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Theological Education: The Next Generation

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When I went off to seminary back in January 1974 theological education among Southern Baptists was experiencing its zenith. The crop of "boomers," spiritually birthed and nurtured in Baptist churches for two decades, had finally hit the seminary campuses. Enrollments ballooned. Buildings sprouted up on seminary campuses like mushrooms after a cool, damp rain. New faculty were hired. Classes were full. Theological education among Southern Baptists had become big business. Those were heady days. The major problem facing the seminaries in those days was the happy dilemma of managing the growth and developing an infrastructure adequate to support it.

But that was then, and this is now. Nearly two decades of denominational foment have dramatically altered the landscape of theological education among Baptists. When I went to seminary there were six options for Southern Baptist students. Today about a dozen (it's hard to be precise; the figure changes almost daily!) new Baptist schools have emerged within the last ten years. The Gardner-Webb University School of Divinity is one of those new schools.

Created by an act of the University's Board of Trustees in August of 1992 as a response to the new landscape of Baptist life, GWU's School of Divinity is now in its sixth year, having graduated two classes. Predicated on the assumption that ministers in the church should share a common theological substructure irrespective of their particular calling, the School of Divinity offers as its basic degree the Master of Divinity degree in three iterations, each sharing a common 62 hour core comprised of biblical studies, historical/theological studies, spiritual formation, and ministry studies. Beyond the core, students can choose, by means of a 29 hour concentration, to earn the traditional M.Div., an M.Div. in Christian Education, or an M.Div. in Church Music. The GWU School of Divinity currently has about 120 students enrolled with eight full-time faculty members. As a part of a regional, Baptist, liberal arts university enrolling over 3,000 students in all degree programs, the School of Divinity enjoys the advantages of participation in a larger university setting. The School of Divinity is currently engaged in a self-study as the final part of its candidacy for full accreditation by the Association of Theological Schools.

While the foment in Baptist life provided the impetus to overcome the inertia preventing a reassessment of the system of Baptist theological education, many of us who were both nurtured and who later taught in that system had already come to believe that such a reassessment was necessary. It was not that the Southern Baptist system of theological education wasn't successful. Indeed, in some ways the system was victimized by its very success. The larger the seminaries grew, the more difficult it became to make the kinds of changes—pedagogical, philosophical, and institutional—both the church and society were demanding. Denominationally funded theological education on a large scale had the effect of increasing the distance between faculty and students, between theory and practice, and between the seminaries and the very constituencies they were designed to serve. In their own ways, each of the new Baptist theological schools is attempting to address these issues, to try to put together again what Baptist theological education had unwittingly torn asunder.

These are exciting days in which we as Baptists are trying to reinvent theological education for the next generation of Baptist ministers. It should not be surprising that many of the same initiatives, curricular, pedagogical, and practical, are being replicated at each of the new schools. We were all products of the same system and independently came to similar conclusions about what needed to be done to make Baptist theological education more responsive to the needs of its constituencies.

All of us in these new ventures in theological education face similar challenges. Let me identify six that seem particularly pressing just now as we find ourselves on the cusp of a new millennium.

The denominational challenge. One of the decided advantages of denominationally sanctioned theological education is that divinity students don't have to wonder where they should go to divinity school, and divinity schools and seminaries don't have to wonder who their constituencies are. For those of us doing theological education in the "New Baptist" world, identifying our particular constituencies is not as simple as it once was. For example, Gardner-Webb's School of Divinity relates most closely to the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. However, we also prepare ministers for the larger Baptist family, as well as for churches of other confessions. Identifying a constituency on behalf of which ministerial preparation is being undertaken will be a major challenge for all of us in these new venture schools.

The economic challenge. Denominationally funded theological education meant that students preparing for ministry in Baptist churches could expect virtually tuition-free theological education. For those of us who now do theological education outside that system, this means that new reliable sources of funding theological education must be identified and secured if students are to be able to choose the venue for their ministerial preparation apart from purely economic constraints.

The pedagogical challenge. One of the most glaring deficiencies of theological education as Baptists have known it has been its tendency to be fragmentary,

atomistic, and dispersive. Big theological seminaries typically meant independent schools of theology, church music, and religious education with little or no cross-disciplinary interaction. As a result, no coherent, integrated vision of "ministry" developed among ministers so trained who then found themselves working together on church staffs, but who didn't speak the same language, who didn't have the same skills in ministry, and who, in some cases, didn't even share the same vision of the church. Theological education that trains the next generation of ministers must find a way to put the pieces back together again. That means that we can no longer think in terms of courses in Bible and theology and church history and preaching, as though these "subjects" exist independently of one another in the parish. For the parish minister to function effectively s/he must have learned to integrate these various disciplines into one overarching skill which s/he employs every day in his/her ministry setting; namely, the capacity to do theological reflection in real-world situations. The development of that skill must not wait for graduation; it must begin in the student's divinity studies. For that reason, schools like Gardner-Webb are utilizing interdisciplinary courses, team-taught seminars, and spiritual formation in terms of mentoring in parish settings as a way of integrating not only theory and practice, but also content among the various disciplines.

The technological challenge. Gardner-Webb University recently installed a state-of-the-art fiber optics network to support the burgeoning techno-pedagogy that is proliferating on campuses throughout America. It is now possible from the professor's office, or the student's residence hall, or from the classroom itself to tap into learning resources so far-flung that even a decade ago they would have been considered science fiction. It is possible now for me, by way of the University's intranet, to keep my students engaged in the course even when they are not physically in class. The challenge before us, however, is to make this new technology the servant of theological education rather than its master. The use of technology in theological education must be ministry-driven rather than techno-driven.

The global challenge. The old paternalism and imperialism of Baptist missions and evangelism must give way to a perspective that both recognizes and celebrates the "World Church." The gospel, sown so faithfully by another generation of Baptists, has not only taken hold, but has flowered into vital, indigenous expressions of the church from which we can learn much. Theological education that is global in perspective will help students to take their places in a global church. At Gardner-Webb, we seek to do this through faculty exchanges with international divinity schools, travel-study experiences for students, and missions courses that focus on raising global awareness.

The postmodern challenge. The context in which theological education must take place is increasingly postmodern, and for theological education postmodernism is a two-edged sword. On the one hand, postmodernism (and its methodological correlate, deconstructionism), has happily (and appropriately) closed the breach between "fact" and "opinion" that had risen to the status of dogma in the Enlightenment, affirming instead that everyone operates out of some point of

view or "angle of vision," thereby exposing and repudiating modernity's arrogance and elitism. We simply do not have all the answers, and postmodernism is not only willing to admit that, but indeed insists upon it. On the other hand, too often postmodernism, in its attempt to champion tolerance, diversity, and pluralism, degenerates into ideological egalitarianism and relativism, arguing that because there is no such thing as "objectivity," there is no such thing as objective truth. This, of course, strikes at the heart of biblical faith.

Moreover, postmodern deconstructionism, in its legitimate attack on modernity's preoccupation with "objectivity," locates meaning in the interpretative community, or even in the interpreter himself/herself rather than in the scripture or the biblical author. Often, this leads to a denigration of the historical-critical method as a legitimate tool for biblical scholarship. It can even foster an anti-intellectualism (or at least an anti-reason bias), in the service of what some epistemologists call "interiorization," the penchant to locate all authority within the interpreter rather than in any external authority—text, church, reason, or anything else. Postmodern deconstructionism has taken hold so hard in much contemporary theological education that George Marsden of Notre Dame titled his latest book *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship.* Theological education for the next generation of Baptist leaders must not be squeamish here. Without sacrificing intellectual honesty, we must without hesitation affirm both our commitments to the Bible's essential truth claims as well as to the heritage and legacy of 300 years of biblical scholarship.

These are some of the challenges that face theological education for the next generation of Baptists. Gardner-Webb's School of Divinity, along with our sister seminaries, divinity schools, and Baptist houses of study, is meeting these and other challenges in creative and exciting new ways as we seek to boldly go where theological education has never gone before. Stay tuned. It promises to be theological education worth watching . . . and supporting.