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Curriculum and Character Development in Theological Education

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Abstract

This paper discusses the issue of character development in theological education; and it posits that God has His own curriculum to mould chosen and gifted students as well as lecturers for holy living and loving service using training that is informal, non-formal and formal. The writer explores the methodology of God's curriculum for theological educators to learn how to equip others to do the work so that everyone is adequately equipped to use the gifts he or she has in the ministry. This paper uses prescriptive approach and proposes that God's holy-just-loving character should be the aspiration of theological education in the curricular plans; and keeping in mind that in every teaching-learning process there is one law that supersedes all others. That is, the law of love that is holy and just, this fusion of God's character should be integrated as the cornerstone in curricular plans in theological educational institutions.

Introduction

Those who feel that theological education does not effectively equip its graduates, especially character wise, do complain, "What kind of pastors are you producing in our seminary or college of theology." Is the problem with the curriculum? There are many problem areas related to curriculum but this paper will address one of such problems. The issue is whether our curriculum is incapable of doing intentional character development or teaching spiritual disciplines. Unfortunately there is a clear lack of moral character in some of those

who graduated from theological institutions. More so, some excellence curricula are taught by some lecturers whose lives negate what they are teaching. The issue of character development is crucial in theological education; and this paper posits that God has His own curriculum to mould pastors in training and pastors that are training pastors for holy living and loving service using training that is informal, non-formal and formal. "An excellence curriculum plan understands the part of the task that is ours to do. It builds on the experience and knowledge that our students already have and equips them for the ministries to which God has called them" (Hardy, 2007, p. 124).

There are operative terms in this paper that need definitions for the sake of clarity such as curriculum, theological education and character development. Curriculum is from a Latin word *currere,* which means "to run a race." The race is not primarily that of an intensive weekend seminar or an exhausting semester, but of life! Note that a *Curriculum Vitae,* our C.V., describes everything of importance to us (so far) in our existence: birth, marriage, children, education, work experience, honours received, etc. In theological education we are participating in a life-long curriculum that God is working out in us. For those who have been adopted as God's children, He has a wonderful plan for our lives cum theological education (see Romans 8:28; Phil. 1:6; 2:13). What then is theological education?

Education is a process of teaching, training and learning, especially in schools or colleges, to improve knowledge and develop skills (Hornby, 2015, p. 490). It is central to any society's civilization, growth, development, security, stability and sustainability. One of the functions of education is to give a man or a woman systematic assistance in the development of his or her whole self, intellectually, morally, spiritually, socially, economically, politically, physically, domestically, aesthetically and recreationally (Ajala, 2002, p. 195). Education gives men and women the power that liberates, transforms and ushers into a world of human possibilities. That is why all progressive societies give it priority. Theological education (clergy training) meets these needs and beyond. It is the teaching, training and learning or equipping, of men and women called by God, rooted in God's moral vision and perspective. Its main motive is to inculcate

moral values and divine knowledge, which can guarantee societal security and stability, as well as foster skills and opportunities that are of immense benefit to the Gospel of the kingdom of God and human flourishing (Agang, 2016, p. 1). In other words, theological education is Christian character formation process in the lives of called men and women in training (Das, 2015, p. 11).

The next term to be defined is character development. The word *character* comes from the Greek *charassein*, which means to scratch or engrave. When we say something 'has character,' we imply definite, striking and perhaps excellent features. A person has character if he or she is characterized by such traits as truthfulness, courage, justice and compassion (Roberts, 1995, p. 65). Character in theological education is not rules but rooted in the changeless character of God. Character development in this context means the life that seeks to emulate God's character. What is God like? The development of Godlike character or behaviour focuses on three predominant divine traits: holiness, justice and love (Hill, 1997, p. 15). Curriculum in theological education should help the students to develop a lifestyle that reflects God's holy-just-loving character.

Curriculum in Theological Education

For theological education training institutions, curriculum can be understood in several different ways:

- As a list of subjects offered.
- As an instructional plan for any one of those subjects, using a variety of learning experiences to lead a person towards achieving certain planned outcomes.
- As a programmed piece of instruction for a specific course (such as curriculum for teaching computer skills, leadership management, or a 13-week series of Sunday school lessons).
- As the overall effects of an entire educational package.

According to Hardy (2007, p.125), when one considers the impact of a training institution, it is this latter piece that is most important. The curriculum includes everything we do that contributes to the growth of students.

In order to understand the implications of the various typologies of theological education in our contemporary world, one needs to ask the question, "What is it that makes something *theological* education?" There are six dimensions to the answers considering various models of training:

- The Content – that is about theology and about God.
- The Purpose – this would include not only knowledge but also the development of character, holiness and skills in life.
- The Method – defines how the training is to be done.
- The Ethos – is the individual and communal spirituality that permeates the whole process of education and training.
- The Context – identifies where the training takes place.
- The People – how does the faith of those involved define the education – both the content and the process? (Das, 2015, p. 18).

In putting these answers in theological education perspective Kassis asserts further that there are four kinds of theological training.

The first is *training in theology* for the laity in the churches. The purpose is teaching Christians about their faith, to answer their questions and doubts, for them to understand how to express their faith in their churches and community, and to have the appropriate tools for Bible study. This is to enable believers to find the bases of and coherence in one's beliefs.

The second is *training in ministerial theology* for full-time and bi-vocational Christians to become pastors, ministers and teachers for the ministries of the church. The aim is to equip them to minister effectively through preaching, teaching, discipling, and meet the practical, emotional and social needs of a congregation. In order to do this they need both academic and practical theology.

The third type is *training in professional theology* for the educators of those involved in ministry. Professional theologians are academics and are not necessarily involved in church ministries but should understand the needs of the church and the various ministries where

the graduates minister. These ones are not only professional theologians but also know how to train ministers of the gospel.

The fourth type according Kassis, is *training in academic theology*. Situated in a university, academic theology is not necessarily rooted in Christian doctrine, theology or philosophy. It is the study of God and is rooted in anthropology, philosophy and world religions. Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), a German theologian is attributed to have been the originator of academic theology. Somehow, evangelical seminaries incorporate this model in their curriculum. There is an emphasis on character formation and the moulding of worldview, as well as the "professional studies" required to be a pastor or in some kind of Christian ministry, though the emphasis is on the theory and knowledge (Das, 2015, p. 13).

In any model of training or type of training in theology, curricular plans are how we structure the entire educational process. There are two basic pieces to any curricular plan: content to be taught and person to be equipped in character and for ministry. We need to learn this. Theological institutions have often emphasized one of these at the expense of the other. Hardy (2007, p. 126) explains better, "Content can become a sacred box of accumulated wisdom or traditions to be poured into a student's head, irrespective of how useful the material may be for that student. Alternatively, focusing only on an individual's equipping or formation may reduce training to the mastery of techniques, with little self-understanding and minimal biblical or historical foundations on which to stand." Hardy stresses that both content and practice are important. This paper posits that we need to design the content of our curriculum that will lead to a practical transformation of the total human being. Building intra-and interdisciplinary connections for theological education students and lecturers for the kingdom mandate.

However, while a really experienced and good lecturer can help students to achieve high marks on content exams and (within the capacity and abilities of the student) to achieve much in skill development, no human personnel can change the human heart or ultimately re-shape the mind. Transformation or character development is the work of God. Therefore, in our curricular plan, we must be aware of our role within God's life-long curriculum for the

individual student. Lecturers need to know what God has already been doing in a person's life and then find appropriate ways to facilitate the continuing process of learning and growing towards maturity and character.

Character Development in Theological Education

Transforming the human heart is the work of God as earlier said. So to what extent can curriculum in our theological institutions facilitate spiritual maturity in our students cum the lecturers? In God's curricular plan both the lecturers and students are learners growing towards becoming like Christ Jesus. Every individual's Curriculum Vitae (C.V.) should show the good works that have been done while he or she was being conformed to the image of Jesus. God's final exam is either pass or fail, and the successful ones will hear, "Well done, good and faithful servant!" There are five biblical passages that exhibit some of the principles of God's curricular plan or divine moral character transformation.

God is already at work in students and lecturers (Romans 12:1-2). We enrol in God's educational plan when we offer ourselves to Him as living sacrifices, accepting by faith with gratefulness what He has done for us and in us. We cannot change ourselves from bad to good, but we can be transformed and renewed in order to know God and His will. Yet we continue to live within a specific context. Most of what we know – our worldview, core values, and basic behaviours (including a lot of sinful habits) – has come from our environment. As God works in us, it is important to become aware of both the positive and negative effects that our culture has on us so that we can resist continuing to be "conformed to this world" (Hardy, 2007, p. 127). Both lecturer and students have to submit their bodies, every part of their lives to the leading of the Holy Spirit in every teaching and learning process so that He could use them to impart their world (Blackaby, 2006, p. 1355).

Learning is worth the effort of students and lecturers (Proverbs 2:1-6). As God's students, there are things we need to do to acquire wisdom and understanding even though wisdom is a gift from God. We need to come to His word with a heart inclined to accept it and with a mind ready to remember it. We ought to be active learners

asking questions and speaking up when we do not understand. "Learning requires research and effort, but it is motivated by the value of the result: knowledge of God" (Hardy, 2007, p. 127). Knowledge apart from God is incomplete. God freely gives wisdom and understanding to those who demonstrate their love and respect for Him. Wisdom apart from God is merely knowledge. Such knowledge can become a god and can lead to separation from God.

God rewards the seeker. A true appreciation for God's attributes is the starting place for wisdom and holy revelation. Lecturers and students should approach God reverently and learn His will. Treasure, incline your ear, apply your heart, cry out, lift up your voice, seek, search – these are all the deliberate actions of a determined lecturer or student who is pursuing wisdom. God will not fail to reward those who pursue what is good (Blackaby, 2006, p. 741). Indeed, "the Lord gives wisdom; from His mouth come knowledge and understanding" (Proverbs 2:6).

Training is for obedience both students and lecturers (Matt. 28:18-20). The Great Commission concludes: "Teaching them to obey all that I have commanded you." This suggests two important aspects of God's curriculum: (1) those that are to be taught include all those who have been evangelized and baptized; (2) what matters is not what we know or knows how to do, but obedience to all that Jesus commanded. Most of the theological training institutions do not know how to design a curriculum that teaches obedience. We do better at giving quizzes, test and projects (Hardy, 2007, p. 127). The Great Commission is a threefold assignment. As we go we are to (1) make disciples, (2) baptize new believers in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and (3) teach them to practice all that Christ has commanded. All three must be accomplished for the gospel to spread as Christ intended (Blackaby, 2006, p. 1181).

Truth is to be taught, modelled and put into practice by students and lecturers (2 Timothy 2:2; 3:10-17). In God's curriculum, what we learn from others is to be taught. The Bible is foundational to lead us to salvation and equip us for ministry. That the Bible is useful for "teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness" suggests both a positive and a negative aspect to God's educational process – a character or life transformation. Hardy (2007, p. 128)

writes that learning involves removing bad thinking and wrong doctrine (correction) as well as understanding what is right (teaching). Learning to live and to minister requires correcting bad behaviour and practice (rebuking), while seeing positive models and receiving encouragement (training in righteousness). An important part of God's educational plan is models. Timothy had observed Paul's way of life, his purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance, persecutions and sufferings. He could continue in what he had learned because he knew what both content and practice looked like in lives of those from whom he had learned. "God's intent is that His students will be mature and thoroughly equipped for every good work through their study of His Word and from the models of their teachers" (Hardy, 2007, p. 128).

Everyone is to be equipped to use their gifts, students and lecturers alike (Eph. 4:7, 11-16). The Greek word *katartismos* translated *equipping* is only used here in the New Testament. Generally it can mean a restoration and it suggests bringing to health or making complete. Paul was saying ministers should invest in God's people to bring them to a place where they are healthy, strong, and lacking nothing for service in Christ's body. Every believer has a significant role in building up the body; each one, therefore, must be given tools to serve as a disciple of Christ (Blackaby, 2006, p. 1409).

It is only as each part of the body of Christ does its work that the whole body, which is joined and held together by every supporting ligament, is able to grow and build itself up in love and maturity. All of God's people are gifted including lecturers and students, though not everyone has the same gifts. The methodology of God's curriculum is for leaders to learn how to equip others to do the work so that everyone is adequately equipped to use the gifts he or she has (Hardy, 2007, p. 128).

The Changeless Character of God

Having discussed the biblical passages that exhibit some of the principles of God's curricular plan that bring about divine moral character transformation, on what basis can these be achieved? The basis of character development or life transformation in theological education curriculum is not rules or well-designed curriculum but the

changeless character of God. Scripture describes God as being the creator of all things, perfect, preceding and superseding all things. It also tells how we as human beings were originally created to emulate God. Theological education operates on the notion that human character logically follows God's character. Behaviour consistent with God's character is right – that which is not is wrong. This approach is quite different from human-based moral education systems, which generally focus on either egoism (promotion of individual pleasure via material goods or career success), utilitarianism (the option that best maximizes pleasure and minimizes pain for all involved), or deontological reasoning - the keeping of moral rules such as "Don't harm others" (Hill, 1997, p. 13).

This is not to say that theological education rejects all of these values. To the contrary, there is much overlap between theological education and many human-centred educational systems. The major difference rests in its central priority. While concerned with human happiness and the fulfilment of moral and social obligations, theological education does not see these as its ultimate goal. Rather, it prizes the life that seeks to emulate God's character, both lecturers and students alike. Thus, the great Catholic saint Ignatius Loyola was eulogized as follows: "The aim of life is not to gain a place in the sun, nor to achieve fame or success, but to lose ourselves in the glory of God." The curriculum that is reflecting God's character transforms life of students and lecturers. The critical question is "What is God-like character?"

Theological education's answer includes such common responses as God's orderliness and artistry in creation. It also goes much further, focusing on God's self-revelation as recorded in the Scriptures and through his Son Jesus Christ. Every curriculum should have this kind of reflection. However, three divine characteristics that have direct bearing on character transformation are repeatedly emphasized in the Bible: God is holy; God is just and God is loving (Hill, 1997, p. 14). There is urgent need for curriculum that will spur spiritual awakening of God's holy-just-loving Character in theological training institutions. Producing godly personnel with a holy-just-loving character of God radiating in their lives is crucial for theological education.

Character development in theological education requires all three characteristics to be taken into account when curricular plans are made. Holiness, when unfettered from justice and love in teaching-learning process, drifts into hypercritical legalistic education. Likewise, justice that loses its anchor in holiness and love in teaching-learning process produces harsh outcomes in the trained personnel. And finally, love when it is orphaned in our theological training lacks an adequate moral compass in the ministry. Each of the three contains a vital ethical ingredient for a total life transformation (Hill, 1997, p. 15). Theological education ethos does not involve "either/or" analysis – as if we could choose between holiness, justice and love – but rather a synthesis in which all three conditions must be met before an action can be considered morally right or wrong. Each, like a leg on a three-legged stool, balances the other two. These biblical principles of holiness, justice and love should be highly cherished in theological education if we are to make impact in the lives of those being trained.

These basic Christian values of holiness, justice and love are the keys to God's character as well as the keys to theological education transformation of life. The quest to character development focuses on holiness, justice and love. Together they form an ethical paradigm through which all our moral and social actions may be evaluated. This has serious implications on how we approach issues facing Christians today. Of course, living up to the holy-just-loving standard is easier said than done. It is self-evident that we all fall far short of the holiness-justice-love standard. Rather than be overly discouraged by this moral deficit, we should humbly accept God's offer of grace. There is forgiveness through the death of God's Son, Jesus Christ; through God's Holy Spirit, there is hope of moral and social improvement if this would be the bedrock of our curricular plans in the theological education.

In theological education we recognize that the vast majority of human beings are neither *wicked* nor *angelic* but fall somewhere in between on the moral continuum. It also acknowledges that it is difficult to be holy-just-loving because of not only human foibles or weaknesses but also because worldly institutions and systems are marred. Thus, in social issues we are often forced to struggle between what is

realistically attainable and what is *ideal*. However, since humanity and its various systems, including educational challenges, are imperfect, difficult choices and decisions must be made (Hill, 1997).

A balanced view of biblical curricular plan requires holiness, justice and love to be respected equally in character formation in theological education. Any educational analysis that separates them is somehow risky to produce a total man or woman. The primary contribution of love that is holy and just is its emphasis on relationships – making God our highest priority and taking others' interests into account in all our decisions on issues facing Christians today (Hill, 1997).

Integrating God's Holy-Just-Loving Character in Curriculum

Love that is holy and just, a fusion of God's moral character, should be the cornerstone in curricular plans in theological education institutions. What does holy-just-loving character mean and how do we integrate it into curricular plan? We proceed to explain this more.

Holiness is a vital value in character development. Holiness means 'to be set apart.' It is a single-minded devotion to God and absolute moral purity. God is holy because He is set apart from everyone and everything that is common and unclean. Holiness implies being set apart from sin (Matt. 1:21). Holiness, however, is composed of four primary elements: zeal for God, purity, accountability and humility. Holiness calls us *zealously* to make God our highest priority. It is a competing voice, beckoning us to honour God, to praise him in good times and to be prayerful in bad times.

Purity, the second ingredient of holiness, reflects God's moral perfection and separation from anything morally unclean. Purity has two components – moral purity and moral separation. Holiness holds us *accountable* by rewarding moral purity and punishing impurity (Hill, 1997). Accountability encourages hard work, initiative, efficiency and productivity, which are qualities of a matured mind (Dzurgba, 2000). *Humility* is the natural outcome of seeking to imitate God's holiness. One of the deepest insights of theological education is that we are incapable of making ourselves holy no matter how perfect a curriculum may be. Holiness gives us a correct self-assessment,

deflating our balloon of pride and self-reliance. Humility means holding modest opinions of ourselves – modest opinion about our abilities, merits, integrity, relations, skills or knowledge. A humble person avoids extremes in his or her thought, behaviour and activity. The road to the mountain of holiness first passes through the valley of humility. One cannot enter the kingdom of God without humility. Even the wealthiest, most powerful person must come to Christ humbly and submissively (Blackaby, 2006).

Justice is another vital value in character development. Justice means that all people have equal opportunity, equal protection, equal services and equal access to public benefits (Hill, 1997). At its core, justice provides order to human relationships by laying out reciprocal sets of rights and duties for those living in the context of community. The concept of rights is central to justice. By virtue of being created in the image of God (Gen 1:27) we have been endowed with two fundamental rights: the right to be treated with dignity and the right to exercise free will. *Duties*, the other side of the justice coin, are inextricably linked to rights. One person's right becomes another's duty. If a society overemphasizes individual rights, people become selfish, thinking only of their own freedoms – this is what most Africans inherited from Western education. On the other hand, if duties are overemphasized, people lose their sense of dignity and freedom to choose: the community dictates what they must do – this is what Africans inherited traditionally. However, biblical justice rejects both perceptions – egoism and collectivism – and supports a more balanced approach.

Holiness and justice condemn us when combined because they reflect the very character of God. Our moral imperfections separate us from a holy God, and our unfulfilled duties demand compensation. In frustration, we cry like Apostle Paul, "What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me . . .? Indeed, a third element – love – is essential to provide forgiveness and hope in unravelling the social issues of our time.

Love is the centrepiece of character development in theological education. Love is the selfless giving of ourselves for the good of others. Love is also marked by not being envious, boastful, proud, self-seeking or easily angered. It always protects, trusts, hopes and

perseveres (Ozodo, 2001). Apostle Paul sees it as the greatest human virtue. Love is the essence of the character of God, the hinge for every other moral rules swing on love. Jesus ranks love for God first and love for neighbour second (Matt. 22:37-39). Parenthetically, it is vital to note that Jesus' definition of love includes both holiness, that is making God our highest priority, and justice, that is considering others' interests in all our decisions. Love's primary contribution to the holiness-justice-love mix is its emphasis on divine-human relationships. Holiness focuses primarily on purity and justice on rights, love concentrates on relationships, with three prominent characteristics – empathy, mercy and self-sacrifice. Divine love must be full of integrity and wholeness never compromises the concepts of holiness and justice.

How do we integrate God's holy-just-loving character in our theological education curricular plan? It is the Lord God that gives "the tongue of the learned" that we should know how to speak a word in season to him who is weary. He awakens our "ears to hear as the learned" (Isaiah 50:4-5). The whole man or woman needs to be immersed in God so that the Holy Spirit may operate and the dying world may have the ministry of life for which it is famishing. As the dead body of Christ was given life and brought out by the Holy Spirit, the same Spirit will give us eyes to see and ears to hear and tongue to speak as the oracles of God. "If anyone speaks, let him speak as the oracles of God" (1 Peter 4:11). Those are our orders: Teaching or speaking what no one knows except the Holy Spirit, as the Spirit gives divine utterance – a language that would never come at all unless the Holy Spirit gives the impartation and takes the things of Christ and reveals them in the teaching-learning process of the theological institutions (Wigglesworth, 2000, p. 195).

Conclusion

Lecturers and students in theological institutions are gifted, though not everyone has the same gifts. The methodology of God's curriculum is for theological educators to learn how to equip others to do the work so that everyone is adequately equipped to use the gifts he or she has in the ministry. This paper proposes God's holy-just-loving character should be the aspiration of theological education in

the curricular plans; and keeping in mind that in every teaching-learning process there is one law that supersedes all others. That is the law of love that is holy and just (Maxey, 2017, p. 55). Love that is holy and just together forms the yardstick through which all our curricular plans may be evaluated especially in theological training programmes. This theocentric approach moves beyond theory and practical, consequence and moral rules, aspiring for nothing less than God-like behaviour in the curriculum of theological education programmes.

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