

Session 2 – THE GOSPEL ‘HOW’ OF THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

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1. Introduction

Yesterday our brother César Guzmán reminded us of the Gospel matrix of theological education. He brought us back to that easily-stated but profound truth that theological education has a practical purpose, training people for gospel ministry in local churches. True, as we heard, theological education is not severed from the academy. To that extent, theology takes its place as a true academic discipline, and a demanding one at that. But its focus is the local church, and the life of the people of God from place to place. All this, of course, is no innovation but deeply rooted in orthodox understandings of what theology itself is. Thomas Aquinas stressed that what he called ‘sacred doctrine’ was both practical, dealing with human action, and speculative, concerned with what God reveals.¹ Theological education is a training in this kind of theology.

Yet perhaps we should stay a moment with César’s focus on the practical and the life of the local church. All of us are aware that in the life of the local church it is not simply the quality of a minister’s teaching or preaching that testifies to the Gospel, but the quality of life. Again, the apostle Paul provides a striking instance of this. In 1 Thessalonians 2:8 Paul describes the quality of his relationship with and life amongst the Thessalonian Christians. ‘So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us.’

No doubt we could spend all of today on this verse, but let me make some brief comments. First, the proclamation of the Gospel and the life of the gospel-proclaimer go together. Paul shares both. In this sense, the proclamation of the Gospel is not the mere transfer of information, like a newsreader on a television station bringing one the news that there is a new head of state, a new lord. That there is transfer of information is true, and there must be that element, no doubt. But for Paul here, it is not just that.

Secondly, Paul’s life is theologically significant in the context of 1 Thessalonians 1 and 2. Paul is reminding them in chapter 1 of the authenticity of their response: he summarises in 1:9 and 10 how it is known that the Thessalonians have turned to the living God. In chapter 2 he reminds them of the authenticity of the message to which they have responded. He speaks clearly and unashamedly of the way he has proclaimed it, not from deceit or impure motives or trickery (2:3), not seeking to flatter (2:5), nor to receive praise (2:6), but with gentleness, love and care (2:7 and 8). The continuity of Paul’s gospel life with Paul’s gospel message is important, because he uses just that to reassure the Thessalonians about the authenticity of what they have heard and received.

¹ *Summa Theologiae* 1a.1.4. ‘Hence, although among the philosophical sciences one is speculative and another is practical, nevertheless Sacred Doctrine includes both...’ (*Unde licet in scientiis philosophicis alia sit speculativa et alia practica, sacra tamen doctrina comprehendit sub se utramque*).

Now what has that to do with theological education? Clearly this: in the practical setting of the Thessalonian church, it mattered that the one who proclaimed the gospel lived the gospel. And a theological educator who wishes to see ministers formed as Paul was must therefore be concerned not only with gospel knowledge, but also with Gospel living. There is a character to be formed, as well as a mind to be trained. Both must reflect the Gospel. Now the training of the mind, the content of theological education, we shall return to on Friday in the last of our sessions together. What we aim to look at today are some of the issues that relate to formation of character. Let me stress, we only approach some of the issues in this area, but we can at least scratch the surface.

2. The Hidden Curriculum

The perspective that we are exploring today is the way in which our educational methods themselves, the ‘how’ of theological education, actually serves to shape and mould those we train. Let me at this stage introduce the notion of the hidden curriculum. We may produce course documents that state what subjects are taught and examined, and that is our explicit curriculum. But alongside that there is a hidden curriculum. Perry Shaw defines the hidden curriculum this way. It is :-

...the potent sociological and psychological dimensions of education, which are usually caught rather than intentionally taught – the pervasive environmental features of education that include such things as the nature of behaviours which are encouraged, the type of relationships modelled, and the values emphasised in the learning community.²

The hidden curriculum has both positive and negative elements. Thus, on the one hand, positively, there are things that are unintentionally taught, or as Shaw says, ‘caught’. On the other the very process of selection which goes into any explicit curriculum ensures that some things do not appear or appear only marginally and those omissions also tell a story about what matters. In the UK context, I may, for example, as I teach the Doctrine of the Holy Spirit, not spend time on the way the Spirit was used in the theology of the 19th century minister Edward Irving. My omission insensibly teaches something about how I view his current importance.

Now, this hidden curriculum may teach the right things both positively and negatively. What a student catches from his or her instructors may be just what the Bible asks. The things that are omitted or treated as marginal may be very rightly treated in this way. But Shaw poses the question for any instructor and institution as to what the hidden curriculum does in fact teach or model.

3. The Hidden Curriculum and Gospel Relationships

Let me at that point take us back to another of César’s points in yesterday’s paper. As he spoke about the gospel matrix he reminded us:

The Gospel is a reflection of the relational nature of God’s being in his trinitarian reality, as such, the gospel itself is about relationships...Through the gospel we enter the kingdom of God to enjoy the right order of relationships.³

² P.W.H. Shaw ‘The Hidden and Null Curricula’ *Theological Educator* 2006 1.2, p 3.

³ C. Guzmán ‘A Gospel Matrix for Theological Education’ p 5.

These Gospel relationships, of course, are personal relationships. To use the terms made famous by Martin Buber,⁴ they are I-Thou relations, inter-personal relations, subject to subject relations, as against I-It relations where an I relates to the other as an object, identified, knowable and masterable. Naturally, in the case of interpersonal relations with God, this is a very particular I-Thou relation, a relation in which we know God as Lord and Father. Yet relations with other human persons for the Christian are also to be I-Thou relations and not relations where one exploits another or treats them as a mere object in the world, a resource to use, as an It. This I-Thou, inter-personal, shape to the relationships the Gospel brings is implicit, naturally, in the summary of the Law that Jesus provides: we are to love God and love our neighbour (Mark 12:29-31). However, these two commandments in which I am to love the other, whether that other be God or my neighbour, also has to be set in a wider interpersonal context. Jesus tells us further in John 15:9-12 that he has loved us (verse 9), and he tells us to abide in his love by keeping his command to love each other (verse 10).

Both these commandments, and the context in which they are framed, feature the inter-personal idea of love. The summary of the Law brings us to I-Thou relationships, not I-It relationships

The question I want to pose at this point is whether our ways, the 'how' of our theological education, our hidden curricula, actually do promote these gospel relationships. Or do they subvert them?

Let me suggest two ways in which appropriate I-Thou relations can be subverted. We might, slightly loosely but conveniently, describe one of these ways as essentially modernist, the other as post-modernist.

3.1. Modernist subversion of I-Thou relationships

We begin with a modernist subversion of I-Thou relations. Consider the scene of theological education at least as it occurs so frequently in my own country. You have a room where some-one stands at the front, or who sits chairing a circle of people, a whiteboard or blackboard or projection screen where, it may be, a passage of Scripture or a set of theological propositions is put, so to speak, under scrutiny.

Now there may be a certain inevitability to something like this taking place. Theological education certainly includes instruction, and there is transfer of information and expertise. If there is not some transfer of information and expertise then one may ask in what sense theological education has taken place. But even so, we might want to voice some misgivings. They lie in two dimensions, my relation as an instructor with those I instruct, and my relation with what I am teaching.

⁴ M. Buber *I and Thou* 1923, ET Ronald Gregor Smith. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958.

Now, concerning my relation with those I instruct, Perry Shaw speaks of the set-up I have described as creating an emotional distance between instructor and learner.⁵ This is not the same as having a relation of respect. Obviously there is an instructor-learner relationship between Jesus and his disciples, and it is a relation of respect, but not of emotional distance. The risk is that some-one who has modelled to him or her an emotional distance between teacher and learner will take just that into their relationships in a local church as they teach there. It would scarcely correspond with Paul's attitude of sharing his very self with the Thessalonians in 1 Thess 2:8.

But let me turn to the other dimension, the relation of teacher with what is taught. I take it that at some level all our instruction relates back to the word of God and ultimately, therefore, to the God who gave that word. Think again of the lecture or seminar room scene I have described. We may say we are taking scripture seriously as we pore over every word and clause, but is there not a risk that as we do so we pass to a state of mind that sees even knowledge of the will of God as a commodity, as something we own, that we possess? It is a very telling turn of phrase to say 'we have mastered the Letter to the Ephesians'.

Please do not misunderstand me at this point. I am not suggesting that the tools of rigorous scholarship that one associates with the modernist period are useless. At its best modernist thinking, and the Enlightenment philosophies in which it was rooted, were highly concerned with truth and with intellectual integrity. But even that concern for truth can suffer distortion. Helmut Thielicke comments very perceptively on this:

Truth seduces us very easily into a kind of joy of possession: I have comprehended this and that, learned that, understood it. Knowledge is power. I am therefore more than the other man who does not know this and that. I have greater possibilities and also greater temptations. Anyone who deals with the truth -- as we theologians certainly do -- succumbs all too easily to the psychology of the possessor. But love is the opposite of the will to possess. It is self-giving. It boasteth not itself, but humbleth itself.⁶

One of Thielicke's concerns is the way that this lust for possession can ruin relationships with other Christians who are not so trained.

And in possession of this truth, he despises – of course, in the most sublime way – the people who as simple Christians pray to this Saviour of sinners... This disdain is a real *spiritual disease*. It lies in the conflict of truth and love. This conflict is precisely *the* disease of theologians.⁷

This aspect of the hidden curriculum would be a terrible thing, would it not? To have our explicit curricula teaching earnestly for the local church the truths of self-giving pastoral ministry and to have our graduates catching the disease

⁵ Shaw 'Hidden and Null' p 4.

⁶ H.Thielicke *A Little Exercise For Young Theologians* Carlisle: Paternoster 1996:16-17.

⁷ Thielicke *A Little Exercise* p 17

of disdain from our hidden curricula. Quite simply, this will not help our graduates love their parishioners.

Yet this modernist approach to learning can also create the impression that what we study is an It, an object, a bounded thing to be mastered and treated as a commodity. But centrally, as César reminded us, what we study is the Word of God, and therefore who God discloses himself to be through his word. Now we do indeed have a personal relationship with God: in salvation we have been adopted by him as his children and heirs of eternal life. He has loved us in the giving of the Lord Jesus, and we love him. He is, nevertheless, in this I-Thou relationship, Lord.

I would surmise that many, perhaps all of us, who are instructors have found ourselves with a pastoral problem along these lines. An able and competent student approaches one. They are diligent in study, interested, with no obvious unconfessed sin. Yet they speak of spiritual dryness and a sense of distance from God. The more they study the Synoptic problem, the less close to their Lord they feel. But if their Lord and his word have been rendered, so to speak, commodities, things to be owned, mastered, confined and bounded, then that would scarcely be surprising. For their Lord and his word have been insensibly treated as Its, and the tacit relationship operates as an I-It relationship, not as an I-Thou relationship. Buber himself comments very perceptively ‘But it is only the I-Thou relation in which we can meet God at all...’⁸

I stress once again that this subversion of the relationships the Gospel seeks to establish is very far from the intention, but this would be one of the perils of involvement in modernist methods of instruction and approach to the object of knowledge. That with the concern for objective truth comes a lust for possession, what Augustine might see as *libido dominandi*.

3.2. *Post-modern subversion of I-Thou relationships*

This takes us to the question whether post-modern approaches and methods fare better. The post-modern western mood is no doubt a highly complex phenomenon. But many of strands within post-modernism would recognise the lust for possession of the object as indeed one of the problems of modernist methods of study. Within post-modernism, there is also an antipathy to the notion of external authority, and a suspicion of the notion of objective external truth, a suspicion characteristically associated with the idea that truth-claims are really power-claims. Some, like Michel Foucault, see all human relations as power relations. And in terms of reading texts the idea of author and authorial intention can readily be taken as imposing authority. And the suggestion can be that the reader is to be equally the author, finding and constructing meaning.

One may well feel that suspicion towards human authority under the sun is very frequently well-taken. It is also certainly true that a post-modern stress that texts can be

⁸ M. Buber *The Eclipse of God: Studies in the Relation Between Religion and Philosophy* Atlantic Highlands NJ: Humanities Press 1988:128.

read in various ways can be fruitful and fits well with a basic humility before God and his word which accepts that God may bring forth fresh treasures and that we do not plumb the depths of the word of God so as to master it in any exhaustive sense.

Yet it is equally true that this style and approach can subvert the I-Thou relationships that the Gospel establishes. While this post-modern mood may not accept the notion of an objective It, a bounded thing to be scrutinised, nevertheless, at its strongest the mood that says the reader is the author, whether one is reading the word of God or whether one is reading a letter from a parishioner, is something that does not treat the other as a Thou either.

One might say this mood goes beyond Buber's scheme. For, not only is there no I-Thou relationship, there is no I-It relationship either. There is only the post-modern I, the post-modern ego. If there is only an 'I' and what the 'I' thinks or chooses to think another might have said, then there is no genuine relationship, certainly of an I-Thou form in which the other, the Thou to whom I relate, has a given-ness and an independence of me and my opinions. Put bluntly, a post-modern solipsism, a 'there's-only-me-ism', where there is ultimately only the 'I', that kills relationship. It certainly kills an I-Thou relationship with God in which I say 'Lord' to God and obey him as such. And the parishioner whose pleading letter about marital desertion is rewritten with post-modern wit and playfulness by a reader as an ironic celebration of the single life is unlikely to feel there is authentic relationship either.

The critic George Steiner observed early on in the emergence of this kind of approach that it has the 'covert thrill of violence' in the way that it allowed the reader to treat others. We may return here to one of the most perceptive exponents of postmodernism, Foucault. Foucault, we recall, saw statements about truth as claims to power. But he also saw claims to power in a certain light. He asks rhetorically: 'Shouldn't one therefore conceive all problems of power in terms of relations of war?'⁹ This is striking, to see relationship reduced to war. It is devastating to think of an interpretative approach and technique as presupposing relations of war, when the Gospel speaks of relations of love and peace.

3.3. Common Features of Relations in Modernism and Post-Modernism

What both of the approaches we have looked at readily share is a propensity for the 'I' to dominate. In the case of the modernist style, this domination comes from rendering the other an It, an objective object in the world to be mastered. In the case of the post-modernist style, domination comes from rendering the other not even an object with its own objectivity, but something that exists only insofar as it is construed and constructed by the 'I'. The common feature is domination, and it is right to see both methodologies as opening the door, no matter how unintentionally, to what Augustine calls the *libido dominandi*, the lust to rule and dominate.¹⁰ For Augustine, this was what marked out

⁹ M. Foucault 122, 123 in 'Truth and Power' pp 109-133 in *Power/Knowledge* New York: Pantheon 1980 ed. C. Gordon.

¹⁰ Augustine *City of God* I.

and characterised the city of this world, not the city of God, and it is, after all, the city of God that we are training people to serve.

4. Intellectual Vice and Intellectual Virtue

Inevitably I think we ask how significant this may be, and we may possibly even feel somewhat resigned, along the lines that these problems have a certain inevitability. We may even feel that, at least in the case of the modernist I-It approach, it does take the issue of truth seriously. At its best there is a genuine intellectual virtue there.

For my own part, I do not wish at all to downplay the significance of the intellectual virtue of truth. After all, we serve a God who does not lie and whose word is truth. I do, though, want to ask, first, whether our definition of intellectual virtue has not become a little narrow, and indeed, secondly, whether a narrow view of intellectual virtue, too exclusively in terms of truth, will not paradoxically leave the value of truth itself open to corruption.

4.1. Intellectual Vice

Let me begin by thinking about intellectual vice. We have noted the way that our hidden curricula can promote not gospel relationships, but a lust for mastery, *libido dominandi*. It is possible that our hidden curricula promote a sense of the 'I', the self, in our students that is essentially individualistic, not merely individual. Characteristically, and understandably, students are tested and examined as individuals and often ranked with some precision, and with high intellectual ranking enjoying prestige and approval from us as teachers. Those with lower ranking may not attract our approval so significantly, or even our interest.

Now, individual assessment and handling may be necessary and desirable in some respects. Yet I do recall my own experiences as a law student where rivalry and individualism were taken as read in this kind of educational environment. And an individualist educational ethic can become intensely competitive. Competitiveness can create conditions ripe for arrogance, pride and pugnacity. And competitiveness is a marked aspect of the social profile from which many of the students I am privileged to teach are drawn (Ivy League university, 'alpha' personality, high achiever). One only has to watch them play touch rugby.

W.J. Wood comments very perceptively on the consequences of this:

Arrogance, dishonesty, pride, pugnacity, laziness, and many other vices undermine our ability to think well and to pursue the truth. A vicious character can undermine good thinking just as effectively as some physical debility.¹¹

¹¹ W.J. Wood 'The Crisis in Contemporary Epistemology' <http://wheaton.edu/FandL/pdf/wood.PDF> (accessed 01.08.07) 21. He adds elsewhere: 'Intellectual vices include traits such as gullibility, superstitiousness, willful naïveté, closedmindedness, and being prone to self-serving beliefs.' 25.

His point is that what one might think of as the prime intellectual virtue, truth, is undermined by these vices. Contentiousness and rivalry, for example, may lead one to deny the truth when another asserts it, precisely because it is another who has said it. Arrogance can lead one to repudiate a perfectly legitimate criticism, and the sense of one's significance can lead one on that quest to find something new, something original, no matter how eccentric, a thought that one can call one's own and possess, of which one is proprietor and master. Is that not, to be honest, a snare for the academic, the yearning to have a school of thought or line of argument named after one? For one's doctoral thesis to be all too definitive?

As I mention the temptations that can beset us in the Academy, I should make a further observation. To be a successful academic does not require us to be a whole human being. No doubt many of us have met individuals from time to time who are enormously gifted in one discipline or another, but whose skills in that cannot be employed in, or seem irrelevant to, the rest of life. Their virtues are not integrated into a whole life. And one of the problems that we face with a narrow definition of intellectual virtue too exclusively in terms of truth is that it may lead to a life where the virtues themselves are not integrated. Where truthfulness does not walk with consideration, graciousness, humility and mercy. G.K. Chesterton commented long ago on the disastrous tendency in the modern era for the virtues to become dissociated:

The modern world is full of the old Christian virtues gone mad. The virtues have gone mad because they have been isolated from each other and are wandering alone. Thus some scientists care for truth; and their truth is pitiless. Thus some humanitarians care only for pity and their pity (I am sorry to say) is often untruthful.¹²

Again, we must remind ourselves that those we teach are being prepared for a practical task, serving in local churches. And as we have seen from the example of Paul, this requires lives that are consistent with the Gospel. Now I take it that the Gospel is consistent, coherent and the life it brings is integrated. In that case, clearly we look to be forming characters whose virtues are integrated, not people who have so developed one virtue that it serves actually to choke others. A coherent Gospel implies, so to speak, integrated gospel workers.

4.2. Intellectual Virtue

Naturally at this point, I am arguing for the inseparability of the virtues. Again, this is nothing new in orthodox Christian thought, for Aquinas argues that moral virtues cannot ultimately operate without at least the intellectual virtues of understanding and prudence.¹³ This is something we must investigate more closely on Friday in our last session as we consider the question of the content of theological education, the 'what'

¹² G.K. Chesterton *Orthodoxy* London: the Bodley Head. 1909:51.

¹³ *Summa Theologiae* 1a2ae.58.4

of the explicit theological curriculum. But vitally, for our present discussion he also argues that intellectual virtues require moral virtues.¹⁴

Our question here is how best we nurture moral virtues, especially through our hidden curricula that may support our intellectual and academic programmes. Let me make some observations under two broad headings, coherence and humility.

4.2.1. Coherence

We have been observing the way that lack of coherence between explicit and hidden curricula, and lack of coherence between the pursuit of truth and other virtues can subvert our aims to equip and form gospel-hearted ministers. We may well, then, want to pursue factors that make for coherence in the experience of our students.

First, we as their teachers must strive to model the integration of Christian virtues, not their incoherence, or the optional nature of, say, charity, when discussing theologians with whom one disagrees. Our personal holiness and love of Christ are not irrelevant if we want to see a holy learning in our students. This is obviously one reason why one would be extremely slow to contract out teaching of, say, John's Gospel to an unbelieving lecturer at a local secular university, no matter how eminent. For that would speak precisely of the separation of intellectual virtue from the others.

Secondly, as between ourselves on a particular faculty, a quest for an essential coherence as between our subjects and as between ourselves is also desirable. Clearly we will not attain unanimity on all issues – that would not be so in the Academy or the typical local church. But there does come a point where a faculty looks less like a team involved in ministry and more like a loose confederacy of people temporarily in league while they pursue their own agendas.

Thirdly, we will want to ensure that learning is properly related to worship. It is not even enough to say that a particular community of students and teachers worships together as well as learns together. What we learn and how we worship must surely be consistent with each other. To use a slightly caricatured example, there is no point reciting the Nicene Creed with conviction in a chapel together if the Creed is not then taught with conviction.

4.2.2. Humility

Our second heading is humility. A moment's reflection tells us how important the New Testament regards this. Luke repeatedly enjoins humility, not least because the humble will be exalted and the proud cast down. Humility, naturally, works in two relational directions, horizontally and vertically.

Horizontally, in terms of relations between humans, a theological education, or a theological educator who models humility will not behave with contentiousness and

¹⁴ *ST* 1a2ae.58.5

arrogance. Humility opens the door to a generous listening to others, and a refusal to try to overwhelm them with intellectual aggression. It encourages a proper interaction with questions and objections.

Vertically, in terms of relation with God, humility discourages the attitude that seeks to possess and master God's Word, or to tell others what God should have said on particular topics. Humility opens the door to a trust that God does speak and speaks truthfully, but does not insist that one has grasped him and his word exhaustively. In that sense learning humbly really does reflect the relationships the Gospel establishes, and there would be something odd about expecting a minister who has been taught in ways that make him proud, to be able to live the gospel life of humility. But humility is the model, and not just from Paul. For Philippians 2:3 warns us strenuously to be humble and drives this home with the example of the Lord Jesus in the Incarnation. Naturally, we would want Christ's ministers not simply to speak of him, but to live him.

Discussion

- How can we best encourage both humility and good learning in those in our charge?
- Are there particular educational techniques that hinder or help Gospel-shaped theological education?