The Aims and Purposes of Theological Education
A Study Guide

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Introduction: An Era of Reappraisal in Theological Education

During the two decades since 1980, the theological schools of North America have pursued a reappraisal of their fundamental aims and purposes that is unprecedented in its scope. This reappraisal of theological education is part of a much wider debate in North American higher education that has critically assessed such disciplines as sociology, history, and English as well as professional education in medicine and law. But, in the case of theological education, debates about aims and purposes were specifically encouraged by the Issues Research Program, a decade-long project of the Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada, the accrediting organization for graduate seminaries in the two nations. Funded by the Lilly Endowment, Inc., the Issues Research Program sought to step back from immediately pressing decisions about curriculum design, the recruitment of students, and institutional finance, in order to explore and clarify the assumptions and governing principles on which those immediate decisions are based.

The published results of the Issues Research Program have been impressive: nearly two dozen books and scores of articles evaluating theological education and making proposals for its reform. The writers have not only expanded our knowledge but also raised important questions for faculty, students, clergy, and all those who are concerned for the highest possible quality of ministerial leadership and theological scholarship. This study guide is an invitation to explore the literature produced by participants in the Issues Research Program and the basic issues they have raised for theological seminaries, divinity schools, and the religious and public constituencies to which these schools are accountable.

The Pressures for Reassessment

What factors have prompted this generation of reappraisal for seminaries and divinity schools? Most students of the subject have pointed to changes in three broad areas: the subject matter studied at theological schools, the participants in theological education, and the North American cultural context for seminary education and ministry.
Subject matter: Graduate theological seminaries began to be established in America in the early decades of the nineteenth century, and, since that time, the customary curriculum of theological education has been shaped around four subjects: Bible, Church History, Systematic Theology, and Practical Theology. The fourth, Practical Theology, collected together the various duties of ordained ministry—preaching, religious education, church administration, worship, and pastoral counseling. As these four fields have developed into specialized academic disciplines, questions have emerged about their relationships to one another and to the adequate preparation of ministers. The Issues Research Program therefore pursued considerable research into the coherence and professional purpose of the theological curriculum.

Participants: A generation of change in American religious life has brought varied new voices into the discussion of theological education. Women and minorities, on faculties and among students, have challenged the priorities of theological study and called for greater diversity. At the same time, the Association of Theological Schools, an institutional creation of mainstream Protestantism in the years following World War I, has substantially diversified its membership during the past thirty years. Member schools of the association representing Roman Catholic and Evangelical Protestant constituencies have introduced new ranges of issues to the discussion. As a consequence, research into basic issues in theological education has often turned on the question of inclusiveness: the range of persons and perspectives represented in theological seminaries and the pedagogical implications of increased diversity among students and teachers.

Cultural context: Changes in the academic programs, faculties, and students, of seminaries have, of course, been a part of wider cultural and educational changes in North American society. Specifically, since 1970, the number of departments of religious studies in colleges and universities has increased quite substantially. Since these departments study religion without particular attention to the preparation of persons for ministry, their development has pressed theological schools to rethink their historic dual loyalty to the church and to institutions of higher education. Meanwhile, cultural attention to North American religious diversity and world religions has raised numerous questions for schools as they seek to reflect theologically on global religious diversity and its meaning for the education of religious leaders.

The Organization of This Study Guide

The Issues Research Program developed as a deliberative conversation that debated, wrote about, and clarified the basic issues over a period of several years. In the course of these deliberations, the program provided competitive research grants for scholars, held a series of regional conferences on significant
books and topics, and funded forums at individual schools, all in order to reconsider the presuppositions of the profession. In 1984 the program sponsored a “Convocation” of theological scholars from the United States and Canada that sought to identify the basic issues facing contemporary theological education. On the basis of this deliberative assembly, the program staged a series of four Issues Research Summer Conferences, at which scholars annually spent five days pursuing such topics as the significance of religious pluralism for theological education or the role of theological studies in the moral and spiritual formation of students.

This study guide reflects the deliberative processes of the Issues Research Program itself. The program identified common problems and questions but assumed that alternative perspectives and priorities would cause a shared issue to be evaluated in substantially different ways. The program presupposed that a serious effort to “put the issues on the table,” while it likely would not lead to a consensus, would have the effect of deepening and extending the participants’ understanding of the common enterprise.

Reflecting this process, the study guide is an invitation to dialogue. The books and essays recommended below make frequent references to one another and often adopt contrasting positions. They do not represent a completed conversation but implicitly welcome further contributions and proposals about the subject matter, participants, and cultural context for theological education in the twenty-first century.

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**Session One: An Expanded Understanding of Theology**


**Identifying the Issue**

The inherited approach to the study of theology seemed, in the early 1980s, to be “fragmenting” under two different but related pressures. The four traditional elements of the theological curriculum had become independent academic disciplines more closely aligned with various humanistic fields in the university than with one another. Ministry, meanwhile, had come to be described functionally in terms of a set of duties and skills, and a double problem thus arose. First, how does one explain the unity of the four separate disciplines that collectively comprise theological studies? Second, how do these four academic disciplines actually prepare persons for the practice of ministry? Vanderbilt University theologian Edward Farley made the most important initial statement of the problem and proposal for its solution in his 1983 book *Theologia*, and this
study guide therefore begins with it. According to Farley, retrieving a unified purpose for theological study required a renewed understanding of the nature of theological inquiry itself as a practical wisdom directed toward God. Theology was not specialized knowledge restricted to experts but rather a deepened and extended reflection on understanding God, which is the concern of Christian communities as a whole. Subsequent debate has both challenged and elaborated Farley’s analysis, but it has generally shared his concern to reconceive the unity or coherence of theological education through a reassessment of the nature of theological thinking.

Questions for the Session

What is Farley’s definition of theology, and does it alter or expand your own definition? How do you think theology in the form that Farley proposes relate to the life of the church or to other parts of American higher education? What forms does “fragmentation” take in the theological school? In what ways, if any, would theologia enhance the preparation of ministers?

Further Reading: The Fragility of Knowledge: Theological Education in the Church and the University, by Edward Farley. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988. This collection of essays extends the general argument of Theologia, by proposing a structure for the study of theology and by relating this proposal to Christian education in the churches and the academic study of religion in universities.

Session Two: Theological Education in Relation to the Church


Identifying the Issue

Nearly fifty years ago, in a classic study of theological education entitled The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry (New York: Harper, 1956), the noted theologian H. Richard Niebuhr remarked that “without a definition of Church it is impossible to define adequately the work of the ministry for which the school is to prepare its students” (17). In Niebuhr’s opinion, the operative definition of the church established the relative importance of courses in scripture, church history, theology, worship, or preaching. It established the relation of the church to the wider culture and thus had direct implications for the place of such disciplines as philosophy, psychology, and sociology in the theological school as well as teaching about other religions of the world. From this perspective, theological education pivots on debating, clarifying, and cultivating an understanding of the
church, or, in the words of Joseph Hough and John B. Cobb, the issue of “who we are as a Christian people.” Their book *Christian Identity and Theological Education* argues that “the greatest current danger of the Church in North America is that it conforms to expectations established for it by a bourgeois society that stems from the Enlightenment and that it thereby will lose its Christian identity” (93). To combat that danger, Hough and Cobb propose to engage students in practical theological reflection that focuses on the nature of the church and the global context in which the church discerns the activity of God.

**Questions for the Session**

What do Hough and Cobb think are the central problems of contemporary theological education, and how does their assessment agree with and differ from Farley’s? How does their understanding of the church’s history relate, on the one hand, to the contemporary practice of Christianity and, on the other hand, to the theological curriculum they propose? Select one of their “guiding images for the church of the future” and develop its educational implications for a hypothetical theological school.

**Further Reading:** For reflections on the proposal by Hough and Cobb, see the published proceedings of a conference held at the University of Chicago, *The Education of the Practical Theologian: Responses to Joseph Hough and John Cobb’s Christian Identity and Theological Education*, ed. Don S. Browning, David Polk, and Ian S. Evison (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989).

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**Session Three: A Case Study: The Relation of Theological Education to the Local Congregation**


**Identifying the Issue**

The term church has multiple connotations. In *Christian Identity and Theological Education*, Joseph Hough and John Cobb made the church universal and especially the global ecumenical church the organizing definition for theological education. The late James Hopewell, a historian of religion at Emory University, proposed giving priority to a quite different connotation of church: the local congregation. Arguing that the local congregation is the most pervasive and directly influential form of Christian life, Hopewell suggested that the theological curriculum could be fruitfully reorganized by beginning with observation of local
congregational life, uncovering from a particular congregation the histories, ethical and spiritual commitments, and images of transcendence that guided its life from generation to generation and which informed the its ministry. Hopewell’s idea proved not only suggestive but also controversial, and in *Beyond Clericalism* Joseph Hough and Barbara Wheeler assembled a range of responses to the congregational focus for theological education.

**Questions for the Session**

What are the principal advantages of a congregational paradigm for theological education? The principal hazards? Does the proposal by Hopewell complement or contradict the proposal by Hough and Cobb? Does the church as an educational paradigm, in any connotation of the term church, stimulate or inhibit the relation of theological schools to other institutions of higher education? How might the church as an educational paradigm affect the study of other religions within a theological school?

**Further Reading:** *To Understand God Truly: What’s Theological about a Theological School*, by David H. Kelsey. Louisville: Westminster / John Knox, 1992. In this important work, Kelsey, a systematic theologian at Yale Divinity School, argues that a theological school’s “overarching end is to understand God more truly.” Since congregations represent different expressions of this same overarching end, Kelsey proposes to reorder theological study by focusing it “through the lens of questions about congregations.”

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**Session Four: Theological Education as the Formation of Character**

**Reading:** *Theological Education as the Formation of Character*. Supplement I to *Theological Education* 24 (1988). This special, topical issue of *Theological Education* was based on the 1987 Issues Research Summer Conference and featured papers by theologians George Lindbeck and David Tracy, with formal responses from Douglas John Hall, Jane I. Smith, and Robert P. Meye.

**Identifying the Issue**

What role should theological education appropriately play in the formation of character, in the sense of the sum of mental and moral qualities belonging to an individual? Considered historically, it is somewhat surprising that this issue has emerged so starkly. Throughout most of Western cultural history the formation of students was the presumed goal of all education. Indeed, from the sixteenth
century forward, when Catholics and Protestants founded schools for the education of clergy, they generally called them “seminaries,” literally, plots of ground in which seedlings were cultivated for later transplanting. But this inherited view of the theological school as the seed-bed of the church’s leadership presupposes a school embedded within a coherent community and acting, through texts and teachers, to hand on the community’s inherited values and models of public leadership. In the contemporary scene, that communal context of education is widely perceived to have become unstable, and one principal result is uncertainty and disagreement about the inherited notion that theological education necessarily involves the formation of character.

In their appraisal of the current religious situation, scholars have suggested that traditional assumptions about the communal context of personal character formation have been upset by at least three factors: the plurality of communities and values experienced in contemporary society, the individualistic current in American religious life, and the formative power of unobserved or unacknowledged social norms. Hence, in reconsidering the question of whether character formation should be a programmatic component and goal of theological education, George Lindbeck and David Tracy also faced some very basic questions about the nature of the self in community, about the place of the Christian community in the larger society, and about the form of theological reflection.

Questions for the Session

Is character formation the comprehensive aim of theological education? What differences, if any, are implied in the two phrases “character formation” and “spiritual formation?” Can and should formation be incorporated into the academic curriculum of the theological school, or is it better addressed as a separate component of ministerial preparation? What are the ramifications of uniting or separating academic study and formation? What are the practical implications for formation of the increasing diversity of theological students with respect to age, ethnicity, prior religious education, and employment experience?

Further Reading: *Between Athens and Berlin: The Theological Education Debate*, by David H. Kelsey. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993. Professor Kelsey argues that contemporary issues facing theological education arise from commitment to “two contrasting and finally irreconcilable types or models of what education at its best ought to be” (5). One model aims toward moral and spiritual formation while the other stresses disciplined critical research and professional preparation for ministry.
Session Five: Theological Education as the Formation of Intellectual Capacities


Identifying the Issue

Charles Wood, a theologian at Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University, has proposed that “theological education is the cultivation of theological judgment” (93).  As such, it aims to develop the theological capacities of students for “vision and discernment.”  Vision seeks to grasp things in their wholeness or relatedness.  Discernment discriminates among particular matters and sifts the distinctive features of situations.  Together, these capacities enable a student to pursue critical inquiry into the history and practice of Christian witness, by asking how a particular instance of Christian witness is appropriate both to an interpretation of the Christian tradition as a whole and to the specific setting in which this witness is enacted.  Through this proposal Wood narrows the gaps in theological education between formation and critical academic inquiry, between scholarly study and ministerial judgment.

Questions for the Session

Wood organizes theological studies into three disciplines, historical theology, philosophical theology, and practical theology.  What are the distinctive questions of each discipline, and how does each discipline contribute to the capacities of theological judgment—vision and discernment?  Looking back to Edward Farley’s *Theologia*, what would you say are the most important differences and similarities between its conception of theological understanding and the conception set forth by Charles Wood?


Session Six:  A Case Study:  The Place of Practical Theology in the Theological Curriculum

Identifying the Issue

A longstanding commonplace regarding theological education has been that biblical studies, church history, and theology are the “theory” that a student learns to “apply” to the actual practice of the church. In *Christian Identity and Theological Education*, Hough and Cobb called this dichotomy between theory and practice “pernicious,” and many have shared their evaluation. In various ways, all of the readings thus far have challenged the theory-practice dichotomy, and one important consequence of such challenges has been a renewal of the field of practical theology. This reconsideration has focused less on practical ministerial preparation, homiletics, for example, than on the rethinking of theology itself as an enterprise of practical reflection, reflection that brings specific historical interpretations of “the truth about life” to bear on the complexities of contemporary life. In *Formation and Reflection*, Lewis Mudge and James Poling draw together essays by eight leading scholars around the proposition that practical theology makes “the process of formation of Christian community and personhood in the world thematic for critical reflection.”

Questions for the Session

What should be the relation between theology as an academic discipline and living, worshiping, serving communities of faith? In attempting to answer such questions, Mudge and Poling emphasize that the contexts and ways in which Christian communities and persons are formed are extraordinarily diverse. They call attention to the fact that the crucial issues facing the church are quite different in different cultures and different parts of the world. In what ways do the interpretations of practical theology in this book point toward an academic discipline that would equip students to reflect on formation amidst the diversity of world Christianity? How does the general reinterpretation of practical theology shape preparation in specific arts of ministry such as preaching or pastoral care? In what ways does the renewal of practical theology orient practical reflection toward public life as well as toward the life of the church? Are these orientations in tension or are they mutually reinforcing?

Further Reading: *A Fundamental Practical Theology: Descriptive and Strategic Proposals*, by Don S. Browning. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991. Don Browning argues that the concrete practices of religious communities are a lively repository of practical wisdom and moral thinking, and he interprets practical theology as the strategy for bringing this communal wisdom into critical engagement with personal, social, and religious issues. Refer back to Hough and Cobb on the church leader as “practical Christian thinker” (*Christian Identity and Theological Education*, chapter 4).
Session Seven: The Relation of Theological Study to Its Wider Cultural Context

Reading: Theological Education in a Religiously Diverse World. Supplement to Theological Education 23 (1987).

Identifying the Issue

The theological scholars participating in the Issues Research Program regularly called attention to the theme of diversity as a major factor influencing virtually every aspect of contemporary theological education. This diversity takes several different forms. Most immediately apparent is the increasing diversity of theological students, with respect to age, gender, denominational affiliation, educational and economic background, and ethnicity. Moreover, the American society from which these students come and into which they will return as religious leaders is increasingly attentive to its own religious pluralism, less firmly rooted in particular denominational cultures, and intrigued by religious practices and ideas drawn from a variety of traditions. The diversity of students, the diversity of church constituencies, the place of Christianity within the diversity of world religious traditions, all these are recognized as exerting pressure on the traditional objectives of theological education: the formation of character, the transmission of tradition, and training in the arts of professional ministry. These different aspects of diversity are considered in this collection of essays, which were prepared for a four-day Issues Research Summer Conference held at Estes Park, Colorado, in 1986.

Questions for the Session

In being responsive to the claims of diverse publics, can the theological school maintain its coherence for perhaps fashion a new coherence? On what basis would a school not simply embrace diversity but do so in a suitable or orderly way? What do the diverse experiences and ideas that students bring to the classroom contribute to the educational experience? Do models of the theological school as a community of dialogue, discourse, or conversation adequately address the educational responsibilities of the theological school? Amidst the diverse claims placed on theological schools by the churches and other social institutions, how should the school set priorities and cultivate a distinctive sense of its own vocation and identity? In addition to the diversity of individuals who comprise a theological school, should there also be a diversity among theological schools themselves and what are the implications of such diversity for the enterprise of theological education as a whole? Can and should theological dialogue extend beyond churches to engage the diverse, non-religious perspectives on society and social issues?
Further Reading: Apologia: Contextualization, Globalization, and Mission in Theological Education, by Max L. Stackhouse. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988. Theological ethicist Max Stackhouse draws theological scholars from five continents into a conversation about theological education that pursues three broad questions: “What does it mean to engage in theological education when it appears to be the case that every statement we make and every response to it is contextually shaped? What does it mean to engage in theological education at a time when the world is shrinking and new voices are entering the dialogue? What is the mission of the church, and especially of its academic wing, the seminary, in a ‘post-modern’ global context”? (7)

Session Eight: A Case Study: Feminist Perspectives on the Relation Theological Education to Church and Society


Identifying the Issue

Particularly through the insistence of feminist and minority scholars, a series of questions have been raised about the tacit moral structures of scholarship and the moral accountability of scholars to broader questions of social justice and cultural renewal. One of several important books to explore these questions is Saving Work by theologian Rebecca Chopp, the dean of Yale Divinity School. Her book is a contextual analysis of the “actual cultural practices of theological education” and the “socially shared forms of behavior . . . that provide meaning and orientation to the world, and that guide action” (15). By focusing on theological education as concrete practice and process, Chopp proposes to place theological reflection fully within history, critically examining not only the nature of the interests that shape memory and retrieval of the past but also the horizons of expectation that orient action toward one possible future rather than another. Since the practices, narratives, and ideas of community in a school are not static but emerge from the complex interaction of the institution with students and society, the dramatic rise in the enrolment of women in the seminaries is transforming the schools’ Christian and educational practice.

Questions for the Session

Professor Chopp argues that feminist practices of theological education include a central focus on the church and the development of an interpretation of the nature of the church. How does her feminist approach to the church shape her
model of theological education? How does her model of the church challenge or complement the paradigms proposed by Hough, Cobb, and Hopewell? What implications does her emphasis on personal and corporate narrative have for the traditional disciplines of theological study, bible, church history, systematic theology, and practical theology? How does Chopp address the concern for the unity or coherence of theological education that figured so prominently in Farley’s Theologia?

Further Reading: God’s Fierce Whimsy: Christian Feminism and Theological Education, by the Mudflower Collective (Katie G. Cannon et al.). New York: Pilgrim, 1985. Seven feminist theologians argue that good theological education should be oriented toward issues of justice and build its pedagogy on collaborative dialogue among persons of “diverse life experiences.”

Session Nine: The Mission of the Theological Faculty


Identifying the Issue

The first eight sessions of this study guide have presented a series of proposals for the reform of theological education. Each of these has especially significant ramifications for the theological faculty. Faculty members typically have the longest and most intensive connection to a theological school of any of the school’s constituencies. They shape the curriculum of the school, guide its daily practices, and have large influence over its comprehensive purposes. Changes in theological education thus exert direct pressure on the mission of the theological faculty. For a telling example, it is useful to recall that, prior to the founding of American theological schools, the most common form of clergy education was apprenticeship, in which the student lived and worked with the practicing minister of a local congregation. The shift from the ministerial mentor, a theological generalist, to the seminary professor, a theological specialist in, say, New Testament entailed a dramatic shift in the theological teacher’s professional preparation, daily responsibilities, and relationship to the church. Whether or not the contemporary transformation of theological education approaches the scope of the shift from apprenticeship to seminaries, the same types of questions are being raised about the contemporary mission of the theological faculty.
Questions for the Session

The inherited roles of the faculty member as scholar, teacher, and religious mentor have been related to one another in a variety of ways, sometimes generating real tensions among the three. How should the various roles of the theological professor—as suggested by the terms scholar, teacher, mentor—be related to one another so as to advance the excellence of a theological faculty?

What are the criteria of excellence in a theological faculty? What is the contribution of faculty diversity to faculty excellence? Can the case be made that religious, cultural, gender, and racial diversity contributes fundamentally to or is a necessary condition of faculty excellence? Are there legitimate constraints placed on this diversity by the different contexts and aims of particular theological schools?

What are the requisite features of theological scholarship? Do these features differ substantially from one theological discipline to another? Do these features set theological scholarship off in any ways from research in religious studies? How does our understanding of the nature of theological research influence our criteria for faculty development and for the appraisal of faculty for promotion and tenure?

Further Reading:  
A Preface to Theology, by W. Clark Gilpin. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996. A history of the academic study of theology in America, from the eighteenth century to the present, which explores the responsibilities of theological scholars to a threefold public in the church, higher education, and civil society.