

# Book Review: González, Justo L. *The History of Theological Education*

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If we imagine the great Church Fathers and ancient theologians graduating *summa cum laude* from the most prestigious seminaries of the ancient world, then Justo González has a surprise for us. Seminaries are actually a recent development, established less than 500 years ago to prepare those called to ministry. How in the world did the church survive over one and a half millennia without our darling theological schools?

Four premises underlie the fascinating history of theological education that Cuban American historian Justo L. González recounts in his book: 1) theological education is part of the very essence of the church, 2) it has been in crisis for the last few centuries, 3) some progress has been made nonetheless, and 4) studying its history will provide guidance for the future.

With these premises in mind, González delineates the development of theological education through the different eras of church history. The book explains the importance of the catechumenate, monastic and cathedral schools, and Medieval Scholasticism, as well as the impact of the Protestant Reformation and Modernism on theological education. At the end, González provides a sharp analysis of the current state of theological education, pointing out its strengths and weaknesses. He concludes by proposing clear ways to improve our theological programs.

For most of Christian history, notes González, only a small percentage of church leaders have had any formal theological training. However, this does not mean the church drifted along aimlessly without any way to sift candidates for the pastorate.

From the beginning, churches held ministers to certain requirements (cf. 1 Timothy 5 and 1 Peter 5). Despite the nonexistence of seminaries during the first centuries of the Christian era, churches provided some form of theological education to all believers, including, but not limited to, candidates for church offices.

In the eighth century, formal theological curricula started developing, mostly in the monastic context. Monasteries became study centers keen on preserving ancient writings, copying biblical texts in their original languages, and passing on the traditions of the church. They provided a combination of character formation in community and theological instruction.

Facilitated by the scholasticism of the Middle Ages, a university system grew out of the great cathedrals of the West to prepare candidates for ordination. Nevertheless, very few pastors actually had university training. “Therefore,” González explains, “monastic, diocesan, and parochial schools continued being the place where the vast majority of pastors were formed” (47). The seminary (a word originating from the Latin for “seedbed”), grew out of the Council of Trent (1545-1563) as a strategy for forming more ministers in response to the swift spread of the Reformation. In this environment, formation of candidates for priesthood was a combination of devotional and community life, together with an emphasis on reading and analyzing classical and patristic texts, preferable in Greek and Hebrew. This seminary model “continued almost unchanged until the time of the Second Vatican Council” (85).

In his concluding chapters, González evaluates seminary-based theological education, and delineates some proposals to change and adapt it to make it more effective today. Since theological education, over time, became more academic and lost its relevance for the church, he calls for a “radical transformation in theological education – a transformation that cannot be limited to curricular matters or to means of communication and evaluation but must be grounded on a renewed vision of theological education. In this vision, all Christian life is, among other things, a life of theological study and reflection” (119).

In order to avoid what González calls “the canonization of ignorance” and “biblical imperialism,” theological education today should prepare candidates to enter into dialogue with all areas of human knowledge, and to respond to evolving contemporary contexts theologically and biblically (112). In a prophetic fashion, González predicts that “if we do not prepare such leaders, when those circumstances and challenges arrive the church will not know how to respond to them, and in consequence it will seem irrelevant and will be increasingly marginalized” (121).

Among the new challenges theological education faces are the “expansion of knowledge and its ensuing specialization” (120), a dangerous emphasis on separation from the world during the seminary years which makes it difficult for the candidate “to return to the wider community in which ministry takes place” (123), and the tendency for theological training to become “a matter of instruction and not of formation” (123). Also, the arrival of the Internet, which González compares to the invention of the printing press in the fifteenth century, has wrought radical changes not only in theological curricula, but also in pedagogical processes. Teaching biblical languages, for example, looks quite different now with so many digital resources available.

Even though González primarily analyzes the Western model of theological education, his book will benefit greatly theological educators in the Global South nonetheless. After all, most institutions outside of the West have been developed after the Western model and therefore suffer the same maladies. In addition, González’s proposed changes encourage the adoption of practices and values that resonate with non-Western cultures, such as mentoring by elders, communal over individualistic emphases, and holistic approaches, among others.

González provides plenty of food for thought and rings key bells for anyone involved in theological education. These are times for a “total reorientation and redefinition of theological studies” (127). Seminaries either keep adapting or run the risk of falling behind. We hope this book will challenge all of us to take seriously leadership development, bringing honor to God and radical change to the world.



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