

Oswald P. Bronson²⁶

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE INTERDENOMINATIONAL THEOLOGICAL CENTER

The emergence of the Interdenominational Theological Center has considerable significance for theological education in general as well as the educational needs of the black ministry. The significance of its impact is implied in the elements used to construct an educational philosophy. Its significance is seen in its contribution to ecumenicity and to the wider American culture.

SIGNIFICANCE FOR EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY

The Interdenominational Theological Center (ITC) is in the unique position which affords it the opportunity to develop a functional philosophy of theological education for American Protestantism. The functional philosophy as suggested in this paper departs from the classical approach with its emphasis upon the transmission or impartation of information. While not denying the heritage, however, its focus is upon the tasks to be performed in the parish ministry. The tasks are not disconnected from the past and the “Given” inherent in the Christian faith, but placed into a living continuity with the heritage, the Gospel, contemporary culture and the Black experience. The ITC takes into its curriculum the streams of real life flowing through the participating denominations and deals with the situational needs in terms of the impact of theology, ecumenism, scientific insights into human behavior and the culture upon pastoral function. To use the functional philosophy suggested in this paper means that the central concern is the practical performance in a real situation using bibliographic resources to interpret the meaning and the relevance of the Gospel to the situation in which the students in training find themselves. It means that the curriculum grows out of

²⁶ Dr. Oswald P. Bronson was president of The Interdenominational Theological Center, 1968-1975.

Presidential Leadership at the Theological Seminary

the dialogic continuity between the Christian faith and the problems the minister faces in the exercise of his ministry.

The significance of this philosophy for theological education is not that the ITC can claim to be the seedbed for functionalism in seminary training, but that it joins a trend in theological education, which relates the message of the Gospel to the cultural situation influencing the “functioning” and the “problem solving” apparatus of the parish ministry.

SIGNIFICANCE FOR ECUMENICITY

It is important to note that a major interest in ecumenicity was not the primary motivating force which gave rise to the Interdenominational Theological Center. The denominations accepted the plan because it rescued their dying theological institutions from utter obliteration and protected denominational interests while, at the same time, it provided an accredited seminary education. However, the emergence of the ITC does provide a unique organizational facility for conversation and experience in ecumenicity. The organization, life, and work of the ITC challenge the students to see the wider context of theological education and the manner in which their respective denominations participate in the ecumenical dialogue. The students are not simply exposed to ecumenical pedagogy, but actually participate in an ecumenical dialogue both in word, study and relationships that is facilitated by the organizational plan of the ITC.

Along with the students, sponsoring denominations have a new channel of communication across denominational lines in the origin and continued existence of the ITC. Mutual concern for the academic pursuits of the ITC brings the sponsoring denominations around the conference table where ecumenical insights are more likely to emerge than would be the case if they remained in isolation from one another. However, the significance is more than conference table experience; the denominations are engaged in an interdenominational project during which the “wholeness” of the church can be momentarily experienced in actuality.

THE SIGNIFICANCE FOR THE BLACK CHURCH

The Black Church has been accused of being other-worldly, existing outside the main stream of Protestant thought and experience, and lacking a meaningful theology and a real sense of mission. However, the emergence of the Interdenominational Theological Center gives evidence of a creative vitality at work within the black church. The participating denominations are being exposed to the mainstream of Protestant thought and theology out of which should develop a real sense of mission and a better balance between its decreasing “other-worldly” character and the temporal situation. The Black Church sees itself as having a prophetic mission to the mainstream of Protestant thought.

In addition to its ministerial training program, the ITC also has a theological educational plan for laity. This “lay training” program not only acquaints laymen with contemporary Christian education theories and methodologies, but also with the meaning and importance of an effective lay ministry as the church. Through discussions and interdenominational experiences in the ITC such concepts as ecumenicity, Koinonia, covenant community, people of God, priesthood of believers, and lay evangelism, come alive. Lay people are challenged to see the church in its “wholeness” and the relationships of their respective denominations and local churches to the ecumenical church. The opportunity to study church history enables laity to see the historic roots of the Black church. The ecumenical church of which blacks are a part dates beyond slavery. The historic stream out of which the Black church emerged began in the faith of the New Testament community in the life, work, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The most significant aspect of the existence of the ITC for the Black church is the educational facility it offers for the theological preparation of the Black ministry. It is difficult for any group to rise higher than the vision of its leadership. The Interdenominational Theological Center provides an accredited theological education for the Black ministry which many would

Presidential Leadership at the Theological Seminary

not have been able to receive otherwise.²⁷

Of further significance is the fact that the ITC rescued four tottering schools from total termination. The four schools are: Gammon Theological Seminary (United Methodist); Morehouse School of Religion (Baptist); Phillips School of Theology (Christian Methodist Episcopal); and Turner Theological Seminary (African Methodist Episcopal). Through the mutual efforts of these four schools, the Interdenominational Theological Center was chartered in 1958. The Center's plan of agreement, which provides both for the Center's own common property and the continuation of the four schools as distinct identifiable institutions, is the genius of the plan. The Center not only affords the continued identity of the schools and an accredited theological education, but also provides guidelines for future endeavors in interdenominational educational efforts.

What the denominations were unable to do singularly/they now do jointly. They did not have sufficient resources to develop and maintain competent training schools as individual denominations. The formation of the Interdenominational Theological Center provided a means for effective cooperative action capable of successfully meeting the obstacles that ordinarily must be surmounted in the operation of an accredited institution.

The most recent additions to the Interdenominational Theological Center are: Absalom Jones Theological Institute (Episcopalian); Charles H. Mason Theological Seminary (Church of God In Christ); and Johnson C. Smith Theological Seminary (United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A.). Declaring the significance of the Interdenominational Theological Center to be rooted in the meaning and importance of the Church to the Black people in the past and present as well as its potential for the future, Dr. Henry P. Van Dusen said:

²⁷ Joseph R. Washington, *Black Religion* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), p. vii.

Presidential Leadership at the Theological Seminary

The significance of this school is very vivid. Let me try to express it by an illustration. If an atomic bomb were dropped on Manhattan and destroyed Union Theological Seminary, it would not destroy theological education. It would be very tragic. It would result in the death of approximately a thousand faculty, student, and staff members, but it would not destroy theological education. Those prospects for study at Union would go on to Yale, Boston or elsewhere and theological education would continue. Neither would theological education be destroyed if some catastrophe were to destroy any one of the denominational schools. If a catastrophe were to destroy ITC, it would be absolutely irrevocable and irreparable. There would be no other school to pick up and carry on the education of Negro ministers. There is no other school in the front rank in the education of the ministry for the Negro race.²⁸

It is interesting to note a striking parallel between this statement of Dr. Van Dusen and the statement regarding the significance of Gammon by Reverend A. C. Haygood in 1886.

THE SIGNIFICANCE FOR THE BLACK REVOLUTION

Joseph A. Washington accused the non-violent movement of being theologically inept. He questioned Martin Luther King's assertion that love is the regulating ideal of the civil rights movement. The dynamic of the present Black revolution is anger, a burning desire for dignity, justice and equality before the law. The principle of love, says Washington, was imported, decorated with Christian trappings and added to the movement to control physical conflict and bloodshed.²⁹

²⁸Henry P. Van Dusen, "The Significance of ITC As I See It." Remarks by Henry P. Van Dusen, Chairman, Board of Trustees. Interdenominational Theological Center, delivered to the faculty of the Interdenominational Theological Center, December 8, 1964." Washington, *loc. cit.*, p. 9.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

Presidential Leadership at the Theological Seminary

In attacking what he calls King's syncretistic religion, Washington declares:

The error in syncretism is that it is blind to the honest differences inherent in various faiths. In seeking the lower common denominator among religions there is the risk of rubbing out the authentic dimension in each. This is the grave error of all Negro religion, and it is due to the lack of theology... the syncretistic element in King is due to the dominance of philosophy over systematic theology... Thus King, in the midst of the crisis, was in no position to add to the theological dimension—he was in need of a guide for action. As we have seen, he turned in his need to the inspired example of Gandhi and the method of non-violence.³⁰

In making these assertions, Washington fails to realize that the demand for freedom and justice was characteristic of the prophetic faith of the Old Testament. This desire did not alienate the Hebrew prophets from God; rather they linked social justice to true religion as one of the outcomes of a living faith in God. There is also serious doubt concerning his charge that the Black church as a disengaged institution from the mainstream of Protestant thought is an alien institution. Does a lack of knowledge of Barth, Brunner, Bultmann, Tillich, mean spiritual ineptness? Is a highly technical theology a pre-condition for the presence of the Holy Spirit? Was King in error for teaching love even if other motives were present? Did not Jesus and the Apostles, New Testament writers, teach love to a community of persons who were capable of both love and hate?

While Washington's statements regarding the Black church and the civil rights movement may be inconsistent, naive and sometimes irresponsible, one of the significant outcomes of his study is the need for an adequate theological rationale for the civil

³⁰ Ibid, pp. 9-10.

Presidential Leadership at the Theological Seminary

rights movement. The importance of theology for the Black revolution is that it keeps before the participants the meaning and relevance of the Christian faith for the aggressive correction of evil. Otherwise the movement degenerates into a fragmented activism lacking the direction of an eternal dimension and spiritual depth so necessary if the experience is to be redemptive both for the oppressed and the oppressor.

The significance of the Interdenominational Theological Center for the Black revolution is that through its graduates, its extension program for laity and in-service ministers, and institutes held throughout the participating denominations, the ITC has the rich opportunity of strengthening the theological framework for the movement. By continuously showing that the Christian ethic roots in the Gospel and is a response of faith and gratitude to God's self-disclosure in history and that the Christian ethic calls for responsible decision-making and action in which the Christian faith is the determining dynamic, the ITC may channel into the Black revolution not only a theology, but positive attitudes toward a theological norm. Many of its graduates will return to areas of service where the struggle for justice, equality and dignity is in progress.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE CENTER FOR THE WIDER CULTURE

The emergence of the Center speaks to the distorted images of the Black community held in the wider culture. Through these images, the culture tends to see the inferior schools, churches, and the general life of the Black community as an innate characteristic of black people. These images often prevent the wider culture from perceiving the environmental manipulations that give rise to negative conditions which elicit and reinforce negative responses. The genius of the Black community is reflected in its ability to transcend these imposed barriers and produce a quality institution. The ITC presents a more accurate image of the Black church and ministry to the wider American community. This new image facilitates real dialogue across racial lines.

Presidential Leadership at the Theological Seminary

The creative vitality within the Black community could not find fruitful expression without those persons within the wider community who see beyond the negative images of the Black. The Interdenominational Theological Center would not have been possible if it had not received the unselfish and perpetual assistance from persons and agencies within the larger society. The Center, therefore, represents a new level of interracial cooperation.

In view of the changing times, the ITC would limit its usefulness if it focused its attention only upon the needs of the Black community. With its competent interracial faculty, interracial and international student body, and excellent facilities, the Center can join with other seminaries throughout the world in promoting the educational process, and in providing a stabilizing religious faith in times of national and international crisis. It can help to sharpen the nation's conscience, develop responsible attitudes, and improve moral conduct in all areas of life by sending into the American society and the world trained, dedicated ministers capable of making the Christian religion a vital, creative and transforming experience. However, before it can accomplish this task, it must be able to sustain itself in spite of the challenges that confront it.

SUMMARY

Inherent in the structure and operation of the Interdenominational Theological Center are elements that give rise to a functional philosophy. The Center's emphasis upon professional orientation in preparing for those performances necessary for an effective parish ministry in a time of rapid cultural change supplies the major basis for this philosophy. In adopting this approach the Center joins with an increasing number of seminaries taking a realistic approach to the functional problems of the parish in the context of the Christian faith.

While ecumenicity was not the primary motive that brought the Center into being, however, the organizational plan provides experiences in ecumenicity. The significance is not

Presidential Leadership at the Theological Seminary

limited to conference table sessions, but includes the actual participation of the member denominations in an interdenominational cooperative undertaking. In such an atmosphere, the likelihood of ecumenical insights increases.

The Center represents creative stirrings within the Black church. Laity is exposed to concepts and experiences in the New Testament doctrine of the church and their relevancy to present concerns. Black ministers receive a competent theological education that would have been impossible in the unaccredited denominational schools. The Center preserved those schools while at the same time it provided quality education in an interdenominational setting.

The Center has a responsibility to the Black subculture. Black students from southern communities make up the overwhelming majority of the student body. They bring their background experiences to the Center for interpretation and clarification in the context of the Christian faith. The Center further relates to the subculture through the participating denominations. This relevancy is expressed not only in polity classes sponsored by the participating denominations, but also in the very life and atmosphere of the school. It is for this reason that the Center is in the front rank for the education of the Black ministry. The current focus is upon Black students; however, the Center is eager to have students from all races and nationalities.

The Center not only has the task of strengthening the theological framework of the civil rights movement, but it also has the unique opportunity to present a better image of the Black ministry to the wider culture. Its emergence witnesses both the creative vitality at work within the Black community and to the fruits of interracial cooperation. The combination of the creative forces operating within the Black community in dialogue with persons of the wider community who have real vision and concern have produced a theological school capable of rich contributions both to the Black community and to the larger American community.