

# The Work of Faculty and the Educational Goals of Theological Schools

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Two years ago, David Scholer died. He taught at Fuller Seminary for the last several decades of his career and, during the last of those years, taught with terminal cancer. As he was becoming progressively more ill, an article appeared in the *Los Angeles Times* about him. I quoted it in *Earthen Vessels*. He told the reporter that for much of his career, he had “puzzled over a line from 1 Thessalonians: ‘Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.’” He asked “How did one ‘give thanks in all circumstances’? In tragedy? Sickness?” During his last few semesters, he lectured sitting down, used a cane when he walked, and told students about his disease at the beginning of each course, in part to explain his physical condition and potential absences. Students who have been in his classes the last few years learned many lessons. The article describes “Clarissa Chng, a former student, (who) remembers what he said on her first day in his class: ‘Seminarists are called to a higher standard and greater responsibility. You have burned the bridges of naiveté, and there is no more turning back.’ Chng said she often reflects on Scholer’s words. ‘Every time I am faced with a difficult decision and find myself wishing that I could take the easy way out by feigning ignorance, I remember his words and realize that I must take responsibility for the knowledge I have and use it to inform my decision-making, even if that means going through a period of discomfort.’”<sup>1</sup>

You share David Scholer’s legacy. You invite students across the divide between the naïve faith that most of them bring to seminary and the critically informed faith that will provide the foundation for their future work in ministry. I want to talk with you about your work. It is work that most of you have thought about a great deal, have spent years preparing to be qualified to do, and have felt fortunate that you were appointed to teach in your area when others with whom you shared graduate school never found the appointment that they were most looking for. It is also contested work, perhaps more contested than it has been in much of the twentieth century. I want to talk with you about both the contest and your work.

## **The contest of a pressured church and privileged seminary**

American religion is changing. The reunion of two US Presbyterian church bodies that formed the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is twenty-five years old this year, and membership has declined by one-third since the reunion. The Assemblies of God, on the other hand, has grown each of the past nineteen years, and now equals the PCUSA in size. The Unitarian Universalist Association has charted membership gains during the past two decades, while the US membership of the Church of the Nazarene<sup>2</sup> has been relatively flat. Evangelical Lutheran Church in America membership has declined gradually for many of the years following the merger that formed it,<sup>3</sup> and membership in the massive Southern Baptist Convention<sup>4</sup> plateaued during this past decade and registered slight declines in the most recent years. The United Church of Canada has lost almost half of its membership since its mid-twentieth century peak. Even stable numbers mask considerable internal change. For example, while Roman Catholics have constituted about 25 percent of the American population across these two decades, almost

25 percent of adults who grew up Roman Catholic no longer consider themselves to be Catholic. (No Protestant denomination has as high a retention rate as the Roman Catholics.) The percentage of the population that is Roman Catholic has been stable because of the large number of immigrants.<sup>5</sup> Some denominations are stronger, most are weaker, and while each has a loyal constituency, it does not appear that denominations will be the structural center of North American Christianity in the future that they have been in the past.

The membership decline happens congregation by congregation, and many congregations that could afford a full-time pastor fifteen years ago can no longer afford one. As graduates completed MDivs and prepared for ordination last spring, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) had almost twice as many candidates for ordination to word and sacrament as it had congregations open to a first-call pastor. Dependable structures and systems in the church have been changing, and most of these changes are generating pressure on denominations, judicatories, and many congregations. Not all churches are stressed, but enough are that the stress is a common topic. Patterns of religious affiliation, attendance, not to mention the cultural status of religion, have all changed, and the result is felt pressure.

Under pressure, people often look at those under less pressure as if they aren't pressured at all. Seminaries are experiencing a great deal of pressure, but faculty are increasingly perceived as so distant from the pressure of the churches that they are perceived as privileged. You know how hard you work to teach three courses; others think that teaching load amounts to a privileged work week. You know how important summers are for your research and reading, but others perceive summers off as a privileged work year. You are hoping that you will be able to earn tenure, or a long-term contract, and know how much work it is going to require between now and the time a decision is made, but others see tenure or long-term contracts as a privileged form of employment.

Perceptions, as you know, are not reality, but they have powerful and sometimes determinative agency in human relations and social institutions. The church feels like it is in a triage situation in North America and seminary professorships look safe and secure, even privileged by comparison. Many seminaries have needed to prove their value in the past, but many of you will spend a great deal of your energy proving that your work meets a compelling need in the Christian community. It is nothing that you can prove on your own, of course, but it is something that seminaries will need to do. There is a contest between perceived privilege and perceived pressure, and it will shape your first decade of teaching.

### **The contest between the need to reclaim a grand narrative and the specialization needed in theological research**

There is another contest going on, at least in my opinion, and it is about the intellectual agenda of theological teaching and research. It is a contest between the intellectual needs of students and the church and the intellectual agenda of theological research and scholarship.

The general take on current seminary students is that they are not sure what they are studying for and that they know less than what previous generations of students knew when entering seminary. Many are not sure about the difference between Ishmael and Israel or the Exodus and the Exile. The current generation of students appears to have been less well educated in their parishes or congregations, to have had fewer educational opportunities at camps and regional educational events, and to have less experience as active church members than previous generations of students. These students need to learn the narrative of the biblical story, the sweep of Hebrew history, the centuries of the church's work, and

the range and fundamental importance of the Christian theology. They need the grand narrative that forms Christian identity and provides a basis for subsequent critical reflection on faith and ministry.

The current intellectual moment, however, is suspicious of metanarratives. “Lamenting the ‘loss of meaning’ in postmodernity boils down to mourning the fact that knowledge is no longer principally narrative.”<sup>6</sup> Knowledge is in bits and bites, and there is considerable suspicion to claims that things are tied together in grander schemes. Our intellectual moment is suspicious of a grand narrative that provides thematic glue to the particles of new knowledge that pile up on a daily basis. Your work as a researcher is dependent on specificity. Research increasingly depends on intense intellectual focus on very specific and often very technical forms of research and discourse. Patterns of understanding and Christian identity depend on large scale narratives that provide a comprehensive frame of reference, but for many, the path to tenure forces faculty to work in deep holes and narrow questions.

I think the church needs new intellectual support for its grand narrative at the very moment that intellectual conventions push theological research into deep particularities. We are in the middle of an intellectual contest; it is a difficult one; you will be influenced by it as you do your work.

### **The contest between disciplinary teaching and professional practice**

There are still other contests that will be lived out in your teaching. One is the contest between academic disciplinary expertise and teaching students to engage in professional work. To focus on the issue, let’s imagine that you had very different intellectual interests than you currently have.

Imagine that, in high school, you became interested in biology. You majored in biology in college, where you were fascinated by cells and their chemical processes and biological functioning. You had posters of cells on your dorm room wall. You entered a PhD program in biology, focused on cells, worked in your professor’s lab, and completed a dissertation on some absolutely fascinating but esoteric issue in cytology. You had two job offers upon finishing your dissertation. One was to teach biology in a department in a research university and the other was in a medical school. The research university job would allow you to specialize even more, teach graduate students who would, in many cases, do as graduates what you were doing as a professor: teach and conduct research. The medical school job would allow you to continue your research program but you would be teaching students who would use the discipline very differently. They intend to practice medicine. You need to teach them about cells so they can understand cellular health and pathology and the influence of both on overall health and illness, but these medical students will never be professors of biology. Teaching, I think, is more difficult in this second case, and that is the kind of teaching you do in an MDiv program.

As in all professional education, your students will use whatever they learn from you in a very different form of work than your’s. Few will love the subject you teach the way you do, because they love (or think they will love) the ministerial work they will do. For professors, their disciplines are an object of respect; they are their own intellectual end. For students, the subjects are a means to another intellectual end — their work in ministry. I think faculty new to theological education sometimes struggle with love of their discipline and what seems to them as students’ more utilitarian use of them. Good teaching, in theological or medical schools, requires sensitivity to the relationship of disciplinary knowledge and professional practice.

## The contest between two educational aims for theological education

I want to call your attention to one more contest. How would you answer this question: *If your school succeeds this year, what will be accomplished with your students?* There are two grand traditions about the aims and purposes of higher education in Western culture, and your answer will vary depending on which of these educational traditions you affirm.

The older tradition reflects the Greek educational vision of *paideia*. *Paideia*, as it has been abstracted by David Kelsey, is a kind of education that, among other things, seeks to cultivate the excellence of the soul, which consists “. . . in knowledge of the ‘Good’ itself.” This knowledge “requires a conversion, a turning around of the soul . . .” As Christians worked with the educational ideal of *paideia*, the focus shifted to the kind of education that prepared persons “for inward and religious transformation.” Kelsey labels this kind of excellent education as the Athens model.<sup>7</sup> It was the dominant educational model in medieval education, and it formed the dominant model of English universities in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In this educational model, you will succeed as a professor as your students learn the subject matter, but more importantly, as they are transformed as Christian human beings. They graduate both knowing the Christian story and being more mature and congruent Christians.

The newer tradition has its roots in the nineteenth century foundation of the University of Berlin. The Berlin pattern focused on critical inquiry. In this tradition, inquiry is “critical in that it begins by requiring justification of all alleged authorities or bases of truth . . . disciplined in the sense that it is highly self-conscious about the methods that are used to establish truth . . . and orderly in that it seeks to locate its subject matter in the context of the largest possible set of relations to other things.” Berlin was the first of the kind of universities that many of you attended for graduate work: a research university. In this educational tradition, there is limited room for truth derived from revelation or for any formation other than critical intellectual formation. As a result, there was a question about whether such a university could have a divinity school. The University of Berlin did include a divinity school but altered the traditional pattern of ministerial education. It refocused ministerial education toward two elements: (1) orderly, critical research and (2) “professional” education for ministry. In this educational model, you will succeed as a professor if your students have the capacity to engage critically the subject matter, develop the ability to pursue truth in self-critical and disciplined ways, develop critical professional skills, and make a rational and coherent case for what they think is true.

These two traditions represent very different educational goals, and they are deeply interwoven in the current practice of theological schools. They are both present in the ATS standards for the MDiv degree. Our problem is that we go about these different educational goals with little self-awareness as to the deep contest that they present. Most of you are likely thinking that successful learning at your school would include both kinds of goals. You want your students to become integrated Christian human beings who are critical, disciplined, rational learners. You don’t want to be forced to choose one option or the other. In some ways, this is the conundrum of theological education. We want both, but these educational goals are achieved in different ways, and we are caught in a complex, and sometimes conflicted, educational contest.

I have not posed Athens and Berlin as the ways in which we *should* think about the goals of theological education but as the ways in which we often do, to the confusion of new faculty and diminution of our educational effectiveness. There are other cities on the educational map. Kelsey argues that, in addition to Athens and Berlin, schools are influenced by centers of religious life and thought, like Jerusalem and Rome. For your school, it might be Azusa Street, Geneva, Aldersgate, or Constantinople. And

increasingly, the future of Western theological education will be influenced by Nairobi, Beijing, and Mexico City. Two cities are not enough to explain the layered complexities of theological schools, but they are crucial to understanding a fundamental tension.

## Conclusion

These contests will be deeply influential to you as members of a theological school faculty across the next decades. How you handle them is influenced by how you understand your vocation as a theological educator. Vocation, of course, is about calling. It is about the commitments and passions that form the high side of our work as educators. I once heard someone say that if a task were easy, there would be no need for a calling to do it. I think that the only way you can do your work effectively is to understand it as a vocation, a calling, and to understand that a calling is necessary because the work is hard. The faculty of a theological school is called to form and otherwise educate religious leaders. They do that *through* their disciplines, but the mission of theological schools is served best when they claim as their core identity to be theological educators.

The ATS professional staff was in a meeting a few years ago trying to get a handle on the self identity of ATS faculty, and how their identity contrasts with the identities of other educators. We concluded that elementary teachers think of themselves as teachers, that high school faculty think of themselves as history teachers or math teachers; that undergraduate faculty members tend to think of themselves as math professors or history professors, and that seminary faculty tend to think of themselves as biblical scholars or church historians or theologians who teach at a theological school. The very identity that they need to address the contests that characterize theological education at this time—theological educator—is the identity that many hold at a distance.

Last year, I was asked to visit a PhD seminar at Vanderbilt. The students were examining issues in theological education and had read *Earthen Vessels*. Two of them had the assignment of selecting a passage for close reading and using that passage for a broader reflection on the book's argument. One student chose this paragraph, in which I was commenting about some faculty members I have met in theological schools:

These people, in their own ways, did not merely teach the theological curriculum, they *became* the curriculum. In them, there was a “wisdom pertaining to responsible life in faith.” They had studied hard for years and grappled with ideas and texts, and in the end, they had more than the sum of the intellectual work they had done—Christianity's hopes and longings had taken up residence in them. The theological curriculum does not consist merely of courses and degree requirements. Perhaps more importantly, it consists of teachers and others who so embody theological wisdom that they form a cloud of witnesses who have become texts worthy of study. Theological schools are full of faculty like these.<sup>8</sup>

She chose this paragraph because she was both attracted to and intimidated by it. She asked, “If that is what good faculty can be, how do I become one?” It was, of course a good question, and one that I had never been asked as plaintively. I thought about it, and then told her that most importantly, she should not try. The people who intentionally set out to be that kind of professor usually don't end up that way. It is the result of long years of faithful scholarly work, of caring for students, of struggling with the sorrows and joys of human life, and discovering grace in the crevices, where it seems to grow like moss in the

forest. These experiences accrue, over time, to the wisdom of humility, and that is the stuff that becomes the human text worth reading.

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1. Connie Kang, "Rejoice Always: A Lesson in Dying," *Los Angeles Times* (June 5, 2007).
2. <http://www.nazarene.org/files/docs/StatisticsAnnual.pdf>.
3. <http://www.elca.org/Who-We-Are/Our-Three-Expressions/Churchwide-Organization/Research-and-Evaluation.aspx>.
4. [http://www.lifeway.com/lwc/files/lwcF\\_corp\\_news\\_ACP2009\\_GeneralData.pdf](http://www.lifeway.com/lwc/files/lwcF_corp_news_ACP2009_GeneralData.pdf).
5. <http://religions.pewforum.org/reports>.
6. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, 1984, 26, quoted in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, "Postmodernism," <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/postmodernism/>.
7. David H. Kelsey, *Between Athens and Berlin*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1993).
8. Daniel Aleshire, *Earthen Vessels: Hopeful Reflections on the Work and Future of Theological Schools*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2008), 33.