The Role of Theological Institutions in Missionary Training

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Introduction

In 2011, the World Council of Churches launched a large, global survey on theological education that lasted nearly two years. Over 1,650 theological educators and church leaders responded to the survey. One of the key findings—based on 86 percent of survey respondents—was that "theological education is seen as 'most important' for world Christianity and the mission of the church" ("Global Survey on Theological Education" 2013, 8). But extensive research among long-term, North American missionaries shows that theological institutions are one of the least effective means of missionary training. Why would one group view theological education as "most important" for the mission of the church while theological institutes are providing inadequate training? This article explores this question and the role of theological institutions in training missionaries for cross-cultural missions.

The Research

In the spring of 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic, extensive research was carried out with over seventy-five long-term, North American missionaries in Asia on their training and equipping for missions.[1] At the time, they were serving (or had served) in at least thirteen countries, represented over twenty-five sending agencies, and averaged eighteen years of service. They were also well-educated. Over half held master's degrees, thirty of which were from seminaries and theological institutions. Five of them held doctorates, and several others were currently pursuing doctorates. After having served on the field for many years, these seasoned individuals had a unique vantage point from which to evaluate the training they had received for missionary service.

[1] See Lin, Arthur. 2021. "Reflections of North Americans on Their Training and Equipping for Cross-Cultural Missions in Asia." Ph.D. Dissertation, Columbia International University. All data, findings, and quotations in this article come from that study.

The missionaries who participated in the research (hereafter missionaries or participants) were given ample space to share their perceptions on formal and theological training. They were asked about specific courses that were valuable to them, what advice they might give to prospective missionaries, and in general, how to get the best training and equipping for missions. In total, fifty-nine of the seventy-five participants commented on missionary training in theological institutions.

Among these participants, 68 percent shared positive comments and 44 percent shared negative comments. Some shared both positive and negative comments. In one question, they were asked to rank or assess four prefield training options regarding their perceived value. These options included a one-year apprenticeship under a missionary on the field; a six-month community-based, cross-cultural training program overseas; a professional degree that could be used for tent-making in a creative-access country; and a master's degree at a seminary in missions, missiology, or intercultural studies. The master's degree in missions was ranked last, well below the professional degree, which came in third. Despite the low overall ranking of the degree, however, some participants perceived it differently. Five of them ranked it as their first choice for prefield training, calling it "super," "wonderful," or "ideal." Analyzing both positive and negative comments revealed insights, strengths, weaknesses, and considerations regarding the role of theological institutions in missionary training.

The Positive

When evaluating the value of theological education in missions, it is natural to think of its plain and straightforward meaning—namely, growing in biblical and theological knowledge. This is indeed what many participants spoke of regarding a seminary or master's degree. It provides a "good foundation," a "really strong base," and a "grounding." It also helps in developing a "biblical worldview." Participants placed great importance on such knowledge for missionaries. In fact, an analysis of what they considered "important" in missionary training showed biblical and/or theological knowledge to be at the top. Theological institutions were viewed as places to grow in these areas. In addition to specialized biblical/theological knowledge gained at such schools, they also spoke of other types of growth in one's thinking and understanding that can occur. These included being broadened in one's thinking, learning how to interact with ideas, gaining perspective on issues, thinking through situations one would face on the field, and learning how to critique existing paradigms. In sum, cognitive growth and understanding at formal institutions occurred alongside gaining biblical and theological knowledge.

Many participants noted specific classes that were valuable to them. One participant mentioned that a cultural anthropology class "completely renovated the way I look at Cambodians and their culture." Another noted how church history and historical theology courses helped him to see Christianity from a non-North American perspective. A third said that a seminary course covering animism was helpful in her context where folk religion and Islam are intertwined. Other courses that participants found valuable included cross-cultural communication, systemic theology, church planting, and second language acquisition.

One way in which theological education was particularly helpful to the participants was in the area of contextualization. On the field, these missionaries were sometimes confronted by contextualized forms of Christian practice that were unusual or surprising. For one participant, this led to considerable conflict among missionaries on how far they should go in contextualizing the gospel among Muslims. But this participant felt equipped to deal with these types of issues because of the time spent in seminary thinking and talking through them. Another participant faced similar issues among Hindus in India. Through his theological studies, he was able to make sense of the issues and reach the conclusion that contextualization had gone too far.

Theological, biblical, and intellectual growth were not the only benefits of attending a theological institution. Numerous participants noted the spiritual and character growth that occurred. Character and spiritual growth was in fact the second most commonly cited advantage. Several participants noted general or specific ways they had grown personally or spiritually. These included deepening in faith, growing more confident, discerning one's calling, and learning to appreciate grace. But graduates of such schools were not the only ones to share positive comments. One participant shared an outsider's view, a personal reflection on how he had observed spiritual vitality among students:

> Around year two or three on the field, we were in an isolated Muslim context in Asia. There was a short-term team who we hosted, some seminarians from the U.S., and these were the first people I'd ever met who had actually been to seminary before. The culture towards formal theological training that I had experienced up to that point in my Christian formation was actually a negative attitude towards formal theological education, and I was always very suspicious of them. Anyway, they came for two or three weeks and we were out on the border near Pakistan together on a trip and were just sharing with people as we could and praying, and I just saw a deep love for the Lord and a commitment to

> the gospel in them. That was the beginning of my changing my mind about the value and effectiveness of theological education. I just thought to myself, If training produces this kind of depth in the character of a person, I want that.

In addition to knowledge, understanding, and spiritual and character growth, participants noted a third benefit of theological institutions. This was the impact of their professors on their lives. In fact, in terms of equipping impact, professors were mentioned more than any other role—including pastors, team leaders, peer missionaries, parents, and supervisors. The influence of professors was both inside and outside the classroom. They helped the participants gain direction or influenced them to serve where they were serving. They hosted small groups or discipleship groups in which the participants were involved. They met with the participants outside of class. Some had become lifelong mentors or provided ongoing encouragement by responding to participants' newsletters on the field. This relational dynamic, which usually was limited to school enrollment but sometimes ongoing, was also a strong but intangible benefit of their theological education.

The Negative

Forty-four percent of participants made negative comments about theological education, formal training, or seminaries and Bible colleges. The biggest and most frequent criticism of theological education was that it does not adequately prepare graduates for cross-cultural ministry. Participants spoke of this in several ways. One said, "This past year, I have been taking some leveling courses at the master's level to qualify for a DMin program . . . I would say it has been a mixed bag. I've enjoyed them because I like learning, but I have not sensed a real application with them, just to be honest." Another said, "I did four years of Bible college before I got really involved in cross-cultural work, and I don't think that was very helpful at all." A third stated, "Beyond learning how to preach, I didn't find it very practical." A fourth remarked, "In terms of cross-cultural work, we don't look back at seminary as being that helpful, especially if people are going to be working in primarily a non-Christian environment."

Comments from the missionaries led to the conclusion that theological institutions do not adequately prepare missionaries for life and ministry in a cross-cultural environment; they do not help students develop the skills that are innate in missionary life and work. These skills are needed in several general areas. One is related to language and culture and includes knowledge of other cultures and the ability to

communicate cross-culturally. One participant plainly stated, "Seminary cannot teach you language or the cultural environment." Another said that he had learned far more from his cross-cultural relationships with a Liberian, a Chinese, and several Koreans than he did from his cross-cultural courses in seminary. While a participant did say that a course in language acquisition methods had been helpful, most participants felt that preparation in the area of language and culture was inadequate.

Related to the cultural dimension, many participants said that their theological institutions were too American or Western. They noted that the theology, perspectives, and orientation of their schools were more oriented to a Western environment rather than to the environment in which they were going to serve. Their courses touched very little upon the culture, worldviews, or religions of those in their future fields. One participant said:

> My master's degree has been good, but again, it's sometimes hard to convince American teachers and students in America that the American church isn't the only church that is out there, so those classes are sometimes frustrating from my point of view. I wish there was more inclusion of the global church in an American educational setting.

Several participants noted that their formal theological training had failed to prepare them for the realities of spiritual warfare and demon possession. They used words like "totally ignorant" or "totally unprepared." One humorously recounted:

> I remember one instance . . . after I'd been to seminary and gotten . . . two master's degrees and had done field orientation training . . . I went to this guy's house. His son was acting real strange and bizarre, and long story short, the dad said, "Hey, my son's possessed by a demon. Can you help?" I remember thinking in that moment, "I didn't take this class in seminary," haha.

In general, participants found that theological institutions inadequately prepared them for cross-cultural ministry. One said, "I see so many people that have graduated with Bible college degrees and the only thing they can do is be a pastor." Another said, "The seminary degree is going to leave out the most essential components . . . [someone] without a notion of how to apply any of it in this context . . . I worry and fear that the seminaries leave out the things that matter most." Theological institutions did not help them develop the necessary skills in church planting, cross-cultural

evangelism, working with other missionaries, and Bible translation. Other skills innate to missionary life and ministry could be added as well, including raising financial support, dealing with culture shock, leading teams, leading a larger ministry field or region, relating to the home constituency, dealing with disappointment, and relating well to people of other cultures. Beyond these essentials, missionary best practices and effectiveness on the field were also largely overlooked.

Considerations

Based on feedback from the research participants, three main considerations determined the value of theological education for missionary training. The first was the missionary's role. Theological education was perceived as more valuable for missionaries involved in theological education as a ministry. This is especially true for those who plan to serve in a Bible college or seminary overseas. For them, they need to be grounded in biblical and systemic theology and become aware of theological issues that might arise on the field. In a theological institution in their home context, they would be able to observe and learn from experienced professors before launching out overseas. One participant noted the value of becoming a grader for one of his professors. This allowed him to spend more time getting to know his professor, something that he found valuable now that he serves in a theological institution in Southeast Asia. While Western institutions are unlikely to equip missionaries for a specific language or culture, Larry Caldwell's (2010) article "How Asian Is Asian Theological Education?" suggests that Westerners would not feel out of place in schools in Asia—and likely other regions of the world as well.

A second consideration regarding the value of theological education is where the missionary plans to serve. The primary considerations here are the openness of the country to missionaries, the degree to which the country is reached, and the presence of an existing church. Participants largely agreed that theological education would be of lesser value in a closed or creative-access country than in an open one. They noted that in a closed country, the missionary would unlikely be able to work in a theological institution or to openly teach biblical and theological courses. They also noted that having a theological degree on one's academic record might raise suspicion in the eyes of the foreign government. Theological education is also perceived as less important in unreached areas where disciple-making movement (DMM) methodology is being employed, since such methods discourage foreign missionaries from teaching national believers (Adams and Adams 2021; Coles 2021).

In contrast, missionaries located in open countries like Japan and Thailand perceived greater value in theological education. They noted the importance of a missionary's qualifications in the eyes of local church leaders. These leaders would likely place higher trust and recognition on the missionary if they were from a reputable seminary or held a theological degree. This could lead to opportunities to preach in their churches or take leadership positions—to have greater influence. For missionaries who will be equipping or serving the national church, a theological degree could be valuable.

The third consideration regarding the value of theological education was the time commitment and cost. Participants said that formal theological training in the U.S. would have delayed their getting to the field or would not have been a worthwhile time investment. Others strongly advised against "racking up" or "piling up" debt. Some, however, said that if the time and money were available, it could be worthwhile. Participants shared other considerations regarding the value of theological education, such as the temptation to intellectual pride or the propensity to tell others what to do on the field. But the openness of the country, the missionary's role, and the time and financial cost of theological education were the most frequently mentioned considerations by participants.

Comparison to Existing Literature

Taking into consideration all of the participants' comments on missionary training in theological institutions, the evidence suggests that biblical and theological education is strong, spiritual and character development is good, and ministry skills training is weak. How does this line up with what others have written about theological institutions and their role in training for missions?

Though an exhaustive survey of the literature on the topic is not feasible, it would seem that few question the biblical and theological input that students get at theological institutions, at least at conservative evangelical schools. This would be different if schools were perceived as liberal or if they no longer held to some central tenants of the faith, such as the divinity of Christ or the inerrancy of Scripture. Some have been critical of theological institutions for teaching books *about* the Bible but not the Bible itself, for ineffective teaching methods, and for not having a proper missionary undergirding of theology in general (Witmer 1962). But in the area of missionary preparation and training, few have criticized theological institutions for the biblical or theological knowledge gained.

In the area of character development, however, some disagree that it can be acquired in theological institutions. Lewis and Brynjolfson wrote, "The formation of character and attitude traits is a task difficult to achieve in the context of the formal classroom" (2006, loc. 1052). In their book *Missionary Training: Principles and Possibilities*, Evelyn and Richard Hibbert noted, "[T]he pressure felt by most colleges to become more academic and to focus on intellectual development comes at the expense of the development of spirituality, character, and practical ministry skills" (2016, loc. 1919). Darrell Whiteman remarked:

> Although Bible schools and seminaries can train people for biblical and theological knowledge in a formal classroom, they may not be the best place to train for other dimensions. Character formation occurs best in a non-formal or informal community context of people living together as they prepare for their cross-cultural ministry (2008, 11).

Based on these comments, it is apparent that some hold a divergent perspective on the potential for character development in theological institutions than the long-term missionaries interviewed in the research. While this is an area of further exploration, there are some possible explanations regarding the differences. One is that theological institutions are places of definite but *limited* character development. Another is that character development occurs more in those who are younger and less mature. A third explanation is that schools differ in their emphasis on character and spiritual development.

In the area of ministry and skills training, however, it would seem that many agree that seminaries and Bible colleges provide inadequate training. While some of the following quotes are dated, they still match the recent feedback of the research participants. Robert Ferris, a long-term theological educator in both the Philippines and the U.S., stated, "New missionary training institutions are needed specifically because missionary candidates are not well served by training available in present theological schools" (1991, 235). David Harley, former general director of OMF and principal at All Nations College in the UK, added, "It became evident that candidates from Bible colleges and seminaries [in India] also needed missionary training if they were to become effective church planters in cross-cultural situations" (1995, 15). Jonathan Lewis and Robert Brynjolfson were both former directors of the International Missionary Training Network. In 2006, they coauthored a book on missionary training that was published by the World Evangelical Alliance's Mission Commission. In it, they remarked, "The formal classroom experience, which traditionally has been emphasized,

seems but a small part of the equipping process" (2006, loc. 2643). Darrell Whiteman, who taught at Asbury Theological Seminary and once served as editor of the *International Bulletin for Missionary Research*, wrote, "There is certainly a need for this kind of high-level missiological training that leads to significant reflection and scholarship. But we need to close the gap between the generalized formal training done at seminaries and Bible colleges by academic missiologists and the specific training needed to prepare people for effective cross-cultural mission" (2008, 6–7). Evelyn and Richard Hibbert, authors of *Training Missionaries: Principles and Possibilities*, added, "Missionary trainers who want to implement a training approach similar to the Journey Training face two key challenges. The first is to overcome the assumption that only a two to three-year Bible college program adequately prepares people for missionary service" (2016, loc. 3428). The Hibberts also noted a study out of their native Australia,

> The failure of much theological education to develop students holistically as servants of God was also evident in a recent, wide-ranging study of theological education in Australia. It revealed a "disconnect" between theological education and the life and ministry of graduates from Bible and theological colleges in Australia. Students reported little personal change over the course of their college education, and the changes they did report were primarily intellectual. More than a tenth of final-year students felt that their college experience reflected an "over-intellectual approach to theology" and a "lack of practical connection to life or ministry, with virtually no connection with the secular world which is a large part of the context of lived Christianity." (Hibbert and Hibbert 2016, locs. 3618–3622)

If theological institutions are inadequately preparing students for cross-cultural ministry, this is problematic for two related reasons. One is that such institutions advertise themselves as training centers for missions and ministry. Biola writes that their MA in Intercultural Studies is "designed to prepare students for a variety of careers in cross-cultural and multicultural work environments and ministries" ("M.A. in Intercultural Studies"). Fuller claims that their MA in Intercultural studies is "ideal for those wanting advanced training for careers in mission including church planting, urban ministry, and work with the poor, children at risk, and marginalized populations in any society" ("MA in Intercultural Studies"). Gordon-Conwell states, "You'll receive specialized training as you prepare for and engage in Kingdom work" ("MAIS: Master of Arts — Intercultural Studies"). Dallas Theological Seminary invites prospective students to "see the many ways students are prepared for a lifetime of fruitful ministry"

("Master of Arts in Intercultural Studies"). Trinity Evangelical Divinity School declares students will "develop the knowledge and skills to serve in cross-cultural settings with the MA/ICS" ("Find Your Program: MA in Intercultural Studies"). They also assert, "If you are or are looking to become a missionary, this program will deepen your biblical understanding, strengthen your intercultural ministry skills and elevate your intercultural communication skills" ("Master of Arts in Intercultural Studies").

Related to this is the fact that prospective missionaries attend such institutions with the expectation that they will be equipped for missions. As Robert Ferris wrote, "In Western countries, people who want to become missionaries usually look for training on their own. They attend a Bible college or seminary and take a missions programme [major]" (1995, 125). If these students knew up front that such institutions were *not* going to prepare them for life and ministry on the field, it seems probable that they would choose a different training path. This could, of course, still include taking select courses in a theological institution. In this regard, one research participant summarized the above points well: "Generally speaking, seminary is not all that helpful in preparing for cross-cultural service in most countries in the world. I think the time could be used more wisely unless they need some character building in a Christian institution." This is a very different message from that which is found on the websites of many theological institutions.

The Historical Role of Theological Institutions in Missionary Training

This article has argued, through field research and existing literature, that theological institutions are helpful but inadequate in preparing missionaries for cross-cultural life and ministry. Evelyn and Richard Hibbert wrote:

> There have been many calls *over the past century* for a more holistic approach to biblical and theological education that integrates character and spiritual formation and the development of practical ministry skills with a deep understanding of the Bible, but unfortunately these calls have rarely been acted on" (2016, loc. 3610, emphasis added).

There is evidence of this problem that goes back at least to a 1934 article in the *International Review of Missions* titled "Missions in the Theological Seminaries of the United States." In the article, William Hill wrote, "Seminary students, recent graduates

and ministers of long-standing service, when interviewed, expressed disappointment at the lack of missionary preparation offered them during their seminary days" (Hill 1934, 261–62).

If the problem has existed for so long and calls for change have been "rarely been acted on," it would seem that awareness is not the problem. Lewis and Brynjolfson (2006) argue: "[R]egretfully many of us have concluded that most formal education institutions in both the Global North and South are the least willing to change, to examine their training assumptions, or to learn from others" (2006, loc. 160). The question is then, why *don't* Bible colleges and seminaries modify their programs and incorporate more practical training that serves the needs of cross-cultural missionaries?

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, several specialized training institutes were established to train Christians for ministry and missions. These included Boston Missionary Training Institute (now Gordon College), the (Nyack) Missionary Training College (now Alliance University), and the Baptist Missionary Training School in Chicago (now closed). A number of these institutes were established to train women who were not allowed to enroll in seminaries at the time. These specialized institutes sought to provide accessible and practical training for missionaries and others planning to serve in various Christian ministries. As such, they kept tuition free or low, held low entrance requirements, and sought to equip their students with practical ministry skills. Evelyn and Richard Hibbert described them in this way:

> These institutions and colleges were not trying to be academic. Instead, driven by love for God and a keen sense of the world's need for the gospel, they focused on preparing men and women to take the gospel to the ends of the earth. This freed them to be able to address the issues of character, spiritual formation, and practical ministry skills that are vital to missionary preparation (2016, loc. 1817).

While several specialized missionary training programs currently exist in North America (MTI, CIT, Radius International, Equip, etc.), schools similar to these historic training institutes are rare. What happened to them, and why don't they exist today? Numerous factors are involved in their closure or transformation into colleges, but many of these factors can be distilled down to money, lack of demand, and leadership.

Specifically,

- Institutes began expanding their curriculum to attract other types of students and lost their original purpose;
- Women were increasingly accepted into other colleges and seminaries, and their training schools closed;
- Academic standards increased along with entrance requirements;
- Students were increasingly drawn to schools where they could get a degree;
- Fewer students sought missionary training following the decline in missions interest in the latter years of the Student Volunteer Movement;
- The Great Depression and World War II impacted the schools financially;
- Second and third generation school leaders lost the original vision of the schools;
- Local churches began to offer in-house training;
- Institutes were influenced by large donations that resulted in a school's relocation or expansion;
- There were demographic shifts from farm to city (Brereton 1981; Lewis and Brynjolfson 2006; Ringenberg 2006).

Academic standards have only increased since the days that these practical training schools disappeared. In 1947, the Accrediting Association of Bible Institutes and Bible Colleges was founded. It included the "collective adoption of curricular norms and conformity to external quality standards associated with postsecondary education" (Enlow 2015, para. 3). Some schools, like Prairie Bible Institute in Canada (now Prairie College), initially resisted such outside academic influences and sought to maintain their purpose. L. E. Maxwell, who presided over the school for over five decades, once stated:

> We are not personally concerned about becoming uniform with others, or in becoming accredited. God has given us a special method of Bible study second to none, and we are content to do what God wants us to do without having to adjust to that which others feel led to do . . . We are convinced

> that many of the present trends will ultimately take these very Bible institutes into modernism (quoted in Ringenberg 2006, 167).

But twelve years after Maxwell's retirement, Prairie applied for accreditation and was accepted as a full member of the Association of Biblical Higher Education (ABHE) in 1997 ("Institution Profile: Prairie College").

This is not to suggest that accreditation is the problem. Judith S. Eaton, president of the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), wrote, "Accreditation is a form of self-regulation—professionals reviewing professionals and academics reviewing academics" (Eaton 2012, 8). The issue for missionary training in theological schools is not the existence of standards, but rather *who* sets the standards and the values and philosophy of education they represent. The problem is that accrediting bodies of Bible colleges and seminaries are made up of *educators*, not missionaries. While the standards may increase educational value, they do not necessarily increase missionary training value. After shedding light on three assumptions that undergird the traditional approach to education, Robert Ferris wrote, "I would submit that none of these assumptions is germane to missionary training" (1991, 237).

In light of this reality, both Ferris (1991) and Evelyn and Richard Hibbert (2016) have proposed an accrediting body established by stakeholders in missionary training. The Hibberts, perhaps extending Ferris' suggestion twenty-five years earlier, wrote:

> Our recommendation would be that mission agencies band together to form a missions training accrediting body that would approve certain programs for missionary training and encourage others to meet their criteria. This would help distinguish programs that provide excellent missionary training according to specific missions criteria determined by stakeholders (2016, loc. 3607).

To date, this has not been carried out. It would, however, seem a worthy pursuit for associations such as The International Missionary Training Network (IMTN) or others who have a vested interest in missionary training.

The way forward is unlikely to be reform in theological institutions. While the International Council for Evangelical Theological Education (ICETE) is spearheading change in theological institutions and accrediting bodies, it is doubtful that the specialized training that missionaries need will be offered at theological institutions in the foreseeable future. Because of this, prospective missionaries would do well to seek

out more experiential, relationship-based training that is backed by more biblical and empirical evidence (Lin 2023).

Conclusion

This article has demonstrated, through research and literature, that theological institutions are inadequately preparing missionaries for cross-cultural missions. Positively, these institutions do help prospective missionaries acquire biblical and theological knowledge and broaden their thinking in general ways. They also help to develop their character and spiritual lives, although some have questioned the degree to which they accomplish this. This overall inadequacy to prepare missionaries was shown to be problematic regarding the marketing of theological institutions and in the expectations of prospective missionaries who enroll in such institutions. The historical role of Bible colleges and training institutes in missionary training and the changes over time was then surveyed. Finally, accreditation was discussed along with the suggestion that missionary training stakeholders develop their own accrediting body. The hope is that prospective missionaries gain the best possible training in order to be faithful, fruitful, and effective cross-cultural servants to the glory of God.

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