

LINDA CANNELL

What Is the Future of Theological Education?

Addressing the challenges facing seminaries today



During a meeting with seminary presidents and deans some years ago, someone asked the question, “What is a good theological school?” The question quickly became, “What good is a theological school?” Then, more seriously, “What is theological education?”

We began to think of theological education as bigger than a school; for just as education does not equal school, theological education does not equal seminary or theological school. A school is simply *one* way of doing theological education. All institutions are human creations, and their forms and traditions have taken shape as the result of decisions made across the years. Schools and the institutionalized church are no exceptions.

For several decades, faculty, higher education administrators, church leaders, and students have raised concerns and considered possible alternatives for theological schools. Early critiques generally assumed that the schools would continue but be reformed over time. More recently, some suggest that theological schools as we know them may not be necessary at all. Cynical critics ask, what is the point of a seminary education that requires more time than people are willing to give, more money than people are able to pay, more disconnection from family and career than people are willing to tolerate, and that seems to be less than effective in equipping women and men for leadership and ministry?

No one doubts that the continued existence of theological schools is threatened. The economy certainly has an effect; but of greater threat are the emerging questions about why we need theological schools. Leaders can be trained in any number of institutes, most sponsored by multi-campus churches. In some denominations ordination does not require a theological degree. Internationally, seminaries struggle while non-formal

education initiatives attract hundreds of men and women who are no less concerned about becoming equipped for effective ministry in the world.

It is important that we ask, and answer, the question of what would be lost if seminaries ceased to exist. If the *church* can't articulate a compelling reason, then the seminary that serves the church has cause for concern. But the concern is not just for the seminary.

A Call to Character

I was working on a chapter for the book *Children Matter* at a resort center in Nova Scotia. One day the owner asked about the book, and I told him it had to do with children's ministry in churches. As we looked out at the Atlantic Ocean, he said, “If you want to see church on Sunday around here, go to the local Wal-Mart!”

Like seminaries, the institutional church is not immune from critique. Revitalization efforts, leadership conferences promising to help clergy develop a “successful” church, and the flight of people from so many organized churches suggest that all is not well with the institutional church either.

In a sermon entitled “The Church That Nobody Dared to Join” Walter Liefeld, distinguished professor emeritus of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, noted that Acts 5:1-14 presents a picture of congregational development unfamiliar to most North Americans. Ananias and Sapphira lied to the Holy Spirit and were struck dead for their deception, causing great fear in the church and among all those who heard about the event. After their deaths (not exactly an effective church growth strategy) and the performance of many signs and wonders by the apostles, “No

one else dared join them.... Nevertheless, more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number” (vv. 13-14, TNIV).

With regard to the institutional church, the Acts 5 incident is ever a warning. Though humanity persistently, and rightly, creates institutions to stabilize society and to carry on cultures and traditions, the ever-present danger is that the deeper meaning of that which the institution reflects will be lost or obscured. God is less concerned about churches' organizational structures than about the character of the people of God.

Read through all the letters to the churches in the New Testament

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and make a list as you read of all the terms, words, and phrases used to describe the churches. What were the congregations being admonished to do, to be, and to know? Note the few, and generally imprecise, references to organization and structure. Observe the clear and abundant direction given with regard to the character and values. Then consider what it would mean for the church today—for your church—if certain characteristics were taken seriously.

With Christ as the head of the church, what is leadership? What becomes of planning when we acknowledge that it is God's purposes that should govern the church's activities? How do we define vision and purpose when these are fulfilled through the gifting, guidance, and empowerment of the Holy Spirit? How is human authority defined

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when God is the authority? What difference would it make if all Christians understood that we are *expected* to demonstrate to the world a particular sort of character?

Clearly, the church has both an institutional and a more mysterious spiritual character. We want our churches to demonstrate good organizational practice; but, at the same time, programs, leadership styles, planning, and so on, must be consistent with the character God expects—or the church will become no different from any other helping agency in society.

What does all this have to do with theological education?

Theological Education for the Whole People of God

Over the next few decades, seminaries must learn how to collaborate with churches and other agencies in two urgent tasks: the development of leaders, and the education of the whole people of God. Most still expect those who lead the church to be biblically and theologically educated, to have developed some understanding and ability in critical areas of ministry leadership, and to be spiritually attuned. But the currently overcrowded seminary curriculum cannot accomplish all these tasks alone. Seminaries must learn to collaborate; and churches must learn that effective-

ness is possible only to the degree that *all* members are committed to learning, to spiritual discipline, to a lifetime of responsible service.

It has been observed that a word translatable as “leadership” does not appear in the Greek New Testament. This omission may not be significant, except to underscore that Scripture’s emphasis is clearly on leaders and not on some abstract theory of leadership or set of leadership skills. The more important lessons to be gained from the leaders described in Scripture are found in how they came to understand God’s purposes for his people, and how leaders responded *with considerable variation in style* to that under-

How Important Is Seminary? CRAIG GROESCHEL

My opinions about seminary are mixed. Unquestionably, the schools I attended shaped my views. I studied for one year at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, and for three years at Phillips Theological Seminary in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

Although I see value in what students learn in the classroom, I honestly believe that churches should take the lead role in preparing pastors. (This could also help eliminate some financial pressures that keep too many pastors from furthering their education.) I can’t think of a better way to learn than serving under great men and women of God. Although no system is perfect, I prefer throwing gifted people into the ministry waters and helping them learn to swim rather than sending them to three years of classes to learn how to clean the pool, treat the water, and apply sunscreen.

Each pastor has different developmental needs. Some need more time learning the basics of God’s word. Others are strong in the word, but have significant relational or leadership challenges. These are different needs that deserve different educational approaches.

I’m grateful for what God did in my life through seminary, but much of the time (and money) invested doesn’t apply to what I do today. Just as I love seeing innovation in the church, I’d love to see innovation in the way we prepare pastors.

Here’s a short list of what I didn’t learn in seminary.

I never had a class on how to do a wedding or funeral.

We never looked at how to manage a budget, lead a board meeting, recruit volunteers, raise money, hire and fire staff, or design church facilities.

I only took one class on preaching. In my opinion, we should

have been required to take at least three if we were hoping to be a senior pastor.

We didn’t study any thoughts on kids’ ministry, student ministry, missions, or small groups.

Although my time in seminary pre-dated the need, I think all schools today should teach pastors how to leverage technology in the church.

Here are a few of the things I’m thankful for about seminary:

Seminary taught me to read fast and to absorb a lot of information. (Many classes required us to read a book a week.) Speed-reading has made a huge difference in my life and ministry.

Hebrew was helpful to me. (What I know about Greek I picked up on my own.)

Seminary taught me to be a better writer. At Phillips, we rarely took tests. Most classes required a lot of writing. This skill has helped me minister to people in ways I couldn’t otherwise.

The history courses were helpful. I was especially inspired by D.L. Moody, Charles Finney, John Wesley, and George Whitefield. I also was moved by studying medieval Christianity. Knowing how God used people in the past helps give me a broader perspective of what he could do today.

I learned why I believed what I believed. At Phillips, many professors had a very liberal theology and looked down on conservatives. They tested my faith and helped me to become more grounded than I would have been otherwise.

I made some very good friends in school. ■

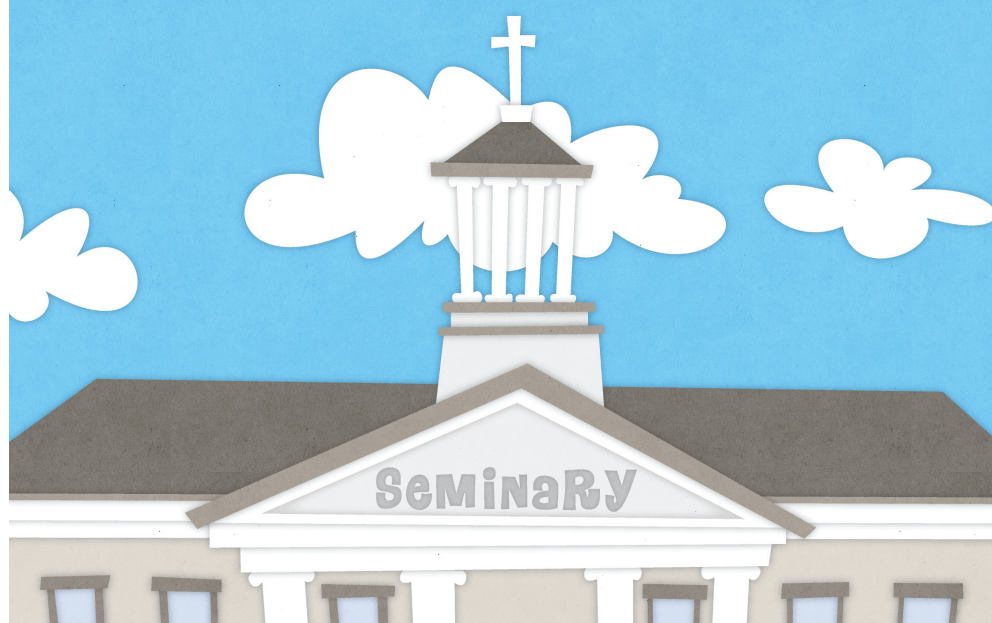
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standing.

Clearly, the primary function of leaders is to make fit God's people for acts of service (Ephesians 4:12). Paul describes a threefold pattern for the development of leaders in his instruction to Timothy: a leader teaches another, who in turn teaches others, so that they can teach others (2 Timothy 2:2). If this pattern of teaching and leadership development is to become normative, if all members are expected to demonstrate the character God demands, if a lifetime of discipleship is not optional, and if a foundational task of leaders is to assist congregations to understand and live out their identity and purpose as the people of God, then perhaps we should think *first* about theological education for the whole people of God, and second about how those who are called to lead the church are educated.

For several years I was part of a group of faculty members from different evangelical seminaries and representing a variety of disciplines that met under the leadership of Richard Mouw, president of Fuller Theological Seminary, to discuss the aims and purposes of theological education. At one of our meetings, pollster George Barna made a presentation using two sets of overhead transparencies. The findings from interviews of American clergy were summarized on one set, and of members of congregations on the other set.

Barna's research found that clergy feel confident in their understanding of the Bible, their knowledge of theology, and their capacity to teach and preach. They feel less confident about their ability to manage a changing organization and to work effectively with people. (Numerous studies over the years have elicited similar findings.) The other set of transparencies summarized congregational members' self-descriptions that they are not growing in their understanding of Scripture or in their spiritual lives and are confused about the nature of *their*



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ministry. I'm sure I wasn't the only person thinking, *what's wrong with this picture?*

For more than forty years I have served in a variety of church staff positions, held different responsibilities in the academy, and consulted with each group. Two years ago, when I accepted the invitation to be the academic dean of North Park Theological Seminary, I did so for three reasons.

1) Most important, unlike many other seminaries, North Park is connected to a supportive denomination, and an expectation exists that the seminary, denominational leaders, and churches should work together to serve the people of God. Thus, the face of North Park is toward the church.

2) The faculty, staff, and students appeared ready to explore alternatives in curriculum and in the ways in which we partner with the church and other organizations.

3) The espousal of individual and corporate spirituality, academic life, social accountability, and the need to encourage multiculturalism and intercultural competency was compatible with my values and experience.

Theological schools can serve the church, but they will serve well only to the extent that all members accept that learning and discipleship are

not optional. A theme that appears frequently in Dallas Willard's writings on spirituality is that the American church has made the serious error of presuming that discipleship, or the expectation of obedient follower-ship, can be separated from belief in Christ as Savior. He also warned in a recent presentation that if the church departs from the most basic descriptions of its character and purpose in Scripture, leaders end up in the undesirable position of "trying to make an organization work that has departed from its function."

So, What Is Theological Education?

I come to my role as academic dean with the conviction that there is a place for the seminary—and for North Park Theological Seminary. Seminary curriculum and structure will certainly change over the next decade as faculty become ever more capable facilitators of adult learning; and as the schools create effective partnerships with other organizations worldwide. The seminary should be a place where women and men called to vocational leadership have the time to explore knowledge, enlarge their understanding, learn to think carefully, and have time to reflect on their

Committing to a Strong Future

BRAD BOYDSTON

personal and spiritual development. Even those who experience the seminary at a distance should be obligated in varieties of cohort structures to take the time to learn, reflect, and evaluate their own lives and experience.

Busyness is ever the thief of learning and spiritual growth. The most effective leaders are those who realize that they, along with the people they lead, are to be lifelong learners. In this regard, the seminary can help. At North Park Theological Seminary we want to say, “When you graduate from North Park, we are with you for your entire career.”

I believe that the church requires a community of scholars to assist the whole people of God to understand their Christian heritage and the word, and to support the spiritual and ministry health of the body of Christ. The church, as the people of God, is God’s mystery. Christians are pilgrims, and learning is best imaged as a shared journey. Lifelong learning is compatible with the Christian mandate of a lifetime of obedience. If all Christians embraced the life of the disciple, with its attendant obligation of a life of learning, the educational enterprise would be transformed.

Theologian Craig Dykstra, among others, believes that seminaries are essential “for the perpetuation, enhancement, and enlargement of the practice of Christian theological education in our society.” Writing in the *Princeton Seminary Bulletin*, he argues that the education of clergy would be “more powerful and empowering were it to take more seriously the hunger and need for a theological education of the church and the public.”

One can hope that the concept of theological education for the whole people of God will be strengthened in coming years. ■

The church still needs seminary-trained leaders! However, we also need a serious church-wide discussion about what that training will look like and how it will be delivered.

It seems to me that Linda Cannell is asking some of the right questions in the accompanying article. She has a good sense for the holistic imperative of Christian leadership formation. Furthermore, she is in the right place because North Park Theological Seminary is uniquely positioned to take her questions and acumen seriously. In my overlapping roles as pastor, church planter, professor, seminary administrator, and missionary, I’ve given some thought to the challenges of Christian leadership formation. It seems that the emerging, holistically engaged seminary needs the following:

Less Responsibility. Local churches must take more responsibility for character and spiritual formation. Seasoned pastors and church leaders need to see the personal development of new leaders as part of their job description. There needs to be local pre-seminary training in biblical studies, theology, character, and practical ministry skills. We should be sending people off to seminary not just because they need these things, but because they have also demonstrated them. Perhaps the church would benefit from an overarching leadership development strategy that includes seminaries, local congregations, conferences, and other mission arms of the church.

More Integration. We don’t need more programs in spiritual formation to supplement the academic tracks. We need academics who can model holistic integration within their disciplines. North Park already does this better than most.

An Expanded Role. As North America embraces more informal and flexible forms of education, seminaries might be better positioned than any other institution of the church to validate the learning that is already occurring through seminars, Internet classes,

iTunes U, and local church-based schools. Instead of seeing diffused education as competition, seminaries can encourage it and then, as a service to the church, create ways to test and measure student development within a holistic framework.

Continued Rigor. As the world becomes more complex, it is important that church leaders become even more sophisticated in their understanding of Bible, theology, ministry, culture—and how they all relate. In other words, this is not the time to lower the educational bar, even while embracing more flexible forms of learning and leadership development.

More Cross-Cultural Focus. Major population shifts and electronic connections around the world are creating a type of cultural fusion the church has never before had to deal with, even in its pristine first century. Add to that mix the rise of post-Christian societies in Canada and the United States, as well as the blurring of the lines between urban, suburban, and rural societies. We live in an era of cultural flux. Leaders can no longer be trained to serve in narrow niches; rather everyone needs to be trained to serve as cross-cultural missionaries. Even those who expect to serve as church leaders in rural America should have some of their development in the likes of Thailand, Mexico, or Spain. Cross-cultural focus must become a part of the holistically formed leader. Local churches can share in this part of the journey, too.

The real challenge, no matter how we frame the issue, is how do we switch gears when so many of our local church perceptions, seminary structures, institutional expectations, and accreditation standards came out of the needs of the twentieth century? ■

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