warford.qxd 8/27/2004 11:40 AM Page 15

▪ RAYMOND BRADY WILLIAMS ▪

The Vocation of Teaching

BEYOND THE CONSPIRACY OF MEDIOCRITY

Three components of theological education—teachers and teaching, students and learning, and theological disciplines and content—form a developmental sequence in the career of many teachers, but it is a sequence that is too often broken by institutional rigidities, personal inclinations, and the guild structures of academic disciplines. Nonetheless, a shift of attention has accelerated during recent decades, and we are beginning to realize that our work and calling as theological teachers require a transformation of ethos and practice, both in the doctoral graduate schools that shape new faculty and in the theological schools that provide the enabling environment for excellent teaching and learning.

For generations the ethos of secular doctoral institutions was to focus, at the expense of teaching, on narrowly conceived research, and this ethos was duplicated in the majority of theological schools where it was neither relevant nor effective. Fortunately, schools are beginning to realize that it is essential to attend to the preparation of graduate students for careers as teachers, not just scholars, and to encourage theological faculty to place as much emphasis on their teaching as they do on their research. Furthermore, changes in the demography of students and their expectations require that faculty members attend to what and how their students learn. It is clear that pedagogical and assessment methods appropriate for previous generations are not adequate for the current generation of students. More effort must be put into understand-

warford.qxd 8/27/2004 11:40 AM Page 16

ing the learning process and adapting teaching methods to the insights of this improved understanding. Finally, despite the changes that schools are beginning to make in the preparation of future scholars and teachers, many old habits continue. The increasing disciplinary specialization and guild structures of graduate schools and the academy in general result in forms of knowledge that are often trivial, irrelevant, and dull. Students yearn for—and meaningful learning requires—integration, grandeur, breadth, and relevance.

TEACHERS AND TEACHING

The shift from a single focus on disciplinary content to the practices of teaching was marked on the national scene by the elaboration in 1990 of "the scholarship of teaching" by Ernest Boyer, then president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. It was part of his attempt to transcend what he called "the tired old 'teaching versus research' debate" with a new definition of scholarship that reflected the full range of academic and civic mandates for faculty members. He posited four types of activity as true scholarship.

1. The *scholarship of discovery* is what most academics mean when they refer to "my work" as specialized research at the cutting edge of a discipline.
2. The *scholarship of integration* is research at the boundaries where fields converge that places specialized scholarship in larger contexts of meaning.
3. The *scholarship of application* is the connecting of the theory of a discipline to civic life as an aspect of the scholar's responsibility to transmit knowledge. Boyer suggests that scholars in all disciplines have a responsibility to interact with civic institutions and engage in public discourse, an idea which applies dramatically to theological teachers, who should cultivate an active engagement with lived religion in church and society that some scholars seek to avoid.
4. The *scholarship of teaching* builds on Aristotle's observation that teaching is the highest form of understanding (23).

Eugene Rice (1990), who helped design the new paradigm of scholarship, identified three distinct elements in the scholarship of teaching: first, a synoptic capacity to provide coherence and meaning; second, pedagogical knowledge to represent a subject in ways that transcend the split between intellectual substance and teaching process; and third, teachers' comprehension of the learning process.

warford.qxd 8/27/2004 11:40 AM Page 17

The work of Boyer and Rice precipitated considerable discussion in some academic circles more than a decade ago, and many colleges, universities, and theological schools have started to place greater emphasis on teaching skills, although, unfortunately, this emphasis seems to be more apparent at the point of hiring than at times of tenure and promotion. Scholars joining faculties are often expected to present, not only their articles and book projects, but their teaching portfolios, philosophies, and evaluations. Accrediting agencies challenge theological faculties to implement assessment plans that include the scholarship of teaching. Scholarly and professional organizations, such as the American Academy of Religion and the Society of Biblical Literature, have developed committees, workshops, and programs to foster better teaching in the field. Several schools with doctoral programs have instituted seminars, mentoring, and courses on teaching for their graduate students.

The current president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching provides a significant elaboration of Boyer's work. Lee Shulman (1989, 13) uses the important and powerful pulpit of the Carnegie Foundation to sharpen the concept by establishing three characteristics of the scholarship of teaching: (1) It will entail a public account of some or all of the full act of teaching—vision, design, enactment, outcomes, and analysis. (2) It will be made public in a manner susceptible to critical review by the teacher's professional peers. (3) The resulting knowledge will be amenable to productive employment and development in future work by members of the academy.

Teaching has the greatest social impact of any scholarly activity in theology and religion. In thousands of locations and contexts, teachers daily engage students in public reflection on their subjects—and well beyond. Teaching is the work that provides justification for theological positions and salaries. Articles and books generally reach a few score specialists in narrow subdisciplines, whereas teaching affects hundreds of students who are thereby empowered to extend that influence into all areas of society. Work in developing courses and curricula and day-by-day teaching in various contexts do more to define and empower the academic disciplines of theology and religion than do other aspects of scholarship. The greater the distance between scholarly research and teaching, the more irrelevant both become. Hence, even though teachers occasionally speak of something else as "my own work," teaching is the defining work for professors, schools, and the professional disciplines.

Teaching and learning in theological schools is generally very good, better than in other disciplines and professional schools, so reflection about theological teaching can emphasize celebration and affirmation as much as remediation. This reflection is based on two assumptions: (1) no one wants to be a bad teacher; (2) every teacher, even excellent ones, can become better. A significant step toward addressing these two assumptions occurs when teach-

warford.qxd 8/27/2004 11:40 AM Page 18

ers engage in conversation with other good teachers, and the Carnegie Foundation has undertaken a study of teaching and learning for the preparation of clergy that will provide comparative data around which such conversations can take place. Those teachers who do not move forward fall behind, because expectations, learning styles, and contexts are constantly changing. Thus, it is sad when a teacher of great promise fails to improve and thereby loses luster, but it is a matter for rejoicing when excellent teaching is fostered, experienced, and rewarded.

Teaching is the last bastion of professional life that is conducted in relative secrecy—unobserved, absent of critique by peers, and without a mandatory refreshment of knowledge and skill. The classroom is the teacher's castle where colleagues hesitate to tread. It is protected both by academic freedom and by a "don't ask, don't tell" conspiracy of silence about teaching and learning and thus leads to an unhealthy privatization. Where little support for collaboration or collegial discussion about teaching exists, a situation often develops in which a strange double self-deception occurs. Most teachers are better at teaching than they feel they are and certainly than they feel called to be by God. Yet they are often not as good as they pretend to be. Such doubts and suppression of doubts result in several pathologies. Perhaps the worst is a flight from teaching to research and publishing, which, if done as an escape from teaching, leads to research that is dull and irrelevant. Neither fear nor pretense provides a solid base for good teaching and learning. Better than such self-deception is a systematic collaboration that will help faculty members come to a clearer understanding of their abilities as teachers and thereby improve their teaching skills.

Further, the privatization and pressures under which theological students and faculty work can lead to a conspiracy of mediocrity, which is the greatest single danger facing theological schools. It occurs when a silent and unholy pact is made between student and teacher that if the teacher does not expect very much from the student, the student will not demand good teaching from the teacher. The unfortunate reality driving the conspiracy is that teaching is one of the easiest jobs in the world to do poorly but one of the hardest to do well. The danger is that everyone will be satisfied with mediocrity, a state that is easy enough to achieve but which comes with great costs to both students and teachers.

The penultimate character of work in theological schools makes it spiritually frustrating and thus a fairly dangerous activity in which to engage. Few objective standards exist for judging the success or failure of a teacher's work. Each classroom is a private stronghold that teachers guard with misdirected ferocity, and yet their validation as teachers rests in the learning and formation of students and, ultimately, on the success of those who choose a path of min-

warford.qxd 8/27/2004 11:40 AM Page 19

istry. But teachers will have no reliable means of predicting the outcome of their teaching until they knock down the walls of privatization and open up the castles of their classrooms to the invigorating light of collegial collaboration.

Implications for Practice

"We teach as we were taught" is the conventional wisdom. The statement contains some truth. Graduate education is a process of formation for future faculty members—a kind of professional training, though academics hate to think of it as such. Many new faculty members learn to imitate their graduate teachers, especially their doctoral advisors, reducing scholarship to research. They copy their teachers' lecture styles; they adopt their manner and questions in seminars. They begin their teaching careers trained in what could be called the observation method, copying through trial and error that which they have experienced. Such observation is a necessary but not a sufficient step in learning to teach. It is much like expecting a patient who has gone through many operations to get up from the table and begin to operate on other patients.

Fortunately, some graduate faculties have instituted apprenticeship programs, either formal or informal. Apprenticeship is a well-tested method by which most people throughout history have learned their special craft—parent to child, craftsman to craftsman, teacher to student. It assumes that graduate students who participate in active teaching with a skilled teacher will develop skills and a disciplined reflection on their experience. Reflection on teaching and learning by faculty and students in graduate school links basic research in the discipline with primary career goals in exemplary ways that avoids the unfortunate distinction between research and everything else that is one's career. The close linking of research and teaching enriches the results of research and enhances the quality and integrity of a teacher's life. The best graduate programs involve faculty and students in discussions of pedagogy, class sessions and course preparation, observations of teaching, and reflection, often in conjunction with the university's teaching and learning center.

The methods of observation and apprenticeship have met with more success than one might predict, but they alone are no longer adequate. Teachers and students no longer constitute homogeneous cultural groups. Theological students come from far more varied backgrounds and have far more varied life experiences than the students of previous periods. Teaching is more challenging, and more exciting, than it was a few decades ago. This new situation suggests that new approaches and greater attention to teaching and learning are required throughout a professor's career. An endemic problem with the apprenticeship method is that it is restricted to the pre-entry career stage as though teaching were a skill learned and thereafter applied rather than an art acquired through lifelong learning.

warford.qxd 8/27/2004 11:40 AM Page 20

Collaboration in the art of teaching is more promising than either observation or apprenticeship (Shulman 1993, 6–7). Collaboration should be started early in doctoral study and should characterize the environment in colleges, universities, and theological schools throughout a faculty member's career. Apprenticeship for a brief period is a way to begin; collaboration with colleagues throughout a career is the way to continue. Collaboration with colleagues through structured discussions and projects is absolutely essential to the future health and well-being of theological schools, faculties, and students. The goal of collaboration is to enable colleagues to learn from each other and engage in a common discourse about their life's work so that together they will enhance the learning of their students.

The richest context for such collaboration is in local institutions, even though it is surprisingly difficult to create a safe local space for discussions of teaching and learning. Collaboration changes the discussion and evaluation of teaching from summative judgments about salary, tenure, and promotion to formative partnerships aimed at helping all teachers become better. It liberates faculty members from the consumer mentality of institutions and the professional myopia of students and thus enables them to deal more creatively with the particular missions of the institutions in which they teach. Moreover, collaboration enables teachers to return to the passions and virtues that led them into teaching in the first place. Responses to recent works on the teacher's vocation by Parker Palmer and others reveal a yearning for reflection and discussion of the deeper issues of the teacher's calling.[1]

Collaboration in the art of teaching comes in many different forms. For example, graduate faculty can gather in faculty meetings and at retreats to discuss ways of helping their doctoral students prepare for careers as teachers, which in turn leads to faculty engaging in discussions with students about course preparation, course syllabi, and the vocation of teaching. As another example, a faculty member might invite a trusted colleague to discuss syllabi, visit classes, and reflect about teaching. Such collaboration might develop into a team teaching project that incorporates disciplined discussion of pedagogy and student learning. Further, deans can designate faculty meetings and retreats for collaborative reflection about institutional mission, student learning goals, and teaching strategies. Larger schools can establish teaching and learning centers; smaller institutions can affiliate with university centers or designate a faculty member to be a teaching fellow, encouraging and facilitating reflection on teaching and learning. Faculty members can join workshops on teaching and learning, such as those convened by the Wabash Center and The Lexington Seminar, or they can develop workshops with their colleagues (Barnes 1999). Faculty in a specific subdiscipline of theology and religion can gather some guild colleagues to reflect on the challenges and mastery of teach-

warford.qxd 8/27/2004 11:40 AM Page 21

ing a particular subject. Finally, deans and department chairs bear responsibility for regularly attending to the question, "What and how well are our students learning today?" They must work together to create an environment that encourages excellent teaching and learning for the benefit of their students.

STUDENTS AND LEARNING

The first rule of good teaching is "Know your students!" And that means knowing how students in a class learn best and to what ends by clearly identifying their learning styles and their learning goals. It is increasingly important for teachers to understand and respond to these styles and goals, and yet at the same time it is growing increasingly difficult to achieve this understanding and make the appropriate responses, in part because the demographic profile of students is changing so rapidly. The demographic changes recorded on paper in the 2000 United States census are a lively presence in the classrooms of theological schools and universities, and these changes are likely to become more pronounced with the passage of time. Diverse learning styles, new ethnic and religious differences, new student expectations and market demands, age variations, and divergent theological commitments make classrooms and institutions exciting and sometimes conflicted places, leading faculty to fall into an odd kind of cynicism mixed with haughty self-congratulation: "I'm okay, you're okay, students are awful."

Theological teachers may know their students better than teachers in other secular institutions, but they often know the wrong things in the wrong ways. The openness and sharing characterized by some theological schools creates an ethos encouraging the lowering of boundaries and the sharing of knowledge about personal matters that is sometimes mistaken for answers to the questions that faculty really need to ask: How do these students learn? What goals do they seek? How can we enable their success?

It may be helpful to note why current students' experiences are so different from their teachers when they were students and why they may be resistant to what teachers are trying to help them learn. Many teachers were socialized in relatively stable social and religious contexts—cradle Christians, secure homes, liberal arts education, stable churches, relatively straight career paths. Teaching for such students was intended to pass them through a refining fire of doubt and criticism. Few students now enjoy such previous securities. Some arrive in seminaries with identities formed in the midst of postmodern struggles with fragmentation, broken homes, broken communities, broken churches, and broken worlds. Many craft a personal identity that is no assured thing, but is instead fragile and hard won, a personal accomplishment grasped desperately with faith. Other students come from strong and

warford.qxd 8/27/2004 11:40 AM Page 22

diverse communities, often minority communities with personal creeds and conduct foreign to those of most faculty members. Both groups of students may, with good reason, suspect that what teachers call transformation will separate them from all that they hold dear, even their faith.

A teacher attending The Lexington Seminar conference in Maine described the process desired for students as the movement from enchantment to disenchantment to re-enchantment, bringing to mind Paul Ricoeur's description of first naiveté, then the necessary critique, and then, God willing, a second naiveté (1967, 352). What is missing in these simple descriptions of the process is the pain and suffering that attend the transformation of students, pain and suffering that all good teachers remember, understand, and heed, and with which they must help their students cope.

W. E. B. DuBois captured the pain and suffering of transformation in "On the Coming of John," published in *Souls of Black Folks* ([1903] 1996, 230–251). Two Johns, one black and one white, returned home from northern colleges to the same small Southern town. Both curiously had become prodigal sons through education. The son of the local judge—white, aristocratic, and wealthy—arrived from Princeton to his anticipated state of privilege, though not without pain. The black son returned from a technical institute to be met at the railroad station by his family and church members and taken to the Baptist church for a joyous welcome. Pushed reluctantly behind the pulpit, he talked about things that had become important to him. But he had changed so much that he spoke in "an unknown tongue" learned at college and could not make connections with his people. He made the mistake of saying that the difference between Baptists and Methodists about baptism was not important. In response, an elderly black deacon stood up and "seized the Bible with his rough, huge hands; twice he raised it inarticulate, and then fairly burst into words, with rude and awful eloquence," but John "never knew clearly what the old man said." An awful chasm! John passed silently into the night. When his little sister joined him, John wept on her shoulder. "John," she said, "does it make everyone unhappy when they study and learn lots of things?" He paused and smiled, "I am afraid it does," he said. "And, John, are you glad you studied?" "Yes," came the answer, slowly but positively.

One message of the story is that everyone stands on the shoulders of their forebears to see more than those forebears could see. Teachers prepare students for an unknown future, and neither teachers nor students should forget that they do not learn in order to know; rather, they know in order to learn, which is always the forward movement in real education.

But never forget the pain involved. Remembering that pain should cause teachers to take off their dirty shoes when entering the classroom because they tread on holy ground.

warford.qxd 8/27/2004 11:40 AM Page 23

A teacher's work is based on a fundamental ethical imperative that arises from a basic human characteristic: relationship. Humans are social creatures and cannot exist without social relationships that provide language, existence, and meaning. Each is impelled to intrude into the lives of others with word, touch, signs, and much more, and, moreover, to receive the other into a personal sphere of existence. Only so can one be human. It is part of the social contract. Each class of teacher and students constitutes a specialized interpretive community with its own rules, ethics, boundaries, and goals. Students and teachers enter into it willingly and, one hopes, with a sense of calling to human and social good.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

One of the narratives from The Lexington Seminar (Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School 2002)[2] refers to the need for "compassionate pedagogy," a concept teachers should ponder throughout their careers. The first challenge of compassionate pedagogy is to know the students and their learning styles and goals. The most important step is to move from the current emphasis on summative assessment that results in final grades, mailed after the opportunity for engaged learning ends, to formative assessment that helps faculty learn how to teach better and students learn how to learn better.

Adult learning, which is the context and focus of theological education, has been the focus of much research and reflection in the past couple of decades, and many useful resources on developmental stages and adult learning exist. Two books of particular value are *Intelligence Reframed: Multiple Intelligences for the 21st Century* (Gardner 1999) and *The New Update on Adult Learning Theory* (Merriam 2001). Further, theological faculties can and should participate in workshops and seminars on adult learning.

Research on diversity and the effect it has on learning styles has also begun to appear and should be used by theological faculty to help broaden their teaching strategies. Numerous classroom strategies are available to faculty members who wish to find out how their students learn, what their goals and aspirations are, and how well they are learning at any given point in a course. In fact, theological faculty are in a particularly sound position to make valuable contributions in the scholarship of teaching.

All such research and scholarly endeavors enable a teacher to better meet the first requirement for good teaching: "Know your students!"

DISCIPLINES AND CONTENT

Many of The Lexington Seminar narratives demonstrate a struggle with the

warford.qxd 8/27/2004 11:40 AM Page 24

character of the theological disciplines in search of the elusive virtues of integration and relevance. Students move from class to class and from assignment to assignment searching for the unity that will create from their courses a curricular relevance to lived religion that is the context for their life and vocation. Theological disciplines are mere skeletons of their former selves, being malnourished by narrow specialization, fragmentation, postmodern critique, and secularization in many theological schools and Ph.D. programs. Attention to the breadth, grandeur, and unity of the theological disciplines is essential to the integrity and relevance of theological teaching.

The study of theology and religion is the most compelling of all disciplines in higher education because it reveals fundamental aspects of value and commitment, encompassing all humans through time and place and engaging many critical methods developed and honed through the centuries of the Western tradition. These methods constitute a genealogy of disciplines, mansions of human creativity; they are our cultural and religious heritage, and their proper use and maintenance is crucial to individuals, church, and society, because throughout time, across space, and in every culture, religion has functioned to ground individual and group identity in a transcendent reality that anchors identity and preserves it.

Theological teaching and learning is at the apex of humane study because such teaching and learning develop directly out of a fundamental characteristic of humanity. Humans are creatures who create, bear, manipulate, and transmit symbols. As a species, humans are instinctually deprived, but they are culturally creative and social as a direct evolutionary necessity stemming from that deprivation. Hence, humans can inhabit a broad ecological niche stretching from the heavens to the depths of the sea. We humans create meaning and accomplish most of what we do culturally rather than instinctually. Our survival depends upon it. All forms of teaching and learning, especially as the acts of relatively free social beings, emerge from that basic human necessity to create and communicate meaning through culture. Hence, theological teachers are formative agents of a fundamental human capacity.

Religious and theological systems are universally generated out of that symbol-creating capability and that human striving for meaning and identity which makes theological teaching one of the most conservative and, at the same time, one of the most transformative of human activities. The creation of religious symbols testifies to a human striving for survival and meaning that requires us to transcend ourselves in all that we do. Religion and theology represent the self-reflexive aspect of human creativity that symbol creation makes possible and encourages. One might well argue in theological terms that this is what makes humans "in the image of God" and enables them to receive and interpret revelation from God. Alas, we bear this treasure in earthen vessels.

warford.qxd 8/27/2004 11:40 AM Page 25

Religion's power arises by providing a transcendent basis for personal and group identity in relation to God and divine revelation. Most individuals and groups throughout human history have self-identified themselves in relation to a set of beliefs and practices, anchored in a transcendent realm, that encompasses their fundamental social relationships. The relevance of religion is demonstrated by the human tendency to couch their basic commitments, value systems, worldviews, and mores in religious terms. These enable believers to be, in their own and in God's terms, strong and good. Transcendence gives them the power to stand firm against many earthbound pressures to be "confirmed to this world." A sobering caution, however, is that this power can be divine or demonic and that the only antidote for the demonic is the divine. The only cure for bad, dangerous religion is good, salvific religion. That is ultimately what is at stake in theological teaching and learning.

The importance, breadth, and depth of both the content of the theological disciplines and the methods that have been developed to study them constitute the *raison d'être* of the theological teacher. Stephen Webb (2000) argues convincingly that the old distinction between research and teaching is a false one. He indicates that teaching itself is a way of researching the very ideas we are teaching, of experimenting with various modes of thought, of translating thought into practice. Teaching is not mere application; it is not a matter of distributing information that has been gathered elsewhere. Teaching itself affects the way we think, the way we research, the way we live. To teach is to reveal. To educate is to create ways in which self-revelation can enable the other to explore and discover new fields and new ways of thinking and being. Indeed, teaching is the highest form of understanding.

Four aspects of the understanding of religion are present in the apprehension of religious experience. The first is the primary religious experience often associated with myth, symbol, faith, discipline, and ritual found in faith communities. A second aspect is reflection on the experience in theological and pastoral work and in the legal and ethical prescriptions for community order appropriate to the theological seminary. A third aspect is critical analysis in a discourse in the academy about the first and second aspects that often distances the student from the specific traditions studied. The fourth aspect is evaluation and appropriation, either positive or negative, of what is studied for the living of one's own life and vocation. Each of the first three has its own primary social community: the church, the seminary, and the college. The fourth, of course, is at the heart of Christian discipleship.

The theological teacher in a seminary or divinity school is engaged in the richest study of religion at all levels from the perspective of commitment within a particular Christian tradition. These exalted claims for theologians of the church fly in the face of Kierkegaard's critique of those who think that they "go

warford.qxd 8/27/2004 11:40 AM Page 26

farther." Johannes de Silentio's dictum (Kierkegaard 1954, 21–25) criticizes those who think that the easiest thing in the world is to go farther than faith, to develop analytic and academic systems that will permit them to go farther than the first level of religious experience. It is not easy, but theological study reaches for the highest levels of human reflexivity about symbol, meaning, and identity creation. Thus, one might call the academic study of religion and theology the queen of the human sciences, striving toward the divine.

Theological teachers occupy a special place in the church as conservators, critics, and creators of a theological and pastoral tradition. They are always caught in a basic hermeneutical tension between what goes without saying in a church, what can be said, and what will be said. The tension between experience from the past and imagination for the future, between conservation of a heritage and the creation of new possibilities, must be worked out in the intellectual and religious biography of each theological teacher and student. Education is both celebration and quest, hence, the ambiguous position of teachers and students in any society and church as they are, at one and the same time, conservators in the custodial class and its institutionalized critics. Excellent theological teachers provide a space in which students can do their own thinking about the tradition and their vocation; they also provide resources and examples to assure that students do their thinking in the best of company.

To be sure, it is possible to structure and teach theological studies in a dull and lifeless manner by wringing out all passion, expansiveness, and significance, but that is more difficult with theology and religion than with most other subjects. Unfortunately, some teaching practices conspire to narrow the vision and reduce the effectiveness of theological education. For example, graduate study can be made increasingly narrow and irrelevant, church theologians can be stultified through guild professionalization, curriculum decisions can be governed by turf wars, inappropriate pedagogies can reduce an exciting discipline to rote learning, and ill-directed reward systems can encourage all of the above.

Theological teachers must enter through a narrow gate of doctoral study, and it seems that graduate study has become more deformative than formative, both personally and professionally, over the past few decades. Scholarships and fellowships provide smaller portions of the funding, so more students are forced to work at marginal, low-paying jobs to cover their costs. The opportunities for secure tenure-track teaching positions have been reduced, resulting in an increased competition for credentials that is often counterproductive. Increasingly narrow specialization limits vision. Graduate students are expected to present papers at scholarly meetings, publish articles, gain extensive teaching experience, and, if possible, sign a book contract before they are elevated slightly to the position of "junior faculty" with all the status liabilities that designation implies. Such deformation of candidates and younger colleagues

warford.qxd 8/27/2004 11:40 AM Page 27

in the profession appears to be a culture-wide experience shared by young lawyers, physicians, clergy, teachers, and others. The deserts of graduate education expand, and the promised land of entry into the profession grows more parched.

A significant goal of doctoral education should be to produce theological teachers and theologians of the church who are able to be faithful in their work of conservation, critique, and creation in a lively religious and theological tradition. Graduates also become public intellectuals who serve an increasingly important function to negotiate the role of religion and its institutions in the public sphere. That requires preserving a creative balance in graduate schools of the pastoral virtue of chastened, normative, faith-based proclamation and the academic virtue of neutral, objective investigation for its own sake. It is unfortunate that the role of the academic critic of religion is increasingly thought to require secular commitments by some who, at the worst, despise religion, disdain religious people, and denigrate the church, or at the least, are noncommittal.

It is particularly unfortunate when theological schools, created to house the theologians of the church and to educate ministers for the church, duplicate the ethos of secular doctoral programs. It is a shame when theological teachers and schools sell their birthright for a mess of pottage. Guild professionalization and identification directs the talents and creativity of theological teachers, through jargon and syntax understood by only a handful of like-minded colleagues, toward topics that bear little relevance to the life of the church, the faith of Christians, or the social good. These same guild identifications become the battle lines for curriculum discussions that are little more than turf wars, what one wag has called "the intramural sport of faculty." The pedagogical corollaries are obsessive coverage of huge amounts of data, learning styles based on information retention, and summative assessment of both faculty and students through objective tests or standardized measures. Thus theological schools adopt reward systems defined by guild expectations and preserved by status differentiations of entrenched, unimaginative faculty and administrators. Straining at gnats!

Implications for Practice

A bleak and perhaps overdrawn picture of a starved discipline nevertheless points to some constructive steps that theological teachers and schools could take to preserve their birthright in the power and relevance of theological teaching for the church. Graduate schools could focus more intently on educating church theologians who are conservators, critics, and creators of a theological heritage. Changes in degree programs, curricula, and courses would focus the

warford.qxd 8/27/2004 11:40 AM Page 28

efforts of students more consonantly with the breadth and power of religion than narrow subdiscipline specialties. Theological teachers and theological schools would have to reexamine their reward systems to make sure that they reinforce rather than pervert the grand work of theological exploration and creativity and the grander work of preparing Christian ministers who can serve the church faithfully. Graduate programs rarely focus on integration and relevance, nor on pedagogy and teaching. Time and resources are needed to permit faculty to catch up with contemporary challenges and demands, which inevitably leads to a new focus on teaching. In fact, one of the discoveries of The Lexington Seminar is that attention to pedagogy not only reveals new ways of engaging students and understanding the vocation of the theological teacher, it also generates a renewed passion for the theological discipline itself.

CONCLUSION

The spotlight has shone on three elements: teachers, students, and theology as a discipline. What is next?

The spotlight could better illumine theological study if it moved back a bit to focus on the institution as the unifying agency for discipline, teaching, and learning. Note that this is not a call for one more fragmentation of the image, adding a fourth component separate from faculty responsibility. What is needed is a more unified image of the teaching/learning process. The focus should be on the theological school as a unified learning organization and an enabling environment for excellent teaching. The goal is to pull together the highest vision of the theological disciplines in the service of the church's mission, the excellence of diverse teachers who together see their work as teaching scholars and theologians in the church as one calling, and the aspirations and abilities of their students as learners so that they will in their work as ministers be conservators, critics, and creators of a lively and life-giving heritage. The goal is to provide an enabling ethos for excellent theological teaching and learning, a worthy mission for theological schools and a compelling vocation for theological teachers.

NOTES

1. See Palmer (1993; 1997; 2000), Daloz (1996), and Parks (2000).
2. All narratives cited in this book can be found in the Archives section of the Seminar's Web site: http://www.lexingtonseminar.org/.