

SERVICIOS PEDAGÓGICOS Y TEOLÓGICOS (SPT)  
(PEDAGOGICAL AND THEOLOGICAL SERVICES)

**FOR A QUALITY THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION  
MANIFESTO**

**1. To Promote a Debate**

We are people committed to Theological Education (TE), taking as a starting point the diversity of our practices: from the classroom as well as from the church, from the university and from non-formal education, from research as well as from political commitment, from theology as well as from the science of religion, from somewhere in Abya Yala<sup>1</sup> or from other areas committed to this reality.

We begin this document by defining what we mean by TE (section 2), then we try to substantiate our choice and use of the term “quality” (3) within the challenges of the current situation (4), linking it to the quality of life (5), which is becoming increasingly threatened in our Abya Yala. We conceive of TE as a practice embedded in Christian mission (6) as well as in general education (7), which seeks a way in which both spheres must approach the struggle for an abundant life for all. TE, as a systematic, rigorous effort, needs the critical support of theology and of pedagogy, as well as of many other disciplines. Starting from a paradigm (8) suited to integrate both aspects in a liberating and intercultural framework, we point out some characteristics of a quality theology (9) and pedagogy (10). Finally, we relate some of the particular characteristics of a quality TE (11) to the institutions (12) in which it can be achieved, suggesting some possible uses of this manifesto (13).

**2. What We Mean by Theological Education**

We understand TE to be part of the Church’s mission of announcing and anticipating the Reign of God in history. It deals with a particular kind of education connected to the creative, organized, and critical learning of those who reflect on their faith—that is, those who do theology—from the diversity of their gifts and ministries. TE differs from other responsibilities in the Christian community, such as initiation into faith, catechesis, liturgy, proclaiming the Good News and the pastoral service, although it is supported by these. We propose a TE that is open to all believers, women and men, that is continued throughout their lives, and with an incidence in different spheres and degrees of specialization. To accomplish this, TE will dialogue with political practices, cultural expressions, and the sciences committed to the defense of all

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<sup>1</sup> Given the colonialist and Eurocentric bias of the words “America” and “Latin,” we join those who for years have used the Kuna expression “Abya Yala” to symbolically refer to Latin America and the Caribbean. In the Kuna language, an ethnic group of Panama and Colombia, Abya Yala means “land in its full maturity” or, according to some, “living land” or “flowering land.”

aspects of life. We vindicate a TE that is articulated in a Jesus-modeled theology, and produced by a Church that is not self-centered but directed toward the Reign of God.

We envisage a TE devoted to encouraging the defense of life. Such TE needs to be contextual, open, dialogical, change-oriented, interdisciplinary, and intercultural, and assumes and goes beyond traditions and cultures, as well as pastoral and particular educational models. In addition to being at the service of the churches, we would like TE to be open to questioning by explicit or implicit theologies in the religious, cultural, and contemporary traditions of Abya Yala. Thus, we are talking about a TE that is assumed within the framework of the Christian faith, but from an inter-religious context and perspective.

### 3. Why Do We Speak of Quality in Theological Education?

In this globalized world, the term “quality” is used frequently and in very diverse ways. Invariably, in every corner of our planet, people have tried to define what a “good education” would be, but the different approaches to quality are historically and culturally conditioned. In the 1980s, the neo-liberals imposed on education and other social practices a discourse of quality similar to the quest for “excellence” or “total quality” in the business world. Among other things, this approach aims to separate arbitrarily the technical from the political, as if education could be isolated from the social environment. However, despite our criticism, we appropriate some of the challenges posed by this trend. We want to adapt this language and its demands and refashion it from an ethical, political, and theological perspective, as we think it would be beneficial for TE and our churches.

We don’t talk much about quality in theology. But if we are to do so, particularly from Abya Yala, we need to assume and overcome several tensions and contradictions. Following the example of Jesus, Christian quality would:

- Integrate the inspiring and transforming (*Pneuma*) Word with a normative discourse (*Logos*);
- Assume the creative tension between the faith of the people of God and the sophistication of a discourse regarding faith;
- Be nourished by the struggle for change as well as by mystical silence;
- Move between cultures with emerging rationalities and the legacy of a dominant culture and rationality; and
- Know that “truth is something constructed” and that there is always the risk of its being “imprisoned in injustice.”

To seek quality in the theological undertaking means combining in an imaginative way the search for theological *relevance* in the context of the overwhelmingly pressing reality of Abya Yala regarding the *pertinence* of a discipline that has its own epistemological identity and demands.

#### **4. The Vulnerability of Theological Education Demands Greater Responsibility from Us**

It is crucial that we take responsibility for the quality of our work in Abya Yala, above all, in higher education, because it is becoming more difficult to justify the very existence of TE:

- Churches question us about the real service that we provide;
- Social movements pressure us to explain our relationship with their struggles;
- Ancestral and emerging cultures ask us about our complicity with the colonial past and with a present that is sometimes neocolonial and influences the way of learning, teaching and researching;
- Educational institutions (academic as well as non-formal) demand that we give an account of our pedagogy and teaching methods;
- Governments, through their respective ministries of education, impose ever stricter formal requirements on our institutions to grant recognition at the university level; and
- Funding agencies demand well-founded theological-pedagogical plans, as well as transparent and efficient financial administration.

Because of the vulnerability of TE we must assume greater responsibility. To face this challenge we must relate the quality of TE with the general context, as well as with the practices, disciplines, and paradigms that are a part of it.

#### **5. For an Abundant Life**

Within the Christian faith, life is lived as a gift, as something that precedes us, that continually transcends and transforms us, even beyond death. We remember that God is the author of life and that we are part of a Creation without boundaries, which includes all living beings in the world.

Quality of life is not a state of being, but a dynamic and relational goal: no one can achieve a true quality of life while the lives of others are threatened. Quality of life is integral: material and spiritual, physical and intellectual, moral and esthetic, personal and communal, natural and cultural. It embraces both needs and desires.

We acknowledge that, generally speaking, our societies, cultures and churches fail to guarantee an abundant life not even for themselves, not to say for everyone. On the other hand, neither do our practices nor our theological and pedagogical projects necessarily assume the centrality of life and its defense.

As Christians we envisage the Reign of God as the horizon of abundant life, of a shared and harmonious life. It is this utopia that drives us to craft a quality of life together with other cultures and beliefs that have life as the heart of their commitment. In every context, place, and circumstance, we must discern how we can creatively articulate this utopia to different social actors and movements within a particular project of community, of society, and of citizens. We

acknowledge that, while aiming to this common utopia, we held different and even contradictory visions and practices according to our own social or cultural origin, according to our gender, our generation, and so forth. We admit that such a diversity of utopian visions is conflictive.

Faced with the colonization of minds intended to impose a dominant system, faced with the globalization of late capitalism, the “virtualization” of reality, and the destruction as well as privatization of public spaces, we put our faith in a quality education—including TE— suitable to bring about spaces in which diverse ways of life might develop that make it possible not only to resist these impositions, but to create a subjectivity that anticipates new life styles. The eschatological tension of faith and Christian theology—its inevitable dimension of hope—is the invitation to think, believe, and work in terms of the “new human being,” of “the new creation in Christ.” Therefore, we propose a theological education that remains open to new experiences of faith, and to a renewed future; not one anchored to predetermined systems or schemes, nor won over by the ideology of a single system and its deep anthropological implications.

## **6. For a Transformation Bearing Mission**

By quality mission we mean both the projects and the practices of those who follow Christ at the service of an abundant life and the anticipation of the Reign. Mission comes primarily from God rather than from the work of people or specific institutions. Mission, for Christians, must be a creative and change bearing practice. Its quality emanates from its closeness and conformity with the practice of Jesus and all of those witnesses who, throughout history and in their own context, were inspired by the Holy Spirit to retrace the same path and continue along it.

At the same time, we admit that Christian mission always presents a contradictory aspect, which defines a permanent tension between the ideal and the real, between the coming of the Reign of God, the incompleteness of the human being, and the ambiguity of any human project. From the point of view of TE, we see mission as:

- A response to the Mission of God as a call or demand that precedes our initiatives;
- A Church not self-centered, but at the service of the excluded and of an abundant life;
- Denunciation of and resistance against all kinds of power (economic, political, religious, moral, sexist) that intend to become absolute;
- Development of and participation in alternative and liberating social practices that lead us on paths to greater equity, justice, peace, non-violence and preservation of the Creation;
- Accompaniment and consolation of suffering people; and
- Inclusion and wholeness: an inclusive focus (at the service of all humanity) as well as integral (for all the dimensions of a person).

## 7. For an Education devoted to Life

We are struggling for an education devoted to life in abundance, which means a continual and permanent high quality education for everyone. By denouncing the divorce between quality and equity, we vindicate the democratic nature of education, the ethical concern for shaping responsible citizens and the struggle for living together in solidarity. We believe that, among many other criteria, quality education involves:

- Diversity, accessibility, and the permanence of diverse educational modalities and specializations throughout life;
- A critical knowledge of reality and systematic analysis;
- Emphasis on learning, on learning to learn, on learning to be, on learning to live together, and on learning to follow a path that leads to a culture of peace;
- Respect for the different ways in which people give meaning to their lives;
- Advocacy for fair production, distribution and consumption of goods;
- Consistency between discourse, theory, and practice;
- Social, cultural and citizen participation;
- Leadership and interaction of the participants in educational communities;
- Permanent evaluation of the leadership and of their goals regarding to their pertinence and impact on specific contexts; and
- Development of Pedagogue-student and of student-Pedagogue relationships in agreement with political projects aimed to improve the quality of life.

Many of these challenges are a legacy from the popular education movement.

## 8. For an Intercultural Paradigm

As a part of the political, pastoral, and educational practices that aim to quality of life, we relate TE to theology and pedagogy, and these to a broader paradigm within which they operate. This has to do with an epistemological framework in which different viewpoints and dimensions of action and human thought meet. Even at the risk of remaining at a very abstract level, we tentatively describe this paradigm as:

- Inter/trans-disciplinary and intercultural;
- Integral and multifaceted (multiplicity of forms of knowledge and the complexity of their relations);
- Inclusive of the multiple forms of rationality and human potentialities (emotional, cognitive, physical, spiritual, moral, intuitive, creative, etc.);
- Contextual and historical (articulated in historical circumstances and in economic, political, cultural, gender, and other contexts);
- Problematic and transforming (toward changes implying a greater quality of life for everyone);

- Intuitive and unprecedented (open to unexplored dimensions of the person and of human life, of history, of other cultures, etc.); and
- Procedural, in an ascending spiral (that is, with successive interpretations, contextual, and transcending).

## 9. For a Liberated and Liberating Theology

We are putting our faith in a quality theology in which the practices, contents and methods are in permanent interaction. Its method, in addition to using the paradigm previously described, will present its particularities that are peculiar to hermeneutical, communal, ecumenical, and other spheres. From within its own context, a quality theology integrates and articulates emerging theologies with theologies that have interpreted the Christian faith in its multiple expressions throughout the history of the Church. The evangelical hallmark of this theology comes from a revelation intended more for “fools and children” than for “wise men and scholars.”

The community of faith produces and takes an active part in theology and is not only a recipient. Its activity articulates the technical and regulating role of the professional theologian, as well as of the Church or of church tradition.

We want a theology that critically assumes its own identity and specificity in dialogue and interaction with other theologies. Furthermore, in the context of an ethical and hopeful horizon, we will build the quality of theology in dialogue with other spiritualities, sciences, as well as cultural and ideological expressions. We will see that the content of a quality theology includes some of the following dimensions:

- Prophetic, sapiential, and mystical;
- Trinitarian, that is, in creative interaction between its theological, christological, and pneumatological dynamic;
- Practical, biblical, and hermeneutical;
- Provisional, because it is attentive to the unexpected irruption of grace in different situations and circumstances;
- Liberated, and liberating from intellectual, political, and ecclesiastical systems that act against an abundant life;
- Embedded in a specific tradition (theology is always conjugated in plural form; there is no theological synthesis that subsumes all of the particular traditions);
- Articulating the spiritual with the political; and
- Open and receptive to the richness and teachings of other beliefs, worldviews, and spiritualities.

We retake many of these theological characteristics as part of the rich legacy already transmitted to us by the Latin American Theology of Liberation.

## 10. For a Pedagogy of Hope

A quality pedagogy is that one which we are able to build and renew continually, from emerging educational experiences, without enclosing ourselves in any particular pedagogical school, but making it relevant in the specific context or circumstances. Such pedagogy submits educational practices to a critical assessment, seeking to supplement and strengthen their quality without conferring any legitimacy to them. It is rather the outcome of a permanent inter/transdisciplinary work with all the sciences and arts of education. We count on a rich tradition to produce quality from pedagogies:

- Of hope, related to a broader political project;
- Of transformation and of context;
- Of diversity (diversified pedagogy tailored to the subjects' field of knowledge, projects, methods, contents, types of learning, etc.);
- Of dialogue between different knowledges and cultural negotiation;
- Of creativity (assuming the multiplicity of expressions and promoting autonomous learning);
- Of democracy and equality (in terms of human rights, culture of peace, of gender, inter-generational, and ethnic equity, etc.);
- Of criticism, participation and dialogue;
- Of popular social sectors, that is to say, sensitive to the presence of excluded people, of those marginalized by power structures; linked to cultures produced by people so far ignored by established knowledge.

## 11. For a Theological Education of Quality

As expressed by the characteristics and criteria that we have indicated, we closely relate TE with the quest for the quality of life (personal, spiritual, institutional, political, etc.). We want to open TE to a multiplicity of social actors who respond to charismas and ministries connected to different kinds of theological students and modalities of teaching. This means recognizing the diversity of needs, interests, intelligences, and talents, according to gender, generation, culture, beliefs, sexual preference, and so forth, of each one. We want to translate the recognition of diversity into a coherent interaction between theological-pedagogical theory and practice.

If we propose a TE that would make a critical and constructive contribution to the mission of the Church, we will have to aim towards:

- A reciprocal or cross-fertilization between popular theology (communal, biblical, artistic, political) and the academic exercise of theology;
- Continuity and diversity of TE throughout all of life and in all environments;
- Resolution of the tension between vocation, critical reflection, and acquisition of tools for Christian commitment in general and pastoral work in particular;
- Construction of bridges between theology and the pastorate, between ecclesiastical commitment and the transformation of society, between comfort and denouncement;

- Articulation and complementarity between the different areas of theological work;
- Critical, creative, and interactive use of the principal mediations of theological work (spiritual, practical, hermeneutical); and
- Relevance and impact of TE (in the context of the family, community, church, cultural, social, political, etc.) in terms of the pertinence of theology as a discipline.

## **12. For Quality in Theological Education Institutions**

We link the quality of a TE institution to the quality of life and of TE itself. The kind of human relations within an institution foreshadows the climate and quality of its institutional life. Quality management in the institutional life is measured by the level of learning, security, welfare, mutual trust, initiative, as well as by other general criteria linked to an inclusive character, diversity, and gender equity. The quality of management and of administration, regulated by planning, monitoring and evaluation techniques, is subject to the project and to the participative performance of TE. In other words, the administrative model also should respond to the criteria of service and pedagogical criteria in the search for a true learning community. Because relationships connected to knowledge are inevitably relations of power, the management of a quality TE institution needs:

- Democratic, political participation;
- A style of relations based on mutual trust and transforming professional commitment;
- Transparency, flexibility;
- A solidary efficiency (as an alternative to that which is dictated by the appetite for wealth);
- Empowerment of the various actors;
- Distribution of information;
- Sustainability (less dependence, more self-management);
- Etc.

## **13. How to Work with this Manifesto**

The convictions and hopes that we express in this manifesto will have an impact and relevance only in the measure that the actors involved in TE make them their own, restating them according to their own context, church, educational instance, and specific actors. Sections 5 and 12, and in particular the last four, can be used as information for holding workshops where people involved in specific TE institutions would translate the norms and guidelines into verifiable indicators within their own practices. We are convinced that this manifesto can stimulate deep debates about some of the pillars on which any TE project rests, for instance:

- The general context of TE and of the institution;
- The pedagogical, theological, and political project;
- The study plan and curriculum;



- The formation and continual education of professors, the revision of materials;
- Teaching methods;
- Management and administration;
- Many other aspects.

Servicios Pedagógicos y Teológicos (SPT) is at your disposal to support and coordinate the development of this kind of initiatives, taking into consideration the particular reality of each institution, and has qualified professionals to assist in this area. Those interested can write to [serviciospt@gmail.com](mailto:serviciospt@gmail.com)

As individuals, we endorse this manifesto as the outcome of a collective reflection encouraged by SPT, which gathers our convictions and integrates our individual contributions:

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