Promise: A Faithful Future for Theological Education

Daniel O. Aleshire

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And they told him, “We came to the land to which you sent us; it flows with milk and honey, and this is its fruit. Yet the people who live in the land are strong, and the towns are fortified and very large; and besides, we saw the descendants of Anak there.”

“Let us go up at once and occupy it, for we are well able to overcome it.”

“The land that we have gone through as spies is a land that devours its inhabitants; and all the people that we saw in it are of great size . . . to ourselves we seemed like grasshoppers, and so we seemed to them.”

The whole congregation said to them, “Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in this wilderness!”
Numbers 13:27–28, 30b, 32b–33, 14:2b (NRSV)

In the first two lectures, I argued, first, that a religiously and culturally dominant mainline Protestant presence in the first half of the twentieth century was significantly diminished by the end of the century. It is not a novel argument, of course; it has been made by many others, espousing a variety of hypotheses about why it happened. Evangelical Protestants, who were comparatively weak in the first half of the century, gained numeric strength and cultural muscle by century’s end. This has attracted even more research, not to mention a little horn tooting from one group or another. I went on to contend, second, that American Protestantism and theological education have entered a wilderness in this new century. While there is vitality and diversity in the wilderness, old practices and ways have dissipated, and new ones have not yet emerged in a stable form. What is true for churches is true for theological schools. Mainline seminaries were dominant for much of the twentieth century, but by century’s end, evangelical schools were dominant. The last several decades have not only reversed the fortunes of two grand camps of the Protestant empire, but they have also displaced educational conventions and practices in both of them.

In this lecture, I want to peer into the land beyond the wilderness. The twelve spies whom Moses sent into the land beyond the wilderness brought back a mixed analysis, ranging from a land that flowed with milk and honey—which must have sounded pretty good to people who had been eating quail and white stuff every day, to a land full of fortified cities and oversized men—and a land that devoured its inhabitants, which must have sounded even more threatening than an indefinite future in the wilderness. Everybody saw the same thing but did not agree on what it meant. The land I have peered into looks a little like that. It is full of great potential and foreboding threats, and different people will see both in the same thing. I have not been out of the wilderness myself, so the image of a spy is much too optimistic. As I think about it, even though I have not been to the future, I have considerable confidence about it. My
confidence is not based on a perception that the future is going to restore the best of the past. It isn’t. My confidence is that theological education will be reinvented in ways that serve the church and the gospel in the future as effectively as it has served them in the past. My confidence is that the schools will discern what needs to be held onto, what needs to be abandoned, and what needs to be invented altogether new.

**The instability of the past and strength of the future**

As we begin, I want to place two fundamental issues on the table, as I did in the last lecture.

The first is that the past was not as stable as we might imagine it to have been. I reached back a century in the first lecture, but had I reached back two centuries, to 1800 instead of 1900, theological education would have looked very different than it did in 1900. It was, at its best, education at the baccalaureate level. Much of it was nondegree based, taking the form of reading with an experienced minister or simply reading a few books and practicing ministry. If people did have a baccalaureate-level education, they were exposed to a curriculum of Latin, Greek, Hebrew, and dogmatic theology. The curriculum did not bear a great deal of resemblance to the current curricula of ATS schools. If we go even further back, to the eighteenth century, the curriculum was even more different. Theological education does not have a long, stable history that was suddenly interrupted in the last four decades of the twentieth century. Dominant theological education practices in North America have never had long lives. We have come through a time when established educational practices were well adapted to the cultural and organizational needs of denominational Christianity. It was a form of theological education that matured in the 1930s, lasted for almost a century, and is now under stress. The past is not more stable than the future.

The second is that in the future the need for theological education will be as strong as, if not stronger than, it is now. Christian literacy is decreasing in this culture, and as the culture continues to withdraw the privilege that it once extended to religion, Christianity will move further from the cultural center of interest. The result will be that a greater percentage of persons who sense a call to ministry will begin seminary with less depth in their understanding of the Christian story and, as graduates, will lead worship for those who will know even less. Theological schools will be needed in the future like monasteries were needed in the Middle Ages. A thousand years ago, Christianity needed places to reproduce and archive sacred manuscripts and educate people to read, copy, and interpret them. This new century will need centers of religious study and thought to sustain and renew the Christian tradition. The Christian tradition must be reinterpreted in each new intellectual age, and it will take scholars who know both the tradition and the intellectual idiom of the day to keep the tradition for the church and to teach it in service to the church. The need for Christian theological education has been around since Jesus taught the disciples and Paul taught Timothy. It is not going to go away, whatever the future holds.

**Educational practices of a faithful future**

With these two assumptions in mind, what might a faithful future look like? I want to explore that question primarily in terms of the educational practices of theological schools. While these educational practices will have significant influence on institutional form, I will focus on the educational practices in the land that flows with milk and honey, or devours its inhabitants, however you decide to see it.
The **MDiv as gold standard**
The future will begin with, and perhaps be dominated by, the theological education practices that emerged as the gold standard in the twentieth century: a three-year postbaccalaureate program of study conducted as graduate professional education in schools that were invented for this kind of education. The curriculum will include versions of four primary themes, most recently embodied in the ATS accrediting standards as (1) the study of texts and tradition of the religious community, (2) development of skills and perceptions necessary for the effective practice of ministry, (3) attention to spiritual growth and personal maturity, and (4) learning the knowledge and skills necessary for public leadership.³

This pattern of clergy education became widely accepted in the twentieth century. Unitarian Universalists and historic fundamentalists, Pentecostals and Presbyterians, Baptists and Episcopalians, Nazarenes and Disciples—all take the MDiv as a basic professional degree for pastoral ministry. They all attend in various ways to the four broad curricular areas, and complete a three-year curriculum in an average of 4.2 years, according to ATS statistics about time to degree. Dramatic amounts of theological and ecclesiastical diversity flow through this one theological education portal. Liberal and conservative, free church and connectional, sacramental and nonsacramental—all use a common model of theological education.

It is actually quite an accomplishment, when you think about it: such divergent groups have adopted such a common pattern. It served mainline Protestants as they rose to the top in midcentury and it served evangelical Protestants as they became ascendant at the end of the century. It has brought students together with one another and with talented faculty in classrooms where learning took root in the lives of students and wisdom was nurtured in the work of professors. It was the pattern of theological education that formed me, and it is alive and well this semester at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. This standardization has been accomplished, to no little extent, by ATS accreditation, which has accredited schools on the basis of this kind of educational program since the mid-1930s. It has become the gold standard. While there are other models of theological education, the one embodied in the ATS standards is understood to be the norm against which others are judged. It has been a form of educational orthodoxy that served the church and the gospel very well. It has effectively supported the leadership needs of churches and has provided the context in which faculty have conducted research that has expanded the understanding of old traditions and yielded insights into new realities. The practices that support teaching, learning, and research—and the interaction of these three as they are engaged in a common environment—are crucial as the church finds its way through the wilderness. As literacy decreases, these are the very practices that will be most needed.²

Theological schools as the stewards of religious vision
Good theological schools fulfill more than educational functions, and at least one other function will be sorely needed in the future. Theological schools are born of a religious vision and tend to provide an institutional home for that vision. As bureaucratic denominational structures weaken, as other institutions that served the church’s mission in the past distance themselves from diminished denominational communities, the need for an institution to house that vision increases. Institutions play an important role in times of rapid cultural change, and at times like these, it is especially important to heed Hugh Hedco’s encouragement to “think institutionally.”³ He argues that thinking institutionally involves a “faithful reception”—seeing ourselves as “debtors who owe something, not as creditors to whom something is owed.”⁴ “To think institutionally is to stretch your time horizon backward and forward so that the shadows from both past and future lengthen into the present.”⁵
Because theological schools are born out of religious vision, they are the recipients of a legacy of value and meaning. They educate religious leaders, to be sure, but the soul of a theological school is not its curriculum or educational strategy. The soul—the real institution of a theological school—is the religious vision it inherits, embodies, renews, and perpetuates. A religious vision cannot survive disembodied from institutional forms that make it possible “to stretch the time horizon backward and forward so that the shadows from both past and future lengthen into the present.” A religious vision needs some place where people are up in the middle of the night thinking about where these shadows overlap. The Christian vision enters this new millennium with fewer institutional homes than it has had in the past—fewer denominationally focused colleges and social service agencies, weaker denominational structures—and it needs the home that theological schools can provide. Life beyond the wilderness needs structures, institutions, communities of long-term engagement, homes where religious visions are cared for, renewed, interpreted, and preserved for a future day.

The church will grow weaker in the land beyond the wilderness if theological schools as they now exist, and the education they now provide, do not grow stronger. The value of this kind of education for religious leaders will increase, not decrease. The need for the institutional home of powerful religious visions will increase, not decrease.

**A bigger tent**

However, in addition to the continuation of the current gold standard, theological education will have a great deal more diversity in educational practice than it now has. The Association of Theological Schools has been called by some as one of the most ecumenical organizations in North America. I am not sure about that, but I do think it is a “big tent” community. While working in this kind of organization, I have noticed a few things about big tent structures. They require a large fabric, of course, and for ATS, this has been a common understanding of graduate, professional education for ministry—the twentieth century gold standard. A big tent also requires tall poles along the center line to give it height. In recent history, these tall poles have been exemplar institutions that embody one version or the other of the gold standard. While a big tent could have only tall poles if they were properly rigged, the interior space would be limited. To have a big tent, there must be smaller poles around the circumference that stretch the tent out, give it breadth, and increase the space that it encompasses. In the current educational mix of ATS schools, the shorter poles are good schools that expand a common educational model to include a diversity of ecclesial communities.

This big tent has served denominational Christianity particularly well. While there is no governmental licensing of ministers or priests, as there is for every other profession, standardized theological degrees have made it possible for denominations to respect the education of each other’s clergy, which makes it possible for United Methodists to be the second largest denominational group at Pittsburgh Seminary. The problem for the single standard model is that bureaucratic, denominational Christianity is the most threatened form of Christianity. Almost every American Protestant denomination, both mainline and evangelical, is experiencing a decline in membership. Forms of Christian expression that are more plastic and supple seem to be in the ascendency. In a recent interview, Michael Lindsay compared bureaucratic denominations to Sears and some newer forms of Christian expression to eBay. Both were invented to sell products, but one is proving to be far more successful in this culture than the other. Sears has depended on standardization and quality control of products, while eBay depends on a vast diversity of products without standardization or quality control. One gold standard for theological education practice fits the bureaucratic, denominational model of Christianity. However, if the future is going to look more
like eBay than Sears, then theological education will only be able to serve the Christian project if it provides a diversity of educational strategies.

The future will have a big tent, but the tent will be different from the current one. The tall poles on the center line that give the tent height will be the kind of schools that embody the current gold standard of theological education. These schools will be crucial for the future of believing communities. The shorter polls at the circumference that expand interior space will consist of diverse educational models. The future will have a big tent, but it will not be a tent where one model of theological education is extended to a variety of constituencies. It will be a big tent that provides a variety of theological education practices for all constituencies.

I realize that metaphors are risky and that extended metaphors are dangerous. You may conclude that I have transformed theological education into a circus. But I will stand my ground. Diversity of educational practices in the future will be as crucial as uniformity of educational practice was in the past. Diversity, however, will not be adequate. Different practices will need gold standards. More than one pattern of theological education will not do much good if each model does not reflect passionate and intelligent educational practice, have intellectual substance and quality, and result in the kind of learning that religious leaders most need. Theological education must have more diverse models, and it will need a clear understanding of a gold standard for each.

**Diverse models**

What might some of these diverse models be?

**Baccalaureate-level theological education**

One form of diversity might be the development of more theological education at the baccalaureate level. The current system of postbaccalaureate clergy education was invented in the context of the early-twentieth-century status of religion. It does not appear that Christian expressions in the future will have the same cultural status, and it may be that other levels of education will be needed for religious leaders. Religious communities need more candidates who are from recent immigrant and some racial/ethnic groups with a low percentage of persons who hold baccalaureate degrees. As compensation in many small- and mid-sized congregations continues to grow less than compensation in other sectors, the church may need more leaders who have been theologically educated at the baccalaureate or even associate degree level.

American higher education is robust, in part, because of its diversity. There are community colleges, regional state universities, noncompetitive liberal arts colleges, public research universities, selective liberal arts colleges, and private research universities. A student can learn the same things in all of these schools (like English literature) but in different ways and for different purposes. Regardless of the kind of schools these different institutions are, they are all schools, and schools provide education very effectively. They have learned to think about curriculum and pedagogy, to work with different kinds of students with different kinds of talents, and to gather resources in support of educational practices. One president of an ATS member school was struggling with the uniform postbaccalaureate pattern of theological education and opined to me that it is very hard to tell the difference between a baccalaureate level funeral and a graduate level funeral. His point, of course, was that many of the central tasks of pastoral ministry can be learned effectively at more than one educational level. The postbaccalaureate model of theological education has more to do with social status desired for religious leadership than
with the educational level of desired learning. Theological education practices could be broadened to include levels of education other than graduate, professional education, and in so doing, might be strengthened, rather than weakened.

The Hispanic/Latino community is the fastest growing racial/ethnic group in the United States. It also has the lowest percentage of baccalaureate degree holders, and that is one of the reasons that this group is the most underrepresented constituency in theological education. There are hundreds of institutes and other programs to educate Latino/a pastors, and many serve faith communities that have never required formal theological training. However, a baccalaureate degree with a focus on ministry would help in two ways: it could provide entree to certain opportunities for community leadership and support their ministerial work. Theological education for this group, on the scale on which it is needed, will depend on non-baccalaureate or BA completion patterns of education for the next several decades.

**Alternatively credentialed clergy**
Mainline Protestant denominations have adopted alternative routes to credential clergy that do not require a graduate professional theological degree. In the PC(USA), a growing number of local Presbytery programs have been put in place to provide theological education for these alternatively credentialed clergy. Barbara Wheeler’s analysis of the requirements in several Presbyteries is that the total required education amounts to the equivalent of three or four college-level courses, with limited reading and accountability. I don’t think that is a new gold standard educational approach to clergy education. Not every pastor needs a graduate degree, but the family who attend a small membership church whose child is dying of cancer needs as skillful pastoral support from an alternatively credentialed pastor as a family with the same trauma in a larger congregation with a seminary-educated pastor. The fifty attenders in a small congregation deserve biblically and theologically informed preaching as much as the 350 in the larger congregation. While the part-time pastor cannot leave his or her job for three years to study at seminary, then return to a part-time position, these pastors need more than the current alternative educational models are providing. Pastors serving part time are a growth industry in mainline Protestantism. What appears to be happening is that regularly credentialed pastors have the gold standard of a post-baccalaureate degree and alternatively credentialed pastors have next to nothing. I don’t mean this to disparage the work of talented pastors who are teaching in Presbytery programs or the work of alternatively credentialed clergy. I am critical of what seems to be the educational equivalent of all or almost-nothing for pastors. Both the gospel and the people in the pews deserve better.

We need a gold standard for the education of part-time alternatively credentialed pastors. The people who hear them preach and depend on them for the care of their souls need a gold standard. What might that be?

**Postemployment education**
Theological schools will enhance their ability to provide postemployment education in addition to traditional preemployment education. Seminaries have built educational systems primarily on the professional school model in which students go to school, get a degree, and then begin work in ministry. For most professions, this is a mandatory model. Not so with ministry. Even denominations that require a seminary degree for ordination have alternative paths to pastoral ministry that do not require one, and many denominations do not require one at all. There is simply no parallel in medicine or law, in engineering or architecture. Persons must have their professional education to be eligible to obtain the license or certification necessary to engage in the profession. In the future, ministerial leaders will get to their positions by a diversity of paths, many of them without any theological education when they begin.
Theological schools will need to develop patterns of postemployment education that enhance ministerial work underway rather than qualifying for that work.

Pastors are not the only ones who need postemployment theological education. In a previous lecture, I noted the attendance patterns in American congregations: 90 percent of congregations have less than half of all attenders and more than half of all attenders are in the 10 percent of churches with the highest attendance. These larger congregations employ a significant number of program staff ministers. In these larger congregations, there is anecdotal evidence that program staff members do not move from congregation to congregation, as an earlier generation of ministers in education, youth, music, and children’s ministry tended to do. The current generation of program staff members is more likely to become paid staff members in the congregations and parishes in which they were already active volunteers. Only a small percentage of them have any theological education. According to the National Congregations Study, while 90 percent of the clergy in congregations with at least 200 regular attenders have a seminary-educated pastor, only 29 percent of education and youth ministers and 18 percent of music ministers have any seminary education.8

What kind of good education practices would form the gold standard for on-the-job education? Good educational practice for part-time pastors and full- and part-time program staff ministers begins with the assumption that these persons cannot leave home to get the education they need. It will also recognize that the congregation or ministry context in which these persons are serving is the primary community of formation and will use that community in developing educational practices. It will assume that these students are already good at doing much of what they do in their places of service and that these students are as capable learners as on-campus degree students. This kind of education will likely take the form of short-term intensive courses and online courses and will not assume that these students necessarily want a degree. Schools will need to find a financially workable way to offer this kind of theological education.

**Education for lay persons**

Theological schools will need to become more effective centers of education for lay persons. The deepest layer of identity for most ATS members schools is the education of clergy and religious leaders. Most ATS schools have expanded that identity to educate persons who do not want to seek ordination or who are ineligible for ordination in their religious communities but who want to work vocationally in some kind of ministry role. Both of these groups are well served by the professional educational identity that characterizes most ATS schools. Many schools have added a second identity in offering academic degrees. The educational aim of professional degree programs is for students to learn areas of study to the end that they are equipped to exercise religious leadership. The educational aim of an academic degree program is a more thorough and comprehensive understanding of an area of study, often in preparation for advanced study. The students whose educational needs are not well met by either of these kinds of degrees are lay persons who are seriously interested in learning their faith but do not want to work in ministry vocationally and do not want a specialized academic degree. Schools squeeze them into one of these two programs, but the educational design does not address their real educational desire.

Regent College, in Vancouver, was founded for the education of Christians who will work in a variety of professional and other roles and who want to exercise these roles with deep Christian understanding. These students complete a Master of Christian Studies degree. It is not a degree to prepare them to work in ministry, and it is not so much an academic specialized degree as it is a general studies degree in which persons gain a deeper understanding of the Christian faith in order to take that understanding with them into their work in law or health care or government service or business. In the days of robust
denominational structures, there were often educational opportunities offered by regional or national offices. For the most part, those programs have dissipated. In the future, more theological schools will need to do what Regent College pioneered and offer the kind of education that provides intellectual substance and spiritual growth in Christian faith and life. The church is in as much need for an educated laity as it is educated ministers, and theological schools may be among the best environments to provide this kind of education. What would gold standard theological education look like for lay persons who are often better educated in almost every area of their lives than in their faith?

*Education outside the research university model*

Theological schools are hybrid institutions; they are part higher education institutions and part churchly institutions. A student may think that a seminary is primarily churchly until he is confronted with a “D” in Hebrew and realizes that seminary is a graduate school, not a Sunday School. Another student may have grown weary of the academic reading and paper writing when a professor says something that reaches the center of her faith, and her soul is shaped—something that had happened only in church before. These two identities are part of all good theological schools and must remain a part of their identity in the future.

However, there is more than one way to understand the educational identity of a theological school. I have already suggested that higher education has considerable diversity, but mainline Protestant theological education has been most deeply influenced by the higher education model that is most associated with research universities. This model includes conventions of full-time faculty with research expectations, tenure, a nine-month academic year, and periodic time away from instructional responsibilities for reading and writing. These are all good educational practices, but as a set, they are very expensive. Some sectors in higher education have never had these practices, and other significant sectors are shifting their practices to appoint more faculty members outside tenure structures, to utilize more part-time faculty, and to move toward year-long academic schedules instead of academic-year schedules. Some theological schools may need to pay more attention to these other higher education models for financial and missional reasons. While it would be tragic if all ATS schools did this, it might also prove tragic if some did not. Many schools have the resources to continue university-like practices, and theological education needs centers of scholarship and research that require these practices. However, more diverse models may be needed in the future. What would a gold standard of theological education practice look like that does not embody the educational practices of the research university?

*Curricular changes to meet new realities*

The theological curriculum will need to be reexamined in at least two ways. Of course, much of it should remain exactly as it is: students need to know sacred texts and the history of the tradition; they need to know theology and how to do the work they are called to do. However, two areas that are either minimally present or altogether absent in the current curriculum will need to be addressed. Both of them relate to the new religious realities in the American population that are on the increase. The first is the number of persons who affiliate with religions other than Christianity. While still a small percentage, it is growing. The second is the fastest growing religious preference in the United States, and that is “no religious preference.”

The first of these changes will require ministers and priests to be more sensitive to Christian ministry in an increasingly religiously plural context. Christian ministers and priests cannot do their work effectively in the future if they know as little about other faith traditions as the current generation of pastors and religious leaders know. Christian pastors, whose job it is to stand in a pulpit every Sunday and tell people
that Christianity has a vision of the world that is worth their devotion and commitment, need to be able to call Christians to their faith in ways that do not alienate them from neighbors and colleagues of other faiths or nurture religious prejudices. Pastors need to be able to work with families that include many faiths, be comfortable around other traditions, and simultaneously affirm their Christian faith and commitments. This is a pastoral skill that has not been required before, and as we move out of the wilderness, it will be fundamentally important. It will require greater curricular attention.

The second is equally as important. What is the job of Christian pastors and the congregations that they serve in a culture where the fastest growing religious preference is “none”? In the past, Christian pastors have been able to do their work in a broadly Christian culture. Every indication points to a future in which there is less cultural awareness of or attention to the Christian faith. Pastoral work will increasingly take on the character of missionary work. To an ever-expanding percentage of the future population, the gospel’s Good News will be new news. Fewer people will have been raised in the Christian faith, and mainline congregations will need to learn to tell the Christian story to people who have never heard it, or heard only distorted versions of it, and invite them to Christian faith. For most of the twentieth century, the culture was sufficiently Christian and mainline Protestantism was sufficiently a part of the culture that it did not have to do this in the way that it will need to do it in the future. Theological schools will need to address this reality, like pastoral skills with other world religions, with curricular attention.

These two needs do not travel together easily. Interfaith understanding is not typically coupled with Christian evangelism. Pastoral work has never been easy, but it is going to become more complex, more demanding, more in need of what theological schools do when they do their work well.

**Required changes in perception**

Thus far, I have argued for the necessity of continuing the current form of theological education and adding more diversity of educational practices to it. I have proposed several kinds of diversity that might be introduced to create a new kind of big tent for theological education: providing theological education at the baccalaureate level, taking the education of alternatively credentialed clergy more seriously, increasing ability to offer effective on-the-job education, taking seriously the need to develop a new kind of educational program for lay persons, reexamining the typical higher education conventions that ATS schools employ, and shifting some emphases in the theological curriculum. All of these changes would push theological schools in new ways and require them to embrace changes in their institutional self-understanding. There are still other changes that have to do more with changes in perceptions than changes in educational practices, and I want to identify some of the perceptions that I think will need to be modified as the church and schools move into the land beyond the wilderness.

**Valuing varied models**

The first is that theological schools will need to pay closer attention to the educational integrity of other theological education providers. The uniformity of the postbaccalaureate model has led to the perception that theological education doesn’t begin until the student enrolls in a graduate professional degree program. That has also led to a tendency to devalue education at other academic levels and in other educational settings. In the future, ATS schools will need to reassess this perspective.

For example, the Association has several member schools that function as a Bible college and seminary. A Bible college degree typically involves ninety semester hours of undergraduate Bible, theology, church
history, biblical languages, and ministry studies and thirty hours of general educational studies. The current ATS standards require that these students earn the MDiv in no less than three postbaccalaureate years of additional study. These schools are all faithful to the ATS standard, but I am not sure that it is the most effective way to look at ministry education or to serve the church. Could there be ways to articulate undergraduate competencies into graduate professional programs that both honor prior work and maintain appropriate standards?

Many Latino/a students have attended Bible institutes or other church-based programs and learned a great deal about the Hispanic church and ministry in Spanish-speaking communities. Is there a better way for ATS schools to honor this experience and the learning that it has generated? The answer to this and similar questions is bound to the ability of ATS-accredited schools to understand the broader ecology of theological education providers and determine how they participate in that ecology instead of over against it.

Valuing the wisdom of practitioners
Theological education, as professional education for the church, needs to give intense attention to the sources of wisdom that pastors and church professionals can bring to theological education. As seminaries have leaned into the academic identity of university education, they have become accustomed to the assumption that wisdom accrues from advanced degrees, from research and writing, and from participating in the technical work of academic guilds. Certainly it does, especially wisdom about the Bible and its interpretation, theology, history, and ethics. But students need other sources of wisdom—the kind that accrues from the discipline of preparing sermons every week, working with people in congregations, engaging the community in witness in word and deed, being with families in the middle of unspeakable pain and sadness. This is hard work, and if people do it well, they develop a wisdom that can’t be gained from books and academic presentations at the AAR or SBL.

The practice of Christian congregations is changing rapidly, and the wisdom about that practice is not in the seminary. In the future, theological schools will need to engage talented pastors differently than in the past. Pastors are on the front lines of change in a period of very rapid change; they and their congregations are inventing new paradigms of congregational ministry that reflect crucial forms of new learning; and they are dealing concretely with many of the issues that will form the next theory of practice. Theological schools simply cannot neglect this source of wisdom. Seminary students won’t be well educated without it. Fifty years ago, the perception of faculties of ATS member schools was that serious, advanced scholarship was underrepresented—too many pastors and not enough academics. Now, ATS schools have significant academic talent, and it is the pastoral talent that might be underrepresented. The gold standard for theological education must include both the wisdom from academic work and the wisdom from pastoral work.

Embracing technology
Technology has changed and will continue to influence theological education. Technology provides access to information that simply wasn’t possible before. Many of the footnotes to these lectures include an Internet citation. You can go to the US Religious Landscape Study and look at the numbers I am interpreting to see if you agree. You don’t need to go to the library to check out a book; you don’t even need to leave your study. That simply wasn’t possible a decade ago, and it is changing faculty scholarship and student research. More theological schools are developing online courses, and the early evaluation suggests that, when courses are well designed, most students can learn as much in an online course as in a classroom-based course, and some students learn even better. While online resources for
theological education are less present online than for many other areas of study, these resources are increasing. Google Books, for example, has digitized most of the holdings of the Andover Harvard Library, which is one of the premier theological libraries in the country. After the legal issues are resolved, texts that used to be available only at great effort can be downloaded to your Kindle. The American Theological Library Association has digitized entire series of theology journals and has made them available not only for access within libraries but to individual graduates of participating ATS schools. You can read every issue that has ever been published of *Theological Education*, the ATS journal, if you want, although I don’t know of anyone who has ever wanted to.

Online educational strategies improve as increased bandwidth and affordable, fast personal computers are available to students. The future of online courses is not the equivalent of a digital correspondence course. Good online courses are more complex and interactive than correspondence courses ever were. Technology has and will continue to change higher education. Along the way, it will invite intense debate over theological education practices that have become sacred for many: residency and program duration. Do we want to give a theological degree to someone we have never seen interact in meaningful ways with others? If students could take twenty-five hours of online courses and complete all the reading and required work well, would we let them graduate with an MDiv in two years? What would gold standard practices look like for technology-based seminary education?

Theological educators have perceptions about technology, and these perceptions will influence the use of technology more than data about its effectiveness or ineffectiveness. No educational strategy has intrinsic value. Any strategy—from learning in a classroom in a residential academic community to learning in an extension class in a church-housed branch campus to learning in an online course—can be good if the strategy effectively accomplishes the fundamental aims and goals of theological education. And, conversely, any of them can be bad if they fail to be effective strategies. All educational strategies function in service to educational goals, and acceptable strategies are the ones that best accomplish these goals. In theological schools, educational strategies have a way of attracting value-laden commitments (i.e., online education is not appropriate for theological education because of an incarnational understanding of Christian faith). While value-laden commitments are altogether appropriate for holding and advancing religious beliefs, they are misplaced when applied to educational strategies. Technology will likely contribute less to theological education than its most ardent advocates are predicting, but it will be able to enrich theological studies far more than theological Luddites will allow. While technology will require a great deal of attention to educational practice, greater attention at this time needs to be paid to technology and educational perspective.

**Conclusion**

William Faulkner wrote that the “past is never dead. It’s not even past.” I suspect that the future is never purely the future; it has already begun. The future grows out of forces and movements that, in some form, are already here. If this is true, the present is where the past that is not past overlaps the future that has already begun. If Hugh Heclo is right, this is a good place for institutions—where “the shadows from both past and future lengthen into the present.” There are many institutional implications of what I have said, and I struggle with raising proposals about educational practice and perspective without a corresponding analysis of the strategy and funding issues that institutions will need to address in order to implement them—but that is another lecture.
I said earlier that I am confident about the future. I am confident because the Spirit is at work, and I am also confident because theological schools are at work. They are capable of doing what needs to be done to serve the church. It will take them longer to change than the church thinks it should take, but the change will be faster than some satisfied faculty would like it to be. I’m the director of the accrediting agency that produced the great homogeneity in theological education, and I am not sure how to accredit what I have just proposed that seminaries should do.

I have used the image of earthen vessels in 2 Corinthians for theological schools. It is not a metaphor that had theological schools in mind any more than Egypt and the wilderness mean in the Bible what I have used them to mean in these lectures. (I guess I am consistent in my misuse of biblical metaphors.) Earthen vessels are remarkably durable. Occasionally, an archeological excavation unearths an intact vessel. It can still hold water, thousands of years after it was formed. The long, useful life of earthen vessels is characteristic of theological schools. They are built to last, and they are very durable. Unlike wineskins, earthen vessels can hold both new wine and old wine. They can hold water and wine. They can even hold water turning to wine. At a time when change is a dominant characteristic of religious life in North America, it is reassuring that a school that served in one way in an earlier era can serve in another way in a future era.10

Does the future feel more like milk and honey or a land that devours its inhabitants? I am hopeful. I am also confident that, whatever we do, the gospel will continue to be the best news the future will ever hear and the Spirit will do its work to make sure the news is heard. Our task is to help the Spirit in that work, not hinder it. There is life beyond the wilderness. I have not been there, but you can see it with eyes of faith.

1. See the MDiv standard at http://www.ats.edu/Accrediting/Documents/DegreeStandards.pdf.
2. I have sought to argue the case for this kind of theological education in Earthen Vessels: Hopeful Reflections on the Work and Future of Theological Schools (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2008).
4. Ibid., 98.
5. Ibid., 109.
6. This interview appeared in the March 17, 2010 issue of Faith and Leadership and can be found online at http://www.faithandleadership.com/qa/michael-lindsay-the-mainline-not-the-sidelines.
7. Wheeler is the director of the Auburn Center for the Study of Theological Education, and this information was drawn from a personal conversation with her about this study. It is, as yet, unpublished.
8. Mark Chaves, blog, from the National Congregations Study, see www.faithandleadership.com/blog/06-18-2009/mark-chaves-has-your-whole-staff-been-seminary.
10. I have argued this point elsewhere at the ATS 2008 Biennial Meeting in Atlanta, Georgia.