

FINAL REFLECTION PAPER
Revised Ministry Project

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December 2018

INTRODUCTION

How can a human being experience a deep and lasting transformation? As Jesus explicitly states in Matt 28:19-20 we are called to make disciples of all nations by instructing them to observe his teaching. To a large degree, this means being involved in a process of transformation of human minds and hearts. But how can we respond to this enormous challenge? What kind of preparation and equipment do we need in order to be successful in this endeavor? Multiple streams of knowledge and skills coming from different directions and a matrix of influences are involved in the process of formation of a Christian minister. In my experience, TCMII became the instrument God used to help me learn some of the greatest lessons for life and ministry. Through my education, I was given the necessary directions and I was properly trained for my journey as a servant of Christ.

It has been my goal in writing this paper to demonstrate how my education has led to my personal transformation and how it has influenced my ministry. The first part of this paper outlines the journey I have been on for the last six years while studying at TCMII and includes brief comments on some of my experiences and key events that were especially significant in my life. The second section is intended to show how I have been able to integrate the knowledge I had acquired and how it was specifically applied in my ministry of teaching and discipling.

I. MY TCMII EXPERIENCE

Ever since I became a Christian I have felt a great longing to know and understand the Scriptures. I always dreamt about being able to study theology one day. That became a reality only 22 years after that. But when the time came for me to start my education at TCMII my fulfilled desire turned into a tree of life for me personally and for my ministry.¹ I cherished dearly this opportunity to study, grow intellectually and spiritually, and to change. I was totally dedicated and motivated to achieve the goals I had set before me.

Commenting on the history of humankind Justo González says that there are moments ‘that seem to be pregnant with future possibilities ... because the old ways have run their course and it is necessary to venture in new directions.’² This is how I felt right before I began

¹ I experienced the truthfulness of the following verse in Proverbs 13:12, “Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a desire fulfilled is a tree of life.”

² Justo L. González, *A History of Christian Thought*, Vol. 3, iBooks, p. 56.

my studies at TCMII in March 2013. I had come to a point where I was not able to stretch beyond my level of knowledge and expertise by educating myself through reading. I needed external help.³ A chain of godly ordained events and providential guidance led me to TCMII.

It took me six years to graduate. In 2013, my first year at TCMII I took three courses – one at Haus Edelweiss, one in Sofia and one online. My first course was Systematic Theology with professor József Kovács. This was my first visit to Haus Edelweiss. I found myself in a different world. The atmosphere of love, acceptance, and care, the relationships between students, professors, staff and volunteers, the general spirit of kindness fascinated me. It was the closest embodiment of what I had believed the Kingdom of God should look like. I will never forget the deep emotions that flooded my heart during that first session at Haus Edelweiss. I had waited for this moment for 22 years. It was precious for me indeed.

In 2014 I took only one course due to health issues resulting from a serious burnout I had experienced several years before. I was still fighting fatigue and fever which interfered significantly with my daily routine and work schedule. These were dark and difficult days and weeks. At times I was not sure if I would be even able to finish my education. There was no hope that I would recover completely. This year I spent almost the whole month of August in bed. It was a season of emotional suffering and testing. The Lord taught me the lesson that we are totally vulnerable as human beings and we depend upon him for everything. There is no place for independence and unreasonable audacity in the heart of any true Christian minister.

In 2015 I took New Testament 2, Discipleship, and Transforming Leadership. In 2016 after taking History of Christian Theology 1 and Theology and Practice of Prayer I faced another health issue which was even more challenging than the first one. This time, only because of God's grace and his mysterious ways, my sickness became the beginning of a new life. Sometimes joys are hidden in sorrows. "We need to remind each other that the cup of sorrow is also the cup of joy, that precisely what causes us sadness can become the fertile ground for gladness."⁴ In 2017 I took Introduction to the Old Testament, Old Testament Theology and Worldviews and World Religions.

The last year before my graduation, 2018, was full of surprises and a set of unexpected

³ My experience at this point can be explained by Howard Stone and James Duke's statement, "Deliberative theological reflection carries us forward when our embedded theology proves inadequate" (*How to Think Theologically* [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013], 20). In just a few months while taking the Research Methods course I was able to realize this process of moving from embedded to deliberative theology.

⁴ Henri Nouwen, *Can You Drink the Cup* (Notre Dame, Indiana: Ave Maria Press, 2006), 56.

and trying events followed suit. In this year I took History of Christian Theology 2 with Sorin Badragan, New Testament Teaching and Preaching with Jeff Snell, and New Testament Theology with Kevin Conway. I took all of my courses except two at Haus Edelweiss. I made this decision the first time I visited Haus Edelweiss. I realized that the experience there is much fuller and the opportunity to meet people from different cultures was enriching and created further occasions for fellowship and interaction.

I chose no concentration for the course of my studies. I opted for courses I considered useful for my ministry of teaching and discipling. On several occasions, on purpose I chose courses that were harder because I wanted to hone my study skills. In 2014 when I took New Testament 1 with professor Barry Blackburn I was the only student to finish the course. The requirements were too high. But after this course, my writing skills were drastically improved and it was worth paying the price.

It is hard for me to point out the best courses and best teachers. It will not be an overstatement to say that I was excited about every single course and every professor has left an indelible mark on my heart and mind. I benefited considerably from every single one of the courses and I have learned something valuable from every one of the professors. I was able to see their different gifts and approaches and to observe what servant leadership looks like in practice.

One of the significant events that influenced my ministry during my studies at TCMII was a split that my church experienced at the end of 2017. It was a heartbreaking and shattering episode. I have heard and read about splits but never thought that I would have to go through such myself. I had to learn the lesson of forgiveness and to bear the pain of rejection, betrayal and unjustified accusations. “How you respond when it happens can make the difference between continuing a vigorous leadership or falling as a casualty.”⁵

A note must be entered at this point concerning an advantage that made my studies a far more positive and successful experience. I was blessed with the ideal circumstances for reflection, study, and writing. During that time, I lived by myself or with close friends who extended invaluable help and support. Another advantage was the long-standing practice of spiritual disciplines. I have done everything within my power to grow towards Christian maturity. The good habits that I had developed before becoming a student at TCMII, helped me

⁵ Myra, Harold and Marshall Shelley, *The Leadership Secrets of Billy Graham* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 178.

to benefit even more from my education. There was room for a further step in my spiritual and theological forming.

II. HOW MY EXPERIENCE AT TCMII HAS FORMED ME AND MY MINISTRY

I now turn to consider how my education at TCMII has shaped my ministry and me personally.

1. Personal and spiritual development

During the six years of my education, it has been my goal not merely to add to my head knowledge but also to grow in my experience of Jesus. There were also some character traits that I needed to avoid or deal with. The strongest but, at the same time, most vulnerable weapon we possess as ministers is our heart. If bitterness, desperation or deceit creep in, this will drastically affect, one way or another, all aspects of our ministry. The heart must be our most cherished and protected treasure.⁶ Three courses during my program especially accentuated this truth and led me to a deeper and wider relationship with Christ – Discipleship, Theology and Practice of Prayer and Transforming Leadership. Studying for these courses was a time for exploring the spiritual center of my life. My background experience and the professors who taught these three courses convinced me that the inner transformation and integrity of the leader are of utmost significance.⁷

A successful minister is bound to a continuous process of change and growth. This is a disposition I saw in the lives of many of my professors. It set me on the same track of heart searching and self-awareness. “A life that is not reflected upon isn't worth living. It belongs to the essence of being human that we contemplate our life, think about it, discuss it, evaluate it, and form opinions about it. Half of living is reflecting on what is being lived.”⁸

Another character trait I discerned in my teachers was humility. It was especially Meego Remmel who impressed me in this respect. In my view, he is a man mightily used by God in different contexts of ministry. In spite of this, I have never noticed any trace of pride or self-conceit in him. I call this “the power of being.” We influence others mostly by who we are,

⁶ The Bible puts it this way: “Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life” (Proverbs 4:23).

⁷ A habit useful in this process of reflection and transformation might be the keeping of a diary. Professor Roadcup in his course on Discipleship emphasized the benefits of this spiritual discipline. Important events and processes should be evaluated and analyzed. I developed this habit and now I can always go back and review the work of God in me and see how His hand has guided me.

⁸ Henri Nouwen, *Can You Drink the Cup* (Notre Dame, Indiana: Ave Maria Press, 2006), 29.

by the character we have developed and by the atmosphere we create. Albert Bandura, a renowned psychologist, asserts that “most human behavior is learned observationally through modeling” and he shows that “modeling is the greatest form of unconscious learning there is.”⁹

At TCMII I witnessed the life of ministers who possess and demonstrate a high level of personal integrity and whom I can describe as “solid.” They never brag about their achievements; they are careful in their choice of words and they are humble enough to admit their mistakes and correct their views. Oswald Sanders points out, “If you want to maintain an image of infallibility, find something else to do besides leading people.”¹⁰ I learned not to be overly sensitive when being criticized, to be tactful, tolerant and graceful, to be a peacemaker. These were some points of weakness and failure for me and I became aware of them in the course of my studies. Also, I became more focused and goal-oriented. God used my time at TCMII for clarification of my direction as I was surrounded by men and women who had a purpose in life.

Over these six years, the level of my emotional intelligence has risen considerably and I experienced a deep emotional healing in many areas of my life. I learned that unruly and painful emotions can only be a symptom of underlying diseases. Duane Elmer puts it this way, “Symptoms are important for maintaining health. Like an early warning system they can tell us when something may be wrong. The physician diagnoses and treats the problem based on an accurate description of the symptoms. If I ignore the symptoms, things may get worse, causing more problems.”¹¹ This might seem a peripheral issue but, in fact, it was of key importance in the formation of my Christian character.¹² Peter Scazzero, in the Introduction to his book *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality* notoriously acknowledges that the lack of emotional health early in his ministry almost led him to a catastrophe.¹³

2. Acquaintance with biblical and theological resources for ministry

Professor Fred Hansen said in one of his classes that we don’t know what we don’t know. So true! As I began my education at TCMII I was aware of the vast areas of ignorance

⁹ Howard and William Hendricks present Bandura’s conclusions in their book *As Iron Sharpens Iron: Building Character in a Mentoring Relationship* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995), 27.

¹⁰ Oswald Sanders, *Spiritual Leadership* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), 38.

¹¹ Duane Elmer, *Cross-Cultural Connections: Stepping Out and Fitting In Around the World* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 47.

¹² I am deeply grateful to professor David Roadcup who as a mentor helped me in my journey to emotional health.

¹³ Peter Scazzero, *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017), 8.

that crippled my ministry. I am a reader and in the course of my studies I read extensively. This was the primary way I would acquire new information and reflecting on it. Textbooks and journals became my first mentors. “The leader who intends to grow spiritually and intellectually will be reading constantly.”¹⁴

Studying the Word of God and supplementary reading has been part of my life as a Christian but now my reading became informed. In the practice of my ministry now I knew what I was looking for and where to find it. I also learned to discern the quality of the different books I was using. Francis Bacon remarks that “some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested.”¹⁵ Moreover, courses like Research Methods taught me how to gain much more from reading books. For the last 18 years I have been involved in teaching adults and discipling. The acquaintance with biblical and theological resources changed the quality of the materials I was preparing for my teachings and my efficiency has greatly increased.

In the leadership and faculty of TCMII, I saw exemplified the truth expressed by John Maxwell, “Successful leaders are learners. And the learning process is ongoing, a result of self-discipline and perseverance.”¹⁶ Study is ‘one of the central ways God uses to change us.’¹⁷ This is not the mere amassing of information, but the internalization of this knowledge, its transformation into wisdom. This was one of the reasons I chose TCMII – knowledge and education are not an end in themselves but a way of serving our Lord Jesus Christ.¹⁸

3. Development of critical and analytical thinking

This was one of the major outcomes of my education. I realized that I was not properly equipped for responsible theological thinking. This affected the very core of my ministry. I faced a crisis with my first course – Systematic theology. “Deliberative reflection questions

¹⁴ Oswald Sanders, *Spiritual Leadership*, 102.

¹⁵ Mortimer J. Adler and Charles Van Doren, *How to Read a Book* (New York: Touchstone, 1972), 19.

¹⁶ John Maxwell, *The Complete 101 Collection* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2010), 160.

¹⁷ Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2005), 79.

¹⁸ The following warning by Robert Mulholland is to be remembered by all who devote themselves to study, “With the discipline of study, however, we must be alert to the temptation to enter into the discipline as a means to help us exert greater control over our lives, the lives of others and the problems of the world. The liturgy of study, as with all the elements of liturgy, is a means of offering ourselves to God, willing for God to do with us as God chooses” (Invitation to a Journey: A Road Map for Spiritual Formation [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016], 136).

what had been taken for granted.”¹⁹ I had to go through a process of “unlearning.” I began questioning some of the fundamental beliefs I had inherited.²⁰ In other words, I became involved in a process of theological reflection that began the transformation of some of my convictions. Patricia O’Connell Killen and John de Beer define theological reflection as: the discipline of exploring our individual and corporate experience in conversation with the wisdom of a religious heritage. The conversation is a genuine dialogue that seeks to hear from our own beliefs, actions, and perspectives, as well as from those of the tradition. It respects the integrity of both. Theological reflection therefore may confirm, challenge, clarify, and expand how we understand our experience and how we understand the religious tradition. The outcome is new truth and meaning for living.²¹

As a result, my teaching became clearer, less spontaneous and emotional, more careful and more effective. At the same time, I gained confidence. But this was a new way of confidence since I became comfortable with tentative conclusions.²²

People think and act out of their theological understanding.²³ The ministry of teaching and preaching molds the theology of God’s people. In turn, this determines how they will live out their faith. What a weighty responsibility!²⁴ “Many are hampered and confused in their spiritual walk by a simple ignorance of the truth. Worse yet, many have been brought into the most cruel bondage by false teaching.”²⁵ My education at TCMII equipped me to more easily recognize flawed or imprecise doctrine and defective biblical exegesis. Unfortunately, the church has plenty of all of the above.

As teachers of the Word, unwittingly, we might spread our faulty assumptions and beliefs. This is why it was of vital importance for me to learn to better recognize and define the embedded theology that informed my teaching and my life as a Christian. I learned to reflect

¹⁹ Howard W. Stone, Duke, James O., *How to Think Theologically* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 18.

²⁰ Howard Stone and James Duke put it this way, “Questioning is a corrective to complacency – the danger of becoming satisfied with old answers and preconceptions. We subject our own answers of yesterday to fresh questioning in order to embrace new situations and new insights” (*How to Think Theologically*, xiv).

²¹ Cited in Robert Kinast, *What are They Saying about Theological Reflection* (New York/Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 2000), 20.

²² James Sire’s observation is noteworthy, “We believe as Christians that God is omniscient and that we, as much as we know, as much as God has told us in his Word, are finite and fallible in our knowledge. We should, therefore, keep our own developing views of everything – God, human beings, nature, ourselves – in perspective. On any of these we could be wrong” (*Discipleship of the Mind* [Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press], 1990), 20.

²³ Howard W. Stone, Duke, James O., *How to Think Theologically* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 1.

²⁴ Hence the stern advice of James, “Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness” (James 3:1).

²⁵ Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 79.

theologically on a new level. I allowed new information in and I developed a new attitude of receptiveness as I realized that “theological reflection is not only a personal but also an interactive, dialogical, and community-related process.”²⁶ At the same time, I adopted the attitude of intellectual humility.

My growth in analytical and critical thinking was aided and accompanied by better research, study and writing skills. All of them are crucial to my ministry. Unfortunately, my study at Sofia University many years ago had not been very helpful in this sense.²⁷ At TCMII I learned how to identify main ideas and how to remember more of what I read. Special thanks to Katharina Penner who read and re-read my papers for the Research Methods course and whose help has been invaluable as I was developing and sharpening my writing skills. “Reading maketh a full man; speaking a ready man; writing, an exact man.”²⁸ Hopefully, I have become fuller in my knowledge and thinking, readier as a speaker and more exact in the way I express my views.

4. Developing a theology of ministry and servant leadership

Servant leadership is a key concept to grasp. It creates a context in which the Spirit of Christ operates – a spirit of humility and servanthood. In my own country, I have seen the nature and scope of unhealthy leadership and its far-reaching ramifications. I have listened to many sermons and teachings that promote servant leadership. But at TCMII I met leaders who model this teaching. “God always wraps His truth in a person. . . . He shows what biblical truth looks like with skin on it.”²⁹ I am certain that the examples of servant leadership I have observed have left an indelible mark on me.

Despite the worldwide vision of TCMII, the theology of discipleship builds a culture in which every person is appreciated and valuable. Now I am confident that it is possible “to build a people culture in a numbers world.”³⁰ I fully adopted this theology of ministry and I am careful to never see people as a means to an end and as a helpful provision towards the fulfillment of a vision, whether it be a God-given vision.

²⁶ Howard W. Stone, Duke, James O., *How to Think Theologically* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 4.

²⁷ I never had a course before with a content similar to the Research Methods course at TCMII.

²⁸ Francis Bacon quoted in Oswald Sanders, *Spiritual Leadership*, 101.

²⁹ Howard and William Hendricks, *As Iron Sharpens Iron*, 28.

³⁰ Dan Sanders has included a chapter devoted to this idea in his book *Built to Serve* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2008).

“Spiritual truth is learned by atmosphere, not by intellectual reasoning.”³¹ I must stress, in particular, that the atmosphere of encouragement and healthy positivism at TCMII unlocked some of my gifts that lay dormant and instilled more confidence in me as a leader. This is the kind of atmosphere I would like to create in my ministry.

Empowering others is another important aspect of leadership which I was able to perceive during my education. “A leader is great, not because of his or her power, but because of his or her ability to empower others. Success without a successor is failure. A worker’s main responsibility is developing others to do the work.”³² This goes hand in hand with the ability to accentuate the positive and redirect the negative.³³ I witnessed how this kind of attitude has the power to “unlock” the potential of people. The culture in my country is judgemental. To some degree, it has influenced me negatively. I was especially confronted by David Roadcup’s kindness and grace. It is true that “When you judge someone, it impairs your ability to see him or her clearly, as if a filter is screening out everything about that person except what fits your assessment.”³⁴

During my studies at TCMII, I was exposed to a variety of influences. This led to the formation of a broader perspective. I had the privilege to see the operation of different ministerial gifts, skills and positive attitudes. Staff, faculty, and volunteers never spared their time or strength in order to serve. I also became aware of a lurking danger – settling. Sam Chand warns leaders, “Settling is no fun. It’s a malignant habit, a slippery slope that takes you to mediocrity.”³⁵ In my opinion, TCMII is an organization that is in a state of constant development and growth. This set an example and a standard for my own ministry.

5. Skills in the practice of ministry

Until the time I became a student at TCMII I was involved in administrative work, teaching, preaching and discipling. In every one of these areas, I have grown during the years of my education at TCMII. The knowledge I acquired helped me to perform much better my ministerial tasks. One aspect was a higher degree of self-discipline and better organization. We may here quote the words of John Maxwell, “Perhaps the most valuable result of all education

³¹ Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost for His Highest* (Uhrichsville, OH: Barbour, 1993), 286.

³² John Maxwell, *Developing the Leader Within You* (Nashville: Nelson Business, 1993), 10.

³³ Ken Blanchard, *The Heart of a Leader* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2007), 9.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

³⁵ Samuel Chand, *Leadership Pain: The Classroom for Growth* (Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson, 2015), 97.

is the ability to make yourself do the things you have to do, when it ought to be done, whether you like it or not.”³⁶

At TCMII I had the opportunity to observe how problems can be solved in a wise and careful manner. As I mentioned above I had a longstanding problem with burn-out. I was constantly overwhelmed by the multiple demands of ministry and did not know how to handle stress. The course *Transforming Leadership* and some of my professors helped me with counseling and good advice. Now, at the end of my studies, I can confidently say that this problem is solved which makes me more efficient and I am able to carry more responsibilities without being worn out.³⁷ I was also set free from the paralyzing effect of the fear of failure. I saw how mistakes can be corrected and failure isn't fatal as long as we don't move steadily in the wrong direction.

I strongly believe that relationships define the quality of our ministry. The greatest command we were given by Jesus is to love each other the way He loved us. The focus of our ministry is people. My highest call as a disciple maker is to love people and empower them to become who God made them to be. “There is no substitute for knowing and being known by another human being. There is no other way to experience what deep down we really want as people – to be heard, to be understood, to be affirmed, to be valued. God has put into each of us a longing to be significant, to feel that our life counts. Yet countless men feel inadequate and insecure, no matter how much talent they may possess.”³⁸

If we learn how to properly form and maintain relationships in ministry we have learned one of the most valuable lessons. My education helped me to cultivate the attitudes and values I needed. God awakened me to the extraordinary power of relationships in ministry and during these six years, He was teaching me how to handle them wisely.³⁹

One of the reasons I took almost all of my courses at Haus Edelweiss was the opportunity to meet people from different countries and backgrounds. Seeing how diverse the body of Christ can be taught me to love and accept unconditionally. The words of Gladis DePree ring loud in my soul, “Until the day you can greet a man as a man and not be conscious

³⁶ John Maxwell, *Developing the Leader Within You* (Nashville: Nelson Business, 1993), 163-164.

³⁷ As John Maxwell says, “When we are able to think right about tough situations, then our journeys through life become better” (*Developing the Leader*, 84).

³⁸ Hendricks, *As Iron Sharpens Iron*, 24.

³⁹ Oswald Sanders concludes, “How we handle relationships tells a lot about our potential for leadership” (*Spiritual Leadership*, 37).

of his face, except for its individual beauty, you are still acting as judge.”⁴⁰ Moreover, we cannot serve people successfully if we don’t accept them unreservedly.

And lastly, Professor Blackburn is one of my professors from whom I learned how to become a better teacher myself. I am thankful for his course *New Testament I* which was a challenge, but also an instrument in the hand of the Holy Spirit to form my ability to remember, think and understand better the world and truths of the New Testament.

6. Engaging Scripture in the context of key theological traditions

I have always tried to use Scripture responsibly and not violate the different contexts in the interpretation of the text. But the course in *Hermeneutics* which I took with professor Chuck Sackett really opened my eyes how to read, interpret and teach the different texts in the Bible. It was summer and I read extensively for this course. I gained real confidence in working with texts from the Old Testament. This was also a needed preparation for the time when I began to preach. I am thankful that I was able to minister in this way only after I had taken this course.

Historical Theology 1 and 2 are the other two courses that taught me how to engage Scripture in a more informative way. Reading the writings of the Patristic fathers and some of the Reformers acquainted me with my Christian heritage. This gave me a new perspective. I was able to trace the development of doctrines and to learn what church life looked like centuries ago. This gave me also assurance about the eternal truths of Christianity and at the same time made me think about some areas of practice and belief in which the contemporary church has probably gone astray under the pressures of contemporary culture.

7. Effective communication of the message of Christ

I come from a tradition where Christians believe that “theology is a conversation that is closed or stacked against them.”⁴¹ I realized that this cannot be true and I knew that “the way we relate our faith to the world around us is always in flux because the world is constantly changing.”⁴² The problem is that I lacked the necessary tools and abilities to successfully do the work of ‘bridge-building’ between the world of the Bible and my culture. This is the challenge

⁴⁰ Gladis DePree, quoted in Duane Elmer, *Cross-Cultural Connections: Stepping Out and Fitting In Around the World* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 87.

⁴¹ Howard W. Stone and Duke, James O., *How to Think Theologically* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 6.

⁴² *Ibid.*, xi.

to teach and preach messages which are relevant.⁴³

Gradually my theological understanding was changing and it became more tentative. This led to some difficulties and misunderstandings on the part of believers who were used to fixed theological systems. My approach to teaching and discipling changed. My purpose became ‘to help people think for themselves as Christians.’⁴⁴

In 2018 I took the course New Testament Preaching and Teaching that led to a considerable improvement of my communication skills. Jeff Snell taught with eloquence and zeal which I have rarely witnessed. As a teacher of the Word, he set a high standard before me. A book I read for this course, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text* by Sidney Greidanus, was especially illuminating. I became conscious of my tendency to easily fall back into the “moralizing” style of teaching and preaching. In his book, Greidanus talks about Christocentric interpretation and the Holy Spirit impressed this idea upon my heart. Many of my sermons on the gospels were centered around different characters and the centrality of Jesus (and most importantly, the implications of his resurrection) had been lost.

I came to the conclusion that proper theological interpretation never loses sight of the gospel, the good news about the Kingdom of God and Jesus Christ. Christ-centered teaching and preaching is essential not only for my local church but for the whole body of Christ in Bulgaria. The gospel and the person of Christ should be the theological framework and interpretive glasses for the content of all my teaching and preaching.

8. Engaging cultures appropriately from a Christian worldview

During my studies at TCMII I have experienced what the well-known preacher J. Christian Blumhardt calls a second conversion. He says that a person “must be twice converted, first from the natural to the spiritual life, and then from the spiritual to the natural.”⁴⁵ I moved from an individualist, pietistic understanding of the gospel to a gospel of the kingdom. The gospel preached in most churches in my country is “individual, future, and otherworldly salvation.”⁴⁶ This new interpretation of the gospel changed some aspects of my teaching that

⁴³ John Stott’s work *Between Two Worlds* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) was of immense help in my effort to teach a message that is pertinent to today’s culture.

⁴⁴ Stone and Duke, *How to Think Theologically*, 10.

⁴⁵ Quoted in Herman Bavinck *The Philosophy of Revelation* (Woodstock, Ontario: Devoted Publishing, 2017), 87.

⁴⁶ Goheen, Michael W., Craig G. Bartholomew. *Living at the Crossroads: An Introduction to Christian Worldview*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), ix.

are of the utmost importance.

In order to engage cultures appropriately, a Christian needs to understand what worldviews are and how they operate. A book I read for Research Methods, *Living at the Crossroads* and later, my last course in 2017, *Worldviews and World Religions*, have been of great help. I learned how to recognize and approach the different worldviews. Every culture functions in the framework of a specific worldview. First, I had to rethink my own worldview and to recognize the elements and patterns coming not from the Word of God but from my own culture. Then, I was able to reflect on how I can approach appropriately my culture.

C.S. Lewis is correct when he says that Christians “are tempted to make unnecessary concessions to those outside the Faith. We give in too much. . . . We must show our Christian colours, if we are to be true to Jesus Christ. We cannot remain silent and concede everything away.”⁴⁷ Now we, Christians, are faced with the challenge of responding correctly to the pluralism, relativism, and syncretism flooding our culture and society.

In the course of my studies, I gradually came to the conviction that “no single tradition is able adequately to grasp or to express the fullness of the gospel. We have much to learn from our brothers and sisters from other parts of the world, from other historical eras, and from other denominations and confessional traditions of the Christian church.”⁴⁸ I may say that I became more ecumenical in some of my convictions.

CONCLUSION

When I began my education at TCMII I was deficient in many areas. As a student, I have been privileged to be part of a remarkable journey. I learned how “to love God in the ways I think.”⁴⁹ Now I can confidently say that my character, thinking, behavior, and ministry are significantly transformed. The courses I took, the culture of TCMII, the prayers, support and encouragement of my professors led to the release of gifts and qualities that were dormant before. I feel empowered for a much higher level of leadership.

Foster insists that “Our world is hungry for genuinely changed people.”⁵⁰ I believe this is true and I have committed myself to make a difference in the world I live and to be an

⁴⁷ C.S. Lewis, *God in the Dock*, 290.

⁴⁸ Goheen, Michael W., Craig G. Bartholomew. *Living at the Crossroads: An Introduction to Christian Worldview*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), xiii.

⁴⁹ “*Learning to Love God in the ways We Think*” is the subtitle of James Sire’s book *Discipleship of the Mind*.

⁵⁰ Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 11.

instrument in the hands of God for the transformation of human hearts and lives. My greatest joy has always been to see people who surrender their all to our Lord Jesus Christ and serve Him unreservedly. The difference is that now I am better equipped to aid their growth toward maturity in Christ.

I believe I was able to receive a lot from my education because I fostered an attitude of high expectations. I was willing to glean from my professors' wisdom, experience, and expertise. If one is constantly aware of God's work and presence in everything, then ordinary events turn into lessons. This mindset transforms *chronos* into *kairos*.⁵¹ "So the way we learn is rich and diverse process. We are assimilating knowledge and experience all the time, directly and indirectly, consciously and unconsciously, by words and images, by listening and looking, by discussing and discovering, by passive absorption and by participating in the action ourselves."⁵² Thus, through all these channels seeds were planted in me that are at work and I have yet to see the fruit.

Towards the end of my studies at TCMII I entered a new season in my ministry. As the book of Daniel says, "He changes times and seasons." I have faced new challenges that required of me to recognize, accept and deepen my understanding of my identity and calling. The following words of Henri Nouwen sank in, "Just as there are countless varieties of wine, there are countless varieties of lives. No two lives are the same. We often compare our lives with those of others, trying to decide whether we are better or worse off, but such comparisons do not help us much. We have to live our life, not someone else's. We have to hold our own cup. We have to dare to say: "This is my life, the life that is given to me, and it is this life that I have to live, as well as I can. My life is unique. Nobody else will ever live it. I have my own history, my own family, my own body, my own character, my own friends, my own way of thinking, speaking, and acting - yes, I have my own life to live."⁵³ As one of Jesus' followers, I realize that I have a mission that is unique, a mission which only I can accomplish, a mission which is not concerned with escaping from this world but includes restoration of the whole creation back to its Creator.

⁵¹ The ancient Greeks had two words for time – *chronos* and *kairos*. *Chronos* is simply time as such or the succession of moments. *Kairos* is a favorable opportunity. (R. C. Trench, *Trench's Synonyms of the New Testament* [Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1989], 221.

⁵² John Stott, *Between Two Worlds*, 80.

⁵³ Nouwen, *Can You Drink the Cup*, 31-32.

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