

Today and Tomorrow: Theological Education in a Shifting Context

(3 of 3)



Dr. Justo L. González

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Even while post-Reformation scholasticism—both Catholic and Protestant—still took for granted a generally supportive context, that context was beginning to shift. René Descartes declared that his great metaphysical discovery took place in 1619, the same year in which the Synod of Dort met. And his *Discourse on Method* was published in 1637, ten years before the Westminster Confession. Yet neither at Dort nor at Westminster was there any acknowledgment that times were changing. New ideas were emerging that would soon deprive both the church and theology of their traditional positions of privilege. Cartesian rationalism on the Continent and British empiricism in Great Britain soon resulted in Deism and similar systems of “natural and universal religion,” or simplified Christianity, which increasingly marginalized traditional Christian theology, making it seem unenlightened and often pushing it out of universities. Thus, while some schools continued teaching a traditional scholastic theology and others taught an “enlightened” theology, in both cases what was taught had little to do with the actual life and faith of the people.

It was against both of these alternatives that the Pietist movement arose. Spener published his famous *Pia desideria* in 1675, while Protestant scholasticism was still dominant and Deism was on the rise. The last two of his “pious desires” are of particular interest for our subject. In the fifth, he proposes a reformation of schools and universities, so that not only the mind but also

the heart will be educated. And his sixth and final point is the need for renewed preaching that will not consist in learned lectures on details of doctrine nor on philosophical points. Preaching should be solidly grounded on a careful exegesis of Scripture but must also aim at the upbuilding of the body of Christ by appealing not only to the minds of listeners but also to their hearts.

Obvious as this may seem to us now, it was not then and was staunchly resisted by theological schools. While teaching in Leipzig, Spener's follower, August Hermann Francke, founded the *collegium philobiblicum*—a group that gathered to study the Bible and to listen to lectures in which Francke discussed theological themes grounded on biblical exegesis, always relating them to the practical life of devotion and of service. This he did with great success. But the response of his colleagues at the university was to order its students not to attend the *collegium philobiblicum* and to persuade the government of Saxony to expel Francke from its territories.

Francke then went to Halle, where he was instrumental in the founding of a new university. Although the University of Halle became famous for its training of missionaries, it also proposed and implemented a new curriculum grounded on the careful study and exegesis of Scripture in its original languages, but always with a view to preaching and to the practice of pastoral ministry.

The growing criticism of theological studies by the rationalism of the Enlightenment on one side and by the Pietist movement on the other led to a quest for a new understanding of the nature and task of theological education and eventually to the work of Friedrich Schleiermacher and of the University of Berlin, whose statutes Schleiermacher helped write in 1810. The next year, in 1811, he wrote his *Brief Outline of Theological Studies*. Here he proposed a curriculum that reflected the spirit of the Enlightenment in that it was based on the notion that theology is a science—a Wissenschaft, a field of critical knowledge. But it also reflected the spirit of Pietism in its emphasis on the practical dimension of all theological studies.¹

Schleiermacher's insistence that theology—philosophical, historical, and practical—is a science is an indication of the direction in which universities had been moving and continued moving as a result of the Enlightenment and the various scientific discoveries and revolutions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Universities, originally founded as schools of theology, now had a place for such schools only insofar as they could show that their methods followed the canons of objective scientific inquiry. In Europe, this often led to a separation between the theological studies one followed at the university and the more practical training in a separate institution where, after learning all the theory at the university, one learned how to preach, how to lead worship, etc.

Although somewhat modified, such tendencies could also be felt this side of the Atlantic, where universities originally founded for the training of pastoral leadership now tended to marginalize

their schools of theology, and where, following the pattern set in Europe, although not as radically, it was taken for granted that one must first learn the more theoretical aspects of theological studies, then learn the theory of practice—for instance, the theory of homiletics—and only after that engage in actual practice. Universities such as Harvard and Yale, founded as schools for the training of pastors, one in 1636 and the other in 1701, became research institutions in which theological studies were increasingly marginalized. Further south, the College of New Jersey (now Princeton University) had proposed to create a school of theology, but when this was founded in 1812 by action of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, it was conceived as a free-standing institution, partly out of fear of university control and partly because the university was not quite convinced of the "scientific" nature of theology.²

The impact of what one could call "the Berlin canon" may be seen to this day in the way theological education is conceived and practiced not only in university schools of theology but also in many free-standing seminaries. It may be seen, first of all, in the movement toward ever-increasing specialization that has dominated theological education throughout the twentieth century and well into the twenty-first. According to this canon, when it comes to recruiting and evaluating faculty, the more specialized, the more qualified one is. Secondly, the same canon has led to the "publish or perish" principle and to the manner in which this is often applied. This is why, in order to advance as a theological educator, one must not only publish but publish at the growing edge of specialization in one's field.³

It is at this point that we now stand. Our present-day schools of theology are in various degrees heirs of the traditions of monastic schools, where community life and character formation were paramount; heirs of the Berlin canon, in which individual research and scientific objectivity predominate; and heirs, too, of modern pragmatism after the fashion of business schools. These are not easily compatible.

As we then summarize what we have found in these three days, and seek to relate it to the present situation, some strange conclusions stand out. The first is that seminaries are a relatively recent invention, dating from the Catholic Reformation of the sixteenth century. Secondly, the same is true of the notion that ordination requires a particular form or level of education. And third, in its best times the church has had programs for the theological education of all its membership, rather than just of the clergy.

Now back to the crisis in North-American theological education to which I referred two days ago. This crisis is multidimensional. Some of its elements are more readily apparent than others. But all are fundamentally important if the church is to develop systems of education that will be viable in the coming decades of the twenty-first century.

The most obvious of the many challenges that theological education faces is financial. There is no doubt that many seminaries are in difficult financial straits and that in many cases this threatens their very existence.⁴

In the midst of this crisis, a very select few have managed to continue and expand programs and even to raise their endowment and erect new buildings. They seem to be the exception to the rule, and they have good reason to celebrate. But perhaps such seminaries have an even greater problem: Their problem is that they have no problem, and therefore they can temporarily afford the luxury of continuing business as usual, perhaps expanding or modifying a program here or there, but not asking fundamental questions as to how theological education will be shaped in the coming decades. I would suggest that in the long run, this crisis may prove more serious than the crisis of schools now having to find new ways to make ends meet.

But there are more serious challenges than the matter of finances and even more than the challenge of those in the church who love to complain about what we do in seminaries.⁵ Among these, one could point to two parallel demographic challenges.

The first is the population shift from the countryside to the cities and their suburbs. As the rural population decreases, the number of churches that the mainline denominations consider "viable" also decreases. This means that every year there are fewer pulpits to be filled. In the PCUSA, in the last ten years the total number of congregations has declined by 603, or 5.35% of all congregations. In denominations in which churches call their pastors, the result is that a growing number of seminary graduates have difficulty finding a place for ministry.⁶

There are a number of ways in which Protestant seminaries seek to respond to this situation.

One of the most common and temporarily successful is to develop Doctor of Ministry programs whose students in many cases outnumber those enrolled in the Master of Divinity. While the Doctor of Ministry is valuable, and seminaries with excellent doctoral programs ought to be commended, simple arithmetic makes it obvious that, as M.Div. enrollment wanes, the point of saturation will soon be reached, and the decline in the number of M.Div. students will eventually result in a parallel decline in Doctor of Ministry programs. Thus, in the long run, seminaries should not count on their D.Min. programs, no matter how excellent they may be, as a permanent solution to their recruitment shortfalls.

But the second demographic challenge is even more daunting. The class, race, and culture of the traditional members of most "mainline" churches in the United States are no longer as dominant as they were fifty years ago. The number of church members whose denominational connection goes back to their NorthEuropean ancestors is waning for two reasons: First, the actual proportion of EuroAmericans within the entire population is decreasing; and, second, a growing number of them are losing touch with their roots, and therefore also with the religious traditions of their progenitors. People who are Presbyterian, or Anglican, or Methodist, or Lutheran because they trace their background to Scotland, or to England, or to Scandinavia are becoming a smaller proportion both in the nation at large and within the denominations of their immigrant ancestors.

In the ten years before the census of 2010, the Euro-American population grew by 7.1%; the Afro-American, by 11%; the Asian-American, by 32.3%; and the Hispanic-American, by 37.1%. Obviously, much of the growth of the last two groups is due to immigration. That is certainly the case with the Asian-American population, whose median age is about the same as that of the white population –roughly 36 years. But no matter what politicians want to make us believe, the main source of growth for the Latino population is not immigration but rather the birth rate. The median age of the Hispanic population is more than ten years less than the median age of the population at large. The result can be stated starkly: According to the census, for every Euro-American who dies 1.4 children are born; but for every Latino or Latina who dies, 8.9 children are born. And this statistical difference is expected to become even more marked in the next census. Among children under five years of age, more than a quarter are Hispanic and more than a fifth are African-American. In other words, by the time some of the younger faculty here at Columbia retire, more than half of the population who could be ready to enter seminary directly after college will be ethnic minorities.

A parallel fact is that, when one looks at membership statistics of major denominations in the U.S., one sees not only that their membership is declining but also that if there is any increase it is among people belonging to ethnic backgrounds other than those traditionally associated with a particular denomination. Thus, while Episcopalians, Methodists, and Presbyterians bemoan their declining membership, they would have much more to bemoan were it not for the rapid growth of Korean churches among Presbyterians, of Koreans and Latinos among Methodists,

and of immigrants from Africa and the Caribbean who are Anglican. Actually, in the PCUSA the only synod that reports membership growth is the Synod of Boriquen, in Puerto Rico.

It is also important to note that, even among Euro-Americans, Pentecostal churches and religious traditions that have sprung up in the United States are growing, while those that are more established are waning. This produces the anomaly that the resources in theological education in terms of faculty, libraries, buildings, endowments, etc. are available mostly to a declining student population, while many searching for better theological education do not have adequate resources.

All of this means that traditional mainline denominations, as well as their seminaries, must begin taking the current demographic challenge more seriously. It will no longer be enough for a denomination to have an office or a department of racial-ethnic minority ministries. It will not be enough to recruit a few ethnic minority students and faculty. It will be necessary to reexamine the very structure, ethos, and form of government of a denomination in order to see how these promote or impede its witness in the presently shifting circumstances. Note, for instance, that in order to parallel the ethnic composition of the nation, the African American membership in the PCUSA would have to quadruple, and the Hispanic membership would have to be multiplied by more than ten. And every year that goes by the disparity becomes larger.

If one then looks specifically at seminaries, one sees that these demographic trends are having a slight impact. In the last four years, the total enrollment in M.Div. programs has remained fairly

stable and most of the increase has taken place among Asian and Hispanic-Americans. While the total white enrollment in those programs has declined by almost 7%, the African-American enrollment has remained the same (5,001 in 2007, and now 5,000). The number of Asian-Americans enrolled in M.Div. programs has increased by 4.5%. Latino enrollment has also gone up by 14%. Even so, at present Hispanics are almost 16% of the total population, while they are 4.4% of M.Div. students. If one takes into account that this includes some 200 seminary students in Puerto Rico, the figure is more like 3.8% of the total M.Div. population.

Bringing that a bit closer, out of 1,443 Presbyterian M.Div. students, approximately 70 (or 5%) are Hispanic. It is interesting to add that the seminaries with most Presbyterian Hispanic students are not themselves Presbyterian. And to be even more specific, here at Columbia Theological Seminary 2 out of 146 M.Div. students are Hispanics. This comes to 1.4% of the M.Div. enrollment and 1% of total enrollment in all programs. African-Americans are slightly over 4% of M.Div. enrollment.

An immediate and most common reaction to such statistics is to enhance recruitment efforts among minorities, frequently by hiring a person—often a part time person—to recruit minorities. If the success of such a step is limited, we have done our part, or perhaps the recruiter was not as efficient as we had hoped. A more enlightened approach tries to be holistic, realizing that in order to recruit minorities, one has to combine three elements: efforts at recruitment, increased financial support, and the presence of ethnic minorities among the

faculty. But institutions soon find that this does not suffice, and some go a step further by offering courses and sometimes entire programs in other languages.

Each of these three levels of response is good. But even the last is but a stop-gap measure that does not take into account what is happening all around us. The one painful point that it is most difficult for us to accept is that the Association of Theological Schools and its member institutions no longer hold the near monopoly on ministerial education that they had just a few decades ago. Back then, except for the Southern Baptists, every major denomination expected that all or most of its clergy would be seminary trained. In more recent times, however, the situation has changed drastically, both in those denominations and in the total picture of Christianity in the U.S. Among more traditional Protestant denominations, alternative routes to ordination—or at least to pastoral ministry—have become ever more common, particularly among ethnic minorities.⁷

Thus, while the picture of ministerial education in the U.S. is becoming increasingly complex, the traditional place and role of mainline seminaries is rapidly changing. Change can be costly and painful. But those institutions that do not recognize the urgent need for change will be left behind.

Allow me to illustrate this by an example drawn from the history of two schools in New York City, New York Theological Seminary (NYTS) and Union Theological Seminary. In the mid-60s,

NYTS was in deep trouble, and on the verge of closing. In contrast, Union was flourishing. It boasted the largest theological library in the Western Hemisphere. The Union library system of cataloguing became the standard for theological libraries all over the nation and even overseas. When professors such as Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich spoke, the *New York Times* and all the nation took notice. In brief, while New York Theological was floundering, Union was flourishing.

By the end of the decade, the crisis was so profound that NYTS called a new president with the freedom and the mandate to change whatever was necessary. That new president was familiar with the changing demographics of the city and set to work developing an institution that would respond to the new conditions. Since many among the ethnic minority population did not have the necessary academic credentials, agreements were made with an accredited college to facilitate the process of qualifying students to enter more advanced programs at the seminary. Classes were begun in Spanish and Korean, and later in French and Haitian Creole. The class schedule was adjusted so that African-Americans, Hispanics, and other generally impoverished minorities could attend in the evenings and Saturdays. To open the doors of theological education to a growing incarcerated population, by the mid-80s an extension program was begun inside Sing Sing Correctional Facility.

Meanwhile, at Union things began to decline. No longer did the voice of its professors command the widespread attention it once did. Eventually, the only way for Union to maintain

its very prestigious programs was to overdraw on the endowment. Then it became necessary to sell part of the beautiful campus, to rent other parts, and to turn its famed library into part of the Columbia University Library System.

At present, the total enrollment in all degree programs at Union is 253, while NYTS has 390 enrolled in its ATS-accredited seminary degrees and another 270 in other programs. As to Union, it is currently engaged in efforts to do what should have been done decades ago, but this promises to be quite an uphill struggle.

There is no doubt that there is a crisis looming for theological education as most of us have known it. Such theological education reflects a history of some fifteen centuries during which the church could count on the generally supportive attitude of its cultural and social environment. It is the heir of monastic and cathedral schools, of medieval universities, of post-Reformation seminaries and universities. This is a grand legacy, and one that must not be lost, for it is part of our identity. Yet it is also a legacy that may make it difficult for us to respond to the present shifting situation, when we can no longer take for granted that the surrounding culture and society are supportive, as they were when most of our theological schools were founded.

This new context has several dimensions. For a number of economic and cultural reasons, the demographic shift also means that the proportion of people with a college degree in any of the

liberal arts is diminishing. Thus, it will be increasingly difficult to sustain a theological education that is generally reserved for such people.

Then there is the religious illiteracy of the population at large. Without much exaggeration, one may say that there are in our society growing numbers of people who know about the Christian faith just about as much as did a moderately informed pagan in the third century.

Taken together, these two factors mean that traditional accredited theological education runs the risk of becoming just as elitist and as generally irrelevant as were the medieval universities in the fourteenth century, or the scholastic Protestant universities in the seventeenth.

If we are to respond to such challenges, there is much we can learn from the practice of the church at a time when it found itself in a non-supportive context.

First of all, we must learn that theological education must be a continuum, leading from catechetical teaching, through the continued education and growth in discipleship of the entire church, to the most sophisticated levels of research and reflection.

Second, we must challenge the modern model in which theory precedes practice, and make room for an action-reflection-action circular model, similar to what Ambrose had to follow when he was unexpectedly ordained.

Third, mostly in consequence of the first two, we need to set aside the elitism that so often plagues us and our institutions. As part of a continuum, we must learn to judge our work, not on the basis of how difficult or how exclusive our admissions are (or on the G.P.A. of those whom we admit), but rather on the manner in which we communicate with that entire continuum.

Fourth, we must realize that the relationship between study and ordination is not as clear-cut as we have made it. Throughout most of the history of the church, even the highest levels of theological education have not necessarily led to ordination, and ordination has often preceded advanced studies.

Fifth, it should be clear to all that the number of commuting and part-time students is increasing and will continue to increase, and that therefore a major factor in deciding where to pursue theological studies is location and ease of access. While the residential, full-time model that recruits students from a wide area has an undeniable value and will continue, seminaries will need to establish closer ties with their immediate communities, knowing their needs, and offering programs, schedules, and other options that meet those needs.

Sixth, as a consequence of all the foregoing, ATS-accredited theological institutions must find ways to encourage and acknowledge the work done in responsible but not-accredited programs, for it is out of such programs that the vast majority of Protestant pastors are emerging and will

emerge in the future. (Right now, here in North Georgia, there are 21 Hispanic United Methodist churches, and two of their pastors are seminary graduates.)

Seventh, while denominational schools must continue preserving and transmitting the values of their own traditions and confessions, they must widen their ecclesiastical and denominational horizons. This must be done intentionally, systematically, institutionally, and urgently.

And, finally, as part of that widening of horizons, we must acknowledge the cultural captivity of much of our institutional and ecclesiastical life, which prevents us from recruiting and making way for the growing minorities who will soon be the majority of the church. Difficult as this may be, it is necessary if our institutions are to remain viable and relevant in the decades to come.

I said at the beginning that as I look at the work of Columbia graduates, I know of no institution that is better preparing its students for the practice of ministry for the church as it exists today. It is my hope and my prayer that another Smyth lecturer thirty years from now will be able to say the same.

Thank you.

Notes

1. The curriculum that Schleiermacher proposed was organized under three major headings: philosophical theology, historical theology, and practical theology. The first was not to be based on the "natural theology" of Deism, which had lost much of its appeal after the critiques of Hume and Kant, but rather on the "feeling of absolute dependency" that stands at the heart of all religion. The second, historical theology, would study the life and teachings of the church through the centuries and would include not only what we today call "historical theology" and "church history," but also "dogmatics," by which he meant the study of the doctrines of the church at a given time and place—particularly in the present. Finally, "practical theology" would focus on all that is necessary in order to be a leader within the community of faith. For this reason, Schleiermacher has been dubbed the "father of practical theology," even though by this he did not mean the wide gamut of disciplines now included under that heading but rather the manner in which theology is to take into account the feeling of absolute dependency as it is experienced within the present life of the church—in which one may see the clear influence of Pietism.

2. The story of that institution and of its rivals shows the debates that took place within the Presbyterian Church throughout the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth. In the nineteenth century, Princeton became known for its staunch defense of orthodox Calvinism. But in the twentieth century, some who considered Princeton too liberal broke away and founded Westminster Theological Seminary. Seven years later, in 1936, another group that considered Princeton too conservative founded Union Theological Seminary in New York City. It is interesting to note that all of these schools, conservative and liberal as well as in-between, were free-standing institutions. Even though Schleiermacher had argued for a proper place for theological studies within the university, his attempt to justify theology as a discipline of scientific inquiry—a *Wissenschaft*—had not been successful. (My own Methodist denomination followed a different but parallel course: Its first educational institutions were seminaries that then evolved into universities; by the early twentieth century it was founding universities that included schools of theology; and by the second half of the century, it was creating free-standing seminaries; and some that had formerly been part of universities were becoming independent.)

3. I would be the last to say that there is no value in specialization or in research and publishing. But still, one must ask, are such values integrated into the mission of a theological school, or are they simply a way to bolster our standing and prestige vis-à-vis other schools of theology and academia in general? How does our academic specialization contribute to the integration of theological studies that is so necessary for the practice of ministry?

A factor further complicating matters has been the development of various secular disciplines that now must be taken into account in theological education. From the development of psychology and pedagogy in the latter half of the nineteenth century, to our days with communications, economic analysis, and business management, each of these new secular disciplines requires a place in the field now known as "practical theology"—and so we now have pastoral counseling, Christian education, church management, and so on. While all of these disciplines are important, the tendency toward increased specialization means that too often they develop quite apart from theological reflection and critique, thus leading to a curriculum that is increasingly fragmented.

4. It is difficult to determine how many institutions of theological education are in serious economic difficulties—partly because the definition of "serious difficulties" varies. If by "serious difficulties" one means being in danger of immediate extinction, the number may be relatively small—probably no more than 10% of all schools. But there are other manifestations of serious difficulties. Quite a few institutions have been overdrawing on their endowments, and the principal has declined enough so that even with a sudden upsurge in the stock market the financial difficulties of the institution would not be solved. Many have cut programs, reduced staff, frozen salaries, and deferred maintenance. A few have weathered the storm by freezing hiring, or at least limiting it, and by reducing or postponing plans and programs.

5. Much more serious than the financial crisis is the ecclesiastical challenge. By this I do not mean simply the complaint that we hear so often that the seminary is not training its students adequately, that it does not necessarily make them better pastors, etc. This complaint has been there for almost as long as seminaries have existed. The way this complaint is usually expressed has overtones of anti-intellectualism, and therefore it is easy to dismiss it, or to become defensive and develop an entire apology trying to show that theological education is indeed necessary. But this does not mean that we should pay no heed to it, just in case there may be some truth to it.

In any case, those who voice this complaint can easily point out that, as we look at the entire ecclesiastical panorama in the United States, by and large the churches that have traditionally most insisted on the need for seminary education in order to practice the pastorate are also the churches whose membership is most rapidly declining. (The main exception is the Roman Catholic Church, whose membership is increasing, not among its traditional Irish, Polish, and Italian constituency, but mostly due to immigration from Latin America, Viet Nam, and the Philippines.) A simple explanation—or rather, a simplistic explanation—would be that the reason for this is precisely the aforesaid complaint, that the seminaries are not doing their job properly.

Were that the case, then it would be relatively easy for the theological education establishment and its institutions to respond to the crisis. All that would be necessary would be to make sure that seminary graduates are properly trained for their pastoral tasks and that they are proficient in evangelism and church growth. And indeed, there are a number of institutions that have responded to the challenge at this level.

But the ecclesiastical challenge goes far beyond the complaint that the seminary does not prepare its students adequately. And the needed response also goes far beyond tinkering with the curriculum, or adding a few practical courses, or strengthening supervised ministry. All of this may be good and even necessary but will not suffice to respond to the challenge we now face.

6. Certainly, the growth of the larger, suburban churches, with their multiple staffs, provides some new possibilities of a call. But this does not suffice to cancel out the number of positions lost as smaller churches find themselves unable to call a pastor. As increasing numbers of graduates are unable to find a call—or at least to find a call that fulfills their vocational goals—the result will be decreasing enrollment. In denominations such as mine, where pulpits are filled by denominational appointment, the process is different, but the end result is similar. Jurisdictions are becoming less aggressive in the recruitment of candidates for ministry, and therefore the number of students whose goal is the pastoral ministry is decreasing.

7. In my own United Methodist Church, even though the number of Hispanic seminarians is growing, the vast majority of Hispanic pastors do not go to seminary but follow the alternative path known as the Conference Course of Studies. In the Episcopal Church, there is the possibility of "reading for orders." In

the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America there is the path to pastoral ministry provided by the project named T.E.E.M.—Theological Education for Emerging Ministries. In the PCUSA, the training of lay pastors, which began as a way to provide leadership for dwindling rural churches, has now become a major way of providing pastoral leadership for ethnic minority churches—particularly immigrant ethnic churches. In short, even among those denominations that require or mostly require a seminary education for their pastoral leadership, the ATS-accredited route no longer has the near monopoly it once had. (And in those denominations that will not allow full ordination for those coming through such alternative routes this is creating dangerous divides in which ethnic minority pastors are often second-class not-quite members of the clergy.)

And this does not take into account the Pentecostal churches that emerged early in the twentieth century and a hundred years later have become a major presence in the total picture of Christianity in the U.S. Traditionally, those churches have not required a seminary education of their pastors. Indeed, some of them have even discouraged it. Over the years, they have developed a vast number of Bible institutes and Bible colleges that now produce the majority of their pastors. The result is that, in the entire picture of theological education in the United States, ATS-style theological education is no longer normative. In any of our major cities there are several hundred churches whose pastors never went to seminary, but rather to a Bible institute or a Bible college.