

# CHRISTIAN STUDIES

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## CONTENTS

<b>FOREWORD</b>	Editor	2
<b>ARTICLES</b>		
WHY JOHNNY CAN'T PRAY	Michael R. Weed	3
"WHAT DO THESE STONES MEAN?"	Douglas L. Gragg	13
SKILLS, CREDENTIALS, OR FAITHFULNESS?	Allan J. McNicol	19
READING THE BIBLE THROUGH LIFE	Wendell Willis	29
FROM SCRIPTURE TO SHARING	Gary Holloway	39
<b>BOOK REVIEWS</b>		
<i>Why Johnny Can't Tell Right From Wrong</i> by William Kilpatrick	Dean F. Smith	49
<i>A Teachable Spirit: Recovering the Teaching Office in the Church</i> by Richard R. Osmer	Allan J. McNicol	52
<b>CONTRIBUTORS</b>		54

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## Skills, Credentials, or Faithfulness? Reflecting on Theological Education

*Allan J. McNicol*

We sat in the congregation on a Spring Sunday morning waiting for the annual presentation of the high school graduates. As always it was an inspiring and hopeful time. These seniors represented tremendous promise for their families and the church.

But as each graduate walked by, and I noted from the bulletin where each one would go to college, as well as their intended majors, a disturbing thought began to cross my mind. No one had indicated an interest in ministry. I recalled a similar situation last year. When was the last time someone I knew had elected to go to college for a theological education?

Of course there have always been reasons parents discouraged their children from vocations in church work. I suggest however, that there is a new and disturbing factor that accounts for the paucity of talented young people in churches of Christ entering vocations in ministry. Specifically, it is increasingly difficult to understand the rationale for Christian ministry. We know what nurses, bankers, and engineers are supposed to do. But what do we mean by the term "ministry"? Is it a service? Is it a profession? Who would wish to have an undefinable job where fundamental questions are raised about the necessity of its very existence?

This was not always so. As recent as this century a person discouraged with life would visit the priest or minister convinced that he would get the final word about the meaning of it all.<sup>1</sup> He may have been told nothing more than that he should live for the

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<sup>1</sup>As noted by Terry C. Muck, "Religious Education and Theological Education: Background Potential, and Problems," *Insights* 107/1 (Fall, 1991) 6.

praise and glory of God.<sup>2</sup> But, at least, he left that visit convinced that he had received the final word on the matter from the appropriate person.<sup>3</sup> Today, things have changed drastically. Many are convinced that there are no definitive answers to the ultimate questions. Ministers know no more about these things than anyone else.

The minister no longer serves as the steward and teacher of a body of ultimate truths. He now has a functional task of facilitating and enabling voluntary religious communities to survive. As Dean Acheson said of the British after World War 2, "they have lost an empire but have not found a role." Little wonder that few young people are challenged by this vision of ministry.

All of this puts tremendous strains on theological colleges. How does a faculty, given these new realities, design a curriculum that will prepare one to be a minister? Should the emphasis be on spiritual development, cognitive knowledge, or the development of practical skills? All of these emphases have their advocates.

This essay will assess the current philosophy and practice that informs theological education in the churches of Christ. I will argue that present programs imitate a model of ministerial training popular among mainline denominations--a model that has been shown to be seriously flawed. Specifically, this pattern is known as the theory-practice model of ministry. In my view, we are in danger of turning our ministers into the worst products of the theory-practice model. We are creating leaders who attain positions in the life of the church, either on the basis of credentialed knowledge, or by mastering professional skills.

In place of this model we ought to encourage the development of leaders who have both a vision of what it means to live an integrated life in the church informed by the Christian story and have the capacity to help us make the choices necessary to live worthy and faithful lives.

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<sup>2</sup>*Muck, 6.*

<sup>3</sup>*Muck, 6.*

Procedurally, I will first show why the theory-practice model of theological education became so dominant in the West and why it is flawed. Second, I will note that evidence indicates that theological education among churches of Christ is becoming dominated by the theory-practice model just as others are giving it up. Finally, I will offer suggestions regarding the direction theological education in churches of Christ should take.

### **The Failure of the Theory-Practice Model**

Programs of theological education operative in the theological colleges of mainline denominations have come under sustained criticism in the past decade.<sup>4</sup> At the center of this critique is the claim that seminaries no longer produce spiritually mature ministers who are informed in their knowledge of the Christian faith and who can interpret that faith clearly for contemporary believers. Either the minister emerges from the seminary with a few practical skills in some specialized area of ministry, while blissfully ignorant of the historic tradition; or, he has mastered a body of knowledge about the faith (on the basis of accepted canons in the modern research university). With the former, the *practice* of ministry is more likely to be informed by models of professionalism gleaned from social sciences or business professions. With the latter, the minister attains *theoretical* competence in handling a body of truth arrived at through critical, historical inquiry; but seldom has he

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<sup>4</sup>On a popular level see Robin W. Lovin, "The Real Task of Practical Theology," *Christian Century*, 109/5 (February 5-12, 1992) 125-128. At the substantive academic level of sustained historical critique the book by Edward Farley, *Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983) is a good place to start. The book sparked a major debate about the nature and effectiveness of theological education in the liberal mainline churches in the past decade. The debate can be traced in the journal *Theological Education* starting in Vol. 20 (1984) and continuing to the present. Recently, the debate has been brought up to date in *Shifting Boundaries: Contextual Approaches to the Structure of Theological Education* eds., Edward Farley and Barbara Wheeler (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1991).

been given a capacity, skill, or even a rationale for communicating and applying this knowledge to the person in the pew.

As a rule, seminary teachers, dominated by this theory-practice model, and having a need to keep abreast in their academic specialties, are not even interested in bridging these gaps. And if they cannot (or will not) cross this divide between the theoretical and practical it is little wonder that students fail to do so. Ultimately students are turned loose to do ministry either with a few skills disconnected from the story; or, credentialed in knowing the latest research, are left to wonder about its relevance for Christian life. After painful experiences the student either accommodates to life in the local church or, out of frustration, gives up. This is why many believe that theological education in the West, by making itself answerable primarily to the secular professions or the academy (the theory-practice model), has become detached from the faith communities it was designed to serve.<sup>5</sup>

A brief description of how this situation arose may be helpful. Throughout the Middle Ages the education of clergy took place in a number of different settings such as the bishop's household, the cathedral schools, monasteries, or the universities. The latter first rose to prominence in the twelfth century.<sup>6</sup> By the Reformation, certain tensions had developed between the church and the university that were harbingers of things to come.<sup>7</sup> Medieval universities placed heavy emphasis on philosophy and the intellectual skills necessary to understand revelation and promote it through argumentation. This spawned a scholasticism in the church which was detached from ordinary life.

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<sup>5</sup>See the disturbing account of the situation in a representative number of seminaries given by Paul Wilkes, "The Hands That Would Shape Our Souls," *Atlantic Monthly* (December, 1990) 59-88.

<sup>6</sup>Carl A. Volz, "Seminaries: The Love of Learning or the Desire of God," *Dialog* 28/2 (Spring, 1989) 103.

<sup>7</sup>Farley, 34.

The Reformation was as much a reaction against this scholasticizing ministry as it was against the moral and religious abuses of the medieval church. Indeed, in an attempt to correct the earlier abuses, the Council of Trent, in 1563, set up schools (seminaries) separate from the universities charged to develop both moral character and spiritual exercises among the clergy in addition to teaching them the tradition.<sup>8</sup>

Nevertheless, the role of the university in the education of ministers remained dominant. Even though the Enlightenment questioned much of the traditional heritage of the West, it fueled a strong interest in the study of Christianity in the universities. Now, however, Christianity was not defended as the true legacy of the ancients. Instead, it was rigorously examined as to its truthfulness before the bar of autonomous reason.<sup>9</sup> In this, developing character and the spiritual life took a back seat to the impartial scientific study of religion.

Downgrading of the importance of the university in assisting the life of faith gradually developed into the contemporary chasm between being a churchman and being a professor. Today, a large number in the university community, given their canons for assessing evidence, consider the academic study of Christianity unworthy to be included in the curriculum.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>Volz, 103.

<sup>9</sup>Farley, 40.

<sup>10</sup>Already by the nineteenth century it had become evident that the university had made its own classifications of human knowledge which were worthy of study. Where did this leave the traditional curriculum for the preparation of ministers? The study of the Bible could be housed as a branch of Near Eastern Studies or Classics. Theology could be viewed as one stream in Western history and philosophy. But what about the formation of Christian character and spirituality? And where did the minister learn the practical skills of preaching and pastoral care?

In the early nineteenth century Friedrich Schleiermacher, living in the context of a strong connection between church and state, made the most celebrated attempt to justify ministerial training in the curriculum of a modern university. He argued that just as the German people needed experts trained in medicine and law they need specialists (ministers) to teach and encourage the development of piety. As the study

To many sensitive observers, the practice of training ministers on the basis of models acceptable to the research university is anachronistic.<sup>11</sup> New paradigms are needed for training Christian leaders that can sustain them in their identity and give them integrity to travel the journey of faith.

### **Troubling Signs in Theological Education in Churches of Christ**

Since its inception in the nineteenth century, the Campbell-Stone Movement has been susceptible to adopting the now highly suspect theory-practice model of ministerial training. Campbell understood Scripture as a "book of facts not of opinions."<sup>12</sup> He stood squarely within the American early post-Enlightenment where, it was thought, through the ordinary use of reason the common man could discover the necessary facts about Christianity and its ordinances in order to live a faithful life. This philosophical position provided a perfect matrix for using the school (both in the church and college) as a model for Christian training. With

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of the natural sciences (*Wissenschaft*) and learning skills of how to practice medicine contributed to the physical health of the nation, the study of Bible and Theology (*Wissenschaft*) supplemented by the practical ministries (preaching and pastoral skills) would contribute to spiritual health. Needless to say, this argument which provided a foundation for the theory-practice model made some sense in a fairly coherent society like nineteenth-century Germany. It became totally implausible in twentieth-century pluralistic America. Current difficulties encountered by those who follow such models can be noted in the article by Merl D. Strege, "Chasing Schleiermacher's Ghost: The Reform of Theological Education in the 1980's," *This World* 26 (Summer, 1989) 102-115. Strege's article also appears in a helpful collection on the general subject, *Theological Education and Moral Formation* ed., R. J. Neuhaus, *Encounter Series* 15 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992).

<sup>11</sup>David H. Kelsey, "A Theological Curriculum About and Against the Church," *Beyond Clericalism: The Congregation as a Focus for Theological Education* eds., Joseph C. Hough Jr., and Barbara Wheeler (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988) 37-48.

<sup>12</sup>Cf. S.C. Pearson, "Faith and Reason in Disciples Theology," *Classic Themes of Disciples Theology*, ed., K.W. Lawrence (Fort Worth: T.C.U., 1986) 114-116.

this approach Restorationists were well on their way toward embracing the dominant theory-practice model.

Campbell himself started Bethany College in 1840 with the Bible offered as an area of study along with other academic courses in the liberal arts. Across the frontier, other similar schools were established by Restorationists. To this day the liberal arts college, with the academic study of the Bible as the cornerstone of the curriculum, serves as the basic vehicle for the training of ministers in churches of Christ.

In due time, the rigorous critical methodologies used in the academy also became acceptable in the liberal arts colleges of the churches of Christ.<sup>13</sup> Since the philosophical underpinnings and basic methodologies for the disciplines were set in the major universities, and since they taught the Bible as a rigorous historical science, it was predictable that our colleges, wishing to be academically credible, would follow suit.<sup>14</sup>

At the same time, while the Christian colleges have looked to the great universities for their theoretical models in the teaching of Bible, these same colleges have been quick to appropriate the philosophies and methodologies of many other secular disciplines as the basis for their teaching about the work and practice of the minister. Preaching, for example, has generally been taught in the department of speech or communications. One would not deny there is much that the preacher can learn from specialists in communication. But one can also question the value such classes place on the theology that should inform the sermon.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>Gary D. Collier, "Bringing the Word to Life: Biblical Hermeneutics in Churches of Christ," *Christian Studies* 11:1 (Fall, 1990) 18-40.

<sup>14</sup>If one would dispute this claim, he is invited to consult the reading lists and bibliographies in the course descriptions for upper-division and graduate Bible courses offered in the colleges of the churches of Christ. There, increasingly, one will find little difference in both the form and the material content of the course offerings to that which is operative in the major universities which still offer courses in Bible.

<sup>15</sup>An additional factor contributing to the dominance of the theory-practice model in theological education among churches of Christ is the peculiar relationship

On the other hand, various programs in the practice of ministry are being set up in our theological schools, in missions, counseling, marriage and family therapy, and special ministries to various age groups. These programs exist independently as areas of expertise with their own peculiar methodologies. It is difficult to see where the theory (the traditional fields of theological study) and the practice (the professional programs) intersect and interrelate.

### Suggestions for Future Directions

Without question it is time for a fundamental analysis of theological education and ministerial preparation in churches of Christ. In these concluding observations it is only possible to highlight general directions which such an analysis should pursue.

First, with respect to the guiding philosophy, it would appear advisable that schools (whether preaching schools, liberal arts colleges, or university graduate schools) re-evaluate their adoption of the theory-practice model and begin to search for other models to undergird theological education. As an example of another model I would commend a mode of theological education that is congruent with the important movement of Narrative Theology. Taking for granted that we live in a post-modern world, and bracketing questions of proving before the bar of reason certain foundational theological claims, we would proceed with theological education on the basic presupposition that the Christian faith *is* true. Consequently, the task of theological education is to teach students the basic rudiments of the biblical story and how they may

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of the churches to the schools. Because of the emphasis on congregational autonomy most congregations elect not to contribute financially towards theological education. From the point of view of the schools (often dependent on foundation and business support) the churches have not shown a great deal of responsibility in this regard. On the other hand, the schools, not being directly accountable to the churches, often tend to gravitate toward academic rather than ecclesiastical models as the basic reason for their existence. Tragically, students suffer most in this system. Lacking direct oversight from either their home church or the faculty of the Christian school, many spend years in a spiritual wilderness wondering whether there will be a place for them in the ministries of the church.

live and serve with integrity in light of it. In short, theological education would become much more catechetical.

The focus of this model would be on developing the character and spiritual maturity of students rather than their being merely credentialed in a certain body of information or given particular professional skills. This model has the advantage of integrating learning about the Christian story with practice congruent with the faith. Such a philosophy would come closer in preparing the ideal leaders as described in passages such as I Timothy 3:1-13 than those who are educated under the theory-practice model. (Scripture emphasizes the character of the person filling the office, not the credentials or skills of the office holder.)

Second, with respect to the actual training of ministers, it may be necessary for the schools to undergo major changes in the present curriculum. A new center of the curriculum may emerge based on the need for growth in faith, the capacity for leading worship, and the ability to carry out the regular routines of the local church which is God's vehicle for remembering and perpetuating his story in the world. Although nourishment of the life of faith lived in the church is central, the student still goes to school and is instructed in the story (Bible, Church History, and Theology) and in ways that are appropriate to live in light of it (Ethics and Ministry).

Schools with this agenda may have to curtail certain specialized studies (e.g., the history of the Synoptic Problem, or the philosophy of Kant) in favor of the more integrated approach traced above.<sup>16</sup> Ultimately, what the church needs is not ministers who can read Ugaritic, but moral and faithful leaders who know the Christian story and can communicate it to others.

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<sup>16</sup>This does not mean that the church does not have a stake in other important areas of knowledge. Realistically, however, such issues are the province of the humanities in the Christian liberal arts college or specialized graduate programs.

## Conclusion

An undercurrent flowing throughout this essay is the claim that the programs of theological education offered by institutions affiliated with the churches of Christ often begin implementing the methodologies of others about the same time these constituencies have realized they were a failure.

The Disciples of Christ in their programs of theological education followed the theory-practice model to the letter. Now with the release of a series of essays tracing the fortune of the Disciples in America during the past century, a major milestone in the evaluation of the ministry in one segment of the Campbell-Stone Movement has been reached.<sup>17</sup> These essays were compiled against the background of a precipitous decline of Disciples membership and influence in the last generation. A major argument of the editor is that the legacy of the Disciples' well-organized higher education system spawned a liberal clergy who served a basically conservative constituency.<sup>18</sup> The situation has produced the disastrous mix of a frustrated clergy and demoralized laity. Given present trends among the churches of Christ, who can say that we will not end up in the same boat?

In this essay we have advocated a change in direction in our philosophy of theological education. We call this the model of informed faithfulness. Implementation of this model requires cooperation between school and church. The focus of this model is no longer on attaining academic credentials or merely developing skills, but on the nurture and formation of *character* congruent with the story we hold. The church must demand evidence of mature Christian character as the *essential* pre-requisite for ministry.

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<sup>17</sup>*A Case Study of American Protestantism: The Disciples' Relation to American Culture, 1880-1989*, ed., D. Newell Williams (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991).

<sup>18</sup>Williams, "Disciples' Relation to American Culture," 3-25; 561-574.



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