



Challenges for Theological Education Today: Secularism, Schism, and the Technological Revolution

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The matter of the proper education of preachers of the gospel is worthy of our ultimate commitment. Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1942)

Theological education is in crisis. Every measurable demographic is on the downturn. The number of seminarians is decreasing and so is funding. Seminaries are selling property. They need capital. But these *facts* beg the question. Why is this happening? That is the question which those of us involved in theological education need to ponder. While certainly not an exhaustive list, my contention is that secularism, schism, and the meteoric growth of technology are three

Theological education and the formation of Christian leaders is difficult in an era when the loss of the transcendent, and the new digital culture makes human community challenging. But the transcendent reality of the presence and promises of God for the human world are still as real as they ever have been, and theological education must be rooted in this reality.

major contributors to this current state of affairs. In this essay, I consider each of these challenges and offer a few suggestions on possible ways to move forward.

THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION IN A SECULAR AGE

Whether we like it or not, western Christians are *all* living under the influence of a robust and ubiquitous secularism. Scholars like Charles Taylor¹, James K.A. Smith², Carl Trueman³, Brad Gregory⁴ and many others have helped us all better understand the secular influences which permeate every aspect of the culture. Perhaps most significantly, Charles Taylor has opened our eyes to the tectonic cultural shifts which have occurred in the past hundred years or so. We live in an age in which, “for the first time in history a purely self-sufficient humanism came to be a widely available option.”⁵ That’s a mic drop statement. *For the first time in human history* we are building a culture devoid of an intimate awareness of the transcendent. Belief in God, or simply belief in the supernatural, is increasingly rare.⁶ Even people who have had generally positive experiences within churches are taking the agnostic (or even atheistic) option and opting out of any significant religious commitments.

For a growing number of our fellow citizens the totality of life is lived within the “immanent frame” which is a “...constructed social space that frames our lives entirely within a natural (rather than supernatural) order... that precludes transcendence.”⁷ Of course, the transcendent is helpful if needed. But increasingly many people don’t seem to feel that need, at least not persistently and deeply. Even church-going people and seminarians are entrenched in this new

¹ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).

² James K.A. Smith, *How (Not) to be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014).

³ Carl Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020).

⁴ Brad Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2012).

⁵ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 18.

⁶ Of course, Taylor is referring to the West. It’s much harder to find an atheist in Iran, for instance.

⁷ Smith, *How Not to Be Secular*, 141.

secular “social imaginary.”⁸ The transcendent may exist, but it’s not a question that causes people to lose sleep. So, why not sleep in on Sunday? Why enter the ministry and why preach the gospel?

Obviously, this raises questions for theological education. The late Timothy Keller put it like this, “For us the question is how to communicate the Christian faith in a secular age increasingly hostile to belief in God and in Christianity in particular.”⁹ Note that Keller says it’s not just that people are increasingly *indifferent* to Christianity, but they are increasingly *hostile* to it. This hostility is more covert than overt. Churches are not being burned by angry mobs. They are being emptied by indifference. How do we effectively prepare preachers to communicate the gospel in this secular age?¹⁰ One of Keller’s suggestions is that theological education for the formation of preachers needs to recover a *teleological* focus. The problem with this suggestion is that teleology is the very thing that the postmodern culture rejects!

We now inhabit a brave new world of material and efficient causes bereft of final causes. This means that we live in a world in which what counts for knowledge is limited to what things are made of and what forces caused them to be made; but we are incompetent when it comes to understanding what they are for.

⁸ Charles Taylor coins the term “social imaginary” and writes, “What I’m trying to get at with this term is something broader and deeper than the intellectual schemes people may entertain when they think about social reality in a disengaged mode. I am thinking rather of the ways in which they imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows... and the deeper normative notions and images which underlie these expectations” in his *A Secular Age*, 171.

⁹ Timothy Keller, *Preaching: Communicating Faith in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Viking Press, 2015), 103.

¹⁰ I’m using the word *secular* in a specific way. Charles Taylor identifies three “senses” of secularity. The third sense is the radical shift from a society, “...in which it was virtually impossible not to believe in God, to one in which faith, even for the staunchest believer, is one human possibility among others,” in *A Secular Age*, 3.

OUR BRAVE NEW WORLD

We now inhabit a *brave new world* of material and efficient causes bereft of final causes. This means that we live in a world in which what counts for knowledge is limited to what things are made of and what forces caused them to be made; but we are incompetent when it comes to understanding what they are for. To use one example, we know what a human being is made of (material cause), and how we came to be (efficient causes like natural selection); but there is no understanding of what a person is for (final cause). Perhaps we're all for nothing?

Aldous Huxley saw this coming. There's a scene in *Brave New World*, in which the "Controller" bans the publication of an essay entitled, "A *new theory of biology*" because it argues for teleological meaning:

It was a masterly piece of work. But once you began admitting explanations in terms of purpose—well, you didn't know what the result might be. It was the sort of idea that might decondition the more unsettled minds among the higher castes—make them lose their faith in happiness as the Sovereign Good and take to believing, instead, that the goal was somewhere beyond, somewhere outside the present human sphere...¹¹

Huxley was prescient. The hostility of postmodern culture to religion (particularly Christianity) is partly due to the rejection of teleology (purpose) in general.

But this is where Keller counsels a "push back." Is it rational for *purpose to be totally* rejected? Even within a wholly immanent and secular frame, human beings find it difficult to escape the notion that the world is "for" something. Modern nihilism goes against a very strong human need for meaning. When this human *need* is denied, bad things happen. Consider another more recent dystopian novel, *The Ferryman* by Justin Cronin. *The Ferryman* is about a large group of people (80,000 to be precise) who leave planet Earth in order to escape ecological collapse. These survivors will travel 230 years to get to the nearest habitable planet. During the voyage the passengers will be placed into a cryogenic sleep. As they sleep, a computer generated

¹¹ Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, 388, note 7.

dreamworld will make the time fly by (just think of *The Matrix* and you'll get the idea.)

However, things go amiss during the pre-voyage testing of this new technology. Volunteers are placed into various computer-generated realities or dream states for extended periods of time. The problem is that when they awaken, they all say the same thing, "It didn't feel alive." They are depressed. Some commit senseless acts of violence. The technologically manufactured dreamworld failed to deliver because:

...the world that you and I profess to live in is alive. It's made by mind, not a machine, and that mind is what gives it the sense of deep purpose. You may not see it, but you can sense its presence, and that's what makes life not merely endurable, but also worth living.¹²

Here we begin to sense the Achilles' Heel of our secular age. Humanity has a hunch that there's more to life than meets the materialist's eye. We sense that there is meaning built into the created order. If we remove that meaning, then we remove an essential aspect of our humanity.

This is where the biblical story speaks powerfully to our secular age. Keller uses the concept of the *logos* as a way of *contextually communicating* the Christian message to address post-modern hearers:

Christians agree that history is not random and the world is not meaningless, that there is a *logos*, a purpose and order, behind it all. Yes, align yourself with that order and you will live well. However, no—it is not something you can find through philosophical reasoning, because it is not an it at all; it is a him.¹³

Note carefully, *Christians agree* on the teleological meaning of creation revealed in Christ. We disagree on many other things, but let's build consensus where we can. This Christocentric teleological conviction is shared by almost all Christians—conservative, progressive, or otherwise.

¹² Justin Cronin, *The Ferryman: A Novel* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2023), 427.

¹³ Cronin, *The Ferryman*, 427.

The evangelical task is to present the biblical story as *the true story of the world*. Of course, this is the “scandal of particularity” which postmodernity cannot stomach. Nevertheless, for Christians the confession of the crucified and risen Lord Jesus cannot simply be reduced to one metanarrative alongside other equally valid metanarratives.

THE REJECTION OF METANARRATIVE

I can almost hear the protests. Jean-Francois Lyotard famously pointed out that a striking feature of postmodernism is “*incredulity toward metanarratives*.” There is no “big” Story that is true for everyone. There are only individual stories. The story that matters is “my” individual narrative. This is a prime example of what Robert Bellah called “*expressive individualism*.”¹⁴ Others refer to it as “*hyperindividualism*”¹⁵ or less kindly “*viral narcissism*.”

What does all this have to do with theological education and the formation of preachers? It is naïve to think that seminary students (or their professors) somehow escape the cultural pressures to be *teleologically rejecting expressive individualists living out their own truth in their own individual stories*. Therefore, we cannot assume that students come to seminary already immersed in the biblical story (metanarrative). However, we can be certain that they come with a tendency towards being expressive individualists.¹⁶ Whatever “spiritual formation” needs to be included within theological education, one thing is certain: this hyper-individualism needs to be baptized.

As culturally heretical as it may sound, theological education is not primarily concerned with therapeutically helping students to tell their individual stories. Theological education *is* deeply concerned with helping students to interpret and to integrate their individual stories as threads within the tapestry of the gospel story. Our stories become much more interesting when seen and shared in the light of Christ!

¹⁴ Robert N. Bellah, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, (Oakland: University of California Press, 2007).

¹⁵ Robert Joustra and Alisa Wilkinson, *How to Survive the Apocalypse: Zombies, Cylons, Faith and Politics at the End of the World* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2016), 99.

¹⁶ “The Age of Authenticity,” see Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 473.

One of the most formative things that happened to me during my years in seminary took place in a course on *Marriage and Family Ministry*. One of the requirements was that each of us had to share our personal stories and family histories. I was terrified. I'd spent years trying *not* to tell my story. It was emotionally painful. It was easier to hide in my head, not to reveal my heart. I approached the professor,¹⁷ and shared my angst. He pastorally suggested that I share my family history with only him and one friend. After I shared some painful memories and experiences, the professor said to me, "Now I can see why you are a Lutheran." I asked him to clarify. He looked kindly at me and said, "Because of grace." That'll preach!

Nothing in the postmodern secular story adequately corresponds to the Christian message of grace. Rather, the world is filled with sad individual narratives empty of both purpose and absolution. That is, empty of grace. It is a wonderful time to preach the gospel. Theological education for future church leaders, needs to help students know and be embraced by the beauty, truth, and grace of the biblical metanarrative. Our personal stories get to be baptized into God's Story.

THE BIBLE IN A SECULAR AGE

There was a time when "the Bible says" carried cultural clout. Those times are gone. Future church leaders need to be able to find and employ secular authorities to support the biblical message. As an example, Keller uses the concept of idolatry. Obviously, this is a key biblical concept, but it carries little meaning in our secular age. Few people today are overly worried about committing idolatry. Yet, from the point of view of the biblical story, everyone should be very concerned about idolatry. To make this point, Keller quotes the late post-modern author David Foster Wallace.

Wallace spoke at a commencement ceremony at Kenyon College. Looking out at all these bright, young, and highly secular graduates Wallace said, "Everyone worships. The only choice you get is what to worship." Then, Foster added a cautionary note. Be careful what you worship—money, sex, power, intellect, beauty—but be careful. These

¹⁷ With much thanks to the late Rev. Dr. Bill Smith of Luther Seminary.

things will “eat you alive.”¹⁸ This is basically Paul’s argument against idolatry in Romans 1, but no secularized listener gives a hoot about fussy old Paul. Secular ears perk up, on the other hand, when people like David Foster Wallace are mentioned.¹⁹

The critical thing for theological education is that students learn to understand and appreciate our secular age and the many ways—positive and negative—it has shaped and is shaping all of us. At the same time we “push back”²⁰ against some postmodern assumptions like *hyper-individualism, and the rejection of teleology and metanarrative.*

Biblical wisdom concerns the conviction that life has a God-shaped pattern (logos) and is best lived when we fit ourselves into that pattern. Faith (even faith alone) does not produce a life of antinomian ethical chaos. Rather, faith forms us in a way that fulfills God’s intent.

THE PURSUIT OF WISDOM

Classical theological education is *philosophical* (faith seeking understanding) and should prepare students for a lifetime of the *pursuit of wisdom*. Biblical wisdom concerns the conviction that life has a God-shaped pattern (*logos*) and is best lived when we fit ourselves into that pattern. Faith (even faith *alone*) does not produce a life of antinomian ethical chaos. Rather, faith forms us in a way that fulfills God’s intent.²¹

I’m reminded of a line by George Bernanos in which the country priest says that Satan futilely is “wearing himself out in absurd, terrifying attempts to reconstruct in the opposite direction the whole

¹⁸ Keller, *Preaching*, 107.

¹⁹ Tragically, David Foster Wallace committed suicide.

²⁰ Keller, *Preaching*, 117.

²¹ This is Paul’s meaning in Romans 10:4. Christ is the end (*telos*) of the law.

work of the Creator.”²² This is, unfortunately, also the futility and folly inherent in much of this secular age.

THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION IN AN AGE OF SCHISM

The readers of this journal are all familiar with the painful reality of denominational schism in the mainline Protestant churches in North America. In recent times, these schisms are usually interpreted as divisions between progressives and conservatives over the issue of biblical authority and sexual ethics. The argument centered on what the Bible “really” teaches about homosexuality. We fought for decades and then turned around to discover that secular people don’t really care what the Bible says—especially about sex.

Perhaps, had we taken more time exegeting the culture—and the culture’s influences upon all of us—before focusing so exclusively on the Bible; we might not be where we are. Carl Trueman gets to the center of the problem when he writes, “...the reason why ethical and political discussions are so acrimonious and futile today is that there is no commonly accepted foundation on which discussions might constructively take place.”²³

How can we have constructive conversation about divisive issues with people, even fellow Christians, who have very different philosophical, theological, and experiential foundations? For example, to the degree that the transcendent is removed from the social imaginaries of ordinary people (even ordinary theologians) then all that’s left is the immanent. This helps us understand and explain both the far political Left and Right. Limited only to the immanent frame, political stakes are no longer *penultimate*. They possess near salvific ultimacy.

In the practical or day-by-day “unthought”²⁴ absence of a transcendent final cause and under the influence of expressive individualism: politics, sex, money, health, pleasure, education, success, and

²² As quoted by Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., *Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 123.

²³ Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, 388.

²⁴ James K.A. Smith helpfully defines *unthought*: “The (usually unstated) presuppositions that undergird an account of secularity and the decline of religious practice.” In his *How (Not) to Be Secular*, 143.

even social justice are divinized and these gods will “eat you alive.” In such a culture, schism is unavoidable but it is also catastrophic.

There is much more that could and should be said about the scandal of our schisms. Let this simply stand as a plea: for the sake of the unity of the Body of Christ and in order to bear witness to the world of our catholicity, theological education must help students build on a common theological foundation—the biblical metanarrative—and integrate their individual stories into it.

THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION IN THE DIGITAL AGE

A discarnate world, like the one we now live in, is a tremendous menace to an incarnate Church, and its theologians haven’t even deemed it worthwhile to examine this fact.²⁵

There’s one final aspect of the influence of postmodernity on theological education that needs to be considered: the technological revolution. Unfortunately, we tend to view technology as a neutral tool. But technology is not neutral, it’s more like Tolkien’s “ring of power.”

THE BACKSTORY

At the end of 2019 I accepted a call to become the second president of the North American Lutheran Seminary (NALS). Three months later the pandemic forced us to go virtual. Community life and education happened exclusively via the internet. What happened at our seminary happened in almost every seminary and congregation in North America.

As events unfolded, we soon realized that solutions to the problems caused by the Covid-19 pandemic were not limited to technological “Know How.” Rather, the problem was *theological*. The knee jerk reaction of many was to seek technological solutions to theological problems. Everyone seemed to forget that the *medium is the message*. Technology *massages the message* in very real, but subtle ways.

²⁵ Marshall McLuhan, *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion*, eds. Eric McLuhan and Jacek Szklarek (Wipf & Stock, Eugene, OR, 1999), 50.

Consider the question raised about the appropriateness of online communion. Pastors were not theologically well-prepared to answer that question. But technology could answer it. Online distance communion was introduced. Some pastors got really creative and introduced “drive-thru” communion. One congregation advertised drive-thru communion with a fast food theme. The McDonaldization of the Mass was at hand—“Do you want fries with that?” Once again, Carl Trueman helps us get to the heart of the problem, “...the rise of the internet [has] detached people from real communities. Now bizarre phrases such as ‘online community’... make sense because we know how the very idea of community has been evacuated of the notion of bodily *proximity* and *presence*.”²⁶

The very idea of offering distance and drive-thru communion is an offspring of our *expressive individualism* and its theologically consequential twin, *consumerism*. In a premodern church culture, such sacramental practices would definitely have been deemed *bizarre* and *heterodox*. But in a culture of expressive individualism, we don’t need an incarnate community to Commune (obviously this also disregards any significant form of communal Eucharistic discipline)!

But the problems and questions didn’t stop with issues surrounding the consecration and distribution of the sacrament. Online worship attendance quickly became the norm in many congregations. It was easy, convenient, flexible, and affordable (note how similar this is to the direction many seminaries are taking!).

You could *watch* worship in the comfort of your home sitting in your favorite chair. To make it even more flexible you could watch asynchronously. You choose the time and place that suits you. If there was Communion you could gather some bread or crackers and a beverage of choice. Please understand, I know that well-meaning pastors and parishioners were not all so flippant about introducing online Communion. The struggle to provide faithful ministry was real. My point is that this novel practice perfectly reflects our secularized, hyper-individualistic, consumer-driven society, and technological age.

Online worship, online communion, online classes, online meetings, online giving, online prayer, online confession, online counseling—it shouldn’t surprise us that there’s been an uptick in online sex.

²⁶ Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, 404–405.

TECHNOLOGY AS EDUCATIONAL PHARMAKON (CURE AND POISON)²⁷

During the pandemic I came across the work of a French educational philosopher, Bernard Stiegler. His work documents the “fact” that technology is not a neutral medium. Youth overexposed to “psychotechnologies” suffer a cognitive mutation.²⁸ This mutation hinders, or even prevents, a young mind to develop the ability to pay *deep attention*. Rather, youthful minds are formed by technology to pay *hyperattention*. Hyperattention is defined as:

...a rapid oscillation among different tasks, in the flux of multiple sources of information, in search of a heightened level of stimulation and having a weak tolerance for boredom... A generational mutation has taken place, transforming deep attention to hyperattention.²⁹

In the process of developing hyperattention, the capacity for *deep attention* is undermined. Stielger (borrowing from Katherine Hayles) defines deep attention as, “the capturing of attention by a single object, sustained over a long period of time...”³⁰ For example, reading a book (like the Bible!) *requires* the capacity to pay deep attention.

It is vitally important to understand that the technological revolution is qualitatively different from the revolution of Gutenberg. A book demands the ability to pay deep attention which is the very capacity that classical theological education demands of students.

²⁷ The Greek word *pharmakon* is often translated as witchcraft or sorcery. However, in classical Greek a *pharmakon* was both a cure and a poison. Too much can kill you. Bernard Stielger compares technologies to medicines, “When we read the label of a medical prescription, we often find that this or that ingredient beneficial to adults can be deadly to ‘children under the age of three’...” Bernard Stiegler, *Taking Care of Youth and the Generations* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 91.

²⁸ Barker, *Taking Care of Youth and the Generations*, 73.

²⁹ Barker, *Taking Care of Youth and the Generations*, 73

³⁰ Barker, *Taking Care of Youth and the Generations*, 73.

It is vitally important to understand that the technological revolution is *qualitatively* different from the revolution of Gutenberg. A book demands the ability to pay deep attention which is the very capacity that classical theological education demands of students. But, “Today images have primacy over ideas. For that reason, cinema, television, and now the Internet have left books to one side.”³¹

I’m no Luddite, but like apprentice sorcerers, care must be taken to manage the magic of the technological ring. Every teacher knows that teaching online with isolated *pixel people* is qualitatively different from teaching an incarnate classroom of students. Every preacher knows the *qualitative* difference between an incarnate community and online worship. Technology has *unintended consequences*. Other examples include the decline in worship attendance and the decrease in the number of residential seminarians. Embodied participation in worship and education are increasingly devalued.

In the United States, virtual congregations are springing up. Congregations in which the congregants attend virtually via an avatar of themselves. One of my students shared with me that he has a friend who attends a church *virtually*. His friend suffers from agoraphobia. He is obese, shy, and introverted. Virtual worship *fits* his felt needs. But, is it also preventing him from healing and growing? Are we in danger of unintentionally enabling a future generation of church leaders who have grown accustomed to *excarnation* in which faith is practiced *in the head* rather than *enfleshed in community*?³²

Decades ago, Dietrich Bonhoeffer alerted us to this potential problem. Separation from real, incarnate community fosters an idealized concept community:

Innumerable times a whole Christian community has broken down because it had sprung from a wish dream. The serious Christian, set down for the first time in a Christian community, is likely to bring with him a very definite idea of what Christian life together should be and to try to realize it. But God’s grace speedily shatters such dreams. Just as surely as God’s desires to lead us to a knowledge of genuine

³¹ Mario Vargas Llosa, *Notes on the Death of Culture: Essays on Spectacle and Society* (New York: Picador, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016), 37.

³² Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 554.

Christian fellowship, so surely must we be overwhelmed by a great disillusionment with others, with Christians in general, and, if we are fortunate, with ourselves.³³

The cross of the incarnate *community* should not be underestimated. Technology can, and unfortunately does, undermine the capacity for clergy (and congregational members) to bear that cross. This is another *unintended consequence* of technology.

THE FUTURE OF THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

In spite of the obstacles, I remain optimistic about the future of classical theological education. I'm optimistic because I believe in the beauty and truth of the Christian gospel. Human life and culture cannot flourish without the gifts of grace, purpose, and absolution. These are gospel gifts.

Sooner or later the yearning for transcendent values will overtake the yearning for lesser gods of the immanent frame. We can anticipate the growth and expansion of cult movements of various kinds.³⁴ The need for the transcendent cannot be locked away in a small closet of human consciousness. To be human is to be a praying animal.

Carl Trueman suggests that the second century may be the best precedent to the twenty-first century.³⁵ A small, poor, and politically powerless group of early Christians began to gather *together* as followers of a crucified Jew whom they claimed had been raised from the dead. He was their Lord and King. Their *social imaginary* was transformed. They were ridiculed, persecuted, and killed. But, because they were awakened to the dignity of every individual within God's Story; they rejected common pagan practices like abortion, infanticide, and the abuse of the poor and powerless. They were very imperfect people forming very imperfect communities. Yet, they persevered with a divine Promise, "I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

³³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together: Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works: Readers Edition Set* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 27.

³⁴ Charles Taylor calls this the "nova effect" which is an explosion of religious or mystical options in which people can, "wander between and around all these options without having to land clearly and definitively in any one." See his *A Secular Age*, 351.

³⁵ Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, 406.

That Promise remains for us, “I am with you always, even to the end of this *secular, schismatic, and technological* age.” ⊕

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