



Thinking Theologically About Accreditation Part One— What’s theological about accrediting theological schools?

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A few years ago, Barbara Brittingham, president of the Commission of Institutions of Higher Education of the New England Association of Schools and Colleges, conducted a review of the ATS Commission’s administrative, decision-making, and staff structure. She spent two days in the office and two days in the board’s semiannual meeting. After reviewing a number of issues in her oral report to the board, she asked: “What is theological about ATS accreditation?” It is a question that has been on my mind ever since.

In 1992, two years after I began working with ATS accreditation, David Kelsey wrote a whole book addressing the question: *To Understand God Truly: What’s Theological about a Theological School?* It is a significant book and bears reading 25 years later. In the context of a much longer and nuanced argument, Kelsey writes “that which makes a theological school theological . . . is not the structure of its curriculum, nor the types of pedagogical methods it employs, nor the dynamics of its common life, nor the structure of its polity, nor even the sacred subject matter that it studies; rather it is the nature of its overarching end and the degree to which that end comprises its common life.” Much of the monograph is devoted to various understandings of that “end,” but Kelsey returns, again and again, to argue that the “theological” character of the theological school resides in the end it pursues, and the only proper end for them to pursue is to understand God truly.

If a school seeks to obtain or maintain accreditation to better serve the purposes of God, then accrediting has a theological character.

In the categories that ATS member schools use to divide the theological disciplinary pie, I am a pastoral or practical theologian. Kelsey is a preeminent systematic theologian. At the school where I taught before coming to ATS, there was an objection to “practical theology” because it implied that other parts of theology would be “impractical.” Kelsey provides abundant proof that systematic theology can be eminently practical. Can the accreditation of theological schools have any claim to being theological? If so, Kelsey can help.

Practical theology can argue that it is “theological” in one of three ways. The first is to claim that something inherent in the practice itself is theological. Preaching, for example, embodies a special, holy form of communication that is not subject to the general rules of persuasive speech and rhetoric. Another way to argue that a practice is “theological” is that its content is a special religious content that causes or allows the practice to transcend the characteristics of the practice. The religious content of religious education, for example, makes it “theological” even though the practices of teaching and learning are bound to the characteristics of teaching and learning of any subject matter. A third way to understand the “theology” of practical theology is that the goal of a practice is uniquely theological. By this perspective, preaching is a practical theology—not that it is a unique form of communication or that its content is religious, but that its end is uniquely theological. The proclamation is oriented toward understanding God more truly, loving God more faithfully, and obeying God more radically.

I have concluded that what gives a practice a “theological” character is its end rather than its form or content. I am not sure that anyone in the world but me would consider accreditation as an expression of practical theology, but if it ever qualified, it would be because of its ends, not because of its processes, or its content, or its standards.

ATS has been accrediting theological schools since 1936, when it adopted the practices of accreditation that had been developed by regional accrediting associations a few decades earlier and followed the adaptation of these regional associations for education for professional practice areas by law and medicine. The ATS Standards and Procedures—the two guiding documents that are adopted by member schools—are devoid of much theological content, except for an occasional phrase here or there. The practices that the ATS Commission on Accrediting uses—self-study, peer review, member-adopted procedures, and a decision making body elected by accredited schools—are used by a wide range of institutional and programmatic accrediting agencies.

So what’s theological about the accreditation of theological schools? It is in the end that accreditation serves. If a school is going through the effort to get accredited as part of the process of qualifying for participation in the student loan program, the process does not have theological character. If a school goes through the process of accreditation to prove that it is a “player” in the theological school world, whatever that means, there is nothing theological about accreditation. However, if a school seeks to obtain or maintain accreditation because it wants to do its work well, or improve how it does its work so that, in one way or the other, the purposes of God are better served, then accrediting has a theological character.

