

The Graduate

Al Tizon, executive minister of serve globally, Evangelical Covenant Church, affiliate associate professor of missional and global leadership, North Park Theological Seminary, Chicago, Illinois

The first book of the Bible I read when I came to faith in Christ at age seventeen was Revelation. I wanted to know how the story ended, what I signed up for. This evidently set the tone for my life as a theologian, because in my mind it still makes perfect sense to begin theology with the future of God. *God's* future of peace, justice, and joy on the other side of tears and mourning and suffering and death is so certain—so “trustworthy and true,” in the words of the seer—that I don't see the present determining the future so much as I see God's certain future determining how we should live in the present.

I mention this orientation of working backward from the destination in order to explain the approach I've taken in reflecting upon the meaning and purpose of theological education. The framing question that makes most sense to me is not, “What are the component parts of quality theological education?” but rather, “What would be the after-picture of a person who has been authentically trained in theology?” Allow me to describe marks I want to see in the graduate who has fully integrated the best of what theological education can offer.

The Graduate Loves God

Inherent in quality education is developing the ability to think critically, to question assumptions, and to be willing to abandon beliefs that don't hold up in the crucible of honest investigation. Theological education is no exception, as we help students to question their assumptions about God, truth, church, and mission. If I may boast, I can deconstruct,

interrogate, subvert, and turn tables with the best of them. However, if at the end of students' harrowing theological journey their love for God has not been deepened and strengthened precisely by the transforming process of quality education, then we have failed.

In other words, theological education must have a spiritual formation component to it. Without this component, students can study theology devoid of spirituality, devoid of God. As a sibling of philosophy, theology can be approached as dispassionately as any academic discipline. I remember a fellow doctoral student who was an atheist. Whenever we discussed his fascination with theology despite his unbelief, I would act nonchalantly and offer an occasional, "Hmm, interesting." But my insides would be screaming, "But why?!"

By way of contrast, I am reminded of the crucial relationship between theology and spirituality by the example of the Apostle Paul. Of all of his letters, the Epistle to the Romans is arguably his most theologically sophisticated. A highly educated and philosophically adept man, Paul waxed eloquent about the nature of salvation, justification, divine election, Israel, and other theological hot potatoes in the first eleven chapters. At the end of his profound theologizing, and before he shifted gears to practical theology starting in chapter 12, Paul seemed compelled by the Spirit to pen, "O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God. . . . For from God and through God and to God are all things. To God be the glory forever" (Romans 11:33a, 36, *New Testament and Psalms, An Inclusive Version*). Paul's complex theologizing climaxed with worship. Like Paul, graduates finish their grueling, assumption-smashing, paradigm-shifting education with a deeper, stronger, more mature and creative love for the maker of heaven and earth and lover of our souls.

The Graduate Lives and Imparts Biblical Wisdom

The graduate also lives and imparts biblical wisdom. I mean this in two important ways. First, graduates have a healthy respect for the Bible. I say this ultimately irrespective of the debates regarding the inspiration, infallibility, and inerrancy of Scripture. In other words, I am not saying that graduates adhere to the "three I's" of biblical authority. Rather, I am saying that after grasping the complicated history of canonization, after analyzing the books via lower and higher criticisms, after acknowledging the disparate accounts and stories that make up Scripture, and even after interrogating some of those stories through a postcolonial lens, graduates still see the indispensable value of the Bible for faith and practice. They

even appreciate it more in its ability to guide, encourage, challenge, and correct the people of God on their way to maturity. If graduates leave with more suspicion and deeper disdain than with more respect and reverence for the Bible, their theological education has failed them.

If the first point emphasizes the “biblical” part of biblical wisdom, then the second stresses the “wisdom” part. Graduates live according to biblical *wisdom*, which is not the same as head knowledge. It is possible to attain a vast wealth of knowledge from one’s theological educational journey but gain little wisdom. Each of us can probably think of one or two extremely smart people whose lives are characterized by bad relationships, frivolous debt, awful decisions, moral failure, and/or scandal—i.e., highly educated people who are not very wise. I lament, for example, what has been uncovered in the life of John Howard Yoder, one of the most brilliant theologians of the twentieth century. How can the great influencer of gospel peace and reconciliation also have rationalized sexually assaulting women throughout his career?¹

Not only do graduates live wisely, they also impart biblical wisdom to others. Wisdom—not primarily doctrines or ear-tickling new theologies or Sunday-school Bible trivia—is what exudes from the life and teaching of the one who has been excellently trained in theology for the good of the whole.

The Graduate Lives in the World but Is Not of It

The graduate lives in the tension between affirming and transforming culture. Several years ago, I wrote a book containing a chapter on inculturation (or contextualization), followed by a chapter on the need of the church to become an alternative, countercultural community.² Writing these chapters one right after the other was deliberate in order to draw out the tension between living fully in the world while “keeping oneself unstained by the world” (James 1:27). Taken together, the two chapters call the church both to love culture and to take part in culture’s transformation; to incarnate itself in the life of the neighborhood while also bearing witness to the power of the gospel to bring about the transformation that God desires in that neighborhood.

1. See David Cramer et al., “Scandalizing John Howard Yoder,” *The Other Journal* July 7, 2014, <http://theotherjournal.com/2014/07/07/scandalizing-john-howard-yoder>, accessed March 7, 2015.

2. Al Tizon, *Missional Preaching: Engage, Embrace, Transform* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 2012), 37–66.

If seminary does not teach graduates to live creatively in the tension between being in the world but not of it, they will tend either to assimilate in a given culture—perhaps offering at best a nice, non-offensive religious word that affirms all (I’m OK, you’re OK)—or to go against the culture, cultivating a “church versus world” understanding that stands in judgment over those not of the fold. Neither extreme is acceptable. The graduate recognizes this tension and lives in it, thus becoming both a lover and a transformer of culture.

The Graduate Is Committed to Interdisciplinary Praxis

Paulo Freire’s definition of praxis, “action and reflection upon the world in order to transform it,”³ has the power to sustain the theological life, and the graduate is committed to this process. More than mastering a systematic theology inside and out, graduates have learned the art of theologizing, which consists of lifelong learning, continuing to reflect deeply on Scripture and theology; as well as lifelong practice, living out the radical implications of the faith in society for the common good.

In contrast to the conventional, linear understanding of education as obtaining knowledge and skills over a period of three or four years and then applying them in a given context for the rest of one’s ministerial life, the genius of Freire’s praxis is that it is circular. Reflection and action inform each other in a mutually benefitting way—our pastoral and missional actions in the world define our ongoing reflections as much as our reflections inform our ongoing actions in the world. Praxis is a lifelong, transformative process of action and reflection, and graduates are committed to it.

An important warning for champions of praxis is that the term cannot devolve into a mere synonym for “practice,” which seems to be a tendency among liberationists and activists. Thinking—deep, reflective, research-soaked, academic investigation—must always be a part of the formula, or it is less than praxis. To be sure, praxis—action and reflection upon the world in order to transform it—challenges pure academics in that thinking for thinking’s sake is pointless and even irresponsible in light of the world’s desperate needs. But it also challenges unreflective practice, knowing that ignorance can lead to all sorts of misguided behaviors, church malpractice, and discriminatory public policies. Praxis is both

3. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Crossroad, 1970), 36, 66.

thinking and doing, doing and thinking, in a mutually beneficial process for the transformation of the world in Christ's name.

There are other perspectives for the action-reflection process besides the theological, however, and graduates mine the value of these other disciplines in order to understand a given phenomenon or movement or culture more fully. They know that theology cannot explain everything; so ideas, principles, and approaches from other disciplines, such as the social sciences, economics, area studies, literature, and the arts, are also employed in the action-reflection process.

Moreover, an interdisciplinary approach to life is more effective in serving people—important for theology graduates whether they end up in professional ministry or not. Integral to the healing arts of the church is the ministry of referral, leaning on other types of healing that psychologists, social workers, medical doctors, and others can provide. Graduates think and practice, i.e., engage in praxis, in an interdisciplinary way for the overall good of others.

The Graduate Is Committed to the Health and Growth of the Church

A commitment to interdisciplinary praxis is within the context of the graduate's commitment to the health and growth of the church. Graduates know the inadequacy of private, overly individualistic faith and are committed to participating in Christian community, despite its imperfections, blemishes, and even scandals.

Sometimes I am tempted to do what novelist Anne Rice did a few years ago. Rice shocked her fan base when she publicly came to faith in Christ in the early 2000s. But then in 2010, she wrote the following on her blog: "Today I quit being a Christian. . . . It's simply impossible for me to 'belong' to this quarrelsome, hostile, disputatious, and deservedly infamous group. For ten years, I've tried. I've failed. I'm an outsider. My conscience will allow nothing else." She went on to say, "My faith in Christ is central to my life . . . but following Christ does not mean following his followers."⁴

O the temptation to follow suit! But alas, my theology of community prevents me. In fact, I believe that commitment to community, broken as it is, makes us stronger, better people. And by the way, I'm certain

4. Anne Rice, "Reason for Quitting Christianity," www.annerice.com/Chamber-Christianity.html, accessed March 8, 2015.

that each of us contributes to the brokenness, including Anne Rice and myself! Lurking behind the pursuit of unbroken community, the perfect church is a denial of our brokenness, a disengagement with reality, an excuse not to be in deep relationship with others. To be committed to the church is to be committed to real relationships with real people, and quality theological education fosters this commitment.

I once lived in intentional Christian community with a diverse group of students and musicians called Praxis House in Upper Darby, Pennsylvania. As I compare this experience with Sunday church (which Praxis House did not replace), I can say that discipleship occurs much more deeply not when we are at our Sunday best but when we are at our Monday worst. It happens in the context of community meals, shared chores, hard meetings, invigorating conversations, and regular prayer times throughout the week. It happens in relationship. Whether they end up living in intentional Christian community or not, graduates from the best of what theological education can offer have this commitment to authentic, healthy relationships, to genuine *koinonia*, to real church.

Furthermore, graduates not only love the broken church, they also invite others to come to faith in Christ and to join the broken community. In other words, they believe in evangelism in the best sense of that word. Evangelism has gotten a bad rap in recent years, and in many respects, rightfully so; for who can't relate to the repulsion many have for impersonal formulas, tacky tracts, big-haired televangelists, and street preachers with megaphones?

Despite these things, however, the church still has good news to tell. The answer to bad examples of well-meaning but embarrassing evangelism is not to dismiss the practice altogether. In light of my own journey to faith, where certain Christians were faithful to share the gospel with me in a way to which I could respond, how can I abandon evangelism? How can I not also be the bearer of good news for others? How can I possibly not believe that the transformation of the world does not also include the transformation of individuals? Graduates long to see others experience the love and grace of God, even amid the imperfect, broken community, as part of their commitment to the health and growth of the church.

The Graduate Has a Preferential Option for the Poor

Alongside authentic, biblical evangelism and integral to the church's overall mission is the call to love mercy and do justice—yes, to serve all,

but especially the poor, oppressed, and marginalized in the world. This perspective is captured in the phrase, “preferential option for the poor,” which emerged out of the work of the Catholic Bishops of Latin America (CELAM) following Vatican II.⁵ It has since been adopted by those sympathetic to liberation theology across the denominational spectrum.

Essentially, the phrase conveys that God’s heart beats for the poor in the world. Embarrassingly, there was a relatively short season in the history of the evangelical church (with which I self-identify) wherein social justice was not considered a valid form of mission.⁶ Although vestiges of the “evangelism versus social concern” antithesis still remain, for the most part, compassion and justice ministries now occupy a significant place in evangelical theology and mission. Graduates are acutely aware of the softness of God’s heart for the world’s suffering and live and lead accordingly. The gospel is for underdogs, and graduates do their part to “conscientize” people, to draw again from the liberationist lexicon, to the plight of the poor, oppressed, and marginalized, and to take concrete action on their behalf.

The integration of evangelism and social justice constitutes what has become known as holistic or integral mission. Classic texts that have made the case for holistic mission would include Harvie Conn’s *Evangelism: Doing Justice and Preaching Grace*, Ron Sider’s *Good News and Good Works*, Melba Maggay’s *Transforming Society*, and Vinay Samuel and Chris Sugden’s *Mission as Transformation*.⁷ Call me biased, but such books populate the shelves of graduates who have earned a quality theological education—or if not these books, then other titles that demonstrate a strong commitment to holistic mission.

5. The Latin American Bishops’ Conference at Medellín (1968) affirmed the preferential option for the poor without using the exact phrase, http://www.celam.org/doc_conferencias/Documento_Conclusivo_Medellin.pdf, “Preferencia y Solidaridad,” pp. 50ff. The phrase was popularized by Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1971), and canonized at the third CELAM meeting at Puebla, Mexico (1979), http://www.celam.org/doc_conferencias/Documento_Conclusivo_Puebla.pdf, see especially chapter 1, “Opción Preferencial por los Pobres,” pp. 151ff.

6. See Al Tizon, *Transformation after Lausanne: Radical Evangelical Mission in Global-Local Perspective* (Oxford: Regnum, 2008), 17–97.

7. Harvie Conn, *Evangelism: Doing Justice and Preaching Grace* (Philipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1992); Ronald J. Sider, *Good News and Good Works: A Theology of the Whole Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999); Melba P. Maggay, *Transforming Society* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011); Vinay Samuel and Chris Sugden, eds., *Mission as Transformation: A Theology of the Whole Gospel* (Oxford: Regnum, 1999).

The Graduate Embraces Diversity and Works for Reconciliation

The church's mission of compassion and justice is of course done indiscriminately across gender, race, and class. This should go without saying, but the hope of theological education must not only include identifying and purging prejudice from the hearts of students; graduates must also become *champions* of gender equality, racial righteousness, and economic justice. Graduates fight against sexism, racism, classism, and all other injustices, beginning in their own hearts and then extending this fight to society.

This affirmation turns graduates into reconcilers in the world, challenging human-made lines in the sand and creating spaces for enemies to embrace. At the very least, this means affirming women as full partners in ministry, ordaining them alongside men according to their gifts and not their gender. It means creating healing spaces for black, white, and brown peoples to repent, forgive, be reconciled, and eventually to become partners, working together for the sake of the gospel. It means not favoring the rich among us and in fact giving the seats of honor to the poor and vulnerable.

This commitment to diversity and reconciliation can and must inform the structures and practices of theological educational institutions. This includes not only specific diversity-related courses, but the commitment to diversity in every course offering. It means mandatory diversity in the required readings of all courses. It also means diverse faculty and administrators. Such structural commitment ensures that graduates of this kind of school embrace diversity and engage in the ministry of reconciliation.

The Graduate Demonstrates Humility

And finally there's humility, with which I have chosen to cap my list. Graduates can be all of the above—they can love God, live and impart biblical wisdom, live in the world but not of it, be committed to interdisciplinary praxis and to the health and growth of the church, serve the poor, and embrace diversity and reconciliation—but if they are all of this without humility, something has gone awry along the way. Knowledge puffs up, as Paul remarked (1 Corinthians 8:1), and knowledge of God has the potential to make us the puffiest. God spare the church and world from know-it-all, condescending, Greek-spouting seminary graduates!

At its best, theological education produces not arrogance but humility. Such humility emerges from our acceptance of at least two realities. First, to quote Paul again, “We see through a glass darkly” (1 Corinthians

13:12). This should remind us of the limitations of all knowledge. We can't know everything. Our minds have been clouded and our eyes blurred by the limitations of our traditions, the dysfunctions of our upbringing, the brokenness of culture and society, and the sin in our own hearts. Insofar as we are products of these things—and we unavoidably are—we cannot see it all. The graduate knows this acutely and does not “think of themselves more highly than they ought to think” (Romans 12:3).

Beyond our disability to see perfectly, humility is engendered by recognizing the vastness of God, the mystery of God. Even if we could see clearly, we are confronted with a force, a personality, far more complex than even our most enlightened selves could fully take in. Indeed, the All-Mysterious can be known because of God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ—but fully known? The impossibility of grasping the fullness of the Divine keeps the graduate forever “walking humbly with God” (Micah 6:8).

Let this be true of all of us.