

## *Theological Education Need Not Be Irrelevant\**

**Michael C Griffiths**

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Why is it that so often theological students find their years of theological studies to be a spiritual desert experience? Students arrive eagerly asking for spiritual bread, fish and eggs, and instead so often they are given the stones, snakes and scorpions of desert experience. Why do theological fathers behave so unnaturally and unkindly to their theological sons? If this were confined to university theological courses alone, some of us in evangelical seminaries might congratulate ourselves somewhat smugly on how much better our colleges and courses are. But recently I shared in a BBC Radio Easter talk programme with a Jewish rabbi and an agnostic, who knew all the jargon and wistfully spoke of his time studying in one of our evangelical colleges.

Walter Wink claims that his voice belongs to a chorus of voices raised in the name of God and humanity against a form of scholarship gone to seed. Biblical criticism he says is:

bankrupt solely because it is incapable of achieving what most of its practitioners considered its purpose to be: so to interpret the Scriptures that the past becomes alive and illumines our present with new possibilities for personal and social transformation.<sup>1</sup>

The patron saint of theologians in scripture would seem to be Gamaliel who sits firmly on the fence leaving his hearers to make their own decision as to whether the followers of Jesus are of 'human origin' or 'from God'. Though a master of Israel he fails to make any decision. Contrast him with the apostles, who are willing to be flogged for their convictions, and rejoice at being counted worthy to suffer disgrace for the Name (Acts 5:38-41). Our evangelical forbears who founded the Tyndale Fellowship were not fence-sitters, but men of conviction at a time when to be an evangelical and to be a scholar were thought to be mutually exclusive alternatives. We are the inheritors of their vision—but have we lost our way? Ten years ago Colin Buchanan said in his inaugural lecture as principal of St. John's College, Nottingham:

I detect that the affirmation of the supreme authority of Holy Scripture to declare the will and mind and word of God to his people can still be made, although I also note that some who

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would affirm it might still be willing to accept many propositions about the literary character of the books of the Bible and about their authorship which would have horrified their spiritual forbears.<sup>2</sup>

Despite our desire to influence the university faculties in a more biblical direction, I sometimes wonder if they have not more influence upon us than we have had upon them. Are

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\* A lecture given at the 1989 annual meeting of Tyndale House, Cambridge.

<sup>1</sup> *The Bible in Human Transformation* (Fortress Press 1983) 2. Detached neutrality and alleged objectivity in matters of faith, he argues, is not neutrality at all, but already a decision against responding.

<sup>2</sup> 'The Role and Calling of an Evangelical Theological College in the 1980's', *The Churchman* vol 94 no 1 (1980) 30.

we now in danger of becoming like a certain prominent church leader of whom it has been said 'that he always nails his colours firmly—to the fence'? Of course, there are issues where Holy Spirit enlightened scholarship must remain undecided between alternative readings, and we may sometimes maintain the unity of the faith better by honestly admitting that we cannot decide between two alternative interpretations. But in our effort to appear respectably scholarly, we can sometimes remain agnostic when we ought not, or even appear unbelieving. Robert Runcie has said:

Much of the dissatisfaction that currently exists comes from the belief that present patterns of training are either too academic or at least are too influenced by university models.... The unsatisfactory aspects of the theological college syllabus are largely due to the fact that they are a boiled down version of an academic, university syllabus which is itself inadequate as Church theology.<sup>3</sup>

It is this danger of becoming 'men pleasers' resulting in an uncommitted theology and obsession with minutiae, that gives rise to the heart-cry of students, even in evangelical colleges, for practical relevance and application to contemporary society and church life. Writing from Australia, Professor of Education Brian Hill feels this failure arises from mimicry of university faculties:

Most theological seminaries for status reasons covet comparison with universities... seeking accreditation within the academic community at the cost of innovations they would like to introduce, because literary-academic criteria tend, in universities to out-rank field work and clinical experience.<sup>4</sup>

Walter Wink claims that the historical critical method has reduced the Bible to a dead letter. Our obeisance to technique 'has left the Bible sterile and ourselves empty'. One most powerful sentence of his illuminates my title:

The outcome of biblical studies in the academy is a trained incapacity to deal with the real problems of actual living persons in their daily lives. It pretends detachment when in fact the scholar... himself has a high stake in advancement in that institution by the publication of his researches.<sup>5</sup>

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Indeed it is possible that in bowing the knee to the Baal of academic theology we are in danger of rebuilding what the Protestant Reformation had sought to react against and destroy!

Scholasticism's increasing isolation from the pastoral ministry and preoccupation with the stereotypes of academic scholarship was shattered by the Reformers' emphasis on the pastoral nature of scholarship, on theology as a tool of pastoral edification.<sup>6</sup>

## **Export problems**

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<sup>3</sup> *Theological Education Today*, ACCM Occasional Paper no 25 (1987) 9, 12.

<sup>4</sup> 'How then shall we train?' Unpublished lecture given to the faculty of Union Biblical Seminary, Poona, Jan 1984.

<sup>5</sup> Op cit, 6.

<sup>6</sup> H M Conn, 'Theological Education and the Search for Excellence', *Westminster Theological Journal*, vol 41 no 2 (Spring 1979) 326.

The effect of evangelical scholarship's desire to be thought respectable is not only felt in the arid classrooms of post-Christian Europe, but unfortunately has spread its insidious blight into the Third World as well. The relative weakness and strength of the Japanese and Korean churches seems directly related to the fact that the impact of European unbelief in theology reached Japan fifty years before it was allowed to have much influence in Korea. It is not only that missionary theological educators have carried the virus with them, but that the process of colonization means that Asians, Africans and Latin Americans are forced into the mould of our western theological establishment and if they are to be credible in our terms, then they must first come and study theology in our universities before they are qualified to teach in their own colleges. As Harvie Conn expresses it, 'Third World patterns continue to go to the West for educational circumcision.' Conn then quotes a 1970 consultation of the Indonesian Council of Churches, which denounced this kind of unconscious imperialism as:

a form and system of education inherited from the west which lays too heavy emphasis on historical-theological analyses of a highly academic character, whose aim is to transmit the logical knowledge and tradition as a complete whole... not sufficiently concerned with the concrete problems of the people.<sup>7</sup>

The principal of an African seminary has commented that: 'We continue to train an aristocracy for the leadership of the church which will guarantee the future inertia of the people of God.'<sup>8</sup>

In a survey of theological education in Taiwan, Jonathan Chao describes how one college got all its missionary lecturers from Asbury seminary and sent its Chinese lecturers to the same seminary, while another favoured Westminster or Calvin, and comments:

Such theological loyalty doubtlessly perpetuates conflicting branches of Western theological schools of thought and extends American and European theological battlefields to Taiwan. Is this not theological imperialism? When will our Western colonialist friends grant us our theological freedom and independence?<sup>9</sup>

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The Latin Americans even speak of the danger of an imported curriculum 'made in USA'. It may not always be deliberate, but teachers tend to reproduce overseas the kind of curriculum in which they themselves were taught, without stopping to reflect on the differing needs of the new target group.

Now it is only too easy for us to be critical of our theological education, and I have no wish to set up Aunt Sallies in order to knock them down. Diagnosis of our ills, is always so much easier than treatment that effects a cure. How can we make theological education everywhere more relevant?

### **Who are they to teach?**

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<sup>7</sup> *South East Asia Journal of Theology* vol 13 no 1 (1971) 25.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted by Ian Bunting in an unpublished lecture given at Oak Hill College, London, Dec 1987, 'Appropriate Training'.

<sup>9</sup> *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, vol 9 no 1 (Fall 1972) 9.

Voices have been raised in protest recently at the consultation of the Latin American Theological Fraternity at Conocoto, Ecuador, in 1985 and published as *New Alternatives in Theological Education*.<sup>10</sup>

Donald McGavran in a lecture delivered at Columbia Bible College in 1975 described five levels of church leadership needing theological education as follows:

- 1 'Unpaid leaders heading in'—elders, deacons, Sunday school teachers etc.
- 2 'Unpaid leaders heading out'—a variety of lay evangelists.
- 3 'Unpaid or part-time paid pastors of small congregations' (who benefit most from theological education by extension).
- 4 'Full-time paid pastors of well established congregations.'
- 5 'International leaders' who link Christians worldwide.

Writing from a church growth viewpoint, McGavran then went on to enunciate four principles:

First, class 1, 2 and 3 leaders provide the growing edge of the church whereas static churches usually consist mainly of class 4 and 5 leaders.

Second, leaders from growing segments are usually more effective.

Third, the function of class 3 and 4 leaders is to multiply the class 1 and 2 leaders through equipping them to develop their gifts. Sadly class 4 pastors are often jealous of class 2 and 3 rivals, warning 'We are the leaders! Don't infringe our rights'.

Fourth, Bible colleges and seminaries manned by scholars who know how to multiply churches are more useful in promoting church growth than those manned by scholars who have little or no experience of multiplying churches. We might add one more:

Fifth, the more respected and prestigious a college becomes the less it seems interested in class 1, 2 and 3 leaders. Yet if it is to be effective in building the church, it is folly to think only of training more clerical class 4 and 5 type leaders. As the Latin Americans argue so powerfully, it is healthy when a college is determined to provide training at all five

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<sup>10</sup> Ed Rene Padilla (Oxford 1988). The final chapter is the document which summarizes their findings concerning the patterns brought to them for 'the theological education of a pastoral elite' or 'equipping the clergy to the neglect of the laity' (159). They tell of 'the slavish imitation of other curricula forged in other latitudes' and even observe that 'possibly the only way... Latin America can have a curriculum which speaks to their own situation is to free themselves from economic dependence' (168). Too often theological education exists merely to perpetuate itself or exclusively for the equipping of a clerical elite. They make a plea for theological education of the 'whole people of God'.

levels. In this way it will be in touch with grass roots leadership, and thus develop in its relevance to the man in the street. The kind of theological education which aims to teach only professional full-time ministers is in danger of clerical isolation.

We need new models of theological educators in men and women who somehow achieve 'street credibility' and not just library credibility. I am thinking of people like Francis Foulkes, a Balliol man and considerable scholar, who yet was willing to write simple commentaries for the African Christian Press; or Harvie Conn, a Westminster trained Reformed theologian and bibliophile, who held Bible studies for prostitutes in Seoul, Korea, and evangelized taxi-drivers. He now runs the urban evangelism project of Westminster Theological Seminary. These are what we might call grassroots theological educators. So let us think more about the kind of theological teachers we need, if we are to restore relevance to theological education.

### **Who is to teach them?**

It could be argued that we have made little progress from the time when monks trained up novices within a theological ghetto, and so perpetuated a theological elite, who successfully isolate themselves from the rest of humanity by developing their own 'theology-speak' incomprehensible to the vast majority of people (who today do not know what such things as periphrastic, pericope and stochastic synecdoche might possibly mean!).

The Latin Americans do not doubt the need for what they call 'Scientists of the Faith'. A passage from *New Alternatives in Theological Education* is worth quoting in full:

Theologians are needed... who work in close contact with the marginalised sectors of the population, who themselves know their needs, and who can articulate the Gospel in the socio-cultural context in which the majority live... This willingness to be identified with the poor and humble will save theologians from the pride that so often traps scholars and leaves them feeling as if God were absent. Furthermore, it will produce a theology forged by dialogue with the people (178).

This is a different methodology, for the great danger is that normally theologians only talk to theologians and write for theologians! We must grow theologians among grassroots!

Our colleges teach as though we are producing scholars, whereas only a relatively small percentage of them will ever develop 'library credibility'. But this very procedure makes it harder for them to develop 'street credibility', which they are going to need at the cutting edge of church growth and evangelism. All of us face a tension in selecting new

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faculty members—the requirements of respectable, credible academic training demand that our lecturers have 'library credibility'. In order to teach master's courses and to supervise doctoral research—the more rarified and sophisticated courses—the more acute the tension, and the harder it is to find lecturers who are, both competent academics and at the same time have recent grassroots experience in the churches and mission field. In order to have 'classroom credibility' as trainers of church-workers they need to have spent some years as practitioners in order to gain 'street credibility', but life is often too short for them to have had time both for study and for practical experience. The result may be that theology is taught by

highly intelligent scholars who have spent more of their lives in the library than in the street. They might even have escaped into the library, because they are not very convincing in the street! Listen to Brian Hill again:

When the churches are crying out for church leaders who can marshal the diverse gifts and ministries of their congregations, they are being given schoolmen who relate better to books than to people in the midst of life (58).

Inevitably teachers serve as models to their students of what men of God are like, and what they themselves wish to become.

Seminary teachers tend to reproduce their own kind—the man who revels in the library or disparages his own gifted ministry because he does not, the man whose knowledge of the church and the world comes mainly through the careful phrases of the academic tutor, and who copies that pattern in his own ministry in the future (330).

Ian Bunting argues that some issues can only be studied in the street.

A training which takes place mainly within the seminary or Bible College is not well-placed to give rigorous attention to this unique contemporary challenge within the United Kingdom. Strategies for evangelism... interfaith dialogue is too important to be confined to colleges... these disciplines are to be thrashed out on the streets where all theology has to be re-created (9).

Somehow we must insist that gifted young scholars, with a future as academic theologians, should serve apprenticeships in full-time ministry in a local church: only so can their future classroom teaching have practical relevance for the majority of their students. I advise every young scholar who inquires about a teaching post, not to hang about waiting for a vacancy in his chosen discipline to arise, but to throw himself into the practice of theology in the street, at the bedside, by the grave, in the pew, in the home—as well as in the pulpit—and to gain experience of local church leadership. Such men and women will be able to demonstrate relevance and gain 'classroom credibility', and be able to

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feed their students with bread and not stones. So often specialist lecturers are unable to relate their teaching to that given by their own colleagues. Ian Bunting complains that 'traditional subjects (are) each taught separately with the minimum amount of integration and cross-fertilisation' (10).

Because the teachers fail to integrate their courses, 'The struggling student is often left to build the bridges between each department'.<sup>11</sup>

Colin Buchanan tried to promote inter-disciplinary integration:

One further question with which I am keen that college staff should grapple is how they should function together—in what I call a 'centripetal' way—in their theological thinking and exploring, provoking, stimulating and enriching one another. The larger the staff, the

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<sup>11</sup> Peter Savage, 'Four crises in third world theological education', *EMQ* (Fall 1972) 30.

more specialisms which can be accommodated and brought to bear upon the whole: but equally the harder the task in holding a theological fellowship together (32).

### **Where are they to teach?**

Residential training has a long history going back long before the Reformation. Even fifty years ago a high proportion of theological students came straight from school or university, and were young and unmarried. The problem of these monastic places is that withdrawal from the world did not really prepare people. It has been described by James Hopewell as a 'three year vacation, so to speak, from the life he would live before and after':

In the usual setting, the symbiotic environment of the candidate is not the world, but rather an artificial theological community. In this usual setting, the world is the calisthenic, not theology. We pepper the traditional theological course with spot announcements about the world, catchy phrases about involvement, and canned observations of social importance.<sup>12</sup>

Much more attention needs to be given to training men and women without pulling them out of normal life to do it. Many mature and gifted people with families to support are unable to afford three years full-time training. Theological Education by Extension is not some Two-Thirds World gimmick: it actually reaches some outstanding people and trains them for church leadership.

### **What are they to teach?**

It may be an educational oversimplification to say that there must be knowing, doing and being, or more correctly, perhaps, cognitive input, psychomotor skills and affective goals. Classic theological education concentrated upon treating students as animated memory banks and

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stuffing their heads with cognitive input; to be fair, skills in understanding and interpreting might also be tested. Ten years ago Colin Buchanan was able to say:

'Learning' has become a much wider concept in theological education than the stuffing of minds with facts and arguments. We now view ourselves as training and forming men and women in their entire persons for... the ministry they will exercise.

We would all echo this as a worthy goal, but is it unrealistic in its idealism? Even today the skills of using the Bible in prayer, in worship, evangelism and even preaching are not emphasized in comparison with ability to write essays and sit examinations. If practical skills are taught at all, they are ancillary, neglected and not examined! Thus Brian Hill notes:

...the poor integration of theory and practice. Field experiences off-campus are often squeezed into extra-curricular time, evaluated less keenly than academic studies, and treated slightly as practical work unrelated to a theoretical rationale (38).

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<sup>12</sup> 'Mission and Seminary Structure', *International Review of Missions* vol 56 no 222 (April 1967) 158.

Even when missiology or pastoral theology is included, it must be made academically respectable and forced, albeit a bit artificially, into an academic mould, with more interest in past history than in present issues.

The Two-Thirds World has something to teach us about the importance of skills. Savage reports that in the Pentecostal Church of Chile, to graduate as a 'worker' one must have won so many people to Christ; to graduate as a 'pastor' he must have led people to Christ, brought them together and formed a missionary church; and to graduate as 'reverend' he must have planted five or six churches (32). Academic examinations provide good tests of cognitive input, but our graduates may have few skills of the kind regarded as essential in Chile!

When we come to affective goals, it has to be admitted that it is possible to gain a good degree and be a moral disaster. Sometimes we seem almost casual about character. I still possess a document signed by the dean of my college at Cambridge which informs the Lord Bishop of Salisbury that Michael Griffiths is a man of unblemished reputation. Its force is somewhat diminished, because it is a standard form and the dean had never met me! We all try to stress that we are concerned about 'personal formation' and 'character', but in practice it is easier to teach the North and South Galatian theories (even if the late beloved Colin Hemer was right in saying that no one who had ever been there embraced the North Galatian theory!) than it is to teach 'being'. We do try to filter out the obvious rogues, hypocrites and pirates, but few of us have got very far. We are much better at producing scholars than producing saints, for though it is difficult to be very sinful if you live in a

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library, it is far too difficult to teach people to be saints. We may suspect that heaven prefers saints, even saintly scholars, but traditional machinery finds it difficult to deliver saints!

### **What actually shapes our theological education?**

#### ***'Curriculum-orientated' theological education***

More interesting is the whole matter of goals. Very often we have provided, without intending to do so, 'curriculum-orientated' or 'content-orientated' education in which the course determines the product and the course has been inherited from time immemorial. Thus Peter Savage comments:

The classic curriculum found in most seminaries and Bible colleges has followed the patterns that have existed for the last two hundred years, where emphasis has been placed upon the digestion of packets of knowledge rather than bringing each student to spiritual maturity and effective ministry (31).

So it must contain Old Testament and Hebrew, New Testament and Greek, church history, liturgy, theology and ethics. An important rule is that while new courses may be added—hermeneutics, homiletics, counselling, spirituality etc—nothing may ever be subtracted—which is another reason why three-year courses have now virtually replaced two-year courses in Anglican colleges (the Scots never had them that short anyway). The curriculum becomes a kind of sausage machine turning out so many per annum. As Conn writes: 'There is the metaphor of production, in which the curriculum becomes the means of producing from the raw material (the theological student) a finished product (348).'



This product is determined by the traditional curriculum, as we rattle along in our well-worn ruts. The whole system owes so much to the Greek regard for the primacy of the intellect, as well as the linear way of thinking we owe to Gutenberg Man. The moment we try to export this machinery to cultures which think in non-linear ways, it starts to creak. It is always salutary to ask how some particular approach will work if you try to use it in the Two-Thirds World!

***'Goal-orientated' theological education***

Would it be far too radical to sit down and ask what knowledge, skills and character are required in the product and devise the curriculum accordingly? This would make for a 'goal-orientated' theological education, and would be much more logical. Far more of the course would be seen to be relevant.

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Brian Hill insists that the essential educational strategy is to *determine objectives before subject matter*.

I know only too well, as a university teacher, the tyranny of traditional academic priorities and ways of doing things. Most colleagues are very reluctant to look beyond their specialist subject matter and ask what sort of graduate their professional programme as a whole is meant to produce. Christians cannot let this pass, for they are committed to seeing students as whole persons, and careers as ministries. But how successful are theological halls in implementing this strategy? ... Such priorities will only gain support from those who have begun by setting objectives which relate to the kind of church leader we need today, liberated from medieval stereotypes (40).

This view finds clear support from Robert Runcie who asks: 'Will we ever be able to equip people to exercise ordained ministry properly in the Church of England until we have come to a clearer understanding of the sort of ordained ministry the Church of England requires? (6)'

***'Student-orientated' theological education***

Just as bad hospitals are run for the benefit of the doctors or the nursing staff rather than for the patients, so bad theological education has been run for the convenience of the teaching staff. I knew one college in a metropolitan Asian city where the lecturers were only present on campus when they arrived to give lectures, and then they disappeared from the scene. Tape recorders could scarcely have been less human. We must see clearly that teachers have been made for students, and not students for teachers.

The weakness of the production model is that we assume that we require a standard product, when in fact we want to produce scholars (relatively a small proportion of the total), pastors, preachers, administrators and leaders at several levels.

Student-orientated education might better be called 'gift-orientated' education, because it is based on the insight that not all students are alike—for the Creator has made them differently and given them differing natural abilities, now sanctified in differing spiritual gifts. Conn quotes Rowen:

Finally is the metaphor of growth, the curriculum a greenhouse where each plant (the theological *neophytos*) will grow to its full potential under the care of a wise and patient

gardener. The plants in the greenhouse are of different varieties and each is treated according to its needs. No attempt is made to divert the inherent potential within the individual plant by the whims and desires of the gardener.

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It seems an appropriate analogy, for the etymological derivation of the word 'seminary' suggests a 'seed-bed'. As an avid alpine gardener I like this horticultural model: some plants are by nature of erect habit, while others are prostrate; some cushions, others hanging and others climbing. No wise gardener tries to force them all into the same shape or habit but works to develop to the utmost the individual features of each species. So it is argued, instead of assuming that every product of our colleges is supposed to be teacher, pastor and administrator, all three, we shall start to believe what 1 Corinthians 12 says and recognize that some are teachers, some pastors and some may have the gift of administration. We all know from bitter experience that very few individuals are gifted as all three. Many of our theological colleges have been very monotonic until recently. Spurgeon's College, which for generations has churned out a series of quite excellent one-man-band, omnicompetent ministers, has a new scheme to produce also evangelists and church planters. This is an excellent trend.

#### ***'Problem-orientated' theological education***

The enthusiasm for praxis, especially in Latin America, means that some would insist that theology is best studied in a clear relationship to current contemporary issues and problems. It is quite rightly pointed out that what we have in Paul's letters is not an analytical, systematic theology, but a response to immediate problems. Thus Conn says:

Paul is a 'careful and systematic thinker who is accessible only through pastoral letters and records of his sermons' and 'theology has always been done in serious life-situations and not as a mere intellectual enquiry (356)'.

He also quotes a theological teacher asking African students what questions were troubling them. They answered, 'Life after death and witchcraft'. He found that he only had ten pages on these subjects in his library (319). Our schools ought to be focusing upon styles of training which concentrate upon the urgent issues both in church and in society. The whole process of learning to apply the whole counsel of God, and of the whole of scripture—Old and New Testaments—in meaningful concrete, real-life situations is a skill that people will need to exercise again and again in the future. In such a process, they are bound to learn a great deal about hermeneutics, as they learn first to interpret and then apply scripture in real-life situations. Much of our approach can seem bland and generalized, because it is not firmly anchored in contemporary life. We are so busy being very objective about what the Bible meant to its first hearers, that we take our students back 2000 years and leave them there, like marooned members of the Starship Enterprise. Looking at actual contemporary issues will force us to apply scripture, rather than merely analysing it in a vacuum.

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#### **The future**

Many have stressed the importance of training students for tomorrow's church, rather than today's or yesterday's. Buchanan insists:

We really are training for the future. We have to identify the role of the ordained ministry in the future and prepare students for that... there will be an accredited leadership... which will nevertheless have to be non-clericalist and non-authoritarian (34).

He goes on to insist that because the gospel itself forbids us to lord it over the Lord's people,

the staff have a need to model a non-hierarchical style of leadership. We have to earn the right to teach, not assume it from our place in the structures... not pontificating from a height. We have to be open to criticism and advice—not proofed from it by the steel fence of a bogus professionalism. We have to let our humanity show, with no frantic covering up of our weaknesses.

At present we seem to have a self-perpetuating system in which courses and curricula have changed very little. Each generation perpetuates the kind of courses and content that they had when they were students. Concern for being 'up to date' is only a matter of having read the latest books, while the overall structures seem to perpetuate themselves indefinitely without alteration. Perhaps Tyndale House might help to provide us with a new order of theological educationists with time to reflect upon the whole traditional process, and the courage to change it radically in order to make it more relevant.

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