Some Observations about Theological Schools and the Future[1]

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I am completing twenty-two years of service on the staff of The Association of Theological Schools this academic year. It does not seem so long ago when I sat through my first Commission on Accrediting meeting in early June 1990. I remember it quite well. 2033 is twenty-two years from now—the same distance in the future that I am from my first ATS Commission meeting. While 2033 seems like a long way into the future, 1990 does not seem so distant in the past. What will it be like in another twenty-two years? With the realization that 2033 is not very far away, and that no one can predict with certainty, I want to make a few observations about theological schools, identify the factors that I think will most drive changes in the future, and then speculate about some characteristics of theological schools in 2033.

Some observations

The seminary backpack

Seminaries carry a huge backpack. It is full of the thousands of years of scripture and its interpretation, church conflicts and their resolutions, the accumulated teaching of the church, and the witness of people of faith through centuries. The scholarly task of a theological school is to preserve this long past and bring its implications and values into the intellectual idiom of the current day. The effort required to drag this huge backpack into the present makes theological schools resistant to quick-paced change. They do change, and over the span of enough years, they change substantively, but not quickly and not often. Other institutions—like those in business and medicine—change more readily and more often. Twenty years is about the cycle of one major institutional change in a theological school. In a medical school, twenty years in the past is a virtual prehistoric era. So, I would discourage anyone from thinking that, if you came back to most theological schools in 2033, everything will be different.

External factors are more likely than internal factors to influence change

The second observation is that whatever change does come will come as a consequence more of external factors than of internal factors. Theological schools tend to be built to last. Endowments, tenured faculty members, historically significant buildings, a significant heritage to hold onto and live out of—all of these contribute to a kind of internal stasis. These factors have no influence, however, as soon as you walk off campus. The world around the seminary is not beholden to these factors—often does not even value them—and is much more subject to fundamental shifts across very short periods of time. These external shifts form relentless pressures on schools to change, even though the schools have influential internal structures that resist change. Often, the external factor is the school's relationship to the church. A school's task is to get the past to the present—to deliver the faith that has been received through the ages. Congregations, on the other hand, are trying to get the faith of today into the future. They are the

[1] I have been working on these issues during 2011 and have used versions of this material for presentations to the Princeton Theological Seminary board and the Pittsburgh Theological Seminary faculty and board, and for an article published in January 2012 in *Dialog*, the journal of Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg.

evangelists of the next generation. The conflict between seminary and church is often at this very point. Schools don't think that congregations are sufficiently attentive to the past, and congregations don't think that seminaries provide the practical help needed to get the faith to the future. Churches, never the fastest changing social institutions in the world, nonetheless tend to change faster than theological schools, and they exert pressures on the schools. Other forces, influences like issues in the culture or practices in higher education, also tend to change faster than theological schools change, and their pace of change influences theological schools as well.

Friction and change

This leads to a third observation: the primary force that influences change in theological schools is the friction caused between the slower internal pace of change and the faster, usually unrelenting, pace of change in the world in which the seminary is embedded. The less ability to resist friction, the faster a school will change. The more ability to resist friction, the slower a school will change. ATS schools that have no endowment, have no tenured faculty, and use rental space for their programs have little ability to resist any friction, and changes in the world around them can significantly redirect their missions and work. Their vulnerability to every external influence forces these schools to discern what their most true mission is and how to sustain it in the context of the changes that they will be forced to make. Schools with large endowments and tenured faculties have a huge heat shield that makes it possible for them to sustain huge amounts of friction. Their ability to resist external forces means that these schools change more slowly, and their task is to discern when to change, even though they don't have to change. Most theological schools are somewhere between these two extremes, and for schools in the middle, the task is to discern the external factors that are enduring and must be accommodated versus the factors that are transient and must be resisted.

Seminaries try to change without changing

Because theological schools are built for stability, they are not overly interested in new educational paradigms. As much as they like new ideas, they are not eager to change anything else. The result is that, as forces to change intensify, schools "layer" innovations on top of existing commitments. Old conventions are never altogether gone, and new ones never fully replace old ones. They change by addition, by accommodation. Theological schools, however, will not be able to address the coming change drivers by accommodation. I think we will see some patterns of fundamental transformation in theological education over the next twenty-two years. The problem with transformational change is that you can't predict what form it will take, because that is the nature of transformation. Theological educators have taken a liking to the language of transformation. Some schools promote their "transformational education." Others offer degrees in "transformational leadership." Transformation, however, is the result of many forces that can't be managed easily, and transformation may not be as likeable when it is the school being transformed instead of the students.

Dominant external factors that will influence change

As I look at the next twenty-two years, I think three fundamental external forces will create most of the friction that theological schools will experience and will serve as the drivers for change.

The changing social status of religion in American culture

In the first decade of the nineteenth century, church leaders were shaping culture in North America as much they were leading religion. Joseph Willard, president of Harvard at the turn of that century, came

to the university from the pastorate, and his two successors were also clergymen.[2] During the same period, Samuel Smith, a clergyman, was the president of the College of New Jersey, now Princeton. Benjamin Moore was the Anglican bishop of New York when he became the president of Columbia College, now Columbia University.[3] The role of clergy in colonial America, as well as in the first decades after independence, involved more than leading religion. Their role contributed significantly to the cultural and intellectual leadership of the nation. The power of theological education to shape the broader culture was a function of the public intellectual status that clergy enjoyed in that culture. There was a similar tendency in Canada, though not as pronounced.

The culture-shaping power of religion has weakened and continues to dissipate—not because the seminaries are employing or educating less talented people, but because the broader culture has reassigned religion from a social role of culture shaper to one that is more personal and private. The culture will recognize religion as a valuable personal choice, perhaps even a noble one, but is less inclined to give it a seat at the table where the fundamental future of the culture is developed. This is not a choice that religion has made; it is a choice that the culture has made about religion. Seminary graduates will make a significant contribution to religious lives and visions of countless individuals and congregations. However, they will not have the culture-shaping influence wielded by Joseph Willard or Samuel Smith. The future of theological schools will be in shaping American religion in the context of this changed cultural reality.

A demographic shift

By 2040 the American population will have completed a fundamental shift that began in the late nineteenth century: this nation of immigrants largely from Europe and the British Isles will be become a nation in which "white" will be the racial minority.[4] By mid-century, if not before, persons of African descent, Asian descent, and Hispanic descent will outnumber white residents. The America that was the new world of Europe will become the new world of the world. While the numbers are less striking in Canada, the direction is the same. Throughout US history, higher education has been a cherished privilege—the higher the education, the more privilege. It has been the fulcrum by which children have transcended the economic status of their parents and by which one generation in a family extends its privilege to the next generation. As best I can tell, it has served a very similar role in Canada. Theological education has always been more accessible than most other forms of post-baccalaureate education, but the changing racial/ethnic composition of society and the church will challenge assumptions in theological education that reflect the cultural visages of privilege, such as what constitutes intellectual excellence, what backgrounds qualify individuals for admission to study, and what determines the current intellectual agenda. The future will bring struggles to theological schools over the loss of the "white" privilege it has enjoyed. Racial/ethnic communities are religiously engaged, by many estimates more so than white communities, and religion will be influenced by the fundamental shift in racial/ethnic composition.

The shifting character of Protestantism

A third external force that will influence theological schools is the changing status of Protestantism. Fifty years ago, the denominations and conventions of mainline Protestants were the dominant Protestant presence. Today, the networking and conventions of evangelical Protestants are dominant. Just over 60

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[2] www.president.harvard.edu/history/history3.php.

[3] www.columbia.edu/cu/president/docs/history/index.html.

[4] A good analysis of population trends, extracted from US census and other data sources can be found at U.S. Population Projections: 2005–2050, http// pewsocialtrends.org/2008/02/11/us-population-projections-2005-2050/.

percent of students enrolled in ATS member schools are enrolled in schools classified as conservative or evangelical Protestant, and just under 30 percent are enrolled in schools classified as mainline or more liberal Protestant. The center of gravity in American Protestantism has shifted in fundamental ways. The change is a function of both the increase of evangelical Protestants and the decline of mainline Protestants. It takes both kinds of movements to effect so much change over such a limited period of time. If the current mainline trends continue for the next two decades, a significant number of congregations will close, and a considerably larger number will have joined the ranks of those that used to be able to support a full-time pastor but are no longer able to do so. The enrollments of mainline Protestant theological schools will be influenced by the number of positions available for graduates. Enrollments in evangelical Protestant schools are not as closely related to pastoral positions because evangelicals tend to be more free-market and networked in their structures. The result of the shifting balance of power in Protestantism exerts a common influence on theological schools, and that is to question their value for the future. Mainline questioners suggest that they are nice but can no longer be afforded and do not provide the kind of pastoral education that the ever-growing number of part-time and bi-vocational religious leaders need. Evangelical questioners suggest that theological schools may not be as effective in educating leaders for new paradigm Christian practices as the churches that have invented the paradigms. Two hundred of the Association's 260 schools were founded by mainline or evangelical Protestants, and the changes in Protestantism have contributed to change and will continue to drive change.

The characteristics of theological schools in 2033

Given these characteristics of theological schools and the drivers that will influence change in the future, here are the characteristics that will be increasingly evident over the next twenty-two years, especially among the most successful schools.

Multiracial and multiethnic

The majority of the student bodies of most seminaries will comprise racial/ethnic students. Faculties will still be majority white, but less white than is currently the case. To the extent that these schools are faithful to their students and the faith communities that those students will serve, educational practices will differ from current practices. The schools will live with the gifts and complexities of multiracial and multiethnic Christianity instead of talking about it theoretically. Many schools will struggle with what aspects of their storied histories in white Protestantism must be set aside to make room for equally storied futures in the increasingly multiracial constituencies that seminaries will be called to serve.

A changed community of theological schools

Some current ATS member schools will not be around in 2032. Many of the schools that will be closed will have closed because of the continued decline of their constituency or because they so overspent their endowments and other assets that nothing was left to fund the future. The community of schools will also differ because new seminaries will have been founded. These schools will be related to communities of faith that have never had a seminary, to new religious movements, or to growing religious communities in racial/ethnic populations. Seminary education is not going away. New schools will reflect the growing edges of American religion, as they always have, while schools that close will most typically be related to religious movements that have declined or lost their unique identity.

Educational diversity

Theological education practices will be more diverse in almost every way. Schools will have to decide what practices they will engage, discern why they choose the practices they do, and assess the impact on mission and service that is inherent in their choices. Seminaries will be much more different from one another than they are now. Even within one degree program, such as the MDiv, there will be greater educational variability. This variability will be possible because the capacity to assess the outcomes of learning will have increased, and theological degree programs will be evaluated even more on the basis of attaining the educational goals of degree programs than they are now. There will be greater variability, and likely more disagreement, among schools as to what constitutes "good" theological education and what is needed to sustain it. An increasing number of schools will have added programs that reflect either broader dimensions of human service education, like social work, or programs for lay persons who do not anticipate ministry-related employment. Still other schools will look very much like they do now in terms of their educational programming.

The disciplinary shape of faculty

The trajectory knowledge will have no retreat from continued specialization, and ATS schools will respond to continued specialization in one of two ways. Some schools will have the capacity to increase faculty size to be able to accommodate increasing disciplinary specializations. Schools that are able will also need to appoint scholars who can deal with the social, behavioral, anthropological, and theological issues that accrue to religious and ministerial realities in an increasingly multiracial and multi-religious culture. Second, the disciplinary shapes of the faculties of most seminaries will likely move in a very different direction. Most ATS schools will not be able to keep up with this increasing specialization and will need to return to an earlier pattern of faculty work in which each professor was responsible for a broader range of disciplinary areas. These faculties will consist of more generalists and fewer disciplinary specialists. The result will be a new kind of "generalist" discipline and the need to identify the scholarly competence appropriate to it.

Continuation of current patterns of institutional support

Future financial realities will resemble and amplify the current financial status of schools. The dominant patterns of funding will be either endowment or current gifts from a committed constituency. Denominational support, except for Roman Catholic schools and a handful of Protestant schools, will be gone for all practical purposes. Schools will have expanded missions and programs in an effort to broaden their bases of support, but individuals will continue to be the primary source of institutional support.

Different facilities

Facilities are already changing, and that change will continue. The facilities for most Protestant schools will be built or modified to sustain program more than community. Seminary facilities will look more like a University of Phoenix location than a traditional liberal arts campus. They will have classrooms and offices, gathering spaces, and information commons, but they will not have the residential, eating, and recreational space that support communities of people who live and study together. For many schools, facilities will reflect the programmatic needs of a web of educational programming that brings more people to campus for shorter periods of time, blends learning that is both web and classroom based, provides classroom instruction simultaneously in multiple locations, and utilizes contexts of ministry for more educational purposes. All of these, of course, already exist, but they exist for some schools and as exceptions to the norm. In another twenty-two years, they will likely be the normative pattern.

Missional theological education

Most theological schools will still have more mission than money, will have more tasks to do than can be done, and will do most of them better than anyone thinks they can. They will accomplish their missions by the dedication and competence of faculty and staff. They will have re-defined their missions to fit their work effectively in a culture in which religion does not enjoy much cultural privilege. However, they will need to be more missional than they currently are. While schools have missions, they can get by with "mission light" because they benefit from the lingering support for their work in the church and society. It will be different in twenty-two years. More of the support will be withdrawn, and schools will do what they do only because they are committed to doing it, even at great cost. The most robust forms of theological education will be deeply missional and entrepreneurial—which is the very way that theological education has been conducted in cultures that have been less friendly to Christianity.

The Global South

North American schools will look to the Global South for an increasing amount of the scholarship that Christianity will need in the last half of this century. Institutions of theological education are maturing in the Global South, and North American theological scholarship will be as incomplete by the mid-twenty-first century if it does not include scholarship from the Global South as it would have been in the first half of the twentieth century if it had not looked to British and European scholarship. This is a substantial shift, and the most scholarly schools within the ATS community will have made it.

Conclusion

As I have put these thoughts together, it is not clear to me whether I am predicting what will happen or what is already happening and will simply mature into a fuller form by 2033. If my predictions are correct, I will celebrate the advent of some of these new characteristics of theological education, but I will grieve the loss of some current characteristics. My biggest worry is two-pronged. On the one hand, I worry that ATS schools will not "get" how much the church has changed or how fundamentally the culture will change as a function of the shift in racial/ethnic composition. Too little change to accommodate these realities would be tragic. On the other hand, I worry that schools, in their effort to deal with these changing realities, will assume that more has changed than really has and consequently change too much. Theological schools have an enduring legacy as keepers of Christian texts, history, and theology, and in 2033, people will still need to know as much about those texts and that theology and history. My hope is that schools in 2033 will be different in the right way and to the right degree, and remain the same in areas crucial to extending the Christian project one more century into the future.

I spoke the other week to the board of the Episcopal Church Foundation that was meeting in Pittsburgh. I told them that I tend to wake up worried. The way before theological schools is not completely clear; there are many decisions to be made; theological schools cannot afford to make many bad decisions. I also said that I go to bed with hope. I have seen grace find its way through one more day; I have seen the Gospel influence life yet once again; I have seen the occasional speck of justice and the abundance of mercy; I go to bed in the confidence that God will work out God's purposes; that congregations will continue to teach and preach, worship and serve. And, because they are communities, they will look for leaders, and leaders will continue to look for places that can equip them for their leadership, like seminaries.