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Q&A#93 Theological Training

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Today's question: "After your thread on Twitter RE: theological training, and given that you're currently back in the UK, could you share with us what you think the best avenues for theological training are for people in the UK?"

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Transcript

Welcome back. Today's question is, after your thread on Twitter concerning theological training, and given that you're currently back in the UK, could you share with us what you think the best avenues for theological training are for people in the UK? My thread was concerning the importance of doing theology in conversation with people who've gone before us and wise theologians around us, and I wrote, it is also best done by people who actually have theological training. The democracy of discourse on Twitter can blind us to the fact that only a minority of people in most theological conversations here have really earned the right to an opinion.

It is great to have broader and more open conversations about the Bible and theology here, yet there are reasons why we've expected people who express public opinions on theology to have extensive theological education and to be subject to rigorous stress testing of their ideas. Some people have queried my comments about the need for

extensive theological training for anyone publicly expressing theological opinions. Others have read too much into them.

Let me unpack them. First, I never claim that such people need formal academic credentials or a formal theological education, nor that everyone with such credentials or an education are qualified. However, few who lack such credentials are qualified.

Second, I never claim that you must have extensive theological training to hold theological opinions, rather that theological, extensive theological training really is important for people who publicly express theological opinions. Why is this important? Among other reasons, because as we express theological opinions publicly, we increasingly assume the responsibility of teachers who face a much stricter judgment. Twitter blurs the boundaries between public and private, and we must take care of our speech.

Third, why do I use the term training? Mostly to contrast with the approach of the dilettante. The dilettante dabbles on their own terms and isn't really subject to anyone. Their knowledge is typically highly uneven, shaped and constrained by their private concerns.

Training, by contrast, whether formal or informal, isn't just dipping into a subject as a dilettante, but involves submitting to a pedagogy, apprenticing oneself to masters and gaining competence in a body of teaching. Trained persons approach theology as a discipline. Finally, in publicly expressing one's theological opinions, one should expect oneself to be held accountable for your words by others, sharply criticized if you're wrong, etc.

Challenge and attack properly comes with the territory. And so the importance of this is the importance of theological training and theology as a discipline. Now for this to occur, it really helps to have some sort of formal theological training.

My theological training has been in a more seminary context in the Evangelical Theological College of Wales that has since become the Union School of Theology in Brintirion near Bridgend. And then later on I went to St Andrews in Scotland and studied there at St Mary's, did a master's there and then went on to Durham to do my PhD at the university here. Now those things give different strengths and different foci for your theology.

The training that I did at the Evangelical Theological College of Wales was very good at placing my theology within the context of the church and in the service of the church and in the context of ministry. And that was really a fundamental basis for much that went later on. I don't think I would have benefited in quite the way that I did from my later theological training had it not been for that foundation and that orientation to the life of the church.

So when we're talking about training and talk about apprenticeship to masters, I talk about a body of knowledge that you need to gain and the importance of a pattern of education. This requires a sense of the body of people, the community of learning that you're responsible to. And as Christians and as theologians we are responsible to not just the theological guild but to the church.

And so if you're just studying within an academic context like a regular secular university I think you can easily miss that sense of responsibility to the life of the church. And that's something that I really gained within that context in the Evangelical Theological College of Wales. If you do not have that sort of training you will need to add that in somehow.

And there are ways to do that. There are ways to connect yourself strongly with the life of the church to ensure that your theology is always being outworked in some sort of ministry and there is a sense that your theology is not just for the sake of an academic pursuit, certainly not an individual academic pursuit, but is for the sake of the well-being of the church more generally. The benefit of the education that I received in places like St Andrews and Durham was the outward looking tendency of the university where you're engaging with people across a range of different disciplines.

You're situated in a social context where you're constantly interacting with people who aren't studying theology and people who are thinking at the top of their fields. You're being stimulated to think about things in ways that you would not otherwise. You're also being exposed to a far greater range of opinions and viewpoints regarding scripture and it's challenging, it pushes you, but approached well it can strengthen you, it can force you to develop stronger arguments for your opinions, stronger arguments than if you were just surrounded by people who agreed with you.

The other benefit that you have is a greater degree of resources. You have the intersection certainly of the life of the university, for instance in Durham the life of the university, the life of the cathedral and the life of Cranmer Hall where people are training for ministry. There are ways that you can situate yourself in that intersection between these different realms of activity in ways that are very fruitful for your theological enterprise.

There are many ways in which even if you're situated within a context which is ostensibly one of the academy, there are ways to connect that with the life of the church, certainly within the context that I think we have within the UK where theological departments are often very closely associated with the Church of England and tied in with its life. The other thing that you find is that your education will depend far more upon your peers than you might expect. It's your social groups and your friendships that really bear the weight of your theological education.

For me the friendships that I've formed in different places, those have been the things that have really shaped my theological education considerably more than the actual

formal teaching. The formal teaching ensured that there was a certain shape to my theological training so that I was certain bases were covered but you'll find that that doesn't really take you very far in terms of the larger purpose of mastering a body of material and gaining training and mentorship and all these sorts of things. You won't find it sufficient for that.

It may be often necessary and helpful towards that end but its benefits can often be found chiefly in the people it brings you into contact with. So the conversations that have been formed through peer groups that have been brought together by theological training, those have been far more formative for me than the actual formal classroom experience. The other thing I've found, my theological education has mostly taken place in online contexts.

Much of the things I've been exploring have been shaped by conversations, by contexts of discourse that are not UK ones and so I've been interacting with a people in the US on email discussion lists, on fora and in blogs for well over a decade and that interaction particularly in the context of a blog which is a place where you're forging your own independent voice but in ideally certainly in the past in an aerated community of conversation with others and you're exploring and it can sometimes be a sort of theological sandpit where you explore ideas, stress test them and see how far they can go and that I've found incredibly fruitful and helpful. I learn by writing in large part and I learn by the interaction with people who criticise me and who engage with me in various respects in those sorts of contexts and so that has been far more important for my theological education and this is what I think you'll find. The weight of your theological education will, there's a certain shape that will be given to it by your formal theological education but often you'll find that courses that are taught in universities do not cover some of the important bases or if they do so they leave them thinly covered.

There are many things that I have had to cover myself in my own personal study and much of the theological training I have has been on my own time. What you will find is that friendship groups, mentors, contexts of discourse and outlets of theological, outlets for your theological expression, those are the most important things. Those are the ways that you can really develop in a fuller way and so I would focus upon developing those.

One of the things that I've appreciated about the work of the Davenant Institute is its specific attention to bringing theological scholars, pastors and others together in service of the church and informing fruitful and fertile contexts of discourse and community so that out of friendship there could emerge greater contexts of theological conversation and education and this is often what I've found that there have been key contexts that have been profoundly important for my theological growth and often these will be obscure and small because the more that people enter into them the less focused they can be. They can often get very diluted. I was listening to a video by John Gray recently where he talks about the question of why do we have such an improvement in Tetris

performance nowadays and in the past there was a far greater base of players, countless millions, billions of players but now there are far fewer but they're closely connected and they're involved in contexts that encourage deliberate practice, exchange of expertise and playing off each other in a way that really encourages high performance and that's I think what you often find in theology.

Often it's not the really big context but it's the context with people who are really pushing, people who really want to excel and people who are not just there to be part of the group and to have the benefits of being part of the group without contributing but people who want to throw their weight into it. Get into those sorts of groups, have those as your peers, find people who you want to grow into, to you want to learn from, people a generation or two above you and people who have gone before you and who can give you some sort of direction and follow their example. Tie yourself in with the life of a church, that is important to have that rootedness of your theology within a context of ministry, in a context of service for a community of the people of God and so theological training is not to be equated narrowly with formal theological training or with credentials, that can be a very helpful way of connecting you with context, connecting you with material, enabling you to access great libraries for instance but really a lot of this thing will have to be done under your own steam.

It will have to be forming networks, forming friendships, forming contexts of theological speech where you can express your thoughts and develop and hone your ideas in conversation with others. Join some good discussion lists, start a blog, write in that sort of context, read a dozen books a month, something like that and push yourself, push yourself to read things that are harder than you have read before, push yourself out to read things beyond the areas that you're familiar with, read voices that disagree with you, familiarise yourself with a wide terrain of theology and also develop a peripheral vision, read beyond in the area of literature, in the area of social sciences, in the area of philosophy and you'll find that that brings things to bear upon your theological education. The other thing is don't get too fixated upon the current theological arguments that are taking place on Twitter and elsewhere, they'll blow over within a few days.

Focus upon reading the greats and digging into the history and the tradition, focus upon reading those books that have stood the test of time, focus upon interacting with people of stature, people who have less of the preoccupations that a younger generation has with the immediate conversations that are taking place, more of a sense of those teachings and that body of knowledge that will equip you as a theologian more broadly and in the service of a community of the people of God. And so theological training should always be considered to be considerably broader than the formal theological training that you have. It requires mentors, authority figures to guide you, it requires communities of discourse, it requires disciplines that will often be self-imposed to read widely and to explore in areas that you would not be pushed to.

The person who's just going to read nothing more than the suggested reading list, if that, they're not going to be a great theologian, you need to push yourself, you need to read things that are tough, you need to interact with people who will push you and challenge you and you need to root yourself in a context that draws you back into the history and pushes you forward into a more intense form of theological study than you are doing currently. If you're just coasting you won't grow, you need to think in terms of deliberate practice. What are the areas where you need to improve, what are the areas that you need to grow, what are the areas, the skills that you need to acquire, what are the contexts that you need to find access into, who are the friends that you need to make, what are the contexts of discourse that you need to situate yourself within, what are the means of expression, the forms of the writing that you need to do to understand things a bit better.

And so those are the things that I'd recommend. You'll find that your mind will develop very quickly in certain contexts and stagnate in others. Learn the difference between them, learn the importance of choosing your peers wisely and choosing a good library.

Don't waste your time on books that aren't helping you to grow. Much of the books that people recommend aren't worth reading and focus upon those books that really push you, really help you to grow and often those will be the books that you disagree with, those books that rub you up the wrong way, those books that surprise you and unsettle you and those are often books that will push you to think differently, to develop your thinking in response and then think about those things in conversation with others. Learn what they have learnt and share their bodies of insight and that is something I've found incredibly helpful.

For instance, an email discussion list, listening in on people talking about their expertise and their areas of expertise which aren't mine, areas where I feel weak but yet they can really assist me. I hope this is of some help. If you have any further questions please leave them on my Curious Cat account.

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God bless.