

The Aims of Education for the Professional Ministry of the Church - A Theoretical Basis for Curriculum Planning

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Introduction

It is our assumption that the details of any curriculum should express the basic aims of the educational institution. Every course offered and every aspect of the life of a seminary should be consistent with the theology of seminary education explicitly professed by the leaders and teachers of the seminary. Therefore, in attempting to fashion a curriculum for education for the professional ministry it is necessary first to try and formulate a statement about the fundamental objectives which the curriculum will aim to realize.

The theology of seminary education and its practical application in the life and curriculum of a seminary should continually be a subject of concern and debate among the seminary staff and students. The understanding of what seminary education is for and how it should be done ought to go on growing perpetually in depth and breadth. In the present world-wide discussion about education for the ministry of the Church, traditional priorities are being re-examined, new experiments are being reported, new ideas are forthcoming and it is difficult to discern any consensus of opinion on the nature of seminary education. This makes it more difficult to formulate a statement on the question. However, every seminary must make a start at defining its deepest purposes, and the limitations of its initial statement may be justified by the hope that self-understanding will grow.

The General Purpose of Education for Ministry

This title indicates a basic presupposition, namely, that it is ministry which is the deepest reason for the existence of a theological school. Sometimes the basic purpose of theological education is described in terms of dedication to the pursuit of truth or in terms of faithful study of the Scriptures. However, it is our belief that, while these aims are important and relevant to theological

education, there is a priority that must come before the purely academic purposes of a seminary. The calling of every Christian is to serve God by serving people. (cf. Jesus' summary of the law and also his first sermon in Nazareth that declared the intention of his own ministry.) It is people who have priority in our concerns above everything else. Intellectual excellence or Scriptural expertness should serve the prior purpose of directly or indirectly ministering to the needs of people. It is education for ministry that is the fundamental aim of a theological school.

It needs to be said that ministry here is understood in the broadest sense possible as any act or word in the name of Christ on behalf of others. Ministry is not the function of only those persons who are ordained professional workers in the Church. Ministry is the function of every follower of Christ. Hence, a school for ministry is concerned about the ministry of lay people in the Church as well as about that of the professional workers. It is concerned about ministry in the world and to the world as well as about ministry in the Church and for the Church. There are countless forms that the ministry of the Church can take. All the many kinds of ministry are directly or indirectly the concern of a school for ministry.

In actual fact, however, those who are directly educated by the seminary are, for the most part, candidates for professional ministry in the Church. The seminary may offer occasional courses for lay people in the Church but most of its students will be those who expect to be professional workers in the Church. Through these professional workers in the Church the school for ministry indirectly extends its influence to the laity of the Church. In a word, the school for ministry educates those who themselves will minister and who in turn may educate others to minister.

Recently, there has been a development of various kinds of "specialized ministries" which are also the legitimate concern of the school for ministry. A seminary cannot and should not set arbitrary limits upon the number or kind of ministering vocations that its students may have. The specific educational goals of the theological school should be conceived broadly enough to apply to many kinds of ministering.

The Specific Educational Aims of a Theological School

(a) Development of Persons

There is one fact which makes it possible to have one set of educational goals that apply to students planning on doing several kinds of ministry. This is the fact that all ministry is a ministry of persons to persons. Education for ministry can thus be conceived as the development of students *as persons*, specifically, as persons who intend to minister in one way or another in the name of Christ. The personal qualifications of a minister are the most important factor affecting his ability to minister effectively, no matter what is the peculiar and specific nature of his work. St. Paul stated the matter in a timeless way: "If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy going or a clanging symbol" (1 Corinthians 13:1) To have the right personal qualities is the first requirement in ministering effectively. To help students in their personal development is the first aim of a school for ministry.

It is no simple matter to say what are the right qualities for ministering and to decide how personal development can be assisted. This is another area where the seminary staff and students need to grow indefinitely in their understanding. As a start, however, some general conclusions are possible. If "maturity" is an adequate term to denote the goal of personal development then we may say that the school for ministry aims at helping students grow towards maturity. Further more, maturity can be understood as having three aspects: maturity with respect to oneself; maturity in relation to other; and maturity in the person's relationship with God. This latter aspect of maturity is sometimes called "Christian formation."

Maturity with respect to oneself includes among other things the qualities of freedom from emotional repression, freedom from excessive dependence. Stated positively, a mature person is capable of appropriate emotional expression. He is able to handle anxieties in a wholesome way and he acts for the most part from "inner-directed" motivation. He has internalized certain values and ideas that are expressed in his thinking and behaviour. Maturity includes a measure of consistency or integration in one's thoughts and actions and presupposes a concern for truth in what one says and does. It also entails a vocational self-understanding in which a person realistically accepts responsibility for his own possibilities and limitations.

Maturity in relation to others might be called the quality of "humanity." It must, of course, include the ability to love others. Love can take many forms, some of them strange, but its commoner ones are the qualities of friendliness and sociability, concern for others' well-being and empathy for their feelings. Social maturity for a Christian implies the role of "servant" which means a self-sacrificing style of living that is not a "martyr complex". Maturity in respect to others also implies the ability to trust others and to balance one's rightful independence with dependence on others when it is fitting.

Maturity in a person's relationship with God, or Christian formation, is a subject much under discussion lately in theological education. The manner of a person's explicit relationship with God can vary widely. What is important is that there should be an explicit relationship with God that has a direct bearing on the person's daily living. The development and maintenance of this relationship with God presupposes not only personal discipline in some manner but some experience of God that elicits faithfulness. It is important that students of ministry should learn how to worship both privately and in public so that worship is immediately relevant to their ministering. If this development is to take place it will require more than a course on worship arranged by the seminary. The life of the seminary community both in and outside of teaching hours will have to be conducive to growth in proper piety which is not a spurious religiosity.

Continuous thought and effort are needed to make the curriculum and life of the seminary community effective in fostering personal development in all its aspects in both staff and students. Some specific steps are implied, one of which is the provision of every student with a *staff advisor*. With his advisor each student can share his experience of seminary education. In turn, these advisors need to meet regularly to share information, but not the students' confidences, and to cooperate in bettering each student's experience of seminary education. Another step might be to provide the students with an opportunity to gain experience in *group dynamics* and to undertake *sensitivity training* under properly trained leadership.

Personal maturity depends to no small extent on the breadth of a person's experience. There should, therefore,

be no attempt to shelter a seminary student from the full impact of the many values and points of view that may be encountered in a university. On the contrary, students should be encouraged to broaden their outlook by taking *as wide a range of subjects as possible* in their first years of study. At the same time, the seminary has to be concerned about the morale of the students throughout their course and, for this reason, it would be helpful to offer a course in the first year that would "enlist the motivations that led the student to the school"¹ A *course on the nature of the ministry* might help students to begin thinking more deeply about their vocational objectives and about how their present educational tasks are related to it.

Personal maturity, it was noted, includes the ability to be free and responsible for oneself. This implies that the curriculum should allow individual students as much as possible to shape their own training along the lines of their own vocational objectives. A *core curriculum* might be suggested which aims at covering the essentials for any professional ministry. Beyond this, the curriculum should contain *as many options as possible*. In consultation with his staff advisor a student could help to decide the scope of his own curriculum. The staff would have control over the sequence and distribution of the curriculum, that is, the order in which courses are offered and the weight of credit assigned to each course. The staff can thus try to schedule courses so as best to maintain the students steady progress toward the realization of the school's aims.

Examinations can be a misleading incentive since they are easily conceived as an end in themselves and not as an integral part of the vocation of ministering. An undue emphasis on the importance of examinations can subvert the maturity of students by replacing their sense of vocational responsibility with a largely meaningless anxiety about a largely meaningless success. Examinations should be limited, if possible, to a set of *comprehensive examinations* at the end of a student's education in the seminary. These examinations might be simply graded pass or fail to reduce further the emphasis on temporary success. The student might then be free and encouraged to regard examinations as a necessary minimum standard of his preparedness for the profession of ministry. By having

1. C.R. Fielding: *Education for Ministry* AATS, 1966, p.146.

the comprehensive examinations at the end of his studies the student is encouraged to keep his knowledge and concern for various subjects alive and growing for at least the period of his seminary education. This might develop habits of study and thought which would lead to the student's continued self-education after he graduates from the seminary.

(b) Theological Orientation

Persons who minister effectively need a good theological orientation as well as professional competence in their chosen vocation. Theological orientation is not unrelated to personal development since it entails a knowledge of the elements of one's own faith as well as some experience of the spiritual realities which have been the lifeblood, so to speak, of the Christian community throughout history. Theological orientation is a kind of self-understanding and social empathy as well as being a highly specialized academic discipline. In any case, it is one of the major aims of a school of theology to develop the student's abilities to think theologically in order to minister more effectively.

The goal is, specifically, to equip students with the categories of thought that will enable them to interpret the ever-changing data of their experience in a theological way. This requires an integrated theological perspective which understands the dynamics of theological thought and which is able in new situations to see the systematic implications of the ideas that are involved.

Such an orientation of thought presupposes a knowledge of the origins and history of the Christian faith. *The Bible* and the *history of the Christian Church* are at once the source and criteria for the validity of present theological ideas. The student should also have the chance to study *contemporary theologians* so as to be able to identify and place his own theological convictions in the current stages of the development of theology. By creating in the student an active interest in contemporary theology, the school might encourage him to continue keeping abreast of developments in the future.

Theological orientation is of essential importance when the need arises to apologize for the Christian faith. The best apology might well be a profound exposition of the realities with which theology deals. However, the study of *psychology of religion* and *philosophy of religion*

can provide students with terminology and insights that will, perhaps, add an apologetic perspective to their theological orientation.

In view of the urgent need for greater unity in the Church there should be a stress on *ecumenical theology*. Similarly, the need for better understanding in the world at large suggests the need for the study of *comparative religions*.

The fundamental nature and purpose of the Church could be described in terms of mission as well as in terms of ministering. This fact should be prominent in theological orientation. Therefore, the *theology of mission* should be included in the curriculum.

(c) Professional Competence

Since ministering takes place in the Church and in the world the school for ministry must try to prepare its students to be professionally competent to minister in both these spheres.

(i) Knowledge of the World

The Church is called to be the servant of the world for the sake of Christ and, therefore, its ministers should understand the ways and concerns of the world. In a sense, this knowledge is part of a theological orientation. However, there is a more practical necessity for this knowledge which is directly related to actual ministering. One cannot understand how the secular would actually function without some knowledge of *sociology, political science, economics, and other sciences*. Furthermore, supervised practical experience would appear to be necessary in such areas as *urban organization, welfare services, labour and management, family court, and all community resources*.

(ii) Ethics

Ministering is invariably involved with complex ethical problems which require the minister to have adequate background in general ethical theory as well as more detailed knowledge of traditional and current Christian thinking about particular problems.

(iii) Christian Education

In one way or another a professional minister is usually involved in educating others for ministry. Specifically, the ordained minister in the pastorate is often the

logical person or else the only one available to train and supervise the Christian education workers in the congregation. For this reason, he should know how to teach the Sunday School teachers and other Christian education leaders and be thoroughly aware of the opportunities and methods of furthering Christian education at every level of the congregation.

(iv) Pastoral Care, Preaching, Liturgy, and Administration

The ordained minister in the pastorate has to be equipped to do the particular functions of his office. These usually include preaching, pastoral care and counselling, administration, and leading in public worship. Hence, the school of theology must offer courses in *pastoral theology, homiletics, liturgics, and Church administration*.

(v) Specialized Ministries

While a small seminary necessarily has only limited resources for teaching the technicalities pertaining to specialized ministries, it nevertheless should do what it can to assist students who are planning for highly specialized vocations. The scope and distribution of curriculum should be altered in individual cases so as to be as suitable as possible for the particular vocation. Perhaps, in the university setting, courses might be taken in other departments which would be suitable preparation for specialized ministries.

Other Considerations Related to Education for the Ministry

(a) Integration of Theoretical and Practical Subjects

In the actual teaching of students it is important that "theory must inform and direct practice, and practice must in turn aid in the critical evaluation and improvement of theory."² No subject in the curriculum should oversimply be regarded as strictly theoretical or strictly practical. Specifically, the academic subjects such as Biblical studies, Church history, and theology should be taught "so that the student is encouraged and enabled actually to form his ministry by the doctrine of Christ."³ To realize this objective some course might be taught with *team teaching* in which teachers of various subjects cooperate. Other means, too, should be sought to achieve the integration of

2. *Ibid* p.9.

3. *Ibid* p11.

all subject matter in the curriculum. Nothing is more important for this purpose than that the teachers themselves should have a clear conception of the necessity of integrating all subjects, both for the benefit of the subjects themselves and in order to prepare the students for ministering.

(b) Concern for Approach and Method in Teaching

In order that education for ministry should be as efficient and effective as possible, the school for ministry should try to have the best available learning theory reflected in its teaching methods and general approach to education. For example, the seminary should try to put into practice the widely held conviction among present educationists that experience must precede understanding, and that helping students to discover for themselves is a more effective way of teaching than merely telling them. Another significant development in learning theory appears to be the establishment of the fact that greater integration of related subjects produces greater results in learning. Apparently, the wider the context of a course and the more all the relevant implications are drawn out then the better the subject will be learned. This and similarly established facts of learning theory should be carefully applied to the curriculum and teaching approach of a seminary. It might be helpful to have one member of the staff given special responsibility for leading the other members in the study of development in learning theory.

(c) Organization of Field Work

This subject is immediately related to the previous two paragraphs. Field work is both a method of learning and a means of integrating theoretical and practical subject matter in the context of ministering. It cannot then be regarded lightly. It requires careful planning and close supervision. There should be a Director of Field Work whose responsibilities include leading the seminary staff in a continuing study of the possibilities of field work as well as coordinating the actual supervision of the student's field work.

(d) Planning the Use of Time Blocks

It has been observed that the student's seminary education falls into a number of clearly distinguishable

segments or blocks of time. These include the time before the student begins his first year as well as each academic year and each period between the academic years. Thus, there are eight or ten blocks of time which can be utilized in specific ways to further the education of the student. For example, the first academic year is especially important, having the need to orientate the student in many aspects of higher education. The use of the periods between the academic years is also of vital importance for broadening the student's experience in more practical areas.