In this paper, I would like to pursue two main questions. First, how should theological education be conceived? Second, how should the "confessional" and the "public" character of theological education be understood, distinguished, and related?

I. "Theological Education"

My reflections on the first of these questions come in three parts. First, I will summarize what I take to be the leading developments in the study of theological study in North America in recent years. Second, to illustrate those developments more concretely, I will sketch out my own constructive proposal for the conduct of theological study and theological education. And third, I will briefly suggest some implications of this line of thinking for the concrete practices of teaching, learning, and curricular planning in theological schools.

The recent discussion

What knowledge I have of the study of theological study itself arises mainly out of my involvement for a dozen years or so in the "Issues Research Program" of the Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada. From the early 1980's into the mid-1990's, this program brought a good many people in North American theological schools into an ongoing conversation about theological education. Those involved in the conversation produced a fair number of publications concerning the aims of theological study and theological education, the ways these enterprises might be restructured so as better to realize those aims, the contexts in which these enterprises are carried on, the training of people to carry them on, and so forth.¹ Some of this research has

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¹ See W. Clark Gilpin, "Basic Issues in Theological Education: A Selected Bibliography," Theological Education 25 (1989): 115-121, on the literature produced in connection with this program in its early years. David H. Kelsey has provided a thorough discussion at a somewhat later stage in his Between Athens and Berlin: The Theological Education Debate (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993).
spurred subsequent studies of theological education in particular ecclesial traditions, and of the graduate education of theological faculties. It has affected curricular design to some extent at a number of theological schools. It has also informed the redevelopment of the standards for accreditation in the ATS.

In a review of this program of research on basic issues as it was coming to fruition, David Kelsey and Barbara Wheeler identified three points at which the reflections it was producing challenged conventional assumptions about these enterprises – assumptions that have governed our discourse and our practice for a very long time. These points have to do with the goal, the movement, and the structure of theological study.²

First, as to the overarching goal or aim of theological education: The conventional view is that the purpose of theological education is to prepare people for what we Methodists used to call "full-time Christian service" – that is, for employment as pastors, chaplains, directors of religious education, and the like, with the ordained pastor in charge of a congregation or parish more or less as the norm. Theological education is what equips that person to do that job; and if decisions are to be made about the content and conduct of theological education, the criterion by which these decisions are made is that of effective preparation for this kind of work. The terms "theological education," "ministerial education," and "education for church leadership" are thus all taken to be nearly synonymous.

The challenge to this conventional view in the recent work on theological education has not usually taken the form of outright rejection. As Kelsey and Wheeler observe, its critics are not "opposed to competence in the clergy"³; further, they are generally agreed that theological study has something to do with that competence. What they oppose is the simple identification of theological education with education for church leadership – an identification that implies, on the one hand, that what unifies the various branches or aspects of theological study is their common orientation to that goal, and, on the other hand, that whatever education seems to prepare persons for church leadership is ipso facto theological education. Rather than identify the two in this way, many of us involved in the current discussion want to distinguish them.

Now, to distinguish is not necessarily to separate; it can also be to relate. The question of the relationship of theological study to education for ministry or for church leadership is, then, another item on the agenda of this research. The answer to that question will depend on what alternative view of the overarching goal of theological education is put forth. While there is something of an emerging consensus on this point, namely, that the goal is the development of a particular kind of competence, there are also some significant differences of judgment as to just what kind, and what it is a competence for. Both the emerging consensus and some of the nuances of difference within it are represented handily in a paragraph from the new ATS standards of accreditation, on "Goals of the Theological Curriculum":

The theological curriculum is the means by which teaching and learning are formally ordered to educational goals. . . . In a theological school, the over-arching goal is the development of theological understanding, that is, aptitude for theological reflection and wisdom pertaining to responsible life in faith. Comprehended in this over-arching goal are others such as deepening spiritual awareness, growing in moral sensibility and character, gaining an intellectual grasp of the tradition of a faith community, and acquiring the abilities requisite to the exercise of ministry in that community. These goals, and the processes leading to their attainment, are normally intimately interwoven and should not be separated from one another.

The final sentence of the paragraph just quoted touches on what Kelsey and Wheeler called the second point of challenge in the newer work on theological study, a point having to do with the basic movement of theological education, or the dynamics of the process: Recent writers have challenged the conventional and deeply-rooted notion that theological education is a movement from theory

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4 For one approach, see the first two chapters of Charles M. Wood, An Invitation to Theological Study (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1994).

5 Bulletin of the Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada 42/3 (1996): 40.
to practice. Indeed, some have challenged the very terms in which this issue is normally discussed: "theory" and "practice," the "theoretical" (or sometimes the "classical") disciplines and the "practical" disciplines, the problem of "applying" theory to practice, of "bridging the gap" between them, or of "integrating" the theoretical and the practical aspects. Here, this research draws upon a variety of resources in contemporary philosophy, psychology, educational study, and other fields, but perhaps most of all upon decades of collective experience with curriculum reviews and faculty discussions in which framing the problem in terms of "theory" and "practice" has gotten us exactly nowhere.

What is to take the place of "theory and practice" is, again, a matter of only partial consensus in the recent literature. The consensus, as I read it, is on two points. One is that the theory-to-practice model must be replaced by some model that recognizes the way experience and conduct rightly inform thinking, and not merely the way thinking informs experience and conduct. The other is that, insofar as theological education works, it works not so much by equipping the learner with a new theory, that is, with a new interpretation of reality to be applied to practice, as by bringing about a deeper change: by equipping the learner with new ways of perceiving, new abilities, even new dispositions. The desired outcome is not merely a better, more adequate "understanding" of things, but rather a set of new or improved capacities for understanding, and for responding to what is understood. This applies as much to, say, biblical studies as it does to pastoral care. In consequence, the neat division of curricular areas into the "academic" and the "practical," into those which impart "knowledge," on the one hand, and those which (merely) impart "skills," on the other, is seen as a very dubious affair, dangerously reductive on both sides. Even the distinction between theological education and personal or spiritual formation, important and valid as it is, needs some new sorting out.  

When it comes to the constructive articulation of these two points of consensus – the development of alternatives to the theory-to-practice model, and the development of a more adequate account of what theological teaching and learning must involve – the current proposals are varied.

Third, as to the structure of theological study: There is a nearly unanimous judgment in the recent literature that the traditional "fourfold curriculum" of biblical, historical, systematic, and practical studies has long outlived whatever

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rationale it may once have enjoyed, and serves us ill. It originated in the immediate post-Reformation era, and rested on assumptions of various sorts that were severely weakened already by the beginning of the eighteenth century. It was re-engineered then in an uneasy compromise between the church and the emerging modern university. It persists today mainly for sociological and political reasons having to do with the traditions of scholarship and of the accreditation of scholarship in the various areas, with the formation of "disciplines" and "professions" in modern culture, with the complex relationships among seminary, university, and church, and with the inertia of ingrained habits of discourse and patterns of association. Its original rationale was largely dependent upon the conventional assumption about the overall aim of theological study (i.e., the preparation of pastoral leadership), and it has also been tied very closely with the conventional assumption about the movement of theological study (i.e., from theory to practice). It is a structure very difficult to shake, even with the best of wills and intentions. When we turn from the observation that the fourfold pattern is problematic to the envisioning of alternatives to it, again we find a variety of proposals, ranging from the rearrangement and reinvigoration of existing disciplines, through their replacement with a different array of disciplines, to the abolition of disciplines altogether (a sort of utopian fantasy, but, like other such fantasies, potentially useful).

A sample proposal

My own proposal for addressing all these issues was worked out most systematically (if still sketchily) in a book entitled Vision and Discernment: An Orientation in Theological Study (Scholars Press, 1985). A fairly early product of the "issues research" program, this book offers some ideas as to how we might conceive of the goal, movement, and structure of theological study and of theological education. Reviewing these ideas briefly might indicate with a little more specificity how the three challenges just mentioned might be constructively met.

The goal of theological education is best conceived, in my judgment, as the fostering of an aptitude for theological reflection. In order for that assertion to be at all informative, I need to explain what I mean by "theological reflection" and what is involved in acquiring and possessing an aptitude for it.

Christian theological reflection may be defined as critical inquiry into the validity of Christian witness. Theological reflection is thus the "second-order" activity of
examining and making some judgments about a prior, ongoing "first-order" activity or way of life, namely, the life and work of the Christian community. To call that first-order phenomenon "Christian witness" is somewhat problematic; that designation has its uses, but also its limitations. One might speak instead of "Christian tradition," or "the church's proclamation of the Gospel," or simply "the church." Different Christian communities will have different preferences as to the best way to designate what David Kelsey, following G. K. Chesterton, calls simply "the Christian thing." In any case, the subject matter of theological reflection is some attempt at being Christian. The judgments reached in reflecting upon that attempt may be retrospective (e.g., assessing the practice of some Christian community or individual in the past) or prospective (e.g., trying to determine what one, or one's community, ought to be and to do to carry out the Christian witness, and weighing the merits of various possibilities).

To possess an aptitude for such reflection is both to have an ability for it, and to be disposed to exercise that ability under the appropriate circumstances. Neither the ability nor the disposition by itself is sufficient, which is why theological education must engage both head and heart. It must not only teach students how to think theologically but also persuade them that it is a good and needful thing to do so. For most of the students in our theological schools, this means enabling them to understand and to affirm what theological reflection has to do with the vocations in church leadership for which they are preparing. A large part of the work of theological education is done, or undone, at just that point.

This brings us to the question of the movement of theological study and theological education. If the connection just mentioned between theology and ministry is framed in terms of the application of theological theory to the practice of ministry, theological education will be quite predictably undone. The alternative that I would advocate is to think of theological education as a process of reflection, under supervision, on the church's life and work: a process of learning to form judgments by forming judgments, and then thinking about both the judgments and the process by which one arrived at them in the company of someone with perhaps a little more competence who can provide some suggestions as to what went wrong and how to do better next time.

This supervised reflection on what is going on in the church's life and work gradually produces and refines a capacity for judgment that operates through a constant movement between two poles, or perhaps two mental modes, that I have called "vision" and "discernment." Vision is a capacity for synthesis, for
seeing the big picture and making connections; discernment is a capacity for analysis, for noticing what is distinctive about a given situation or problem so that it can be addressed in its specificity. Perhaps the most serious gap in most thinking about theological education, at least in the mainline Protestant tradition, is a general neglect of discernment as something that can and must be taught and learned. What I mean by "discernment" here – and it is well to note that the term can be used in a variety of ways – is a teachable and learnable capacity for analysis, for noticing relevant differences. (If "vision" is a workable rendition of the Greek *theoria*, perhaps "discernment" translates *eisthesis*, the "seeing into" of Philippians 1:9 or Hebrews 5:14.) It seems to me that our conventional way of talking about moving from "theory" – the big picture – to "practice" reflects and encourages a neglect of this aspect of theological education. The movement of theological education, just like the movement of theological reflection itself, is best conceived as a reciprocal process in which both vision and discernment are used and, by that use, constantly strengthened and deepened.

But how is discernment taught and learned? How might the theological curriculum engender in students both vision and discernment as modes of theological judgment? We might draw some helpful analogies from examples of excellence in other disciplines.

In her biography of the Nobel Prize-winning biologist Barbara McClintock, Evelyn Fox Keller calls her "a virtuoso at reading the intricate secrets of maize genetics," with a remarkable sensitivity to the smallest details. McClintock worked hard to cultivate what she called "a feeling for the organism." When a colleague said "I've often marvelled that you can look at a cell under the microscope and see so much," McClintock replied, "Well, you know, when I look at a cell, I get down in that cell and look around." Acquiring that capacity for seeing into things in all their uniqueness requires a kind of self-forgetfulness, and a willingness to allow the material to disclose itself.

Take another example from another field where virtuosity depends on the

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8 Keller, p. 101.
9 Keller, p. 69.
cultivation of discernment: Learning to play a musical instrument is not just a matter of learning how to do certain things to the instrument to make it produce the effects you want. It is also, and largely, a matter of being taught by the instrument: being willing to allow it to do things to you, letting it show you what you and it together might do. You are not solely agent in that discipline, you are also patient; you are affected, changed. And it is not the case that "when you've played one violin you've played them all." A good musician acquires a capacity to learn from each instrument what its own character is, and to adapt to that character so as to bring out what this particular partnership of instrument and musician can achieve.

What might these examples have to do with theological education? At a fairly concrete level, they suggest the importance of providing, in the context of the curriculum, opportunities for students to learn from particular instances of human and Christian experience and practice, as well as opportunities to learn about them in a more synoptic fashion. Developing exegetical skills through practice with particular texts; developing a sensitivity to the nuances of human interaction by working through case studies of social conflict or of pastoral conversation; acquiring a feeling for the "depth grammar" of Christian doctrine by observing how doctrines structure the life of a Christian community over time, or how they shape individual Christian lives – instances such as these point to the importance of plentiful provision for "inductive" learning and for painstaking attention to particular cases throughout the curriculum. It is precisely through such respect for particularity, combined with resources of a more "theoretical" sort that will help students to see connections and to see things whole, that both discernment and vision may be cultivated.

What does this imply for the structure of theological study and learning? First of all, it implies a discarding of the conventional division between theoretical and practical disciplines or areas of the curriculum, or between "knowledge" courses and "skills" courses. Second, it implies a reordering of the disciplinary and curricular structure in a way that will better serve the aim of the endeavor. My own proposal for this (probably nearer to utopian fantasy than to sober expectation) involves a restructuring of theological inquiry and of theological education governed by a consideration of what reflection on the validity of Christian witness involves. As I see it, the question of validity when it comes to the performance of what is intended as Christian witness has three components. There is the question of the authenticity of the performance of witness: of whether it really represents what it claims to represent, the gospel of Jesus Christ. There is the question of its intelligibility and truth: of whether the
message embodied therein is, as its proponents say it is, true and worthy of acceptance. And there is the question of whether Christian witness is (or was, or will be) **fittingly enacted** in this instance – that is, of whether the gospel is being related to the specific situation of proclamation in such a way that the truth and life it represents might actually be heard or felt and accepted.

I have gone so far as to project some imaginary theological disciplines corresponding to these three dimensions of theological inquiry. “Historical theology” is the name I have proposed for the discipline that pursues the question of authenticity, that is, of the fidelity of the Christian tradition(s) to the apostolic witness. “Philosophical theology” designates, in my scheme, the discipline devoted to the question of the logic or intelligibility and truth of Christian witness. “Practical theology,” long a name for a multiplicity of studies having to do with the tasks of church leadership, I propose to reassign to the discipline that inquires into the fittingness of Christian *praxis* to its context.

None of these three disciplines can be rightly pursued in isolation from the others; each requires the others. I think of “systematic theology” as the effort to think these three together. Other theological disciplines or specialties – moral theology, pastoral theology, and so forth – can be viewed as concentrating upon certain aspects or features of Christian witness, for certain purposes. Like other disciplines of study, theological disciplines are cultural artifacts, subject to many adaptations and redefinitions. But the process of change is often subtle, and rarely responsive to deliberate direction. I very much doubt that my proposed disciplinary rearrangement will be embraced by anyone very soon. (And I console myself with the thought that the eminent theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher's proposal for the reform of theological study met with no success in his lifetime.)

**Some implications**

What might this newer understanding of theological study imply for the concrete

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10 The formal structure of my threefold scheme is more akin to Barth's than to Schleiermacher's. Barth identifies three main questions theology has to raise about the church's talk about God: Does it *derive from* Jesus Christ? Does it *lead to* him? Is it *in accord with* him? For Barth, these are all interdependent components of the one question about the truth, and Jesus Christ is the criterion of the truth. See Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I/1, tr. G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975), pp. 4-5.
practices of teaching, learning, and curricular planning in actual theological schools today? Let me suggest just three lines of thought that might be pursued:

1. It might help us think about how what we teachers do in our particular courses and fields might relate to the overarching aim of the theological curriculum. Rather than taking our cues only from the inner identity and trajectory of our specific disciplines, we might think about the aims of our teaching in relation to some common aims in theological study.

2. It might also help us think, in light of the aims of our teaching, about how to do what we do: about both the pedagogy and the content of our courses.

3. It might help us into conversation as colleagues in a theological school about ways of understanding and realizing our aims together. Without this kind of conversation, discussions of curriculum revision quickly degenerate into battles over territory. The battling might be mitigated if we had some better sense of perspective than we are likely to have if all we can think about is what a student needs to know about whatever it is we ourselves teach.

II. “Confessional and Public”

How should the "confessional" and the "public" character of theological education be understood, distinguished, and related? In the way this question is stated, and in the way the statement is anticipated in the title of this paper, a thesis is implicit: theological education is to be conceived as confessional and public. Often, at least in the settings with which I am most familiar, the relationship is assumed to be disjunctive: theology and theological education can be either confessional or public, perhaps, but certainly not both – or at least, not both at the same time.

Here I want to explicate and defend the thesis that good theology and good theological education are always both confessional and public. In order to do so, I will need to do several things. Accordingly, my reflections have three parts. First, I will briefly examine some ways of construing the meaning of “confessional” and “public” that would suggest a disjunctive relationship between them. Then I will explore at somewhat more length the possibility of a
“conjunctive” understanding. Third and finally, I will ask what this understanding might imply for the practice of theological education in a variety of specific settings.

Confessional or public

When we refer to theological education as “confessional” or “public,” what might be meant by those terms? Although in a specific context it may be obvious to everyone just what is meant, in the broader discussion of theological education these adjectives are used in a variety of ways, and so it may be worthwhile to mention some possible senses. These are not mutually exclusive alternatives; the connotations can easily overlap. Still, there are some significant principles of distinction that can be brought out. Let us look first at some ways of interpreting “confessional” and “public” as disjunctive terms. I will mention four of these – surely not an exhaustive list.

First, when we refer to “confessional” and “public” theological education, we may be referring simply to two different ways theological education may be established and financed: we might thus define a “confessional” curriculum as one that has ecclesiastical sponsorship and support, while a “public” curriculum is one that operates under state or government auspices, with public funding. In either case, various expectations may accompany the provision of support: money is rarely free. But we might decide to use the terms in this way, i.e., to make the source of support the determining factor in whether to call an institution or program confessional or public.

Another way we might distinguish between “confessional” and “public” theological education would be to say that a confessional program confines its attention to one religious tradition, while a public program studies a variety of religious traditions. In this case, it is not the source of support, but rather the scope of the subject matter, that determines whether a curriculum is confessional or public.

A third way of stipulating the distinction between confessional and public theological education would be to say that a confessional curriculum serves what we might call religious interests – aiming, for example, to help its students grow spiritually, or to prepare them for ministerial leadership – while a public curriculum serves what we might call academic interests, aiming at the understanding of religion but not at its practice.
Finally, a fourth disjunctive way of distinguishing between “confessional” and “public” is this: a “confessional” school (or faculty or curriculum) is one in which certain ideas – normally, ideas important to the identity and interests of the school’s sponsoring denomination – are explicitly ruled to be beyond question, while in a “public” setting for theological education such constraints upon inquiry do not apply. A school that is confessional in this way may require its members literally to subscribe a confession, that is, a common declaration of faith or statement of principles, and to promise, as a condition of their membership in the school, that they will not teach or advocate anything inconsistent with that statement. There may be a more positive counterpart to this expectation, namely, that the members will teach and advocate what the confession sets forth. A school of this sort may have some explicit procedures for enforcing doctrinal discipline and dealing with infractions, either directly or in cooperation with the authorities of the sponsoring church. Of course, a school may be “confessional” in this sense even where there is no formal act of subscription and no formal procedures for monitoring members’ compliance, but where there is a clear (if unwritten) understanding that certain teachings and practices will be upheld and certain questions are not to be asked. Similarly, a school may not be confessional in this sense even if it requires a formal act of subscription, if the act is understood to mean something different – if, for instance (to take an extreme example), everyone regards it as a pro forma ritual of admission with no bearing whatsoever on the actual practices of teaching and learning. (A school that is formally confessional but has become functionally non-confessional in this sense may find itself in an awkward situation if for some reason the dormant confessional expectations are later revived and enforced.)

Advocates of a confessional approach to theological education in this fourth sense are often quite clear about the antithetical relationship between “confessional” and “public” that it implies. For example, R. Albert Mohler, Jr., the current president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, has recently written in a defense of “confessionalism” that we now face a landscape with two opposing cultures of theological education. The confessional culture understands its primary public of accountability to be the churches. The nonconfessional culture sees its primary public as the academy. The issue comes down to this: Who sets the norms and establishes final accountability? Evangelical institutions must stand ready to declare their theological convictions and maintain unapologetic fidelity to their confessions and churches. . . .
confessional accountability is immediately vulnerable to the accommodationist pressures of modern secular culture.\textsuperscript{11}

Although Mohler does not use the word “public” as the alternative to “confessional,” the disjunction is clear; and in this case, what is determinative is accountability. The theological school that is “nonconfessional” is captive to the norms of the modern, secular academy. “Confessionalism must be guarded by sustained relationships with identifiable churches, who hold the seminary accountable.”\textsuperscript{12} For Mohler, the proper home of confessional theological education is the church-owned seminary, under the church’s ever-watchful eye.

The understanding of theology and of theological education that Mohler advocates is radically different from the understanding I proposed in the first part of this paper. If Christian theology is a critical inquiry into the validity of particular ways of being Christian or of bearing Christian witness, and if theological education aims at the cultivation of an aptitude for theological reflection, it is difficult to imagine how either one could flourish in the atmosphere of this sort of “confessionalism.” It is worth noting that, when the Association of Theological Schools voted to adopt its current standards for accreditation in June of 1996, Mohler’s seminary and a handful of other Southern Baptist schools committed to similar principles were the only ATS member institutions that refused to vote in the affirmative. Mohler and his colleagues might construe the new standards as evidence of the capitulation of the ATS to the spirit of the secular academy. Others, myself included, see these standards as deeply rooted in the spirit of Christian confession. But to see them thus is to have a different understanding of the confessional character of Christian faith and of Christian theology and theological education from the one informing Mohler’s prescriptions. Another evangelical scholar, Gabriel Fackre, writing in the same volume that contains Mohler’s essay, might have been responding directly to Mohler’s view when he wrote: “A faithful seminary is not, finally, accountable to its ecclesiastical tribe, but only to its Lord. Indeed,

\textsuperscript{12} Mohler, p. 280. The sort of accountability Mohler has in mind is illustrated by the recent history of the Southern Baptist seminaries in the United States. Several of these schools have been in difficulty with the accrediting agencies because of the way fundamentalist forces in the Southern Baptist Convention have enforced “orthodoxy” within the schools.
just as the discipline of theology is said to be the self-scrutiny of the church’s preaching and teaching, so the theological school, at best, is the church’s loving critic-in-residence.”¹³ It is time to look at an understanding of the confessional and public character of theological education in keeping with this vision of our accountability.

Confessional and public

For some help with this, I want to turn to the account of the confessional character of theology found in H. Richard Niebuhr’s *The Meaning of Revelation*, written some sixty years ago. Niebuhr’s thought had considerable influence on the re-shaping of Protestant theological education in North America in the latter half of this century, owing in part to his leadership in a major study of theological education in the late 1950’s and in part to his influence, as a teacher and as a thinker, on several generations of theologians.

Niebuhr’s emphasis on the constant necessity of intellectual repentance is a leading mark of his thought. In the preface to *The Meaning of Revelation*, he stated three guiding convictions:

The first is the conviction that self-defense is the most prevalent source of error in all thinking and perhaps especially in theology and ethics. . . . The second idea is that the great source of evil in life is the absolutizing of the relative, which in Christianity takes the form of substituting religion, revelation, church or Christian morality for God. The third conviction . . . is that Christianity is “permanent revolution,” or *metanoia* which does not come to an end in this world, this life, or this time.¹⁴

For Niebuhr, ”all knowledge is conditioned by the standpoint of the knower.”¹⁵ Our standpoint both enables us to know whatever it is that we know, and limits our knowledge. All communication of knowledge is a matter of telling someone else how things appear to us from our point of view. This is no less true in


¹⁵ Niebuhr, p. 5.
Christian faith and theology than in other realms. Christian proclamation and teaching, thus understood, are inevitably confessional, both in that they involves a declaration of what our standpoint and our particular relation to the subject-matter have allowed us to see, and in that they require an owning up to the limitations and the self-interest that have affected our knowing. "[W]e can proceed," Niebuhr says, "only by stating in simple, confessional form what has happened to us in our community, how we came to believe, how we reason about things and what we see from our point of view." To be "confessional" in this sense is quite different from espousing unquestionable truths. It is rather a matter of sharing what one has come to see, and giving an account of how one has come to see it.

This understanding of the necessarily confessional character of proclamation and teaching goes hand in hand with a commitment to their public character. When we learn to "confess" what we see from our point of view, we no longer pretend that our knowledge is infallible or immune from scrutiny. (Niebuhr remarked: "It was said of a German philosopher of religion that he regarded as innate truths of reason all the ideas he had learned before he was five years old; the statement is more or less applicable to all men." Implicitly or explicitly, to confess is to invite correction. We offer our understanding as a contribution to a wider conversation. Our conversation-partners, hearing us out, may come to share our point of view and to see things as we do; or they may offer an alternative account of things from their own point of view which attracts us to such an extent that we experience a conversion. More likely than either of these outcomes is one in which both we and they find our own views in some respects challenged, in some respects confirmed, and in some respects amplified by means of the encounter. "To see ourselves as others see us, or to have others communicate to us what they see when they regard our lives from the outside is to have a moral experience," Niebuhr observed. In any case, what this understanding of the meaning of "confession" rules out is the possibility of exempting one's beliefs from critical discussion. Rather than cutting off critical inquiry, confession invites it. This is the posture of "faith seeking understanding."

What does such a conception of the confessional and the public aspects of

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16 Niebuhr, p. 29.
17 Niebuhr, p. 11.
18 Niebuhr, p. 62.
Christian witness imply for theological education? In order to explore that question we need to take a look at some of the places where theological education goes on.

**Contexts of theological education**

In observing the North American discussion of theological education for several years, David Kelsey noticed something odd about it. The discussion tended to remain at an abstract level. Those of us involved in it normally spoke in generalities about the aims and purposes of theological education; we rarely spoke about theological schools, about actual institutions and programs and what went on in them. Kelsey rightly saw this as a serious limitation. In his own major contribution to the literature, published in 1992, he wrote:

"Education" is a very abstract term. It is used to designate a process. But the educational process always takes place in some particular institutional setting located in a particular socioeconomic context, has a particular ethos of its own that amounts to a "culture" open to ethnographic study, has its own structure of power, is offered by a particular group of faculty members themselves socialized in various ways as academic professionals, and is undergone by a particular student body. The phrase "theological education" misleadingly invites us to consider our topic in abstraction from much or all of that.¹⁹

What happens if, instead of talking about the aims and character of theological education, we talk about the aims and character of the theological school? This is the question Kelsey set out to investigate. Immediately he discovered that it is impossible to talk about “the theological school”; one must instead talk about different sorts of theological schools. Theological schooling is pluralistic. Among the “pluralizing factors,” as he calls them, are the ways different schools are situated in relation to the church and the academy, and the particular churchly and academic traditions to which they are related. Although Kelsey chose the term “school” to represent the institutional embodiment of theological education, he would surely recognize that not all theological education goes on in schools of theology. His observations are applicable, *mutatis mutandis*, to

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theological programs and curricula in other institutional settings, for example, in colleges and universities.

Given the plurality of contexts and specific forms of theological education, does the concept itself have any coherence? The differences between theological teaching in a small church-related seminary and in a university department of religious studies may be so prominent as to obscure any common features, particularly if the inhabitants of each context have reason to exaggerate those differences in their own favor.

When one moves from the level of abstract and polemical declarations of principle to the level of actual practice, a different picture emerges. A few years ago, I participated in a consultation of scholars representing the leading doctoral programs in which members of the theological faculties in North America receive their graduate training. These are also among the leading programs educating faculty members for college and university departments of religious studies. The subject of the consultation was the future shape of graduate education for theological faculties. We considered questions such as these: How should prospective teachers and scholars in theological schools be prepared for the kind of teaching and the kind of scholarship that will be expected of them in that context? What are the problems with our current graduate programs in this regard, and how might these problems be addressed? Are there any significant differences between the kind of education that best prepares one for teaching in a theological context (for example, in a seminary or department of theology) and the kind that best prepares one for teaching in a religious-studies context (for example, a university department or program of religious studies)?

After several meetings in which we discussed (among many other things) how theological studies and religious studies might best be distinguished, we put aside those abstract issues temporarily and got into a discussion about teaching: that is, about what we, as teachers, actually do, and why. We gradually discovered that, regardless of the level of the teaching we were engaged in (undergraduate, graduate-professional, or doctoral) and regardless of whether the context was primarily that of theological education or that of religious studies, our pedagogical aims were remarkably similar. Further

20 The report of the consultation, "The Doctoral Education of Theological Faculties," is available from the Auburn Center for the Study of Theological Education, Auburn Theological Seminary, New York.
reflection on this discussion has led me to identify three aims we seemed to hold in common. I do not recall that we ever considered all three together or wondered how they might relate, although some sorts of relations may appear obvious. These are not conflicting aims. All three might be pursued within the same program or course of study, or even within the same course.

One aim is to bring students to a basic grasp of the content of a religious tradition or traditions. The emphasis may be upon the tradition as a whole, or upon some particular part or aspect of it (for example, its doctrines, rituals, or organization). In any case, the aim is to enable students to gain some sort of thematized understanding of it. Whether the religious tradition is the students’ own or another, the understanding sought here may rightly be described as to some extent personal, holistic, self-involving or existential, rather than merely rational and intellectual.

A second aim is to develop in the students some ability to analyze and to reflect responsibly and critically upon various elements of the religious tradition or traditions they are coming to understand; to foster a capacity for reasoned judgment as to (for example) the intelligibility, consistency, significance, and cogency of the claims, values, and practices embodied in these traditions.

A third aim might be called a transformative one. It is to enable students to incorporate the understanding and the judgments they have reached in their study of the religious tradition(s) into their own life-practice – a process which also extends and deepens their understanding and reflective judgment. Indeed, all three aims and the practices leading to their achievement are closely related and mutually reinforcing.

A Luther specialist overhearing our discussion on that day might have recognized in this emerging articulation of three aims the pattern of oratio, meditatio, and tentatio – of receptivity, reflection, and response – that Martin Luther commended as the basic structure of theological study. While the comparison might come as a shock to some of those scholars in religious studies who wish to maintain a sharp distinction between religious studies and theological studies, the evidence seems clear in practice. A single undergraduate-level introductory course in religion will not, of course, be likely to get as far toward the realization of any of these aims as several years of immersion in the study of a single tradition (and in either case, the approaches

21 D. Martin Luthers Werke, Kritische Gesamtausgabe (Weimar, 1883- ), 50: 658, 1.29-661, 1.8.
taken may hinder rather than further students' progress in actually achieving the abilities aimed at), but the aims themselves appear to be widely shared. Any or all three of them may characterize any given program in the field, e.g., in an undergraduate religious studies or theology department, a graduate department, or the various programs of a theological school. Neat distinctions, then, between the aims of undergraduate and graduate programs, academic and professional programs, seminary and university programs, or religious studies and theology programs, would seem to have great difficulty standing the test of practice, at least at present.

At the same time, those associated with a given program may justifiably give prominence to some version of one or another of these aims and think of it as the aim, or the superordinate aim, of their program, or even of the overall enterprise to which that program belongs when rightly conceived. The ideal embodied in the ATS standards that the "over-arching goal" of a theological school's curriculum should be "the development of theological understanding, that is, aptitude for theological reflection and wisdom pertaining to responsible life in faith," and that other legitimate aims should be seen in relationship to that over-arching goal, represents one such decision about priorities. A proposal about the "over-arching goal" of instruction in religious studies or theology in the context of the liberal arts might look quite different from this one, while still featuring, in some combination, the three basic ingredients of understanding, reflective judgment, and appropriation.

Some academic environments are more and some are less hospitable to the realization of those aims. A “confessionalist” school in Mohler’s sense is probably among the less hospitable. At the other extreme, an academic ethos which is hostile to religion or which is in the grip of an uncritical allegiance to Enlightenment rationalism may be equally inhospitable. However, it should be acknowledged that these are both extreme cases. It is increasingly recognized in the academy that all teaching and learning are “confessional,” in something like Niebuhr’s sense. An acknowledgement that there is no “standpointless” inquiry, and no fully disinterested inquiry, and thus no standpointless or disinterested teaching and learning, has come to pervade higher education across most disciplines. Complementing this – as the example of Barbara McClintock may suggest – has been a growing recognition of the importance of a personal “engagement” with the subject matter, as distinct from an artificial objectification of it. It may turn out in the long run that some key principles in theological education are in fact key principles in any significant field of learning.
My late colleague John Deschner, a student of both H. Richard Niebuhr and Karl Barth who gave much service to the ecumenical movement, was my teaching partner in a team-taught course in systematic theology for many years until his retirement in 1991. While I was developing and presenting in our classes my understanding of Christian theology as "a critical inquiry into the validity of Christian witness," and was constantly stressing the need for a rigorously critical approach, my colleague worked out in response his own definition of theology. The church’s theological task, as he stated it, was "to explicate and thus to test the truth of its own service of God in our contemporary situation." He agreed with me that the basic theological task was criticism; but he insisted that theology should be, as he put it, "constructive in form, though critical in aim."

In recent years I have found myself appreciating the wisdom of his approach more and more. "To explicate, and thus to test": that is, I think, an apt summary of an approach to theology and to theological education that is both genuinely confessional and genuinely public.

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22 These quotations are from my notes on his class lectures in the mid-1980's.