders on his own experience of the work to which he calls them. He learned from Christ and, by this stage in his life, has already been engaged in more or less 30 years of Christian leadership. So his words emerge from extensive experience and from the teaching of the Chief Shepherd himself. Thus, he is a fellow elder along with those he writes to, engaged in the same work of caring for God's people. He is not remote from the task, and does not speak theoretically from some ivory tower. What he urges is what he does. Like them his special responsibility is to bear witness to the sufferings of Christ which are at the very heart of the gospel, and which define the nature of Christian discipleship. And, also like them, he does these things looking forward to the reward that must come to those who are faithful.

The appeal, then, is that they should shepherd the flock entrusted to them, and there are important things one might discuss in the exhortation itself. One is the nature of shepherding – the activity that is assumed in the passage, that of watching over the people of God. Peter does not go into this here, although the whole of the letter is in fact an exercise in such shepherding. Another is the fact that it is God's flock, an expression which emphasises both the privilege given to leadership and also their responsibility. There is a parallel thought in Paul's address to the Ephesian

elders when he refers to 'the church of God which he bought with his own blood' (Acts 20:28). But the critical issue here is not so much what the elders do but rather the way in which they do it – the attitudes which they bring to leadership, their character.

2 Attitude

So, Peter does not deal so much here with the pastoral task, nor with the practical skills that are required for it. These are no doubt important: there are skills that must be learned in order to care for God's people and communicate the gospel. However, of at least equal concern to Peter are the attitudes with which leaders carry out their work, and this is indeed the more fundamental issue. It is not so much what the pastor does, but the spirit with which he does it – the character which he brings to the task – that Peter deals with. If the attitude is right somehow or other the work will be done well: character is the central issue. It is a striking contrast to approaches that stress technique and skills rather than motives and hearts. This is not to deny the importance of skills – much damage can be done by those who attempt the task while lacking the necessary skills. But having the right disposition should drive the leader to look for the skills and to use them.

The issues Peter addresses are those of motive, money and power, but they are closely linked and somewhat overlapping. First, the leaders' work is to be done, 'not because you must, but because you are willing.' They are not to be motivated by a somewhat unwilling sense of constraint or obligation, not simply seeing their role as a job that somebody has to do, but labouring out of a sincere desire and a sense of privilege and joy: 'the emphasis exceeds voluntarism to include a joyful embrace of God's will.'⁸ Such an attitude is rooted in a genuine love for the one they serve, as Peter suggests: 'as God wants you to be.' It is striking that Jesus' personal commission to Peter – 'feed my sheep' – followed directly on the question, 'do you love me?' (Jn 21:15-17) Care for the people of God can only be undertaken by those who truly love the one who bought them, and that love is grounded in their relationship with him and in a sense of the wonder of his grace towards them.

It is very obvious when people work grudgingly – because they have to. It may be a particular danger at a time of persecution or difficulty when all is simply burdensome. And there is the danger of keeping going in a job when

⁸ Laniak, T. S., *Shepherds after my own Heart: Pastoral Traditions and Leadership in the Bible* (Downers Grove and Leicester: IVP and Apollos, 2006), 233.

the willingness has gone, out of a sense of duty, or moral coercion, or obligation – even obligation to a supposed call. When that happens, the lack of real willingness becomes evident. Transformed character is the critical element out of which true motivation for Christian service flows – a love of Christ, love of his gospel, love of his people.

Second, the elders must work ‘... not greedy for money, but eager to serve.’ This is a sensitive issue. Many passages teach quite clearly that the labourer is worthy of his hire (Lk 10:7); that those who serve the gospel have the right to a living from it (1 Cor 9:14); that the ox should not be muzzled as it treads the grain (1 Tim 5:18). This is important and too often forgotten in African churches.

However, Peter is saying that the elder does not work *for* the money—it is not the money that motivates him in his labours, and that gets him up and sends him out to work each day. No doubt very many people do work precisely for the wage that comes at the end of the week or the month. But the elders should work because they are eager to serve the Lord Jesus Christ and his people, and the financial recompense they receive is simply what makes concentration on the task possible. The issue here, then, is not whether people are paid or not, but what their motive is for doing the work. They should be paid, but they do not serve *because* they are paid – they serve because they are eager to do so. ‘Although the financial support of the congregations may help the elders fulfill their ministries, Peter insists that it must never become a necessary inducement for them to serve.’⁹

There are different types of soldier. Some fight for their country and their people out of loyalty and patriotism. They may well be paid, but their motive is not the money but the protection of their families, their homes and their nation. Others are mercenaries who fight because they are paid and, when the pay ceases, they stop fighting and go home for they have no interest in the cause itself. Similarly, Jesus contrasts himself, as the good shepherd, with the mercenary – the hired hand – and perhaps Peter has his words partly in mind: ‘The hired hand is not the shepherd who owns the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away’ (John 10:12). The motive of the hired hand is a purely mercenary one: he has no real concern for the sheep, nor for the shepherd, and abandons the task when problems arise. The words are deeply challenging and force us to ask whether we are hired hands ourselves – and whether we are training hired hands. The critical importance of the invisible curriculum again comes into focus here: what do students see in their

⁹Michaels, J. R., *1 Peter* (Dallas: Word Books, 2002), 285.

teachers?—for their teachers' attitudes towards salary and material wellbeing necessarily communicate themselves to those they teach.

Disinterested service comes out of a desire to serve the master. And the principle can be extended further because there may be other ulterior and unworthy motives that keep Christian workers at the job. They should be eager to serve – not eager for the first place, not eager for the prestige, not eager for the title and whatever may go with it. It is not about cash, or any other human advantage. The same theme emerges in Paul's own testimony as he wrote to the Philippians: 'I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want' (Phil 4:12).

Third, they are to serve '... not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock.' The possession of power reveals the leader's real character. Power corrupts, and leaders quickly assimilate to the models they see in the world around them. As Peter wrote he could readily remember how the pursuit of power had more than once divided the apostles themselves during the earthly ministry of Jesus, even at the Last Supper (Mk 9:33-37; 10:35-45; Lk 22:24-28), and it was an issue in the Old Testament too: 'You have ruled them harshly and brutally' (Ezek 34:4). Leadership can be undertaken simply for the sake of power, at which point leaders serve themselves rather than those they lead. And when that happens there are consequences: relationships are disrupted as rivals bid for position – as had happened among the disciples; people are kept down rather than being encouraged to develop, lest they threaten the leader's position; openness and transparency are likely to suffer; and there is schism, the destruction of Christian testimony, the defiling of the gospel. Love grows cold as ambitions grow hot.

But, as Peter points out, truly counter-cultural Christian leadership is not about control, but is rather focused in the example of a godly life. It is not about telling people what they should *do*, but showing them what they should *be* – a life that mirrors Christ himself and incarnates what the words are saying. As we have noted already, the pastor says, like Paul (if not explicitly), 'Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ' (1 Cor 11:1). All of which means a life of sacrifice for the sake of the sheep: they need to see true Christian faith lived out – Christ in the lives of their leaders. Character is again absolutely foundational.

Theological educators need to focus intentionally on these characteristics and on what produces them; their own lives, as leaders and servants within their institutions, must reflect them.

3 Hope

There is one final point to notice in the text. On both sides of his exhortation Peter refers to the reward that is promised to those who faithfully serve: 'the glory to be revealed ... the crown of glory that will never fade away.' It is a central theme of the epistle, which stresses Christian hope from the very beginning, and it is especially powerful in that Peter himself is speaking 'with the intense focus that comes from being close to death.'¹⁰ Hope is what should inspire and stimulate Christian life and ministry – and the motives and ambitions that drive them. Thus earlier Peter urges his readers to set their hope on the grace to be given to them (1:13). Moreover, this is another reminder that the teaching of theology should be transformative in intention. New Testament eschatology is not an academic debate over various millennial positions: it is rather what should motivate and transfigure the present. Shifting the hope of students from the present and visible – from the pursuit of money, power and position, for example – to the eternal and the invisible, changes character, and produces ministry that glorifies God and edifies his people.

4 BECAUSE THIS IS WHAT TEACHING DEMANDS (1 TIMOTHY 4:1-16)

In 1 Timothy 4 Paul addresses Timothy specifically as a teacher of Christian truth. The passage shows that certain character traits are necessary in order to carry out the teaching role faithfully and effectively. Without them Timothy – and any other theological educator – will be crippled in what he tries to do. Moreover, and implicitly, the presence of these traits – or indeed their absence – will communicate to the students. Again, teachers teach as much by what they are as by what they say, and the priorities and attitudes they bring to their teaching are visible and also critical to what students learn. 'In Africa, we have many teachers who possess impressive diplomas, but what we need are models that Christians can imitate.'¹¹

1 Submission

The text raises, first, a fundamental issue of spiritual and theological commitment. Paul responds to a teaching that was producing a form of asceticism: 'They forbid people to marry and order them to abstain from certain foods.' It emerged out of the Greek worldview in which the material

¹⁰ Laniak, *Shepherds after my own Heart*, 234.

¹¹ Andria, S., '1 Timothy' in *Africa Bible Commentary*, 1476.

world was viewed negatively. Such beliefs could have one of two consequences: they might lead to asceticism, as here, or to debauchery. Whichever it was, the consequences in terms of ethics were negative. Paul's response is to refute the error by going back to the doctrine of creation, and in so doing he reflects a commitment to revealed truth and an attitude of submission towards it that should be basic for any Christian teacher. In studying and teaching the teacher submits to what God has spoken, humbly aware of the limits of human reason and of its right use. It is the reversal of the sin of Eden, where Adam and Eve determined to decide matters of truth themselves, independently of God's own word.

Accordingly, human speculation and reasoning about God and truth and salvation, are kept within the boundaries of God's word. It does not mean that the teacher does not use his mind: on the contrary, here Paul uses his critical faculties to identify the issue at the heart of the ascetic approach he is challenging, and to respond to it. However, reason is put at the service of revealed truth – it is not allowed to fly free and become autonomous. Revelation therefore sets the boundaries of so-called academic freedom. In particular such submission to God's word is distinct from an attitude that allows one's teaching to be shaped by cultural preoccupations and assumptions, which is what was at issue here. The Christian teacher is first of all a serious student of the word of God, to which he is intellectually captive – 'we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ' (2 Cor 10:5).

2 Courage

Paul's response to this issue is also a reminder that teaching will at times require courage. It is easy to speak truth when there is general consensus on where it lies, such that it is uncontested. Affirming the doctrine of creation and the goodness of all that God has made – marriage, food and so on, as in this text – may not be so controversial today as it was in Paul's time. But what he was saying was profoundly counter-cultural in a Greek milieu, and risked provoking serious opposition. He needed courage to speak out.

The character issue, then, is that of having the courage needed to communicate truth – no doubt graciously and without rancour – in situations where it is unwelcome. There are numerous examples of this in church history. Athanasius was five times driven into exile from Alexandria, of which he was the bishop, because of his unwillingness to compromise fundamental truth regarding the person of Christ. At the Diet of Worms Luther refused to give way before the power of church and empire, despite

the very real possibility that he would pay for his stand with his life, as Hus had done only 100 or so years previously at the council of Constance: 'Unless I am convinced by Scripture and plain reason – I do not accept the authority of popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other – my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise. God help me.' And in the African context Byang Kato took on the theological establishment of his day for the sake of the gospel – and to his own cost.¹²

Of course, there is a need for right attitude and for discernment. On the one hand the teacher's concern must be precisely *for truth*: it is not simply to prevail or to get the better of opponents. This is a fundamental issue: whose glory are we concerned for? On the other hand, we must identify the battles we really need to fight, and avoid divisive disputing on issues of lesser importance. There is a thin line here, and the distinction between questions of primary and secondary importance is not always easily made; however, for the sake of the peace of the church and its unity discernment is vital – bringing us back to Paul's challenge in Romans 12. The examples cited above all concerned issues fundamental to the health of the church, on which a principled and courageous stand for truth was essential. We must identify in our own generation where the battle lines have to be drawn, and then we must have the courage to contend for truth. This is how Luther expressed it: 'If I profess with the loudest voice and clearest exposition every portion of the truth of God except that little point which the world and the devil are at that moment attacking, I am not confessing Christ, however boldly I may be professing him. Where the battle rages, there the loyalty of the soldier is proved, and to be steady on all the battlefield besides is mere flight and disgrace if he flinches at that point.'¹³

3 Godliness

Paul makes an interesting contrast in verse 7: 'Have nothing to do with godless myths and old wives' tales; rather, train yourself to be godly.' He

¹² Bowers, P., 'Evangelical Theology in Africa: Byang Kato's Legacy' in *TrinJ* 1 NS (1980), 86.

¹³ Luther, M., *Church Postil* (Minneapolis: Lutheran in All Lands Co, 1903), quoted by D. J. Hall, "The Diversity of Christian Witnessing in the Tension between Subjection to the Word and the Relation to the Context" in P. Manns & H. Meyer (eds.) *Luther's Ecumenical Significance and Interconfessional Consultation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 257.

urges Timothy to avoid idle and fruitless theological speculation, but rather to pursue godliness. Thus, as he encourages him as a teacher, a central element of his teaching ministry must be his relationship with God – prayer, the pursuit of God, the fear of God. While of course the teacher's mind is engaged in what he does, the issues he deals with require more than reason for their comprehension. Real understanding emerges out of a relationship with the God of whom theology should speak, for he is the true source of all knowledge of himself. The Bible is a word from God to us, and not just a word about God.

To put this another way, God cannot be the object of our theological study as if we could somehow put him under the microscope. He is rather the one in whose presence alone true theological study can take place. Theology is primarily about coming into relationship *with him* – not about objectively studying facts *about him*; hence the importance of the teacher's own godliness. In his *Little Exercise for Young Theologians* Thielicke points out the danger for the theologian of increasingly speaking of God in the third rather than the second person, and so moving from a 'personal relationship with God to a merely technical reference'. He goes on, 'a theological thought can breathe only in the atmosphere of dialogue with God.'¹⁴

Thus the teacher does not just communicate facts of theology or Scripture, but seeks to draw students into a knowledge of the God of whom Scripture and, hopefully, theology speaks. Of particular relevance here is Paul's teaching on the role of the Spirit in understanding and communicating truth. Thus, he says, truth is spiritually discerned – it comes through the work of the Spirit (1 Cor 2:12) – and so it is to the extent that the theologian knows the indwelling of the Spirit of God that he can truly understand the word of God. And then communication of truth is only possible through words that the Spirit alone can give (1 Cor 2:13). 'We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us. This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words.'

4 Conviction

The teaching role is to be carried out with authority and conviction because what is communicated is God's own word: 'command and teach

¹⁴ Thielicke, H., *A Little Exercise for Young Theologians* (Carlisle; Paternoster, 1996), 34.

these things' (11). In his cultural context Timothy faced the problem of his youth, which might have led to his being ignored as a teacher, and it seems that he may also have been diffident (2 Tim 1:7; 1 Cor 16:10). Consequently, if he is to speak with conviction, youth and diffidence may mean that the teacher must do that which does not come naturally, to which he is averse, and which may even cause some stress. In such circumstances traits of character need to be developed which defy natural personality and circumstance, and they develop in the presence of God. There are in the text two responses to the problem of youth that are of special significance.

First, it is not the teacher's own natural authority or authoritativeness that is important. The flow of the passage is significant here. The teacher is to be a godly person – one who knows God, learns from him, and submits with humility to his word; thus, he speaks with authority to his hearers because he has been in the presence of God himself. Moses was the meekest man on the face of the earth (Num 12:3), but with authority he brought the word of God to the people of Israel because he had stood before God. It is that knowledge of God that makes all the difference: the conviction and authority with which a Christian teacher or preacher must address men and women, come out of a relationship of humble submission to God and his word. Second, while Timothy's youth and nervousness might seem to weaken the natural force of his teaching, the conviction with which he teaches can be communicated in ways other than words alone. Thus, in juxtaposition to his exhortation to authoritative teaching, Paul urges Timothy to be an example: 'Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, *but set an example ...*' The example of his life would bring solid credibility and authority to his teaching; its conformity to the message would show that Timothy truly held the truths he taught. And, *vice versa*, when lives do not correspond to teaching, that demonstrates a lack of conviction on the teacher's part.

5 Diligence

Finally Paul insistently urges Timothy to give himself to those activities that would advance his ministry, to demonstrate diligence in his work and his attitude towards it—to please God and serve his people by doing it as well as possible: '... devote yourself ... do not neglect ... be diligent ... give yourself wholly ... persevere ...' There is always a danger of neglect and casualness in areas one is familiar with. Teachers sometimes lose their taste and enthusiasm for the work, and simply go through the routine until they can finally retire. They may teach the same courses year after year,

but at times they fall into the trap of monotonous repetition with little attempt at revision or improvement. In consequence a staleness and stagnation creeps into the teaching, which students easily detect.

Paul wants to see Timothy constantly trying to do better. His words summon the teacher to continue to research what he teaches; to improve the way in which he communicates; to branch out into new fields with which he is unfamiliar, and to make the connections that result from that. Thus Paul says, 'give yourself wholly to them', and the result should be that progress is evident to both students and colleagues. The teacher's desire must surely be that his students have a longing for growth in understanding and usefulness which will continue throughout their lives, but that same longing needs to be demonstrated in his own life first. After all, teachers are learners along with their students; they have not reached the destination any more than their students have. They may be further along the road than those they teach, but still wanting to go forward, and if students see that attitude they are far more likely to catch it for themselves.

Paul ends with a double imperative – the teacher is to watch both life and teaching. For both of them teach; both shape lives; both are vital to the teacher and to the student, and there should be no division between them. The truth he speaks is to be the truth he lives – in humble submission to God's word, with courage and authority, godliness and diligence. Character is more important than anything else in theological education, for it is vital to the students' own lives and to the task they are being prepared for. And it is the life and words of the teacher – intimately and harmoniously united – that are to make the difference.

CONCLUSION

There is no doubt far more that could be said on a theme of such importance to theological education – and there are equally many more texts which would richly illuminate the subject further. Nevertheless, each of these four passages helps clarify for us the critical significance that character should have in our practice of theological education. Furthermore, each should provoke us to further reflection, as well as to some serious evaluation of what is taking place in our own lives and in the ministries with which we are associated. May God grant us the wisdom we need to make such valuations central to our programmes.

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