

Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning for Christians in Higher Education

Volume 12 | Issue 1

Article 14

2022

Reviewing *Beyond Profession: The Next Future of Theological Education*

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Recommended Citation

Shelton, James (2022) "Reviewing *Beyond Profession: The Next Future of Theological Education*," *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning for Christians in Higher Education*: Vol. 12 : Iss. 1 , Article 14.
Available at: https://digitalshowcase.oru.edu/sotl_ched/vol12/iss1/14

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Beyond Profession: The Next Future of Theological Education. By Daniel O. Aleshire. Grand Rapids, MI: William. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2021. vii + 149 pp. ISBN 13: 978-0-8028-7875-5 (PAPERBACK) \$20

B*eyond Profession: The Next Future of Theological Education* is part of the series *Theological Education between the Times* funded by Lilly Endowment, Inc. Daniel Aleshire is a theological educator who served the Association of Theological Schools (ATS) for nearly three decades, with 19 years as its executive director (1998–2017). ATS accredits more than 270 graduate theological schools in North America. With his finger on the pulse of theological education, Aleshire writes an extended essay on theological education to be read by all in that field.

As the title suggests, theological education is clearly on the cusp of change—“between the times.” Technology and delivery systems for learning have changed dramatically since Aleshire acquired his training in the 1960s and 1970s. More learning is available online, and the virtual classroom is now global with students in Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Americas all “sitting” in the same classroom in real time. But, for Aleshire, “[L]earning has two sides One side provides the key to discipleship and the leadership of communities of faith; the other side causes harm and idolatry” (p. 15). While the technological shift provides much information, character formation may be lost in the mechanics: “Learning can lead to the very heart of mystery, but it can also transform simple obedience into artificial complexity” (p. 15).

In his first chapter, Aleshire summarizes the current goals of M.Div. programs: (1) religious heritage: knowledge of scripture, tradition, and doctrine and its development; (2) community context, both local and global; (3) personal and spiritual formation; and (4) supervised ministry experience (p. 20). Some of these aspects are being affected by current changes, including a deterioration in liberal arts studies that precede graduate theological studies and spiritual development in distance education.

Aleshire traces learning methods as they have developed since the late 19th century: recitation, lecture, seminar/discussion, and distance education, in that order (p. 22). These methods should not be mutually exclusive since each has its strengths and weaknesses. With the old school model of learning at a single physical campus, *koinonia*, communal worship, and supervision of spirituality were more observable.

In chapter 2, Aleshire traces the history of theological training because this past will influence the future. He presents four major types: mainline Protestant, Roman Catholic, evangelical Protestant, and Black schools.¹ The first is given primacy from an English colonial viewpoint even though Christian pedagogy occurred a century before in the Americas with Hispanic colonization. English colonial colleges existed to produce men of letters for both the Church and the civil state. During the Great Awakening in the 18th century, Methodist and Baptist trainees were apprenticed to ordained ministers/evangelists and studied independently. They could not attend the few colleges then available or were suspicious of a learning that could replace “the warmth of revival with the coolness of reason” (p. 33).

In the 19th century, a gradual move was made from colleges to specialized theological schools and seminaries, largely divided along denominational lines. Established schools adopted scholarly methods for studying the Bible, and sides were chosen on the modernist-fundamentalist controversy.

Roman Catholic theological education in North America rose to serve a largely immigrant population but was viewed by the Protestant majority with distrust and hostility. Schools and seminaries prepared both lay and clerical students to serve the Church along ethnic lines. A strength of Catholic curriculum was inculcating spirituality along with doctrine.

1 Because Pentecostals/charismatics are a separate group with feet in several camps, the second largest group of Christians on the planet, their spirituality and ministry being distinctive, their education should be treated on its own terms and not subsumed under the aggregate of one or more of the four traditional types or treated as a mere appendix. Aleshire does acknowledge that the Pentecostal movement is “[p]erhaps the most powerful religious movement in the twentieth century” (p. 57)

Revival movements of the 19th and early 20th centuries developed their own theological schools and Bible colleges, eventually evolving into seminaries and liberal arts colleges serving the denominations that emerged from the fires of evangelism including Baptist, Methodist, and Holiness schools. Early Bible colleges were a new model of theological education: “to get Christian workers to the urban mission field as soon as possible with the practical, how-to knowledge needed to do that work” (p. 56). By the end of the 20th century, more evangelical colleges and schools had been established after the Second World War than the total number of mainline Protestant schools that had managed to survive from the 19th century into the 20th.

Like evangelical schools, Pentecostal higher education grew from Bible schools to junior colleges, four-year colleges, and finally universities with graduate schools. The realization that more education was necessary for effective ministry—and an increasing number of institutions hostile to the faith—gave rise to an accelerating growth calling for academic and theological accreditation.

Because evangelical and Pentecostal schools did not have large endowments, they were more dependent upon tuition. As a result, more “venturesome innovation in educational delivery and degree plan offerings” led to the development of multiple campuses and distance education, which then morphed into online programs (pp. 61–62). Aleshire references Mark Noll, who notes that this utilitarian approach to funding “allows little space for a broader or deeper intellectual effort because it is dominated by the urgencies of the moment.”² Catering to a broader consumer base, however, can lead to a “dumbing down” of curriculum, especially when coupled with an aversion to interaction with academics traditionally assumed to be inimical to faith.

For Aleshire, the previous efforts in theological education thrived because they fit well with the “cultural moment, the state of religion, and the practices of education as they existed in each historical moment. The authenticity of theological education in the future will depend on how well theological schools fit with these three powerful influences” (p. 74). Yes, to serve the Church and movements of God,

2 Page 62 citing Mark Noll (1994), *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*. Eerdmans. pp. 12, 24

the ecclesial academy must adjust to new methods and the pressing issues of the day; however, will it be able to keep its prophetic voice? Will it be able to proclaim “Christ against culture” when needed? Will it boldly diagnose the sickness of the century or just mime the spirit of the age like the prophets at Bethel, the king’s sanctuary rubber-stamping the principalities’ whims? (Amos 7:12–13).

For Aleshire, a major challenge to the future ecclesial academy is the reduction of trust and confidence in the Church and the clergy, which has plummeted drastically in the last five decades due to sex scandals, fiscal malfeasance, and deliberate ignorance.³ Of utmost importance in future clergy education will be the reestablishment of spiritual formation and integrity. While formerly a candidate’s integrity was assumed, such can no longer be the case. It is no longer enough to teach content and method; somehow along the way “a personal knowledge of God and the things of God in the context of salvation” has been lost.⁴ A personal relationship with God and with discipleship must be stressed to reclaim confidence in clergy and Church. A habitus of soul, a lifestyle of individual and corporate worship in a listening attitude, must be at the heart of the enterprise. First, give birth to a child of God; then, construct the clergy person.

Thus, Aleshire stresses three main areas in future theological education: cognitive, affective, and behavioral (pp. 82 & 110). Wisdom comes only with relationship. The challenge of online education will be to build such mentoring and communal relationships as some learning is more caught than taught. These three areas are not just means to learning but to understanding.

In his final chapter, Aleshire outlines the practices of a formational approach to theological education, which will require changes both in programs and in the institutions themselves. He commends the Roman Catholic seminaries in recent formation of seminarians and

3 In Pentecostal/Charismatic circles, it was the *lack of clergy education* that caused much scandal as well as immorality: “Ignorance is excusable when it is borne like a cross, but when it is wielded like ax and with moral indignation, then it becomes something else indeed” (Flannery O’Connor)

4 Page 81 citing Edward Farley (1983), *Theologica*. Fortress Press. p. 7.

recommends their methods to other traditions (pp. 97, 111, 120, 148, & fn. 8). The temptation to water down instruction to garner more tuition must be avoided.

Given that there are as many students over 50 as students under 30—with most students over 30—more andragogical learning methods need to be used. Both ethics and relationship are essential.

The future of theological education must start with the gospel mandate to “love the Lord your God with all your heart . . . and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself” (Luke 10:27). Only then is it back to the future.

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