

Seminary 2050: Knowledge and piety

by [Scott Jones](#) in the [February 21, 2006](#) issue

"Unite the pair so long disjoined, knowledge and vital piety," wrote Charles Wesley in the 1763. Theological education in the middle of the 21st century will still be wrestling with that basic pairing.

The highest levels of theological education will always require the maximum breadth of learning, which will still be represented by a liberal arts baccalaureate degree followed by a specialized master of divinity. There will never be any substitute for excellence in the study of the Bible, church history, systematic theology and the practice of ministry.

But the shape of theological education will be altered in five ways because the shape of vital piety will continue to change rapidly. These changes are already under way; the trends represented by these five adjectives will strengthen over time.

Digital. Sermons and worship will be multimedia experiences of encountering the Word of God. Good worship leaders and preachers will be masters of combining the spoken word, film and music. Seminaries will require students to submit self-produced videos along with written papers justifying why a certain image or sound will facilitate spiritually powerful worship in a specified context.

Formational. In a culture where Christianity is no longer established, theological education must pay attention to spiritual formation in deep ways. The best seminaries will require students to live in community, attend worship daily and be mentored by spiritual directors weekly.

Ecclesial. The best seminaries will be owned and operated by a denomination, which will protect their freedom to innovate while monitoring the curriculum and doctrine. Independent seminaries will continue to decline in the absence of Protestant cultural dominance.

Multilevel. The churches must be served by persons with many different levels of education. While some will have multiple degrees from our greatest universities, there will be schools for lay pastors and those ministering to the least educated in

our society. Because the highest levels of education usually render persons culturally incapable of evangelizing the poor and marginalized, specialized schools will exist to serve those contexts.

Integrated. The integration of academic disciplines will continue, driven by greater attention to the cultural context in which the church ministers.