

The Future of Theological Education

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Any discussion on the future of theological education cannot and should not commence without first a prayer that cries out to God, “Maranatha! Come, Lord Jesus.” We must confess that it is our heart’s desire to see the kingdom of the heavens arrive in its fullness sooner rather than later. With that said, unless Christ returns, we can say that, humanly speaking, the prospects for Christian ministry have never been more sure and have never been more precarious. On the one hand, Christ has assured us that there will always be a church and that the gates of hell will not prevail against it (Matt. 16:18). Ergo, since the future of the church is certain, God’s people will always prepare ministers for the gospel ministry. They have done so in the past and will continue to do so in the future—despite adverse conditions in the cultural climate. On the other hand, this does not mean, of course, that there will be seminaries or divinity schools as we presently know them, or in the same configurations that we currently find them.

In fact, traditional theological education has never been more in peril. A recent study has shown that it is not unusual for seminarians to graduate from their respective programs with somewhere between \$70,000–\$80,000 in loans. Coming generations of seminarians will have to think deeply about whether the ministries into which they will go will be able to support them to the level of being able to climb their way out of the crushing debt.¹ What is more, the denominational financial and human resource support that has traditionally underwritten the campuses and faculties of traditional seminaries is decreasing and will accelerate downward. All of a sudden, these institutions will start looking a lot like Boxer at the end of George Orwell’s allegory, *Animal Farm*—a once

mighty steed endangered by the glue factory. Only a few elite institutions with visionary leadership, creative and adaptive curricula, and convictional mien will be able to survive the collapse.

Although the trajectory looks dystopic from a traditionalist point of view, the reality is that the future is bright for those who still want to learn the way of Christ in the history of the great Christian intellectual tradition. But the future will be underground. In the coming age, theological training will be antiestablishment and quasi-punk. Christ will lead a new ministry into the kingdom as they resist the principalities and powers of the age. As Joe Strummer of The Clash once told a reporter, “It’s good to be sent back to the underground. There’s always a good side to bad things and the good side to this is that at least everyone has to go back down.” The church flourished as a persecuted underground phenomenon, going from a small ragtag persecuted sect to the dominating religion of an empire in a matter of two centuries or so. Under God, it can happen again.

In light of this state of affairs, I see the following adjustments in the future of theological education that all relate to particular kinds of particular places. To wit:

Theological Education Will Look Like Jonathan Edwards’ Parsonage in Northampton

In the 1730s and 1740s, Edwards took in the best and brightest young ministerial candidates into his home. Among them were Joseph Bellamy, Samuel Hopkins, and David Brainerd—names famous in the annals of theology and missions.² These young theologues were not starting from ground zero when they arrived at Edwards’ doorstep, however. They had already received outstanding undergraduate preparation at Yale that gave them a classical education in the liberal arts and theology. In order to get properly trained in ministry, the answer for them was not to repeat their fine Yale experience on a different campus. They sought out a worthy pastor, and in this case, one who just happened to be the greatest theological genius America has ever produced. Edwards poured his life and the power of his thought into them, and they into him. It was a dynamic scene, Edward’s living room. The personal, one-on-one nature of the learning environment holds the vast potential for theological education in the local church. One sees the pastor preaching, living, and dying with his people through the gospel in a real time and place. This principle, once standard, will become the new normal again. As such, moving forward, if (and only if) an excellent liberal arts groundwork has been laid, ministerial training will once again be local under competent, experienced, and academically prepared pastoral supervision in the

context of the local church. These settings will find creative ways to partner with the seminaries and divinity schools that survive and thrive in the new era.

Theological Education Will Look Like Bonhoeffer's Experiment in Finkenwalde

In 1935, as the Nazis tightened their grip on Germany, Martin Niemöller asked Bonhoeffer to take a small group of theological students and form an underground seminary for the Confessing Church. By its very nature, the enterprise was illegal, as nothing but the state-controlled Reich Church was permitted to train ordinands. But Niemöller and Bonhoeffer knew that if a church leader followed the monstrous evil of the Führer, he could not follow Christ. The church was thus morally obligated to subvert fascism. Therefore Dietrich took his students, both men and women, to the von Katte estate in Finkenwalde (Pomerania), and it was here that Bonhoeffer combined passionate lectures on the Sermon on the Mount with an intense experiment in Christian community. In doing so, he erased the distinction between lofty academic theological speculation that had characterized the German universities he had experienced. He put in its place the best of academic theology with the very practical concern of how actually to live out the way of Jesus in solidarity with brothers and sisters in Christ. The central feature of this erasure involved the faculty's participation in the life of the students. Bonhoeffer threw himself headlong into the activities, joys, and sorrows of the ordinands. He exercised with them, played table tennis and other sports with them, and he cooked and ate with them. He brought his gramophone and extensive collection of Black Gospel and Negro Spirituals that he obtained while he was in New York attending the Abyssinian Baptist Church, and they listened to records together.³ Out of this intense experiment in community, Bonhoeffer wrote the magnificent *Life Together*. "The physical presence of other Christians is a source of incomparable joy and strength to the believer," he observes, underscoring that "God has willed that we should seek and find His living word in the witness of a brother. . . . The Christ in his own heart is weaker than the Christ in the word of his brother; his own heart is uncertain, his brother's is sure."⁴ If I do not miss my guess, if the expansion of the powers of the centrally controlled secular state are not attenuated soon, the coming years will call for a new raft of illegal, underground seminaries experiencing the presence of Christ and preparing its ordinands to speak the truth to power.

Theological Education Will Look Like Obi Wan's Communications to the Jedi on Kamino and Geonosis

Those who oppose or at least have serious reservations about the anthropological and theological appropriateness of online education often do so with a static view of existing technological platforms. While the debate rages on over how effective current platforms are, the reality is that in the not-too-distant future real-time three-dimensional conversation will be able to take place between students on the field in ministry with theologians situated in their respective academic and ecclesial contexts. All of us are familiar with the way this looks in Sci-Fi. For example, in *Star Wars: Attack of the Clones*, we see Obi Wan on the planets of Kamino and Geonosis communicating to, and receiving feedback from the Jedi High Council Chamber in Coruscant in a real-time three-dimensional immersive environment. The Jedi are able to advise Obi Wan about next steps and be aware of his precarious situation on the ground. Even when the technology fails, there are workarounds, and thus when a battle ensues, the Jedi are able en masse to join the fight in person when necessary. There can be no doubt that synchronous real-time instruction must be a part of a ministerial candidate's experience, especially in the earliest and most formative stages of his or her career. To the extent that information, teaching, and even applicational wisdom can be delivered from multiple locations, less and less will be lost in translation as technology improves and holographic 3D delivery environments go from being science fiction to science fact.

Theological Education Will Transition to Being God on the University Quad

The missional opportunities for ministry in the coming decades will be accelerated from what is happening on the ground right now. They will be platform-based. In other words, there will be fewer and fewer churches able to finance and sustain large church staffs, salaries, and facilities. In order to establish a ministry in a community, pastors and church leaders will need other skills that the local environment needs: healthcare (nursing, pharmacy, medicine), education, economic development, urban renewal, the arts, design, technology, and engineering. Furthermore, where does the training for these platforms currently exist? Universities. In other words, barista at Starbucks will no longer be a viable platform for church planting. You are going to have to bring other cookies

that the culture recognizes to the party if you want to play. Thus, the idea of the free-standing seminary will increasingly become a thing of the past. They will need strategic partnerships with universities that are willing to offer an integrative environment in which theological disciplines can be seamlessly integrated with other skill sets. Given the increasingly combative environment toward Christian conviction at secular universities, seminaries will have to seek out colleges and universities already engaged in the business of Christian higher education. The university has so many more resources to help pastors understand how to reach cities and neighborhoods with the gospel. There are sociologists, political scientists, philosophers, and economists standing by to help interpret the complex demographics of both the urban and the rural landscapes. The integration of theology with existing disciplines is the only way forward for theological education.

In conclusion, preparation for vocational ministry in the coming decades will look both to the past and to the future. The emphasis will return the primary learning environment of the local church and parish, and the traditional seminary model will become a thing of the past. Yet, in this new environment churches will still need strong affiliations with existing institutions of higher education that can provide the skill sets needed for the coming economy. New alliances will be formed, and the faith once for all delivered to the saints will be preserved.

Notes

1. David Briggs, "The High Cost of Service," The Association for Religious Data Archives, <http://blogs.thearda.com/trend/featured/the-high-cost-of-service-student-debt-burdens-religious-workers/>.
2. Edwards' time with Bellamy, Hopkins, and Brainerd are chronicled in George Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).
3. For a moving recounting of the Finkenwalde experiment, see Eric Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2010), 270.
4. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, trans. John W. Doberstein (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1954), 19, 23.