

Are Pentecostal Seminaries a Good Idea?

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Dan Ayleshire, the head of the Association of Theological Schools, the accrediting agency for most North American seminaries, was asked in an interview last year: “What is the major issue facing mainline theological educators?” Ayleshire’s answer was trenchant: “I think the major issue is this: What is the value of seminary-educated leadership?” He observed that “alternative patterns of education and new routes to ordination” are emerging. With the increasing dominance of Evangelical (and we assume he includes Pentecostal and charismatic) “new paradigm” mega-churches, the “relevance of theological education” becomes a very live issue. Increasingly, Ayleshire noted, seminaries must decisively answer the recurring question, Do seminaries really add “enough value to religious leadership that it is worth the effort, time and money?” (*ChrCent*.120:4, p.35).

Others, such as Timothy Dearborn, Director of the Seattle Association for Theological Education, share these misgivings more emphatically. “There is no other professional organization in the world that is as functionally incompetent as . . . seminaries. Most of our students emerge from seminaries less prepared than they entered, biblically uncertain, spiritually cold, theologically confused, relationally calloused and professionally unequipped.” Recently, The Murdock Charitable Trust funded a major study of seminary effectiveness. Graduates who became pastors “found that 70 – 80% of their seminary education did not apply” to their duties in church ministry. Only “48% of the students believed that seminary education had impacted their personal life and values to a significant degree.”

The disconnect between seminary professors and lay persons in the pew is even greater, where disagreement on the five most important characteristics of an ideal pastor was stark (Morgan and Giles, “Re-Engineering the Seminary: Crisis of Credibility Forces Change,” *CT* 38, p.75).

Ranking	Lay People	Pastors	Professors
First	Spirituality	Relational Skills	Theological Knowledge
Second	Relational Skills	Management Skills	Character
Third	Character	Communication Skills	Leadership Skills
Fourth	Communication Skills	Spirituality	Communication Skills
Fifth	Theological Knowledge	Theological Knowledge	Counseling Skills

Perhaps most striking, where “spirituality” appeared first on the parishioners’ list, it failed to appear at all in the professors’. Accordingly, incoming seminarians, described in a 1995 ATS study, also ranked spirituality (“Devotional habits”) of first importance in their *expectations* of the seminary experience. Exit surveys at graduation indicated that their *actual* seminary effectiveness in meeting that need ranked 9th of 14 categories. To be fair, however, ATS has more recently made spiritual formation a priority in seminary accreditation, though just what that spiritual formation consists of may be problematic to many Pentecostals and charismatics.

Those in Pentecostal seminaries (or Bible colleges) may rightly respond, “What does all this have to do with us?” Unlike so-called “mainline” seminaries which generate as many or more books and journal articles than graduates into full-time ministry and whose professors often take a subversive pride in “stretching the faith” of their students—often past the breaking point, Pentecostals, by contrast, see a phenomenally high percentage of their graduates in ministry while expressing satisfaction with the seminary experience. Our seminaries are growing—my own Regent University School of Divinity is poised to break into the top ten largest in N. America; the spiritual vitality seems positive, and the students generally say so. Yet, episodically we hear (if we are listening) how students are collapsing spiritually even as they are studying how to minister to others. A recurring complaint is that they graduate with much less spiritual vitality than when they arrived. Perhaps the danger lies not merely in where we are, but in where we are going.

Could it be that the extreme reluctance of Pentecostal leadership to bow to pressures for the establishment of theological seminaries has merit? Instead of dismissing them as anti-intellectual, perhaps we might pause to consider if these leaders were onto something. Certainly, the history of institutions offering formal training for ministry in N. America has been a ghastly trajectory from spiritual vitality to virtual agnosticism. One of our admissions staff recently reported sitting in on an Ivy League divinity school program for their incoming freshman class. A panel of nine current students provided part of the “orientation.” Eight of the nine (offered as guides or role models) made a special point of affirming his or her own homosexuality, while the ninth, a foreign student, seemed apologetic that he was not similarly gifted. One can only imagine how this presentation would impact the incoming ministerial students’ view of God, scripture, human nature, sin, redemption and ministry. Yet implicitly or explicitly this institution is held out as the ideal to be emulated by even Pentecostal professors.

So we first need to ask why is it that seminaries go bad? Then, what can be done to prevent our system of training Christian workers from following the almost inevitable path of decline? I would suggest there are three crucial issues to decide for those of us in the business of ministerial training: 1) the conflict of interest in epistemology, which shape 2) the goals of the institution, which will produce 3) the forms and settings of instruction. Because of space constraints we can only treat the first issue before mentioning the other two.

The conflict of interest in the seminary over epistemology has been a fairly hot topic recently. Arguably, the most influential works in the area are those by David Kelsey: *To Understand God Truly: What’s Theological about Theological Education?* (1992) and its prequel, *Between Athens and Berlin: The Theological Education Debate* (1993). The latter offers a survey of contributors to the debate which Kelsey hoped to resolve in his first work. Both books treat the overriding tension in theological education today between what he regards are two incompatible models of Christian theological education.

The so-called “Athens” philosophy of theological training emblemizes a Greek system of *paideia*, which sought to cultivate the “knowledge of the Good itself” the highest or divine principle of the universe, the apprehension of which produced an inner conversion and an outer expressions of virtues (*Athens & Berlin*, 9). Early Church apologists (perhaps uncritically) snapped up this concept as the essence of Christian nurture and growth. It is clear that from the sub-Apostolic period onward, Christianity became a religion of piety and ethics, likely shaped from this “Athens” model of Christian education. In practice, *paideia* moves from instruction to insight to application (the strategy of the sermon or the Sunday School class). In seminaries,

however, the application is more assumed than developed and rarely assessed and placed in the all-important transcript of grades.

The “Berlin” model of theological education, by contrast, follows a research-oriented (*wissenschaftlich*) system that emerged prominently in the University of Berlin in the first decades of the 1800s. Theology was included in the curriculum of this purely “scientific” institution only on the pleas of Schleiermacher who insisted that theology could be studied and taught from the same detached, uncommitted stance as, say, astronomy or physics. Even so-called “practical” theology could be reduced to scientific observation, he claimed, without making any expressions of the study “normative” or binding on anyone. Thanks to Schleiermacher, then, who never met a Christian principle he wouldn’t compromise, theology was relativized to any of its historical expressions; the teaching of theology became a descriptive, rather than prescriptive enterprise. This “Berlin” model of theological education, Kelsey points out, quickly spread throughout Christendom and became a dominant feature of training pastors in N. America.

The practical outcome of this Berlin model is that the controlling goal of academic prominence and the idolatry of academic careerism—all accelerated by the system of tenure, promotion and financial rewards, has choked out a careful concern for the stated mission of the seminary: ministry effectiveness in the graduates. Christian scholarship, I would affirm, is an important and noble undertaking. It has generated wonderful grounding for the Pentecostal/charismatic revival. Perhaps the university, where the rules are somewhat less ambiguous, rather than the seminary, is the more appropriate venue for Christian scholarship.

After reviewing a number of theorists who struggle mightily to deal with the Athens-Berlin tension, Kelsey rightly concludes that the two systems are ultimately irreconcilable. At first sight, it is tempting superficially to resolve the tension by use of the more popular expression “head and heart,” and then to claim further that we simply need a “balance” of the two for effective training of Christian workers. Certainly this is the consistently attempted but failed approach in ministerial training for centuries. There is a profoundly Christian, even biblical reason for this failure.

In Kelsey’s work and in the highly abstract works on the philosophies of theological education that he surveys, there is an astonishing, even studied disregard of scripture as input for the discussion. Ironically, the Berlin model provides the epistemological rules for adjudicating the validity of the very model that Kelsey finds so problematic. But Pentecostal and charismatic educators have done little better to provide a clear way out of Kelsey’s dilemma in a thought-out program that is demonstrably normative and authentically Christian. I would insist that process begins with a biblical grounding.

The central reason for the failure of seminaries and the academic approach to the training of Christian workers is that it uses an epistemology that consistently and with overwhelming frequency has been rejected by the witness of Scripture itself: the revelatory wisdom/knowledge of God *vs.* human resources. Placed as prominently as possible in the narratives of human contact with God is this conflict between the two ways of knowing (then living). The temptation to the first Adam and the Second is identical in essence: does one “know” in a revelatory relationship with God, or by one’s human resources and principles (Gen 3; Mt 4//Lk 4). The “callings” of the great figures of Scripture were all intensely revelatory experiences that introduced the worldview of God *vis-à-vis* that of human culture. A Pentecostal hermeneutic would suggest these calling experiences would be ideal, if not in a general sense normative for the reader. Both testaments stress the practice of “inquiring of the Lord”—seeking revealed *vs.*

human wisdom for the conduct of life. The thesis of Romans appears in the first chapter which identifies the clash of the two ways of knowing: “the righteous person shall live by faith [“hearing” God and obeying],” vs. the outcome of the denial of God’s revelation in the remainder of the chapter, e.g., the student “orientation” story, above. The central characteristic of a “son” of God is that he is “led by the Spirit”—a revelatory, even prophetic phenomenon. Similarly, 1 Corinthians 1-3 is a strenuous debate about the “Berlin” (competitive human wisdom) approach to transmitting Christianity vs. the revealed wisdom of God, the hearing of faith (so Gal 3). (This central conflict is discussed in more detail in my SPS paper: <http://home.regent.edu/ruthven/2worlds.html>). Indeed, it can be shown that the central biblical theme, “New Covenant,” carries a strong element of the “prophethood” (the normative reception of revelation, i.e., the life of faith) of all believers (Gräbe, *Der neue Bund in der frühchristlichen Literatur*).

In view of the enormous importance of this theme of conducting one’s life by a “hearing of faith,” where do we find a corresponding emphasis in our seminary or Bible college curricula? Have we replaced the NT hearing from God with the technicalities of hermeneutics, theologians and history? This shift happened in normative Judaism: the decision, “it is no longer in heaven” refers to the movement from revelation to Torah-study as *the* means of discerning God’s mind. Two millennia later, B.B. Warfield, as a spokesman for Evangelicalism in America actually claimed that only through hermeneutics can one “discern the mind of the Spirit.” No, the important clash of epistemology is not between Athens and Berlin, but between those two and the New Jerusalem, the city of the exalted Christ equipping his ministers via New Covenant revelation and spiritual gifts.

Biblical Curriculum and Training Methods

Against the rationalism of traditional seminary, NT disciples were repeatedly directed to divine revelation and power as the central experience of their training. Very briefly, if we examine the programmatic and summary statements of Jesus’ ministry, e.g., Lk 4:18; Acts 10:38; 1 Jn 3:8, the Gospels’ emphases upon healing, exorcism and revelation in the public expression of that ministry, the explicit commissions he made to his disciples (who were to replicate his life and ministry closely, Mt 9; Mk 3:14-15; Lk 9, 10), and finally, to observe what it is they actually did, say, in the Book of Acts, 27.2% of which is miracle story—more than all the sermons and speeches—not to mention the highly charismatic summary statements of Paul’s ministry (Acts 15; Rom 15:19; 2 Cor 12:12; 1 Th 1:5) we find a profile of activities that is breathtakingly far removed from modern seminary curricula. The central training of Jesus to his disciples, and they to theirs, in faith, prayer, exorcism and healing, rarely find a place in a seminary graduate’s transcript, much less as core educational experiences.

If such courses do appear on the transcript, it is usually because the seminary has reduced the subject matter to a “scientific” study, based on the Berlin or Athens model, consisting of intellectually grasping the concepts (*contra* 1 Cor 2:5 “that your faith not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the [miracle] power of God.”). Like learning to swim (by actually being in the water), learning God’s power occurs best via an appropriate teaching modality—in real ministry contexts of human need.

Space does not permit laying out a radical (in the sense of “returning to the root”), biblical reconstruction of how we could train Christian workers, though some are attempting something like this, e.g., the Group of 12 in Bogota, or to a less comprehensive degree, the Christian Healing Ministries in Jacksonville, FL. Slightly more traditional church-based ministry training schools are springing up by the hundreds, if not thousands, to fill a perceived gap left by existing institutions.

Pentecostal and charismatic seminaries are modeled explicitly (via the unchallenged dicta of ATS) on a profile of Protestant theology, which denies the explicit pattern of ministry training and commissions in the NT (see “The ‘Imitation of Christ’ in Christian Tradition: Its Missing Charismatic Emphasis.” *JPT* 16:1, 60-77). This highly-evolved and truncated theology is further distorted by the teaching modalities of Berlin and Athens into a state of affairs unrecognizable in the normative New Testament patterns. But we have already eaten of the fruit. Is it too late to spit it out? Or has it been digested and become a very part of who we are with all of its consequences? Can the new wine of a biblical, Pentecostal/charismatic ministry formation be poured into the Berlin-Athens wineskins? In any case the Spirit of God will realize His goals, either with us or without us. So to answer our question: Are Pentecostal/charismatic seminaries a good idea? Perhaps, but only with the most radical and biblically based reform.