

KOREAN EVANGELICAL THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

성경과 신학교육: 성경을 어떻게 가르칠 것인가?

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The Bible in Theological Education

Though known more for his tenure as professor at Princeton Theological Seminary, Geerhardus Vos spent his early teaching years at a small theological college in Grand Rapids that would later become Calvin Theological Seminary. As he began his teaching career, this young professor of didactic and exegetical theology delivered his inaugural address titled “The Prospects of American Theology,” offering insightful analysis of culture of Christianity in America and the needed theological method and its proper place within the church.¹ As he prepared for the inaugural, on his mind was the advice of his father Jan Henrick Vos, himself a minister. His word to his son came from 2 Timothy 2:15: “Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth.”² These words of advice from father to a son, not unlike the relationship between Paul and his protégé when the words were written, force us to re-assess and reflect on our own teaching and ministries as we engage in preparation of young men and women for the church.

Despite the seemingly obvious centrality of the Word in church and seminaries, the growing biblical illiteracy has been evident for some time. In recent surveys of Christianity and

¹ Geerhardus Vos, “The Prospects of American Theology,” trans. By Ed. M. van der Maas, *Kerux* 20(2005): 12-52. See the insightful analysis of Bradley J. Bitner, “The Theological Vision of Geerhardus Vos: Theological Education and Reformed Ministry,” *Themelios* 46.3(2021): 641-64.

² James T. Dennis, “Editor’s Introduction” in Vos, “Prospects,” 12.

the Bible, ownership of and access to Bibles continued unabated, but trust and knowledge of the Bible continues to decline.³ But biblical illiteracy is a cause for concern not only in society or in churches, but also in seminaries. Though anecdotal, after serving for 25 plus years, one seminary president lamented that when he began his work, 75 percent of the first-year seminarians passed the mandatory first-year English Bible exams. By the end of his tenure, as many as 75 percent of the students failed the same exam in their first year. During those twenty-five years, theological education in North America has undergone a transformation in North America. Whether the reasons for transformation are commercial, pedagogical, or changing consumer tastes, seminaries and theological institutions have quickly jettisoned original language courses, once considered foundational for studying the Word, reduced course requirements for graduation especially for the MDivs, and shifted from integrated and coherent curriculum to a more flexible and modified forms of education.⁴ It is too convenient to oversimplify the factors and reasons for these transformations – and certainly each provides benefits and affordances that should not be overlooked – these changes inevitably change the quality, depth, and preparations of the future leaders in the church.

Given our current cultural, economic, and pedagogic disruptions in North American theological landscape, it is important to initiate new and intentional conversations within

³ See for example the 2016 study by Barna and American Bible Society titled *The Bible in America: Mapping Bible Engagement in a Changing Culture*. As George Gallup and Jim Castelli conclude in their own survey, “Americans revere the bible – but, by and large, they don’t read it. And because they don’t read it, they have become a nation of biblical illiterates.” Fewer than half of all adults can name the four gospels, most cannot identify the disciples, and majority cannot name even five of the Ten Commandments.

⁴ Association of Theological Schools is the main accrediting agency for theological institutions in the United States and Canada. Their longitudinal research and observations can be found at www.ats.edu. In particular, the state of the seminaries is summarized in this report - <https://www.ats.edu/files/galleries/emp-summary-report.pdf>.

seminaries and churches to discern pathways for ministry readiness for future pastors and leaders. As one involved in theological education for the glory of God and flourishing of the church in North America, it is my conviction that the pattern of readiness richly articulated by our theological traditions need continued retrieval and rearticulation, not as the final word but as a constant reminder of the purpose of theological education and source of humility as it often exposes potential blind spots.

Another Inaugural Address: J. Gresham Machen

As Vos' inaugural address provides a window into his theological vision to be unpacked over decades in his teaching and writing, the inaugural address by J. Gresham Machen on September 25, 1929, titled "Westminster Theological Seminary: Its Purpose and Plan" offers a glimpse of his theological vision and the guiding principles of the newly established institution.⁵ The address is not only significant because of its important to a particular institution of theological education, but also provides a glimpse into the tensions and divisions in the midst of the Fundamentalist-Modernist controversy of the early 20th-century. The founding of the new seminary was necessitated by the state of theological higher education where "one by one" these institutions "have drifted away," conforming themselves to the general change and preferences of the age.⁶ After resisting such a drift for over a century, Machen now believed that his former place of employment, Princeton Theological Seminary, had irreparably changed its theological

⁵ J. Gresham Machen, "Westminster Theological Seminary: Its Purpose and Plan," in *J. Gresham Machen: Selected Shorter Writings*, ed. D. G. Hart (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2004), 187-194. The address was delivered at the first convocation of Westminster Theological Seminary on September 25, 1929, and appeared in *The Presbyterian* 99(October 10, 1929): 6-9. Reprinted in *What is Christianity?* ed. Ned Bernard Stonehouse (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951).

⁶ Machen, "Westminster Theological Seminary," 193.

commitment, making it effectively “dead” and “lost to the evangelical cause.”⁷ Indicative of his seeming contrarian pursuit in light of the changing theological landscape and his sense of institutional isolation is his opening statement: “Our new institution is devoted to an unpopular cause; it is devoted to the service of one who is despised and rejected by the world and increasingly belittled by the visible church, the majestic Lord and Savior who is present to us in the Word of God.”⁸

Whether one agrees or not with his historical assessment of the age and his previous seminary, what is relevant for our discussion is the priorities he outlines in the address for theological education. *First, the purpose of theological education is to produce “specialists in the Bible.”*⁹ Far from being a marketing slogan, Machen is articulating what a seminary is and is not. In an age of specializations, a seminary’s purpose is to train and send out specialists. He considers theological education to be no less specialized and technical than medical, engineering, or other academic endeavors. This also means that seminaries are *not* primarily for training “lay workers.”¹⁰ Though he acknowledges the usefulness of learned laity, he nevertheless emphasizes that “a theological seminary is an institution of higher learning whose standards should not be inferior to the highest academic standards that anywhere prevail.”¹¹ In addition, this specialization is focused on one subject, the Bible. He states unequivocally, “The Bible, then, which testifies of Christ, is the center and core of that with which Westminster Seminary has to

⁷ Machen, “Westminster Theological Seminary,” 194.

⁸ Machen, “Westminster Theological Seminary,” 187.

⁹ Machen, “Westminster Theological Seminary, 193.

¹⁰ Machen, “Westminster Theological Seminary, 189.

¹¹ Machen, “Westminster Theological Seminary,” 189.

do.”¹² Referring to the seminary’s purpose of training “specialists in the Bible” as a contract, he exhorts his audience: “Please do not forget it; please do not call on us for a product that we are not endeavoring to provide. If you want specialists in social science or in hygiene or even in ‘religion’ (in the vague modern sense), then you must go elsewhere for what you want. But if you want men who know the Bible and know it in something more than a layman’s sort of way, then call on us. If we can give you such men, we have succeeded; if we cannot give them to you, we have failed.”¹³ No one could accuse Machen of lacking clarity in articulating the primary purpose of the seminary.

Perhaps this emphasis on academic study of the Bible is not surprising given Machen’s academic credentials. Though often known as a churchman who started a new denomination, an academic administrator who founded a new seminary, and an apologist who wrote stridently against the prevailing culture and ethos of his time, he was first and foremost a biblical scholar, a fact “largely forgotten” and “not been adequately presented” according to one historian.¹⁴ At a time when traditional study of Scripture was challenged in the churches and academic halls, Machen’s writing, especially his *The Origin of Paul’s Religion* and *The Virgin Birth of Christ*, represented “the high point of conservative evangelical scholarship.”¹⁵ Contrary to the common isolation and disengagement of conservative biblical scholars during the turn of the twentieth century, Machen’s conspicuous engagement with critical scholarship upholding the Scriptures as

¹² Machen, “Westminster Theological, Seminary,” 188.

¹³ Machen, “Westminster Theological Seminary,” 193.

¹⁴ David B. Calhoun, “Forward,” in *Toward a Sure Faith: J. Gresham Machen and the Dilemma of Biblical Criticism, 1881-1915*, by Terry A. Chrisope (Great Britain: Mentor, 2000).

¹⁵ Mark A. Knoll, *Between Faith and Criticism: Evangelicals, Scholarships, and the Bible in America* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), 54.

historical, supernatural, and inerrant was both admired and reviled. It is not far fetched to assume that Machen had these academic opponents in mind when he states, “Most seminaries, with greater or lesser clearness and consistency, regard not the Bible alone, or the Bible in any unique sense, but the general phenomenon of religion as being the subject matter of their course. It is the duty of the theological student, they maintain, to observe various types of religious experience, attested by the Bible considered as a religious classic, but attested also by the religious conditions that prevail today.”¹⁶ But his call to focus on the Bible in theological education is not simply his reaction to the academic environment or a formulation of a distinctive characteristic of a new seminary, this has been his driving focus from the beginning of his academic career. In “History and Faith,” Machen’s inaugural address upon being appointed as assistant professor of New Testament at Princeton Theological Seminary, he carefully and steadily stressed the historical character of Christianity with the conclusion that since the Bible contains the gospel – a fact no one then denied – acceptance of the Bible as history is foundation to belief. He concludes, “If the Bible were *false*, your faith would go.”¹⁷ The centrality of the Word of God for faith, theology, and theological education has been a consistent thread that connects the writings of Machen.

Second, the structure of theological education has to be integrated. Having prioritized the Bible as the foundation of theological education, much of his address focuses on the details of the curriculum built upon the foundation of the Bible as Machen provides a running commentary on the proper order of theological education and the necessary integration of the

¹⁶ Machen, Westminster Theological Seminary, 188.

¹⁷ J. Gresham Machen, “History and Faith,” *Princeton Theological Review* 13(1915):337-51. Reprint in Hart, *Selected Shorter Writings*, 97-108.

various disciplines. First order of importance is the original languages. He is adamant that to know the Scriptures, we must first understand the language in which the Bible was given. Pursuing subjects like biblical exegesis or biblical interpretation can be done in translations, he acknowledges, but “[i]f the students of our seminary can read the Bible not merely in translations, but as it was given by the Holy Spirit to the church, then they are prepared to deal intelligently with the question what the Bible means.” Given his training as a classicist, the emphasis on original language is not surprising. He elsewhere penned a brief article titled “The Minister and His Greek Testament” where he pointedly begins, “The widening breach between the minister and his Greek Testament may be traced to two principal causes. The modern minister objects to his Greek New Testament or is indifferent to it, first, because he is becoming less interested in his Greek, and second, because he is becoming less interested in his New Testament.”¹⁸ It should be acknowledged that education Machen received and common in his time for those who had access to education, required the level of linguistic competency uncommon in our day and age. Nevertheless, the importance place on the acquisition and proficiency in biblical languages should be noted with appreciation.

Only when a student is able to approach the Bible in the original languages and with the recognition of the Bible as “a plain book addressed to plain men,” then and only then the student is ready to trace “the history of the revelation that it sets forth.”¹⁹ The focus of such a discipline, called “biblical theology,” is the study of the progress of God’s self-revelation through various fathers and prophets until the revelation culminates in the coming of the Son. Machen explains

¹⁸ J. Gresham Machen, “The Minister and His Greek Testament,” *The Presbyterian* 88(1918):8-9. Reprint in Hart, *Shorter Writings*, 210-213.

¹⁹ Machen, “Westminster Theological Seminary,” 190.

that this discipline of seeing the unity of the Old and New Testaments and the continuity of God's revelation is meant to be pervasive in the curriculum, making appearances in each of the biblical courses as "a vital part" of theological training. Knowing the original languages, sufficient knowledge of the Bible, and study of biblical theology prepare the future minister to tackle what he states is "the very center" of the seminary's curriculum, systematic theology. In what ways is this discipline different than biblical theology? It differs in that systematic theology "seeks to set forth, no longer in the order of the time when it was revealed, but in the order of logical relationships, the grand sum of what God has told us in his Word."²⁰

Anticipating objections, Machen rejects the thought that systematic theology is contrary to the Word or that the discipline is a "mere record of human seeking after God" that offer contradicting human opinions. Rather systematic theology rightly conceived is built upon and dependent on the exegetical studies of the Old and Testament and done carefully in the original languages. In fact, he believes that a system of theology is actually necessitated by the Word, as an outworking of its coherence and consistency. He explains, "[W]e believe...God has spoken to us in his Word, and that he has given us not merely theology, but a system of theology, a great logically consistent body of truth." By "systems", Machen has in mind the confessional documents that came through "Augustine and Calvin to our own Presbyterian church." Far from being additions to the Bible or simply "man-made," these documents are "truth" precisely because these properly and correctly summarize the teachings of the Scriptures. Rejecting or withholding these documents "impoverish our message by setting for less than what we find the Scriptures to contain."²¹

²⁰ Machen, "Westminster Theological Seminary," 191.

²¹ Machen, "Westminster Theological Seminary," 191.

Having unpacked the theological curriculum envisioned by articulating a case for the original languages, biblical theology, and systematic theology, Machen then turns to the history of the Christian church. Interaction with history is a necessary step to a comprehensive study of the Word: “Our message is based, indeed, directly upon the Bible; we derive the content of it not from the experience of past ages, but from what God has told us in the Word. But it would be a mistake to ignore what past generations, on the basis of God’s Word, have thought and said and done.”²² He further explains the church history not only completes the study of the Word but further sheds light on our present, reminding us that often “the darkest hour has often preceded the dawn,” exhorting his hearers and listeners to remain theological faithful in the midst of the current controversy.²³ Therefore the study of the church in history is not a luxury and superfluous, rather it is an extension of the study of the Word not only as interpreted in history but also practiced and applied by the church.

Unity and integration mark Machen’s explanation of theological curriculum. Each discipline although different and unique in methodology and process is united in its singular attention to the Word. Moreover, a wholistic study of the Word necessitates the integration of all these disciplines with each building upon one another with the foundation and beginning point being the study of the Word.

Finally, *as the integrated curriculum prepares students be specialists in the Bible, the ultimate goal of theological education is to produce messengers of the Word.* Throughout the address, he alludes to the kind of ministers he hopes the seminary produces. Descriptions like expert, learned, common sensical, courageous, focused and others may be used to describe the

²² Machen, “Westminster Theological Seminary,” 192.

²³ Machen, “Westminster Theological Seminary,” 192.

graduates that the new seminary hoped to produce. But as Machen closes his overview of theological curriculum with a focus on homiletics and practical theology where experienced teachers and pastors offer corrections and model “the right way” to be followed, he summarizes the ideal minister as “a man with a message.” This minister who knows, understands, and himself believes in the message of Christ in the Word that he is able to deliver the message “to reach the hearts and minds of men.” This ecclesiastical and evangelistic outcome is the ultimate goal of seminary education where the seminary exists for the churches.

This theological vision of Machen has had profound influence upon many of the seminaries and traditions in North America and perhaps even in Korea. I recently came across an essay that explored the legacy of Yune-Sun Park, a Reformed theologian in Korea who passed away in 1988. He was in his own right a Machen in Korea. After attending Westminster Theological Seminary in 1934-36, he established seminaries and denominations, engaged in ecclesiastical and theological battles of his time, trained hundreds if not thousands men preparing for ministry, and published a commentary on every book of the Bible, his most important contribution. According to the author, Paul learned exegetical theology under Machen from whom “he learned how to engage the opinions of historical critics, understand the authority of Scripture, and study hermeneutics.”

Yet Another Inaugural Address: Gisbertus Voetius

Such a brief summary of idealized theological education admittedly raises more questions that require careful attention. For one, has this ideal been realized in the actual curriculum of the

institution and moreover is his a idiosyncratic vision of theological education that should understood and certainly applied more critically? Though answering those and other questions are beyond the scope of the talk and my ability, it is relevant for this discussion to see Machen not as a novelty but a continuation of the Reformation model of theological education and ministry preparation.

Importance of theological education in the time of the Reformation is well summarized by one scholar: “It can easily be argued that one of the primary roots of the Reformation was curricular reform in the university, specifically the reform of the theological curriculum.”²⁴ As increasing number of studies provide support for this thesis, a brief overview of yet another inaugural address that outlines the theological vision of a theologian in the time of the Reformed Orthodoxy is instructive is seeing Machen’s vision in context.

Gisbertus Voetius (1589-1676) distinguished himself as a pastor, missiologist, churchman, professor, and theologian who upon appointment as professor at the University of Utrecht delivered an inaugural address titled “Exercises in Piety for Young Scholars,” outlining his own vision for theological education.²⁵ As one of the delegates to the Synod of Dordt whose convictions on baptism and mission contributed to the confessional document’s surprising practical and global perspective, his church focused convictions are in full display in his

²⁴ Richard A. Muller, “Calling, Character, Piety, and Learning: Paradigms for Theological Education in the Era of Theological Orthodoxy,” in *After Calvin: Studies in the Development of a Theological Tradition* (London: Oxford University, 2003), 105. Previously published as “The Era of Protestant Orthodoxy,” in *Theological Education in the Evangelical Tradition*, ed. by D. G. Hart and R. Albert Mohler Jr. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 103-128.

²⁵ Gisbert Voetius, *Exercitia et bibliotheca studiosi theologiae* (Utrecht, 1651).

address.²⁶ Having emphasized the need for personal faith and piety rather than status or previous training, Voetius then outlines the ideal preparation for theological students. First, in preparation for the study of theology, Voetius advises a sevenfold pattern of study that includes *lectio, meditatio, auditio, scriptio, collatio, collegia, and enotatio*.²⁷ These are stages explain how one studies beginning with “reading,” a threefold task of reading surveys, experts in the field, and the classics of significant authors. Then the student moves to “meditations” upon the topics and “listening or hearing” of the teachings of Scripture and various theological topics related to the subject. Then comes “written composition” where the student learns to articulate on his own the subjects being discussed. His comprehension is then further strengthened by “gathering” and “recapitulation” of information leading to “internalization” of the material being studied. This proposed method “point toward a highly structured but also a carefully integrated pattern of education designed with a view toward mastery of the field both in theory and practice.”²⁸

Second, having been prepared for theological study through disciplined engagement in a general study, Voetius prescribes a three-part course of study specific to ministry preparation. The first-part of this study focuses “textual or biblical, systematic or dogmatic, and disputative (*elenctica*) and problematic theology.”²⁹ Though the disciplines are distinguished there is “the

²⁶ See Joel E. Kim, “The Relevance of Dort for Today,” in *The Synod of Dort: Historical, Theological, and Experiential Perspectives*, eds. Joel R. Beeke and Martin I. Klauber (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2020): 219-232.

²⁷ Voetius, *Exercitia et bibliotheca*, 37-41, 48-56, 60-66; See Muller, “Calling, Character,” 111-12.

²⁸ Muller, “Calling, Character,” 112.

²⁹ Muller, “Calling, Character,” 113.

proper order of learning and of argument” that proceeds from the study of Scripture and “of exegetically elaborated *loci communes* to ‘positive or systematic theology’ and then, only on that foundation, to polemical topics.”³⁰ This is then supplemented by the study of disciplines outside of Scripture such as church history and language studies that provide further proficiency in the biblical language. His recommendation to such Aramaic, Syriac, and Arabic not only connects Voetius to the humanists, it further highlights the necessity of approaching the Scriptures in the original.³¹ In addition to the study of Scripture, theology, and what is commonly referred to as apologetics, the second-part of the study involves practical aspects of pastoral ministry, focusing on topics such as preaching, church polity, disputative or apologetics, and contemporary history.³² The emphasis at this point is the skills and tools necessary for preaching, teaching, and leading a church ministry. The third and final part of theological study is an extended engagement in church ministry.³³ Instead of engaging in new subjects in an academic setting, students engaged in an earlier version of “internship” or “extended education,” which consists of “repetition and supplementation” of the theology studies and skills learned.³⁴ This structured and integrated curriculum – focusing on theology, ministry skills, and church internship – becomes the model for ministry preparation for the subsequent generations.

³⁰ Muller, “Calling, Character, 113.

³¹ Voetius, *Exercitia et bibliotheca*, 44-45; Muller, “Calling, Character,” 114.

³² Muller, “Calling, Character,” 114.

³³ Voetius, *Exercitia et bibliotheca*, 69; Muller, “Calling, Character,” 115.

³⁴ Muller, “Calling, Character,” 114.

Finally, the goal of any study and especially theological education is not only the growth in knowledge and intellect but also the piety and Christian love of the individual.³⁵ The study of theology should draw the student “closer to God through continual meditation on sacred things” with the help of “frequent hearing of sermons, catechization, reading, and meditating on Scripture” and “private prayer.” But this is not an exercise engaged alone, but in a community in which regular conversation and evaluation encourages the maturation of the individual. It is worth noting that “[t]he piety and devotion of the faculty, all of whom should have passed through a similar training, is assumed by Voetius: the professors in the theological faculty serve, thus, as pastors within the institution and consistently engage in the spiritual formation and correction of their students.”³⁶ Through the theological curriculum, both piety and learning are integrated and inseparable where interplay of theological curriculum, community of learning, and professors as pastors are essential foundations for ministry readiness.

Conclusion

Current overlapping technological, cultural, and economic disruptions have caused churches, seminaries, and theological institutions to re-evaluate its mission and purpose. As many of us engage in this intentional conversations with our churches to discern how seminaries may best prepare students for ministry readiness into the future, it is my personal and sincere conviction that the pattern of readiness richly articulated by our theological traditions that focuses on the expertise and confidence in the Scriptures be retrieved and rearticulated for the new environment and generation for the strengthening of theological institutions, flourishing of the churches, and maturation of all believers.

³⁵ Voetius, *Exercitia et bibliotheca*, 27-28; Muller, “Calling, Character,” 112.

³⁶ Voetius, *Exercitia et bibliotheca*, 31-33; Muller, “Calling, Character,” 112.

