

Context, Ideas, Dialogue – Shaping Theological Education

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The *InSights Journal* exists because theological education plays a critical role in the growth and maturation of the global church. Theological schools provide the training ground for Christian leaders serving in the Church and society, as well bear a responsibility to think theologically and respond prophetically to critical issues. The Journal promotes discourse on what Edgar (2005) has described as the multiple dimensions of theological education: content, purpose, methods, ethos, contexts, and participants. As the *Journal* engages both theory and practice across this broad range of topics, three considerations serve as guideposts.

CONTEXT

Theological education is an inherently contextual enterprise. It must recognize the circumstances impacting theological development and leader formation as grounded in particular geographic, historical, social, temporal, and cultural realities. Increasingly, varied contexts interact with and affect one another. An awareness of theological education’s contextual nature allows for more effective global discourse as participants engage multiple perspectives.

In theological education, knowledge of and about God is essential. Yet, theologians have also come to appreciate that theology develops in response to the particular questions and challenges faced by the Church in its sociocultural and historical setting, whether that is the ancient Roman Empire, the European continent, or the many other contemporary global contexts. Bevans declares the engagement of context a “theological imperative” and “a process that is part of the very nature of theology itself” (2002, 3). Recognizing the importance of context in theological process ultimately leads to a more robust understanding of God and revelation.

Furthermore, the Church is an embodied entity that actively addresses the needs of a particular sociocultural setting. Historically, the Church has both responded to and shaped the surrounding culture. Formation of Christian leaders, lay or vocational, requires attention to the particular contexts of their future ministry. Issues related to racial reconciliation, political engagement, sexual ethics, economics, and protection of the marginalized require biblically grounded theological responses to local realities. The formation of Christian leaders thus requires understanding of and sensitivity to context.

IDEAS

As Victor Hugo once observed: stronger than armies is the irresistible power of an idea whose time has come. Ideas have power. Ideas matter. Ideas contribute to change and progress.

Research data, whether gathered in the library or in the field, provide the raw materials from which ideas are constructed. Once formulated, ideas can be shared, tested, critiqued, disputed, improved, and amplified. Ideas can lead to new opportunities and solutions.

In a time of change, new ideas are needed in theological education. Even well-established ideas from one context can be novel and useful in another. Shared ideas enable learning and promote innovation that can help address the needs of new and changing contexts. Ideas can be contagious. Good ideas provoke further conversation.

Rather than replicating a set body of knowledge, the practice of theological education is an integrative exercise that requires careful engagement of biblical texts, contexts, practitioners, the Church, and society. Therefore, we need vehicles for generating new ideas; for sharing existing ideas across contexts; and for critiquing, developing, and improving common practices. We need space for sharing pragmatic and innovative approaches to pedagogy and curriculum development, case studies that illustrate effective approaches to research, and reviews of resources that serve those who train leaders for the Church.

Moreover, theological educators often take a leading role in reflecting thoughtfully and biblically on pressing issues facing the Church and society. Increased nationalism may call for a clearer theology of citizenship and Christian identity, hardships endured in contexts where Christians are a vulnerable minority may inspire reflections on eschatological hope, and rampant injustice may challenge the Church to develop a public and prophetic voice. The Church needs women and men who can formulate and share theological ideas on such critical issues. Global

theological education needs spaces where leaders can exchange and critique their ideas.

DIALOGUE

In our mission, we position *The Journal* as a vehicle for discourse because we believe the exchange of ideas is critical for theological education today.

Dialogue allows for engagement with new ideas, growth, and development. In dialogue, we integrate ideas with our own contexts.

Dialogue also requires a posture of openness and humility, and involves both conversing and listening. In dialogue, the participants share their convictions, but do so with a willingness to learn and, potentially, to change. Dialogue creates opportunities for participants to ask questions, challenge current practices, and explore new possibilities. As a multilateral experience, dialogue opens contributors to a broader knowledge base as well by enabling the group's experiences and expertise to be shared in response. Interactions with others and collective critical reflections can lead to greater understanding and progress.

Finally, dialogue, at times, leads to disagreement. Though tensions may be uncomfortable, they can also drive the development of even better ideas. Theological leaders need opportunities to look up from the intensity of their specific ministries and to broaden their horizons by considering ideas from other cultural contexts and ecclesiastical traditions. As one African proverb puts it, when you dive deep, you need to resurface to see who else is in the pond.

AN INVITATION

Theological education uniquely serves the Church by forming and equipping women and men to serve in ministry both within and beyond local parishes. Theological educators also guide much-needed theological reflection to guide the Church as it engages society. The Church needs theological institutions that are rooted in Scripture, attentive and responsive to context, eager to pursue new ideas, and open to learning from one another. At *The Journal*, we invite you to join us on the journey marked by these guideposts. Contribute ideas, share from your experience, challenge what you read, and talk about it with others. The Church needs this kind of engagement and we each have a role to play in meeting that need for the sake of the Kingdom.

References

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