

**Title: Is “Professional” a suitable adjective for Theological Education ?**

**Author: Dr. Graham Cheesman, Belfast.**

**Summary: In this article, Cheesman analyses the concept of “professional”, traces its use in higher education and its application to theological education. A critique is offered, with especial reference to the Bible College movement.**

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We must commence with some remarks about the concept of the profession itself. It could be said that the oldest profession is that of the priesthood, and others since have been modelled on it. Law and medicine are also of great antiquity as professions, and Visser would add university professorship.<sup>1</sup> Traditionally, the characteristics of a profession are: a body of specialist knowledge learnt over some years; membership of a self-regulating group that controls entry by examination and disciplines members when necessary; competence in a field of service to the public; a sense of vocation and altruistic service; and a high status in society because professionals alone possess the knowledge and skill necessary to do a particular needed job.<sup>2</sup> Hughes sums it up well when he says that the difference between a profession and another occupation is *credat emptor* (let the buyer trust), rather than *caveat emptor* (let the buyer beware).<sup>3</sup> We trust, not because we wish to, but because we have to trust the professional. The model has not, of course, stood still over the years and today it is in the process of modification in a number of directions. Growing society suspicion has led to more openness and less individuality, more joint accountability<sup>4</sup> and less self-regulation - leading to a desire for more public scrutiny in all the professions. Also, the number of occupations wishing to be described as professions is increasing. Nurses, teachers, engineers, accountants and many others are seen in some way as “professional” today. As a result, the content of the word in day to day use has come to mean something

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<sup>1</sup> In the wider North American sense, Margaret Visser, *The Way We Are*, London, Penguin, 1994 (edition consulted 1997), p122.

<sup>2</sup> For the contents of this definition, see Visser, *op.cit.* pp122-126. Sinclair Goodlad “Introduction” in Sinclair Goodlad (Ed.), *Education for the Professions: Quis Custodiet?*, papers presented to the 20<sup>th</sup> annual conference of the Society for Research into Higher Education 1984, Guildford, the Society for Research into Higher Education, 1984, pp5-10. David Watson, “The Changing Shape of Professional Education”, in Hazel Bines and David Watson, *Developing Professional Education*, Buckingham, The Society for Research into Higher Education and the Open University Press, 1992, pp1-10.

<sup>3</sup> E.C. Hughes, “Professions”, *Daedalus*, Fall, 1963, pp655-669, p657, quoted in Goodlad, *op.cit.*p7.

<sup>4</sup> Goodlad, *op.cit.* p8, table 1.1.

less than that described above, often no more than competence in a task. So, a baker can do a “professional job” of baking. It may even have come to mean, in certain circumstances, the opposition of amateur, as in sportsmen and women, where the difference is often no more than the salary. I have already said something about the relationship of higher education to professional training. We have in the university today a mixture of attitudes. Some support the older Newman view of the University, that there can be only a general learning of the knowledge behind a profession and how it interacts with other knowledge, and that skill in practice, in the task of the profession itself, is seen as the responsibility of the organization of the profession or of a dedicated college. This attitude is represented by the 19<sup>th</sup>-century theological colleges, which functioned as post-university preparation for ministry. Others today, influenced by the acceptance of skill and competence learning into higher education through the CNAAC and the new universities, seek to provide a full preparation for “professional” work, in the university undergraduate degree. This has been implemented, not so much in law and medicine, but certainly in theology and the newer professional areas such as accountancy and nursing.

Before a judgment on this phenomenon is made, it would be instructive to look at a significant discussion of the professional model of Christian service that has taken place in the North American seminaries since the 1960s. Edward Farley<sup>5</sup> has proposed that theological education in the United States can be seen as falling into three periods. The first period stretches from the beginning of the 17th century to about 1800 - a period of pious learning of divinity, not as an objective science but a seeking of a personal knowledge of God. The second period is that from the founding of the first seminaries to the present and is characterised by theological education as specialised scholarship in theology. Characteristic of this form are the founding of the chairs of divinity at Harvard and then Yale. The third period can be seen as particularly belonging to the period from the 1940s onward, when the professional paradigm becomes dominant. It is, “an affirmation that the ministry bears the sociological marks of a profession”.<sup>6</sup> The key applicator of this model to the realm of theological education is usually seen as Friedrich Schleiermacher, who used the professional

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<sup>5</sup> Farley, *Theologia*, pp6-12.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* p11.

paradigm to solve the twin problems of the place of theology in a post-enlightenment university and the difficulty of unifying the various branches of theological study.

In the 1950s, H. Richard Niebuhr, along with two colleagues, Daniel Day Williams and James N. Gustafson, carried out a comprehensive study of Protestant graduate theological schools which was published in 1956 and 1957 in two volumes entitled, *The Purpose of the Church and its Ministry: Reflections on the aims of Theological Education* and *The Advancement of Theological Education*.<sup>7</sup> Niebuhr operates within the professional paradigm. He calls theological schools ‘professional schools’,<sup>8</sup> parallels them with medical and law schools<sup>9</sup> and accepts that the society in which the church and school operate will determine, in some way, how we regard such institutions.<sup>10</sup> However, in seminaries of the first half of the twentieth century, "professional" was defined more in terms of functionality, efficiency and success than Schleiermacher had intended<sup>11</sup> and we can also discern in this period, a trend towards understanding "professional" in terms of status. The growth of the professions such as law and medicine and the strengthening of the professional associations and their academic standing also had its impact. Niebuhr believed that the way in which North American seminaries have interpreted their task of creating professionals is inadequate and he sets about modifying this understanding in three main ways. Firstly, it is the church, not society, that is the location and goal of the ministerial task. Secondly, a theological school is fundamentally an academic, reflective community. Thirdly, professional training as imparting competence in a trade is a particularly inadequate model. This state of affairs occurs when a school has lost its reflective focus. Niebuhr’s interpretation of theological education as preparing professionals, laid a careful foundation for the self-image of the North American seminaries in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and his name and ideas occur throughout the subsequent literature. In 1969, an ATS conference took as its theme *Theological Education as*

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<sup>7</sup> In 1985, James Gustafson reflected on the literature that had been published since his and Niebuhr’s monumental study, and re-affirmed its basic attitudes. *Theological Education*, 1988, supplement II, Vol. xxiv, pp9-88.

<sup>8</sup> *Purpose of the Church and its Ministry*, p2, p4.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*p48, p51.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*p90.

<sup>11</sup> Kelsey demonstrates this movement by reference to three studies from the intervening years: a paper by W.R. Harper in 1899, the President of the University of Chicago; Robert Kelly's, *Theological Education in America* in 1924; and William Adams Brown and Mark A. May's, *The Education of American Ministers*, published in 1935. Kelsey, *The Advancement of Theological Education*, pp2,3&4.

*Professional Education*<sup>12</sup> and a number of books and articles continued to explore the model.

Despite such continuing enthusiasm for the professional model, criticisms were building up. In the first instance, it was seen as undergirding clericalism, the idea of a competent class which excluded the laity from participation in ministry. Moreover, it was accused of neglecting the more spiritual aspects of ministry such as a call, a relationship to God and a sacramental function. The professional model was accepted by some for the more mundane administrative tasks, but it was seen as being unable to encompass, for the Catholic, the work of the 'sacramental person', or for the evangelical, the divine call to the ministry or the gifts and working of the Holy Spirit.<sup>13</sup> In addition, some wondered whether the whole idea was a 'con trick' or at least a 'rallying call' by ministers experiencing a crisis of identity. In an increasingly hostile environment, when their authority was being questioned and the place of the church in secular society eroded, ministers were asking for recognition, by comparison with other service organisations, such as medicine and law. But was the substance of theology or the nature of the task sufficient to justify inclusion within the umbrella of profession at all?<sup>14</sup> In my opinion, a landmark in the development of the model occurred when Jackson Carroll was funded by the ATS and released on sabbatical by the Hartford Seminary in 1984 to research the status of the model.<sup>15</sup> His thoughtful paper not only interacted with the growing body of criticism, but gave the professional model a firmer conceptual base by relating it theologically to the cultural situation. For Carroll, the professional model is still "the dominant cultural and social form for the delivery of important services in our society" and so it should not be discarded, although he acknowledges that it may well not be appropriate for other societies or cultures if they have a different sociological construction. He notes that there are areas in which the secular concept of professional training does not correlate with church leadership training and so it will need to be reconceived.<sup>16</sup> It should not,

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<sup>12</sup> Report in *Theological Education*, Spring, 1969, Vol.V. No. 3.

<sup>13</sup> Urban T. Holmes III, *The Future Shape of Ministry and the Priest in Community*, New York, Seabury, 1978.

<sup>14</sup> Robert Towler and Anthony P.M. Coxon, *The Fate of the Anglican Clergy, a Sociological Study*, London, Macmillan, 1979.

<sup>15</sup> Jackson Carroll, "The Professional Model of Ministry, is it Worth Saving?" *Theological Education*, Spring, 1985, Vol. XXI, No. 2, pp7-48.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* p27f.

for instance, concentrate on technical competence and practical skills, but on the competence of reflective practitioners, the application of the wisdom of the Christian tradition to the situation.<sup>17</sup> It should realise that, unlike other professions, the minister relates to a group of people, not to an individual in need, and so it should see the minister as the empowerer for ministry rather than seeing the minister as the facilitator of the community.<sup>18</sup> It should see the minister's authority derive, not from professional competence, but from religious authenticity or charismatic authority.

We are now in a position to offer a critique of the professional model as a description of Bible College work. It is difficult to offer a critique of a fast-changing sociological model with a description ("professional") that is used with a variety of meanings today. I find three elements of the concept appropriate, and two elements of the concept inappropriate, for the Bible College enterprise today.

Firstly, in that "professional" indicates the ability to do a job of service to the high standard society expects, the term, and content of the idea, are welcome among Bible Colleges.<sup>19</sup> The idea that standards of competence in church work can be less than those in society must be rejected and seen to be publicly to be rejected. Just as academisation, described above, has done service in cementing and publicly demonstrating levels of academic competence, so professionalisation can do the same for vocational competence. Secondly, in that the use of the word "professional" still means more than practical ability (the meeting of a set of competencies such as in the NVQ model), and also contains the idea of reflective practice - practice informed by a significant body of knowledge - it too is to be welcomed. It will safeguard the growing vocationalism in the Colleges from slipping into simply competency-based education.<sup>20</sup> Thirdly, in that the word "professional" comes with the idea of altruistic service in response to a vocation, it also helps to preserve an essential element of Bible College training, although it has its inadequacies in this area also, in that Christian service is, in the first instance, serving God.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid. pp29-31.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. pp33-36.

<sup>19</sup> Clive Calver, "A New View of Training", in *Christian Herald*, April, 1989, pp18-19.

<sup>20</sup> Niebuhr, Williams and Gustafson, *The Purpose of the Church and its Ministry*, p114. Carroll, op.cit. pp29-31.

<sup>21</sup> Urban T. Holmes, op.cit. p95.

On the other hand, in that the adjective “professional” implies status in society, it needs to be rejected. It is possible to distinguish at this point between trust and acknowledgment of competence by society on the one hand, and the according of status on the other. The status of a Christian worker has undergone a radical reappraisal as UK society has become less and less publicly or officially Christian. A Christian worker pleading for society to offer him or her a special status now seems, to some, to be a little demeaning. There is a tradition of the Christian church being extended and built up by people regarded by society as without special status, beginning with the apostles, through such people as the Moravian missionaries of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and including those “ordinary people” trained by the early Bible Colleges and serving the Faith Missions at home and abroad. Moreover, to the extent that “professionalism” means exclusivity, the membership of a closed group, occupying, either by official recognition or specialist knowledge, an authoritative position in the church, it is inappropriate for Bible College training. The Bible Colleges chose to operate outside of this “clerical” model, choosing instead what they graphically described as “the ordination of the pierced hands”, rather than that of men’s hands. In their eyes, their licence to preach came from an individual call not from inclusion in a religious caste. They asserted their ordinariness, not only in society but also in the church.

In conclusion, the situation is confused by a variety of definitions today. There are elements in the current usage of the word ‘professional’ that are to be welcomed, but there is sufficient of an element of status in church and society still within the concept of professionalism, to make it inappropriate as a description of the Bible College task. In the rush to respectability, it would be easy to lose the positive Bible College ideals of humble service in an ordinary capacity without seeking the admiration of society. The Bible Colleges need, at this moment, a public repudiation of the status side of professionalism and this has to have a twofold application: it should inform the attitudes to Christian service which are inculcated into the students; and it should determine the attitudes of tutors to their own jobs. In a number of ways it has been pointed out in the last 20 years that tutor example may well be the most powerful

element in the work of theological education.<sup>22</sup> A college cannot be staffed by those who enjoy their status as professionals and then expect to produce students who go out into humble Christian service.

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<sup>22</sup> “Report on the Task Force on Spiritual Direction” (ATS), *Theological Education*, Spring, 1972, pp153-179, p161. J.J. Bonk, *Missions and Money: Affluence as a Western Missionary Problem*, New York, Orbis, 1991 makes a similar point in relation to the issue of materialism among lecturers and the training of missionaries in the West.