

Title - How can the Spiritual Development of the student be best encouraged in a Theological School?

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BACKGROUND

If we want to encourage students' spiritual development, it may not be out of place to ask and find out those things that motivate adults to learn. Some of them are reinforcement, immediate feedback, knowing results and making progress. This is because in the final analysis it is the student who is responsible for his spiritual development. We can provide suitable environment, resources and staff but it is only the student that can react to these provisions to make meaning of them. In this case, spiritual development has to be taken up by the student, in the first instance, by himself.

A prerequisite to any type of development is self-awareness, self value and desire to grow. Of course, it is something that is living that can grow and develop. Are the theology students spiritually alive? There are situations where some students find themselves in theological schools for the wrong reason.¹ Some instances are: (a) A village church holds a meeting and decides that since they have had a priest of a 'rival' denomination, that it was time to nominate someone who would represent them as a priest in their own denomination. They contribute money to sponsor such a nominee. A candidate (let us use the name, Chike) who has all the required academic qualifications is approached to apply to the Bishop for ministerial training. Visits to the Bishop by prominent personalities in the village – often visiting with expensive and irresistible gifts - back up Chike's application. Chike is given a 'please admit' letter by the Bishop. Chike presents the letter to the Principal of a Theological College who carries out the wish of his proprietor by admitting Chike, not caring that Chike neither sat for the entrance examination nor presented himself for the selection interview. Such interviews were avenues for assessing the prospective student's stage of spiritual development. (b) The second category of students are those that are academically qualified and go through the normal processes of selection, but they do not have any definite call of God in their lives. They see theological education as a stepping stone to wealth or worldly fame. Some come into the College because of lack of jobs.

(c) Some bishops reward hard-working teachers with ministerial training. Some of these candidates may not be academically capable but just happened to have excelled in fostering developmental projects in the local settings. They are naturally gifted 'mobilizers' and can do such in any other social setting than the Church.

A greater majority of the students come to College expecting to be transformed into spiritual giants. Their Bishops expect the schools to give them academic, ecclesiastical training and the to nurture them spiritually. Robert Banks observes that;

While most seminary teachers recognize that moral and spiritual formation begins in the home and congregations, continues in other contexts alongside seminary, and develops afterwards in various ministry settings, there is a growing consensus that it must be an intentional part of seminary training, both inside and outside the classroom.²

¹ This phenomenon is not peculiar to Nigeria. "It would be a mistake, however, to assume that all (or even most) members of a student population share this commitment and that it is their commitment to Christ which has led them to matriculate in a seminary" (Jesse H. Ziegler ed. "Report of the Task Force on Spiritual Development"

Theological Education. Volume 8, Number 3 1972 p.160

² Robert Banks, **Re-envisioning Theological Education: Exploring a Missional Alternative to Current Models** (Cambridge: Wm B. Eardmans 1999) p. 25

The purpose of this essay is to identify the various ways, methods and strategies the spiritual development of the student can be best encouraged in a theological school.

THE CONCEPT OF SPIRITUALITY AND SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT

Alister McGrath defined Christian spirituality as “the quest for a fulfilled and authentic Christian existence, involving the bringing together of the fundamental ideas of Christianity and the whole experience of living on the basis of and within the scope of the Christian faith.”³ He emphasized that Christian spirituality includes knowing God, not just knowing about God; Experiencing God to the full; Transformation of existence on the basis of the Christian faith; Attaining Christian authenticity in life and thought.

Dallas Willard in his article on “Spiritual Formation: What it is, and How it is Done” identified spiritual formation in the tradition of Jesus Christ as:

... the process of transformation of the inmost dimension of the human being, the heart, which is the same as the spirit or will. It is being formed (really, transformed) in such a way that its natural expression comes to be the deeds of Christ done in the power of Christ.⁴

In a pastoral letter on spiritual formation, Richard J. Foster cautioned that spiritual formation should not simply become a new label for the old activities we do in theological schools.

Another possibility is perhaps more dangerous for those of us here today. It is that spiritual formation will simply become a new label for old activities--for what we are already doing: worship, hearing the word, community, quiet time, plus a new twist or two such as spiritual direction and so on. Now all of these things are very important. But if spiritual formation merely becomes a new label for things we are already doing, it will leave us right where we are. And the issues of deep inner transformation will remain untouched. And I say with trepidation that there is a real danger of spirituality becoming a field of mere "expertise," of academic competence, focussed upon "religious activities."⁵

Sandra Schneiders reinforces the personal participation involved in spiritual development.

Christian spirituality, that is, personal participation in the mystery of Christ begun in faith sealed by baptism into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ was nourished by sharing in the Lord's Supper, which the community celebrated regularly in memory of him who was truly present wherever his followers gathered.⁶

There is a general assumption that the seminaries are alive to their responsibility of the spiritual development of the students. After all, that is the main difference between the seminary and a typical University department of Religion. All that happens in the seminaries are designed to facilitate spiritual growth. “Everything is involved in this process: liturgy, classes, prayer, living arrangements, families, the entire staff, periods of clamour and of quiet, student health services –

³ Alister E. McGrath, **Christian Spirituality: An Introduction**. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1999 p.2

⁴ Dallas Willard, “Spiritual Formation: What it is, and How it is Done.” <http://www.dwillard.org/articles> 15th September 2005

⁵ Richard J. Foster, “Spiritual Formation: A Pastoral Letter,” Sunday January 18, 2004. THEOOZE <http://www.theooze.com> p. 1.

⁶ Sandra M. Schneiders, “Scripture and Spirituality” in Bernard McGinn *et al* **Christian Spirituality: Origins to the Twelfth Century**. New York: SCM Press Ltd 1985 p.2

everything that impacts an individual.”⁷ We must ask the vital question: How do the students internalise these experiences. We can talk about models of integration – unification or otherwise – but the central actor is the student himself. He has to do the integration as he internalises the experiences. We did not impose the baptism on him. Even if we did when he was an infant, he went through the process of confirmation where he was taught that he had to ‘take over’ the promises made on his behalf by his Godparents.

The tone of administration, hiring policy and wage scale, the behaviour of trustees, the conduct of faculty meetings, the form of student government, student aid and student housing, the attitudes of comptroller and registrar, of gardener and dietician – these shape the spiritual life. Similarly, the relation of the spiritual to the academic is always to be borne in mind. The area called instructional or informational is perforce formational. Degree requirements, the nomenclature and character of degrees in themselves, catalogue statements, organisation of the curriculum, the types of tests and examinations, the grading system, the facility of the library, the content and rationale of field education, indeed the manner in which a professor enters or leaves a classroom, even the way in which he asks or answers a question or makes an assignment – all these shape the spiritual life.⁸

The tutor is assumed to be the most potent factor in all these, not that the others are not important. It has been observed that, “the spiritual development and formation of students begins with and depends on the spirituality of the faculty.”⁹ This may be an overstatement because we are arguing here that the primary mover in the event of spiritual development is the student. The tutor can do all he can yet the student who decides not to change will not be affected by the example of the tutor. However, in our attempt to develop a student-based model of spiritual development, we shall not underestimate the impact, negative or positive, of the tutor.

THE ROLE OF THE TUTOR AS EXAMPLE AND MENTOR

The tutor should play a pivotal role in the spiritual development of the students in a theological college. The target of the tutors should be to help the students to apply what they hear to real life situations. It has been found that people change only by applying what they hear. The problem with humanity is not reading or hearing but with practical application. In the words of A. W. Tozer, “It is change, not time, that turns fools into wise men, sinner into saints.”¹⁰

There should be a re-training of the tutors in all Anglican theological colleges in Nigeria. Such a course should emphasize the role of the tutor as an example and a mentor. The training is important because, the process of employment of tutors is faulty. Some of the tutors do not have interest in teaching in seminary and did not apply to teach there in the first instance. Their Bishops just decided to deploy them there. Bishops deploy their priests to different parishes in the diocese. Priests do not question such deployments. They just pack their properties and move to the new parish. In most cases, the priests that are sent to teach in the seminaries are the ‘bad’ ones. Those who dared challenge the decision of the Bishop or found it difficult to raise money to pay assessment or disagreed with influential members of their congregations or looked ambitious for ecclesiastical position or were involved in moral scandals. There are, however, a few priests who opt for teaching in seminaries and the bishops grant their requests. No one of these priests has a qualification on how to teach in seminary. Some may have higher university

⁷ Jesse H. Ziegler, “Report of the Task Force on Spiritual Development” **Theological Education** Volume 8 Number 3, 1972 p.163

⁸ Ziegler, *Op Cit* p. 179

⁹ *Ibid*

¹⁰ A.W. Tozer, “The Incredible Christian” quoted in Waylon B. Moore, **Multiplying Disciples**, (Tampa, FL, Missions Unlimited, Inc. 1992), p.51

degrees in academic areas, mainly Old and New Testament studies, but they are deficient in the methodology of theological education. This is very unfortunate, because, asking a priest to go to teach in a seminary just because he was trained there is like asking a patient discharged from the hospital ward to go back there and administer drugs, just because he was on admission in the hospital for long enough time.

Henri J. M. Nouwen posits that the original meaning of the word, 'theology' was 'union with God in prayer. He laments that; "Today theology has become one academic discipline alongside many others, and often theologians are finding it hard to pray."¹¹ Tutors prefer to be referred to as 'lecturers'. The reason is not far fetched. They want to be comparable to their counterparts in the University Department of Religion where the teachers are called 'lecturers'. Consequently, seminary tutors limit their area of focus to academic excellence. Some of them do not even attend worship services in the compound.

It is imperative that all seminary teachers should be trained and strive for a life-long programme of self improvement. As we said earlier, a prominent part of the curriculum for the training and re-training seminary teachers should include ways of facilitating the mentoring relationship. Shelly Cunningham defines mentoring as "an interaction between two people in which one person is guided, taught, and influenced in his or her profession by another member of the profession."¹² A mentoring relationship involves:

A more experienced professional serving as a supportive and guiding role model for another professional less experienced in the field. "Mentor" is the word given to describe the more experienced professional and "protégé" or "mentoree"¹³

Willingness to undergo training on mentoring process and the acceptance of mentoring as a regular schedule should be criteria for the employment of tutors. The schools should stop the practice of accepting lecturers from the Bishops. A major break through in the reform of theological education should start with the autonomy of the schools to set the criteria for employment and to have the powers to hire and fire staff.

FOCUSING ON JESUS CHRIST AND THE SCRIPTURES

Richard Forster argues that there is nothing more important in Christian spiritual formation than our need to continue ever focused upon Jesus.

This is not formation-in-general. This is formation into Christlikeness. Everything hangs on this. Everything. Jesus gives skeleton and sinews and muscle to our formation. In Jesus we find definition and shape and form for our formation. Jesus is our Saviour to redeem us, our Bishop to shepherd us, our Teacher to instruct us, our Lord to rule us, our Friend to come alongside us. He is alive. He teaches, rules, guides, instructs, rebukes, comforts. Stay close to him in all things and in all ways.¹⁴

A focus on the Bible is another important area for spiritual formation. God, in sovereign grace and excessive love, has given us a written revelation of his own being and. The Bible gives us all that we need to know in our intimate relationship with the saviour. It clearly documents all about God and of his purposes for humanity. "That written revelation now resides as a massive

¹¹ Henri J. M. Nouwen, **In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership**, New York: Crossroad 1991 p. 30

¹² Shelly Cunningham, "Who's Mentoring the Mentor? The Discipling Dimension of Faculty Development in Christian Higher Education". *Theological Education*. Volume 34 Number 2 Spring 1998. P.35

¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ Richard J. Foster, "Spiritual Formation: A Pastoral Letter," Sunday January 18, 2004. **THEOOZE**, <http://theoone.com>.

fact at the heart of human history. There is, simply, no book that is remotely close to achieving the presence and influence of the Bible.”¹⁵

But the intrinsic power and greatness of the Bible does not make it easy for us to receive the life it offers. In fact, we can often use the Bible in ways that stifle the spiritual life and even destroy the soul. This happened to any number of people who walked in the literal presence of Jesus, and it still happens today. Even to those who speak most highly of the Bible. This happens when we become too conscious of the ‘culture’ and times of the Bible. We use our filter to sift all that we consider ‘culturally bonded’ in Bible. In search of the historical Jesus, we are left with a skeleton of what was the power of God to save and sanctify.

Sometimes we study the Bible for information alone in order to prove that we are right and others are wrong in particular doctrines or beliefs or practices. At other times we study the Bible to find some formula to solve the pressing need of the moment. But both approaches to the Bible leave the soul untouched. This should not be so. We need to study the Bible with a view to the transformation of our whole person and of our whole life into Christlikeness. We come to the Bible to receive the life “with God” that is portrayed in the Bible. To do this we must not control what comes out of the Bible. We must be prepared to have our dearest and most fundamental assumptions about ourselves and our associations called into question. We must read humbly and in a constant attitude of repentance. Only in this way can we gain a thorough and practical grasp of the spiritual riches that God has made available to all humanity in his written Word. This focus should be brought back to the seminary, to make it worth its name.

The staff and students tend to take pride in the fact that they are doing phenomenological study of the scriptures. What is described, as professional theology is often atheistic interpretation of the scriptures. Ability to quote authors, most of who are liberal theologians, is acclaimed in the school. This should stop. There must be a conscious attempt to hear from the Lord Jesus Christ. The Bible is a book that should guide the behaviour of Christians. The theological school should be so re-formed as to give due reverence to the Lordship of Christ and the pre-eminence of the scriptures.

FOCUSING ON THE HUMAN HEART AND PRACTICAL CHRISTIAN LIVING

The heart of man is the focus of spiritual development. “Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life (Proverbs 4: 20-24 NAS see also Mark 7:15, 20-23). It is the inner nature of a tree that determines its product. “The good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth what is good; and the evil man out of evil brings forth what is evil; for his mouth speaks from that which fills his heart” (Luke 6:45). As Dallas Willard observed, “spiritual formation in the tradition of Jesus Christ is the process of transformation of the inmost dimension of the human being, the heart, which is the same as the spirit or will. It is being formed (really, transformed) in such a way that its natural expression comes to be the deeds of Christ done in the power of Christ.”¹⁶

We should design a curriculum based on this focus of the human heart. Such a curriculum should be powerful enough to convert an unbeliever who has come to train as a priest in the theological school. We painted the picture of the quality of the students that come to the school. Some of them are no where close to any religious belief. They have never ever seriously considered the claims of the Lordship of Jesus Christ in their lives. Our overt curriculum should therefore provide for a spiritual transformation of the heart of the student as he receives Jesus Christ as his Lord and saviour. It should then provide appropriate follow up and equip the student to carry the undiluted gospel message of the salvation to the members of his congregation.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Willard, *Op. Cit*

There is a direct relationship between the life a person lives and what he preaches. It is said that the secret of the preaching power of Whitefield, M'Cheyne and others like them, is found in their lives, not in their method of delivery. Their lives were so clothed with power, and they lived in such vital communion with God that the truth became a living principle when it came through such vessels.

Our actions back up what we say. We are like sales persons, ambassadors of heaven. Imagine a medicine vendor in a public transport selling a product that he claims cures catarrh and cold. The vendor is himself seriously infected and suffering from cold. Such a vendor will not make reasonable sales. In the words of Jesse Ziegler; "The efficacy of ministry cannot be empirically separated from the life of the minister."¹⁷

The entire school should be run as a Christian community. The concept of the Christian family should be introduced into the school. At the moment there is a wide social gap between the junior and senior member of staff. This gap should be closed. The school should see itself as a worshipping community. All the members should come together in worship and service. The non-tutorial staff should also be part of the mentoring process. Their Christian lives should challenge and encourage the students.

All the members of staff should be urged to participate in Bible Study groups. At the present, the students are left to conduct the Bible studies. This is not proper. The staff should come closer to the students in group discussions. This will help the staff to know the students better and offer help that will enable them to grow spiritually. Other avenues should be created for the staff to meet with students in less formal settings.

PROPOSAL FOR FULLY INTEGRATED APPROACH TO SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT

There has been a growing recognition of the need for spiritual development to be within the formal education of theological schools. We acknowledge that there has been a debate on whether spiritual formation should be integrated into the existing curriculum and practices, or whether it should become an additional or special dimension in theological education. Tilden Edwards adds another dimension to the debate by asking whether one member of staff should be accountable for special attention to this area, or should be shared by all the staff, or both. We acknowledge the argument of some people that formal education with all its programmes, assignment, classes and examination, is itself a process of spiritual formation. It has been assumed that the important thing for the schools to do was to do their normal classroom activities then spiritual formation will take care of itself. These classroom activities have been going on yet, in the words of Forster Freeman;

Research confirmed that their mentors (graduates of theological schools) typically had given no attention to how the students personally related with the God who was daily the subject of critical scholarship. Nor had there been any laboratory course on how to enter prayer and overcome its obstacles, how to be a partner with Christ in wrestling through tough issues of living, or how to establish a discipline of personal devotion and stir its fires when they threatened to go cold. It was predictable, after such neglect, that the transforming life in Christ failed to be generated spontaneously.¹⁸

We should not divorce formal study in the classroom from the programme of spiritual formation. They are not in competition either. Rather, they are complementary. Classrooms and libraries are ideal places in which to respond to the apostolic injunction that we take every thought captive for Christ. Spiritual formation surely includes study. The discipline of study is an

¹⁷ Jesse H. Ziegler, "Report of the Task Force on Spiritual Development" **Theological Education**, Volume 8, Issue 3, 1972, p. 171.

¹⁸ Forster Freeman, "Spiritual Direction for Seminarians," **Theological Education**, Autumn 1987 p. 44

essential component of spiritual formation. It is said that rigorous intellectual exercise is good for the soul. The mind is renewed by truth. Change in behaviour, as we noted earlier, comes from the heart. A lecture on the grace of God, for instance, if related to the lives of the students, is very much part of spiritual formation.

We are aware that in the area of learning in the affective domain the hidden curriculum is as important as the overt, that is, the planned curriculum. The hidden curriculum reminds us that learning is concurrent. The students may be learning many things in addition to what the teacher says in the class. They may be learning entirely different things. The learning outcomes may be opposed to the specified goals of the teacher. This suggests that the goals and focus of our interactions in theological schools should be well articulated and focused on the Lord Jesus Christ. Even when that is done, we should be conscious of the *mystical* in our work in the seminaries. We cannot reduce everything to the objective and observable. The Holy Spirit is at work to transform lives. We all need His empowering to live the Christian life, which is 'extraordinary' by all descriptions.

CONCLUSION

People look to their ministers for spiritual leadership. They expect the ministers to be competent to teach the truth of the Christian faith with accuracy and clarity. Functional models of theological education are therefore needed which will help the priests to recognise and respond to the spiritual hunger in their congregations and beyond. Theological schools should aim at producing graduates who not only project the Christian faith but also know how to help others to find faith in Christ and share it with others. This model that is student centred will help them to integrate the intellectual, spiritual and practical aspects of theological education. It is based on the understanding that theological education is an essential part of spiritual formation, spiritual formation is an essential part of theological education. They are effective when the internalisation of the stimuli by the student is emphasised.

It should be pointed out that some of our expectations for theological schools are out of proportion with realities. For example, in the secular world, it is known that formal schooling is only a 'preparation' for life. Unfortunately when we evaluate the seminaries, we take them as producing 'finished' products. It is time for us to start seeing these schools for what they are – preparatory schools. In actual fact, seminaries provide mere introduction to basic ministry skills. Graduation from seminary should be seen as matriculation into a life-long education.

We have argued that the student should bear the primary responsibility for his spiritual development. Our efforts should be directed at arranging the environment to reflect the emphasis on spiritual development. We should employ different motivational approaches to assist the students to respond positively to the environment. The tutor is a primary factor in the spiritual development of the students. All our tutors need a well-designed and articulated programme to enable them to perform as role models. We will continually be dependent on the leading and empowering of the Holy Spirit to produce well-rounded and fully integrated intelligent, practical and spiritually mature students.

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