

A Biblical Philosophy of Theological Education

Principles for Seminary Education

I. The Material Substance of Theological Education

The first thing to be considered in a biblical philosophy of theological education is the question, “What is it that theological education seeks to teach?” This question has to do, then, with the material substance of theological education. In what does the subject-matter of theological education consist? That is, “Into what intellectual material does theological education intend to introduce its students?”

A. The Supreme Importance of Christian Truth (John 8:32; 14:6; 17:17, 19; 18:37-38)

Here we must surely remind ourselves of the premium which the religion of the Bible places upon “truth.” As the passages cited above from John’s Gospel make clear, it is the truth which liberates men from the dominion of sin. The Scriptures make clear that this truth is the truth centered in the Mediator who said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” Those liberated by this truth centered in the one Mediator between God and men are further sanctified in their life and conduct by this truth. Finally, it is this truth, as the passages also make clear, which a fallen world either completely denies or deeply doubts can be known.

B. Christian Theology as Christian Truth

Clearly, theological education has as its goal to acquaint its students with the science of theology. An extended examination of the definition of theology is out of place here. Suffice to say that this essay assumes that theology is the

science of God. When properly expanded and analyzed, this definition of theology means that “the science of God and His relations to the universe as He has revealed himself and them for our knowledge and worship unto His glory and our salvation.” If this expanded definition is correct, then, theology is substantially identical to (what we have called) Christian truth. The *science* of theology is simply the systematic or scientific study of Christian truth. Theological Education is, then, the task of educating men in what is the supremely important area of human knowledge, Christian truth.

Thus, the assumption of this attempt to provide a biblical philosophy of theological education is that Christian theology—properly so called and properly understood—is just Christian truth carefully, systematically, comprehensively understood. The science of theology, in other words, is just the science of Christian truth. It is the science of the truth as it is in Jesus (Eph. 4:21).

II. The General Authority for Theological Education

A. This Authority Identified

The Apostle Paul leaves no doubt as to what agency is responsible for the maintenance and promotion of Christian truth in the world. It is clearly the church of Jesus Christ that is charged with this responsibility. 1 Timothy 3:15 is plain: “... but in case I am delayed, I write so that you will know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth.”

B. This Authority Specified

The question may be raised, however, as to what Paul means exactly by the term, church, in 1 Timothy 3:15. To be specific, the question is whether Paul is thinking of what theologians have called the universal church or whether he is instead thinking of the local church. This is not a distinction which ought to be too sharply drawn in 1 Timothy 3:15. This is so because it really appears that

Paul (in this passage and some others) understands the local church to be a particular expression of the universal church and speaks of it in terms which assume this relationship. It is clear, for instance, in this passage that Paul is writing to Timothy with regard to his particular responsibilities to guide the church in Ephesus and that this is prominent in his thought in this passage. It also seems clear, however, that he regards this church at Ephesus in light of its connection with the universal church. Paul could hardly mean to describe the local church at Ephesus—in itself and by itself—as the house of God, the church of the living God, or the pillar and support of the truth.

Here, then, we must fall back on a broader scriptural understanding of the church and see that each particular church is seen as a local expression of the universal church. Though recognizing their spiritual unity as part of the universal church, Reformed Baptist ecclesiology sees each particular church as governmentally independent and in that sense autonomous. Cf. the 1689 Baptist Confession, chapter 26, paragraphs 5-7. At the same time, it recognizes that it is vital for these churches to cooperate for the better achievement of their tasks in the world. Such cooperation may take many scriptural forms, and in Reformed Baptist life it has taken many forms. According to the Confession it may involve formal associations of churches where this is providentially possible—as long as such associations do not infringe on the independence of the local church. Cf. the 1689 Baptist Confession, chapter 26, paragraphs 14-15. It has often been thought that such tasks as missions (church-planting) and theological education (the training of ministers of the Word or pastor-teachers) especially require, or at least are more easily and better accomplished by means of, such cooperation. It is the assumption of this preamble that this thinking is correct.

III. The Specific Responsibility for Theological Education

The work of theological education is assigned throughout the Bible as the specific responsibility of a specified class of men or office in the church. More than one reason for this arrangement may be mentioned. It would certainly be true to say that the supreme importance of Christian truth might warrant that

its study and teaching should be made the solemn responsibility of certain men. It is also true that the vast extent of Christian Theology seems to require such an arrangement. Whatever the reason may be for this arrangement, it is the fact of this assignment of the task to a specific class of men which will be particularly emphasized here.

A. The Arrangements in the Old Testament Church

Even in the Old Testament times and within the Old Covenant the extent of this truth was such (and the complications of its application to the corporate life of the people of God was so extensive) that a special class of men or office was appointed which had for a major aspect of its responsibility the study, preservation, and application of this truth. The Levitical priesthood was charged with this responsibility. One of the clearest emphases of the Old Testament Scriptures is that the priest in Israel was to be the reservoir and dispenser of instruction with reference to the holy law of God. Cf. 1 Sam. 2:12, 13; 2 Kings 12:2; 17:27; 2 Chr. 15:3; Ezra 7:6, 10, 11; Neh. 8:1-9; Jer. 2:8; 18:18; Ezek. 7:26; 22:26; Micah 3:11; Mal. 2:1-9. These passages make plain that it was one of the great duties of the priests in Israel to instruct men in the precepts of the law.

B. The Arrangements in the New Testament Church

1. The Necessity of These Arrangements

One might argue that it was the complications introduced by the detailed, ceremonial laws into the life of the people of God which made such a class of teaching priests necessary. Thus, it might be concluded that such a class of men is no longer necessary in regard to the less ceremonial and complicated revelation of the New Covenant. This argument, however, forgets a number of factors unique to the New Covenant.

- First, in the Old Testament period there was a relatively primitive and limited revelation of truth. This is the necessary implication of the doctrine

of progressive revelation. Now in the New Covenant we have the final and more extensive revelation of God's truth (a revelation made "in (His) Son") in which the radiance of the Word shines more clearly and extensively (Heb. 1:3). While, certainly, some of the difficulties and complications of the ceremonial law have passed away, this greater revelation creates its own more extensive field of study.

- Second, this revelation of truth took place within the relatively insulated and limited context of the Jewish theocracy in the promised land. The application of this primitive revelation in this insulated and limited context was, therefore, much simpler than in the universal context of the New Covenant revelation. The revelation in the New Covenant is not meant to function in the confined context of one nation in a small part of the earth. It is rather meant to function among all nations and to the ends of the earth. This vast field in which the truth is to be applied creates its own complications, especially when we take into account the twisted and depraved character of so many fallen cultures.
- Third, this revelation was given to a people of God who spoke the language (Hebrew) in which God had revealed His truth. In the New Covenant the added difficulty of translating the divine revelation originally made in Hebrew and Greek into the multiplied languages of the world must be considered. This complication may be reflected even in the Old Testament period. We are told in Ezra 7:6 and 10 that Ezra was a skilled scribe in the law who had set his heart to study, practice, and teach the law of God. Later we are told that in teaching the people of Israel this law it was necessary for Ezra after the Exile to translate the law (originally given in Hebrew) into the (Aramaic) dialect now spoken by God's people. Nehemiah 8:8 says: "They read from the book, from the law of God, *translating* to give the sense so that they understood the reading." Now if such translation (or explanation) was necessary because of a slight change of dialectic, it is certainly so now when God's people speak many very different languages. A truly adequate theological education will require, then, a careful study of the original languages in which God gave divine revelation and the proper way of bringing that revelation into the languages of the many peoples to which it was intended to be taken.

- Fourth, and finally, adding to the extensiveness of theological education in the New Covenant age is the way in which the implications of divine revelation have been displayed over the almost 2000 years of church history. Theological education which did not acquaint the student with these controversies and the way in which they have served to bring out more explicitly the meaning of Scripture would certainly have to be judged defective. On the other hand, acquainting the theological student with those controversies clearly and necessarily adds the department of historical theology to the study of the science of theology.

2. The Identity of These Arrangements

It is not at all surprising, then, to discover that in the New Testament a permanent class of men occupying an ecclesiastical office described variously as elders, overseers, and pastor-teachers are appointed who have as their distinctive responsibility the teaching of the Word of God (Eph. 4:11-13; 1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:9-11). Nor is it surprising that certain men in the office were to be financially supported so that they might give themselves by way of vocation to the study and teaching of this revelation (1 Cor. 9:13-14; Gal. 6:6; 1 Tim. 5:17-18).

3. The Specificity of These Arrangements

There is a specific passage which addresses with particular relevance the duty of the Christian ministry with regard to theological education. The Christian Ministry as the particular agency for the preservation and communication of Christian Truth to its future teachers is the theme of 2 Timothy 2:1-2.

The Bible reveals that the task of maintaining and promoting Christian truth in the world is not simply or generally the task of the church as a whole. Indisputably, every Christian ought to feel a responsibility in the context of his local church, within the compass of his own gifts, and as suggested by his own complex of duties to promote the truth in the world (Matt. 12:30; 1 Cor. 10:31-11:1). Similarly, each local church as a local manifestation of the universal

church must endeavor according to the strength and gifts God has given it to be a pillar and support of the truth (1 Tim. 3:15). Indeed, this work is essential to its very identity.

The New Testament makes clear, however, that it is the Christian ministry in particular that is charged with this responsibility. Key here is the Apostle Paul's instruction to Timothy in 2 Timothy 2:1-2: "You therefore, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. 2 The things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, entrust these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also." So key is this passage to a proper understanding of theological education that a brief explanation of its importance must be given here.

First, notice the spiritual commodity which this passage specifies.

The Apostle calls Timothy to be strong in "the grace" that is in Christ Jesus. It has been asserted that the grace mentioned in verse one refers to the doctrines of grace. It is true that one of the clearest and strongest statements of the sovereignty of God's grace in Paul's writings is found in the previous chapter at 2 Timothy 1:8-10. The doctrines of sovereign grace are definitely involved in this grace of which Paul speaks here. Thus, Paul when he speaks of the grace that is in Christ Jesus is thinking of the entire system of grace and truth contained in the Scriptures. Grace here, then, refers partly or wholly to the system of the doctrines of grace which Paul taught.

This seems to be confirmed by verse two which immediately refers to Christian doctrine in the words, *the things which you have heard from me*. These words clearly designate Christian doctrine. Paul refers to such doctrine frequently in the surrounding context (2 Tim. 2:8-9; 1:12-14; and 1:8-11). The spiritual commodity which forms the subject and burden of Paul in this passage is the doctrine of grace which he preached. This was the heart of Paul's message. It was for this grace and in this grace that Timothy was to be strong. Further, it seems to be clearly implied that the way—at least one way—in which he was to be strong in this grace was by communicating it to other faithful men.

An implication of the duty to communicate “the things which you have heard from me” is the careful preservation of the original deposit of truth imparted by Paul to Timothy. It is this Christian truth whole, unimpaired, and unpolluted which must be imparted by Timothy to a new generation of Christian teachers. This means that there must be agreement on the content of those doctrinal “things” which Paul mentions. This means in turn that there must be an agreed upon doctrinal basis for such instruction. Where there is no such agreed doctrinal basis, coherent theological education conducted by more than one man is not possible. Reformed Baptists adopt the 1689 Baptist Confession as the best summary of “the things” which Timothy heard from the Apostle Paul and the best available creedal summary of Apostolic Christianity. Confessional integrity is especially necessary in the theological education of men in the truths of Apostolic Christianity. For Reformed Baptists such confessional integrity means that such instruction will conform in its teaching to the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith.

Second, the spiritual genealogy which this passage envisions.

Four generations of truth are specified by Paul here in verse 2.

- *From **Me** in the presence of many witnesses*
- *The things which **you** have heard*
- *Entrust these to **faithful men***
- *Who will be able to teach **others also***

Thus, the spiritual genealogy found in this passage runs like this:

- Paul
- Timothy
- Faithful Men
- Others Also

To rightly estimate the importance of this spiritual genealogy for Paul we must remember the poignant circumstances in which these words of 2 Timothy 2:1-2 are written. Paul faces his imminent martyrdom for the sake of Christ (2 Timothy 4:1-8). One of the things most important to the Apostle Paul as he writes Timothy shortly before his death—one of the things of greatest significance to the Apostle with his death clearly on his mind—is the preservation and communication of the truths of the gospel of grace. It is not, however, simply or generally the communication of these truths to all the members of the church which burdens his heart. It is most especially and significantly the communication of these truths to faithful church leaders who will continue the genealogy of truth. That is, it is the instruction of men with the ability to hand down the tradition of truth faithfully to the next generation. Myths and false doctrines will arise and assail the truth of the gospel. Timothy is to combat this, not only through his own ministry to the whole church, but through passing the deposit of truth down particularly to faithful men who will maintain unbroken the genealogy of truth.

Paul's poignant emphasis on this spiritual genealogy brings to light three special characteristics of the spiritual instruction (or theological education) required in this passage.

- First, and very clearly, the spiritual instruction in view has a special class of men in view as its recipients. Though it is certainly true that the Great Commission requires every disciple of Christ to be taught to observe all things that Christ commanded (Matt. 28:18-20), here it is plainly not every disciple of Christ which is to be taught in the way which Paul requires in this passage. Those to be taught must be especially “faithful” men who possess a special aptitude to “teach” others. To put it plainly, those to be taught are not the next generation of Christians, but the next generation of Christian pastors and teachers.
- Second, consequently, and clearly, the instruction in view is not the general instruction of all Christians, but the special instruction necessary for Christian leadership. Of course, the subjects of study are generally the same, but the depth of truth into which these men were to be taken was much

greater than that into which the ordinary Christian could or should or needed to be taken. What was true even in Paul's day is, of course, even more true for us as we apply Paul's words to our generation. Of course, the greater depth of understanding into Christian doctrine and Apostolic tradition given to those Paul has in mind in 2 Timothy 2:1-2 must continue. Yet, as noted above, the exigencies of the history of the church in which the precise implications of the deposit of truth Paul gave to Timothy by means of great theological controversies will require that the instruction given include a knowledge of the accumulated church history and historical theology of 20 centuries. Also as noted above, the spread of the gospel and the church into nations whose native languages are not Hebrew and Greek will require that Christian teachers be instructed in the original languages of the Bible. Associated with such studies, the geography, history, and culture associated with these languages will have to be considered in such instruction.

- Third, those specifically charged with the work of theological education in the passage are Paul, Timothy, Faithful Men, and Those Able To Teach Others Also. It is clear that it is a special class of Christians to whom the work of theological education is committed. It is those men who have been spiritually gifted by Christ to be faithful teachers of the Word of truth. This means that, while the authority of the church must be respected in this work, the role of faithful teachers in this church must be emphasized. It is the specific responsibility of the Christian ministry to engage in this work of theological education. There is something more, however, that may be reasonably deduced in regard to this matter. The work of theological education is not equally the responsibility of every pastor-teacher. Just as Christians have different gifts, so Christian pastors have different gifts. It stands to reason that the work of theological education may fall more heavily and squarely on the shoulders of some pastors particularly gifted for this work and their churches than on others.

IV. The Practical Implementation of Theological Education

From this overview of the material substance of theological education, the general authority over theological education, and the specific responsibility for

theological education a number of guiding principles for the ministry of Covenant Baptist Theological Seminary may be derived. Three such overarching or guiding principles may be identified, and their significance elaborated.

A. Submission to the General Authority of the Church over Theological Education

The principles delineated above manifest that the actual authority of the church over a seminary must be respected. It is also clear that it may be recognized and submission offered to the authority of the church in two forms. It may be recognized, first, in the ecclesiastical authority of a local church or, second, in the ecclesiastical authority of a formal association of churches who have formally united for the purpose of forming and operating a theological Seminary. While such an association may not exercise actual ecclesiastical authority over its member churches, the churches together associated may exercise authority over an associational ministry like an associational Seminary.

One of the stated purposes of Covenant Baptist Theological Seminary is to conduct theological education in a way that represents the whole range of various churches that seriously subscribe to the 1689 Baptist Confession. It is a fact that no formal association unites all such churches. It is, therefore, necessary for CBTS to seek to recognize and submit to ecclesiastical authority in a different way than through being operated as an associational ministry by a formal association of churches. While the value of such an association is recognized, it is not a viable possibility or a practical reality for the churches we serve.

The respect for and submission to ecclesiastical authority required of the ministry called Covenant Baptist Theological Seminary will, therefore, be embodied in the following, several, specific ways.

- First of all, and most importantly, this will be embodied by way of a connection with a host, local church. This Host-Church will provide the Seminary with its commendation and its recognition as a stated ministry of that church. CBTS will operate as a stated ministry of such a Host-Church and at the discretion of that church and its elders. Its Chief Executive Officer (President or Dean) will be a member of that church and under its formal pastoral oversight. In this way CBTS will be a ministry under the oversight of a local church. It will also provide the Seminary with its primary, physical facilities including classroom, library, and office facilities. The authority of this local church will also be real and substantial in that it may withdraw if necessary not only its commendation and oversight, but also the use of its facilities from the Seminary. While such a withdrawal of support ought not, of course, to be lightly concluded or precipitously implemented, its possibility is, nevertheless, a clear exhibition of the authority of the Host-Church over the Seminary.
- Second, the ecclesiastical authority of the church will be honored by the Seminary seeking the commendation of individual churches besides its Host-Church and of associations of churches. These commendations will be sought as an essential requirement of its credibility before the Christian community at large. The list of such churches and associations will be prominently displayed by the Seminary. Other local churches will also be encouraged to cooperate with and participate in the seminary by financial support, sharing facilities, and encouraging their pastors as appropriate to serve on the Board, teach, or mentor students.
- Third, the ecclesiastical authority of the church will be recognized in that no regular student will continue to attend classes who is not a member of a local church. Students in transition between local churches will be placed on a provisional status. Students who fail in a timely fashion to join a local church will be dismissed from the Seminary.
- Finally, and fourthly, the governing Board of the Seminary will consist only of the members of churches holding the 1689 Baptist Confession. This Board will be mainly composed of the pastors of such churches.

B. Recognition of the Specific Responsibility of the Christian Ministry for Theological Education

As explained above the specific responsibility for theological education belongs scripturally to the Christian ministry and especially those members of the Christian ministry particularly gifted for this work. This is of great practical importance. Since the work of the Seminary could easily become a distraction to the elders of the local church which hosts it, the regular operation of the Seminary will be placed under the Seminary Board and a Chief Executive Officer (President or Dean). As noted already, since the work of theological education is the responsibility of the Christian ministry (the pastor-teachers of local churches), the Board of Directors will consist mainly of such pastors. Deacons and members of such churches, since they are charged to support the work of their pastors, may also be appointed to this Board.

This Board of Directors has authority over all the operations of the Seminary. This includes overseeing the Seminary in the furtherance of its stated mission; assuring that the mission is being fulfilled; providing for the election and dismissal of Board members; supervising its financial operations including the approval of the annual budget and the compensation of its paid employees. It will, therefore, meet regularly to give leadership to the Seminary. This authority will be exercised through the Chief Executive Officer (also called the Dean or President) of the Seminary who is appointed by the Board and is responsible to it.

Experience has shown that individual, local churches who have endeavored to provide theological education may experience internal issues or problems which may destabilize the work of the Seminary or bring its work completely to a halt. This is especially true if a Seminary is considered as solely a ministry of one local church. The Board of Directors of CBTS provides a broader and more stable basis for the Seminary. The Board may, therefore, authorize the Seminary in the event of such instability in the Host-Church or for other good reasons to seek the oversight of another Host-Church and transfer the work of the Seminary to such a church.

Therefore, while the Seminary and its CEO are under the general oversight of the Host-Church in terms of the facilities provided to the Seminary and the spiritual oversight of the CEO, the specific operations of the Seminary and the CEO are under the authority of the Board. Christian cooperation and good communication between the Board of the Seminary and the Host-Church and its elders are, thus, essential. Since the Seminary is overseen by these interlocking authorities, questions may sometimes arise over whether an issue comes under the elders of the Host-Church's authority or that of the Seminary Board. Such issues will need to be negotiated by the Board of the Seminary and the elders of the Host-Church and a solution satisfactory to both entities reached.

C. Subscription to the Creedal Basis for Theological Education

Since the purpose of the Seminary is to communicate the things which Paul taught Timothy, this assumes and requires agreement with regard to the identity of those things on the part of the church hosting the Seminary, the Board of the Seminary, and the teachers teaching in the Seminary. This necessary, doctrinal agreement is provided for Covenant Baptist Theological Seminary by means of the most historic and influential of Reformed and Baptist Confessions of Faith, the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith. The Host-Church must subscribe to this confession; each member of the Board must be a member of a church which subscribes to this Confession and himself hold this Confession; and the President (Dean or CEO) must subscribe to this confession. The instruction in the classes provided by the Seminary must also be doctrinally consistent with this Confession. Though the Seminary may occasionally employ instructors who do not fully subscribe to it, the content of their class instruction must conform to the doctrinal teaching of the Confession.