Theological Education and Theology of Education

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Theological education – or at least theological education as we have known it in recent centuries – is in deep crisis. There are many signs of the crisis, and I need not dwell on them. Suffice it to say that in recent years the oldest school of theology in the country has decided to close its doors and merge into another; that a school that fifty years ago was one of the flagships of theological education in the country has found itself unable to keep its famous library and in need to reduce its physical plant; that major Protestant denominations are debating whether they have too many schools of theology and should close or merge some of them; that quite a few schools all over the country are reducing staff in an effort to make ends meet.

The crisis is not limited to the United States. The situation may be somewhat different in other parts of the world that I do not know well, but in Latin America one sees signs of a similar crisis. In Buenos Aires, the oldest and most prestigious Protestant seminary in all of Latin America is now closed, and practically all that remains of it is its excellent library. In Mexico, an ambitious plan developed over half a century ago, to create a theological community involving the major

seminaries of the nation, has become a shadow of the original plan. In Puerto Rico a united seminary that is over a century old, and that once was the cutting edge of theological reflection on the island, has reduced its faculty to an absolute minimum, and does not have the resources for the proper upkeep of its library and its facilities.

And the crisis is not only financial, it is also demographical. If I may put it bluntly, most of the churches that are losing membership are also the churches that have traditionally required a seminary education for ordination. The one significant exception is the Roman Catholic Church, and the main reason why it is not dwindling like the others is immigration. Let me hasten to say that I don't point this out in order to support those who say that theological education somehow takes away commitment and zeal. The matter is much more complicated than that. Probably the most significant factor is simply that the birth rate among those who compose the traditional "mainline" denominations has dropped rapidly, and the average age of their membership has risen dramatically – and this further diminishes the birth rate among the members of those churches. Another factor is that many of the children brought up in those denominations are no longer active in them. (I do not know the statistics, and I am not a

statistician, but all you have to do is visit one of those churches, sit at the back, and notice how much white hair you see.) The net result is that most of the denominations that have traditionally required seminary education now need fewer pastors, and therefore fewer seminary students. Furthermore, in several of those denominations alternate routes to ordained ministry have been developing rapidly –routes that do not require a seminary education.

This means that quite likely what we now see as a crisis cannot be solved by better fund-raising, and even more that what we now see is not really the crisis in its fullness, but only the first signs of what in a few decades will be a radically changed situation. Quite likely, most major denominations will cut the number of their seminaries. Some that survive because they have large endowments –and there are denominational seminaries with very significant endowments– will become less and less denominational as the demand for pastors and other leaders in their denominations continues to decrease and will have to find other ways to be of service. And the list goes on and on.

This may seem to be a very dismal picture. But my intention in making these points –points which should be obvious to most of you– is not to cause dismay, but rather to stress the point that radical change is needed. Raising more money will not suffice. It will not suffice to revise the curriculum. It will not suffice to develop new ways of recruitment. It will not even suffice to create specific programs for minorities. All these things may be necessary. But none of them, and not all of them together, will be an adequate response to the looming crisis. Simply patching up the holes will not suffice. Actually, the patch itself may prove stronger than the old cloth and make the hole even bigger.

But this crisis is really a great opportunity for creative developments in theological education. Precisely because patching and mending will not do, we are now at a time when significant changes are possible. Institutions are by their very nature conservative and reluctant to change. But the crisis itself will force them to think in new ways –perhaps even making them feel compelled to turn to new ways by their own will to survive. (And allow me to add parenthetically that this may not be the best of motives, but I will still take it!)

Having said all that I hasten to point out that the very framework of what I have been saying to this point is too narrow. Quite purposively, I have been discussing theological education within the framework in which most people think of that subject, that is, of theological education as that which takes place primarily in seminaries and schools of theology –of theological education as the academic means by which we prepare people for leadership in the church.

What is the purpose of theological education? It is now almost 56 years since I began teaching, and as I reflect on the answers I have heard, and the answers I have given, the list is long: theological education is passing on the tradition; theological education is similar to any professional education; its purpose is to provide prospective church leaders with the tools they need; theological education is formation; and so on. But until very recent times that conversation took place mostly within the context of seminaries and schools of theology, and was practically limited to questions such as, what is our role? How are we to understand ourselves? What is our place vis-a-vis the church and the academy?

Today, I would like to begin at a different point, asking who is or are the intended recipients of

theological education. Obviously, at a certain level there are many different sorts of recipients. Any seminary probably has students who are there because they hope to serve as church leaders, and feel they need to know more; there are some who are seeking a deeper truth, further understanding, a connection between faith and knowledge; there are some for whom their studies are a stepping stone for further studies; there are some who are already in positions of leadership, and feel the need for further education; and there are some who do not really wish to be there and do not even think it is necessary, but have been told by their church authorities that they have to be there.

But I submit to you that if we are to understand theological education in a fuller sense, and to use that fuller sense as we look to the future, we must no longer think that the final recipients, the object of theological education, are those who happen to be our students – be it in seminaries or in Bible institutes. The final recipient, the object of theological education, is the church at large. The final goal of theological education is to equip the people of God for participation in the mission of God. The real cutting edge of theological education is not in my study or in my classroom, but in the thousands of communities of faith where the people of

God learn and practice the faith, in order to go out and join the mission of God. The main reason why our students are in seminary, or in graduate school, or in a bible institute, is not to learn more, but to better teachers, both as to content and as to methodology. This certainly does not mean that they do not have to learn. Otherwise we risk being, as Pope Leo said of Eutyches, as those who "stand out as teachers of error because they were never disciples of truth" (Ep. 28.1). We must learn, yes; but the reason for our learning is to teach. And our students must learn, yes; but their reason for learning is to teach. Were we to take this point seriously, it would radically change both our pedagogy and the criteria by which we evaluate success.

Allow me to explain what I mean by means of a brief autobiographical note. Beginning with elementary school and eventually continuing to Yale University, I had an excellent education. For that I am grateful, and if it were not for that education I would not be where I am today. But as I now look back at it I am increasingly convinced that what was an excellent education was also a terrible education. The deplorable side of my education probably began much earlier, but my first memory to that effect was when I was in third grade. I had learned all sorts of things

about subordinate clauses and punctuation signs –colons and semicolons, parentheses and dashes– and I wrote an essay showing off all my recently acquired knowledge. The first sentence was almost a page long! My teacher was impressed! And she congratulated me!

My father, who was both a novelist and a wise man, read my short essay, gave it back to me and said, what does it mean? I explained it to him, and what I said in my own words, the words of an eight-year-old, made much more sense than what I had so carefully written!

At the time the significance of my father's comment was lost on me. As I grew older, I learned that, when he was given the opportunity to choose among a number of government positions, he had requested that the Department of Agriculture create an office whose task would be to translate scientific findings about agriculture into such a format that small farmers could understand and apply them. But when I was in the third grade, I did not really know that this was my father's passion, nor the point of his comment on my paper. So, inspired by my teacher and her response to my essay, from that day on I studied, and I wrote to impress my teachers and those above me. The process continued through high school, university, and seminary, and

graduate school. And at the end I received a PhD in which the final exercise was a dissertation I wrote to impress three people!

Again, I am grateful for that education. But as I now look back on it the best image, I can use to describe it is that of a stairway with very steep steps, where at each step you try to impress those above you so they will pull you up to the next level –until you reach the pinnacle and celebrate how far you have gone.

I realize this is not the whole picture. There are many other dimensions to my career as a student, and there were many other dimensions to those whom I met along the way. You may even say that what I have drawn is a caricature. But a caricature is not altogether false. Trump's hair may not be exactly as cartoonists depict it; but he clearly does not wear a crew cut! And Jimmy Carter's teeth cannot be as big as cartoonists show them; but he does smile!

If what I said earlier is true, and the intended recipient of theological education is the church at large, this means that we must change our pedagogy and the manner in which we evaluate the

work of students. If our student is not the intended final recipient, but rather an agent for the theological education of the church, what is important is not just what a student learns, but also –and probably foremost– how that student is able to teach the church at large. If what is important is that students learn so they can move to the next wrung of the ladder, we shall evaluate their work on the basis of how much they know, and how they can reflect on it. But if our goal is not simply that students learn, but also and most importantly that they can take part in the theological education of the entire church, then we must find ways to evaluate their studies that go beyond exams whose purpose is to find out how much they know and research and reflection papers that show their ability to move on. And this is not limited to the so-called "practical" fields. Suppose, for instance, that I teach a student the history of the Council of Nicea, what is more important, that the student can name all the major players and their participation in events, or that the student be able to show a community of faith what is significant about Nicea for its life of faith? What is more important, that a student be able to recite and describe the various schools of ethical thought, or that the student be able to help a faith community learn how to deal with ethical issues?

If the answer is the latter, this would seem to demand radical changes not only in our individual pedagogy as teachers, but also in the way those who teach are evaluated and in the way we evaluate ourselves. Again, somewhat oversimplifying things, I believe it is fair to say that in general faculty are evaluated primarily on the basis of what they publish, what they know, and how they teach. All of these are important. But much more important is how they teach to teach, how they encourage and help students to teach. If the ultimate recipient of my teaching is the people of God, then if my students learn much, and even if they can be critically creative in their reflection, and if they can write great papers, but cannot teach the people of God, I have fallen short of my goal. In other words, the same principle of evaluation that applies to my students, how well can they teach, applies also to me: how well I can teach them to teach.

This will require, among other things, that we take more seriously the action-reflection-action model of education. Education seems to have come to a fork in the road and followed two different paths: if you wish to be a carpenter, or a plumber, or an auto mechanic, you learn by doing, and then you may study the theory in order to understand and improve what you are already doing; in most other fields –certainly in most modern higher education– you first learn

the theory, and then you apply it. As we all know, both of these approaches exist in the church today. To take preaching as an example, some feel called to preach, go out and start preaching, and perhaps eventually read a few books on preaching. I am sure we have all sat on a pew and cringed at what some of these people were saying. Others are not even allowed to get near the pulpit until they have studied homiletic and hermeneutical theory, written a dozen sermons –not for a congregation, but for a preaching class–, and then finally go out and try to do it. I am sure many of us have also cringed listening to a perfectly well constructed sermon delivered by a preacher who seemed to be hanging on to the manuscript for dear life.

In these last thirty or so years, I have been pleased to note that there is much discussion in theological education circles about a third model –one that does not favor practice over theory, nor theory over practice. This is good. It has long been the prevalent method in many bible institutes. But at the same time, I am concerned that even when it comes to this action-reflection-action model we seem to feel the need to examine it from every angle, to make sure we understand every single element fully, before we dare put it into effect, or make it a fundamental consideration in our development of curricula, faculty hiring, etc. In other

words, while we talk a good talk on the circularity of action-reflection-action we cannot walk the walk because we have to make sure we have the theory right!

Obviously, all of this has important implications for the institutions that still today consider themselves to be the main vehicle for theological education –for the same institutions that today are in crisis. It requires new curricula –not just new lists and sequences of courses, but really new curricula whose purpose will be to enable both students and professors to deliver theological education to the people of God. It implies new venues for teaching, where students actually have the opportunity to teach and teachers have the opportunity to see their students teach. It will require new programs in mentorship, where professors see themselves as mentors of others so that they too may become mentors. This is why right now, jointly with this assembly, and thanks to a grant from the FTE, AETH is working with a group of youth leaders on a pilot mentoring program, with the hope that it can be improved and replicated for the benefit of the entire enterprise of theological education. And, even more, what is required is that all this will not be simply a marginal, optional element in theological education –something we do because we have received a major grant– but will be at the very center of the curriculum and of

an institution's view of itself.

If I may change my imagery, and leave aside the stairway, at least for a moment, I have said elsewhere that some thirty or forty years back, as a group of us began discussing the need for more Hispanic participation in theological education, we spoke of the need to build a pipeline leading people through college, then to seminary, and finally to doctoral studies. Please do not misunderstand me. I do not mean to say in any way that we should abandon or diminish any of our many efforts to promote the presence of Latinos and Latinos in every echelon of theological education. There is much work still to be done to promote greater presence and participation of under-represented minorities in all venues of theological education. In this respect, the recent agreement between ATS and AETH (the Association for Hispanic Theological Association) is an important breakthrough. By means of that agreement, the pipeline has been extended, and that is good. But I am no longer certain that the pipeline imagery is adequate. A pipeline is intended to carry its contents –usually water or oil, but in this case students– from one place to the next. Thus, when applied to the issues of theological education, a pipeline implies that the purpose of theological education is to carry students from one level to the next, with as little

leakage as possible and as far as possible. Taken to an extreme, it would seem to imply that the highest measure of success of a seminary is the number of its students who go on to higher studies, and that the highest measure of a PhD program is how far its graduates advance in their careers, and how famous they become.

This may be very well and true in education at large. But *Christian theological* education is all about a very strange man who said, “not so among you.”

This leads me to suggest that, better than a pipeline, we should think about the entire enterprise of theological education as a dripline irrigation hose. This hose carries water just the same as a pipe, but while the success of a pipe is measured by how far the water travels through it, the success of a dripline is measured by how well it irrigates the land through which it runs. Certainly, some water travels farther than the rest, and it is essential that some get to the very last hole; but this does not make it any more valuable, nor is it more important to the dripline than any other water that dripped out along the way.

Back when I was in the third grade, and just about the time that I was composing my masterpiece of convoluted writing, there was in one of our readers a particular story that I found disconcerting. It was simply about two boys who walked past a house. The first did not know how to read, and just passed by. The second was able to read a sign offering a bicycle for free, got the bike, and then went and told the other, “See what I got and you missed because you did not know how to read?” I found it disconcerting, because in church I had not been taught to look at education as a means to get ahead of others.

Many years later, that story came to mind as I learned that at the University of Puerto Rico, across the street from where I was teaching, a famous and well-loved Catholic priest began his graduation address by declaring: “We are gathered here today to dish out thousands of privateer licenses.” Many in the graduating class did not like his words. Nor did the parents who had spent good money to see their children reach this peak! But he had a point. Many of those in the graduating class had studied because they wanted to be able to read the sign and get the free bike –to get a good job and to move up for more money.

That may well be true within the parameters of common life and general education. But part of the task of *Christian theological* education is to build education on the difficult principle, “but not so among you.”

As I reflect on this. I remember the famous words of an educator back in the nineteenth century: “Instruir puede cualquiera; educar, solo quien sea un evangelio vivo” – “Anyone can teach; but to educate you have to be a living gospel.” This may be a bit of an exaggeration, and it certainly is an impossibility. But these words constantly remind me that theological education has to be *evangelical* education –not in the sense in which that word is commonly and improperly used and tossed around today, but in the sense that it must not be content with teaching about the gospel, but must also seek ways to be shaped by the gospel.

So, if we go back to the agreement between ATS and AETH regarding bible institutes, it is important to understand that, if all we have done is to extend the pipeline, we may not have done much of a service to theological education as a whole. Actually, we may even have harmed it by introducing the pipeline model into bible institutes whose long-standing purpose

has not been to get people into the pipeline, but to enable their students to teach and to lead the people of God – institutes that, by design or by necessity, partly because this is how they conceive their mission, and partly because the educational establishment did not acknowledge them, would never think of themselves as part of a pipeline, but rather as a drip-line watering and fertilizing the life of the church.

But there is another possibility. If, by opening schools of theology to a closer connection with bible institutes we are able to bring the drip-line model to the foreground in the self-understanding of theological schools, great changes may follow.

This second alternative is not easy. Money, bibliographical resources, building facilities, social prestige, and many other such advantages are in the hands of the more traditional institutions – that is, of those who see themselves as part of the great educational pipeline. Inertia, the impulse to continue doing things as they have been done so far, will clearly support the pipeline.

This is why the coalition or network of bible institutes being considered in this assembly is so important. Institutes and other similar agencies that for years have provided theological irrigation for the people of God, and now seek ways to improve what they are doing by working with the great theological institutions around them, have to make sure that their vision of an education at the service of the people of God and of the mission of God will not be lost, but will become a voice making itself heard in the most traditional centers of theological indication. No bible institute can do this by itself. AETH cannot do this by itself. But it can be done if we are able to create a network or coalition that will help us think and sharpen our own mission, our own pedagogy, our own practices, and then take all this to the more traditional forms of theological litigation as a gift that we bring to them in the name of God, so that the drip-hose imagery will make way within theological addition and the knowledge, and justice, and love of God will reach to all corners.

This network or coalition will help us improve and amplify the resources that we now have, to develop online courses from which all may benefit, to produce printed as well as online material for the teaching and upbuilding of the entire people of God, to discuss the challenges

and opportunities that will come before us, to help our teachers become more knowledgeable, and to widen the circle of our students. And it was also helpful so that our voice may be here throughout the world of theological litigation.

But let us make sure that we do not do this for ourselves or simply so that our particular institutions may enjoy greater prestige. We are to do it out of the conviction that the Lord who brought us to this hour has done so with a purpose, that we have been blessed so that we may bless others, that we have received grace so that we may graciously give, that we have learned so that we may share what we know, that we are not here to serve ourselves nor to magnify our institutions, but rather because we have heard and we wish to follow the guidance of a voice that tells us “but not so among you.”