

THE CHALLENGE OF LEADERSHIP FORMATION

**For too long, it appears, theological training
has overlooked “the inner person
of the would-be parson.”**

It took place about a month after graduation. I was a very young minister attending a youth ministry retreat in northern California. The speaker told a story to highlight the challenge teachers and others in formation vocations have with young collegiates. A college professor was lecturing to his class in a sizable amphitheater-type classroom. In the course of the lecture, he wrote on the blackboard the word *apathy*. A young male on the last row, leaning so far back he was nearly horizontal, his legs up on the seat in front of him,

attempted to read the word: “Ah—pay—thee. Ahpaythee.” Elbowing his slumbering seatmate to the left he asked: “Hey, what’s that?” His young friend, rubbing his eyes, looked at the board and read: “Ah—pay—thee.” After a long silence, he finally declared: “Oh, who cares!”

For those interested in the frightful yet joyous responsibility of form-

**Ron E. M. Clouzet, D.Min., is Dean of the School of Religion, Southern Adventist University, Collegedale, Tennessee.*

If the change is no more than going from stiffness on the platform to glibness behind a pulpit, if the change is simply from saying “church” in English to saying ekklesia in Greek, not much has been accomplished that is worthwhile. If their lives have not conformed to the loving will of the Master, teachers, mentors, and administrators have failed at their greatest task: that of character transformation.

ing young men and women to become the spiritual leaders of the church, the question is this: Will what is offered them change anything in them? Or will they say of the things of God, “Who cares?”

This is not an issue of knowledge or skills, but of character. For if the change they experience is merely going from darkness to being conversant with Karl Barth’s arguments, if the change is no more than going from stiffness on the platform to glibness behind a pulpit, if the change is simply from saying “church” in English to saying *ekklesia* in Greek, not much has been accomplished that is worthwhile. If their lives have not conformed to the loving will of the Master, teachers, mentors, and administrators have failed at their greatest task: that of character transformation.

Formation Lacking

The history of theological education in the Christian Church shows

that a variety of paradigms have been used for leadership formation. The *ascetic* paradigm, with its emphasis on mystical religion, gave way to the *scholastic* paradigm of the 12th and 13th centuries. The 16th-century Reformation brought about a focus on Scripture and preaching. Two tracks can be identified as a result of this focus. One, taking deepest root in North America, was a *mentoring* paradigm, emphasizing relational interchanges between a would-be pastor and his more-experienced pastor-teacher. The other, rising up in the German universities and eventually influencing American seminaries in the late 1900s, was an *encyclopedic* paradigm: the fourfold and now traditional structure of systematic, biblical, historical, and practical theology. Today’s paradigm is known in the literature of theological education as the *professional* paradigm, the currently dominant paradigm of the 21st century.

At every historical juncture, a goal

never quite achieved was the spiritual or character formation of the future minister. The current paradigm reveals the same situation.

During the past century, four major studies were conducted on the state of theological education in comparison with the state of ministry.

The first study, conducted by Robert Kelly in the early 1920s, looked at 161 theological schools in America and Canada. The report included many aspects of theological education, but it also provided the first hint that something was amiss in the training of the inner person of the would-be parson. It indicated that the growth of Bible schools with enrollments as high as the seminaries “is an indication that the seminaries have not occupied the field of ‘theological’ education. The churches are demanding new types of workers.”¹ What did Kelly mean by new types of workers? In the rise of Bible colleges, the churches longed for ministers whose exposure to the Word actually made a difference in their everyday lives, resulting in greater piety and evangelistic conviction. The irony today is that most of those once-unaccredited Bible colleges are now well-respected evangelical seminaries just as unable to transform their charges’ inner life as the schools they once criticized!

Ten years after Kelly’s study, a report found a proliferation of professional courses aimed at staying even with other professions, such as

medicine and law. But it also recognized the paradigm’s inability to directly affect the inner life of the ministerial candidate. For example, regarding students’ spiritual development, the study admitted great concern:

“These [students] are, for the most part at least, looking forward to the ministry, and the specialty of the minister is religion. Unless the seminary succeeds in keeping the religious [spiritual] life of its students unimpaired, it has failed at the place where failure is most disastrous . . . many of our seminaries do not seem to be taking this responsibility with due seriousness.”²

Another study in the post-World War II years’ enrollment boom, saw the role of the modern spiritual leader as the “pastoral director” of the congregation. The study provided insightful evaluation and deft analysis, but did not explore what could be done about the inner spiritual growth of the spiritual leader.

The most ambitious report to date, the *Readiness for Ministry* study conducted in the 1970s, became the spark that ignited the current trend of self-examination in theological education. One observer noted with alarm that the research “marked the beginning of a season of discontent in American theological education. . . . The worry was whether professionalism produced [spiritual] leaders. In and outside theological edu-

cation, thoughtful people noted that the churches did not have effective people at their head.”³

The study showed that in spite of continued concentration on ministry skills, the preponderance of what was considered valuable for the pastor’s effectiveness in ministry were not, in fact, ministry skills, but character values. For example, more than half of the 12 most-valued ministry descriptions—out of 444—were character-based, such as “keeps his/her own word and fulfills promises,” “acknowledges his/her own need for continued growth in faith,” “serves others willingly with or without public acclaim,” and “maintains personal integrity despite pressures to compromise.” Although skills, compassion, and other factors are important in ministry, this watershed study clearly showed that the solidity of a pastoral candidate’s Christian character in the sight of God and people ranked above faith tradition, clerical training, or ecclesiastical priorities.

In the wake of the report, a seminal work was published by Edward Farley, called *Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education*, and the Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada sponsored major works in the field of theological education. What had happened? Whereas until then, all discussion on theological education for spiritual leadership had mostly to do with pragmatic

issues of curriculum, resourcing, governance, and development, suddenly the entire center had shifted to aims and purposes of theological leadership training. This shift has caused a revolution in the field, producing hundreds of articles and a host of well-articulated, book-length proposals on what is theological about theological training.

But no proposal yet has a handle on how to bring about the spiritual formation of the leader. No one knows! It is either taken for granted, considered outside of educational boundaries, or viewed as of such a personal nature that it is left alone. Yet, all seem to realize that this is key for leadership formation and that something ought to be done about it. Evangelical seminaries have acknowledged poor marks when it comes to the spiritual development of their students. One independent report said:

“We generally agree that the spiritual development of the pastor is extremely important. . . . But we have been unable or unwilling to give to the development of the character and spirituality of [our] students nearly the time and attention that we have given to the intellectual skills necessary for careful handling of the Scriptures.”⁴

In an interview with the coordinator of the spiritual formation component at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary at Andrews

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University in 1996, he considered the seminary’s efforts at spiritual-formation a complete failure, noting that students were very resistant to accountability in spiritual direction. It was not working. Dean Alan Jones has said it well: “In some ways seminary training is too practical. Students are forced to acquire too many ‘skills for ministry’ without ‘the one thing needful,’ a maturing sense of self and a hunger for God.”⁵

The lack of power in spiritual leadership, the inability to influence a world careening to self-destruction, is perceived even by those whose interest in religion is minimal at best. Not long ago, John Piper, at a meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, quoted Karl Meissner on Albert Einstein’s view of preachers and their relevance. Einstein had profound respect and awe for the design of the universe. Meissner considered Einstein more truly religious than many preachers, certainly than shallow, thoughtless, and powerless ones. Meissner said: “He must have looked

at what preachers said about God and felt that they were blaspheming. He had seen much more majesty than they had ever imagined. [The preachers] were just not talking about the real thing.”⁶

Elisha: The Real Thing

Do you think ministerial students would want to see “the real thing”? Do you think they would like to learn at the feet of someone who has bowed so low before God as to have touched the heavens? Few lives can have more impact on would-be spiritual leaders than a teacher’s well-lived life, soaked with the living Spirit of the loving God of the universe.

Consider an Old Testament example: “Elisha died, and they buried him. And the raiding bands from Moab invaded the land in the spring of the year. So it was, as they were burying a man, that suddenly they spied a band of raiders; and they put the man in the tomb of Elisha; and when the man was let



As a master in the schools of the prophets, Elisha demonstrated his spiritual leadership through such miracles as the cleansing of Naaman's leprosy.

down and touched the bones of Elisha, he revived and stood on his feet" (1 Kings 13:20, 21, NKJV).

This is a unique incident in Scripture, paralleled only by the Jerusalem resurrections at the death of our Lord (Matt. 27:52).

Elisha's was a well-lived life. For years before he led the sons of the prophets, he served a great prophet. He was known as the one "who poured water on the hands of Elijah" (2 Kings 3:11, NKJV). Even this hints

at his character. Ellen White says of Elisha that he had the "characteristics of a ruler" but "the meekness of one who would serve" (*The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, vol. 2, p. 1035). That he had energy and was steadfast (*Education*, p. 58), and had integrity (*Prophets and Kings*, p. 218). She repeats time and again his chief characteristic: Elisha was meek and had a gentle spirit (*Education*, p. 58). He had what we could term a "heart impressed by the Spirit" (p. 220).

Does this remind you of the Master, whose only self-description, found in Matthew 11:29, tells us that He is "gentle and humble in heart"? (NIV). Do you think students could profit from mentors who have a humble spirit and whose hearts are impressed by the Spirit?

It is interesting to note that at the time of Samuel, the schools of the prophets were known as the "band" or "company" of the prophets, but at the time of Elisha, they were known as the "sons" of the prophets. The "bands" became the "sons." The Semitic idiom "son of" carries a much deeper sense of imitation than the English expression, which mainly deals with identification. The sons of the prophets functioned in a spirit of close communion with their mentors, especially in the time of Elisha. When the school at Jericho needed bigger quarters, Elisha felled trees for construction alongside the students. When he was at the Gilgal campus, he shared instruction and meals with them. This is even demonstrated linguistically. R. Payne Smith had noted that when the sons of the prophets are found "sitting before" Elisha (2 Kings 4:38, NKJV) and "dwell[ing] with" him (6:1, KJV), the verb and preposition are the same. The verb *yashad* is translated in its more literal sense in the first passage and denotes an academic activity. In the second text, it denotes a domestic activity, a daily routine.

This was "a master-disciple relationship in mutual commitment to service of God." That relationship was so valuable that when a financial crisis arose on the part of the widow of one of the sons of the prophets, she was led to seek Elisha's help (2 Kings 4:1). Why would she do that when at the time such requests were normally made of the next of kin? For the same reason God had those "sons" be so close to their teacher: so they could see that God was alive and well in Israel.

"In these 'schools of the prophets' young men were educated by those who were not only [1] well versed in divine truth, but who themselves [2] maintained close communion with God and [3] *had received the special endowment of His Spirit*. These educators enjoyed the respect and confidence of the people both for learning and piety. *The power of the Holy Spirit was often strikingly manifest in their assemblies, and the exercise of the prophetic gift was not infrequent*" (Ellen G. White, *Signs of the Times*, July 20, 1882; italics supplied).

This is the real thing, a Christlike character yielding Christlike power. The times of the ministry of Elijah and Elisha were dark, and apostasy was omnipresent in Israel. How else could God stay the final decline of His people into the hands of the uncircumcised except by nurturing a group of youth, leading them to be so close to those who knew Him best

that absolute trust in the mighty hand of Jehovah was not for them an academic exercise but a living reality, seen day after day after day? Those teachers “had received the endowment of His Spirit.” The servant of God noted that “the power of the Holy Spirit was often strikingly manifest in their assemblies.” Can they see God in those today who have the responsibility of molding future spiritual leaders?

Seeing God

The challenge of leadership formation for this new millennium and for always has never been about the knowledge or skills imparted to students, as fundamental as these things may be. The challenge of leadership formation has to do with whether students can see God in their mentors, teachers, and administrators, the infinite, loving, powerful, wise, and transforming God of the heavens in the lives of those with more education and experience. Can they see this in the way classes are conducted? Can they hear it in the tone of voice? Can they see the passion that teachers have for souls in darkness? Can they see the absolute, awesome respect professors have in the handling of God’s Word? Can they see God when administrators walk in the hallway? Can they hear God through prayer in the classroom? When teachers defend a grade given a wearisome student? Can they see that the Lord God is

without a doubt the most important Person in the lives of church leaders? In other words, can they see that their teachers see God? Students long to climb a mountain conquered by a mentor who, already at the top, can see the wonders of the living God from such a vantage point. They want to know Jesus Christ as their leaders do.

Take an 18-year-old who has just graduated from academy. When she takes a college Bible class, what do you think she is after? Oh, some are after the “almighty A,” and some after the easy “religion A.” But deep down, there is in many the secret longing to be stunned by God in the classroom. They may appear nonchalant, they may pretend not to care, they may look like all that matters in their world is money and fun. But they too, in the words of C. S. Lewis, want to be surprised by joy. They want to believe what they have heard and not seen: that God is alive in regular people. That what the Bible says is actually true, not only because it is merely written there but because it is lived by regular folks.

Take a 20-year-old junior, a sixth-generation Adventist, in a theology, homiletics, or New Testament class. What do you think he is after? He is more anxious than the freshman. He has logged two-plus years already, and time is running out. He is more conscious of his character flaws, his weak points triggered by an incen-

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sant enemy. He has seen things and tasted things that originate in the throne room of heaven. But consistency in these matters has been elusive. He longs to know if there are any Elishas left in the land. He would like to witness a miracle-working life, but he will happily settle for knowing a genuinely Christlike soul in whom God lives unrivaled.

Take a 30-year-old senior, a second-career man with a wife and two children, a man who decided to embrace the three angels’ messages only a few years ago. He has accepted a conference’s call to pastor and is taking a church ministry course or a seminary’s church administration course. What is he after? Oh, yes, he is after every single bit of pragmatic wisdom available—after all, ministry now has context. But what does he really want? He wants the assurance that with Christ, all things are possible. All things, indeed! And he wants to know if his professors and church leaders, of all people, have found that

truth to be theirs experientially.

As John Piper intimated, the problem faced in our schools is a problem of the heart. As teachers and administrators have become expert professionals in their fields, as they have rubbed shoulders with the best and the brightest, as they have read some of the most amazing body of literature humans can produce, too many of them have become false teachers. Leaders in ministry have not abandoned the faith, certainly not in public, but some have grown personally cold and distant from the God who gave so much joy in private and produced such Christlike results in public. David Watson used to quote Carl Bates’ sad, yet accurate comment: “If God were to take the Holy Spirit out of our midst today, about 95 per cent of what we are doing . . . would go on, and we would not know the difference.”⁷⁸ Even Karl Barth, in his farewell lecture in Basel, recognized the poverty of the spirit found in the teachers and shapers of spiritual leaders:

This from a man who spent his life studying and influencing, one of the greatest theologians of the 20th century. And this is his conclusion at the end of his career. Can the same be said of our own leader shapers? In true Pauline fashion: May it never be!

“Everything is in order, but everything is also in the greatest disorder. The mill is turning, but it is empty as it turns. All the sails are hoisted, but no wind fills them to drive the ship. The fountain adorned with many spouts is there, but no water comes. . . . There is no doubt piety, but not the faith which, kindled by God, catches fire. What appears to take place there does not really take place. For what happens is that God, who is supposedly involved in all theological work, maintains silence about what is thought and said in theology about him (rather than of him as its source and basis). It does happen that the real relation of God to theology and theologians must be described by a variation of the famous passage in Amos 5: ‘I hate, I despise your lectures and seminars, your sermons, addresses, and Bible studies, and I take no delight in your discussions, meetings, and conventions. For when you display your hermeneutic, dogmatic, ethical, and pastoral bits of wisdom before one another and before me, I have no pleasure in them: I disdain these offerings of your fatted calves. Take away from me the hue and cry

that you old men raise with your thick books and you young men with your dissertations! I will not listen to the melody of your reviews that you compose in your theological magazines, monthlies, and quarterlies.”¹⁹

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The challenge of leadership formation in the new millennium has little to do with adequate knowledge or consummate skill, it has nothing to do with finances or resources, but it has everything to do with whether mentors and teachers have a mere proper acquaintance with the Almighty or are ravished by the presence of the Lover of souls. If, in fact, the latter is true, like Elisha, the bones of those in spiritual leadership will make others live. And just as Elisha cried on the shores of the Jordan, “Where is the God of Elijah?” before parting the waters that would give way to the beginning of his ministry, to-

day’s students cry out, “Where is the God of Elisha?” They cry out in a time not only of dark worldliness and demonic enslaving to lesser things, but also of theological flaccidity, of powerless belief, and of relative certainties. They ask the same question the Israelites, buffeted by Moabite raiders in a post-Elisha period, asked: “Where is the God of Elisha?” Where is the God who can make axe heads swim, lepers whole, poisoned waters give life, and little boys rise again from death? And God, in His great mercy, will answer. Through the lifeless bones of His servant came life to answer the anguished cry, as if to say, “Elisha, my servant, is dead, but I, the Lord, am not. Believe in the God of Elisha and you too will be saved.”

May those who have surrendered their trust to be formed and shaped understand the same message when they engage with teachers and leaders today: Believe in your teachers’ God, and you too will be delivered. Believe in the Master they represent, and they too will see their enemies defeated. For the challenge of spiritual leadership formation is not in what teachers and leaders know, nor in what they

do, but in what they have become in Christ their Lord and Savior. □

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