

SOUND THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION FOR EFFECTIVE AND PRODUCTIVE AFRICAN PASTORAL MINISTRY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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Abstract

The explosive growth of the African church is not devoid of peculiar challenges. These issues demand the development and execution of a sound theological education, which will create and sustain a critical, dynamic, and spirit-filled pastoral ministry that addresses the challenges. In this study, we reimagine and recast the significance and the traditional content of theological education with reference to the paradoxes of the modern African church. We argued for the integration of the threefold content of theological education into a wholistic pastoral training program that will produce academically competent and spiritually sound African pastors. Such pastors will establish and tend critical but spirit-filled local church congregations in the 21st century through faithful preaching of the word and the right administration of the sacraments. We demonstrated that the sustainable sound theological education stands or falls with the robust and constant funding of theological institutions in Africa.

Keywords: Theological Education, Pastoral Ministry, African, Development, 21st Century

Introduction

The African church is growing exponentially by leaps and bounds in the 21st century. But the African church like any church in the world is beset with peculiar intractable challenges, which call for the construction and execution of a sound theological education. These challenges range from literal and superficial understanding of the Bible, superstitious and unscientific interpretation of the causes and treatment of natural and human misfortunes or illness, untrained “men and women of God” in the church, gullible follower-ship to an ineffective impact of the church’s conservative values on the public domain of the African society. Therefore, the need to train spiritually and academically sound pastors to meet the ever growing manpower needs and the challenges of the church in Africa and Nigeria especially is more glaring now than ever before.

In this study, we reimagine theological education for Africa as an essential tool for effective delivery of liberating and life-affirming pastoral ministry. We recast

the traditional essential components of theological education in the light of the contemporary needs and challenges of the African church. We argue that the integration of these components into a wholistic theological education program is the foundation for forming and sustaining a well-informed, dynamic, and relevant African pastoral ministry. We contend that the sound theological education for the cutting-edge pastoral ministry that meets the needs and challenges of the 21st African church stands or falls with the robust and unfailing funding of theological institutions in Africa.

Challenges of the African Church that Call for Sound Theological Education

The Christianity in the global south especially in Africa is experiencing a phenomenal growth in the 21st century. Yet the church has exerted little to no significant positive impact on the public life of the continent. According to Matthew Michael (2020), the modern African Christianity is replete with paradoxes. Michael charges that though the African church is predominantly conservative in rejecting modern social issues, it has failed to live out its conservative values in public space to transform the African society. The African Christians, who are largely uncritical of their pastors, believe unquestionably their proclamation of “God’s word” without double-checking its veracity from the Bible. Their literal and shallow understanding of the Bible has discouraged them from engaging in deeper conversations with critical people about the theology of the Bible. In fact, most of them will rather settle for what their “man of God” says, which they believe to be sacred and sacrosanct than the Bible in any critical biblical discourse. The blind loyalty to pastors has made them default their responsibility of fact-checking the teachings and theologies of their churches, but also challenging the false teachings creeping into the African church. He writes, “The idolization of the clergy, especially of the Pentecostal brand, has contributed to the uncritical character of church members, many of whom have submitted their minds to whims and caprices of so-called ‘men and women of God.’”

The world has witnessed an unprecedented advancement, proliferation, and massive impact of the knowledge of science and technology in the 21st century. But too many African Christians are still superstitious and traditional in their spiritual thinking and mindset. Michael claims that the Africa church still believes and blames misfortunes such fatal road accident, poverty, and physical ailments on spiritual causes like demons, evil spirits, and witches rather than on socio-political factors such as bad government, bad road, reckless driving, and viruses. In most cases the incident of natural disasters such as drought is seen as

God's judgment on the sin of the church and its members. Thus, the divine punishment for sin unapologetically dominates the preaching of the church as well as its private and public conversation. The people are threatened by the clergy to repent for their sin to appease or turn away God's judgment. Michael (2020) writes, "This mindset does not encourage empirical, scientific study in order to find appropriate solutions. Thus, the African church in this modern age still advocates superstitious interpretations, diagnoses, and analysis of natural phenomena."

The Africa church no doubt believes in the modern scientific methods of analyzing the empirical world and its natural laws, but it often reverts to superstitious, supernatural interpretation of natural misfortunes or illness in times of existential crisis. Michael (2020) believes that this superstitious attitude "informs noisy, aggressive disposition, contentious character, 'commanding God' theology and warfare mindset in the saying of prayers. Silent prayers are regarded as an indication of lukewarm Christianity, whereas aggressive ones are thought to indicate vibrant spirituality . . ." Consequently, the African Christians waste enormous amount of time and energy, which should have been productively used to seek scientific solutions to their natural and human misfortunes, on aggressive casting and binding of real or perceived evil spirits (whether natural or ancestral), demons, and witches through ceaseless night vigils, fasts, and prayer meetings. The African church especially the Pentecostal strand worships God not merely for who God is and his atoning work of salvation, but for his miracle of material breakthrough, healing and deliverance. Many of the members may not even worship God at all if not for His power to perform signs and wonders. Hence, their migration from one church to the other and or from one man of God to the other not in search of a sound doctrine, but search of this "miracle working God." Although this critical but true submission is somewhat offensive and in many ways, overstated, it undoubtedly points to the dire need of training theologically competent and spiritually sound African pastors to resolve these paradoxes of the modern African church. The right tool for meeting this need is the provision of a sound theological knowledge to African pastors with which to establish and tend critical, but Spirit-filled African congregations through faithful preaching of the word and the right administration of the sacraments.

Rethinking Theological Education

Sound Theological Education (STE) is a process of training men and women for effective pastoral ministry. But it is not just a preparation for pastoral ministry; it

is a preparation for life in the ministry. The preparation does not begin and end in the “four walls” of the theological institution; it continuous throughout life. According to Mary G. Nwagwu (1998), “Theological Education is an on-going process that continues even after the acquisition of degrees and expertise in the field. The science of the faith never ends so long as God’s revelation continues unabated in human history.” STE is a lifelong process. There is no time in our pastoral vocation that we don’t need to learn and improve on our theological knowledge. It is fair to say if you stop learning and improving on your theological education (TE) today, you should stop being a pastor/theologian tomorrow.

STE should not be overtly dogmatic; it should be open to and be ready to embrace new perspectives and insights into the Bible, liturgy, tradition and practices of the church. God loves the world, not just the church, so much that he sent his son to die for it. This world in which we are living is fast changing. Understanding the world in which the church exists is key to effective and productive ministry. Thus, theological education should enable students to understand the world so much as they understand the Bible, liturgy, faith and tradition of the church.

Theological education is designed to train and equip the people with divine call to develop their gifts and commit their life, time, energy and resources to the service of God and his missional church in the world. STE liberates students from biblical ignorance, corrects their misinformed or even ill-informed interpretation of the Bible, and equips them with tool and skill with which to rightly interpret the scriptures to the changing world. STE is God centered, though God in general, but God as revealed in the person of Jesus Christ. This Christocentric knowledge of theological education must be rooted in the Bible, creeds, confessions and general traditions of a particular church community. Therefore, a sound theological education should uphold, teach, promote and strengthen the distinctive identity of its funding church denomination. For example, sound theological education should produce graduates who are biblically sound and theologically erudite enough to competently explain and defend their denominational identities such as the Roman Catholic, the Lutheran or the Methodist identity in a compelling way to the people they serve and the adversaries alike.

STE embodies Christ centered knowledge, values and norms, which the church desires to transmit to its prospective ministers. It teaches, corrects and forms students for honorable life in the ministry. Ronald F. Thiemann (1987) says TE is

“The transmittal of knowledge, the development of the capacities required for critical inquiry, formation of skills for ministry, and the nurturing of the virtues of honesty and integrity that are essential to serious academic and [pastoral] work.” Theological education is carried out in obedience to Christ’s command to teach all the liberating and life affirming truth that he taught. But theological education, which provides training for those becoming ministers of word and sacraments, is distinguished from Christian education that the church gives its members. As Graham Cheesman argues:

Christian Education is generally seen as for all and takes place generally in the church. Theological Education is not for all, usually results in special service and leadership and usually takes place in a college or in a Theological Education programme centred beyond the church. Sunday School teaching, Bible study evening meetings and so on are Christian Education. Belfast Bible College, Ministry Training Colleges, TEE and Seminaries are Theological Education.

In short, Christian education is meant for every Christian but theological education is intended for the selected few people who strongly believe that they are divinely for public ministry in the church. The task of STE, is thus to develop the head, heart, and hands of these selected students not only to proclaim the true Gospel, but also to deliver productive and effective pastoral care in the church. Ray Easley (2014) writes, “Theological reflection begins with the mastery of academic content, and moves to an application of the wisdom gained from such knowledge. It is the ability to see present realities in the light of biblical truth and theological constructs.”

Essential Threefold Component of Theological Education

There are essential components of STE. The first component is spiritual formation. STE seeks to form students into effective instruments for spiritual transformation of the church and the society. The institutions of TE are therefore, spiritual nurseries where spiritual lives of students are formed and transformed for service in the church. The spiritual formation of theological education provides students with opportunities not only to discern their pastoral call, but also to grow in personal faith, moral integrity, emotional maturity, and public witness. It molds and shapes students into authentic Christians and Spirit-filled leaders who can exercise liberating and life-affirming leadership role in the vineyard of God. As a center of spiritual formation, theological institution should nurture and promote consistent Christian life and deepen the personal relationships of their students with God and one another. Acquiring theological

knowledge without sound spiritual formation only breeds pride and arrogance in students. In fact, spiritual formation lies at the heart of theological education. As Domenic Marbaniang (2016) rightly puts it:

Theological education is not so much about dry academic knowledge as much as it is about stewardship of the mysteries of God. This stewardship is not a mere job, but definitive of a disciple of Christ. Theological knowledge involves personal obligation towards Christ, in whom are hid all the treasures of the wisdom and knowledge of God. We are called to be witnesses. Knowledge puffs up, but love edifies. [Theological] knowledge bereft of devotion and spiritual living is useless. It is not possible to educate one to be spiritual. The hunger and thirst for God lies at the foundation of theological education.

But providing a sound spiritual formation in Christian personal faith and life to the students without acquiring the academic competency in spoken and written communication undermines their effective proclamation of the word and the administration of sacraments and the church. The graduates of theological education who lack the academic proficiency in communication cannot be effectively preach the mystery of salvation and successfully lead their members. As we shall see below, the academic theological formation is as important as spiritual formation for an effective pastoral ministry in the 21st century. There is no way we can deemphasize the former without doing damage to the latter. Providing a sound spiritual formation without an in-depth academic formation will amount to forming a spiritual faith and life that is groundless, irrational, superficial, and blind; and vice versa, providing a solid academic formation devoid of a sound spiritual formation will amount to imparting mere academic knowledge without a sound spiritual substance, integrity, and disposition.

This brings us to the second component of STE, which is an academic formation in Bible and theology even though such a formation is largely belittled in Nigeria. Too many fresh students of theology program who come to theological seminary with a predominantly spiritual formation in mind are often disappointed with the academic dimension of theological education. They often assume theological education is all about deepening their faith and spiritual life through prayer, fasting, and biblical study. But these students are often disappointed when they encounter the rigorous academic dimension of theological education that involves critical thinking and analysis of obtuse biblical and theological ideas. There are also many Christians who feel that one does not need an academic training in Scripture and theology to correctly read

and interpret the Word of God. They claim that undergoing any academic formation in theological education is a waste of time and resources for anybody who is divinely called into the ministry. They often say, “why do you fork out for academic training in God’s Word when you have the Holy Spirit there to teach you the Bible.” There are also those who claim that the Bible is perspicacious enough to anyone who can read and understand the language in which it written. So, they strongly feel there is no need for them to acquire an academic theological education to read, comprehend, and rightly interpret the Bible. Although the Holy Spirit imparts the perspicacious truth of God’s Word to us, it is ridiculous to dismiss as valueless the rigorous academic training, which facilitates the Spirit’s illumination of God’s Word to us. It must be noted that the “secret” of the success of St. Paul, the greatest theologian and missionary of the church was not only his exceptional theological background knowledge of the Scripture he received under Gamaliel as evident in the copious use of biblical quotations in his sermon and letters but also his extreme intellectual knowledge of the culture, languages, laws, philosophy, religion and geography of the world at the time.

For this reason, an intellectual formation in Bible and theology is an indispensable requirement for engaging in pastoral ministry. Jesus took this entry requirement into the ministry seriously. He did not just call and commission his disciples to go and preach the gospel without teaching them. He had to train them for two solid years, during which he even sent them on preaching practice to apply what he has taught them (see Matthew 10). Thus, it is not enough for people to simply claim that they are called by God into the pastoral ministry and then feel that is all they need to become effective ministers of God. Their divine calling must be followed up with a sound academic training for the Holy Spirit to effectively use them to diligently read, interpret, and preach the Word of God. Indeed, in theological education, we believe that the Holy Spirit is the ultimate author and teacher of the truth of God’s word. But the Spirit does not carry out his teaching ministry without a means, a human agency. Theological educators are the human means, which the Holy Spirit uses to impart God’s word to the church. Hence, the church’s knowledge of God’s word cannot advance beyond the knowledge of its theological teachers and their products, leaders of the church.

The poor and half-barked theological education or lack of it is arguably the reason Nigeria is full of pathetic, despicable, and unskilled pastors. Sadly, these pastors do not have the theological competence to diligently study God’s Word

in the original languages and within its historical context before they preach. What these ill-informed pastors preach is either motivational sermons that are devoid of any spiritual value or outright heresy that leads people astray rather than true Word of God that saves, transforms, and forms people in Christ. Acquiring sound academic formation in Bible and theology is the good antidote to clean this ministerial mess. The theological academic formation is not designed to dampen the burning spirit and faith of those called into the public ministry of the church thereby weakening their spiritual life and commitment. No, instead, it is intended to get pastors as close to the Bible and God's knowledge as possible - to study it diligently and even in the original languages so that the pastor might be entirely captive to the Word of God. The pastor must be marinated in the Word before he preaches the Word of God to his flock.

Acquiring a sound academic training in Scripture and theology does not undermine but enhances one's divine calling for excellent ministry in the church. As a matter of fact, the training rather shapes and broadens it. The right handling of God's word requires the right academic training. We often say that the worst trained pastor is better than the best-untrained pastor in the ministry. The diligent academic training in the right reading and correct interpretation of the Bible will spare pastors from making unwarranted interpretative errors that will cause the lives of their members. The wide spread false gospel such as the prosperity gospel in Nigeria to a large extent can be attributed to "unlettered" – untrained and unskilled pastors in the ministry.

The church is living in a complicated age of doubt, skepticism, and postmodern moral relativism. The social configuration of church members is more diverse and complicated than ever before. These church members have diverse and complex spiritual needs. Contrary to Michael's claims, most of them are well educated, well-informed, and better enlightened now than ever before. Some of them are agnostics who doubt or overtly challenge the existence of God. Unless pastors are academically trained, they cannot discern these diverse and complex needs of their members and meet them accordingly. Adelaye (2010) gets it right:

In today' modern world people's minds are so scientifically conditioned that the notion of God being the creator and sustainer of the world has been greatly undermined. A sound theological education will enable the missionary to explain the Christian faith to a scientifically minded world in a way that the message of the gospel will be accepted. In order to put in place a sound theological education to meet the 21st Century challenges, there is need for a comprehensive overhauling of the theological colleges

in terms of staffing, funding, curriculum and the recruitment of candidates.

Therefore, the theological institutions need to form students into vibrant graduates who will engage in a critical Biblical and theological reflection and analysis. A course on theological research needs to be incorporated into the theological education curriculum designed to develop students' critical thinking and research skills. The academic formation needs to be interactive and engaging rather than a passive process whereby teachers of theology treat their students merely as passive learners, "bank accounts" into which they simply deposit knowledge. And then these students are expected to merely reproduce the same knowledge to their teachers when they are tested in exam. It is high time African theological educators jettisoned this traditional colonial banking system of education. They should adopt a critical dialoguing pedagogy of teaching that encourages students to engage in evaluation of existing knowledge, abstract thinking, and creation of original knowledge. The teaching method inspires learners to move beyond memorizing facts taught by the teacher to doing independent critical thinking, research, and construction of innovative ideas. As Paulo Freire (1967) argues, "education is communication and dialogue. It is not the transference of knowledge, but the encounter of Subjects in dialogue in search of the significance of the object of knowing and thinking." As academic exercise, STE should give their students the academic freedom to critically think through and evaluate the views of their professors and the dense materials assigned to them.

The third component is practicable ministerial formation. STE must prepare students for practical performance of their ministerial role in the church. This bridges the gap between theory and practice of STE. The spiritual and academic formations are not an end in themselves; they are means to an end. The end is to train students for excellent ministerial work in and outside the church. The proper understanding of the contemporary changing needs and challenges of the African church requires a pastoral expertise. STE should identify these changing needs and address them accordingly.

The consequences of not incorporating these needs and challenges into STE for effective pastoral ministry is devastating. It will create a wide gap between the theological institutions and the church for which the students are trained to serve. The church and theological institutions are partners in progress, working together for the furtherance of God's kingdom on earth. Thus, theological institutions should not alienate themselves from the church for which they are

established to serve. They need to teach what is in harmony with the needs, beliefs and practices of the church, but also where necessary they need to critique them when they are unscriptural or recast them they become obsolete. The graduates of theological education should be able to serve the church in the capacity in which they are trained.

STE that does not treat the burning contemporary issues of worship, prosperity, mystical forces, healing and deliverance with seriousness in its training for productive ministry is bound to fail. In many ways, an effective and productive ministry of pastors in Nigeria hinges on the critical but also sensitive pastoral approach to these issues. The pastors who are critical as well as sensitive to these issues have witnessed phenomenal growth of their churches than those who ignore them. The Mainline Churches have lost a sizable proportion of their membership to Pentecostal churches due to the failure to confront these issues squarely in their theological training and subsequently in their churches. The theological institutions need to train pastors with the spiritual skills to function effectively in this capacity. Otherwise, the monumental performances of most the “untrained” Pentecostal pastors in the ministry undermines the credibility of institutionalized theological training of pastors in Africa. In fact, it makes it seem even irrelevant.

STE should prepare pastoral students not only for effective ministry of the Word, right administration of the sacraments and effective delivery of liberating pastoral care; it should prepare them in the art of public prophetic witness for a critical prophetic witness in the public domain. The Nigerian society for example, is bedeviled with the evil forces of bad government, social injustice and oppression. The church and the predominantly Christian communities in northern Nigeria have been under the persecution of the northern Fulani Islamic Empire and its foot soldiers such as the Fulani herdsmen, Boko Haram and their collaborators in government. These terror groups have attacked, maimed and killed many of Christians, destroyed their property and plundered their communities with impunity. The church cannot afford to remain silent in the face of this evil. STE should equip and produce graduates who can exercise their prophetic authority to audaciously denounce the systems of injustice, bad leadership, and oppression of the church and minorities in Nigeria. The graduates of STE should have the spiritual authority and academic prowess to wisely and thoughtfully to speak truth power and subvert the forces of persecution, injustice and oppression in Nigeria. This does not mean that they should abandon their primary vocation of preaching the Word and

administering the sacrament and engage in social activism. Rather they should carry out their primary assignment faithfully without turning a blind eye to structural evils.

Theological institutions need to integrate spiritual, academic, and ministerial formative contents of theological education into a balanced whole in the training effective ministers of God's Word and administrators of sacraments. A balance needs to be maintained between them to ensure that the chapel and the classroom are equally the centers of STE where students integrate the knowledge of the head with the knowledge of the heart. An integrated STE requires that what is learned in the classroom e.g. principles of hermeneutics are applied while preaching in the chapel and what is preached in the chapel is lived out in and outside the classroom. For this reason, developing and executing an integrated STE is the antidote not only to biblical and theological ignorance and superficiality, but also to superstitious and uncritical attitude of African pastors and by extension, their members to misfortunes or illness. The integrated theological education program will certainly produce African pastors who are academically and spiritually sound for the much-needed critical and effective pastoral ministry in Africa. These pastors will have a critical and sensitive attitude in their pastoral approach to supernatural and structural evils. They will in turn establish, nurture, and tend congregations that are Spirit-filled as well as critical in their approach to the study of the Bible, the teaching and practices of the church, its leadership, and the supernatural world.

Sustainable Funding of Sound Theological Education

There is no STE without sound funding of theological institutions. The financial viability and sustainability of theological institutions is the life-wire of a sound theological education. An underfunded theological institution cannot provide sound theological education for effective and productive ministry. A poorly nourished mother cannot raise a healthy child. Seminary lecturers should not be kept for several months without salaries as if they are serving church discipline. They cannot just be productive. Theological seminary is not and supposes not to be a punishment or dumping ground for pastors who have issues with the hierarchy of the church or for those them who perform poorly in the ministry. It is a center of spiritual and academic excellence, where theologians with extraordinary spiritual life and academic credentials are assigned by the church to teach. Therefore, the church should not assign pastors to seminary to teach simply because such pastors do not have position in the church.

Theological education is not for sale. Jesus Christ who is the founder and foundation of theological education transmitted it to the disciples free of charge. He commanded them not to sale it for personal gain, for “Freely you have received, freely give” (Matthew 10:8). Therefore, even if theological education is not entirely free today, it is supposed to be qualitative, accessible, affordable, and meaningful for all those who have been called to serve the church as leaders. But the poor funding if not total negligence of theological education by many church denominations has forced theological institutions to “sale” theological education to survive. That is, they do it subtly by frequent hiking of their tuition. The consequences are enormous. The poor funding and negligence has compelled theological institutions to “secularize” theological education at the altar of government recognition.⁴⁴ They have secularized their courses, programs, and certificates to satisfy the interest of their highest bidders who acquire theological education not for a productive vocation in the church, but in the world. This has undermined the goal of ministerial formation of theological education. Given this secularization, there is no way theological institutions can develop academically and spiritually sound theological educators and ministers of God who uphold and defend the authority of the Word of God and identity of their churches.

The private proprietors of theological education have taken advantage of the secularization and commercialized theological education in Nigeria. For them, provision of theological education is a business. We have witnessed in recent years an unprecedented proliferation of private theological colleges and seminaries. The motive of these “roadside” theological institutions is neither to provide spiritual nor ministerial formation to their students. Their motive is to make money and to award cheap certificates to their students for gainful employment. Bulus Galadima (2008) observes that most of these institutions lacked learning facilities and qualified teachers who are indispensable for academic institutions. The qualifications of the proprietors themselves are questionable. Galadima further laments:

Many of these institutions award degrees to those who can buy them. In one year, you could get a B.A. In another six months or less an M.A and in another one year or less, you could get a Ph.D. or D.D. These schools, for the most part, offer classes only on weekends. This is making a mockery of academics and the gospel of Jesus Christ.

⁴⁴ Very truly, we are by no means opposed to government recognition of theological education. There is nothing bad about it. It is simply a deviation from the original vision of theological education.

The poor funding and negligence has also created the brain-drain syndrome in our theological institutions. Theological educators are largely underpaid; hence many of the highly qualified theological educators have migrated to secular educational institutions of higher learning for greener pastures. To reverse this ugly trend, the church should deliberately invest in theological education by allocating 30% of its national budget to theological education. Again, the church can set aside for example, one Sunday yearly on which all offerings, including tithe collected on that day are faithfully remitted to its seminary. Whoever withholds any amount of money realized on Theological education Sunday is guilty of “robbery.” The leaders of the church from the top to the bottom should strictly enforce theological education Sunday. They should ensure that one and only one offering is made preferably at the end of any of the “ember months” in the name of the seminary. The Provost and staff of the theological institutions may visit with congregations on that Sunday to stress the significance of day.

Conclusion

STE must make a difference in the life of its students if only they are to make a difference in the church and society. They cannot give what they haven't been given. Theological institutions should ground their students in Biblical studies, theological knowledge and pastoral care for them to deliver an effective and productive ministry, a ministry that changes lives and transforms the church and society through the right proclamation of the Word in the power of the Holy Spirit. They need to give a rigorous academic, spiritual, and ministerial formation to their students. But theological institutions cannot carry out this noble job unless they are financially viable, spiritually vibrant, and intellectually sound. The church and theological institutions need to partner with each other to provide the much-needed spiritual and academic environment conducive for the training of church leaders.

This partnership should not only be financial, but also moral collaboration. For example, the church needs to send the most qualified members with the required academic competence and good character to the seminary. Theological institutions should in turn transform them into dynamic preachers with wholesome administrative, managerial, and pastoral counseling skills needed by the 21st century African church. Unless this is done, the noble desire of theological institutions to provide sound theological education to students for productive ministry will ever remain elusive

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