Change in Theological Schools

Session 3

Many social institutions do not change readily. Government systems do not change easily; it sometimes takes great political unrest as Northern Africa has recently been demonstrating to the world. In the United States, the railroad companies were among the most successful and powerful corporations in the first half of the twentieth century. In the second half, there was significant decline in the railroad industry, and many went bankrupt. To keep some rail service available for passengers and freight, the government needed to step in. Why did the railroads fail when the country was growing and becoming more affluent in the decades after World War II? There were problems with overly burdensome taxes and regulations, and many other reasons, but one theory I have heard is that the railroad companies operated as if their job was running trains rather than transporting goods and people. They were apparently so focused on the way they had done business in the pastthat they found it hard to change as new opportunities presented themselves.

Other institutions change more readily. In the US, the entertainment industry changes quickly: it is always discarding older entertainers and introducing new ones, moving quickly to new media forms, and in the midst of it all, trying to change business models to accommodate the innovations. These days, some of the most successful North American businesses have reinvented themselves so that they can change quickly as the business climate in which they are operating changes. However, even fast-changing social organizations, like entertainment, sometimes change more slowly than they should. The American record industry, for example, has been slow to figure out how to function profitably when so much music is sold online in digital formats and as artists have more direct access to their potential audiences.

We are talking about change today, and I think it is important to realize that virtually all social institutions have a tendency to change slowly. The church and theological schools are like these other institutions—and they tend to change slowly, as well. I want to invite you to think with me about institutions and what they contribute to human work, and about how these institutions change, slow as change might be.

Thinking institutionally: institutions and their contribution

When my best friend in seminary and I were first-year students, we started an underground student newspaper, replete with an off-campus mailbox and no list of the editor and writers. It was much more my friend's idea than mine, of course. My article savaged the seminary's grading system, and other articles exposed numerous perceived institutional failures. It was 1969, and we had arrived at the seminary with considerable suspicion about anything "institutional." Institutions, in our view, were impediments to the just solutions that the times needed. It seemed to us that institutions were in the way of the civil rights movement, ending the Vietnam War, and dealing with systemic poverty. If anything, we were anti-institutional; institutions were the source of problems, not the means by which problems could be solved and social capital generated.

I have thought a lot about that assessment I had in my youth across the more than two decades I have spent working with institutions that have more mission than money, more value than social status, and more social significance than cultural privilege. My mind has changed. I have come to the conclusion that institutions are vital and that they serve important purposes. They are slow to change, and that can be a huge problem, but they are not sources of much social good and need to be understood for what they are and how they do their work. My thinking has been especially influenced by a book by Hugh Heclo, *On Thinking Institutionally*. Across these years of working in and with theological schools, I have come to realize the value and importance of doing what Heclo invites us to do: think institutionally.

To explain what he means by thinking institutionally, Heclo identifies some things that it is not. For example, thinking institutionally is not thinking *about* institutions. He illustrates the point this way: "To think about art is not the same thing as having an artistic view of the world…. To think about religion is clearly not the same thing as being religious in your approach to daily life. . . ."[1] Neither does thinking institutionally involve thinking in organizational or bureaucratic terms—which is what my friend and I were doing as seminary students in the 1960s.

Heclo then goes on to define what he means. Thinking institutionally "has to do with living committed to the ends for which the organization exists rather than to an organization as such." Institutional thinking is "exercising a particular form of attentiveness to meaning in the world."[2] Institutional thinking involves a "faithful reception"—seeing ourselves as "debtors who owe something, not as creditors to whom something is owed."[3] It is receiving—being infused with— values that transcend the organization that conveys them. "To think institutionally is to stretch your time horizon backward and forward so that the shadows from both past and future lengthen into the present."[4]

Theological schools are born out of religious vision, and as such, they are the recipients of a legacy of value and meaning. They educate religious leaders, to be sure, but the soul of a theological school is not its curriculum or educational strategy. The soul—the real *institution* of a theological school—is the religious vision it inherits, embodies, and perpetuates. A religious vision cannot survive disembodied from institutional forms that make it possible "to stretch the time horizon backward and forward so that the shadows from both past and future lengthen into the present." A religious vision cannot provide "grounding for human life"—in Heclo's terms— absent an institutional home. A religious vision needs some place where people are up in the middle of the night wondering how to carry old wisdom forward as they discern the new wisdom that will extend that religious vision.

Some of you may have been to England and made a trip to Holy Isle on the northeast coast. It is a tidal island, and you can drive to it when the tide is out, but when the tide is in, the road is covered by water and Holy Isle is an island. The island was the home for an ancient monastery, and its legacy is the work of monks to make manuscripts of the Scripture. The Landisfarne Gospels are among the most treasured of ancient manuscripts. In an era of limited literacy and no printing presses, the Landisfarne Abbey passed along the legacy of the early Christian Scriptures. It is not altogether clear if we would have the Scripture today if it were not for these kinds of monasteries and the work of their monks.

Because the Bible has been translated into an amazing number of languages and modern printing makes them very inexpensive, we don't need the institutions like the monastery at Holy Isle. However, religious visions are in need of preserving and propagating for a future day, and a theological college or seminary is an institution that can do this work very well. A theological school extends the Christian vision one student at a time, one generation at time. There are no monks, but there are professors who know the tradition and its vision deeply and who guide these students, class by class and year by year, and the school as an institution. I have thought a lot about my theological education and reflected on the faculty I encountered this way a couple of years ago:

> These people, in their own ways, did not merely teach the theological curriculum, they *became* the curriculum. In them, there was a "wisdom pertaining to responsible life in faith." They had studied hard for years and grappled with ideas and texts, and in the end, they had more than the sum of the intellectual work they had done—Christianity's hopes and longings had taken up residence in them. The theological curriculum does not consist merely of courses and degree requirements. Perhaps more importantly, it consists of teachers and others who so embody theological wisdom that they form a cloud of witnesses who have become texts worthy of study. Theological schools are full of faculty like these.[5]

People give their lives to the study of faith, and somehow faith takes deep roots in them. In Heclo's terms, the shadows cast from the past overlap with the shadows cast by the future, and in the students who will leave our schools, a crucial religious vision will be carried in leadership and service one generation further. Frankly, I don't want that to change. Theological schools have the responsibility to bring two thousand years of Gospel tradition and meaning to the current generation and to identify what that tradition has to say to this culture, at this time, and how it should be extended into the future. Schools are, by definition and purpose, conserving institutions. They are not just sluggish to change like some other institutions; they have a crucial task of preservation and conservation that cannot be sacrificed to current needs and interests.

Change and theological schools

If you think about theological schools institutionally, you get a perspective on what they do, why they do it, and the actual necessity to withstand change. However, there is change and there is *change*. It is one thing to hold onto the long tradition of faith and pass it on to the next generation of pastors and church leaders; it is another never to rearrange the chairs in the classroom. It is one thing to keep the faith once and for all delivered to the saints; it is another thing to keep the curriculum just as it was when the current faculty members were students twenty years ago. The problem with the institutional stability of the schools is that it spills over into areas of institutional life that truly should change. What is good for a stable value structure of a theological school can spill over into areas where there are no fundamental values at stake, and reduce the school's ability to advance those underlying values. It is a virtue not to change what is true and good and it is a vice *not* to change the educational practices and institutional habits that should be changed to enhance the school's work or extend its education to the people who need it most. During periods of great stability in the church and culture, the tendency not to change

can be a nuisance but not fatal. In periods of significant change in the church and the culture, the tendency can become fatal to the very reason the school exists, so we need to take a careful look at change in theological schools.

Because schools can be resistant to change, even the changes that they most need, they tend to "layer" innovations on top of existing commitments. Old conventions are never altogether abandoned and new ones never fully replace old ones. We are at a moment in North American theological education, and perhaps you are in African theological education, when theological schools will not be able to deal with the amount of change that is needed by layering on gradual accommodation. We need to think carefully and technically about change. I want to share some observations about change and some factors to consider when seeking to guide schools to needed change.

Some observations about change in theological schools
 1. Institutions can implement change, but the capacity to change in one area seems to require a firm anchor in another. One of my early observations working with ATS schools is that Evangelical Protestant schools tended to hold to traditional doctrinal positions but were very liberal about educational processes. Mainline Protestant schools were more open to doctrinal exploration, but tended to be very traditional in their educational and pedagogical strategies. My conclusion was that any innovation needs an equal and commensurate conservation in an institution. It is as if to move on one foot most of us need the other foot firmly planted.

2. For most schools, more than 75 percent of the budget is tied up in personnel. Theological schools are personnel intensive institutions, and changes are almost always threatening to individuals. Most people who work in a theological school were employed because they had skills that qualified them for the jobs they are doing, to which they have brought practice and efficiency. In most cases, change requires different sets of skills or different use of the skills people have. The mission of theological schools is not to employ people, and while schools need to care for people in every way possible, they cannot let the people employed to implement the mission become an impediment to accomplishing the mission.

3. Theological schools have limited resources, and innovations present the threat that these resources will be used in new and different ways. Seminary budgets are limited and that means that money spent on one new pattern of work cannot be spent on the older patterns of work or even another new pattern of work.

4. Institutions seldom change for reasons that seem self-evident. For example, little change occurs in seminaries because it represents a better idea. There is an axiom when American companies market their products: people don't abandon a product or way of doing something simply because a better product or way of doing the task comes along. Neither does change occur because the institution *should* do something. Most middle class Americans agree that they should save more money and eat less sugary food, but that perspective doesn't seem to change their saving or eating habits.

5. Institutions do change, but change has many roots. Some change happens as a response to external influences. Theological schools have changed, but they have changed in response to

something, not because they decided to adopt an innovation. This change might be necessary for institutional survival, or it may happen in a school's effort to keep up with other institutions that it considers its peers, or it may happen because individuals with power, vision, and stamina cause change to happen. There are institutional changes that can be traced to presidential leadership, and curricular and educational changes that can be traced to individual faculty.

Factors that influence change
In the 1970s, the US was undergoing a major change in how mentally ill patients were being treated by moving all but the very ill out of residential facilities and into community-based care. The National Institutes of Mental Health (NIMH)was spending millions on research to develop effective community mental health programs and intervention strategies in support of this major change in mental health care. The new programs were well-researched, were demonstrated to be effective, but the agency noticed that mental health professionals were not adopting these new effective programs. They were not changing.

As a result, NIMH established a division to conduct studies on innovation and utilization of programs. They wanted to know what variables were associated with organizational decisions to innovate. This research identified a set of eight variables that it concluded influenced how agencies adopted new programs or changed. The likelihood of innovation increases as:

1. The organization has the **Ability**—the time, personnel, resources—that an innovation requires;
2. The organization has **Values** that are compatible with the values represented by the innovation;
3. **Information** flows readily and appropriately within the organization.
4. The absence of **Circumstances** that would interfere with innovating the program;
5. The **Timing** for the innovation fits well with other institutional agenda and variables;
6. The organization has some sense of **Obligation** about adopting the innovation;
7. **Resistances** within the organization are limited; and
8. The organization can anticipate a positive **Yield** from the innovation.

The research did not guarantee that the positive position on each of these variables would guarantee innovation, but more positive positions on each would increase the chance that the change would be made. So, for example, an ideal innovation for a seminary would have a major gift to fund it, which would permit needed staff to be hired without affecting work of other staff members (ability). The new program would be clearly tied to the institution's mission (values), and implemented when other programs were relatively stable (timing). It will be obvious to the persons in the institution that the program will be both personally and institutionally beneficial (yield).

Some research that Merton Strommen and I conducted many decades ago used these variables to estimate the "readiness" of youth-serving organizations to consider and implement change. Our study suggested more variables were relevant than these eight, but that they were relevant to human service organizations, which are similar in many ways to theological schools. To the extent that these findings apply to theological schools, institutions have differing **basic institutional skills or openness** to consider change. It was not clear if agencies high on these

variables change more than agencies that are low on them, but they do provide a way of perceiving an organization's "wiring" with regard to openness to change. The agencies in our study used a lot of variables to **evaluate** a potential program innovation—different ways in which an organization can determine if the innovation should be adopted. There were other variables that expanded what the NIMH model identified as **resistances**. These findings suggest that theological schools: (1) differ in their ability to change because of deeply embedded organizational characteristics, and I would add that, in this era in North America, those that have limited capacity to change may not survive at all; (2) that change typically comes after an organizational process of evaluation that leads to some conclusion that the change will be worthwhile, and (3) that all organizations have patterns of resistance to change, and that these resistances need to be overcome, one way or another, for change to occur.

Conclusion

Seminary leaders need to be very attentive to the reasons that theological schools need to be sturdy and stable organizations, and the factors that leaders must consider in guiding change. I talked with ATS presidents last year about a famous text: God's call to Abram.

> [1]The LORD said to Abram, "Leave your country, your relatives, and your father's home, and go to a land that I am going to show you. [2]I will give you many descendants, and they will become a great nation. I will bless you and make your name famous, so that you will be a blessing. [3]I will bless those who bless you, but I will curse those who curse you. And through you I will bless all the nations." [4]When Abram was seventy-five years old, he started out from Haran, as the LORD had told him to do; and Lot went with him. [5]Abram took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, and all the wealth and all the slaves they had acquired in Haran, and they started out for the land of Canaan. (Genesis 12)

In many ways, North American theological schools are being called to go in directions in which the destination is unknown. Faithfulness takes expression in the willingness to leave the places and practices that have made us secure and go as God calls, even though the destination may be unknown.

Daniel Aleshire
May 2011

---

1. Hugh Heclo, *On thinking Institutionally* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2008) 85.
2. Ibid., 97.
3. Ibid., 98.
4. Ibid., 109.
5. Daniel Aleshire, *Earthen Vessels: Hopeful Reflections on the Work and Future of Theological Schools*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2008), 33