

Strengthening Spiritual Reconciliation through Theological Education: A Soul-Forming Conversation

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Published in *Global Missiology*, www.globalmissiology.org, April 2023

Abstract

Today, the Church carries out the Christian mission in different geographical, cultural, and social aspects. God's mission requires a transformation of the individual minister. Consequently, Liberation Theology, Integral Mission, and Pentecostal-Charismatic affiliations contribute to a solid theological education, as they all have a constructive and mutually beneficial influence. An adequate epistemology of faith education should be based on rationality, senses, or judgment. Theological education strengthens conversations while harmonizing with the Spirit of God. This educational process offers a dynamic, soul-forming dialogue between students and teachers. The spiritual welfare of students is essential for reconciliation. Reluctance to take direct instruction from the soul-forming process can lead to slow spiritual growth and distorted relationships. Church leaders, pastors, preachers, missionaries, and teachers still struggle when accepting direct instruction for deep spiritual practices.

This article addresses specific theological education issues and discusses aspects of *missio Dei*. Caring for soul-forming education is necessary for the Church to achieve its mission. A method for following the Spirit of God will enhance the spiritual formation and the proper involvement of students in theological education. Inquiry into how epistemology, curriculum, instruction, and ministry may influence meaningful collaboration for the soul is needed. A model of this kind of process should be capable of responding to the spiritual needs of students, forming them wholistically.

Key Words: *En Conjunto*, *Mission of God*, theological education

Introduction

Theologically speaking, reconciliation between God and humans, as well as between humans, can be achieved through trusting in the person and work of Jesus Christ, adhering to God's divine laws, living as Jesus did, and being guided by the Holy Spirit. Despite many religious scholars' and students' best attempts in theological education for reconciliation today, the question remains: *how can a healthy soul-forming education be nourished during theological studies?* Theological education needs to focus on the preparation of ministers. This article explores the idea that theological education can help foster the spirit, which could contribute to reconciliation between God and people and among human beings. A Latino-described collective approach may enhance the dialogue between God and diverse people to achieve this goal. This approach focuses on developing and nurturing the soul-forming education of everyone to foster connections with the divine in relationships with others. The absence of Latino characteristics in theology would hinder its potential to bring about a significant transformation in theological education by neglecting the holistic nurturing of the individual.

Concerns for Theological Education

Experts in the field of theological education are giving attention to the development of students. The *Association of Theological Schools* (ATS) and the *Association for Hispanic Theological*

Education (AETH) are significant entities in the United States, providing essential insight into this area. This latter organization has been promoting the strengthening of faith since 1992, including in various countries throughout the Americas. Recently, conversations have occurred about building a reliable and successful theological education framework considering knowledge comprehension, curricula organization, pedagogy, and ministry engagement.

In his book *Beyond Profession* (Aleshire, 2021), Daniel Aleshire, the former executive director of ATS, identifies spiritual formation in theological education as an issue of primary concern. He presents a theological model that focuses on the development and importance of the church, culture, and higher education (Aleshire, 2021, p. 7). Aleshire notes that, since 1996, ATS formation has mainly encompassed spiritual awareness and moral sensitivity. This formation is incorporated into the educational process to achieve a specific goal (Aleshire, 2021, p. 79). However, Roman Catholics diverge from the conventional ATS definition as the preparation for sacraments is not factored into the standard formation definition. Aleshire explores the ATS and Roman Catholic views of formation, advocating for a change in the system.

The intersection of Catholic, Protestant, and other beliefs within the field of theological education calls for increased attention in contemporary curricula. In his encyclical *Born from the Heart of the Church: On Catholic Universities*, John Paul II extolled Catholicism as a source of truth and inspiration for today's theological education (John Paul II, 1990a). This historical recognition has led to increased awareness of the role of theology in promoting human reconciliation. Nevertheless, Daniel Salinas cautions against a uniform approach in Latin America, where Vatican II reforms have been met with opposition by Evangelicals (Salinas, 2017, p. 182). Suppose churches are to collaborate successfully with theological educational institutions. In that case, there must be a balance between respect for local context on all sides and an emphasis on an individual's profound experience with God. This issue has been addressed by Aleshire's model of theological education, which emphasizes process and purpose.

Elizabeth Conde-Fraizer, president of AETH, has observed a meeting of two eras in theological education and has suggested that collaboration could lead to a fresh educational design suitable for this one-of-a-kind period. According to her, theological education must emphasize love for God, people, and the world around us and enable multi-faceted pedagogies. Furthermore, it must impart the understanding of God that inspires loyalty in our living, joining theology and practice with a trust-based attitude (Conde-Frazier, 2021, p. 127). Therefore, a viable solution may be to craft a cooperative program emphasizing the elements already existing in theological education, for instance, associating convictions with individuality and friendliness with collaboration. This strategy has been applied before, for example, by providing theological education to attend to the soul through an energetic involvement in current globalism.

According to Aleshire and Conde-Fraizer, theological education requires a new approach. Aleshire is committed to conceptualizing a teaching framework suitable for all students to understand the means and the end of formal learning. On the other hand, Conde-Fraizer argues that we must introduce collaborative practices in Christian and theological education to complement the new teaching models and perspectives.

The Integrity of the Mission of God

Theological education concerns college students, who often feel disconnected from their purpose and identity post-graduation. Therefore, establishing relationships with God and a vital mission

from the Church is critical for fostering unity and inclusivity between Catholic, Protestant, and Pentecostal communities. Collaboration based on the Trinity is critical to making this task achievable.

Orlando E. Costas (1979) emphasizes the importance of understanding mission through totality and integrity in the *Integrity of Mission*. Reaching this understanding, collaboration is encouraged in various realms, such as theological, historical, cultural, and practical, developing an all-encompassing approach to the church's mission. Moreover, as collaboration reinforces the integrity of the mission, it can potentially increase the effectiveness of the church's mission.

I believe in the importance of forming a unique mission. For Catholics, Gustavo Gutierrez's notion of *Liberation Theology* sparks a fresh outlook on how we can be restored to God and others. He proposes that true reconciliation begins with one's soul formation. After exploring the works of Bartolomé de las Casas, the 16th-century Spaniard who witnessed and challenged his fellow compatriots' maltreatment of Indigenous people in the Americas, Gutierrez formulated a new notion of liberation through spirituality. This sense of liberation guarantees the value and integrity of underprivileged or poverty-stricken people. Henri Nouwen views this style of approach as an incomparable experience embedded in the knowledge of God in religious figures such as St. Benedict, St. Francis of Assisi, and St. Ignatius Loyola (Nouwen, 1975).

As a former missionary, Samuel Escobar (2013) explores the Church's duty to propagate the message of Jesus Christ without discrimination of geographical, cultural, or social boundaries. Escobar draws knowledge from the Bible, theological and historical studies, and the social sciences to better comprehend the Church's missionary function. Through insightful and thought-provoking studies, he has immensely contributed to the global evangelical debate on the contemporary mission and its future. The *Lausanne Covenant* discussed the conflict between dominant cultures and social justice (Lausanne Movement, 1974). To ensure that the gospel remains complete and wholesome, René Padilla endorsed the *misión integral* (wholistic mission) as highlighted in the Bible (Padilla, 2010). Wholistic Mission claims that evangelism and social responsibility are not conflicting. Instead, these are connected to Christ's peace for the oppressed and the disadvantaged. Indeed, more than 600 mission and relief organizations currently use the integral mission as an authorized term and method for their work (Kirkpatrick, 2019, p. 142). We must put all aspects of life under the leadership of Jesus and proclaim that evangelism and social responsibility are indispensable for delivering his peace to those in need (Kirkpatrick, 2019).

Pentecostal movements face numerous social and cultural obstacles, causing an ongoing discussion surrounding the distinct historical origins and evolution of ideas that form part of the mission's integrity (Medina & Alfaro, 2015). Oscar Garcia-Johnson explains this discussion in his book *Spirit Outside the Gate*, which emphasizes reframing a focus on how the Holy Spirit has been experienced and understood within the cultures and histories of the American global south (García-Johnson, 2019). Odina González and Justo Gonzales have collected this experience in their complex perspectives on life and society in Latin America (González 2014, p. 2). Amos Yong asserts the need to understand various theological beliefs to foster a favorable and unified relationship (González, 2014, p. 201).

Engagement in theological learning can be improved by recognizing the different traditions in *Liberation Theology*, *Integral Mission*, and the *Pentecostal-Charismatic movements*. In his book *The Brown Church*, Robert Chao Romero explores the practical nature of partnerships and collaborations between diverse groups and the spiritual richness of Latinx and Hispanic cultures.

The author uses the term "unions" to refer to these partnerships, emphasizing their gainful nature for all involved parties (Romero, 2020, p. 10).

The Impetus behind *Missio Dei*

The fundamental objective of *missio Dei* is to restore harmony between God and people and people with one another. To reach this purpose, the missionary must be wholly committed and adequately trained in theology. According to David Bosch, the heart of the *missio Dei* is a continuous change between salvation's immutable and physical aspects (Bosch, 2011). William Burrows reveals in his foreword to the 20th-anniversary edition of Bosch's *Transforming Mission* that Bosch puts to ease the difficulties linked with changing thoughts about God's mission and involving oneself in it as an experience, transforming the beliefs of believing missionaries (Bosch, 2011). Christopher Wright perceives the power of *missio Dei* to be found in participating in the setting and every generation (Wright, 2013, p. 535). In missiologist Gailyn Van Rheenen's point of view, theological learning is associated with the import of *missio Dei*, the crucifixion and resurrection, and the realm of God, provoking contemplation (Van Rheenen, 2014, p. 107). These points might lead missionaries to become apathetic about seeking out incentives to participate in the mission of reconciliation. With the objective of this mission in mind, Van Rheenen endeavors to spark a spiritual awareness in which ministers comprehend that they cannot accomplish this mission on their own (Van Rheenen, 2014, p. 47).

To achieve the mission of God, the transformation of an individual missionary who delivers God's message is critical. Aiming for such transformation creates a way of educating missionaries that works towards mending the divides that have grown in our increasingly globalized world. Therefore, theological education must prioritize preparing students with the knowledge, developing their inner selves, and how they fit into their faith communities.

Theological Education and Church

According to John Paul's encyclical *The Mission of the Redeemer* (John Paul, 1990b), the mission of the Church, in Latin known as *missio ecclesia*, is to spread God's redeeming grace to every person in the world, as outlined in Scripture. This missional ecclesiology is an opportunity for individuals to share the story of Jesus with the world through spiritual practices that shape the soul. This perspective emphasizes that even those who cannot participate in *missio Dei* can still be involved with God. To strengthen this approach, missionary studies prioritize theological training to prepare individuals for missionary work. By promoting a unique collaboration between the Church and its clergy, missional ecclesiology highlights the Church's role in supporting the development of missionaries.

To reach an in-depth understanding of the church's distinctive histories, theologies, and futures, pastors, preachers, teachers, and other church leaders need to have direct instruction in the spiritual practices necessary to cultivate spirituality. Collaboration, or partnerships and cooperation between diverse groups, is paramount to progress in theological education, as it promotes reconciliation and implements the tasks God assigns us in his mission. While institutions training missionaries face many difficulties, a well-constructed collaborative relationship may result in improved curriculum and instruction. The statistics show that the Hispanic population in the United States is quickly increasing, drastically altering the country's social, economic, and religious conditions (Sanchez, 2006). Considering this collaborative reality, there is an urgent need

for a new approach to training missionaries in theological education that incorporates biblical principles, is culturally aware, and relates to the present day.

According to Willie James Jennings, the key objective of theological education is to teach students how to foster a sense of belonging (Jennings, 2020, p. 10). Jennings endeavors to innovate theological learning by bringing to light a novel platform rooted in a craving for what God has ordained. Encouraging inclusion delivers chances for freedom and life that bridge disparities and lead to a struggle in the theological field. For this reason, it is indispensable to bring forth a collaborative practice to theological education for persons hindered by whiteness and those removed from the dialogue at the outskirts of society. To Jennings, cooperation is a method of inhabiting the world to generate intellectual and physical edifices, such as rephrasing the gospel's message.

Latin American women have a theological perspective that embraces principles and acknowledges the importance of fundamental assumptions. Such a perspective arises from, for example, their roles as mothers, grandmothers, and nurturers of life. They believe that individuals are deeply connected to the historical context in which they live. This contextually aware perspective aims to transform or affirm change in how individuals deal with each other. Maria Pilar Aquino argues that Latin American women are no longer content to wait for others to guide them merely; they are taking the initiative (Aquino, 1996).

Similarly, they no longer want others to define their experiences but actively participate in the definitional process. They want to express, communicate, and articulate their journeys. Because certain opportunities and particular topics are often male-oriented and discriminatory, Latin American women must be cautious about participating in such as these can lead to self-alienation (Goizueta, 2001, p. 81). Roberto S. Goizueta proposes a theology of presence that considers the preferential option for marginalized groups, including the marginalized group of Latin American women. This theology of presence engages life's ethical, political, and aesthetic dimensions and offers a spiritual focus (Goizueta, 1995, p. 211).

Loida I. Martell-Otero employs the concept of *Teología en Conjunto*, which emphasizes the collaborative and diverse nature of Latino theology. Her approach emphasizes explaining that theological inquiry is a dialogical process (Martell-Otero et al., 2013, p. 127). Martell-Otero amplifies the voices of the silenced, sharing theological insights from the oppressed community. Samuel Escobar notes that Ephesians 4:13 provides a framework for preparing future missionaries through education and formation geared toward continuous transformation (Escobar, 2002, p. 171). He stresses that such preparation must occur within a communal context, as it cannot occur in isolation. A comprehensive mission arises from the realities of Latin America and is characterized by interdisciplinary action. Fernando Bullón offers essays on the observations from the fifth Latin American consultation of the Alliance for Higher Education. He notes that Christian higher education does not have a directed approach toward social change and fails to engage with activities and topics that reflect the struggles of the present era (Bullón, 2014). The failure to supplement theology with Latino characteristics would impede its ability to significantly transform theological education by holistically not nurturing the individual.

When churches and universities form meaningful partnerships, they create mutually beneficial opportunities for growth by exchanging insights on academics and church leadership while strengthening church missions. By establishing a close relationship with Christ through active

engagement with the Holy Scriptures, believers can access spiritual gifts that the Holy Spirit guides. They can then work together and contribute to a shared communal vision.

Agents of Sound Collaboration

In the New Testament, Hebrews 13:12 presents an excellent portrayal of Jesus as the perfect facilitator of productive collaboration. Orlando Costas, in his work *Christ Outside the Gate* (2005), and later Oscar García-Johnson in *The Spirit Outside the Gate* (2019), both focus on the idea that Jesus' suffering took place “outside the gate,” representing the margins of suffering and alienation from the urban core. To prioritize the soul-forming 's well-being, there may have been deficiencies in theological education, which quantitative and qualitative research should evaluate. Throughout this article, theological education must look beyond the confines of academia and embrace a spirit of successful collaboration. Costas challenges us to become "agents of mobilization of a servant church” and offers us a fresh perception of redemption and a fuller understanding of our mission (Costas, 2005, p. 194).

Drawing on words from Hebrews and other theologians, theological education for non-clergy begins with a collaborative effort of soul-forming education. Multiple aspects are considered during this challenging process, such as epistemology, curriculum, instruction, and sustaining the missionary mission of reconciliation. The AETH's members have started *Red de Entidades Teológicas, Ashrei Centro de Formación Espiritual* - a spiritual formation center located in Mexico City - to enable a portable church platform for joint work in practice. Furthermore, *Neighborhood Seminary* recently presented an alternative approach to seminary education.

With the assistance of others, theological organizations are trying to promote a constructive union for the contemplation of soul-forming education to attain harmony. This involves going beyond Catholic, Pentecostal, or Protestant tradition and not confining the epistemological dialogue to scholastic ideals disregarding participants' mental and physical well-being. While joining these alternative methods is strenuous, a commitment to God's purpose binds them, looking at the collaboration between the church and higher education. In addition, liberation is highlighted through the provision of arenas for reconciliation and communication. The church remains part of the operation, and the congregation contributes to community outreach activities.

Agencies have developed collaborative networks that come together monthly as small units to foster successful teamwork. This collective serves as a place to store and access their combined knowledge to be utilized in their unique contexts. The membership includes people of Catholic, Protestant, and Pentecostal faith to provide integrity to the mission of God. This theological association is a non-profit multicultural entity to contribute to, engage in, and converse with one another. *Ashrei*, a Mexican spiritual formation institute, also works to advance collaboration by offering valuable resources to individuals and communities. This establishment is devoted to connecting spiritual formation to communal efforts to create transformation in English and Spanish. Moreover, the Neighborhood Seminary strives to make God's healing, restoring, forgiving, and liberating love a reality within neighborhoods through the local church.

Conclusion

The development of a fresh approach to theology from an outside perspective presents a valuable opportunity for students in both theological academia and the church to form relationships that further the mission of both institutions. We must also consider the implications of globalization

and take a new perspective that considers the spiritual needs of students while still considering past truths that have enabled liberation. To effectively collaborate and work towards reconciliation, academia, and the church must unite and recognize their complementary relationship.

Theological education offers an opportunity to strengthen spiritual well-being and open a path to reconciliation. Developing a collective approach that encourages collaboration between faith-based entities and their agents can empower individuals to nurture their soul-forming s and help others forge connections with God and their environment. Through this process of liberation, integral, and Pentecostal missions, the minister becomes more accessible to those on the journey towards realizing the *missio Dei*. To answer the question, how can a healthy soul-forming education be nourished during theological studies? The answer, then, is that the *Teología en Conjunto* is a significant demonstration of appreciation for both the Bible and the valuable resources provided by others. We miss God's gift for soul-forming education and reconciliation when this unity is impossible. Therefore, theological education must prioritize spiritual needs ahead of academics to help young learners work cooperatively.

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