CONSIDERING CONTEXT IN MINISTRY EDUCATION

By Howard Andersen, PhD

Introduction

In biblical exegesis, and other studies of a literary nature, context gives text its meaning. An ancient document may be poorly preserved in places, but scholars may determine the meaning of a missing word by a careful consideration of the context. This paper argues that context should be deterministic in theological education and especially so in ministry education.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the need for a serious reconsideration of context in theological education. When instruction was pushed out of the classroom and off campuses in the Spring of 2020, most seminaries in North America already were delivering significant amounts of education online. For several decades, there has been widespread debate as to how online education compares with classroom education. Most seminaries have settled into a moderately comfortable stance that steers to a hybrid model for at least some of their offerings. This is a rational position to take while awaiting answers from empirical research. The availability of different delivery models has raised a host of ancillary questions, including the purpose of theological education, capital costs for regular or satellite campuses, student finance, adequate library resourcing, capacity of seminary students to travel or relocate, the provision of on-site or field education, appropriate technology, and faculty capacity and training.

With the pandemic limiting options in some instances, seminaries made efforts to be sure that the online experience would replicate, as closely as possible, the live classroom experience. The central question then became: how well does the fully online experience replicate the classroom experience? This is a question of context. Many seminaries assumed that classroom education is the ideal by which other models and delivery systems should be measured. They did not extend the question to: what is the ideal venue for theological education?

This paper offers definitions of theological education and ministry education and analyzes Western culture as the context for Western theological education to date. It considers the importance of context in the long history of education from ancient times to "industrialized education" in the nineteenth century. It then broadly defines the options for context and describes and evaluates context for theological and ministry education.

Preliminary Considerations/Definitions

The following simplified definitions of education, research, context,

theological education, and ministry education will enhance the clarity of this discussion.

Education

Education, in an era of mass and industrialized education, means the process by which students come to know what a teacher knows. In addition, the teacher that inspires in the students an interest in and capacity for continuous learning.

Research

Research is the process by which thesis students and faculty members discover, create, articulate, and disseminate new knowledge.

Context

Context is the environment in which and by which learning takes place. It is helpful to distinguish the learning environment from the teaching environment. In graduate level education, and especially in graduate level education with a professional interest and commitment, learning is prompted and guided by the classroom teaching experience. But much learning also takes place wherever the students find themselves, in coffee shops with their laptops, in their vehicles listening to recordings, in the neighborhood on walks, in the gym working out, watching videos in the basement, or discussing ideas with friends on digital media.

Context also teaches. Small children in a playground with no language or background culture in common quickly find ways to relate and play. Guided by the environment, they negotiate relationships with people and things without mutually understood words. In libraries, hospitals, churches, parties, or funeral homes, adults behave according to context. Context provides opportunities to test ideas, practices, and ways of being in multiple settings. It provides a hook onto which new learning can attach itself. Context heightens awareness that one can choose to isolate from or integrate into often messy worlds.

Theological Education

Though they are essentially connected, it is helpful to distinguish between theological education and ministry education. If theological education is anything that has a serious theological interest, ministry education is a clear fit. Christian ministry without Christian theology is an obvious absurdity, though it has been tried. On the other hand, theology without ministry education begs the question of Christian missionality. This paper understands ministry education to be a subset of theological education.

Ministry Education

Defining the nature of this subset, and making good on its implications and requirements, is perhaps the most serious question being asked of seminaries by their church constituencies today. Not all seminaries have church constituencies; some did have but have no more. Some with church constituencies fail to reckon with and deliver what their churches need. Church constituencies that are being failed by their seminaries are looking elsewhere for church personnel, creating their own church-based educational efforts, or worse, hiring untrained or under-trained leadership. Ministry education must supply churches with graduates who have acquired sufficient knowledge, skills, and character to be effective practitioners and leaders in congregational or other ministry settings.

Western Culture as the Formative Context for Centuries of Theological Education

A Classical Greek Heritage

Greek intellectual culture was the shaping host for Christian theologians from the patristic period on. It was a generous culture in that it leant Christian theology most of its structural ideas, and more importantly, shaped the kinds of questions that theologians felt they needed to address. The categories of systematic theology are largely modelled on Greek ontological categories reaching back to Plato and Aristotle. Western theology became a thematic enterprise, with no obvious connection to the narrative, prophetic or wisdom character of the Old Testament or much of the New Testament. Instead, Western theology used the biblical literature as data for constructing meaning around thematic concerns raised by culture and the Western Church. The themes were largely about "being-ness," and the "what" question, not about "how questions." The Greek categories of Christian thought persisted through the Reformation and the Enlightenment. They reflected the Church's self-understanding. This critical self-understanding was necessary as the Church encountered external influences like Gnosticism and internal issues like the dual nature of Christ or the proper form of worship. Systematic theology enabled the Church to fulfil the first commandment by discerning what it means to love God.

Had Christians meeting together remained a Palestinian or Middle Eastern or Jewish splinter movement, its theological development would not have been as massive, or as Greek in its cultural underpinnings and epistemology. According to John Goldingay, "The development of theology was not a development required by the nature of the Scriptures, but an accidental result of the journey of the gospel into Europe"[1]

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[1] Goldingay, 17.

During the first four centuries, the Church experienced phenomenal growth. By the end of the period, the entire Roman world from Spain to Persia and India, and from Great Britain to North Africa was essentially Christian. This growth was less dependent on the theologians of the period than on the active ministry engagement of ordinary Christians serving people in need, for example, during the Roman plagues. It may be said that this was the way the second great commandment, to love one's neighbor, was fulfilled in the early centuries.[2]

Christian Hegemony for More than a Thousand Years – Greek Heritage Empowered by the State

The success and stability of the Christian Church from the middle of the fourth century, when Constantine made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire, through the Reformation and into the eighteenth-century Enlightenment is owed to the linkage of political power with the interests of the Church. Church and state were indistinguishable and hegemonic; few alternatives to Christianity were available. During these thirteen centuries, Christianity's ubiquitousness was due not to the faithful ministry work of ordinary Christians as in the first four centuries, but to the identification of church and state and the co-option of theology in the service of the state. The Reformation kept church and state connected. Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli, and John Calvin are known as Magisterial Reformers because their movements depended on the support of the magistrates.

The great cathedrals and the art of Europe testify to the success of the Christian hegemony. As universities were founded across Europe, the Christian hegemony established theology as the "queen of the disciplines." The architecture of the universities, for example, of Cambridge (founded in 1209 CE) with its multitude of upward pointing spires, reflects belief in a transcendent dimension to all of life, including higher education. The names of some of the earliest colleges of Cambridge - Christ's, Corpus Christi, Emmanuel, Jesus, St. Johns, and Trinity - kept the theological dimension of higher education alive in the minds of students and professors.

The Enlightenment

Not until the so-called Enlightenment of the eighteenth century was the traditional nexus between church and state seriously challenged. From Galileo, and led by such figures as Rene Descartes, Isaac Newton, and Francis Bacon, modern science began to base its conclusions on observation and experimentation. The empirical approach to truth did not challenge Christianity, but it was problematic for the ontological and rationalistic foundations of Western theology. As a precondition

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[2] See publications by Rodney Stark, Distinguished Professor of the Social Sciences at Baylor University, co-director of Baylor's Institute for Studies of Religion, and founding editor of the *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion.*

to empirical study, the Enlightenment removed any consideration of transcendence. The enlightenment removal of the possibility of transcendence represented in the physical sciences was not an empirical necessity. Nothing in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament contradicts either rationality or empirical inquiry. Theology could be based on empirical methods based on the narratives of the ancient documents.

After the Enlightenment, Christianity continued to occupy a privileged place in Western society including in the New World of North America. Christianity's history of privilege and state power meant that the Church did not feel the need to be self-reflective or self-critical. Not until the late nineteenth century and the twentieth century in North America did the challenge of the Enlightenment assert itself in church existence and life. When the challenge occurred, the foundation of traditional Western theology was gone. Part of the structure still stood, but for how long?

Enormous effort has been expended by theologians and other scholars describing and lamenting what has come to be called secularism[3] There is compelling evidence that secularism has resulted in enormous losses not only in theology, but also in humanness, ethics, and the arts. Christianity has been returned to the cultural context of the first four centuries, a period when it grew enormously across the West. It is time for a serious reconfiguration of Christian theology away from the philosophical hegemony of the past 1400 years. The Church may yet learn to follow Jesus's teaching to render unto Caesar what is his, and, on the other hand, to God what is his.

Making Meaning in a Postmodern World

Neither rationality nor empirical inquiry are antithetical to Christianity. When they are absolutized or made individualistic and autonomous, they contradict their own interests and bleed into other academic disciplines. Rationality is a means, not an end. It must be treated only as a means of getting from one truth to another. The truth of any conclusion is dependent on the truth of the starting assumption. The most profound question facing human beings is always the starting assumption. The Hebrew Bible insists that there has to be a valid starting point and the beginning of wisdom, is "the fear of the Lord." In other words, there is no place for a completely autonomous reason. Similarly, both new and old portions of the Christian Scriptures deal constantly and unavoidably with empirical, observational truth, evidenced especially in the pervasive narrative literature of both testaments.

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[3] Charles Taylor is Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at McGill University.

Four Responses to the Current Situation

Four responses to the enlightenment condition of empirical inquiry are recommended. First, the Church and the seminary can review and revise their epistemology. Both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament are empirical and observational in their quest for truth. Its empirical nature is beginning to be recognized in Christian theology and the dependance on Greek philosophical categories of thought is loosening. The biblical theology movement that began in the nineteenth century[4] is a step in the right direction. Its reshaping of theology has been enormously enhanced by Walter Brueggemann, John Goldingay, and Bruce Waltke[5] in the past 30 years.

Second, the Church can adopt empirical methods to measure its successes and failures. While church and state were synonymous in the West, the success of the Church was easily measured by the success of the Western world, exemplified in its colonial activities. In the last half of the nineteenth century and in the twentieth century, the decline of the Church as a force in Western society is easily measurable and well-documented in precipitously declining attendance numbers at church services.[6] The Church can easily adopt its own new empirical measures of success. It must be willing, along with its seminaries, to face up to empirical facts and do the necessary self-examination to adjust its self-understandings and define its mission in a post-modern world.

Third, the Church and the world around it can accept the fundamental nature of all interpretation. All interpretation, all making of meaning, whether of ancient artifacts or currently produced data, is inevitably existential as Gadamer and others have pointed out.[7] Truth and certainty, to the extent they are achievable, are not in themselves facts but human interpretations of facts. As interpretations of facts, they all are subject to constant revision.

Fourth, the Western Church and the seminary can learn from non-Western Christianity. Having a different epistemology and having lived, most recently, through enormous cultural upheavals, Christianity in Eastern Europe, Russia and the Ukraine have lessons for the West, The West also can learn from South America, Africa, many parts of Asia, including China.

One reason church constituencies fail to thrive in the contemporary world is the nature of seminary education. There is a serious intellectual problem which

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[4] Karl Barth was the great "interrupter" of biblical studies. He recovered epistemological space and freedom for Walter Eichrodt, Gerhard von Rad, Albrecht Alt, and Martin Noth to begin the redevelopment of Old Testament theology in the twentieth century.

[5] Brueggemann, Goldinger, and Waltke.

[6] Joel Thiessen, Professor of Sociology at Ambrose University, notes that "[a]pproximately one-quarter of Canadian adults and one-third of Canadian teens do not identify with a religion. Many of these individuals were raised in Christian homes; however, increasingly religious nones are raised by religious nones."

[7] Gadamer.

seminaries have failed to solve. New thinking is needed, perhaps radical thinking. Western culture has changed profoundly. Its foundations have been shaken.[8] Changes in seminary culture have exacerbated, rather than ameliorated, the disconnect between seminaries and churches. A new better foundation needs to be sought. This paper argues that much, though not all, of the current disconnect can be attributed to the importance of context for ministry education.

Seminaries are supposed to be, the theological and ministry training arm of churches. However, they are not adequately addressing the intellectual challenge of secularization or its existential ministry consequences.

Context in the Long History of Western Education

The modern paradigm for theological education developed largely in the nineteenth century (11) along with other forms of mass higher education.[9] The paradigm adopted well-known measures of academic rigor and achieved excellence in theological understanding and theological research. However, by the mid twentieth century, it had become clear that the paradigm was inadequate for the preparation of highly functioning pastors and other ministry practitioners[10]

In hunter-gatherer societies, children and adults learned both in, and from their contexts. In the Indigenous communities of Western Canada, for example, which berries to eat and which to avoid and which animals to hunt and which not, was learned through experiment and interaction with the real world, the context. Parents, as family mentors, passed on to their children traditional knowledge, knowledge gained from patient interaction with their lived physical context. This was field education literally, and perhaps at its very finest.

In settled agricultural societies, intensive cultivation and animal husbandry were required once new ground was not continually being inhabited. Settled societies accelerated learning so children could make quicker contributions to the well-being of their families through systematized labour. What worked in the field was conceptualized, abstracted, compressed, and systematized to meet the demands of a clustered society. This systematization of learning accentuated the cognitive and distinguished it from *praxis* and the affective domain.

While most education in ancient times took place in the family, in many cultures the elites were given special education. Elite education tended to be highly individualized, for example, the education of Moses in Pharaoh's court, Samuel in the temple, and Aristotle as the hired tutor to Alexander the Great. It might be

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[8] Paul Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations*, Wift and Stock (2012)

[9] In *The Soul of the American University*, George Marsden observes that many early universities established denominational theological seminaries and divinity schools on their campuses and welcomed the professionalization of theology.

[10] O'Gormann, Talvacchia, and Smith.

delivered in small groups, for example, the tutelage of Daniel and his three friends in Babylon. Plato's academy was a semi-formal gathering of wealthy and leisurely upper-class people, who paid membership fees, and who were particularly interested in investigating philosophical questions. The Lyceum of Aristotle seems to have offered regular morning lectures, cooperative research among students, and a significant library. Plato's academy and Aristotle's lyceum were expansive, largely outdoor places, conceptually perhaps the beginnings of the university campus.

Cloistered places like cathedral schools and monasteries largely carried the educational burden in the Middle Ages. They catered to the training of priests and other religious functionaries necessary to the Roman Catholic Church. The cloistering signified that learning was a special thing for special people and separate from the outside world. Some priests also taught children.

In the early universities of Europe, teaching was sometimes referred to as tutoring. A professor would give a public lecture and students would meet with tutors individually or in small groups to wrestle with philosophical, theological, and other questions. Other than education of children in the context of family, education was for the elite, somewhat formal, and largely theoretical and philosophical in content. In addition, some students were being prepared for administrative roles. Formal learning was conducted away from the fields, the regular spaces of life for the general population.

Following the Reformation, forms of education for the larger population began to develop. In the nineteenth century in Europe education at the elementary level was thought to be a major contributor to appropriate social and political behavior. In the late nineteenth century, most Western countries in Europe, and North America established laws requiring children to go to school. Workers needed to be trained for the Industrial Revolution. Also, more wealth brought movements to enhance the general well-being of the general population, and more specifically women and children. Education often took place in readily available church buildings as well as in schoolhouses.

In higher education, courses of lectures in a particular subject area became the product and credits became the currency by which exchanges of value among educational institutions were facilitated. Courses were offered on campuses with academic buildings designed for the purpose. Gradually over the centuries, Western education institutionalized, systematized, and was recognized as a public good.

Identifying/Characterizing Contextual Options

Humans live, work and learn in four distinguishable contexts.[11] The world of

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[11] The author is indebted to the analysis of Dr. Jordan Peterson, Canadian psychologist and intellectual. See *Maps of Meaning: The Architecture of Belief.*

things, of physical reality, ranges from cells, bacteria and DNA to humans and large mammals, and from atomic particles to galaxies and more. Science, engineering, and technology are the disciplines that typically deal with physical reality, and hopefully harness it for the good of mankind. The world of ideas is the reflective and cognitive world, exemplified mainly by the disciplines of philosophy, theology, and mathematics. Seminaries and other institutions of higher education excel at idea disciplines. The world of events and actions is the world of effect and effectiveness, where things happen, and things are made to happen. It is the world of the professions, the world where leadership and power are exercised. Business, sport, and entertainment also represent the world of events and action. The world of being is the affective world, the world of emotion, feeling, and character. Psychology is the field which deals most directly with this world. Humans have feelings before they have anything else. People in churches and in the neighborhoods of churches have feelings. Ministry practitioners cannot ignore the world of being.[12]

Humans are integrated creatures with a working balance between these worlds. Those who are unable to balance may have to undergo therapy or be institutionalized. Nevertheless, the range of acceptable weightings between worlds illustrates how broadly humans can function and be understood. Nothing but the facts in the lab, to quiet contemplation in the library, to the frenetic activity of day-to-day ministry, to over-anxiety in ministry – these are all within the generally accepted range of human being. Every human life and every human career uniquely balances the world of things, the world of ideas, the world of events and action, and the world of affect.

Theological education clearly fits into the world of ideas. Christian ministry education fits into the world of events and action. At the same time, Christian ministry education is facilitated and guided by the other worlds. It needs the world of ideas. How will pastors know what to aim for in their lives and ministries if they lack a powerful understanding of the nature and activity of God (theology), fallen human nature (biblical anthropology), redemption (soteriology), and what a church should look like and how it should function (ecclesiology)? Without a knowledge of the overall biblical narrative, how will ministry students develop a cohesive Christian world view? If they don't study history, how will ministry students avoid the failures and errors of the past? If it doesn't go beyond the world of events and action, Christian life and ministry will remain undefined, and intolerably pragmatic. Education in the biblical, theological, and historical disciplines is essential to ministry education.

While a broad academic ministry education is necessary, empirical evidence over the last 70 years indicates that it is not sufficient. Charles R. Feilding argues that

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[12] Many high-profile evangelists and pastors have blotted the good name of Christianity by giving insufficient attention to their feelings.

"the gap between the working ministry as seen in the seminary and practiced in the parish is alarmingly wide…Theological education does not prepare for ministry."[13] It has proven to be inadequate in skill development and mastery, and in character formation. Skill development and character formation are essential to church leadership, and they cannot be effectively or fully developed in the classroom or on a campus.

In the broad world of theological education, the MA, MTh, ThD, and PhD degree programs belong to the world of ideas. These programs normally are not designed to prepare for pastoral ministry in churches. On the other hand, the MDiv and DMin degree programs are designed to prepare ministry professionals. These programs belong to the world of events and action. An MDiv graduate who only knows the world of ideas and not the world of action and events is not ready for ministry.

Field as Context

Beginning in the early to mid twentieth century, the notion of field education became a well-established rubric for concern about the need for praxis training in theological education. In the radically shifting culture of the post-World War II era, churches and denominations were failing to thrive. Churches expressed serious dissatisfaction with the ministry competency of MDiv graduates and pressured seminaries to produce MDiv graduates who could function successfully in church contexts.[14] Seminaries accepted field education but not as an academic discipline. Field educators struggled for recognition and acceptance as full and necessary participants in a seminary education.[15]

At first, field education was an *ad hoc* venture without agreed or formal guidelines and structures. It consisted of various on-site and apprenticeship experiences and was considered something of a "bolt on" to the main, regular, in-class education. Over decades, field education became more definable and systematized. In 1946, the Association of Theological Field Educators (ATFE) was formed within the Association of Theological Schools (ATS). It developed into a robust organization offering resources, encouragement and definition to field education.[16] But regular faculty and deans still saw field education and field educators as necessary but not central to the curriculum. They continued to measure every aspect of education by the rubric of academic rigour.

Reporting on a comprehensive, far reaching, and often disturbing study in 2001, Robert T. O'Gorman, Kathleen Talvacchia, and W. Michael Smith described

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[13] Charles R. Feilding, *Education for Ministry.* (Dayton: AATS, 1966) pp 29,31.
[14] "Theological education does not prepare for ministry." O'Gorman, Talvacchia, and Smith, 2.
[15] See O'Gorman, Talvacchia, and Smith, "Field Education in Conversation," 5 ff. and "The Identity of the Field Educator," 22 ff.
[16] See atfe.org.

the deep anxiety and uncertainty with which field educators in ATS schools regard themselves, their place in the academy, and the nature of their function[17] Their research found that there is an identity crisis among field educators. Field educators are not sure of their place and recognition among faculty colleagues in seminaries. Their levels of formal education are generally lower than academic faculty. They react to the "imperialism of theory over practice," but are not effectual in creating fundamental change. They are ambivalence about thinking of field education as a career because most field educators are not eligible for the recognition and rewards (such as sabbaticals) of academia. In addition, there is a lack of clarity about proper field education methods and systems. The researchers described the field education role using academic terms, including teaching, research, and knowledge base.

This paper argues that the problem of field education is much deeper than the self-identified issues of the 2001 study. The notion of field education is unnecessarily feudal in concept. It implies a central source of power, sophistication and privilege, and that there are ordinary field workers who do comparatively menial but necessary tasks at the periphery, under its direction.

Field education concedes, grudgingly and wrongly, that a seminary's purpose is defined largely by the seminary itself, and not by the churches it serves. Seminaries that are disconnected from the interests of church constituencies may deliver theological education satisfactorily, on par with theological departments of universities. They cannot do ministry education satisfactorily without continuing, quality engagement with churches. These churches are their market, the industry and employer group being served, and the entities most likely to appoint their graduates.

Currently, field education is locked into an educational paradigm that places supreme value on cognition and on research. This represents a seriously flawed conception of professional education for pastoral ministry. Day to day, year to year pastoral ministry is not principally conceptual and cognitive. On a day-to-day level, the professor's life belongs to the world of ideas. The pastor's life belongs to the world of events. It is principally active, pro-active, reactive and interactive. It is energetic and dynamic. It is existential, performative, and phenomenological. It is pragmatic and functional. It is drama - how to carry yourself, how to sit, stand, move, and speak. Teaching is too narrow a construal for the preparation of ministry students. Ministry education needs to reflect the Hebrew wisdom, "knowing what to do" more than the Greek notion, "knowing what to think."

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[17] Though field education has evolved in the last two decades, a far reaching and fundamental rethink of ministry education as distinguished from field education is still necessary. Field educators are not likely to feel any consolation or new possibilities from the revised ATS Standards of Education (2020). See standards 3.9 and 3.10 in particular, at https://www.ats.edu/.

Theological learning practices are drawn appropriately from the disciplines of the humanities. Ministry learning practices should be drawn from science and the social sciences. Because ministry practice is planned, reflective, progressive, and iterative experimentation, students should learn to measure ministry success in social scientific terms, by empirical means. Theology learned well in the classroom represents the imaginative future against which we must judge the present. Reflection on practice for the same end may also be learned. How can ministry students learn ministry skills that will help them get closer to the imagined ideal ecclesiology learned in the classroom?

Campus and Classroom as Context

The Physical Context

Ironically, the Latin word *campus*, means "camp" or "field." Currently, however, campus education and field education are not synonymous. Christian college and seminary campuses generally are a picture of well-being, with their manicured lawns, trimmed shrubbery, pleasant, artful, and stately buildings, and happy students. The ethos is not overly ostentatious but suggests privilege. The nitty-gritty of other kinds of life is not evident. Graduations are, not inappropriately, displays of grand formality, pomp, and circumstance. A campus is a special place; people go there for education, truth, understanding, principle, and vision. It is a place for elevated intellectual pursuit and scholarly activity. Libraries are row-on-row depositories of scholarly output over long periods of history, and places of solitude for professors and students. The modern campus evolved from the collection of denominational colleges of the ancient universities of Europe. Until the mid twentieth century, campuses inevitably were elitist.

The classroom has a long history as well. Beginning as an occasional lecture hall, it assumed its modern form about 150 years ago. The impetus for educating "the masses" arose from the Industrial Revolution in the United Kingdom and North America. Institutions of higher learning needed places where students could be taught in sufficient numbers in an efficient way. The solution was to place the professor behind a podium and the students in well-organized rows facing the professor. This arrangement served at all levels, from primary to secondary to universities, colleges and seminaries. Limited by this structure, innovation could consist of arranging moveable tables and chairs into a seminar configuration.

The Campus as Social Context

The social aspects of the classroom continue to be determined by the physical arrangements. The social structure is hierarchical. Expertise, knowledge and wisdom reside in the professor, and this is imparted to listening students through the

medium of lectures, usually enhanced by the blackboard, the whiteboard, and by slides, by questions and answers, and by discussions. The ethos of the classroom is orderly, removed from chaos, and highly predictable. The classroom is a safe, comfortable, and pleasant place to learn. There are no threats, except the threat of new ideas.

The learning that takes place best in the classroom is the conceptual, the aspirational, the idealized, the principled, the abstracted and the visionary along with the factual. For example, in history classes, inquisitions, plagues, and wars, though presented as horrific, are inevitably abstractions, usually presented from an aspirational point of view – how the world could be better.

Classroom education is subject to the restraints of the academic system of the institution. Subjects for consideration are divided into discipline specific courses and the courses are ranked as introductory, mid or advanced level. There normally is a semester or quarter system of a set number of weeks, with a set number of hours of lectures for each course each week. Exam periods, holidays, and mid-term breaks are determined across the institution and by the institution.

Students compete with the syllabus and with other students to succeed in each course within the semester timeframe prescribed. Assessment is done on a prescribed timeframe, and the students' final mark represents their achievements absolutely, in comparison with other students, and in relation to the semester time available. Class averages and the distribution of marks across students within a course are considered measures of the success of the professors and also of the validity of their grading rubrics.

This system of education mirrors the production processes spawned by the Industrial Revolution over the last 150 years. Raw materials of varying qualities are taken in at the beginning of the production line and subjected to the bashing, bending, pounding, and assembling. The produce arrives at the end of the process in whatever quality the process was able to produce, given the raw materials, and the set timeframe of the production line.[18]

This system of education has successfully produced the rich Western world with its impressive economic, scientific, and technological achievements. It has successfully educated hundreds of millions of students, up to and including the baccalaureate level. Hundreds of students from Asia and elsewhere sacrifice and work hard to get to the West and obtain a degree from a Western institution.

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[18] For decades, in the Western world, consumer items produced by this method were taken up and eagerly purchased from a product list rivalling that of St. John's extraordinary vision of Babylon (Rev 18:11ff). The Harley Davidson motorcycle company produced powerful throaty bikes that slowly dripped oil on the showroom floor from the day of delivery, almost as a badge of honor and grittiness.

However, in applied fields like medicine, business, and ministry, an entirely classroom-based educational system has proved insufficient.

Church as Context

In many disciplines, rationality has prevailed as the way to arrive at solutions, as well as gain order and a measure of certainty. In ministry education, this is no longer the ruling paradigm. If theological studies are much like the study of humanities, pastoral ministry learns toward study of the social sciences. Ministry deals with an empirical world. It is understood and improved by experience, experimentation, testing, assessing, and iterating.

The ruling paradigm in ministry education is that it should occur not on a campus, but on a scene of practice. Campuses are created and operated for the benefit of students. Churches are created for benefit as a worshipping community, and for the benefit of the neighborhood. Making the commitment to learn ministry as a working pastor within the context of a local church will be disorienting for students. Unlike campuses, churches are eerily quiet and comparatively empty most of the week. The busy times are Sundays and evenings. At first, the student experience will feel decisively unlike the seminary experience.

If human life is lived on the boundary between order and chaos,[19] an assertion compatible with the biblical narrative, the step from student life on the campus to pastoral life in a church clearly is a step away from order. Every church has disorder because it engages the world of daily experience. The order of the campus is unique. Bringing godly order to the chaos of postmodern culture may be the mission of the church in the twenty-first century.

A Shift in Epistemology

Moving ministry education from the campus and classroom to a church means that the program and the MDiv student must make several onerous shifts. The most fundamental thing human beings need to know is what kind of a person they should be. The most fundamental thing seminary students need to know is what is true. The most fundamental thing ministry practitioners need to know is what works.

Not all answers are found in books, documents, and lectures. Sheer intellectual capacity is not a guarantee of success. Abstract thinking may not prove adequate to the task of working with congregants from all walks of life and all they experience every week. The shift from classroom to church is principally a shift from knowledge to skills and from knowing to doing.

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[19] As Peterson argues, *passim*.

MDiv graduates will need to look for truth and praxis in the reality of their ministry contexts. They will need to adopt a scientific or at least a social scientific approach to understanding actions to take, programs to initiate, and how to manage them, steps to conflict resolution, and pastoral care to bring to personal and family situations. Paying attention to what works, and what doesn't, and when will be important. Learning directly from the ministry context is critically important and represents an epistemological shift from the classroom and courses.

A Shift in Power Dynamics

In the classroom, power, the ability to act, resides almost exclusively in the professor. The student in the classroom is in the process of gaining authority, that is, the right to act ministerially and professionally. They do not have power to act yet, to change the lives of others. Once in a church context, graduates not only receive the ability to act, they are expected and required to act. The pastor as employee is accountable to make a difference not just in congregants' thinking, but in their behavior. New graduates must deliver, at the risk of their ongoing employment.

A Shift in Personal Identity

This is perhaps the most profound of the shifts between classroom and church. It gets at the identity of new pastors - how they see themselves and how they stand, sit, move, and talk. New MDiv pastors are now servants of their particular public, and are continuously judged by how they present themselves personally and professionally. Only sustained and guided experience in, and attachment to, the reality of church life can produce the ministry competence required by churches in MDiv graduates.

Conclusion

Context is a critical and determinative factor in literary study and in the entire world of education. The classical Greek world was formative for Western higher education and accounts for much of its success. For almost a millennium and a half, classical education was empowered by the integration of church and state. The Enlightenment severely challenged the assumptions of church and state; therefore, churches and seminaries of the twenty-first century are free to discover their own ground and reason for being. This is an onerous task.

Classical Christian theology was insufficient for the Church. With its empirical thinking, the Enlightenment provided the Church with a new and appropriate means by which to measure its success. It may be hoped that the existential, experimental,

narratival nature of Christianity's founding documents will prove a better guide to authentic Christian theology and living than the West's classical Greek heritage.[20]

Seminary communities in the United States and Canada are considering profound and challenging questions. They are recognizing that they are not effective enough. Some institutions are weathering the storm of declining enrolments and relevance through the liquidation of assets built up over decades. Some go out of existence. Others search agonizingly for ways forward. Some Canadian and American seminaries have developed a new competency-based educational model that is showing great promise.[21]

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[20] Brueggemann and Goldinger, *passim.*

[21] Notably, Grace Theological Seminary, Northwest Seminary, and Sioux Falls Seminary. At Northwest Baptist Seminary, reverse-engineering of the traditional model of MDiv education began 10 years ago. In close cooperation with its denomination of churches, Northwest has defined necessary and desired knowledge, skill, and character outcomes for the MDiv graduate. The entire MDiv operational design is intended to produce these competencies. Mastery is assessed on an ongoing basis through a carefully designed mentoring process. Northwest is continuing to develop competency-based programming while conducting empirical research to demonstrate its effectiveness for ministry education.

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