

The Khit-Pen Theological Education Model: A New Methodology for Contextualizing Theological Education in Thailand

Response by Neville Bartle

Daniel's paper on Theological Education, which is derived from his Doctoral dissertation at Asbury Seminary has made me think. At first I thought, "This paper does not really deal with hermeneutics, but theological education." But then I thought, "Is it possible to deal with theological education and not deal with hermeneutics?" Daniel's paper certainly does deal with the issue "How much should culture influence our hermeneutics?" Daniel raises the question of spiritual authority, which is certainly a hermeneutical issue. He says that for many theological students "The words of the missionary have become the primary source of religious authority by which the cultural issues are judged and evaluated." Regardless of how saintly or orthodox the missionary is, that is not acceptable hermeneutics.

The Kit Phen model "sets out to tackle theological questions and issues found within the unique context of the Thai churches which have not been adequately discussed by the Western educational models." This is in contrast to the traditional educational model where students were trained to "memorize the information they have received from their trainers and to transmit the information to their local congregations, irrespective of its relevance." Unfortunately this problem is not unique to Thailand. Too students have been placed in a passive, receiving, container-like role.

Daniel presents an interactive dialogical approach to theological education that involves five stages. His paper is quite long so it may be helpful to summarize the five stages.

1. Preparation. Through a questionnaire, the teacher learns from the student basic information concerning the student's Christian life and their expectations in relation to the college. They are also asked concerning the learning styles they prefer and the courses of study that they think will be most helpful and least helpful.

This gets the student actively involved in the learning process right from the beginning. This helps to develop a training program that is relevant and related to the student's needs and learning styles. The usual system is that students are "trained to memorize the information they have received from their trainers and transmit it to their congregations irrespective of its relevance" (p 3).

2. Exploring the Issues. The "teacher and students study local questions and issues from an objective nonjudgmental point of view" (p 6). They look at prevailing questions the people are asking inside and outside the church. These questions may be cultural, religious, social or political. The student starts therefore with issues of everyday life that are both familiar and relevant, and moves towards the unfamiliar.

3. Integrating with Scripture. The teacher and students study the Scripture within its own historic and cultural contexts and see how it relates to the cultural and social issues that have been studied in part two. “The Scripture is the standard of truth upon which all other issues are reflected and judged” (p. 8). This is a need-centered approach to theological education in which the students help to set the agenda, and seek with God’s help to study scripture and find God’s answers for themselves and their communities. This is in contrast to a teacher-dominated approach in which the teacher tells the student what the Scriptures said and meant. As noted earlier, “many times the words of the missionary have become the primary source of religious authority by which the cultural issues are judged and evaluated” (p.8).
4. Interacting with the Community. Community refers to the people both inside and outside of the church. This interaction is accomplished by requiring student involvement with people in the community as part of the course requirements. In addition there is a required “Supervised Ministries” course. Daniel equates this interacting with the community with the “experience” component of the Wesleyan quadrilateral. The truths they have learned in the classroom must now be lived out in the church and community. Students connect theory with praxis, by getting involved in social issues and problems.
5. Implementation. Implementation is the final segment of the cycle. Implementation is the student’s ability to integrate the truth they have learned and to incorporate it into their personal as well as their communal lives. They have been encouraged to put into practice the insights they have gained from their investigation of scripture and interaction with the community.

Central to this model is the primacy of scripture upon which the five stages are founded. The whole program is very flexible, thus giving the students freedom and creativity to respond.

There are a number of features in the third stage of “Integrating with Scripture” that are especially related to hermeneutics.

- The importance of the recognition of the authority of the Scriptures and a thorough knowledge of their teachings.
- A careful study of the biblical message within its own historic and cultural contexts.
- Scriptures stand in judgment on all cultural elements.
- The teacher takes the lead in helping the students understand what the Bible has to say regarding issues and questions confronting the community.
- In traditional models the *students were told* what the Scripture said and meant. In this model, the *students are involved*, with the guidance of the teacher, in *studying scripture and finding God’s answer for themselves and their communities*.

This model is a definite departure from a teacher-dominated model of education that many of us grew up with. It has a number of strengths that I will mention. There are also a number of questions that I have, which are not addressed in the paper.

Strengths

1. The Khit Pen model takes culture and the life situation very seriously. The focus is very much on Christianity as a life to be lived. Theology that ignores culture will be considered by many to be both foreign and irrelevant. If theology is to be relevant it must relate to people's lives.
2. This model emphasizes doing theology rather than learning theology. It is certainly opposed to the students passively learning a prepackaged theology.
3. The model emphasizes social transformation. Ministry is done in community, which consists of people both within and outside the church.
4. Daniel has emphasized, and rightly so, that we need to contextualize methods of theological education and not just the content of theology.
5. Daniels circular model is quite appropriate, for the issues arise within the life and experience of the community and pass through stages of exploration, integration, interaction with the community and finally implementation. Implementation does not take place in an artificial learning environment, but back in the social setting where it began. This naturally raises other questions, which start the learning cycle all over again.

Unanswered Questions

Dr Saengwichai's paper leaves me with some unanswered questions. Perhaps Daniel can help to answer them.

1. Integration with Scripture. In the second stage, the students are encouraged to explore the issues and look at questions that people are asking inside and outside the church. This then leads to integrating with Scripture. Scripture is clearly given a central place in the model, but how do we approach scripture? Unless there is a solid foundation of scriptural knowledge, how can the integration with Scripture take place? It seems to me that there needs to be a foundation of Biblical knowledge to be in place before the integration can take place. How do you address this?
2. You quote Groome, "a critique of the Story [Scripture] in light of the stories [realities] and a critique of the students' present story in light of the past Story." Does this mean that you use a narrative approach in your theological education? Do you approach the Bible as being God's Story and teach from Genesis to Revelation as one continuing story, with numerous themes and sub-themes? Or do you follow a traditional systematic approach to learning Bible and theology?

3. To what extent do the needs of the students or the issues they raise control the curriculum? It appears that in the Khit-Pen model, theological education does not always begin with an established agenda, but often arises from within the life situation of the students. This has the advantage of helping people see the Bible as relevant, for it relates to issues they are facing in their own lives and social situation. It also makes students think deeply and does away with memorizing a theoretical knowledge. However how does one work this out practically in a college setting? It would be good to hear how this has been accomplished as an ongoing experience.

Thank you Daniel, for being bold and innovative. This model challenges us to involve our students in looking at prevalent issues confronting the church, and then commit ourselves to finding answers from the Word of God. Hopefully we will be able to help the students combine theological learning with life experience, so that communities will be transformed by the Gospel.

Neville Bartle