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Th.D. Seminar  
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The Nature of Practical Theology: The implications of Edward Farley's account of  
*theologia* for my focus in the Th.D. program

Edward Farley traces the roots of the fragmentation of theological education in his book, *Theologia*.<sup>1</sup> Farley laments that seminary graduates learn the fourfold division of the theological disciplines (systematic theology, practical theology, Scripture and church history) and yet never learn if there is a common thread that unites them. Students who embrace the division rigorously pursue theological studies in ever greater specialization while others finish seminary relieved that they never have to read another book in those irrelevant disciplines.

Farley argues that the aim of all theological education should be the development of *theologia* or theological understanding. Each discipline should be drawn into dialogue with the Christian tradition and critical inquiry.

Schliermacher's assertion that the church needs "educated leadership, as do medicine and law, and a university faculty which provides the cognitive foundations of that education"<sup>2</sup> led to what he calls the "clerical paradigm" where theological studies are united solely by their perceived utility to clergy. This concept is still the most common understanding of the unity of theological education.

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<sup>1</sup> Edward Farley, *Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1983, 1994).

<sup>2</sup> Farley, *Theologia*, 86.

This criteria led particularly to crisis in the fourth area of the traditional fourfold division “practical theology.” Because “utility to clergy,” was the single unifying criteria, in liberal seminaries in the 1960’s and 70’s, there was an explosive increase in the use of psychology, cultural studies, feminist, Black studies and Marxist studies. In the 1980’s, many evangelical pastors embraced marketing techniques and business practices because they were thought to be useful. Farley believes these tools are valuable but they need to be filtered through theological reflection (the development of *theologia*).

Farley argues that the three traditional theoretical disciplines (systematic theology, biblical studies and church history) also need to be challenged to develop wisdom (not just knowledge) in students through the dialectical analysis he calls for.

This discussion has two implications for me. First, how can I incorporate *theologia* or the development of theological wisdom in students as I teach the ministry arts? Second, what courses should I take while I am in the Th.D. program?

My end goal is to teach the ministry arts in a seminary setting. As a professor, I want to help pastors lead and minister more skillfully. Clergy today can benefit enormously by being able to analyze consumerist American culture and lead more effectively. But I want to bring these practices into conversation with the Christian tradition so that business techniques are not accepted blindly.

In my previous position, I taught a course called “Program and Curriculum Development” to Christian Educational Ministries majors and minors at Taylor University. Though my goal was to give the students experience doing a number of administrative and skill-oriented tasks, I also required that they theologically reflect on each of the approaches being taught. Farley articulates his vision for what that reflection

(the dialectic of theologia) should look like: (1) Begin with the life situation. (2) Raise questions about the situation. (3) Question the norms of the Christian tradition. (4) Discern what is true and real. (5) Craft a response to the situation.<sup>3</sup>

If I am facilitating these sort of conversations about American business practices in the seminary classroom, I will not be simply swallowing blindly practices that could be poisonous.

Before the first week of classes this fall, I met with professors Lacey Warner, Greg Jones, and Randy Maddox to hear their advice about which classes I should take this fall. I told them I was interested in pursuing the Th.D concentration “Leading Christian Communities and Institutions.”

“Would your interest in ‘leadership’ incline you to take a course in the Duke business school?” Randy asked.

“Yes, I would love to eventually take a course at the business school,” I said, “I think eventually I will write books about theological engagement with the church’s use of American business practices like marketing techniques. But during my two years of coursework, I think I want to concentrate on theology and bible courses.”

I decided in addition to the Th.D. seminar, to read all the works of Rowan Williams this semester with Greg Jones and do a doctoral seminar on Matthew with Richard Hays.

If I decide to take more theoretical courses in systematic theology and Scripture, how can I also subject these disciplines to the dialectical process so that I do not simply get more fragmented by pursuing specialization in areas that I will never be able to attain

<sup>3</sup> Farley, *Theologia*, 165-168.

expertise? Farley has raised my awareness of the need to engage in the dialectical process regardless of the “discipline” in which I am studying.

★★★★★ **Dense tracing of the history of theological education**, September 13, 2007  
By [Andrew D. Rowell](#) (Durham, NC) - [See all my reviews](#)



Do you sense that something is wrong with theological education but you just can't put your finger on what it is?

Farley traces the history of theological education to discover the roots of the four-fold division in theology: church history, Scripture, practical theology and systematic theology (with many more subcategories like ethics, languages, feminist studies, spiritual formation, etc.)

He laments this fragmentation and suggests "theologia" (or theological reflection) as the proper aim of all theological education. This theologia includes starting with situations, reflecting on them in light of theology, reflecting on that theology, and deciding on proper actions. Farley criticizes courses that build clergy skills but contain little theological reflection.

I read this book for "Th.D. Seminar: Explorations in Practical Theology" at Duke Divinity School. Farley is strong in analysis - breaking down every concept into multiple parts. But this is also the book's greatest weakness. Because of its dense argumentation, it is a difficult read.

If you do a google search with the words: review farley theologia, you will find some more substantial reviews of the book and an interview with Farley.

Farley's book has stimulated deep questions about the direction of theological education since its publication in 1983. This is its enduring legacy.