THE GOAL OF A "THEOLOGICAL" EDUCATION

Virgil Warren, PhD

People have different reasons for pursuing an education. (a) Education for knowledge has been considered a German emphasis. The goal consists of accuracy and completeness in any field of study. If anything develops out of that knowledge, well and good; but the stress falls on knowledge for its own sake and the love for learning as such.

What has been regarded as a British emphasis is (b) education for culture. The goal here consists of fulfilling expectancies associated with one's position in the social structure. Cultured people should know their way around in the world, be able to converse intelligently about what goes on there, and be able to place themselves and their society in the proper historical niche. The upper classes serve as tradition bearers who contribute to the stability of the present social structure. As a primary function, education reinforces social position.

The American distinctive has a stronger element of (c) education for use. The goal in this pragmatic emphasis is to know information as it pertains to a person's work or "quality of life." It does not mean that everything must be directly usable to be valuable; rather, it means that knowledge always connects with practical ends.

Theological education certainly falls under education for use. Theology strives to see a unified whole. It deals with Christian truth topically more than exegetically. Theology wants to see the truth itself instead of being content to follow a line of thought in a book of the Bible.

Out of regard for wholeness, expressions are used that connect certain areas of concern with the ultimate frame of reference—God. The "theology of leisure," for example, connects the use of leisure time with the ultimate concerns of God. The same can be said about a theology of wealth, a theology of leadership, a theology of education. Similarly, seminaries offer courses in "practical theology," which studies how the knowledge of God can most effectively affect the behavior and relationships of people. The word *theology* is used for the study of God himself; then theology refers to topics studied in relationship to him.

Within the framework of education for use, people participate in at least two levels. (1) Recognition follows along the presentation without much intention to log the information. Hearers are rather passively involved as observers. There is little deliberate effort to retain, so hearers remember what "strikes" them. This level of learning occurs mostly in listening to sermons and in personal conversations. Nothing is written down for later retrieval even though people realize they will retain only a small percent. They suppose that what is important will "stick."

There are values, actually, to such "light" learning. For one thing, it can motivate. Normally people already know what they should do. They need continued encouragement to do it. Light learning can confirm. People do not try to remember a whole line of thought; they are satisfied with remembering the conclusion. If they knew and believed it before, they feel more confident about it now because of evidence that made sense as they listened, because someone they respect defended the belief, or because it fits with their other convictions.

Many activists take a recognition approach to education. In the course of a presentation, they notice practical pieces of information immediately useful to Christian life and service. They find it difficult to take interest in the theory behind the practice, but they make a little go a long way by using repeatedly what they do know. If some need for explanation comes along, they do their best to create an explanation or they ask someone about it, get the answer, and get on with their work again. They learn what they recognize as immediately useful. Education for them is more like grazing than mowing. They take a bit here and there to feed themselves for doing something.

A "theological education" has more in mind, however, than these useful things. Its aim is (2) generation. It enables people to "describe" to other people what they themselves know. In light of his imminent martyrdom, Paul described the ongoing education process for the church by telling Timothy, *"What you have heard from me . . . commit to faithful people who can in turn teach others"* (2 Timothy **2**:2). First, Paul's statement defines the theological student as a "faithful" people, those who demonstrates proper character as well as those who can be entrusted with responsibility to serve. Besides that, they must be "able to teach," which implies a level of awareness and a facility for presentation. To carry on the multiplication process, theology students must be equipped to generate the content of Christian understanding, not just recognize it when they see it.

Second, Paul's statement defines the theological enterprise. To teach, people must (a) know theory as well as have skills; otherwise, they will not know how to generalize beyond the specifics that scripture mentions. Too many new moral issues and contemporary concepts simply must be evaluated and decided on to leave biblical study at the level of direct assertion. "Theological interpretation" requires faithful people to extract principles from particulars so they can generalize to contemporary dilemmas.

"Biblical positivism," on the other hand, contents itself with affirming the statements of scripture without venturing to explain their meaning. While such a practice seems safe, it accomplishes little because it repeats words without conveying meaning. Knowing theory gets at the "meaning" of things—the connection between parts, between parts and whole, between causes and consequence—and enables us to generalize to current needs that revelation does not address.

To teach faithful people, people must be able to (b) see the big picture as well as understand its parts. Having an overall grasp of Christian truth makes it possible to see relationships between parts, judge the relative importance of each one, and determine whether matters are germane to Christian concerns. Continually trying to work at the detailed level causes Christians to stress secondary things and to center their interests in the wrong places, because they cannot get a good sense of proportion. In fact, a general perspective is often necessary before some individual matters come into proper focus. These cases illustrate the give-and-take that occurs between exegesis that leads to overview and overview that elucidates other exegetical particulars.

A capable teacher needs to (c) organize for presentation as well as understand subject matter. Even as many people can do but do not understand well, so others understand but cannot teach well. A faithful person who can teach others must structure presentation to achieve clarity. A good pianist may not be a good piano teacher. Even as learning requires a deliberate act beyond hearing, so teaching requires structuring beyond knowing. There are no shortcuts to learning for teaching.

A theological education necessarily includes (d) the more advanced matters of the faith along with the preliminaries (Hebrews **5**:11-**6**:13). We must understand these matters, not only as a safeguard against temptation through persecution, but also as a basis for articulating them to others in trying times (1 Timothy **4**:16). Such understanding needs to be "part of us" because we minister out of what we consciously know. We should not expect to field hard questions by sheer creativity on the "spur of the moment" or suppose that we can learn what we need to know "on the wing." Preparation ahead of time lets us concentrate on issues aside from the "heat of the moment" and the pressure of time.

A theological education is concerned to do more than describe the faith; it is concerned to (3) "prove" it. Theological education learns more than what relates to conversion; it concerns itself also with growth (Hebrews **5** and the meat of the word). To persevere to the end, we need a growing confidence in the gospel's truthfulness as well as an increasing knowledge that things are the way they are revealed rather than some other way (as in other religions or in the secular mind). We must be able to give reasons for the hope that is within us (1 Peter **3**:15).

Not only does "giving reasons" mean providing evidence for what we believe; it involves giving reasons against alternatives afloat in the world; it means disproving error. That calls for knowing what errors exist and showing why they are less adequate or just plain false. Unfortunately, false teachers always abound, *"whose mouths must be stopped"* (Titus **1**:11).

Finally, "teaching" requires (4) practical skill at approaching issues. Faithful teachers must understand people and be able to work with them in ways that do not undo in method what they understand in doctrine.

"Teaching faithful people who can teach others" perpetuates, expands, and matures Christ's church until he returns. It calls for going beyond recognizing to generating, going beyond describing to proving, going beyond knowing to understanding, and going beyond understanding to presenting. Equipping people for the "teaching office" means concentrating on those who can reproduce themselves. Efficiency calls for it, economics demands it, and the goal of theological education requires it.