

Wrong Time, Wrong Place, Wrong Courses: The Dangers of the Unconverted Seminary¹

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I am caught in a dilemma. I am not the only one in this dilemma, and it is not completely of my own doing. I am an active participant in the decline of Christianity in the West. I teach in a seminary, preparing pastors, priests and preachers who leave our sacred halls and try (among other things) to reverse the trends of western Christendom. Frankly, we are not doing very well. What strikes me most about Protestant theological education is not that it follows the academy in terms of method, medium and mood. I am not overwhelmed even by those occasions when I encounter the lack of genuine faith, ignorance of basic Christian doctrine, or lack of honest submission to the text (all of which would be good to have). No, what strikes me as odd here in the 21st century, even as tragic for the future of Christianity in the West, is that our seminaries are still teaching as if the Reformation were the pivotal point of all of Protestant Christianity. It is not.

This is no surprise, for on one level, for the Protestant churches “started” in the 16th century. Therefore, this foundational story should probably be central to training pastors for ministry. Actually, even this is not true. The Protestant Churches, like all Christian Churches, started sometime after the crucifixion, not after Wyclif, Erasmus, Luther or Calvin. It was the resurrection that initiated Christianity and therefore where we find what I call the “myth of origination” for the Church and for our churches. Until now, the Reformation genesis story has been the myth of origination for Protestant theology and ministry, and both seminaries and church judicial bodies make sure—through ordination exams, interviews, and research papers—that the future ministers can pass on this message. We follow Calvin, or Luther, or Zwingli, or Henry the VIII (well, maybe not the King).

This brings me to one of my main points. The Reformation was an in house argument: Christians arguing with other Christians about what it means to be the true, or a truer church. That was the context and for five hundred years we have been preparing people to defend why they and their church got the Reformation correct. As one student asked in a history class, “Professor you mean to tell me that churches were splitting over the exact words to use to describe what happens in communion?” And I confidently responded, “Absolutely. People were dying and killing each other over these important matters.” And that was his point. “I can’t imagine that,” he told me. “That was a whole different world, and frankly, I have a much bigger vision of the Christian church today.” The seminary student today must prepare more precisely to take on a culture that is opposing all of Christianity, than to take on the Baptists or the Catholics.

A bright and experienced pastor in his 50s came into my office recently, working on ecclesiology for his sabbatical. He came to the seminary to do some reading, and to visit two types of churches: those that are starting out trying to reach the 21st century cultures, and others that are trying to move from traditional to “missional.” He asked me an important question which, frankly, I could not answer. “Where do we find in Church history a similar time when there was so much rapid change in the culture, and who were

¹ With apologies to Gilbert Tennent, “The Dangers of an Unconverted Ministry,” 1740 sermon.

those people who provided leadership in that time?” We talked about this for a while looking at major changes: slavery, the Enlightenment, the Industrial Revolution, the rise of communism, et cetera. I became convinced that what we are going through now is unprecedented. There has never been a time when such massive global changes have taken place. However these massive global changes have not affected us (seminaries) much. Here are some of the global transformations. Christianity in Africa has gone from about 32 million to over 360 million since 1960. Christianity in China has gone from less than 2 million to over 60 million since 1950. From 1944 to 1969, 95% of colonized Africa and Asia became independent. Since 1944 Communism has risen and (mostly) fallen. In 1995 most students wrote papers by checking out books from the library. Now most college student assume they can write a paper without leaving their (on line) computer. Last year in the U.K. over 40% of the men downloaded pornography on their computers. China is draining the world of oil and raising the prices of concrete because of its rapid economic growth. There are 16 million Muslims living in Western Europe. And there is much more. But here is the most important change, a change that we mostly talk around rather than talk about. Christianity is a foreign religion to most Americans today.² Most people in America do not attend church. What they know of Christians and Christianity is often libelous stereotypes.³ Dechristianization of the West is accelerating as European and American countries develop social policies that are less neutral; i.e. more opposed to active Christian faith and practice.

Now, back to my first paragraph. We still use a curriculum that assumes Christendom. We assume that most people are Christian, we assume that if you put “*Gloria Patri*” in the bulletin, or if you talk about the “invocation” that a person understands what you are talking about. In short, as others have said, we are preparing priests and pastors for a church and a society that no longer exist: chaplains for vanishing Christendom. We assume that a pastor’s job is to preach, lead good worship for the people who come on Sundays, and visit the sick. This is just not enough. We need to prepare evangelists who can convert the people who will come to church. It would be better to require seminary students to plant a church for field education, than to follow a pastor who is teaching what she or he learned 20 years ago. We have little in common with Christians of the 1950s and almost nothing in common with 16th century European Christians. But we have much in common with 2nd century west Asian, 19th century South Asian or 20th century North African Christians. They lived in a world opposed to their faith. They understand that the church (*ecclesia*) is a “called out” community.

My pastor friend, after he could see that I was not able to answer his question about church leaders in the past said something that is frightening. I paraphrase and embellish:

People don’t realize that what is happening in our churches and our society is enormous. The change is tremendous. Our average age in the

² The evidence is uncontrovertable. “Everywhere we look Christianity and its societal influence is in rapid decline. Less than two weeks ago, as final preparations were being made for the visit of Pope Benedict XVI to the United States, the bishop of Camden, N.J., announced plans to close or merge nearly half the parishes in his diocese. Meanwhile, Catholics in New Orleans, Boston, New York, Toledo, Ohio, and nearly three dozen other dioceses are mourning the loss of parishes and parochial schools they grew up in.” *New York Times*, April 14, 2008.

³ See David Kinnaman, *UnChristian: What a New Generation Really thinks about Christianity (and Why it Matters)* (Grand Rapids: MI: Baker Books, 2007)

Presbyterian Church is 58 and so with that average, we are dying off fast. Any younger people who visit our churches don't know any of the basic Bible stories. They come into the church as a person would come into a Chinese restaurant for the first time...with a Chinese menu they can't read.

Our students go out to a world where Christians are more and more a faithful minority struggling against an increasingly pagan and hedonistic culture. And yet most of the church history and theology they are taught prepares them to be a certain type of Christian (say Reformed) in a Christian world. I have read a number of introductory church history books in the past 25 years. These books are valuable and there is much for students that will help them, if they learn it well. However, most of the history they describe is Western Christendom, a context which is no longer with us. Both the questions and many of the answers are only relevant by extension or through some major translation or adaptation.

Here is some evidence that things have changed. In the past 13 years when I teach church history I have had the most amazing response to my lessons on the early church. In the first or second lecture I describe late antiquity in the Mediterranean world. I discuss evolving forms of Platonism, Stoicism, mystery religions, trade routes, Empire, persecution, sexual ethics, poverty, slavery, pluralism, women, etc. When I finish the lecture there is always a student or two who says, "Wow that is just like today." When I discuss any other time period, especially the Middle Ages or Reformation, students never have the same type of identity crisis. Students recognize the disconnect: we talk mostly in introductory classes as if we are preparing to speak "Christianese" to other Christians. In fact, we need to learn to speak local dialects and act more like missionaries to the pluralistic, hedonistic, pagan late antiquity where we find ourselves today. Let me put it even stronger. We are taking students out of the world and teaching them a foreign culture: 1950s church culture. We are training chaplains to comfort and guide people for an age and a place that no longer exists. Our students, in contrast, will increasingly identify themselves as "Christians" rather than as PCUSA, PCA, UM, ELCA or RCC. They need to be more like protestors and resistance fighters than chaplains and counselors.

When I was in seminary, we each found our theological heroes and they were, generally speaking, people we liked from our church tradition. Being Reformed, I had friends who were fanatical about Calvin, Edwards, Niebuhr or Barth. I was a little odd with my personal fascination with Erasmus. Today our students, many being converts, or returnees to the Church, find their heroes in the strangest of places. We have students who like the Cappadocian Fathers, Wesley, Wilberforce, Bonhoeffer, Matteo Ricci, St. Francis, MLK, and Mother Teresa. Why do they choose these people as their theological heroes? I suspect it is because most of them sense that these were people who were Christians resisting a largely unchristian movement or an overly contextualized church. Seminary students accurately sense something that many faculty have not yet admitted: we need a theology of social and religious engagement more than a systematic and philosophical theology that comes out of western Christendom. Students today need to bear the death of Christ to the world, the very world that crucified him. The problem for the next 15 or 20 years is that we still have professors (like myself) who were trained by Christendom scholars, but we are serving in a post-Christendom world. Change in large

well-endowed institutions comes very slowly. Some schools will not survive, so they will go down affirming the rightness of their work, and telling of the tragedy that others didn't understand the important prophetic work they were doing. The endowments will be paid down, the student body will diminish, and then they hear, "Sold!"

Some may say that the situation is not really as drastic as I make it sound. I believe they are wrong for the evidence is all around us: combining dying churches and then closing them 10 or 15 years later; combining dying seminaries; seminaries cutting back on programs and faculty, and then there is the forty-year decline in church membership.⁴ One of the clearest indications that we in mainline seminaries are not preparing students well is the seminary demographics. Of the 20 largest seminaries in the United States, 16 or 17 have a strong emphasis upon Christian mission.⁵ My guess is that students are going to these seminaries both because of the theology and there is a curriculum that looks out to missional engagement. Most of these seminaries are concerned with missionary work and evangelizing the unreached...everywhere. But even these seminaries do not get it. Their programs and syllabi are not radical enough for our age. Another illustration may help.

When younger students come to seminary, they sing different songs, they have a different idea of what worship should be and they are reading different books. Some of this disparity between new student and old faculty member has always been true, but it is much more drastic now than a generation ago when I went to seminary. We sang hymns in chapel and shared some common theological books which many of the faculty had heard of, even if they were not their favorites. We now have students who endure the organ and hymn singing, but prefer to sing a different type of Christian music; music that is about basic issues of faith and worship. The older theologically intricate songs of Christendom do not speak to the heart of a convert living in a largely pagan world. What books are they reading? Many students, the ones who are engaged in thinking about their faith before they come to seminary, are reading books like *Resident Aliens*, and they know about emergent, house church, small group and missional literature. They are reading about the encounter of Jesus with the post-Christian, post modern and largely antagonistic world of the West. Why do they read Hauerwas rather than Niebuhr? Why the attraction to Orthodoxy and monasticism today? Simply put, these younger students have been raised in a culture antagonistic to, or ignorant of the Gospel and so they think more like the early church or the radical reformers (like Anabaptists) than like us who came out of the magisterial reform. They understand exactly what it means to be a resident alien because that was their experience in high school, college or at home.

Lesslie Newbigin prophesied all this upon his return from India in the 1970s but most people did not take notice, when he later asked, "Can the West Be Converted?"⁶ He understood that the pastoral approach needed in the West now was that of the missionary,

⁴ For 2007 the PCUSA lost 57,572 members.

⁵ From the ATS website the 20 largest schools measured by the number of students studying in the MDiv program (FTE): Southwestern Baptist (869), Sothern Baptist (814), Asbury (805), New Orleans Baptist (698), Dallas (689), Gordon-Conwell and Southeastern Baptist (578), Fuller (535), Concordia Lutheran (526), Princeton (437), Duke (406), Bethel (404), Candler (399), Luther (342), Seventh Day Adventist (330), Reformed (324), Samuel DeWitt Proctor/Virginia Union (319), George W. Truett/Baylor (295), Wesley (276).

⁶ J. E. Lesslie Newbigin, "Can the West be Converted?," *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 6, no.1 (1985):25-37.

challenging the minds, habits and structures of a post-Christian society. Today we should admit that he was correct, and we have done very little about it. We need to do something quite drastic, and we need to start about 30 years ago. We need a conversion. [To be continued.]

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Part II
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In the first part of this article I argued that our seminaries have not caught up with the rapid and radical changes that have taken place in Christianity, Western Society and therefore in our seminary students. In this concluding section, I make some preliminary suggestions as to what needs to be done to begin to construct, if we are not too late already, theological education that would be appropriate for our Western context.

1. The Christian's Holy Book: Seminaries should put away their *preoccupation* with higher critical questions about the text and focus more on the internal logic and message of the Christian's Holy Book. We spend far too much time on questions that, for the most part can not be answered. What we have of the historical Jesus is found in the Bible and our students do not know it. We need to teach and learn the Bible recognizing how we will be presenting it to our western audience: as a foreign book that needs to be understood by outsiders. Our students come with less and less knowledge of Scripture and we still assume they are biblically aware. They are not, so we need to change our primary focus from critical analysis to integration and synthetic understanding. In most places in the world where Christianity is vital and growing, where it is challenging social and economic structures as well, the Christians are people of one book. As Ken Bailey has said repeatedly, Muslims have more respect for our Bible and our Jesus than many professors in the United States. We can learn from Muslims as well as Buddhists who revere their sacred texts. We need students who can preach with some knowledge and with some confidence in the text.

2. Social analysis and engagement: It is not enough for the pastor today to learn only "congregational analysis," she or he needs to know how to read the neighborhoods, school systems and economics. Seminary students need to get out of the classroom. Thinking as a missionary, we need to help the students ask newer questions that speak to the community and to the society, not just "how can we get more people in church." The pastor of the 21st century needs to be prophetic in speaking about sinful structures and dehumanizing realities⁸, but at the same time she will need to be an evangelist with "local knowledge." At present we do not teach our future pastors to be comfortable out in the world, on the streets, in the coffee shops, at sporting events, meeting people in the park and in the shopping malls. Pastors need to be engaging people in the world every week.

3. Evangelism: For too long mainline churches have left evangelism, for a host of reasons to the Baptists and the Pentecostals. The size of churches in America shows that this kind permissiveness ("We permit the Baptists to do evangelism for us.") has

⁷ With apologies to Gilbert Tennent, "The Dangers of an Unconverted Ministry," 1740 sermon.

⁸ Why, for example, are there six times as many blacks as whites (per 100,000) in U.S. prisons?

produced good fruit for the non-mainline churches. We have passively accepted Enlightenment and denominational dichotomies that we should have resisted. There is no dichotomy in Jesus' life and mission, and we must stand against such today. Let's face the obvious, a young pastor leaving seminary to pastor a church of 80 (attendance 22; average age, 60) had better be an evangelist or a thief (sheep-stealer, that is). We suggest that seminaries send out students who have a great passion and a natural joy to tell people about Jesus (not about their church), and to bring the presence of Jesus into public places. Every student graduating from seminary should have led people to Christ each year of their seminary training. You learn preaching by doing it. You learn exegesis by doing it. And so we will learn evangelism. Let justice roll down, and let the word of God flow out.

4. Early church and missional engagement: Church history is valuable and necessary, but not all Church history is equally valuable or equally necessary. Today we need much less on internal Christendom disputes and much more on the life of Christians in situations of persecution and conflict; who is teaching about early Arabic and Persian Christianity today? Much time needs to be spent on the first four centuries and much time needs to be spent on the encounter with religions in India in the past three centuries. Our churches are placed among seas of unchurched people, many of whom are antagonistic to Jesus and his message. Polite, respectable Christianity that blends into the world is a dying breed. It is of no value. It is not worth its salt. Church leaders need to study how Christians were faithful, and faithfully serving the poor, when it was unpopular and even illegal to do so. Christianity that is so clear and confident brought the Roman Empire to its knees, wore down the Japanese occupiers in Korea, and outlived the Maoists in China. By contrast our Christianity often looks pretty anemic. It can barely keep the church alive, forget bring life to others.

5. Education as discipleship: At present our seminaries assume that church leaders are developed environmentally. I have often wondered how someone becomes an elder or deacon. It is generally, from what I can tell, that the nicest people who stay around the longest and complain the least eventually end up as elders. With more and more people coming to church without the long term "environmental Christianity," more needs to be done to intentionally disciple leaders. Faculty and pastors need to view their jobs not as teachers or "leaders" but as disciple makers. Disciple is a good biblical word. To this end, we need to teach our future pastors one simple ministry skill: how to lead a small group Bible study. Most seminaries don't teach such a skill, even though this is one of the most basic ministry skills in a post-Christendom world. Raising up Christians, as much as anything else, is a matter of helping people pray, study the Bible and step out in obedience. Our Bible departments need to seize this responsibility and send out students who can lead young people in joyous inductive discovery of our Sacred Book.

6. Spirituality for the road: Finally, we need to teach spirituality not as a religious habit (only), but as a rhythm of life, as the rhythm of our life, *for the sake of others*. Christian growth and development is a matter of obedience as we take the life and message of Jesus into the world, and then as we withdraw to be with Jesus (only). Christian spirituality is seldom taught as equally a matter of missional obedience and Christian worship. The engagement of the world often wounds us and challenges us. The worship and devotion brings both healing and empowerment for mission. Mission and worship, are the two strands of ecclesiology that make for a healthy church, and that will make for strong leaders for the church. Can we teach missional spirituality? We better.

Here is a challenge for the mainline seminary: can we take on a revolutionary change for the Kingdom's sake? If not we will become more and more of a side show. This revolutionary change I am talking about will involve scraping off the barnacles that have attached themselves to the western church. We must no longer hold anything in our seminaries as sacred, because our human sacredness (idols) will drag us down. It will also mean letting go, or as a ship in the doldrums, throwing unnecessary goods overboard. We are not alone. Humility may guide us to listen to Christian leaders from Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean and Asia. At present, their preparation for ministry enhances mission in some very difficult places. Maybe learning from Chinese or Kenyan or Brazilian pastors is an appropriate type of decolonization that could bring new life to our old seminaries and then to our churches.

It will seem costly at first, but very quickly the results will prove the wisdom of the radical response. The first step is to simply recognize that we are training pastors for an era which is gone (wrong time), we are doing it too much in the academic setting (wrong place) and we are teaching a curriculum which is obsolete (wrong courses). It may seem dangerous to take such drastic steps, but the far greater danger is to keep doing the same thing over and over even though it is bringing less and less results.

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