

PARAMETERS FOR SEMINARY EDUCATION

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Pentecostal educators serve today at a critical juncture in the life of the church. Under the blessings of God, the Pentecostal movement has flourished to the point where it has enormous potential for worldwide evangelism and social impact. But with respectability and affluence has also come the temptation to succumb to the world's agenda under the guise of a popular theology tempered to the times.

The educator is uniquely poised to impact candidates for the ministry at the most malleable period in their lives. The college and seminary years are frequently the time of early adulthood when beliefs and values are critically examined and adopted. Older students are usually vulnerable and open to new ways of approaching life and ministry. At such a time, Spirit-filled teachers are essential in the formation of a truly biblical philosophy of life and ministry which is equal to the challenge of the times.

With these things in mind, I suggest that the following parameters for graduate seminary education are vitally important. And they are equally important for those in undergraduate Christian education.

I. Theological Integrity

Ours is a world of theological ferment. The agenda of many seminaries is becoming increasingly liberal and revolutionary. We who teach are not untouched in such an environment, having ourselves been educated in the seminaries and universities of this country. We live in the same world which impacts the thinkers of those schools. We are subject to the same kind of "gut" temptations. We are propagandized by the same world system.

In this kind of world, our task is to maintain a theology that is always striving to be truly biblical—or as biblical as we can make it given the limits of the divine revelation and our own finitude. No generation yet has succeeded in writing a definitive biblical theology that addresses every contemporary question! We recognize, of course, that Scripture does not answer directly all our questions and that limited data in peripheral areas makes it possible for godly and intellectually honest theologians to arrive at different opinions about nonessentials.

A truly biblical theology will of necessity be a Pentecostal-charismatic theology, since Pentecost, its promise, and its endowments are inextricably interwoven in the biblical text. In articulating such a theology, we will be attuned to the efforts of other students, but we will always be listening to Scripture itself. We will also be listening for what the Spirit is saying to the Church, realizing that He nuances the message with a relevance that mere mortals alone can never achieve.

It must be a theology that is faithful to Scripture's witness to itself as an infallible divine Word transmitted through human beings. Recognizing that the phenomena of Scripture are sometimes ambiguous and confusing, it will nonetheless uphold Scripture's great theological affirmation that it is *theopneustos*, "God breathed." It will reflect the teaching of our Lord that "until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any

means disappear from the Law..." (Matthew 5:18, NIV) and that "the Scripture cannot be broken..." (John 10:35). I cannot reconcile Scripture's witness to itself with the views adopted by some 'left wing' evangelicals who insist that there are scientific and historical errors traceable to the autographa.

It goes without saying that too little scholarship has been offered by a revival concerned more with evangelism and nurture than with its intellectual heritage and theological rationale. There is an urgent need for maturing Pentecostal scholars, laboring fervently in their own God-given corner of the harvest, to set forth a theology faithful to the Spirit's work in the Bible and in the world.

II. Academic Excellence

Seminary is neither a Sunday school nor a summer camp. It is a graduate institution intended to prepare the finest students of the Church for leadership in ministry across the spectrum of professional Christian service. We who teach and serve in the seminary should represent the best our church has to offer for such an important task.

The education we propose should be characterized by an academic rigor which challenges the omnipresent tendency to mediocrity which is pandemic in fallen human nature. Too frequently, churches without a great intellectual tradition, and with a deep anti-intellectual bias, unwittingly foster mediocrity in an effort to preserve spirituality without realizing that mediocre thought and mediocre spirituality go hand in hand in a kind of common law marriage which cheapens both mind and spirit.

As Pentecostal theological educators, we are committed to drawing out the very best of which our students are capable so that we may equip them to be good students of the Word and effective Spirit-filled evangelists, pastors, missionaries, and teachers. We must also prepare them to understand a very complex world and, as Elton Trueblood has recommended, "attack the world in its subjectivism, in its superficial humanism, and, above all, in its irrationalism" [Faculty Dialogue 1:2 (Winter 1984-85): 58.]

This means we educators must be good students and good academic administrators. If we are not, we do not deserve to serve in our present posts. We will work hard to become the teachers whom God has called us to be and whom our students deserve. We must strive to prepare good syllabi, give meaningful and provocative assignments, deliver lectures which inspire and stimulate thought, and involve our students both in learning and the sharing of that learning in creative ways with their teachers and fellow students.

Theological educators, as most ministers, are chronically underpaid—and as an administrator, I will never be content with that—but that must never become an excuse to prevent our being all God has called us to be, nor prevent our giving to our students the very best of which we are capable. Perfection will never be achieved in this world, but excellence must always be our goal and striving for it our lifestyle.

III. Spiritual Excellence

A seminary without a deep concern for spiritual life is really a contradiction in terms, for spiritual growth must be vitally conjoined with intellectual growth in training for ministry. It was certainly not accidental that Mark noted Jesus "appointed twelve, that they might be with him..." (8:14). Disciples learn fellowship with their Lord before they dare be His spokesmen to a lost world.

Intellectual and spiritual growth must proceed on parallel tracks joined like a railroad with innumerable cross ties, thus comprising one avenue to meaningful life and service. Intellectual growth alone leads to rationalism; spiritual intensity alone to fanaticism. It is clear that our Lord never intended a bifurcation between mind and spirit—a stereotype allowed too long to flourish in our church. And it is a stereotype sometimes perpetuated from our side by a few educators who have expanded intellectually while shriveling spiritually, and who manage to become carping critics rather than dedicated disciples.

Devotion to Christ evidenced in a deep concern for Spirit-filled life and ministry must be the foundational heritage we bequeath to our students. May each of us, with the learned Apostle, have as the goal of our life, "that I may know Him, and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death..." (Philippians 3:10).

IV. Christian Modeling

Several of my seminary professors made an enormous impact on my life. They were men of the most prodigious learning to which I had ever been exposed. At the same time, they were obviously men of faith who were deeply concerned to be good teachers in the classroom and good models of Christian faith in daily life and service. They took seriously the importance of example before their students and, as a result, the example often took!

Many of our students, perhaps all in some way, will be malformed. Numbers come from broken homes, others from abusive homes, a few from unbelievably sinful backgrounds prior to their conversions. To this point, their lives have probably been touched by some godly pastors and teachers, but they have seen less than godly examples in the Church also. Televangelist media stars falling from the electronic heavens leave their legacy of cynicism. From limited experience, young ministers too readily conclude that ministry is nothing more than luck, talent, intelligence, and charisma with character, faith, and the Spirit-filled life low on the list of priorities.

It is our privilege and responsibility to be leaders in a truly Spirit-filled community where faith and power, piety and spiritual fruit are in evidence in the chapel and the classroom, in the halls and in the offices, in local churches and personal ministries. At the crossroads of our students' lives, we have the opportunity to flesh out the contours of valid Christian discipleship and service. Should we not say with Paul, "Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ" (I Corinthians 11:1)?

V. A Practical Focus

Seminaries are intended first and foremost to train ministers. Too frequently in this country they have turned to something else. Many of them, even evangelical seminaries, have become graduate schools for college and seminary professors. Others are more interested in effecting social and political revolution which they see as the contemporary task of the Church. As a result, hundreds of men and women who are ill prepared enter the service of the Church every year and contribute to the decline of evangelical faith.

By contrast, we must remember that our task is first and foremost to train Assemblies of God ministers who will serve in a variety of leadership roles and who will form our Church in the years to come. Some of them will go on to doctoral degrees, and we want to give them a good foundation. But most of them will go directly to pastorates, chaplaincies, mission stations, counseling offices, and classrooms of our Fellowship in this country and around the world.

There must be a conscious engagement of sound scholarship with the mission of the Church in its multifaceted expressions. Pentecostal scholars should be more the servants o' Christ and less the slaves of current academic fashion. We ought to be teachers of the mission, inspirers of the mission, and partners and participants in the mission. Theory must come to fine focus in daily life and in the practice of ministry at all levels.

Our practical emphasis ought to be broader than a narrow Pentecostal pietism which concerns itself only with personal faith and religious institutions while ignoring the needs of a larger world. God has given us visibility and power. It is time to face up to our responsibilities in His world. We must bring the social concerns of the prophets to the urgency of the Great Commission and attempt not only to win the world but also, to the best of our ability, make the world a better place to live until Jesus comes.

I do not feel I have personally attained to all the things of which I speak. Indeed, my own talents and gifts seem all too limited in view of the great work to be done. But these are my aspirations, and I hope that they characterize all Pentecostal educators. I do believe God has "brought us to the kingdom for such a time as this" (Esther 4:14). And I also believe God will help us extend His kingdom and make our church and our world more expressive of His will and purposes as we serve Him faith fully in the urgent and essential task of higher education.