

Responsible Theological Education

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“...that Thy Word, as becometh it, may not be bound, but have free course and...”

That line from the collect (“for the church”) is a motto for responsible theological education. Of course, theological education is a churchly task. Were there no community of Christ-believers, what we today call theological education would not exist either. Oh, historians might study the church’s ancient documents and its history for purposes of better understanding the human dream. But surely they would not busy themselves initially to let that Word have free course. Of course it might just happen, given what that Word, whenever encountered via whatever vehicle, is always capable of doing “where and when it pleases God.”

The Word, and the free course that becomes it, is the nucleus of the business of theological education. But, as the collect reminds us, that agenda is instrumental to yet another purpose: “to be preached to the joy and edifying of Christ’s holy people”—which agenda in turn is also instrumental: “that in steadfast faith we may serve Thee and in the confession of Thy name abide unto the end through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

It is simply “becoming” to the Word to have free course. Curricularly as well. This freedom, of course, is the strongest indictment of the theological education now taking over at major LC-MS institutions. The “binding” resolutions (consciences, contracts, clauses, or whatever) allegedly imposed to protect the Word are crass contradictions to the very Word that is the agenda for theological education. That same freedom, of course, is also the grounds that guarantee the failure of such theological education. Imagine trying to bind molten metal in a paper cup. Poof! Or trying to “work” molten metal with wooden chopsticks. Disaster! For the chopsticks!

Doubtless the freedom of that freely coursing Word is a risky vertigo-inducing cascade—sparks, heat, energy, glow, and all. Our harshest critics probably have the least notion of how daring that risk actually is. It carries us away and leads us to risk telling, not just our leaders, but God Himself that we fear no criticism, not even His. Such cosmic freedom for sinners is what that freely-coursing Word is all about. It cannot be bound. Neither can we when we are riding on it. True, people can be barricaded from it, and the free word can be aped by surrogates and supplanted by them, and it is not easy to detect the genuine article when the counterfeit has been cunningly molded. Is that not what is happening in the “education” coming from 500, 801, and elsewhere these days like never before?

When the Word gets its free course to people, their “joy and edification” is the result; and when Christ’s holy people are rendered this service, they themselves are outfitted for “steadfast faith,” “serving Thee,” “confessing His name,” an “abiding to the end.” The end-product of responsible theological education is the response it creates in the final client: consumer jollification and edification. This is not the same as consumer satisfaction. All efforts to get grass-root laity support for a movement must bear this in mind. If you do wish to measure consumer satisfaction, the Word itself gives the standard for what satisfactory satisfaction is. Suppose we conducted our own “Saxon visitation” in the LC-MS. The question for the people to answer in order to test how responsible our theological education has been is this: How are you doing on the items in the last half of the collect? Has our churchly care delivered to you the free-coursing Word so that you can cope in joy and edification on the turfs of steadfast faith, serving Christ, confessing the name, and abiding to the end?

We are tempted to say that “our” theological education does all that, while “theirs” does not. Until it has been tested, all we can say is that the collect text is our explicit agenda with the Gospel’s own freedom at the heart of the matter. Judging from the horrendous history of the controlling board at 801 and from Robert Preus’ inaugural speech at Springfield, an alternate, yea antithetical, agenda is elsewhere the clear order of the day. And because it countermands what the free-coursing Word channels out for itself, it will fail. Thus Christians at work on the “free course” agenda should encourage one another to have no fear—not really—of the rampant take-over now underway by agents of the other agenda. Tears, yes; but fears, no. The counsel of Gamaliel is our insight. In seeking to silence, to bind God’s Word, they are not finally our opponents. Rather, they are “opposing God”—perhaps no more wittingly than the Sanhedrin did it—which inevitably leads to grim consequences for their program and its programmers.

How does this “free course” platform for theological education qualify as “responsible”? Simply stated, “responsible” is a value judgment term. Responsible action is “right” action. Irresponsible is “wrong.” It is not finally the action, but the actor who is being evaluated by the term. The person is the bearer of the qualitative evaluation. The approval or the disapproval is placed on the person’s back and the consequences to be suffered or enjoyed.

By what yardstick of evaluation does any churchly action qualify as responsible, right, kosher, approved? Answer: by the yardstick of the very Word of God under discussion above. At root that freely-coursing gospel Word is evaluative. Fact is that’s how it creates freedom. It liberates folks out from under a whole spate of deadly negative evaluations and sets them loose in a new creation of such new evaluations as: beloved child in whom I am well-pleased, forgiven, righteous, holy. Can such a yardstick of personal evaluation be used for such a corporate phenomenon as churchly theological education? If for no other reason than that our critics say “no,” we ought to see whether it might not be “yes.”

It means setting up structures that are compatible with the perpetual aim of the Gospel, as Melancthon says in Augsburg Confession 28. If molten metal is what you’ve

got to work with, then the instruments must be compatible; otherwise you're not being responsible, not making the proper response. Where our molten metal metaphor limps is that the paper-cup and chopsticks alternative suggests more a mental defect than a moral one in the practitioner. The folly of trying to bind the Word would not seem so bad if one had never encountered it before. But for people who have been praying the collect all their lives to do so is morally culpable. Not merely mistaken, they are wrong. God's own Word judges their venture culpable. Like their ancestors, the Galatian judaizer-Christians, they are not merely "foolish," but under the apostolic (God's) anathema.

A proposal for theological education is responsible if it is a proper response (corresponds) to the perpetual aim of the Word of the Gospel. Does anyone doubt any longer that the conflict in the LC-MS is over this yardstick? How can there be consensus on responsible theological education, or responsible anything else, as long as the yardstick for measurement and the very power that elicits our response, the Word and its free course, is so conflicted?

It is at the root meaning of the term response/responsibility that I am already at stage two in a process. I have already been acted upon. For example, like Adam in Genesis 3, God bids me hold still for a moment while he checks me out: "Adam, where are you?" Or, again, a claim is made upon me by every encounter with some fellow human being who demands my attention, my time, perhaps my tears, money, help, even my life. So the responder does not start on an empty stage. Something has already been plopped in front of him and now he's compelled to respond; and the response is proper/improper, responsible/irresponsible, if he did/did not do what he ought to have done. He ought to have yardsticked his response by the yardstick that God himself is finally using for cosmic evaluation (a la Romans 2.16) "on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus."

"It has been given to you..." is the apostolic formula for looking at what has been plopped in front of us. Even when we have an active role in shaping the history that now confronts us, "it has been given to us" for our responsible, faith-full response. Exile has been given to us. Elim's existence and continuing care have been given to us. The historical-critical method has been given to us, by the same God no doubt who gave St. Paul rabbinic methods and the Lutheran reformers humanistic methods of Biblical interpretation. The tradition of academic freedom has been given to us. The Reformation heritage has been given to us. Missouri's conflicting history has been given to us. For most of the readers of this journal the task of theological education has been given to us. What responses are responsible according to the yardstick of the freely-coursing Gospel? For the remainder of this piece I offer some ideas for being responsible towards a few of the givens of this paragraph.

The Gift of Historical Critical Methods

Every Elimate had his own way for responsible use of this gift. Here's a segment of mine. Rabbinic methods in the New Testament era and humanistic methods in the late middle Ages were used both by those who read the Scriptures rightly and those who read

them wrongly. The methods were no guarantee one way or the other. If Rabbinic Torah-centrism and humanism's pelagianism were false doctrine (and they were, and are), defect in the "-ism" did not prevent faithful use of the exegetical methods that arose with the "-isms." Finally, it was the Word itself, wouldn't we say, which used them to carve additional footage in its "free course to be preached to the joy and edifying of Christ's holy people." There is nothing more or less "faithless" about historical-critical methods than there was about first and sixteenth "secular" tools of interpretation.

One thing our sixteenth century fathers did when using the methods of their day was to insist on asking their own questions, and not the pelagian questions, of the texts. They addressed the texts not with pre-conceived answers, but with consciously perceived questions: What is the Word of divine criticism here and how does it flow? What is the Word of divine promise here and just how promising is it? What little I really know of critical historical methods does not indicate that such techniques—for separating traditions, chronicling development of a text's own history, clarifying the historically conditioned aspect of a Biblical writer, sifting the mythic and legendary components loose in ancient texts—would inhibit final asking of the "free course" questions. How did folks then get critically evaluated via this text? How did folks then get any message of joy, if at all, coursing through to them via this text? Is there anything which *ipso facto* rules such questions out of court when current scholarly methods are used on Biblical texts? Is not that the "responsible" question to be addressed to this issue in theological education? And hasn't the unbound Word already shown that it has been using this channel for the further charting of its own course?

The Gift of Academic Freedom

The tradition of academic freedom has one of its roots in the Reformation. Simply stated, it says: No one tells you ahead of time what you have "got to" believe; the data themselves tell you what you "get to" believe. Isn't that an interesting twist? That is true as well of the data at the center of the collect for the church. Our danger is not that we will believe and teach things too expansive, too liberal, too good to be true, too radical, and thus we need restrictions to hold us to a more modest pantry of credibles and teachables. No, it is rather that apart from the Word's own liberation we are chronically too chintzy, too miserly about the truth. That applies to both the depth of the truth of the bad news and the even more profound depth of the truth of the good news. Our defect is that we stand incredulous (you wouldn't believe!) before all the heady stuff which we get to believe from the free course of the Word.

When we make a confessional commitment this notion of academic freedom is not being short-circuited. Instead it is being practiced. We are not "binding" ourselves to all the things you "gotta" believe, but willfully tying ourselves to that cascading flow, that One Source of all that we "get to" believe for our own and others' "joy and edification." And we admit that we don't yet know what all that is. Is that responsible? The collect's Gospel yardstick says so. We trust that God concurs.

The Gift of the Community

At a seminary where the confessional commitment is held to be a “get to” rather than a “got to” there is no bondage in being bound to a confession. So in life together the model of conciliarism (Acts 15 is the first recorded instance of it in the church) shapes community life insofar as it is consciously organized at all. Problems are not pleasant, but they ought not be let go to waste. There is the expectation that everyone can still be edified, that consensus is a realizable goal, though it may take hours and hours of talk and worship. Seminex’s own internal achievement on this score is very modest. But the vision is consciously perceived. It is now documentarily framed into our charter and by-laws. We are now trying to keep it going in practice.

But that is not just Seminex’s bag. That’s the gift of the entire Elim movement. Since One is our master, we are all of us equal sub-ordinates. This does not deny that some are older and others younger, some wiser, some gifted this way, others gifted that way. At Seminex just one year ago we were all led by the student body’s own initiative, their taking the risky first step of gutsy Gospel freedom. It was given to the rest of us to respond to what the free course of the Word had moved them to do.

Is such leveling equality of persons responsible? Since One is our master this risky consequence is what we “get to” believe. Would that our current church leadership did not think that such equal sub-ordination were too good to be true. The gospel yardstick says it is indeed true. We trust that God concurs.

The Gift of The Tradition

In commemoration of St. Stephen’s Day this Christmas, I read his story in Acts. His speech there is the Christian model for reading one’s own community’s tradition. Stephen measures the tradition of Israel by the yardstick and sees that there were two traditions in the tradition. One was a tradition of the people’s just plain cussed unfaithfulness back to and including the patriarchs. The other was the tradition of Gods continuing to send agents of His freedom-bestowing Word to these very same people even as they persecuted and slew them for their trouble.

The LC-MS tradition is similarly a mixed weaving of two traditions. One is some just plain gosh-awful legalism, ruthlessness, unlove, and unfaith (e.g., what the fathers did to Scharlemann in the early sixties, to the 44 in the forties, to Brux a generation before that, and more), which qualifies New Orleans and what has followed in its train to be genuinely “traditional” Missouri. And there is the other tradition of evangelism, pastoral care, Biblical-Gospel fidelity fostered by agents whom God has given to us in the very face of the other tradition. Faithfulness to the tradition is to read the history of the fathers as Stephen did, normed by the Gospel, and, of course, not to be surprised at the reaction that follows.

We know that the Reformers read their tradition in precisely this way. If you will, you might say they did a “gospel-reduction” process on it. Better still, this is the way the Word of God Himself read the tradition when He traversed Palestine and engaged the

official keepers of the tradition. So when we seek to do likewise, we call that responsible. We trust that He concurs.

Finally Seminex, as Gift and Promise

Is Seminex all that promising for responsible theological education? I have left most of the bases untouched about what actually happens in a week's worth of work. Not only the bases and how we run them, but the outfield as well have hardly been mentioned. This essay has been mostly about the pitcher's mound, one could say, and how that center of the diamond looks to me. It doesn't say anything of how good the game is that we are actually playing.

Seminex's promise for responsible theological education is not apparent in its institutional givens: longevity, fiscal fixity, public acceptance of itself and its graduates. But then measured by the yardstick its very temporariness might well be its promise. Nor is our community of any "gnostically" superior quality as we practice the faith. We still have one Old Adam/Eve in each one of us. Chapel attendance is not automatically easier for us than for other readers of this publication.

The promise of Seminex lies in what has been given to us: to live very publicly by what we confess; to enjoy and be edified by the unbounding which Exile bestowed upon us; to do something with the Gospel-reduction Platzregen which God showered upon this bunch at this time (Caemmerer, Piepkorn, Bertram, Krentz, Tietjen, etc.; their names are not legion, yet God has made one out of them!); to have a share in Elim, the movement, and to be paycheck-receiving beneficiaries out of it; to have students who first came and keep coming.

Perhaps it could finally be said that what has been given to us is a model of church reform that is "free course" rather than programmatic. We have no five-year plan, although we wistfully long for one out loud. But then how could we? We are subordinates, not the Head. He, not we, has his hand on the conveyer-trough of the free-flow. Our agenda is to be faith-full with what gets plopped in front of us. We don't say it very often, though we should, that the central historical question at Anaheim is not what will "they" do, but what is "He" going to do. Until He does, we've not yet got Anaheim to respond to.

Does that mean being lackadaisical? No, it means doing today's pre-Anaheim agenda with a view toward tomorrow, of course, but not with the chopsticks notion that we've "got to" channel the free-flowing course of events to make sure that such and such takes place before July 1, or the end of this year, or of this century. It (He) will channel us—to our joy and edification, and surprise! Is that a responsible view of the reform movement and its theological education, action, reflection? I think so. But if it is not, then the yardstick presented in the collect needs to correct it, and such correction is invited. Which very thing, "the Holy Spirit, and the wisdom that cometh down from above" promises to do "for the church," viz., US.

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