

## **What Is Our Business?**

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I can think of several reasons why the Auburn report does not have to be taken seriously by those of us who bear responsibility for the direction of our seminaries. Some of the reasons are better than others. But none of them really holds up. Since we seminary types are skilled, though, at thinking of reasons why we need to look at all sides of an issue, it is necessary to name some of the excuses in order to lay them aside.

While I was thinking about what to say concerning this report, I received a call from the local Rotary Club—although I am inclined to think it was really a call from the Lord. The Rotary people wanted me to speak at one of their meetings. The requested topic: what is Fuller Seminary? The Rotary Club has its meetings in a private club right next to our campus, and in order to get there the members have to walk past the Fuller Seminary entrance sign. One day someone asked his friend, What kind of place is that? Neither of them knew, so they asked others at lunch. No one else had the answer. So they decided to ask the Fuller president to come and talk about his school.

There went one of my main reasons for not taking this report seriously. I hadn't thought that it applied to my seminary. But now I had to face an important fact: Fuller Seminary is, on any given weekday a community of well over 1500 souls carrying out our business at a two-block distance from City Hall, and not one person at a Rotary Club breakfast could give a decent account of what we are about. "Speak, Lord, for thy servant heareth."

But if the Rotary Club folks *were* to have a decent understanding of our mission, and if we *were* doing all we should be doing as a seminary that resides in the heart of Pasadena, what would they know about us? What do we owe the immediate community in which we find ourselves? Do we really want seminaries to be centers of community activism? Is that what theological schools should be about?

There are many ways to articulate the excuses that allow us to dismiss this subject and get on with other things. Chastened Protestant liberals (and those evangelicals who are eager to keep chastening them) can point to the widely discussed defects associated with the influence of “the Social Gospel” on theological education. The danger of making too much of the social role of seminaries is that we create an elite corps of social activists who are poorly equipped for such important tasks as evangelism and pastoral care. To be sure, there was something noble about a time when State Department officials would call Reinhold Niebuhr for advice on foreign policy questions, or when the endorsement of clergy made a difference for candidates in municipal or state elections. But was that also a time when seminaries produced the kinds of pastors that we need today? Did mainline churches flourish under such leadership? Or, to focus on a phenomenon that is more contemporary, now that the patterns of Christian activism have shifted a bit, do we really want to produce evangelical pastors who are guided by the agenda of the Christian Right?

Obviously we ought never to ignore the lessons of past or present for our understanding of the social role of theological schools. But neither do those examples give us legitimate grounds for refusing to think about how we can be

more effective in our immediate communities. The fact that some people have pursued the task in the wrong manner—or in a way that produced excesses—does not mean that we should back away from the subject altogether.

The underlying question, of course, is the role of the seminary *as seminary* in addressing issues of public life. Back in the days when some of us in the evangelical world spent quite a bit of our time urging our fellow evangelicals to get more involved in “social concerns” (yes, there was such a day, only a few decades ago), some of the more sophisticated arguments that we ran up against—a refreshing change from the proof-texting references to “Render unto Caesar” and “My Kingdom is not of this world”—focused directly on what is properly included in the mission of the church. Sometimes the case was put in terms of the institutional church’s *competence*: “The clergy are not experts on social problems; they are doctors of the soul.” At other times the argument focused on the church’s *authority*: “God calls the church to address the enduring issues of sin and salvation, and not topics having to do with social specifics.”

It takes little imagination to transfer these arguments to the seminary context. It’s not our “business” to try to influence the cities and towns in which we carry on our teaching ministries. And furthermore, we don’t necessarily have that kind of competence. We are already too burdened down with new practical areas of concern: singles ministries, youth ministries, church administration, counseling, gender sensitivities, spirituality. To be asked to add community activism to this ever-increasing agenda is simply too much.

My response is a pious one, but that does not count against it in my way of viewing things: if God is the one issuing the mandate, then we have no excuses

for not obeying. And I cannot avoid the conviction that God is precisely the source of our obligation in the public arena. The schools in the neighborhood of my seminary's campus are not doing an adequate job of educating the children of low-income families. I have to walk only a minute from my office to see a homeless person roaming the streets. City council meetings debate "culture wars" issues in tones that often lead to angry confrontations. Students in our New Testament classes have commuted from South Central Los Angeles communities where drive-by shootings have occurred the night before.

How can we *not* address those topics directly as a seminary community? I know, of course, that there are different ways of "addressing" issues of community life. But then, let us at least name the varying modes of address. And let us examine ourselves to be sure that the approaches we claim to be adopting have some match with the problems we claim to be addressing.

There is much room for pluralism in theological education as seminaries develop and pursue strategies for involvement in local communities. Let the pluralism flourish! But let the discussion of such concerns also flourish, lest our refusal to talk honestly to each other about such matters be the occasion for unfaithfulness. For those of us who know in our hearts that such a wide-ranging conversation is long overdue, this report is a gift we dare not file away.