JETS 32/2 (June 1989) 227-235

SEMINARY EDUCATION: A PHILOSOPHICAL PARADIGM SHIFT IN PROCESS

WAYNE G. STRICKLAND*

With the rapid increase in seminary enrollment over the past few decades has come a corresponding change in seminary educational philosophy. This is partially validated by the proliferation of other seminary programs in addition to the standard M.Div., Th.M. and Th.D. degree programs such as the various types of M.A. programs and the D.Min. programs.[1] Many of the changes in seminary curricula have been long overdue and needed. The increased attention to Christian education objectives in the pastoral ministry may be cited as a positive example. Yet at the same time a shift has occurred that may have a serious long-range impact on the efficacy of seminary education. Just as in secular education the notion of a classical education has been abandoned, so also I fear the jettisoning of critical ingredients of the classical seminary education is in progress. My purpose in this article is to raise the issue in order to further discussion on this aspect of seminary educational philosophy. Hopefully it will foster communication between all of those investing time and effort in seminary education: administrators, board members/trustees, faculty, and staff alike. I seek to raise a caution flag regarding seminary curricula.

I. THE SHIFT

Traditionally, the Biblical languages have been a foundational structure in the complete and adequate training of the ministerial student. Every seminarian was expected to include enough Hebrew and Greek in the course of his studies to be able to accurately exegete the Biblical text. Harvard in its early days was exemplary of this classical model with its requirement that the students learn to read the Bible in the originally received languages.[2] The philosophy underlying this emphasis was sound. Whereas secular educators had stressed the classics for sometimes the

* Wayne Strickland is professor of theology at Capital Bible Seminary in Lanham, Maryland.

[1] The D.Min. program in particular illustrates the changes and lack of clear philosophy dominating the seminary scene today. For a more detailed discussion see J. W. Carroll and B. G. Wheeler, *A Study of Doctor of Ministry Programs* (1987), conducted under the auspices of Auburn Theological Seminary and Hartford Seminary; "The Doctor of Ministry Program in the Context of Theological Education," *Theological Education* 23 (1987); S. J. Hafemann, "Seminary, Subjectivity, and the Centrality of Scripture: Reflections on the Current Crisis in Evangelical Seminary Education," *JETS* 31 (1988) 129-143.

[2] P. Miller and T. H. Johnson, *The Puritans* (New York: Harper, 1963), 2. 698-704.

wrong reasons—such as using Latin and Greek to separate the average from the superior intellects, or giving the possessor an aura of refinement[3]—the reason for including Greek and Hebrew was very practical and necessary. It was believed that Scripture was the key to changing the lives of people. Since the Bible was deposited in Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek, they should be mastered in order to give the most accurate understanding of the life-changing book. Systematic and pastoral theology were built upon this foundation in the seminary curriculum.

Yet the current seminary scene seems different and deficient in this area. More and more seminary M.Div. and Th.M. programs are being bypassed by seminarians for M.A. programs, which offer two advantages for them: (1) They can avoid laborious study in the original languages (or at least minimize the studies in the language disciplines). (2) They can reduce the amount of time and money it takes to receive a seminary degree. Various factors such as the difficult economic situation, the fact that many have chosen the ministry as a second career later in life, the prestige of any advanced degree—all help to explain this trend.

On a deeper level, has seminary educational philosophy succumbed to the secular educational objective of practicality as the test of sound educational philosophy? A typical scenario is as follows: A survey is given to alumni to measure seminary preparation effectiveness. Some alumni argue that they never use their Hebrew in the pastorate and that they did not learn how to handle ministerial stress in the seminary classroom. The conclusion often suggested is to remove the Hebrew from the curriculum and provide more practical issues such as stress management. On the surface this appears to be the solution.

Yet as M. L. Peterson has noted: "Modern educators have been so busy developing new instruments for measuring intelligence and aptitude, exploring creative methods for teaching mathematics . . . and seeking more efficient ways to complete a college degree that they have seldom stopped to ask why such things are desirable."[4]

Is it possible that seminary educators have been so concerned with balancing budgets, drawing more students, and satisfying alumni that they have lost sight of the goal of seminary education? Or perhaps the educators and administrators have never been forced to think through the larger issues. Peterson remarks: "Professional educators, both present and future, must be able to think intelligently about the large questions which underlie educational methods and goals."[5] If the goal of seminary education is to equip servants of Christ for the labor of ministry, why are the Biblical languages being bypassed with such ease?

[3] R. L. Church and M. W. Sedlak, *Education in the United States: An Interpretative History* (New York: Free Press, 1976) 47.

[4] M. L. Peterson, *Philosophy of Education: Issues and Options* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1986) 143.

[5] Ibid. 17.

II. THE SHIFT EXEMPLIFIED

As an example of this paradigm shift in seminary educational philosophy, I would like to give a selective historical account of the role of the Hebrew language in the ministry. I have chosen Hebrew since it is usually the first casualty in the ministerial curriculum (if it was even there in the first place).

The student of Church history is reminded by its events of the crucial role the languages of the Bible have played in guaranteeing orthodoxy in the message of the pastor. In the endeavor to defend and expound the Scriptures, the languages of the Bible must be studied in order to accurately understand the message of the Word of God. Reliance upon secondary tools such as commentaries forces the pastor to depend upon the accuracy of another and prohibits the pastor's informed evaluation of the commentator's understanding. This lesson is most graphically illustrated in the events leading up to the Reformation.

1. *Medieval Period Humanism*

In the early medieval period the Church, with notable exceptions, became entrenched in a sacramentalism and moralism that did not promote a truly evangelical gospel message. This was partially due to the growing emphasis on Latin as the language of the Church replacing Greek in the early Christian era.[6] The translation of the Scriptures into Latin by Jerome in the fourth century eventually became the standard Bible of the Church.[7] The reason for the ascendancy of Latin was the rise of Rome as the dominant force in the Church. With the emphasis on Latin, the Scriptures and the Latin Fathers of the Church were studied and facility in Greek and Hebrew was lost. For example, the stress in monasticism was on the Latin language including the Bible and the Latin scholars of the early Church.[8] This allowed and fostered misconceptions regarding the true basis of salvation, especially since the fathers were stressed over the Scriptures.

In addition, the mass was performed in Latin. Yet by the later medieval period few of the laity in Europe could understand Latin.[9] This fostered the ability of the Church to promote un-Biblical ideas such as sacramentalism and generally diluted interest among the laity in seeking God.

The emergence of the movement known as humanism (not to be confused with secular humanism) or the renewed emphasis on the humanities changed the emphasis on secondary language study of Scripture

[6] K. S. Latourette, *A History of Christianity: Beginnings to 1500* (New York: Harper, 1975), 1. 21-22.

[7] Ibid. 232. See also J. L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity* (New York, 1984), 1. 204.

[8] Latourette, *History* 332.

[9] Ibid. 532. See also J. Van Engen, "Christianity and the University: The Medieval and Reformation Legacies," in *Making Higher Education Christian: The History and Mission of Evangelical Colleges in America* (ed. J. A. Carpenter and K. W. Shipps; St. Paul: Christian University, 1987) 20-21.

and rekindled the interest in the study of the original languages of the Bible.[10]

In Italy scholars retreated to a study of the pre-Christian writers, and this led to the Renaissance.[11] In northern Europe, however, scholars went back to a study of the Biblical sources, and this led to the Reformation.

They studied the Biblical documents in the original tongues as much as or more than they studied the writings of Plato or Aristotle. Their emphasis was on the Jewish-Christian heritage rather than on the Hellenic heritage of western Europe. They were essentially Christian humanists who applied the techniques and methods of humanism to the study of the Scriptures.[12]

This return to the Biblical sources (including the renewed study of Hebrew and Greek) created an environment whereby the principles of the Reformation were able to be promoted and implemented. The Reformers imbibed this humanist desire to return to the classical source of the faith, the Scriptures in their original tongues.[13]

Hebrew was revived as a study in the twelfth century as exhibited by such men as Hugh and Andrew Victorinus, who devoted themselves to a greater emphasis on Hebrew and OT exegesis than the more popular Greek patristics.[14] The Franciscan, Roger Bacon, realized the necessity of facility in Greek and Hebrew for the ministry, as seen in his satire on the shortcomings of mendicant training schools for boys in Paris (1271).[15] Likewise scholars such as Nicolas de Lyra in the fourteenth century continued the pursuit of Hebrew, and in fact de Lyra was influential in Luther's understanding of the OT since Luther made frequent use of de Lyra's commentaries based on the Hebrew text.[16]

The importance of the Biblical languages in ministry was recognized by the Church as exemplified by the provision at the Council of Vienna in 1311 to "establish chairs of Greek and of Hebrew, Arabic, and 'Chaldean'

[10] E. E. Cairns, *Christianity Through the Centuries* (rev. ed.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981) 262-265. For the origin of the term "humanism" see Van Engen, "Christianity" 25. He writes that the term "originated in Italian universities from the slang expression for a student or teacher of the humanities (from the expression *studia humanitatis* comes the word *umanista*)."

[11] J. A. Mazzeo, *Renaissance and Revolution: The Remaking of European Thought* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1967) 14-32; R. Weiss, "Learning and Education in Western Europe from 1470 to 1520," in *The Renaissance 1493-1520* (ed. G. R. Potter; Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1957), 1. 98-111; L. W. Spitz, *The Renaissance* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1971), 1. 153-155.

[12] Cairns, *Christianity* 262.

[13] Ibid. 282.

[14] C. L. Stinger, *Humanism and the Church Fathers: Ambrogio Tranversari (1386-1439) and Christian Antiquity in the Italian Renaissance* (Albany: State University of New York, 1977) 89.

[15] R. Bacon, *Compendium Studii Philosophiae: Life in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1954), 2. 59-60.

[16] Ibid. See also J. H. M. D'Aubigne, *The Life and Times of Martin Luther* (Chicago: Moody, 1900) 30.

at the universities of Oxford, Paris, Bologna and Salamanca, and at the Papal Court."[17]

James Lefevre furnishes an example of Hebrew and Greek scholarship that led to his conversion to Christ. One of the leaders of French humanism, he turned to a study of the Bible and in 1509 published *Quintuplex Psalterium*, an attempt to restore the true text and a philological commentary on the Psalms.[18] He was motivated by a desire to understand the Biblical text. A few years later he published a similar work on the Pauline writings. It was his study of Paul's doctrine of justification by faith alone that changed his spiritual destiny.[19]

Preserved Smith notes that the humanism of Germany centered in the universities. This was where men destined for the ministry were prepared. "At the close of the fifteenth century new courses in the Latin classics, in Greek and in Hebrew, began to supplement the medieval curriculum of logic and philosophy."[20] The best example of the influence of the study of Hebrew on the Reformation is John Reuchlin (1455-1522). This humanist lived in Stuttgart and devoted himself to the study of Hebrew, becoming the "foremost Christian scholar in Europe."[21] His greatest work was *De Rudimentis Hebraicis*, a grammar and lexicon of Hebrew.[22] This work aided Luther in his efforts in the Reformation, primarily in the translation of the Hebrew OT into German.[23]

Needless to say, this rebirth of emphasis on the Biblical languages, Hebrew and Greek, was crucial to the advent of the Reformation and the subsequent training of men for the gospel ministry. As has already been noted, Luther studied the Scriptures in the original languages, and this helped him discover the *sola fide* principle. John Calvin, the other major Reformer, also was well educated in Greek and Hebrew. It was through his influence that the study of Hebrew was added to the Geneva Academy curriculum (Greek having already been included) in 1538. This betrays his attitude toward the study of Hebrew in order to be adequately prepared for the pastoral ministry.

2. *Charles Bridges*

Charles Bridges (1794-1869) was one of the great leaders of the evangelical wing of the Church of England. He served as the vicar of Old Newton Suffolk (1823-49) and later held the vicar posts at Weymouth and Hinton Martell. He published commentaries on *Psalm 119*, *Proverbs*, and *Ecclesiastes*, demonstrating facility in the Hebrew language, but his

[17] Stinger, *Humanism* 89-90.
[18] P. Smith, *The Age of the Reformation* (New York: Henry Holt, 1920) 52.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Ibid. 53.
[21] H. J. Grimm, *The Reformation Era 1500-1660* (London: Macmillan, 1965) 73.
[22] Smith, *Age* 54.
[23] D'Aubigne, *Life* 30.

enduring classic was entitled *The Christian Ministry*. As the title implies, it was designed to be a course in effective preaching and pastoral ministry. It exposes the reasons for failure in the pastorate and then treats the proper pastoral qualifications and pursuits. (It should be noted that this work was one of the few that Robert Murray McCheyne took with him when he began his missions work among the Jews in Palestine.)

It is significant to note that in the preparation of sermons Bridges applauds Cotton Mather's collection of rules for the study of the Biblical texts. Further, Bridges singles out one of Mather's rules: "Some of Cotton Mather's rules for his student's *treatment of texts* are excellent; such as—if possible—to read the text in the original."[24]

Further, in commenting on Mather's allowance for commentaries and other tools, Bridges voices the need for great caution:

> There is no greater hindrance to solid learning, than to make use of other men's resources, as to neglect our own. The use of helps *generally*, and especially "*Helps for Composition*" in the form of "Skeletons"—needs great discretion, discrimination, and diligence, lest, by restraining the active energy of our native powers, they do not rather prove *serious* hindrances to composition.[25]

3. *A. C. Gaebelein*

The work of A. C. Gaebelein illustrates again the advantage of a working knowledge of Hebrew in the ministry. Gaebelein (1861-1945) was a German immigrant to New York City in 1881 in order to minister the Word in German-speaking churches.

He began his study of Hebrew while pastoring a German congregation in Baltimore, Maryland. W. Wiersbe notes that it was "his knowledge of Hebrew and his love for the Jews" that eventually "brought him into prominence as a missionary to the thousands of Jews pouring into New York City."[26] Because of his knowledge of the OT Scriptures (based on the Hebrew) hundreds of Jewish people flocked to hear Gaebelein in New York. He ran the Hope of Israel Mission for five years and authored works such as *Studies in Zechariah*, *Psalms*, and *The Prophet Daniel*. His very practical evangelistic and teaching ministry was made possible by a firm knowledge of Hebrew, allowing for capable exposition of the OT.

4. *Princeton Seminary*

Undoubtedly the strongest example of the necessity of the Biblical languages in the education of would-be ministers is found in the case of Princeton Theological Seminary in the early twentieth century.

In 1902 the reorganization of Princeton Seminary was effected with the division of the college and seminary. The college had been established in 1746 to educate Presbyterian ministers and was known for many years

[24] C. Bridges, *The Christian Ministry* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1976) 198 (italics his).
[25] Ibid. 198-199 (italics his).
[26] W. Wiersbe, *Walking with the Giants* (Chicago: Moody, 1976) 120.

as "The Theological Seminary."[27] With the broadening of the curriculum, however, it was decided to separate the seminary operations from the college. The college was known as the College of New Jersey (now Princeton University) and the seminary came to be known as Princeton Theological Seminary. Francis Lindey Patton, the president of the college, served as the first president of the seminary. He presided over the seminary from 1902 to 1913 and was characterized as solidly conservative. He emphasized the importance of the knowledge of Greek and Hebrew in order to effectively understand the Biblical text.

A student rebellion in February, 1909, however, served to plant the seeds of a shift in emphasis from exegetical orientation to practical orientation.[28] The students formulated and signed a petition that was presented to the board of directors. In the petition was a request that the curriculum and teaching of the seminary be revised to decrease the stress on exegesis, including Hebrew and Greek. In particular the courses of Patton, William Park Armstrong (NT) and John D. Davis (OT) were singled out. The cry of the students was for more practical courses such as were being offered at a sister school, Union Theological Seminary (New York). A news article in the *Baltimore News* reported that the students wanted studies in sociology.[29] It should be noted that the deemphasis on exegetical course work and inclusion of more practical courses at Union Seminary corresponded with a much more latitudinal theological perspective.

Machen's own attitude toward the issue of revising the curriculum with less emphasis on the exegesis of the languages is seen in a letter to his parents on February 21, 1909:

> The students are exhibiting a spirit of dissatisfaction with the instruction that is offered them. What they want is apparently a little course in the English Bible, about on a level with White's Bible School. They want to be pumped full of material, which without any real assimilation or any intellectual work of any kind they can pump out again upon their unfortunate congregations. I sometimes feel that we are like a monastery in the Middle Ages. We are able to do little for our own generation, and can only hope to conserve a spark of learning for some future awakening in the Church's intellectual life. Other seminaries have yielded to the incessant clamor for the "practical," and we are being assailed both from within and from without. I only hope the authorities will have the courage to keep our standard high, not bother about losses of students, and wait for better times. It is the only course of action that can be successful in the long run.[30]

Stonehouse, commenting on Machen's concern for the shift in ministerial education, remarks:

[27] For an account of the "Rebellion of 1909" see N. B. Stonehouse, *J. Gresham Machen: A Biographical Memoir* (Philadelphia: Westminster Theological Seminary, 1977) 149-153.

[28] Ibid. 149.

[29] Ibid.

[30] Ibid. 150-151.

> Though the personal factor entered into Machen's judgment, it would be quite unfair to suppose that this was basically determinative of it. For there is cumulative evidence, covering some time prior to this incident and many years afterward, which shows that he was deeply disturbed by such steps as were taken, and by the general tendency to substitute courses in English Bible and other "practical" courses for hours traditionally assigned to theology and the study of the Scriptures on the basis of a knowledge of the original languages. Though the students were not vindicated, the issue of the nature of the curriculum remained one great moment, and Machen lamented the gradual increase of "practical" studies as marking a downgrade course in the life of the Seminary. On the surface the issue might have appeared rather superficial, but ultimately it was bound up with one's total view of the nature and purpose of a Seminary. Machen's own position was no doubt in large measure identical with that expressed editorially in *The Presbyterian* of May 12, 1909. The difference of opinion, it stated, "arises out of the deeper difference as to the purpose of a theological seminary. If its primary purpose is to give young men a clear and systematized understanding of the truth of God revealed in His Word, and the history and life of His Church, one course of study will be readily outlined. If the purpose is, in some haste, to prepare young men to study the varying thought and attempt the regulation of the social order of the present time, a very different method of instruction will be necessary."[31]

Much to Machen's dismay, Princeton Seminary finally followed the advice of its students. In 1913 Patton retired, leading to the presidency of J. Ross Stevenson, whose service as president lasted from 1914 to 1936. He was not theologically as conservative as Patton had been and allowed for the revision of the curriculum, reducing at the same time the Hebrew and Greek requirements. He expanded the practical theology department, and these moves created tension among the faculty members. The new faculty members were more latitudinal and frequently espoused modernist ideas.

In 1926 a committee charged with investigating the schism at Princeton decided that the problem was merely administrative and dissolved the two boards (trustees and directors), opting for a new single board comprised of eight trustees and one director. Not only were the orthodox board members displaced, but two of the new board members were signers of the modernist Auburn Affirmation of 1924.[32] This prompted Robert Dick Wilson, J. Gresham Machen, Oswald T. Allis and Cornelius Van Til to resign from Princeton and found Westminster Theological Seminary to train people for the pastorate with due emphasis on the languages of the Bible and Biblical exegesis.

III. CONCLUSION

Church history is invaluable and indispensable, because it provides examples for the modern Church to follow as well as giving caution regarding patterns and practices that lead to a dead end. It has been

[31] Ibid. 152-153.

[32] *Westminster Theological Seminary Catalogue 1984-86*, 6.

shown that the Biblical humanism of the late medieval period functioned as the womb out of which the Reformation was born. Emphasis on the study of the Bible in the original languages was likewise cultivated by the Reformers who were engaged in preparing people for the ministry.

Two examples from the modern Church period have been given to buttress the need for sound exegetical training in the pastoral ministry. With such training, the pastor is able to think independently when studying the Scriptures.

Finally, the lesson of Princeton Seminary shows that Biblical orthodoxy depends upon men and women who are firmly grounded in exegetical skills such as those provided in a seminary curriculum that adequately stresses the knowledge of Greek and Hebrew. The most capable practitioner in pastoral ministry is the one who not only excels in the practical areas but, more importantly, as the foundation to his ministry has a knowledge of Greek and Hebrew that will enable practical theology to be harmonious with an accurate understanding of Scripture. The two (exegetical and practical) should be inseparable in the pastoral ministry (2 Tim 2:14-16).

As mentioned earlier, some might respond to this appeal to be cautious before reducing or eliminating the language portion of the seminary curriculum that there are enough language aids available to the pastor to allow him to function satisfactorily when exegeting the Biblical text. Also noted was the observation that many pastors are not using their Hebrew in any case. So why keep it in the curriculum?

It is not my purpose to answer these and other objections here, although cogent answers are readily available. The time to discuss the weight of those and other objections is while developing a coherent, Biblical, practical and balanced model of seminary education that incorporates the strengths of the traditional model and integrates the features demanded by our culture. The timely warning of Brueggemann must at the same time be considered when he notes that theological education must avoid at all costs the model based solely or primarily "generated out of our raw experiences or our good intention."[33]

It has been my purpose to raise a caution regarding the direction that seminary educational curricula are taking and, by raising the issue, hopefully foster greater communication between all those who have a vested interest in theological education. As Henry Ford once quipped: "Don't find fault. Find a remedy." Yet this is only possible with the joint efforts of administrators, trustees, and faculty members alike, bringing the issues under careful and studied consideration. Whatever the outcome, may the advice of Thomas Jefferson be heeded: "In matters of principle, stand like a rock; in matters of taste, swim with the current."

[33] W. Brueggemann, "The Case for an Alternative Reading," *Theological Education* 32 (1987) 89-93. Although issuing this timely warning, he also argues that what theological education is "called to do varies in each social setting and each cultural circumstance." I would argue that the task of theological education is timeless, although the methodology of theological education may need revision and refinement as determined by cultural circumstances.