

GLOBAL THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION AND SOUTHWESTERN SEMINARY

W. Madison Grace II*

The call to make disciples of all nations, which we receive from the Lord Jesus Christ in his Great Commission, is a universal call to all believers (Matt 28:18-20). Between Christ's ascension and his return, the call to the universal Church and the local churches is to go to the uttermost ends of the earth, teaching God's Word and baptizing believers. This task is much more involved than mere personal evangelism. It involves teaching, catechesis, preaching, prayer, communion, and other important matters. Following our Lord is a call that involves the whole human person.

Fulfilling that task is one that does not come naturally. To be sure, we receive gifts from the Holy Spirit, but they work in concert with the call to fulfill the mission of the Great Commission. To accomplish this overarching task, Christians need to be formed, taught, and developed into the image of Christ. This process involves hours of shepherding through teaching God's Word and offering wise counsel to believers. To fulfill this important task the Bible mentions that God calls out individuals for the work of ministry.

But how are these leaders trained? How do we ensure they are equipped to rightly handle the Word of God? How do we know they are passing on what our Lord intended for us to know and confess? These questions, and more, are necessary for reflecting on the role and praxis of theological education, or more simply stated, equipping the called.

Historically, different traditions have provided different roles for training of ministers according to their confessions. No matter the title, or the differences of opinion about ecclesial responsibilities, leaders have needed to be trained and taught since the beginning of the Church. Although methods and models have shifted in two millennia, what has remained

*W. Madison Grace II is provost and vice president for academic administration and dean of the School of Theology at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary.

consistent is the need for theological education, and it will remain a need for the Church until the Lord returns.

So, what of our time? What should theological education look like in the early part of the twenty-first century? Certainly, there is an element that is going to be constant, for the gospel has not changed, nor has our mission in propagating it. But our world has changed. How we think, how we interact, how we engage each other as persons in a global environment—these things have changed and require consistent, dynamic change for the static, unchanging ministerial call from our Lord.

I would like to offer my thoughts in what follows on the present needs for theological education in the third decade of the twenty-first century. I, of course, am approaching this task from my own tradition. As a Baptist and an evangelical I have commitments that lead to certain conclusions, especially about the primacy of Scripture, Baptist identity, and the role of education within a free church context. Some of what I say may correspond with other orthodox traditions, and some will be confessionally guided, but all of my statements are aimed at the need for training ministers in our time.

Specifically, I want to point out what remains timeless for theological education. This includes the gospel, Scripture, and orthodox doctrine. We will also consider what needs to be changed. This would include the global nature of the Church and the churches that are now more connected than ever before, as we engage in cross-cultural discourse. Additionally, ever-increasing technological change has created opportunities for new learning as well as obstacles that hinder true educational formation. Navigating this uncharted pathway will be challenging. Finally, I will look to the need for discipleship of the whole person, wherein our formation goes beyond intellectual and practical knowledge to form a minister holistically.

CONSTANT AND CONSISTENT THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

Change is almost always difficult to accept. It is either thwarted by those who dig into their traditions, or it is so prevalent that change becomes the *only* constant an institution knows. The virtuous mean between two vices finds its balance between what needs to remain constant and what needs to be changed. In theological education those who refuse any type of change will not be able to effectively accomplish the mission God has given for equipping the called for service to the church. However, those who change simply for the sake of change can seek after the differentiated ideal

and lose themselves in the process. Whether it concerns a new theology or mere pragmatism, a holistic approach to change can remove the essence of theological education. Neither pathway is new; both are detrimental. So, what needs to change and what should remain the same? This is the question that must be asked for theological education today.

THE GOSPEL

For those interested in changing trends in theological education it might seem strange to begin with the need for constancy in the gospel. However, this is exactly where one needs to begin if we are to effectively think through theological education. The core of what it means to be a Christian is predicated on the truth of the gospel. Since the beginning of the Church there have been attacks on the gospel. Many tried to teach contrary to the truth. In his epistle to the Galatians Paul reminds us of these incursions:

I am amazed that you are so quickly turning away from him who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—not that there is another gospel, but there are some who are troubling you and want to distort the gospel of Christ (Gal 1:6-7).

Distortions of the gospel lead people away from the truth and freedom they have in Jesus Christ. We need to ensure that the core of our theological education is in the gospel and that every bit of our work relates to that center.

So, what is the gospel? The gospel is not something we get to redefine for our times; it is timeless. It is not something we appropriate for our culture; it is supra-cultural. Simply stated, it is the *euangelion*, the “good news,” of Jesus Christ. Paul defines it well in 1 Corinthians 15:1-8:

Now I want to make clear for you, brothers and sisters, the gospel I preached to you, which you received, on which you have taken your stand and by which you are being saved, if you hold to the message I preached to you—unless you believed in vain. For I passed on to you as most important what I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised

on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the Twelve. Then he appeared to over five hundred brothers and sisters at one time; most of them are still alive, but some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one born at the wrong time, he also appeared to me.

Beginning with this text and then looking to the rest of the Bible, Robert B. Sloan rightly summarizes the biblical gospel: “The two central moments for defining the gospel ... are the death and resurrection of Jesus.”¹ These two events are essential to the Christian message. Following Paul, we must affirm the gospel is that “on which you have taken your stand.” From the earliest time in Christianity the gospel is the place upon which the centeredness of faith rested. To upend the gospel is to upend the Church, its mission, and our entire reason for existing. The gospel is so foundational to Christian belief that to change it is to change how we think about God and his interaction with us in the first place.

Students of church history are quite aware of the continuous work of changing the gospel message. It has happened in many ways and through many methods—inclusive of using Scripture—to the end of denying that Jesus Christ died, was buried, and rose again. From Ebionism to Docetism, Arianism to Apollinarianism, and Nestorianism to Eutychianism, the veracity of the gospel as seen through the person of Christ was challenged. Yet the gospel as delivered by the apostles stood firm. Throughout history such challenges have continued and will continue well past our own day. True faith, hope, and love are only met in the truth of Christ and his gospel.

Theological education that is not firmly grounded on the truthfulness of the good news of the work of Jesus Christ will be relegated to the hermeneutic of suspicion that too often defines at least western culture. The level of doubt that such a theology propagates is “driven and tossed by the wind ... and should not expect to receive anything from the Lord” (Jas 1:6-7). The anchored, unchanging position of the gospel of Jesus Christ is the sure and steady place for theological education to persevere in our time and for the times to come.

¹Robert B. Sloan, “The Gospel” in *A Handbook of Theology*, edited by Daniel L. Akin, David S. Dockery, and Nathan A. Finn (Brentwood, TN: B&H Academic, 2023), 429.

SCRIPTURE

The second unchangeable aspect of theological education is its dependence on Scripture. It seems to go without saying that the Bible should be the central text of any curriculum that purports to prepare preachers for the pastorate. In every major tradition since the beginning of Christianity the Bible has been essential to church life. Yet this tradition too has been attacked throughout the years. A long-lasting and effective work in training church leaders needs to ensure that Scripture keeps its place as the central text of the classroom. This is important because of the content and nature of Scripture.

From the Old Testament to the New Testament, we find the content of the Christian faith explicated. “In the beginning” Genesis presents us with God, creation, humans, and our major problem in sin. Throughout the rest of the biblical text, we see the faithful work of God and the faithless rebellion of his people. Scripture’s historical content establishes the reality of the need for a way forward. The wisdom literature teaches us how to cope in this reality as the prophets point to hope in the Lord. The New Testament provides the message of the hope in the gospel of Jesus Christ and in the edification of the churches through the writings in the New Testament, leaving us all with the hope that will come through Jesus’s return in the future. This content is essential for the Christian faith. When biblical content is lacking, so, too, will be the health of a church and its effectiveness in the world.

The reason for the effectiveness of this biblical content is due to the nature of the Word of God. Theologians use a variety of concepts to describe Scripture’s nature—“inspiration,” “inerrancy,” and “authority,” to name a few.² Understanding the nature of Scripture is essential in making sure the divine author of Scripture is always understood when Scripture is studied, taught, or proclaimed. This divine authorship is attested to in Scripture itself, in places like 2 Timothy 3:16, where Scripture is said to be *theopneustos*, “inspired by God,” or 1 Peter 1:21, which claims that “men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.” These two texts help us see the divine author in the inspiration and incription of the biblical text, as well as the authority of those texts for its readers.

²For example, see James Leo Garrett Jr., *Systematic Theology: Biblical, Historical, and Evangelical, Fourth Edition*, vol. 1 (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2014), chs. 7-12; Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), chaps. 8-10; and David S. Dockery and Malcolm B. Yarnell III, eds. *The Authority and Sufficiency of Scripture*, rev. and exp. (Fort Worth: Seminary Hill Press, 2024).

Because of this nature, we can claim the Bible is the very Word of God.³

However, throughout history the veracity of the nature of Scripture and subsequently its content has been called into question by many of those claiming to study it for what it is. The ebbing away of a doctrine of inspiration as well as of its authority has left only a collection of writings that purports theological claims no different than mythological literature throughout history. If one fails to see the historic and authoritative nature of Scripture as the living and active Word of God, where might one find reason for the belief within? Surely the human mind is not sufficient for sureties of truth? But left only to ourselves, we fall anchorless again into the sea of doubt and dissolution. Theological education of this type does not provide the voice for those ministering to the world, for it has removed the all-sufficient voice altogether.

ORTHODOXY

Southern Baptist education began through a variety of institutions—some still going strong, such as Union University and Mississippi College. However, it was at Furman University in 1856 that J. P. Boyce provided a vision for the type of theological education that would be beneficial for the future in a speech titled *Three Changes in Theological Institutions*.⁴ One of those changes concerned the confessional nature of an institution engaged in theological education. Boyce states the need for “the adoption of a declaration of doctrine to be required of those who assume the various professorships.”⁵ This “declaration of doctrine” is an answer to the challenge of fighting against the incursions of theological heterodoxy.

The two previous anchors of the faith—the gospel and Scripture—are rightly aided by a rule of faith that provides the guardrails of theological orthodoxy. Theological education that is not grounded upon these truths will only lead people to go the way of past heresies. I am afraid that Dietrich Bonhoeffer is correct when he states, “the concept of heresy is lost today because there is no longer a teaching authority.”⁶ In a day that rebels against authority we need to be reminded of the consequences of such.

³See Timothy Ward, *Words of Life: Scripture as the Living and Active Word of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press Academic, 2009).

⁴J. P. Boyce, *Three Changes in Theological Education: An Inaugural Address Delivered before the Board of Trustees the Furman University, the night before the Annual Commencement, July 31, 1856* (Greenville: C. J. Elford's Book and Job Press, 1856).

⁵Boyce, *Three Changes in Theological Education*, 33.

⁶Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Christ the Center*, trans. Edwin H. Robertson (New York: HarperCollins, 1974), 75.

Guardrails protect travelers, and theological guardrails protect Christians. Theological education must do its best to ensure that the proper authority is employed to protect from error. This can seem cold and heartless, but, as Bonhoeffer further contends, it is an application of love.

Only when man does not withhold the truth from his brother, does he deal with him in a brotherly way. If I do not tell him the truth, then I treat him like a heathen. When I speak the truth to one who is of a different opinion from mine, then I offer him the love I owe him.⁷

It is indeed loving to ensure that what is taught to our current and future leaders in our churches is that which has been regarded as the correct interpretation of Scripture and not contrary to it.

At Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, we follow this plan, and we look to the confessional authority of the *Baptist Faith and Message*. This is the statement of faith that is approved by Southern Baptists and needs to regulate our institution. We do not claim it is without error or inspired, as is the nature of Scripture, nor is it written in very narrow, specialized ways. It simply provides the guardrails our convention of churches deems necessary to be in cooperation. In fact, it also addresses the need for academic freedom in the classroom. Article XII on Education states:

Christianity is the faith of enlightenment and intelligence. In Jesus Christ abide all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. All sound learning is, therefore, a part of our Christian heritage. The new birth opens all human faculties and creates a thirst for knowledge. Moreover, the cause of education in the Kingdom of Christ is co-ordinate with the causes of missions and general benevolence, and should receive along with these the liberal support of the churches. An adequate system of Christian education is necessary to a complete spiritual program for Christ's people.

In Christian education there should be a proper balance between academic freedom and academic responsibility. Freedom in any orderly relationship of human life is always

⁷Bonhoeffer, *Christ the Center*, 76.

limited and never absolute. The freedom of a teacher in a Christian school, college, or seminary is limited by the pre-eminence of Jesus Christ, by the authoritative nature of the Scriptures, and by the distinct purpose for which the school exists.

The last line is very helpful for us as we engage in theological education for the future. Notice that the confession only limits academic freedom by the gospel, Scripture, and the purpose of the institution. The constraining orthodoxy that theological education needs in the future is something akin to the Southern Baptist *Baptist Faith and Message*. Although our confession is broader than the Apostle's Creed or the Nicene Creed, it includes their creedal dogma and provides a more contemporary outlook.

The three-point anchor of the gospel, Scripture, and confessional orthodoxy provides the elements of theological education which should not change if we are going to be churches that develop ministers and leaders for the present age until our Lord returns. The history of the last century demonstrates the effects of churches and institutions that have disregarded and redefined these stabilizing factors of the faith. Constancy in these will help guarantee a pipeline of well-trained ministers to serve the Church and the churches for generations to come.

WHAT NEEDS DEVELOPMENT

With the anchors of theological education established we need to look to areas that need change. The static nature of curriculum in many schools of theological education has led to stagnant churches, even in places where the gospel and the Bible are still held in high esteem. Why is this so? It is not because there is a limited power to the Word of God, rather it is due to the ever-changing world around us. In some ways, we need an Acts 17 approach to ministry. In Athens, Paul did not present a gospel that was somehow different, nor did he negate scriptural truth in teaching about God; rather he approached the task with the audience at hand. If the gospel is acultural and Scripture is able to be received by all people, then the churches and theological education need to be ever vigilant in keeping up with the changing means of delivering unchangeable truth.

As stated above, there are quite a few areas where one could look for the types of change in our world and needs of our churches. Perhaps one could argue for the development away from denominational traditions

to broader and looser ecclesial bonds. The movements of non-denominationalism or evangelical ecumenism are both issues of note for at least churches in the United States. Or one could look to practical concerns in a broader economic reality where church and state are engaging. The rise of neo-postmillennialism may be an area that needs greater attention for some. However, I would like to look at three areas that I believe will be pushing in and calling for change as we move forward into the twenty-first century.

GLOBALLY CONNECTED

The first area that I think is important to address in our changing world is the shrinking of that world. A century ago, we were aware of a broader world that a century before was barely known worldwide. Today, events that happen twelve time zones away are known within seconds by means of media in a globally connected world. That connectivity is also true for global churches, and it is incumbent upon theological educators to engage this opportunity. But in doing so, this global connection produces tensions which occur when cultures collide. So, it is important to address this global reality from the opportunities both of connectionalism as well as cross-cultural engagement.

Almost nothing has brought the world closer together than the advent of the internet. News and information now go around the world in a matter of seconds and reactions to it on social media occur before most can even process the news. Smartphones are ubiquitous in most cultures. Needless to say, the world has changed. We can look to research in the future to tell us of the health benefits and risks of this level of connectivity through digital devices, but the fact remains we are far more connected than ever before and we are dependent on that connectivity.

This is not bad news, rather such connection creates a global community that has greater opportunities to learn from one another. The ability to connect with one another on a global scale in the past was something left to those who had means for such travel, and that travel was not easy to endure. Today, we can travel the world in a matter of hours or log online and connect with others in a matter of seconds. People have the greatest ability to be connected than ever before in human history. This connective opportunity should be leveraged for a greater engagement in theological education. Although global engagement in its variety of forms, including online curricula, is not new to higher education, sometimes there is a reticence to innovate in ways that reach out to the broader,

global community. The connectionalism that is before us should drive us to find new markets of students as well as engage a variety of communities that assist in the learning endeavors of theological education. If we truly believe we are united in Christ as his Church, then leaning into opportunities where we are connected with the broader body not only makes our educational endeavors greater but draws us closer together in Christ.

A second, important aspect of the global nature of theological education today, which comes out of this connectionalism, is the cross-cultural opportunities it affords. Through immigration, travel, or merely online engagement, theological educators have the ability to engage with other cultures around the world. If we believe that the unchanging gospel exists beyond culture, then it is valuable to see how the gospel is understood and the Church grows in a variety of cultures.

Further, as the world becomes smaller through this global impact, we need to recognize that cross-cultural communities are only going to increase. If theological education is intended to train leaders to reach communities, we need to ensure that we are equipping our students to reach communities as they are and that includes learning how to engage cross-culturally. Our theological education will become better and richer when we engage one another.

TECHNOLOGY

The second major category of change that theological education needs to continue to embrace is technology. As stated above, the world is connected more globally because of the abilities afforded through technology. There are not many tasks in which most of the world engages that do not include the necessity of greater advanced technology. Computers, tablets, and smartphones are not only office essentials in the modern workplace, they also are necessary for navigating the world to and from the workplace. This growth in technology overall has improved our way of life but has also created challenges for us.

The opportunities technology has afforded theological education today are found in the classroom specifically. Professors can now engage students residentially and virtually. Sometimes this virtual world includes live interaction but it can also be engaged asynchronously. For decades theological educators debated this technological move. Some innovated and grew tremendously while others hesitated and now are trying to catch up with the variety of virtual campuses that are completing their mission

in non-traditional ways. Although a case, I think, can always be made for embodied, residential education, online learning can be a very good thing for thousands of students looking to be equipped for ministry when they are unable to relocate.

The virtual classroom is here to stay, and it is important for theological education that we are investing in it for the future. Resources need to be allocated for personnel and equipment to aid in online education. A new coordinated effort is needed for this to succeed. Online education should not be inserted into the old paradigms of theological education, rather it should be created in its own paradigm with the necessary accoutrements. Recently, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* published an article titled, "Online Teaching Is Real Teaching: How to find meaning, purpose, and even a little joy in your asynchronous courses." The article addresses the frustrations many professors have in online education and honestly states, "Despite all the talk and training during the pandemic, online courses are painful to take and painful to teach."⁸ Why is this so? In part it is due to the fact that for many professors this is not considered real teaching. The focus of the courses for the professors was focused too much on administrative guidelines rather than student learning outcomes. The author summarizes the problem, "A hyper-focus on course mechanics has caused faculty members to equate online teaching with hoop-jumping. That's not joy-filled teaching. That's not meaningful interactions with real people who need our support to get them over the finish line. That's just plodding through one online class after another."⁹

How do we overcome these challenges and make online teaching joyful? It will take effort to see the courses as something different than a mere modification of residential versions. For instance, the audience is just as different as the modality of teaching. The cross-section of online students has the potential to be more diverse than a traditional residential class with the professor's added inability to see or perceive that class as a whole. A holistic approach to online learning and teaching is necessary. When available theological education needs to address the resources necessary to equip this different population of students just as eager to be equipped for ministry as the traditional student.

⁸Flower Darby, "Online Teaching Is Real Teaching: How to Find Meaning, Purpose, and Even a Little Joy in Your Asynchronous Courses," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (March 1, 2024), 60.

⁹Darby, "Online Teaching," 60.

Other opportunities also exist with developments in technology in and out of the classroom. Writing, testing, engaging with students, and assessment are greatly impacted by the growth of technology in education. The high cost that accompanies some of these developments should not dissuade institutions from studying and learning about new innovations that could help fulfill its mission more faithfully. There are challenges that accompany any paradigm shift, just as there are technologies that can create problems for learning. But however real these challenges are they should not dissuade theological educators from looking forward to new, innovative ways to use technology for the future.

WHOLE-LIFE DISCIPLESHIP

Finally, one beneficial change in theological education includes the move to seeing the whole person in the curriculum. In the history of the Church this approach has been taken before, and perhaps it really is truly a modern problem, but there needs to be a greater emphasis on whole-life discipleship in our theological education.

For many who have studied at a seminary or a divinity school the curriculum was completed by ensuring a student earned the right number of credits. Subjects like Bible, theology, and church history are taken. Papers are written. Content is transmitted. Grades are earned. But has a minister truly been made? I am not downplaying the role of the Lord in the calling and development of his ministers, but I am questioning if this accumulating of credits alone has effectively formed the students that theological educators sent into the world for Kingdom work.

The attention to spiritual formation is not new to theological education. In fact many schools, including my own, have included it in their curriculum. But is this move enough for the students in the twenty-first century? With the increasing number of competing worldviews our students are in a greater need of formation of head and heart than ever before. There needs to be an emphasis in the whole program of theological education that looks at the whole person. Training in the Bible is foundational to the task, but more must be built upon it.

Here are three areas that should be considered for this formation. First, students need to process through formative mentorship pathways in and out of their ecclesial contexts. The changing social dynamic of the twenty-first century has many students seeking active mentorship. The desire to be equipped includes experiential, relational aspects that small group

and one-on-one mentorship can provide. The faculty are essential to this task, and efforts should be made to increase the shepherding of students.

Second, and related to this, schools need to look not just to the courses that comprise the curriculum but look also to co-curricular opportunities. The content taught in our lectures is essential, but attention must also be paid to ministerial development outside the classroom. Student life departments should come alongside classroom instruction to establish a curriculum that develops more than academic prowess but whole-life discipleship. Attention should be paid to the way in which all parts of the institution engage and interact with students. Leadership formation, for example, is not just taught in the classroom; it is also caught in the way in which students perceive their academic leaders operate. Mission, values, and character need to be on the forefront of all employees for the development of kingdom workers.

Third, seminaries need to partner with local churches to assist in the development of future ministers who will be leading in the near future. Any seminary, divinity school, Bible college, or university needs to remember that they are in a support role and operate as a parachurch organization. The primary task of theological education remains with the churches. This support role is intended to assist churches as they are fulfilling the Great Commission. Institutions need to be proactive in seeking cooperation and partnerships with the local church beyond the ever-important task of sending students and funds. Local church ministry needs to become part and parcel of theological education's curricular and co-curricular programs. All in all, this creates a greater, holistic student engagement that forms and disciples students for life.

This type of engagement calls for theological educators to rethink their investment and resourcing strategies. Teaching will always be a need for the educational task but there also needs to be an increased resourcing of personnel that administer mentoring environments for forming students into ministerial leaders. This can be accomplished in a variety of ways, but what is important is that attention is paid to the formation itself. Content transformation is not the goal. The mission is to equip future leaders, teachers, and missionaries for the whole life task before them, and this takes an approach to whole-life discipleship.

CONCLUSION

The mission of theological education is found in assisting the Church and the churches who are bound to the Great Commission. All Christians are called to go into all the world and make disciples of all nations, and the better equipped we are to do this, the more effective our response to his commission will be. Theological education needs to constantly evaluate its supportive role in this task. It is the churches who are sending students to our schools and are trusting us to form these students into ministers equipped for the twenty-first century. Some schools do well at teaching the unchanging content of the gospel and the Bible but have not evaluated their pedagogical methods. Others have sought change for the sake of growth, stability, or survival and perhaps have given up on their mission along the way. I do not have any institution in mind but can see either challenge in the future of many of our institutions. Leadership in theological education for the future must be anchored in the unchanging ways of our Lord and be ever innovative to ensure that the equipping of students for twenty-first century ministry is effective for generations to come.