

The Confessional Character of Theological Education and the Training of Disciples

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“Rooted in the Word, Engaged in the World”—this title of the ICETE 2012 Consultation expresses the evangelical spirit and commitment extremely well. However, we need to see the inner dialectic between the two. To be genuinely rooted in the Word, the church has to be passionately engaged in the world. Failure to engage in the world is a sign of not being truly rooted in an obedient way. On the other hand, to be relevant and forcefully engaged, the church has to be firmly rooted in the Word. Without this rootedness, there can be no relevant and life-transforming message from the church. Prophets in the OT are intensely relevant and powerful in their message. Why? because they “have been spoken to”. The word “prophet” means precisely “the one who has been spoken to”. The main characteristic of a prophet is not in his speaking, but in the fact that he has been spoken to by God. He speaks out of obedience to speak the message entrusted to him. With no message entrusted, he has no need to speak. Jeremiah has been spoken to, and this causes him great pain as he laments, albeit with a sense of relief, “Whenever I speak, I cry out, proclaiming violence and destruction, the Word of God has brought me insult and reproach...But if I say, I will not mention Him and speak any more in His name, His Word is in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bone.” (Jeremiah 20:8-9). This morning as I am prepared to speak about rootedness in theological education, there is a fire in my bone too. After being in the business of theological education for more than thirty years, right at the end of my ministry there has emerged resounding doubts about the effectiveness of what I have been doing and what I have defended earnestly. Now let me share with you my struggle.

John Stott’s book *The Living Church* points us to the heart of the identity of the Church. The church, Uncle John reminds us, is at the centre of God’s eternal purpose of salvation. A church that is alive would uphold this identity, dwelling deep in the truth of the gospel entrusted to her. The gospel is the life transforming truth about ourselves, who are utterly helpless in the depth of our sinfulness, and about God, who gave Himself to redeem us. Without this gospel, we would be free, yes, free to fall into the abyss of destruction. To be

part of the fulfilment of God's eternal purpose we have to live out a life that is worthy of the gospel, the life of radical discipleship, following Jesus every step of the way, even to the cross. In his last book, *Radical Discipleship*, Uncle John calls the church back to the root of her being. In choosing to write *Radical Discipleship* at almost the end of his life, it was as if he drew on his remaining strength to remind the church once again who she is. The church is a community of disciples called by Jesus Christ. Losing that identity, we lose everything. Why did Uncle John choose that last message to give to the church? I suspect there is something in the church that has continued to worry him deeply. He points out in *The Living Church*, "In many parts of the world, especially in significant regions of Africa, Asia and Latin America, the church is growing rapidly...the growth is in size rather than in depth, for there is much superficiality of discipleship everywhere." (p. 21) Or as he puts it in another context, "The church is 3,000 miles wide and an inch deep. Many are babes in Christ." Despite the phenomenal growth, the church is in fact in crisis, a crisis that touches the very core of her being. What is the crisis? It is the crisis of evangelical identity and existence due to the erosion of evangelical faith and the evasion of discipleship.

How have we come to that? On the surface, we can blame it on the influence of secular culture. Indeed, the church is in danger of being held captive by a market driven culture, being driven to cater for religious consumers for the sake of drawing them into the church in great numbers. The drive and technique for growth and for program expansion come into the centre stage. Doing that, compromises would have to be made. The implication is clear. David Wells has long lamented about the fact that increasing numbers of evangelical churches "are adapting themselves to the felt needs in the congregation much as a business might adapt its product to a market." Such adaptation "has enabled evangelicalism to orient itself to our consumer culture and the habits of mind that goes with it."¹ However, in a narcissistic culture like ours, people are not looking for personal salvation but psychological well-being. They come to the church as religious consumers who are free to define their needs and demands. Those who understand the trend of popular orientation best would be able to draw the greatest crowd. With the intrusion of the market ethos, "the importance of theology is eclipsed by the clamour for management skills, biblical preaching by entertaining story-telling, godly character by engaging personality..." Ministers' competence is measured by managerial skills and not theological insights or spiritual depth.² As this is taking place, individualism has found an easy inroad into the church. The confessional character of theology is thus becoming more and more questionable, as common consensus and communal commitment to faith have become so fragmented that theological expressions are

¹ David F. Wells, *No Place for Truth, or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993. Ibid, p. 173.

² Ibid, pp. 233-234.

often treated as personal opinions or ideologies. Theological reflection and judgment get trivialized in the life of the church. The church is no longer a learning church, learning the apostolic and historic faith as her life-blood.

How have we come to that? Beneath the surface of such phenomena, there we have a deeper crisis, the crisis of theology and the crisis of theological education. The erosion of evangelical faith has its epicentre at evangelical seminaries. The loss of confessional character of theology happens there first.

There has been a general trend for decades for theologians to take theology as a profession rather than as a mission in being the teacher of the church. In fact, rather unfortunately, not a few of these theologians have lost their faith, and they remain in seminaries and universities only to help others to lose theirs. In 1999 I was drafted into a consultation in Heidelberg, in which 25 Reformed theologians engaged in dialogue about the future of Reformed theology. There, we had a few colleagues raving about non-exclusivity as the guiding principle for Reformed theology if Reformed theology was to have a future in this pluralistic world. I was rather blunt in response. And I asked, "Is there a limit to non-exclusivity? Can it include a view that rejects precisely non-exclusivity?" I pointed out further that all living systems have a mechanism that excludes whatever threatens the integrity of their life. Only a dead man does not discriminate and exclude. I caution my colleagues with an interesting remark made by William Temple about prostitution, as reported by his biographer. The word "prostitute", according to Temple, comes from a Latin word which means "to lay bare". A prostitute is someone who lays bare his/her self to be open to anyone who may come in and go out at will. A theology that allows anything to come in and out freely amounts to theological prostitution. If Reformed theology were to do that, it would not have any future. My friend Colin Gunton was there in the consultation, and he said to me afterward, "Carver, you caught these guys right there." The next day, we went to the University Church for Sunday Worship. We were quite shocked to find barely 50 souls there, with the 25 conferees included. It was quite a depressing feeling worshipping in this empty historic centre of Reformation where the Heidelberg Catechism was drafted. The church was dead, and what remains is nothing but a monument of failure due mainly to her unfaithfulness to the gospel. Theological unfaithfulness has serious consequences.

Two years later, in 2001, a group of 26 Reformed Biblical scholars met in Stellenbosch, SA, to discuss hermeneutics. I was drafted as one of the four Reformed systematic theologians to provide the theological perspective. Hans Wader, a Bultmannian NT scholar from the University of Zürich, sounded the clarion call to defend autonomous reason in Biblical research. He used Kant's definition of *Aufklärung*, declaring that we are no longer minors, we have come of age, and we should exercise our judgment freely without having to worry about constraints from external authority. Hans Wader belongs to the old

school of historical critical scholarship. There were others who went for ideological reading of the Bible, or reader-response type of hermeneutics. I was one of the very few who insisted that the Bible has to be read confessionally, or else it would be read wrongly in an irresponsible way. I played a little trick on my reader-response colleagues by expounding Roland Barthes's philosophy of reading, regarding a text as nothing more than a collection of ever-shifting cultural-linguistic codes. Pushing this idea to its logical conclusion, the reader himself would eventually be deconstructed into a collection of ever-shifting linguistic codes also. The act of reading becomes pointless, the pleasure for reading is pointless as the reader is basically unidentifiable. Reading, at least certain reading, has serious consequence. Some leads to life transformation. The Gospel of John sums up the author's intention in John 20:31 "These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing Him you may have life in His name." I then asked my colleagues, why read the Bible, why spend your life studying it, why such an industry going on, if there is nothing significant to your life and to that of others? As for me, if the Bible is mere human literature, I won't give a damn to it, I would rather be reading Bhagavad-Gita than the Bible for poetry, or Nagarjuna's Buddhist texts for refreshing poetry and spiritual insights, or perhaps Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, or Homer's Iliad, for drama and philosophical insights, or even Roland Barthes just for the heck of it, for sheer pleasure of reading.

I told my colleagues that understanding and misunderstanding the Bible can be a matter of life and death. To illustrate my point, I used a scenario from the 2nd World War. Early in the 2nd World War, Britain was on the losing side in the sea, for German U-boats were highly effective in locating and sinking British vessels. The British intercepted every message from the German command to the U-boats, but could not decode it. So for a while, warships were sunk, and hundreds of seamen were sent to the depth of the sea. Alan Turing, a young mathematician from Cambridge, was recruited, and in a few months, he found the key to decode the message. The tide was turned. In doing the decoding, Turing had to believe that there were objective messages, and decoding these messages meant life and death to his countrymen. How did he do it? He had to follow the logic of encoding. He had to think after the way the encoder thought. It is an interpretation with deep humility, the humility of following, of thinking after. I pleaded with my colleagues that if we believe there is any objective significance in the message of the Bible at all, we would have to follow the logic with which God reveals Himself. To read and understand His Word, we have to think after the way He thinks as He unfolds His plan of salvation. At the same time, the texts were not written for pleasure as postmodernists would have it. Those who wrote the gospels wrote by putting their life at stake. They have a significant message to convey. Also, much blood of martyrs was spilt for defending and keeping the Word. I was deeply touched by John Piper's account of William Tyndale's martyrdom for translating the Bible into English so that his countrymen could read it first hand. I was of course the lone voice in Stellenbosch.

Well, you can shrug your shoulders and say, these guys are liberals, and we are evangelicals, we are not like them. Are we sure? Is it not true that many evangelical scholars, though upholding their evangelical faith, seldom move beyond technical analysis of genre, structure or rhetoric to distil theological truth from the texts being treated. It is as if theology is to be left to theologians, and once they have finished the analysis, their job is done. Is it not common that Biblical scholars are hesitant to study the Bible with a confessional lens? To maintain themselves as respectable scholars, to be undistracted from their specialization on certain books, they would humbly decline to see the whole of the Bible, as if doing that would jeopardize their expertise. I suspect not a few would feel reluctant to take a confessional stance in interpreting the Bible. Worse still, many evangelical Biblical scholars seldom care to take theology seriously. After having been armed with the most basic systematic theology, they would put it aside and plunge into the sea of Biblical research. With inadequate theological resource for hermeneutical anchor, with inadequate philosophical background for critical reflection on current trends, they can be easily swayed into following the main stream.

Ellen Davis, OT professor at Duke University, shared her struggle. As a young professor, she was required to teach an introduction course on OT studies. The course was taught regularly as a study of the literary history, social history and history of religions of the Hebrew people. She confessed that she was not interested in teaching a course like this. She took the risk and taught the course from the perspective of faith. She pleads that we can and we should read the Bible confessionally. She says in her essay “Teaching the Bible Confessionally in the Church” that “in the present intellectual climate, I believe the Bible is often read ‘too historically’—that is, too narrowly so. Many students in mainstream Protestant seminaries study the Bible as if its aim were to give us insight into ancient ideologies and events. Yet a confessional reading sees in the Bible a different aim: first of all, to tell us about the nature and will of God...the Bible’s aim is to do theology.” Not many Biblical scholars, even evangelical ones, have the courage to go against the stream; too often they feel obliged to apologize for reading the Bible confessionally.

When it comes to systematic theology or dogmatic theology, the situation is not too different, the loss of confessional character in the teaching and learning of theology is quite obvious. Specialization takes its toll. Many theologians would feel comfortable focusing on a theological system, and spend much of his/her academic life studying a theologian or an issue. The heart for taking the faith of the church as a whole and expounding it seems to be on the wane. Instead of expounding doctrines Biblically through the lens of historical-theological formulations, trying to articulate them for contemporary contexts, theological teachers more often than not would take the easy way of merely rehearsing an array of theological views on certain doctrines: what Karl Barth says, what Paul Tillich says, what Pannenberg says, or what Colin Gunton says, etc. What students get from a systematic theology course on

doctrine would end up to be a heap of broken images about certain doctrines. There is much uncertainty and even confusion as to what the church actually believes in regard to that particular doctrine. Equally damaging is the impression that theology as the articulation of the faith of the church is nothing but theological opinions, completely open ended. With such an impression, the ministers we are turning out lack the confidence to teach. When asked by lay people he ministers to about certain doctrinal truth and its implications, he would likely fumble and just murmur a few theological terms or names he learns from seminary. The fact that he is entrusted by the church to be teacher of the church would be evaded. The fact that theology always means theology of church, as articulation of her dogma, and not theological opinions of individual believers would also be missed by his congregation.

What is theology? Let me borrow Barth's definition. Theology is a science, what sort of a science? It is a science of critique. Critique of what? It is a critique of the church's proclamation to examine and test whether it is being faithful to the Word of God. As the Word of God is God's self-giving revelation in Jesus Christ, being faithful to the Word of God necessarily means being faithful to His self-giving love to the world, and thus has to be relevant and responsive to the needs of the world.

Theology so defined is rooted in the church's proclamation, serves within the proclamation of the church as the guardian of Biblical truth. It has the single purpose of bringing the church's proclamation in line with God's revelation in Jesus Christ, testified and expounded by the Holy Spirit in and through the Bible. All theology thus has to be Biblical theology in the broad sense. As science, it is bounded and determined by the object of its inquiry, and that means God's act of revealing Himself. Theology cannot do other but thinks after God's purpose and the logic of His actions in unfolding His eternal purpose. Doing theology is an act of obedience. Obeying what has been given to the church as truth. Its task is to ensure that it is being articulated, expounded and made contemporary faithfully. Theology has to be confessional in character, for it guarantees the right and truthful confession of the church to the world.

The church is One Holy Catholic church preserved in Christ by the Holy Spirit from generation to generation. Despite diverse historic contexts facing diverse challenges, and thus distinctive emphases on aspects of faith, historic confessions of the church nevertheless affirm one another as truthful articulation of the same gospel. Together they are "co-confessors" of the same truth, and thus testify to the living presence of the Holy Spirit among them. Being faithful to the Bible and being faithful to historic confessions of the church go hand in hand together. In so doing, we acknowledge God's unceasing and continuous work in history, we acknowledge the oneness of our life in Christ, past, present and future. We truly believe in the Communion of the Saints. Indeed, in the past as much as the present, we all have to struggle to articulate our faith and confess it to our contemporaries,

but the Holy Spirit ensures that what truly matters in the gospel comes through in those confessions done in faithful obedience to the Word of God. We do not confess our faith alone, isolated in our context; we are one part of the unison of the Holy Catholic church in confessing Christ together.

To be trained as teachers of the church, theological students have to be solidly grounded in the Bible as well as historic confessions of the church so that they know what to teach as genuinely belonging to the faith of the church, that they can make judgment as to where to stand firm in time of turmoil. When Hitler proclaimed his *Führer* principle in 1933 when he became the Chancellor of Germany, a 26 year old theologian responded in a radio message titled “The Younger Generation’s Alternative Concept of Leadership”, warning against idolatry in the *Führer* principle. This young man was Bonhoeffer. His response was theologically rooted in the Lordship of Jesus Christ. It was his Christocentric theology that guided him through the most difficult days of his ministry.

Teaching our seminarians what the church believes, preparing them to be teachers of the church, is vital for them as future ministers and vital for the integrity of the church.

But there is something more. Teaching them what the church believes is not enough. Training them to make disciples is even more vital and fundamental. To John Stott, discipleship is radical because it is the very root of our faith. It is foundational to being saved. Let me tell you a story and you would understand. Five and a half years ago, I was introduced by a friend to a brother and a sister who were about to get married. They came for advice about certain things. After settling what they came for, the brother shared with me his plight. He had just become a Christian for six months. Right after he accepted Christ, he was investigated and eventually charged for bribery. He was the CFO of a big corporation. He signed the cheque of the bribe. His lawyer was confident that he could come out unscathed; the only thing he needed to remember was to confess nothing. He asked me what a Christian in such a situation should do. I then asked him, “Do you truly believe in Christ?” He answered affirmatively. Then I asked, “Are you willing to see God’s will being done on earth as it is in Heaven?” to be followed by, “Are you willing to see God’s will being done in you?” He answered both affirmatively. Then I asked another set of two questions: “Are you willing to see God’s justice being done on earth? Are you willing to see God’s justice being done in you?” For the last question, he paused for a long while before he affirmed. Then I asked, “Have you done something unjust?” He did not answer. But after a few days, he called back to let me know that he decided to confess to the prosecutor against the advice of his lawyer. Because of that, he got a sentence of 40 months in jail. As I visited him in jail five months later, I saw a totally transformed man, calm, peaceful and assured. He told me he did not regret making the decision for it was the right thing to do. After doing what he did, he felt the kind of peace he had never felt in his life. He spent long hours reading the Bible every day,

witnessing about Christ in the prison and brought five to Christ. After 20 months, he was released, went back to the same company for another post his boss cut for him. After a year or so, I was told by one of his colleagues that the whole corporate culture was changed because of him. This to me is radical discipleship.

In the face of this brother's testimony, I keep asking myself, how can all the grand curricula and all the industry of teaching and learning in our seminary program "produce" a disciple so obedient to the call for discipleship? There seems to be a gap between seminary programs and discipleship, that discipleship has not been in the agenda of theological education. Discipleship often seems to be something that comes as an after-thought to be supplemented by parachurch organizations. It is not being regarded as the main business of ministry. The passion and craft of discipleship are left to those uninitiated in theological education.

Reading John Stott's book and re-reading Bonhoeffer's *The Cost of Discipleship* has led me to think hard in humility. Have we been doing the job that we should be doing in theological education? Bonhoeffer saw the failure of the university type of theological education to serve the church. He designed a curriculum that aimed precisely at the nurturing of discipleship. In Finkenwalde, the small theological community centred on studying the Bible, praying with the Bible at the centre, and building themselves as a communion. Barth, hearing all these activities, was concerned that he was compromising theological rigor for devotional edification. Bonhoeffer responded: "I am firmly convinced that in view of what the young theologians bring with them from the university and in view of the independent work which will be demanded of them in the parishes...they need a completely different kind of training which life together in a seminary like this unquestionably gives. You can hardly imagine how empty, how completely burnt out most of the brothers are when they come to the seminary. Empty not only as regards theological insights and still more as regards knowledge of the Bible, but also as regards their personal life....there is really serious and sober theological, exegetical and dogmatic work going on. Otherwise all these questions are given the wrong emphases." (270-271) These ordinands have to be nurtured as disciples that take God's grace seriously. Bonhoeffer saw clearly, cheap grace is the deadliest enemy of the church. It is grace without discipleship, without the cross. Bonhoeffer told his friend Hildebrandt, these seminarians have to be trained in such a way that they can truly preach evangelical sermons. By evangelical sermons, he meant "A truly evangelical sermon must be like offering a child a fine and red apple or offering a thirsty man a cool glass of water and then saying: Do you want it?.. We must be able to speak about our faith so that hands will be stretched out toward us faster than we can fill them...Do not try to make the Bible relevant. Its relevance is axiomatic.. Do not defend God's Word, but testify to it...Trust to the Word. It is a ship loaded to the very limits of its capacity." (272)

With these words, I need to end here. My struggle as a theological educator will continue. I hope this sharing helps you to join my struggle too.