



Lukas Vischer: Theological schools – a dividing force?

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Lukas Vischer was moderator of the Theology Department of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches from 1982 to 1989. From 1961 to 1979 he had served the World Council of Churches as research secretary and director of the Commission on Faith and Order. - The following article was written in view of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches General Council in Accra, 2004.

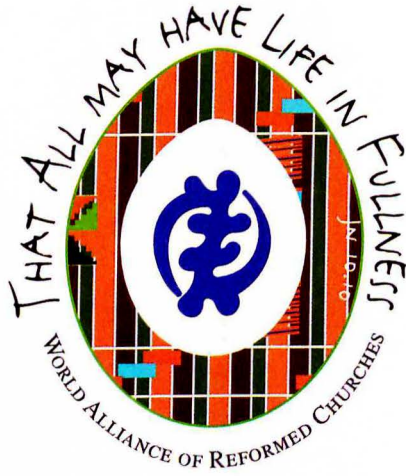
3. Summary

The Mission in Unity Project of the John Knox International Reformed Centre and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches has confirmed so far that theological schools play an essential role in either uniting or dividing Reformed churches. Since the Reformers of the 16th century insisted on preaching true Christian doctrine, Reformed churches had to make sure that people were trained for the ministry of the word. Calvin set an example in Geneva by interpreting, in sermons and lectures, almost all the books of the Bible. He promoted the idea of a special ministry of teachers (*docteurs*) in addition to pastors, elders and deacons. In 1559 he took the initiative to found the Geneva Academy, a school to train pastors. The academy soon developed into an important centre of Reformed theology. When Reformed churches engaged in mission work, they continued to give high priority to schools and theological education and, at an early stage, trained and ordained indigenous ministers. Today the multitude of theological schools represents an enormous potential. On the other hand it represents a threat to the coherence of Reformed theological thinking. – How, then, can theological schools serve the communion and the common mission of the church effectively?

A clearer understanding of theological reflection is required, both of its *freedom* and of its *roots in the communion of Christ's church*. Freedom and responsibility towards the communion must be brought into constructive relationship. Theologians and teachers are accountable to the church. In view of their different theological positions a culture of dialogue is called for. Sound theology will seek to formulate perspectives going beyond apparently irreconcilable positions and will develop in an atmosphere of prayer and worship. Theologians, on behalf of their own community, will reflect: What are the issues calling for a theological answer? At the same time, there is an increasing need for reflection on the global challenges which the church faces today. – Students, in addition to get theological knowledge, need to be made familiar with the history, the present situation and the witness of the church they belong to, as well as with the life of the Reformed churches of their country and worldwide. The time spent at a theological school should include an experience of shared Christian life and, at an early stage of studies, a discussion of the vocation to ministry.

Theological schools are meant to contribute to the *inspiration of the church*. They are the church's *conscience*; they don't speak on behalf of the churches. To advance the cause of the gospel, ways of collaboration must be found. In addition, theological schools should seek to collaborate with one another, to develop complementary roles, and to participate actively in international contacts. The World Alliance of Reformed Churches has an important role to fulfil in this regard.

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Breaking down walls, building bridges

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Theological schools – a dividing force?

Lukas Vischer

Theological schools and mission in unity

When the 23rd general council (Debrecen, 1997) recommended that a study project on mission in unity be set up, it expressed the hope that study materials could be developed which would help WARC member churches to “understand the role of theological schools as a uniting or dividing force in churches, and identify ways for Reformed seminaries and schools to promote unity”.¹

Nearly three years have passed since the Mission in Unity Project was started as a joint effort of the John Knox International Reformed Centre and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches. The efforts so far undertaken have confirmed that theological schools play an essential role in either uniting or dividing Reformed churches.

Wherever initiatives towards unity have been started, it soon turns out that the issues of theological education and theological schools need to be addressed. How can theological education contribute to a deeper sense of communion among Reformed churches? How can theological schools collaborate more closely in order to build up together the one body of Christ?

What must be our response to these questions? As a first step, the advisory committee of the Mission in Unity Project published a paper on Reformed ecclesiology under the title, “Keeping the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace”.² It was meant to provoke a discussion on the strengths and weaknesses of Reformed ecclesiology. What do we have to say on the church of Jesus Christ? How can a more realistic approach to the theme of ecclesiology be developed in Reformed teaching?³

But the general council had, of course, more in mind. It called for reflection on theological schools both as places of theological learning and as institutions, and in particular on the relationship between theological schools and the life and witness of the churches. If the movement towards closer bonds among Reformed churches is to advance, efforts need to be made to deal with this wider question. It is our hope that ways can be found to reach a new awareness of the issues involved in the years to come.

Theological education held in high esteem by Reformed churches

Reformed churches attach great importance to theological reflection, theological education and education generally. The number of theological schools and educational institutions run by Reformed churches is impressive. Even small churches regard the foundation of a theological school as one of the first priorities.⁴

The emphasis on theological education has roots in the Reformation of the 16th century. Since the Reformers insisted on the preaching of true Christian doctrine, they had to make sure that people were trained for the ministry of the word. Preachers needed to be familiar with the content and meaning of the gospel. To establish the recognition of biblical truth in Geneva, Calvin set an example by interpreting, in sermons and lectures, almost all the books of the Bible. But he also took the initiative in 1559 to found the Geneva Academy, a school to train pastors – to minister not only in Geneva but in other places as well. The *Académie* soon developed into an important centre of Reformed theology.

It is interesting to note that Calvin promoted the idea of a special ministry of “teachers” (*docteurs*). In his eyes four ministries are essential for the life and mission of the church – the *pasteurs*, the *anciens*, the *diacres* and the *docteurs*. The function of the *docteurs* is to study and to interpret the Bible and Christian doctrine. While the pastors are involved in all kinds of daily duties, they should be free to devote their time entirely to study and teaching. In Reformed theology, especially in the period of Reformed orthodoxy, the value of the ministry of *docteur* was strongly affirmed.⁵

When Reformed churches engaged in mission work, they normally gave high priority to theological education. At an early stage, indigenous people were trained and ordained to the ministry. This was, for instance, the case in Korea; many attribute the phenomenal rise of the Christian movement in Korea to this fact. Mozambique can be cited as another example. When the country became independent in 1974, the number of ordained pastors in the small Presbyterian church was higher than the number of priests in the Roman Catholic majority church. In many countries, Reformed missions decided to offer opportunities of general education – as a way to communicate the gospel to society. In several Latin American countries, for instance, Presbyterian missions concentrated efforts on the missionary “tool” of schools; the expectation was that educated people would see the light of the gospel and serve both the church and the country.

The double role of theological schools

The multitude of theological schools represents, no doubt, an enormous potential. In hundreds of places, theologians – *docteurs* – reflect on the meaning of God’s word and seek to communicate the gospel to a new generation of ministers and lay people. The schools are the expression of an impressive theological zeal. Often, they give birth to constructive new insights and theological perspectives.

But the multitude of theological schools also represents a threat to the coherence of Reformed theological thinking. On the whole, there is little communication among the various centres of theological learning. Schools tend

to be self-sufficient and develop their thinking and their activities along separate lines. Often, both in the past and in the present, theological schools have been the cause of splits, or have been a hindrance to achieving unity.

A few examples may serve as illustration:

- With the rise of liberal theology in the Swiss churches in the 18th and 19th centuries, the authority of the historical Reformed confessions of faith and even the ancient creeds was called into question. In response, theological schools were founded to maintain the traditional teaching of the church.
- In 1953, a major split occurred in the Presbyterian Church of Korea. The cause was a dispute over the authority of Scripture. The general assembly decided against the use of historical-critical methods in interpreting the Bible, and a group of professors decided to establish a new seminary. Eventually the Presbyterian Church in the Republic of Korea (PROK) was formed.
- Theological schools can easily develop into a symbol of identity of an individual church. In order to overcome separation, an agreement needs therefore to be reached on the role of each theological school in the united church. Hostility and competitiveness need to be replaced by complementarity and collaboration. In the union negotiations between the Netherlands Reformed Church (NHK), the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (GKN) and the Evangelical-Lutheran Church in the Kingdom of the Netherlands, for instance, the future place and function of the schools proved to be a crucial question. How will the various schools serve the life of the united church?
- Often, especially in Korea, theological seminaries are established with a view to the outreach of the church. Pastors are trained to become missionaries and to found new congregations. Theological schools in Korea have been the source and centre of several separate Presbyterian churches. Korean missionaries often apply the same method abroad. In many countries, Bible schools, theological academies, even universities, have been founded, to advance the missionary cause (Bolivia, Uganda, Russia, Ukraine). Often, little attention is paid to the relationship with existing educational institutions.

Freedom and communion

How can theological schools serve the communion and the common mission of the church effectively? The basic thesis of this paper is the following: If Reformed theological schools are to contribute to a deeper sense of communion among Reformed churches, a clearer understanding of the nature of theological reflection is required: both of its *freedom* and of its roots in the *communion of Christ's church*.

In many schools, theology is expected simply to confirm and to defend the teaching and the positions held by the church. Other schools consider theological research and thinking as an exercise which is to be carried out in complete independence from the church. Thus, theology is exposed to two temptations. Either it confirms and solidifies the *status quo* and moves in narrow circles, or it develops theological insights without regard to the communion of the church. Freedom and responsibility towards the communion of Christ's church must be brought into constructive relationship. The relationship must not be allowed to collapse into an either-or. Freedom is to serve the communion of the church.⁶

In the first place, the vocation of theological reflection is to lift up biblical truth. By doing so it is bound to challenge the *status quo* and point beyond the church in its present form. Theology is called to address issues which have so far not been clarified by the church. Theological schools just confirming the *status quo* fail to live up to their vocation. In order to fulfil their vocation, theological schools need to be free to develop their research, their thinking and their teaching.

At the same time, the other side needs to be stressed. Theological reflection always takes place *within* the communion of the church. Theology seeks to interpret the faith confessed by the church. It has its roots in the praise and prayers offered by the church. Both teachers and students are members of the church. They are called to serve a community, not the abstract vision of a church not yet existing, but an actual community with its strengths and weaknesses. As members of *this* community they are also servants of the church universal in all places.

What are the implications of this double commitment?

Theologians and teachers are *accountable* to the church. Theology is not an individual performance. In the Reformed tradition, however, church authorities are not entitled to exercise any control over the soundness of theological reflection. No imprimatur is required. Rather, theologians are expected to exercise self-control. Several old books of order contain the rule that no pastor should publish any book without previously having consulted at least two of his colleagues.

To combine creativity with respect for communion, a *culture of dialogue* is called for. A theological discourse needs to be developed which is characterized by both clarity and the will to understand and appreciate divergent positions. There is room at theological schools for different theological perspectives. Departing from the general line is no reason for expulsion or secession. There are, of course, limits to diversity. Teaching needs to remain within the boundaries of the confession of the church. But theological schools will not seek uniformity of teaching; they will promote theological thinking through a diversity of approaches.

Often, Reformed theologians adopt an aggressive and polemical style. They seem to believe that authentic theology requires the effort to demolish theological adversaries. Unfortunately, the Reformers, including Calvin, have set the model of this style. In their writings they often attack, caricature and denigrate their opponents. Often, they use scathing language. There is no doubt a legitimate place in theology for fair polemics. But there is a difference between clear straightforward criticism and the *rabies theologorum* which creates bitterness and antagonism. Calvin has also been exemplary for another effort – to formulate common perspectives going beyond apparently irreconcilable positions.

Sound theology will always take place in an atmosphere of *prayer and worship*. It is a rigorous intellectual exercise. But *theo*-logical reflection is carried out in front of God – prayer is the framework of all theological activities. In Reformed theology, this is not a matter of course. Often, the dimension of prayer in theology is neglected. Often, the effort to interpret the biblical message is regarded as in itself a sufficient act of worship. Reformed theology often has a touch of intellectualism.

As theologians are members of a *specific* community, they will reflect on behalf of this community: What is its context? What form should its witness take? What are the issues calling for a theological answer? Theology is bound to be contextual and should not be ashamed of being contextual. Reformed doctrine is not a system giving the answers to all issues in all contexts.

At the same time, there is an increasing need for *common* reflection on the global challenges which the church faces today. Even more than in the past, theological reflection has become a common task. An interaction needs to take place between contextual and intercontextual reflection. So far, Reformed theology is relatively weak in this regard.

Training of ministers

The same two dimensions of freedom and communion also apply to the training of ministers. The training of ministers must take place in an atmosphere of both freedom and commitment to the church – to its tradition, its calling and its witness. Students are to become free and responsible persons. They should learn to think and interpret the Bible and the Reformed tradition on their own. They are not to become copies of their teachers, and any inclination to “cloning” on the part of teachers should be resisted. True education enables students to discover themselves and interpret their calling.

But clearly, theological schools must also be places where students are made aware of the church, the “mother of all believers” (Calvin, *Institutes*, IV, 1). They are to learn what it means to be part of Christ’s church. Theological schools need to introduce students into the service of the church. Ideally, theological education leads to a passion for the church, the fulfilment of its calling, its unity and its mission.

Through the act of ordination, normally after the successful conclusion of theological studies, students are accepted as ministers by the church. Ordination is an act of the church – recognizing the vocation of the candidate, the church includes him or her into the company of ministers of word and sacrament ; while the candidate commits himself or herself to the service of the church, the church agrees to recognize and to honour his or her service. The crucial question is in what way the prospect of this act is present in the course of theological training. Is theological training an end in itself or does it lead to the service of the church expressed through the act of ordination? Often, ordination is treated as if it were a mere appendix to final examinations.

What are the implications for theological training?

In addition to conveying the theological knowledge which is required for responsible theological thinking, students need to be made familiar with the history, the present situation and the witness of the church they belong to, as well as with the life of the Reformed churches of their country and indeed worldwide. Reformed Christians have on the whole only a limited knowledge of their own church. Theological teaching tends to overlook the reality of the Reformed churches as they actually exist today. In order to participate in the reform of the Reformed tradition, accurate knowledge of the churches involved is required.

The time spent at a theological school also should include an experience of shared Christian life. Students must be given the opportunity to learn what it means to be members of Christ's body.

The theological school – teachers and students – need to form a worshipping community.

At an early stage of studies, opportunities should be offered to discuss with students the vocation to the ministry. The issue should not be postponed until the eve of ordination. Theological schools need to be a place where pastoral care is exercised.

Theological schools and the authority of the church and its leadership
The relationship between theological schools and the church has often been the cause of tensions. To advance the cause of the gospel, ways of mutual affirmation and constructive collaboration must be found.

Theological schools need to enjoy a certain degree of independence from the church. They are to challenge the church. Calvin's insistence on the ministry of *docteurs* is significant in this respect. They are freed from daily obligations in order to be able to devote themselves entirely to the interpretation of the word. The same freedom is to be granted to theological schools. It is in the self-interest of the church to respect this freedom. On the other hand, theological schools have to respect the fact that they do not represent the voice of the church. They are the theological conscience of the church but they do not speak on its behalf.

The ultimate authority lies with synods and assemblies. This implies that synods and assemblies can intervene in extreme cases of false teaching or mismanagement.

There is then a double temptation: for the church, to treat theological schools as simple “tools” or, for theological schools, to claim entire independence from the life and witness of the church. A sound relationship can only be established if both sides commit themselves to partnership – reminding themselves through a sustained dialogue of their respective functions.

Some implications:

Training ministers is not the only function of theological faculties. They are to be places of theological research. They are to contribute to the *theological inspiration* of the church. Each individual faculty member has his or her function. But there is also a function of the faculty as a whole. Through combined efforts new issues can be clarified and new perspective offered to the church.

To achieve this, there is need for an *interdisciplinary approach* within the faculty. The various disciplines of theology – Old Testament, New Testament, history, systematics, pastoral theology, etc. – must not be allowed to be pursued and taught in isolation from one another.

Theological schools must seek to promote theological thinking in the church generally. Very easily, theology can develop into an esoteric enterprise. Often, the language used at theological schools can no longer be understood by a wider public. Schools and synods use different discourses. Mutual understanding becomes difficult. There is need for a permanent theological debate within the church. Theological schools must seek opportunities to promote it, e.g., by visits to congregations, by vacation courses, etc.

The institutional dimension

Theological schools are institutional realities. It is important that they are aware of their particular institutional identity and its impact on their understanding of the gospel, their teaching, the relation to the church and its eventual renewal.

There are widely differing types of schools, for example:

- schools which have been founded and are financed by churches
- schools which are independent of the church and are financed by endowment or by an association of friends
- schools which depend on mission agencies, and are financed, wholly or in part, by money from abroad
- theological faculties which are part of a university, and are financed either by the state or by endowment

Each type has its strengths and weaknesses. Each type has an influence on the ways and methods of teaching. To each type corresponds a style of doing theology. Conscious efforts are required to overcome the limitations inherent in each type if they are to contribute to the unification process of Reformed churches.

Institutions tend to be self-sufficient. They represent a small world and are not open as a matter of course to the wider world. There is, with all institutions, a certain degree of inertia.

By what kind of steps can theological schools contribute to the unification process ?

Ideally, Reformed theological schools within the same country should *relate to one another and seek to collaborate*. They can exchange teachers and students. They can launch common initiatives, e.g., student encounters, courses to prepare for ordination, etc. They may perhaps form a national association of Reformed schools. Through joining forces they can contribute to forming a generation of pastors prepared for a ministry in a united church.

Instead of competing with one another, theological schools can seek to develop *complementary roles*. While one school concentrates on higher education, another can give more room to lay training. One school may be entrusted with the pursuit of a special project. The vocation of another school may be to serve a particular language group, etc.

At the same time, theological schools need to regard themselves as part of the international Reformed “theological community” and actively participate in international contacts. Much already happens in this regard – exchange of students, meetings of international theological association (Calvin-Congress, International Reformed Theological Institute, etc.). But in order to develop a concerted approach to global issues, additional efforts are required. The World Alliance of Reformed Churches has an important role to fulfil in this regard. Through its activities (offering a focus for a network of theological schools, consultations on crucial issues, leadership training courses, etc.) it can create the framework within which Reformed theological thinking can develop in new ways – in more deliberate exchange and dialogue, in mutual affirmation and critique, in the perspective of the church universal.

Notes

1. *Debrecen 1997: Proceedings of the 23rd general council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches* (Geneva: WARC, 1997), pp.221.
2. *Keeping the Unity in the Spirit through the Bond of Peace, A Theological Reflection on Reformed Ecclesiology*, Geneva, 2000 (available from the Mission in Unity secretariat in Geneva).
3. Lukas Vischer, ed., *The Church in Reformed Perspective: A European Reflection* (Geneva: John Knox Series, 2002).
4. The – incomplete – list of theological schools published in Jean-Jacques Bauswein and Lukas Vischer, eds., *The Reformed Family Worldwide* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), pp.563-699, bears witness to this characteristic of the Reformed tradition.

5. Calvin explains in the *Institutes*: “Next come pastors and teachers, with whom the church never can dispense, and between whom, I think, there is this difference, that teachers preside not over discipline, or the administration of the sacraments, or admonitions, or exhortations, but the interpretation of scripture only, in order that pure and sound doctrine may be maintained among believers. But all these are embraced in the pastoral office (*Institutes* IV, 3.4).” [S’ensuyvent les Docteurs et les Pasteurs, desquels l’Eglise ne se peut jamais passer. Or je pense que c’est la différence entre ces deux especes, que les Docteurs n’ont point la charge de la discipline, ne d’administrer les Sacramens, ne de faire les exhortations et remonstrances: mais seulement d’exposer l’Ecriture, afin qu’il y ait tousjours saine doctrine et pure conservée en l’Eglise. Or la charge des Pasteurs s’estend à toutes ces choses.] Calvin assimilates the offices of the prophets and the teachers: “The prophetic office was more excellent in respect of the special gift of revelation which accompanied it, but the office of teachers is almost of the same nature and has altogether the same end (*Institutes* IV. 3,5)” [L’office des Prophètes a esté plus excellent, à cause du don singulier de revelation qui leur estoit fait: mais l’office des Docteurs a du tout une mesme fin, et s’exerce quasi par un mesme moyen.] In the *Ordonnances ecclésiastiques* of the Church of Geneva (1561) he returns to the subject; now he identifies the *docteurs* with the teachers at the schools, in particular the theological school: “The specific ministry of the teachers consists in passing on to the faithful the sound doctrine so that the purity of the gospel should not be corrupted either by ignorance or misguided opinions. In today’s situation, we use this title for those helping to conserve the seed for the future and to make sure that the church does not suffer from a lack of pastors and ministers. Therefore, to use a more common expression, we call them the order of schools. The ministry which is closest to the ministry of pastors and most intimately linked to church government, is the one of those reading theology. It is important that there be teachers in both Old and New Testament ... (43-44).” [L’office propre des Docteurs est, d’enseigner les fidèles en saine doctrine: afin que la pureté de l’Evangile ne soit corrompue ou par ignorance ou par mauvaises opinions. Toutesfois selon que les choses sont aujourdhui disposées, nous comprenons en ce titre les aides et instrumens pour conserver semence à l’advenir, et faire que l’Eglise ne soit desolée par faute de pasteurs et ministres. Ainsi pour user d’un mot plus intelligible, nous l’appellerons l’Ordre des escolles. Le degré plus prochain au ministère et plus conioint au gouvernement de l’Eglise, est la lecture de Théologie: dont il sera bon qu’il y en ait au vieil et nouveau Testament.] There was never unanimity among Reformed theologians on the nature of this particular ministry. In particular, various opinions were held about the election and ordination of teachers. Who is responsible for electing teachers? Should they be ordained? If yes, who has the authority to ordain them? Should the theological academies “create” teachers? Or was the authority with the church? While some theologians defended the view that schools were not merely *appendices ecclesiae*, others maintained that the church alone

was entitled to name and ordain teachers: “The right of election belongs to the whole church. Whoever does not enter the ministry through this door is a thief and robber (John 10). This right has not been granted by the church to the teachers of academies... The church alone grants them the right to teach and the authority of being a teacher.” (Guillaume du Buc/Bucanus, professor of theology in Lausanne, d.1603, in Heppe, *Reformierte Dogmatik*, pp.547-548).

6. Maurice Kouam, dean of the theological faculty of Yaoundé in Cameroon, gives a vivid description of this tension: “If the tension between academic rigour and faithfulness to the church disappears, the consequences for the church can be very negative. If academic rigour dominates entirely, the verdict is clear: science without conscience is the ruin of the soul. We end in spiritual barrenness... But if faithfulness to the church is the only criterion, it means the death of the dynamism of the gospel and the church is led gradually into a deadly routine.” See CEVAA, *Séminaire entre les facultés de théologie des pays du Sud et des pays latins d’Europe*, septembre 2001, p.5.