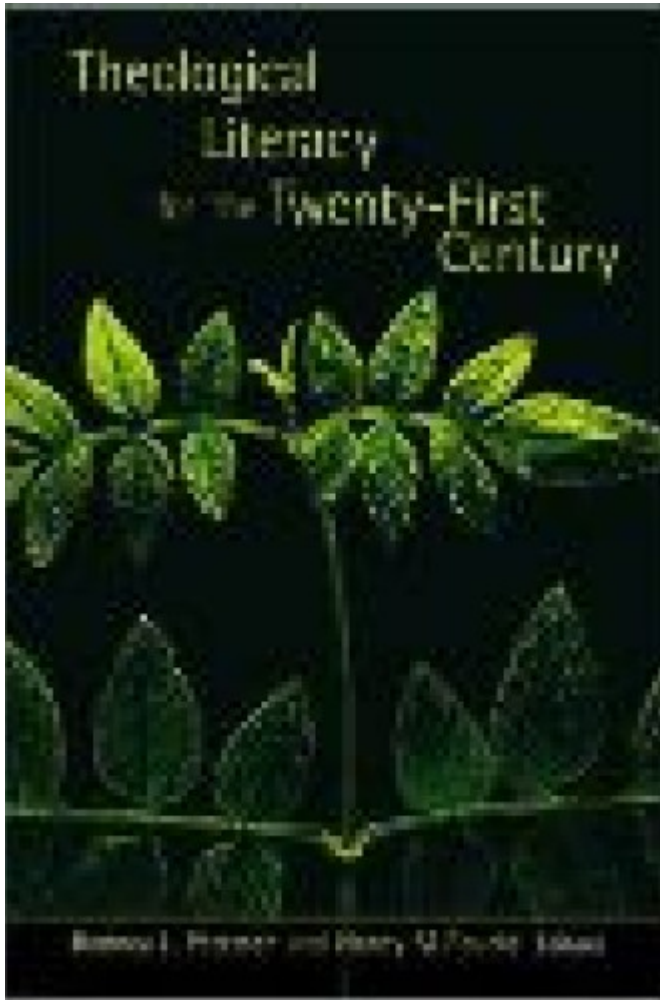


# Spread too thin

By [William C. Placher](#) in the [February 22, 2003](#) issue

## In Review



### **Theological Literacy for the Twenty-First Century**

Rodney L. Petersen, ed., with Nancy M. Rourke  
Eerdmans

Reading this long book on theological literacy has left me mightily discouraged. The discouragement does not come from the book itself, which is excellent. Rodney L.

Petersen, its editor, is executive director of the Boston Theological Institute (the consortium of Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Protestant theological schools, seminaries and university divinity schools in the Boston area). Its authors, a variety of theological educators, mostly from the Boston area, reflect on what a seminary graduate going into ministry in the 21st century ought to know. They offer a great many exciting ideas, but thinking about how to put those ideas into practice engendered in me something close to despair. What follows, then, is not a review of the 22 rich and diverse essays (by Catholics, Orthodox, mainline and evangelical Protestants) gathered in this volume, but some reflections they occasioned in this mainline Protestant on problems facing theological education today.

First and foremost, there's just the sheer quantity of things those seminary graduates ought to know. Since they will work in a religiously pluralistic society, it's not enough to know how their denomination differs from others on the Eucharist. They need to understand how we Christians differ from Buddhists on just about everything. The standard version of church history, focused on Western Europe and the United States, doesn't seem appropriate for a world in which soon two-thirds of Christians will live in the Southern Hemisphere. Even in our own society, there are black, Hispanic, feminist, womanist, *mujerista*, gay, neoevangelical and many other voices. Where can one stop in listing the theological perspectives calling for our attention? And preaching and pastoring in contemporary society surely requires knowing something about the natural sciences, economics and world politics, to say nothing of the range of ways of understanding human beings and how to help them, from Freud to pharmacology.

I wish I were being ironic. Various chapters in this book, as well as other reading and my own experience in churches, persuade me that all these kinds of knowledge and more really would be helpful for contemporary ministers. Back in the distant days of my youth, in the 1960s and '70s, some radical theologians proposed a way of making room for new material. We were to stop reading all those "dead white males," and that would free up a lot of time to read more contemporary, diverse, "relevant" material. Even radical critics today, however, generally recognize the value of knowing the "canon" even as we expand it. Henry Louis Gates Jr. talks about a vision of life big enough to include "Bach *and* James Brown. Sushi *and* fried catfish." So, in a theological context, we might say, "Barth *and* Cone, Aquinas *and* McFague." Unless I missed it, no author in this volume proposed dropping anything from the curriculum.

On a recent Friday I had lunch at a seminary—academically probably better than most—and found the place virtually empty. Its academic week, I discovered, now runs from Tuesday morning to Thursday afternoon. Its administrators find that schedule the only way to accommodate students who live in different cities, have families and jobs or already serve as pastors. The day after that Friday lunch, I happened to have dinner with a former student now enrolled in medical school. He left early because he had to go back to studying that night. After all, there is a lot a future doctor needs to learn.

No doubt the implied comparison is in some ways unfair. The seminary students are doing academic work back home over their long weekends. The workload in medical education is arguably pathologically demanding. And seminaries are often to be admired for the creative ways in which they are making theological education possible for students with diverse and complicated personal and economic situations.

Still, as I visit seminary campuses and talk to my friends who teach at them, I'm struck by how often and how much, except at a few top institutions, the educational process gets stretched and bent these days. "We can't assign library research," a typical faculty member reports, "because our students are in class pretty much the whole time they're on campus, and they don't have access to a theological library when they go home." Students who haven't been in a classroom for 20 years, and who were studying engineering or business back in their classroom days, are often the norm rather than the exception.

They bring with them all sorts of interesting experience, but it often doesn't include the experience of reading the kinds of academic books that are the staple of theological education. The Association of Theological Schools' accreditation allows member schools to admit up to 10 percent of their students without a college degree, and many schools do so. Classes get taught in one long block of time per week, even in subjects in which that approach clearly doesn't make pedagogical sense.

It's easy to dismiss the occasional faculty member who whines, "My students aren't good enough." The teachers I take seriously are those who *admire* their students' struggle against inadequate preparation and their juggling of bizarrely complex schedules, but then sadly admit, "We do the best we can, and many of them bring such commitment to the work and such fascinating life experiences. But every year

it seems we have to find books that are a little easier and cut back on the assignments if they're going to survive."

Unfortunately, some instructors do not have that kind of sensitivity to the realities of their students' lives. They keep making assignments that are over their students' heads and then, sometimes under administrative pressure, grumble and hand out passing grades to people who never really understood what was going on. Their students go off into ministry without ever having read theology with pleasure and understanding, or done exegesis well. So reading theology or doing careful exegesis aren't things they ever try again.

But most seminary faculty members do a tremendous job in difficult circumstances. They teach full loads of classes, juggle a range of administrative duties, try to keep active in the local church, and generally get stretched thinner and thinner. I'm amazed at how they balance family responsibilities with teaching intensive courses around the country, and scholarship with the demands of multiple degree programs in small institutions.

One could drop many of a seminary's programs. One could raise admissions requirements. One could require that students live on campus and attend full-time. One could set higher standards and start flunking people. Whether these might or might not be good ideas, they will not be significantly put into practice. Most seminaries simply can't afford to try them. Seminaries need the tuition income to survive.

Of course, I have been painting with too broad a brush, and therefore have produced too bleak a picture. At some university divinity schools and a few independent institutions the quality of resources and students is much higher (though there one often can worry about how few of their students are headed toward ministry). Even at not very good seminaries, some students are excellent by any standard. And some students who struggle with much of their academic work will make wonderful pastors. Under almost any circumstances, on the right day and sometimes even for a whole semester, a teacher, a group of students and a text or a topic can click, and the magic of education happens. Good teachers get it to happen more often than anyone has a right to expect.

Nevertheless, given many seminary students' abilities, academic preparation and current schedules, it seems to me a very tough job to give them even a minimal

version of a “traditional” seminary education. A book of essays that keeps proposing things to add without ever mentioning things to subtract and that doesn’t acknowledge that all this might add up to a problem does not seem in very close touch with reality. Of course, reality is different in Boston. Many of these authors come from elite institutions with greater resources and abler students.

Unfortunately, the problem gets even worse. One of the advantages of volumes offering ecumenical conversations about theological education is that they remind Protestants of the Catholic category of “formation.” Preparation for ministry is not just a matter of learning things. Effective pastors who do not “burn out” have generally developed a prayer life, moral virtues and spiritual practices that sustain and nurture them. They have been “formed.” In one of the essays in this volume, pastoral theologian Carrie Doehring distinguishes between “theological literacy,” which knows the vocabulary and the right answers to the questions, and “theological fluency,” in which “we ‘inhabit’ our theology as a faith perspective that we use to understand and respond to spiritual and psychological needs. Whereas becoming theologically literate is part of learning how to think critically, becoming theologically fluent involves formation.”

Among Protestants the Pietists particularly understood the importance of formation, though it was not a term they used much. Writing in 1675, Philip Jacob Spener used language that may bring a smile to our lips, but his point is analogous to Doehring’s. In seminaries, he said:

It would be especially helpful if the professors would pay attention to the life as well as the studies of the students entrusted to them and would from time to time speak to those who need to be spoken to. The professors should act in such a way toward those students who, although they distinguish themselves in studying, also distinguish themselves in riotous living, tippling, bragging, and boasting of academic and other preeminence. . . . On the other hand, the professors should openly and expressly show those who lead a godly life, even if they are behind the others in their studies, how dear they are to their teachers.

Most of us today would emphasize different virtues and vices, but Spener’s concern for the character of future ministers still seems timely, and the Catholic tradition’s language of “formation” provides many of the most useful categories for discussing it.

Here again, though, the essayists seemed generally insensitive to the realities of most seminaries today. Formation takes time, and time together—faculty members and students getting to know each other, students forming a community, taking part in corporate worship and having time for reflection. When students arrive from their jobs just in time for class, or spend only a couple of frantic days per week on campus, or when faculty members become circuit riders, turning up at the branch campus every other Wednesday to teach their intensive course before disappearing, formation becomes difficult if not impossible.

It doesn't follow, alas, that formation happens consistently in campuses with the proper environment for doing it well. Too often faculty members at the most prestigious theological schools owe their primary allegiance to their scholarly guilds. That means going off to get the new book written or to attend a scholarly conference. The best students are competing to get into Ph.D. programs. Formation doesn't seem a high priority for anyone. Less "competitive" schools might be in a position to do formation best, if they weren't feeling forced to stretch themselves hither and yon to pick up a few more students in a new degree program or branch campus. In short, in regard to formation as well as curricular content, the authors of these essays have good ideas but seem too often unconnected to the realities of most contemporary seminaries.

Most of the authors in this volume, writing from left of center, focus primarily on the things that ought to be added to seminary education. An exception is Walter C. Kaiser Jr., president of Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, one of the book's few conservative voices. He is probably typical of conservatives in worrying more about what has been discarded. He believes that new theories about how to interpret texts have wrongly led us to think we can get rid of important elements of traditional theological education. Kaiser quotes the patron saint of conservative Presbyterians, J. Gresham Machen, writing in 1912:

Let her [the church] substitute sociology altogether for Hebrew, practical expertness for the proof of her gospel. Let her shorten the preparation of her ministry, let her permit it to be interrupted yet more and more by premature practical activity. By doing so she will win a straggler here and there. But her winnings will be but temporary. The great currents of modern culture will sooner or later engulf her puny eddy. God will save her somehow—out of the depths. But the labor of the centuries will have been swept away.

Kaiser worries that, too often, this is exactly what has happened. He thinks he can identify the underlying problem. Thanks to theorists as varied as W. K. Wimsatt, Monroe Beardsley, Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur, he says, interpreters no longer think that the intent of its author determines the meaning of a text: "The new dogma asserts that when a literary work is finished and delivered to its readers, it becomes autonomous from its author so far as its meaning for others is concerned. . . . This, to my mind, was the most revolutionary concept of the twentieth century."

As a result, he argues, theologians feel themselves free to use the Bible for whatever purpose they wish, from the liberation of women to the church-growth movement, without regard for its supposedly irrecoverable original intent. Learning original languages becomes unnecessary. Theological literacy comes to mean the ability to identify a good contemporary cause, not the ability to understand the Bible in its original context. And that way, he thinks, disaster lies.

I think Kaiser oversimplifies the scholars he criticizes (though maybe not all of their disciples). These postmodern hermeneuts do not replace "original intent" with "anything goes." They try to describe the necessarily complex rules for the appropriate interaction of readers and texts. As the English historian R. G. Collingwood wrote a generation ago, "We shall never know how the flowers smelt in the garden of Epicurus, or how Nietzsche felt the wind in his hair as he walked on the mountains." One level of past experience is indeed irrecoverable.

So we cannot know exactly what Isaiah thought or felt when he wrote of his vision of the six-winged seraphim, or just how "literally" the author of Luke wanted his account of the ascension to be taken. Gadamer talks about a "fusion of horizons" in which *both* our own questions and perspectives *and* everything we can learn about the author's context contribute to a text's meaning. We need to engage in historical work, he says, so that the text can challenge our assumptions and help us grow; otherwise, we would merely subsume everything we read into the categories of our own experience. But the historical work never gets us exactly back to the mind of the original author.

New hermeneutical methods do not lead to chaos and disaster. But they do add yet another level of complexity to contemporary theological education. Once upon a time seminary students were expected first and foremost simply to know a lot about the content of the Bible. Then came a time when the emphasis fell on knowing the methods and results of the historical-critical method. But now a hundred flowers

bloom: historical research, literary methods, feminist criticism, deconstruction, canonical criticism—each has its contribution to make.

Those contributions can be rich and constructive. Phyllis Tribble subtitles her book *Texts of Terror*, “Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives,” packing several “new” methodologies into a phrase. Yet when we read her powerful interpretations many of us find that she has shown us something in the texts we had not seen before, but which we will not be able to ignore on future readings and which gives us a better understanding of what we read. The same can happen when all sorts of interpretive methods are used responsibly and sensitively.

The problem, then, isn’t that hermeneutical pluralism leads to chaos but, once again, the practical issue of how to teach students everything they really ought to learn. How can a first course in Bible introduce students to methodological diversity and at the same time help the biblically semiliterate begin to know the content of the Bible? How can seminary students learn both to preach from the wealth of useful contemporary insights and as people who know and love the Bible? The tough questions lie not in hermeneutical theory but in pedagogical practice.

So where does all this leave us? I conclude with some theses about theological literacy.

- Christian laypeople in North America today are better educated than at any time and place in history. It is common to be cynical about dumbed-down popular culture, American education comes in for its share of critiques, and biblical and theological illiteracy is a real problem. Still, the percentage of college graduates continues to grow. Many laypeople are doctors, lawyers, teachers, executives—but even those who repair cars or raise corn use complex computer programs and have to make judgments about the state of the economy. They are not too stupid to understand their pastors. Indeed, for serious conversation, they need smart, educated pastors.
- The future success of mainline Protestantism depends in part on its ability to appeal to the concerns and interests of thoughtful Christians. We will never do praise songs as well as the evangelicals do. The secular world will always provide more fun on Saturday nights than we can offer on Sunday mornings. But for folks who want to think about their faith, the meaning of their lives, or the possibility of hope in the midst of despair, we have wonderful, complicated, endlessly rich news. When it is well presented, they are eager to hear it. Churches that offer quality adult



education usually have more people wanting to sign up than they can handle. Bible study programs like “Word” or “Kerygma” draw impressive loyalty. Intellectual substance sells, and it is one of the things we mainline Protestants ought to be good at.

- Intellectually rich congregational programs require pastoral leadership and support. Several years ago I interviewed the people in charge of some of the country’s most successful adult education programs in local congregations. When I asked what factors contributed to their success, *every single one* mentioned, “The senior pastor isn’t intimidated by it.” At minimum, pastors need to be confident enough of their own theological education that they don’t run scared at the thought of laypeople learning to ask questions the pastor can’t answer. It is even better if pastors can themselves serve as theological educators.
- The pressure for academic quality in theological education needs to come from the “consumers”—from denominations and congregations. The economic pressures on most seminaries drive them to make everything as easy as they can in order to attract more students. They are aware that a seminary down the road, or online, stands ready and eager to offer something easier and cheaper. The demand for higher standards needs to come from denominations and through the hiring practices of local congregations.
- Denominations and the congregations from which ministerial candidates come need to offer better financial help. Given the low level of ministerial salaries, seminarians (unlike medical students and law students) simply dare not go badly into debt. If we want them to have time for serious study and formation, we will have to make sure they are not holding down three jobs to pay for their education. Indeed, encouraging and supporting candidates for ministry needs to be one of the priorities of Christian congregations. (One way to encourage candidates for ministry, by the way, is to make the congregation’s own pastor’s job seem rewarding and honored.)
- Three years isn’t enough. Given the level of preparation of many students and the range of things good pastors need to know, three years of seminary is not adequate for theological education. Alternatives as varied as “residencies” in which students learn more of the practical side in a year or two of “on-the-job training,” or structured ongoing education during the first several years of ministry, or even four years of seminary are worth exploring. Above all, theological students need to be

“formed” to be lifelong learners whose education has encouraged them to read and think throughout their careers.

- Just adding courses won't do. *Theological Literacy for the Twenty-First Century* makes clear that thinking about the character of theological literacy leads to good ideas for too many courses to fit into even an expanded seminary program. Many important concerns have to come up within existing courses, and it is therefore the creative design of basic courses that often makes the most difference in the education a school provides. Market forces encourage seminaries to engage in a host of peripheral activities. The core of their missions can get lost in the shuffle. Those who care about theological education need to give seminaries all the help they can to focus on their principal job: preparing theologically literate ministers for the 21st century. This book provides a valuable resource for thinking about the relevant issues.