

Session 1 – A Gospel Matrix for Theological Education

By Rev. César Guzmán

Introduction

In his inaugural lecture as professor at Princeton Seminary, Geerhardus Vos said: “I have not forgotten, however, that you have called me to teach this science for the eminently practical purpose of training young men for the ministry of the Gospel.”¹ Unless we are also strongly persuaded of this truth, any form of theological education, and especially formal college training, will easily lose its *raison d’être*. Theological education must exist to serve gospel ministry in local churches. It is hard to find a seminary or theological college that would deny this or not include this as part of their vision. Sadly, much of what goes on in some institutions, much of the academic work, has come to be self-serving, detached from the local church. On these terms, formal theological education can easily be seen as a luxury item, and perhaps even an unwelcome one, as one hears of theological institutions being the source of much malaise in the church. On the other hand, significant growth in the church has taken place without the aid of “professional” ministry training. So, do we really need such programmes and institutions in our Dioceses?

I became a Christian in Chile and grew up in a church that seemed to do well without a theological college, but as the missionaries began to leave the country and the church began the process of becoming “national”, the urgent need of theological education became apparent. Growth could not be sustained without quality leadership. The changes in Chilean society were a clear indication that unless we trained our people at the best possible level we would not be in a position to articulate the message of the gospel for this generation. Later on, I had the privilege of training in a well-established and strong theological college, and served in a Diocese that continually reaps the benefits of having such an institution. So experience has shown me the central role that formal theological education must play. More importantly, I am convinced from the Scriptures that the training of people for Christian ministry lies at the heart of the life of the church. How can we develop a model of theological education that does not fall in the dangers already mentioned?

1. Theological Education as part of the mission.

Behind any good system of theological education lie several theological assumptions that must flow from the gospel and must inform every activity. These include, first, the place of Scripture in the life of the Church. Christ’s programmatic statement in Matthew 18: 16 “I will build my church” sums up God’s mission as declared in the Bible. God is gathering a people for himself (the church) and he does so through a

¹ Geerhardus Vos, “The Idea of Biblical Theology as a Science and as a Theological Discipline,” in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos*, ed. Richard B. Gaffin (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1980), p. 21.

powerful message, the word of the gospel: the word about Christ². God has established the proclamation of the gospel as the means to edify the church. It is no wonder that it is Peter himself, the recipient of the promise in Matthew, who stands up in Acts 2 and tells the Jews present about this gospel with the result that the church is edified, in quantity (3,000 believe) and in quality (they persevere in the teaching of the apostles). It is the regular teaching of the truths about redemption in Christ that will bring new people into the kingdom but will also keep people in the kingdom and bring them to maturity in Christ (Eph 4:13)³.

Secondly, a biblical anthropology tells us that even the heart of the regenerate Christian needs the regular admonition and encouragement from God-breathed scriptures. When we look in the Old Testament at the spiritual decline of the people of Israel we encounter a sobering message: people forget. At the heart of the book of Deuteronomy lies the message “Do not forget your redemption...” Israel’s recidivism is precisely because they forget. They forget their redemption. They forget who is their king. G. Goldsworthy, in explaining the reasons of the disastrous condition of Israel at around the time of the exile, writes:

*“...the reversal of Israel’s fortunes after Solomon are so obvious that one wonders why the people don’t see their condition or do something about it. There are two obvious reasons why things are allowed to get worse. The first is that the sinful nature of the human heart resists the call to continual reformation. The second is that...the Israelites are no different from the people today who tend to live for the moment with little thought for the past or the long term future”.*⁴

Paul himself writes in Galatians 1: 6 “I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel”. A description quite consistent with the picture of the church in chapters 2-3 of Revelation. Therefore, regular teaching of God’s counsel is at the heart of mission, that is theological education in its widest sense (2 Tim 3:15-17).

Thirdly, it is precisely this gospel priority that establishes the place and role of the teachers of God’s word as an indispensable element for the well-being of God’s flock (Acts 6:1-7)⁵. The pastor or leader is not merely a person with the capacity to

² Romans 10:17

³ In the O. T. God goes to great length to teach the Israelites that they do not live except by his word. Deut 8:3 *And he humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.*

⁴ G. Goldsworthy. *According to Plan*. Leicester: IVP, 1991. pp 236-237.

⁵ The apostles realized the priority of their teaching ministry given its spiritual and eternal nature. They delegate other aspects of the work to Spirit-filled Christians so that they could devote themselves to prayerful teaching of the word of God. The outcome of establishing this priority was the edification of the church, verse 7: “the word of God continued to increase and the number of disciples multiplied greatly ...”

empathise. The biblical figure of shepherd is one of authority. Loving pastor-teachers will shepherd the flock by helping people keep focused in the gospel through the regular teaching of God's word. As such, pastoral ministry and teaching/ preaching cannot be contrasted. The pastoral epistles indicate quite explicitly the place and role of these people as well as the requisites to such office. In sum they are to be people whose lifestyle is consistent with kingdom values (both public and private lives 1 Tim 3, Tit 1), whose faith is mature and solid (can rightly handle the word of truth, 2 Tim 2:15, 1 Tim 4: 12-13) and who are apt to teach (2 Tim 2:2, 24; 1 Tim 3:2; Tit 1:9).

Therefore, theological education must be understood as integral to God's mission, and as such, indispensable. Theological education must be about equipping people for gospel ministry as godly and able communicators of God's word.

Effective ministry cannot happen unless the significance of the gospel is applied consistently to the lives of the people of God....Unless the leaders, teachers and lay pastors (whether functioning in a formal capacity or as part of the fellowship) have a clear idea of the message of the Bible, where it is coming from and what its goal is, there will not be effective ministry.⁶

2. Theological Education as both Academia & Pastoralia

A corollary of the points mentioned above is that a biblical understanding of theological education requires that there be no divorce between the academic/ intellectual aspect of ministry training and the spiritual/ pastoral aspect. As Biblebased Christians we need to hold both as equally necessary. In an attempt to express this, in our college we have chosen the motto: Fiel y Claro (Faithful & Clear).

- a) Faithfulness has to do with our commitment to Scripture as God's authoritative word. Our doctrine of revelation informs us that salvific knowledge can only come as the Holy Spirit illumines our hearts and minds to understand and accept the truths revealed in Scripture. As mentioned before, it is only through God's word, as it is applied to us by the Spirit of God, that we will grow as Christians (1 Tim 4:11; 2 Tim 3: 15-17).

Our duty to be faithful to God's revelation compels us to say that only pastors and leaders committed to God's truth as revealed in Scripture are apt to teach in the church (1 Pet 4:11). It is our goal, therefore, to train people in order to strengthen their confidence in the Bible and to help them gain a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures. A good theological education, we believe, begins by imparting scholarly data but goes on to train the individual to think biblically and theologically so that in any pastoral situation or

⁶ G. Goldsworthy, "The Heartbeat of Effective Ministry", *The Briefing*, 298, 2003, p 18.

ethical dilemma he/she faces, an answer from the Bible and consistent with the gospel, can be arrived at (1 Pet 3:15), thus avoiding legalism, moralism or relativism. Christian thinking is gospel thinking.

Faithfulness in these terms requires disciplined, rigorous academic work of the highest standard possible. As explained, our commitment to faithfulness is tantamount to a commitment to the text of Scriptures, therefore, centrality must be given to exegesis (through biblical languages) and biblical theology⁷ in order to understand (and develop) a systematic theology.

I must be emphatic at this point. During much of this conference we will speak about the centrality of the Scriptures and of the authority of the Bible. But it will all amount to very little if we don't know how to approach the Bible. Biblical theology is about understanding the unity of the Bible. Liberals can use the Bible to say whatever they want, because they do not understand the unity of the Bible. They cannot understand how we can say what we say from the Bible and about the Bible because they do not understand the unity of Scripture. All theology, all pastoral models, all church life, all mission models must arise from a sound biblical interpretation and biblical theology is our starting point. Our commitment to be faithful to scripture means we have to take very seriously the business of understanding how the Bible message fits together. Theological education, therefore must have this as its starting point. We have made, in our college, biblical theology the foundation and backbone of all our endeavours.

b) Clarity is the expression of our commitment to a proclamation of the gospel that connects with people. It requires a careful study of our audience to identify the barriers to understanding the biblical message. It is a concrete effort to meet people's needs, not as they perceive them but as the Bible diagnoses. The agenda is set by God's revelation not by people's questions and perceived needs.

⁷ Biblical theology is the study of how every text in the Bible relates to every other text in the Bible. It is the study of the matrix of divine revelation. At the heart of the gospel is the person of Jesus Christ; he is the word of God come in the flesh. The nature of the gospel is such that it demands that it be at the centre of the biblical message. Biblical theology is, then, the study of how every text in the Bible relates to Jesus and his gospel. Thus we start with Christ so that we may end with Christ. Biblical theology is Christological, for its subject matter is the Scriptures as God's testimony to Christ. It is therefore, from start to finish, a study of Christ". G. Goldsworthy [http://www.sbts.edu/pdf/Gheens/The Necessity and Viability of Biblical Theology.pdf](http://www.sbts.edu/pdf/Gheens/The_Necessity_and_Viability_of_Biblical_Theology.pdf)

This is at the centre of the question of what theological education must be about. In a desire to be relevant, many theological institutions have moved towards a more social curriculum. We must engage with society from a gospel platform. Preaching and teaching must be about helping people see reality as God's sees it. The kingdom of God is only visible through the eyes of faith and faith only comes through the word of God (Rom 10). The Scriptures must set the agenda and the Lordship of Christ must be a non-negotiable.

Our commitment to clarity stems from understanding the relational nature of the gospel. The gospel is a reflection of the relational nature of God's being in his Trinitarian reality, as such, the gospel itself is about relationships. Our Lord Jesus Christ is the embodiment of this as He lives in right relationships and comes to bring them about for humankind. The repentance and forgiveness of sins, fundamental to the gospel message, is there in order to bring us into right relationships with God, with one another and with creation. Through the gospel we enter the kingdom of God to enjoy the right order of relationships. In this context, genuine gospel ministry must take place in relational terms. The pastor-teacher or leader must be willing and able to enter into meaningful relationships of mutual love with the people he is ministering to. His ability to be "clear" will depend to a great extent on his capacity to engage with people in an honest, loving and vulnerable way. As we train people, this must be at the forefront of our analysis and discussion of what it means to be a minister of the gospel. Theological colleges must be communities where relationships are a priority. Students and faculty must be prepared to commit to community life, mutual hospitality, pastoral care and social interaction creating an atmosphere where people develop life-long relationships⁸. All this is as necessary as the academic component.

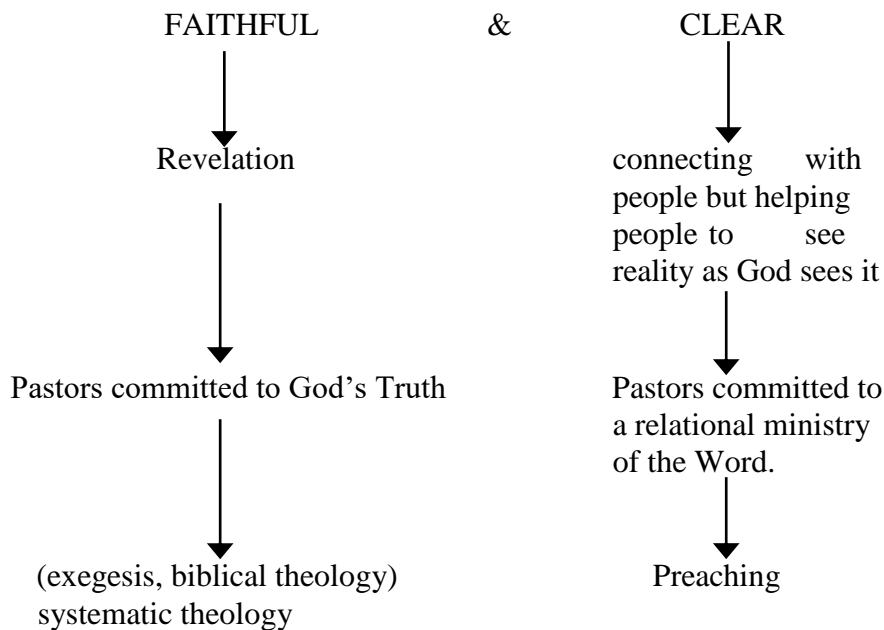
Our commitment to clarity must also mean a commitment to expository preaching. Although it is acknowledged that the teaching of God's word will take place in a variety of forms and situations in the manifold expressions of congregational life (formal and informal, one-to-one, small groups and corporate), we want to emphasise the centrality of preaching in the main Christian meeting (Sunday service in most cases). Our commitment to clarity must mean that we make the best possible use of the gathering of God's family for Christian edification. An expositional approach is essential if we are to understand properly the Bible's teaching on its own terms. Good

⁸ This can be a great cohesion factor in the life of a Diocese. As future clergy and leaders interact and love one another, sharing a fundamental community experience, they develop a sense of belonging and mutual accountability. We have also found that this relational matrix assists greatly in the prevention or solution of crises.

exposition protects us from tearing verses out of context and thereby developing a distorted understanding of God’s message⁹. Clear expository preaching must be integral to ministry training and must be modelled in the life of the theological college.

Last but not least, it must be remembered that our efforts at clarity will only avail to something if they are matched by the work of the Holy Spirit. The proclamation of gospel truths must be both an intellectual event and a spiritual event. It is through the preaching of the gospel that God acts by his Spirit (John 3:8, Revelation 2:7). Thus, our commitment to clarity must require regular and committed prayer as we depend totally on God for this enterprise (Acts 6:4; 1 Tim 4:5). Theological communities must therefore enjoy a rich prayer life. Students must observe the inseparable nature of word and Spirit through the regular practice of a ministry of word and prayer.

Separation between Academia and church life must be avoided



3. The Local Church as the Focus of Theological Education

We have established that theological education must be about training people for the ministry of the gospel. It is through the power of the gospel that God gathers a people around himself to worship him. The full expression of this is in the gathering

⁹ This must not be said in detriment of topical preaching which is also necessary for Christian instruction.

of God's people in every local church. The heavenly reality of the people of God is visible as believers gather together for corporate worship and edification (through word and sacrament). As people respond to the gospel message, the church is built; as people grow in Christ the church is built. This is gospel work (Acts 20:32). Paul describes himself as an "expert builder" (1 Cor 3:1-11). He laid the foundation (Jesus Christ), others were building on it. In Ephesians 2:19-22, Paul describes the result of his building work with a variety of metaphors: "members of God's household," "the whole building," "a holy temple," "a dwelling." All of which point to the heavenly reality that "...through him [Christ] we both have access to the Father by one Spirit" (Eph 2:18). God's household, this holy temple consists of Jews and Gentiles (Eph 2:15b-16). These expressions and many others in the New Testament—including 'church'—refer to the gathering that God is gathering to himself¹⁰. Thus the local church is the focus of God's activity. Furthermore, for the edification of this assembly, God gives word-gifts "to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up" (Eph 4:11-13). Notice how in this case, the gift and the office are linked "some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers". Theological education, therefore, must serve to develop such gifts and such people (evangelist and pastor-teacher). Although in the context of a theological college/seminary priority will be given to developing convictions, there must be a place within the life and activities of a theological community for developing character and competence for ministry¹¹. In sum they are to be people whose lifestyle is consistent with kingdom values (both public and private lives 1 Tim 3, Tit 1), whose faith is mature and solid (can rightly handle the word of truth, 2 Tim 2:15, 1 Tim 4; 12-13) and apt to teach (2 Tim 2:2, 24; 1 Tim 3:2; Tit 1:9).

A final word about those we appoint to teach our future pastors and leaders. It would be utterly inconsistent to allow the teaching and training of our ordinands and leaders to be in the hands of people who do not share the same convictions about the authority and unity of the Bible and who do not display a Christ-like character. Our faculty and trainers must also be people who understand their role, in the light of scripture teaching, as pastor-teachers to their students and who understand the *telos* of theological education i.e. ministers for the local church.

¹⁰ The word *ekklesia* translates the Hebrew *kahal*. The Old Testament recalled "the day of the *kahal*," "the day of the assembly," when God brought the people to himself at Mount Sinai (Dt 9:10; 10:4; 18:16; cf. 5:22).

¹¹ In biblical categories (as expressed earlier): they are to be people whose lifestyle is consistent with kingdom values (both public and private lives 1 Tim 3, Tit 1), whose faith is mature and solid (can rightly handle the word of truth, 2 Tim 2:15, 1 Tim 4; 12-13) and apt to teach (2 Tim 2:2, 24; 1 Tim 3:2; Tit 1:9). The labels "conviction", "character" and "competence" are borrowed from the Ministry Training Strategy developed in the Diocese of Sydney and now used in many countries. www.mts.com.au