

SEMINARY FACULTY REFLECTIONS ON COMPETENCY BASED THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION: CONFESSIONS OF A (FORMER) AGNOSTIC

By Michael Morelli, PhD

When Northwest Seminary and College hired me five years ago to oversee their fledgling competency-based theological education (CBTE) undergraduate programs, I was neither skeptical nor supportive. I was agnostic. Limited job prospects for a recent PhD graduate like me meant I was thrilled to find any kind of work in academia. So, having no knowledge and opinion about CBTE, I was willing to give it a try if it meant getting a foot in the academia door.

There are numerous ways to define CB(T)E. A succinct definition is offered by the Competency-Based Education Network: “Competency-based education [CBE] is an approach to learning that emphasizes what people can do, not the amount of time they spend in a classroom.”¹ Further, over a decade ago, Northwest partnered with its denomination (Fellowship Pacific) to add a *T* (theology) to CBE theory and practice. By adding theology to CBE, the seminary and the denomination integrate(d) competency-based theory and practice with theological education for ministry leaders. What resulted after much testing and refining, which continues to this day, is the following.

Northwest applies many of the principles of training for a trade to preparing people for ministry leadership. It includes classroom time and instruction with credentialed subject matters experts in all essential theological disciplines (biblical studies, church history, systematic and historical theology, practical theology and ethics, intercultural theology, leadership, etc.). It also emphasizes hands-on learning in the ministry field, which is supported by longitudinal supervision, instruction, and direct assessment from a team of mentors.²

After settling into my role as Assistant Dean of Undergraduate Studies, joining faculty as Assistant Professor of Theology, Culture & Ethics, and having my role at Northwest evolve in ways too numerous to list, my status shifted from CBTE agnostic to CBTE believer. While it is difficult to recall exactly when I was warmed to this approach to theological education, I can recall three essential epiphanies that were a spark:

- CBTE is discipleship with a different name,

¹ From the home page of <https://www.c-ben.org/>, accessed Friday, August 9, 2024.

² See <https://nbseminary.ca/academics/cbte/> for further details on how Northwest defines and practices CBTE.

- CBTE and discipleship require attentive proximity, assessment, and longitudinal interaction,
- While attentive proximity, assessment, and longitudinal interaction are *possible* in normative theories, practices, models for higher theological education, they are *limited* by the unidimensional space of the typical in-person and/or virtual classroom, standard teacher to student ratios, and consequently the lack of means to determine whether a student can show in the field what they are telling their teacher(s) in typical classroom environments and assignments.

These epiphanies explain why I am not a CBTE practitioner who thinks in either/or terms about theological education. The way Northwest practices CBTE certainly differs from what most people imagine when they hear the words *seminary* and *bible college*, but these differences do not imply that Northwest’s way of discipling students is the only way to disciple students. Rather, it implies I believe the way Northwest does CBTE is an excellent way to disciple students, whether they happen to be in a classroom, ministry field, or any other social space where the opportunity to disciple someone presents itself.

To comprehensively define *discipleship* would require an article unto itself, even a book, and that is not the aim of this essay. This essay develops a theological rationale for CBTE as discipleship because such a work does not exist in published and peer-reviewed form. I am an academic who takes academic work seriously. It is a unique, rewarding, and demanding vocation. This essay hopes to provide academics with a compelling theological case for CBTE, especially those who doubt its academic and theological merits.

There is research that offers rationales for CBTE. If people would like a fulsome view of what CBTE is and how to do it, they should engage them in tandem with this essay.³ However, the primary goal of this essay is to speak directly to faculties, administrators, staff, and students who view CBTE as nothing more than the latest in a series of novel enrollment strategies and consequently view it with suspicion.

To provide a working definition of *discipleship* that informs the work of CBTE, discipleship is “equip[ping] the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ,”

³ See, for example, Ruth McGillivray, “Competency-Based Theological Education: Origins of the *Immerse* MDIV at Northwest Baptist Seminary,” *Northwest Institute for Ministry Education Research*, <https://nimer.ca/competency-based-theological-education-origins-of-the-immersediv-at-northwest-baptist-seminary/>. Also, Kenton C. Anderson and Gregory J. Henson, *Theological Education: Principles and Practices of a Competency-Based Approach* (Grand Rapids: Kernel, 2024).

(Ephesians 4:12-14). In other words, the end of discipleship is preparing people for ministry work that matures the Body of Christ (the church); a mature Body of Christ is one that cultivates unity through knowledge of and belief in Jesus Christ; and a church unified by ever-growing knowledge of and belief in Jesus Christ will resemble him more-and-more as time passes. But if that is the end of discipleship, what are the means to move disciples and churches in that direction, and how can a theological institution offer churches means to support disciples and churches in their movement towards this end?

There are many ways to answer this question. The following amounts to a short answer, stated in longer form earlier in this introduction, and elaborated at length through this essay. CBTE generates significant time, space, and opportunities for attentive proximity, assessment, and longitudinal interaction, all of which are integral means for churches who want to move towards the end of discipleship, and all of which tend to be limited in typical classroom settings and with standard student to teacher ratios. To substantiate this claim, this essay will use a variety of intra- and extra-biblical resources.

The first section engages with prominent themes in the work of theological ethicist Stanley Hauerwas, particularly his critical analysis of problems that plague North American seminaries and the solutions he offers to the problems. It focuses on his well-known conception of the Christian life and theology as bricklaying and stonecutting—or, crafts that integrate theory and practice and cannot be learned without *in situ* contexts and a diverse group of attentive and proximate people (instructors, mentors, coaches, experts, craftspeople, journey people, etc.) who help an apprentice cultivate the knowledge, skill, and character required for their unique trade through longitudinal direct assessment and in-the-field and in-the-classroom interaction. It also points to scripture, specifically key parts of the New Testament gospel accounts, to show how the foregoing resembles closely the discipleship practices of Jesus Christ. The second section provides an example from my CBTE experiences to concretize my theoretical discussion of Hauerwas' work and discipleship as it is depicted in the gospels. Then, the conclusion engages scholarship by bell hooks to further concretize the theological account of CBTE as discipleship developed throughout this way. Ultimately, this essay proposes that conceiving and practicing CBTE as discipleship is a promising way for theological institutions and educators to become more reasonably confident that they can deliver on the promises they make in the curriculum they develop, the syllabi they write, and to the people and churches they exist to serve, teach, and disciple.

Seminaries are in Trouble

Published in 2007, Stanley Hauerwas's *The State of the University* summarizes Hauerwas' basic understanding of theological education, and in the process, foretells what North American seminaries are in for if they do not take seriously what he has to say. At the end of this text, he includes as an appendix the transcript for a speech he gave at the centennial of Bethany Theological Seminary. There, he suggests,

I do not necessarily believe that the truth will make us free, but I am convinced we will be less than faithful to God if we try to go on as if we know what we are doing in seminaries today. Seminaries are allegedly for training people for the ministry of the church of Jesus Christ. However, given the ambiguous character of the modern ministry, it is unclear what it means to train people not only to thrive but also to flourish in the ministry. Nowhere is this more readily apparent than in the alleged gulf that is said to exist between the more academic courses in seminaries and those courses called practical or ministerial. The former are too often decided by those in ministry as of little use for preparing people for the actual challenges of the ministry. Thus the slogan is heard far too often: "They (meaning the congregation) do not care what you know. They want to know what you care."⁴

Not only do Hauerwas's comments summarize well what has put North American theological education in the precarious state it is in, they also gesture towards some of the possible ways that precarity can be addressed. Theological schools will benefit from earnest consideration of the degree to which they are or are not preparing people for ministry, who are knowledgeable, skilled, *and* caring. Otherwise, trouble will be on the horizon.

On the other hand, despite correctly suggesting "the problem is not just the lack of clarity about what the ministry should be about in our day, or the kind of students that come to seminaries, but the problem is also the disciplinary divisions that constitute the modern seminary,"⁵ some of Hauerwas's proposed solutions here are shaped by either/or dichotomies common to theological institutions which work against, not for, the kinds of integrated theological education that produces ministry leaders and academics who are knowledgeable, skilled, *and* caring. When Hauerwas contends "university-related seminaries have their own pathologies, but at least being in the university means the faculties in those institutions can give reasons why theology should remain an intellectually demanding enterprise,"⁶ he misses the point

⁴ Stanley Hauerwas, *The State of the University* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 206.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 207-208.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 207.

that theology *and* care for people are not only intellectually demanding, but also spiritually, emotionally, and physically demanding.

Putting it differently, the way forward for theological schools is not to choose between knowledge, *or* skill, *or* care; the way forward is a combination of knowledge, skill, *and* care through integrative approaches to theological education conceived and practiced as discipleship. This is not to suggest Hauerwas does not advocate for such approaches elsewhere. In fact, he does, in his well-known treatment of theology as a craft like bricklaying and stonecutting. With this analogy, Hauerwas says in more poetic terms what is being articulated more prosaically here. The dis-integrating tendencies of higher theological education is a serious problem for schools and churches, and the re-integration of theological education is a promising way to address that problem.

For this reason, the next section examines Hauerwas' treatment of theology as a craft to develop an account of how conceiving and practicing CBTE as discipleship can help with the desperately needed re-integration of theological education for ministry leaders.

Theology is a Craft

Theology and ministry come alive when learned and taught like a trade. As Hauerwas puts it in *Hannah's Child*, "I think of theology as a craft requiring years of training. Like stonecutters and bricklayers, theologians must come to terms with the material upon which they work. In particular, they must learn to respect the simple complexity of the language of faith, so that they might reflect the radical character of orthodoxy."⁷ First, it is worth noting in passing that such approaches to theology, philosophy, and education are rooted in the virtue ethics tradition that extends as far back as Thomas Aquinas and Aristotle.⁸ Second, these reflections generate a hermeneutic for understanding what Jesus is up to when he disciples the twelve followers he had chosen to carry on his ministry. Jesus is teaching and forming his disciples in-the-field, on the way, as they are immersed in unpredictable and exciting journeys. There are moments in this journey when Jesus employs direct instruction (Matthew 5-7), but he so often integrates this instruction with skill-based training (Mark 9:14-29), and moments punctuated by moving interpersonal encouragement and challenge (John 13:1-7).

With these gospel trends in view, Hauerwas writes in essays like "Vision, Stories, and Character,"

⁷ Stanley Hauerwas, *Hannah's Child* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 22-23.

⁸ Alasdair MacIntyre, a Thomist (virtue philosopher and ethicist) who strongly influences Hauerwas and liberal arts educators alike, also comes to mind here. See, for example, his book *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, which I think ought to be a staple in the diet of any liberal arts educator.

Our moral lives are not simply made up of the addition of our separate responses to particular situations. Rather, we exhibit an orientation that gives our life a theme through which the variety of what we do and do not do can be scored. To be agents at all requires a directionality that involves the development of character and virtue. Our character is the result of our sustained attention to the world that gives a coherence to our intentionality. Such attention is formed and given content by stories through which we have learned to form the story of our lives. To be moral persons is to allow stories to be told through us so that our manifold activities gain a coherence that allows us to claim them for our own. Stories and character are interdependent in the sense that the moral life, if it is to be coherent, always has beginning and endings.⁹

If the orientation and theme of the Christian story and life is a God who comes to his people in the flesh and calls them family (Matthew 12:46-50), friends (John 15:15), and disciples so that they can disciple others (Matthew 28:16-20) and call them both God's and their family and friends, then any educational theory and practice that attempts to make this the orientation, theme, and story of theological education ought to be taken seriously—including CBTE. Now, CBTE is not the only way that this can be accomplished. Classroom-based approaches, with or without field-education components, with or without formal mentorship models added in, can also accomplish this. CBTE uniquely helps schools and churches do this work because it adopts an integrated, trade-education approach when educating ministry leaders whose vocations are, functionally speaking, akin to trades. That is, for the record, intended to be an ennobling and emboldening designation, not a classist and denigrating one. I am proud to say that I practice a trade like theology and that I apprentice other people in this wonderful craft.

The unique offering of CBTE to trade- and discipleship-focused theological education, as the introduction proposes, amounts to the attentive proximity, assessment, and longitudinal interaction it offers that normative classroom-based approaches often do not offer. As a professor in a physical and/or online classroom, instructing ten to fifteen students on average, directly connecting with and/or coaching approximately one to three of those students, and assessing and providing feedback on their assignments via an online learning management system over the span of twelve or eight weeks depending on the course format, I can only really observe and assess what students *tell* me about their lives and work in their respective ministry contexts; rarely, if ever, do students get a chance to really *show*

⁹ Stanley Hauerwas, "Vision, Stories, and Character," *The Hauerwas Reader* (London: Duke University Press, 2001), 168-169.

me what is happening in their lives and ministry work, and some students would run if required to show me. While some professors would rather not know what is going on in their students' personal lives and ministry work because they distinguish themselves as professors and not pastors, there are many who, with appropriate boundaries in place, do want to know and, to some extent, be pastoral in the way they approach their work as professor. First and foremost, they want to know some of what is going on in a student's life and ministry work through direct assessment, because, if the student in view is or will be a ministry leader, they want to be confident, beyond a reasonable doubt, that they are not a wolf in sheep's clothing. Second, I want to be a pastoral professor because I was a pastor before I was a professor, and I do not see these terms and what they represent as mutually exclusive, but mutually constitutive. Third, and finally, I want to be confident students can do what they say they can do, and have it verified by seasoned leaders who have observed them doing it in the field. Or, stated differently, I want to verify that I can deliver on the promises I make to students and churches with the learning outcomes I put in my syllabi. This is why the exemplar is a key figure in Hauerwas' understanding of theological education and character formation, just as it is in the broader virtue ethics tradition.

Discipleship, holistic formation, and education for a vocation requires people (emphasis on the plural) who are excellent at what they do, and can provide the attentive proximity, assessment, and longitudinal interaction in various contexts (in and outside the classroom) that are needed to help students grow and likewise become excellent in the broadest and deepest sense of the term. As Hauerwas puts it, "We become ethical agents through membership [in] communities by being schooled in the texts and exemplars that determine the character of our lives."¹⁰ Analogically speaking, most of us would be unlikely to trust the work of an electrician who was not longitudinally tutored, observed, and assessed in the classroom *and* the field by a range of seasoned subject matter experts (exemplars). Why, then, are so many willing to trust the work of a ministry leader who has spent the duration of their education in the classroom, with only a particular kind of subject matter expert (exemplar)—namely, one whose expertise is primarily most at home in the classroom and the academic conference? It is possible to reply that normative classroom-based approaches make up for this deficit by providing instructors who specialize in 'practical' disciplines and/or include required field education components in their curriculum. Yet, the first proposed remedy does not provide professors with direct assessment in the field, while the second does not provide longitudinal direct assessment or interaction. CBTE provides all of this,

¹⁰ Stanley Hauerwas, *The Work of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2015), 18.

including the traditional classroom environment and exemplars, or professors who can teach theological subject(s).

The Good Old Days

CBTE does not guarantee wolf-proof theological education, just as classroom-based instruction does not, and neither guarantee bulletproof knowledge, skill, and character development and assessment. No educational theory, practice, or model can make such guarantees, and if they do, beware. The highest performing students, with records of excellent ministry practice, and numerous references attesting to their good character can either make decisions that transforms them into wolves, or they can be public performers of virtue and private practitioners of vice. Nevertheless, foregrounding trade- and discipleship-focused theological education as CBTE offers educators a level of attentive proximity, assessment, and longitudinal interaction that gives one of theological education's best chances at transforming wolves into sheep, helping sheep stay sheep, and catching the wolves who are excellent at pretending they are sheep.

To offer one of many examples of how this discipling works, here is an excerpt from a recent Immerse Master of Arts in Biblical Leadership graduate's graduating, summative assessment, project. This student observed the following about his three years spent in this Immerse CBTE program (forgive the long quotation, but it is worth quoting at length given its communication of the means and ends of CBTE in the way Northwest practices it):

At times I wistfully reminisced about the good old days when I would just memorize enough information to do well on prescribed assignments and exams, and follow a timetable dictated to me that took all the guesswork, and most of the effort out of education. I honestly thought about walking away multiple times, especially when I had assignments sent back to me with a request for more, rather than just receiving a low mark I could brush aside and move on from. There has been a realization that has been slowly dawning on me over the last year or so. I didn't like that it was hard, I didn't want to do the, sometimes, ugly work of digging in and pushing myself beyond what was comfortable, and I resented not being able to outsmart the system. I see now that this is all part of the plan and that has taught me a lot about myself. I don't know all the thinking and reasoning that went into this kind of program, and although I feel there are some bugs to be worked out, especially with the mentor-to-mentor communication, and the timeliness of responses on the platform, this design did, to me, exactly what I believe it is intended to do. It reflects the reality of the actual world of ministry, that doesn't come in a neat

little prescribed package, with a full explained set of expectations understood from the beginning, and the goals that a cunning enough student can manipulate and find the easy road through. There is no easy road in Immerse. It will make you sweat, and make you cry, and make you crazy, and make you face who you really are, just like ministry... I am not coming out of a classroom setting bearing any illusions of my own greatness, with zero experience, only to be humbled and beaten down by the real-world chaos of ministry. I am stepping into the chaos with my eyes at least partially open, having already been at least partially humbled, and bearing a much more significant understanding of how to respond to real people and real situations, and to depend on Jesus in the moment I have no idea what to do. I have enough experience to know he will lead if I get over myself and Immerse helped me learn how to do that.¹¹

Not only are these reflections the earnest confessions of a graduate student and emerging ministry leader who wanted to “outsmart the system” but fortunately and fruitfully failed to because of the design of his program, they also enact a confession for the wider theological education landscape. Despite the elegant, precise, and holistic learning outcomes that are crafted and listed on syllabi for normative classroom-based models of education, instructors/assessors cannot verify by the end of typical classroom-based courses, that students have achieved the outcomes, especially the skills- and character-based outcomes that only can be demonstrated, assessed, and verified through attentive proximity, assessment, and longitudinal interaction in the ministry field. This student’s story exposes what many theological educators would prefer to ignore and/or deny: the reality that without proximity, direct assessment, and longitudinal interaction in the classroom *and* the ministry field with various subject matter experts, it is too easy for students to outsmart the system.

This confession also moves to the heart of discipleship, CBTE, and the innovative kinds of theological education needed today: the heart of Jesus’ way of discipleship. When Jesus called people to be disciples, they had to journey with Jesus in proximity; they had to be directly assessed by Jesus; they had to interact with Jesus in an intentional, longitudinal, way (Mark 4:18-25; Mark 1:16-40; and Luke 5); and, they also had to be willing to learn from not only Jesus (their paradigmatic exemplar) but also from the exemplars he brought them into proximity with (Luke 10:38-42; Mark 12:41-44; Mark 7:24-29; Mark 9:14-29; and, Matthew 18:1-5; 19:13-15). Only with *this* approach could Jesus and his disciples know whether they would practice what he taught them to preach and preach what he taught them to practice.

¹¹ Excerpts from an Immerse Master of Arts in Biblical Leadership summative assessment graduation project. Printed anonymously, with the student’s permission.

CBTE has drawn me, my colleagues, and our students deeper into to this discipleship approach, and it can draw others deeper into it as well. After over a decade of practicing CBTE, Northwest continues to identify and address the “bugs to be worked out,” like the “mentor-to-mentor communication, and the timeliness of responses on the platform” mentioned in the student’s quote.¹² This essay does not imply CBTE is issue proof. Like any educational theory, practice and/or model, CBTE has its issues. Here are the primary issues, from my perspective.

The primary issues are the tensions and timeliness (or lack thereof) generated by a mentorship model that has two or three mentors (depending on the program), all of whom are busy, high-achiever types with *mostly* convergent and/or complementary, but *sometimes* divergent and/or or contrary strengths, weaknesses, experiences beliefs, and values. When the divergences and contradictions occur and are not dealt with properly, or when the busy mentor(s) fail to engage with students, students suffer.

These issues notwithstanding, they can be used as an opportunity to analyze normative models for theological education. Specifically, is this not the CBTE version of similar challenges in established models of theological education—the busyness, divergence, and/or contradictions experienced by/between professors and students? At least in a CBTE setting, mentors are pushed beyond the busyness, divergence, and/or contradictions present within the academy, and are required to learn about and from the busyness, divergences, and/or contradictions of academies *and* ministry contexts. That is to say, by expanding the range of contexts and exemplars involved in theological education, mentors are pushed to and beyond their growing edges: students, ministry leaders, *and* professors.

Of course, CBTE practitioners write curriculum and provide training to help mentors and students navigate these tensions and time delays, but the reality is these and other issues are ongoing concerns for the institution and the students. Not only that, but these issues will not totally disappear. Why? Because tension and timeliness *always* appear when life-on-life discipleship happens. Instead of trying to ‘protect’ students from these issues, institutions can put it to fruitful use as they require theoreticians and practitioners to work together, with students, in the classroom and the ministry field, to figure out how to excel in praxis, in the storm of tension and lack of time, for the long haul in life, ministry, and the theological academy.

In sum, Jesus was a Rabbi and tradesperson who took his disciples to ‘Rabbi school’ in ways remarkably like apprenticeship style learning for a vocation. He taught his disciples to fish for people in ways they would train for a trade (Matthew

¹² Ibid.

4:19).¹³ Northwest is trying to do the same with CBTE. A school does not have to practice CBTE to disciple students according to this description, but CBTE increases the likelihood a school will. As Dallas Willard is known to have said, written, and practiced: “I like the word apprentice because it means I’m with Jesus learning to do what he did. When you look at the first disciples, that’s what they were doing. They watched Jesus and listened to him, and then he said, ‘Now you do it.’”¹⁴ There are many instances of these kinds of disciple-apprenticeship examples in scripture available for theological educators to learn from – Jesus and his disciples, Moses and his apprentice-disciple Aaron, Paul and his disciple-apprentice Timothy. The question is: will theological institutions learn from these examples?

With this question in view, the next section turns to the work of bell hooks, who exposes flaws in normative approaches to education, and in so doing, prompts all educators—not only CBTE practioners—to give an account of their chosen theories, practices, and models and shows, beyond a reasonable degree of confidence, that theological institutions can deliver on the promises they make in their curriculum, syllabi, and marketing.

Beyond our classroom experience

Along with Hauerwas, bell hooks has precipitated and framed the CBTE epiphanies shared thus far. Her work is a gift to educators because she writes from the perspective of an academic insider and outsider. She is a part of the academic ‘system,’ but she is a prophetic presence within it as she names the best and the worst features of normative educational contexts. For example, in *Teaching to Transgress*, she reflects on her early experiences as a teacher, writing,

Excitement in higher education was viewed as potentially disruptive of the atmosphere of seriousness assumed to be essential to the learning process. To enter the classroom settings in colleges and universities with the will to share the desire to encourage excitement, was to transgress. Not only did it require movement beyond accepted boundaries, but excitement could not be generated without a full recognition of the fact that there could never be an absolute set agenda governing teaching practices. Agendas had to be flexible, had to allow for spontaneous shifts in direction. Students had to be seen in

¹³ So, I find it interesting that, when Jesus “came to his hometown and began to teach the people in their synagogue, [they] were astounded and said, ‘Where did this man get this wisdom and these deeds of power? Is not this the carpenter’s son? Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? And are not all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all this?’ And they took offense at him,” (Matthew 15:54-57).

¹⁴ Dallas Willard, “The Apprentices: An Interview with Dallas Willard and Dieter Zander,” *dwillard.org*, accessed August 9, 2024, <https://dwillard.org/resources/articles/apprentices-the>.

their particularity as individuals... and interacted with according to their needs.¹⁵

This dynamic, exciting, and transformative approach to education certainly can be and is practiced within conventional classroom environments. However, confining these practices to the typical physical and/or virtual classroom space limits possibilities for more dynamism, excitement, and transformation. That is why many teachers, hooks included, informally (though intentionally) expand their work beyond the classroom. As hooks writes,

Engaged pedagogy not only compels me to be constantly creative in the classroom, it also sanctions involvement with students beyond that setting. I journey with students as they progress in their lives beyond our classroom experience. In many ways, I continue to teach them, even as they become more capable of teaching me. The important lesson that we learn together, the lesson that allows us to move together within and beyond the classroom, is one of mutual engagement.

CBTE, practiced as discipleship, formalizes this “beyond our classroom experience” without suffocating the enriching relational informality and contextual unpredictability with excessive planning and structure. Theological education as discipleship means that students serve in a ministry context for the duration of their studies, putting them in proximity with a team of mentors who have different perspectives, skills, and experiences, all of whom journey with the student for the entirety of their program, making it possible for mentors to directly assess the student’s progress in and outside the classroom, and teaching accordingly, powerfully integrating the vital form and content of academic theology with the equally vital flexibility and context of ministry work. The result? Students, professors, and mentors perceive and know each other in their particularity, and they are interacted with according to their needs in a longitudinal way. Then, learning becomes unpredictable, dynamic, exciting, and transformative in and beyond the classroom for everyone.

Admittedly, the unpredictability and dynamism have their light and shadow sides. Because the light sides have received ample attention in this essay, it is time to focus on the shadow side. Often, the attentive proximity, assessment, and longitudinal interaction works insofar as students are disciplined intentionally and effectively from start to finish in their degree programs. Yet sometimes students do not make it to the end, usually because they lack the work ethic, character, time

¹⁵ bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 7. Author’s emphasis.

management skills, and/or mentors that can help them make it to the end. When this happens, it is painful and prompts an examination of why the student did not make it. Did the student take on more than they could handle? Did they have character issues that emerged that they did not want to acknowledge and change? Did the student fail to focus on, plan for, and simply do the work amidst the busyness of their life and ministry? Should we (the school) have admitted them into the program? Did the mentors play any part in their choosing not to finish? Are there any flaws in our CBTE model that we did not see and, if so, what are they and how does the institution meaningfully address those flaws?

These questions haunt when a student does not finish a program, CBTE or classroom based. Because they haunt, the institution constantly researches, designs, tests, and refine CBTE theory and practice until the haunting diminishes. The one question that does not haunt is academic aptitude. In my five years of practicing CBTE, I have never had a student leave a program because they did not have the academic aptitude. Students are given as much time as they need to develop knowledge competencies; they never ‘fail’ within the knowledge domain because they receive the time, teaching, and mentorship needed to develop the knowledge competency (or competencies) they are being asked to develop. It is the same for skill-based competencies. That leaves the character domain. When students primarily elect to fail out of their CBTE programs, they either do not have the work ethic or they cannot muster up the humility, courage, and determination to try to change the parts of themselves that are resistant but need to change if they want to finish their program and be ready for ministry. Sometimes they combine these two lacks. The mentors do everything they can to help students make up for any lack, but the character domain is the hardest one to develop because, as seasoned educators know, someone who does not want to learn, grow, and change cannot be taught. Character is the place where the want, the desire, is or is not generated in a person.

These are the questions and realities that haunt theologians and CBTE practitioners. What haunts theologians committed to more normative educational theories, practices, and models? Are those questions like the ones that haunt those who mentor in CBTE programs, or are they different? Perhaps the people practicing standardized theological education are haunted by nothing. If they are not, with the spiritual landscape being what it is in North America today, they should be haunted by at least *some* critical and constructive questions. For hooks names a serious and dangerous problem present not only in our classrooms and churches, but in the world at large:

By learning the arts of compartmentalization, dissimulation, and disassociation, men are able to see themselves as acting with integrity in cases

where they are not. Their learned state of psychological denial is severe. Adding to the definition of integrity in *Further Along the Road Less Travelled*, M. Scott Peck discusses the root meaning of the term “integrity,” which is the verb “to integrate,” emphasizing that this is the opposite of compartmentalization... Peck argues that compartmentalization is a way to avoid feeling pain: “We’re all familiar with the man who goes to church on Sunday morning, believing that he loves God and God’s creation and his fellow human beings, but on Monday morning, has no trouble dumping toxic wastes in the local stream. He can do this because he has religion in one compartment and his business in another. Since most men have been socialized to believe that compartmentalization is a positive practice, it feels right, it feels comfortable. To practice integrity, then, is difficult; it hurts. Peck makes the crucial point: “Integrity is painful. But without it there can be no wholeness.” To be whole men must practice integrity.¹⁶

The gender specific language is worth nothing here, because it exposes the patriarchalism present in the social structures that make North America what it is, including education. Unfortunately, so much within these structures works for, not against, the kinds of destructive compartmentalization hooks describes here, including education. Thankfully, cracks are starting to form in these patriarchal structures, although, the pillars seem to be standing quite strong in the structures of North American theological education, not necessarily in terms of *content* as there are many schools doing the valuable work of decolonizing and diversifying curricula today, but in terms of *forms* and *models*. Despite significant changes in education since the Industrial Revolution, the foundational factory assembly-line, masculine sage on the stage, forms and models endures. More recent shifts to online and distributed learning approaches, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic, do offer appearances of novelty, but foundationally, they represent more of a technologically enhanced continuation, rather than a departure from, these Industrial-era, patriarchal, forms and models.¹⁷

Discipleship, and by extension CBTE, is not the only way to initiate a departure from these limiting, compartmentalizing forms and models. But discipleship and CBTE represent *ways* to initiate it. Therefore, any educational institution willing to try to initiate a departure is worth learning from. I learned from Northwest, which is why I am still here, as a committed practitioner of CBTE and writer of this essay. By this point, I may be biased, but I am trying to be open about my biases, share them publicly, and expose them to self-criticism and constructive

¹⁶ Bell hooks, *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love* (New York: Washington Square Press, 2004), 156.

¹⁷ I have found *After Whiteness: A Theological Education in Belonging* by Willie James Jennings to be an illuminating, stomach churning exposure of the bedrock for these forms and models.

reflection. I ask other educators do the same and inform me if I am missing anything in the way I am thinking about and practicing education—whether that is the established way of practicing it, CBTE, or a new way I am not aware of yet. How about you?

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