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Theological Education and Southern Baptist Missions Strategy in the Twenty- First Century

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Introduction

Mike Pettengill, missionary in Latin America, in an article featured on the Gospel Coalition website noted, “Eighty-five percent of the world’s 2.2 million evangelical churches are led by pastors with little-to-no theological training or books. Our brothers in Christ around the world are crying out for resources. But their problem should be our problem.” He goes on to speak of the need to meet what he calls the “global theological famine.”¹ A great famine for theological training indeed exists across the world today. In this article I will look at evidence for (1) the global need, (2) the historic departure of the Southern Baptist Missions Agency, the International Mission Board (IMB), away from integrating theological education in its field strategy through appointing cross-cultural theological educators, (3) the fall-out from this departure, (4) the current disposition of the IMB to theological education, and then (5) I will offer a few suggestions for change in strategy for the twenty-first century regarding theological education.

A missiological and theological divide has emerged over the last twenty years with respect to the ministry, mission, and structure of the IMB. This divide involves people on both sides with good intentions and motives but very divergent philosophies of engagement. One aspect of the divide relates to the disposition of the IMB toward theological education as a core component of its missions strategy.

Three perspectives reflect this missiological divide. The first is opposition to any significant involvement in theological education as a missions strategy by missions personnel in any form or delivery mode. The second perspective is to connect theological seminaries and mission organizations with the theological education needs on the field rather than appoint personnel to meet the need. The first takes an avoidance posture. The second takes an outsourcing posture. The third perspective, not widely represented in the IMB, advocates an integrative posture, seeking to recruit and send personnel to fill critical roles in theological education in multiple modes of

¹Thanks to my colleague, Dr. John Michael Morris, for providing these quotes.

delivery. The integrative approach seeks to reintegrate theological education and training, both residential and non-residential alike, back into the core of missions strategy.

Assessing the Need

One IMB field leader responsible for developing a training program for pastors in East Asia surveyed twenty-one pastors of large churches and networks of churches regarding their greatest need. They all said without hesitation, “Our pastors need training!” They also commented, “Our churches are under attack by cults and false teaching. Our pastors don’t have a good understanding of how to apply theology. Our churches have grown too big, we don’t know how to manage and administrate.” One seminary president in Southeast Asia heavily invested in training pastors in this same East Asian country and thoroughly acquainted with the church situation there stated, “We are losing 10,000 churches a year to the cults and charismatics.” David Sills observed,

China has been a focal point of missions success in recent decades and is sometimes heralded as an example of what can be done when Westerners get out of the way. The house church growth in the country has been both explosive and encouraging. Yet, all is not as well as we might hope; China’s church is hurting in many ways because of the dearth of theologically trained leaders. Missionaries report that evangelicals in China are losing ten thousand house churches every year to cults because their church leaders have no theological training. They cannot teach or defend what orthodox Christianity holds to be true.²

Chuck Lawless, in his initial role as theological education consultant, travelled extensively throughout the world gathering information from nationals and assessing the needs for theological education overseas and in all of its various forms. One part of his report on national seminaries stands out:

The most common faculty request we heard was not for missions or evangelism professors, but for trained Bible scholars. In fact, we saw several institutions that are strongly committed to the Great Commission. Many were already receiving some level of evangelism and missions training from IMB personnel on the field. I unreservedly encourage potential partners, including the IMB, to provide the requested Bible scholars for these institutions. Global partners who properly understand biblical teach-

²David Sills, *Reaching and Teaching: A Call to Great Commission Obedience* (Moody Publishers), location 646, Kindle.

ings can only strengthen churches around the world.³

As a missionary in Asia with the IMB I remember that leadership at the time stated that they would only appoint missions professors, particularly those favorable to Church Planting Movement (CPM)⁴ principles and would not be appointing missionaries to teach in the theological or biblical divisions, contrary to the felt need of nationals. The felt needs of nationals were well expressed by reports from every region of the world at Lausanne Capetown 2010. Nearly every report made a plea for help in the area of theological and biblical training for leaders and not primarily for evangelism and church planting.

David Sills commented not only on the need for theological education but the irony that those who would deny it themselves hold advanced seminary degrees. He noted,

Theological education is not only essential for pastoral preparation, it provides a degree—and many national churches and their leaders desire this credentialing of graduates. One missionary to East Asia reported that the most common request he has received from the Chinese church leaders is for formal education that leads to credentials. This repeated request is heard the world over. Sometimes missionaries or administrators dismiss such a request, reasoning that it is a purely carnal desire that pales in comparison to the other needs that they must balance, even though the ones dismissing the request may hold advanced degrees themselves.⁵

Everything that we know about immigrants who come to this country from the majority world is that formal and/or credentialed education is highly valued and those who have it are looked upon as leaders in the community. Asians, for example, highly value formal education. The percentage of Asians who go on to university is highest among this demographic.

The Asian value on formal education illustrates the need to contextualize missions strategy in Asia to include formal programs of theological education as a significant component of our strategy. Formal programs of study need not exclude oral learners, who make up sixty percent of the world's population. Not only will such programs provide desperately needed theological and biblical foundations for ministry and missions, but will also provide God-called leaders with the credibility they need in their own contexts as leaders in the Christian community and in the task of making disciples

³Chuck Lawless, *Special Needs*. Report to the International Mission Board. I received this section of a larger report via email from Dr. Lawless. He assured me that he still stands behind the recommendations that he made.

⁴David Garrison, *Church Planting Movements: How God Is Redeeming a Lost World* (Midlothian, VA: WIGTake Resources, 2004).

⁵Sills, *Reaching and Teaching*, location 2325.

of all nations. When missions strategy determines for nationals what is best for them according to the strategist's own sense of what makes indigenous movements advance most quickly, he is repeating a fundamental error in missiology in not responding to the felt needs of leaders. As churches should fit each context, so should leadership development.

In an Asian country that will likely play a significant role in global evangelization in the twenty-first century, the IMB had a strategy to establish rapidly reproducing small house churches of no more than twenty people. The key training tool for this goal was Training for Trainers (T4T). T4T was reported in the Annual Statistical Report (ASR) for years as theological education for nationals when in fact it is a tool for establishing small groups and offering six low-level discipleship lessons. In 2003 I asked a Strategy Associate from this country what their strategy was for theological education among the explosion of church leaders. He replied that T4T was their only strategy, which helps explain why in 2008 the IMB ASR continues to include those trained in T4T as part of the 200,000 enrolled in the theological education.

New field leadership came to this Asian country in 2008 with the goal of becoming more involved in training the next generation of pastors and missionaries. At the time of the new leadership's appointment, one long serving field missionary from this country was asked to conduct a survey of national pastors to assess the needs for theological education. His report came back that there was "no felt-need for theological education" among national pastors. Upon further review by new leadership, this outgoing field missionary only surveyed personnel in the IMB already predisposed against providing theological education for leaders. New incoming leadership made their own assessment and found the opposite mindset of national leaders to be the case. The repeated response of national pastors was similar to this summarization, "We do not need you (IMB) to teach us how to do evangelism or church planting. What we do need is for you to help us to train our pastors so that churches can be strengthened on a firm biblical foundation."

These two assessments of the need for theological training represent a divide that existed and still exists in the IMB today: on the one hand, those who believe that significant on-field and long-term investment in training leaders in residential and non-residential seminary-like programs, inclusive of Theological Education by Extension (TEE), as essential to reaching the nations through the multiplication of biblically-trained leaders, and on the other hand, those who see such investment as a roadblock to the needs of rapid reproduction.

The Redefinition of Training

The IMB underwent a revolutionary paradigm shift in 1997 called *New Directions* under the leadership of Jerry Rankin. Informed by Matthew 24:14 and shifts in the broader missiological world, Rankin led the organization

away from fields deemed reached, according to the two-percent evangelical standard, to areas of the 10-40 window, areas where some countries did not permit an overt missionary presence. With the geographic shift also came a shift in strategy. Through the influence of David Garrison the IMB adopted a speed-based approach to reaching unreached people groups called Church Planting Movements (CPM). The IMB shifted away from what it perceived to be a sequential approach of evangelism that results in disciples that results in churches that necessitates leadership development in favor of collapsing these processes (wrinkling time) to speed the process along.⁶ The goal of the missionary was no longer to plant churches but to initiate a Church Planting Movement. Moving quickly was the goal so as not to hinder rapidity of movement.

Within the broad umbrella of CPM strategy IMB missionary, Steve Smith, took principles gleaned from an IMB missionary serving in East Asia, Ying Kai, and developed a model of forming new house groups that missiologist, George Robinson, says resembles an “Amway product” and “multi-level marketing.”⁷ The goal is to find those who are willing to gather five people who are willing to gather another five people and then teach those gathered how to train others to gather more. Six basic evangelism and discipleship lessons are taught in the small groups that are quickly called churches. New believers are permitted and encouraged to be new pastors of these micro “churches” because speed and rapidity of movement is the primary value.⁸ T4T lacks a robust articulation of a New Testament church or what constitutes church leadership. Church Planting Movements strategy and T4T training is opposed to deep-level theological training for leaders because it allegedly slows down the movement and causes leaders to become (in what I have often heard from T4T proponents) “disobedient and proud.” While living in China, completing language study, I asked one Strategy Associate what types of theological education were being offered to national leaders. He responded by saying that teaching T4T was their theological education. T4T falls far short as a replacement for theological education.

Measuring the Fallout

Onlookers in the broader evangelical community have observed the lack of ability among certain IMB missionaries in East Asia to deal adequately with basic discipleship and leadership development due to the CPM emphasis on speed. Frank Walter Schattner observes,

It appears a significant number among the IMB have a limited

⁶As demonstrated in Garrison, *Church Planting Movements*.

⁷George Robinson, *Review of T4T: A Discipleship Rerevolution*, by Steve Smith and Ying Kai. Published in “Review and Preview” of www.GlobalMissiology.org October 2011. Accessed August 20, 2014.

⁸Steve Smith, *T4T: A Discipleship ReRevolution* (Monument, CO: WIGTake Resources, 2011), 265-72.

view of discipleship and leadership development, particularly as it relates to people groups coming to Christ with no previous knowledge of God and the Bible. I have observed that a significant percentage of IMB missionaries are not experienced in working directly with new believers. Thus, when some communicate that missionaries should move on quickly, the idea does not ring true with more traditional missionaries who have good understanding of language and culture because of their working closely with the local believers at the grassroots level.⁹

The departure from theological education happened in established fields first and then was never fully engaged when the IMB's historic strategic shift occurred from established fields to unreached people groups. As historic mission fields have grown the neo-Pentecostal and liberalizing influences have made their presence felt upon leaders and churches. Historic mission fields are now standing up and sending out missionaries to make disciples of all nations. In the IMB's departure from theological education in those historic fields, which are now producing missionaries, it has forfeited a significant voice of influence in shaping the new generation of missionaries that historic fields are sending. One cannot expect to mobilize national partners effectively for missions if the organization has not maintained incarnational-mentoring relationships with indigenous leaders as part of its core strategy to make disciples of all nations.

David Bledsoe observed,

The ramification of this strategy change was that we, as Southern Baptists, lost most of our influence in overseas seminaries. Instead of transitioning and becoming partners at the table with the nationals, we excused ourselves to begin another tactic that contained no emphasis on formal theological education within this process. The national brothers were invited to embrace the new found methodology, but the focus of CPM continued with or without their help or support. . . . The influential seminaries, especially in large urban centers, have struggled with liberalism within their classrooms, and most missionaries can only shake their heads, standing from the outside.¹⁰

The fallout from the IMB's departure from involvement in theological education was threefold: (1) it alienated historic national partners because IMB moved away from their greatest felt-need, e.g., theological training for their pastors; (2) it led to strained relations with Southern Baptist seminaries

⁹Frank Schattner, "Sustainability within Church Planting Movements in East Asia," (D.Miss. diss., Biola University, 2013), 140-41.

¹⁰David Allen Bledsoe, "A Plea to Reconsider Theological Education Engagement in Historic Mission Fields," *Journal of Evangelism and Missions* 8 (Spring 2009): 95-96.

who frequently voiced opposition to IMB's departure from theological education; and (3) it created a vacuum quickly filled in part by neo-Pentecostal and liberal groups seeking to enlarge their influence among new churches and new believers.

Under the leadership of Tom Elliff, then president of the IMB, a few mission leaders of the Southern Baptist Convention International Mission Board have recognized and openly acknowledged that the strategic move away from involvement in theological education was a critical error. The immediate answer was to appoint consultants and connectors who would primarily be responsible for liaising with Baptist seminaries in the States. To date, the IMB has not answered the call for theological education with a robust effort to source for and send qualified candidates as cross-cultural theological educators. It is obvious, however, that under Elliff's administration, positive steps have been taken to establish a structure of theological connectors that could evolve and expand to provide greater and more direct input to the needs for theological training globally.

Outsourcing the Need

As a result of longstanding and mounting criticism in regards to the lack of emphasis on theological education in its missions strategy, on May 6, 2008, Baptist Press (BP) reported that then IMB president, Jerry Rankin, had appointed Chuck Lawless as a "consultant for theological education." Lawless served initially while remaining as the dean of the Billy Graham School of Missions. Lawless's role turned into a full-time role with the IMB, and he has since transitioned to a full-time position at SEBTS while also retaining his role as Global Theological Education Consultant with the IMB. A large part of his initial role involved traveling extensively overseas, as reported by the Baptist Press, "My first hope is just to learn what the IMB is already doing and to come alongside the efforts that are already taking place and strengthen what's there." I was serving with the IMB in Singapore when Lawless came to Asia. I know that his contact with nationals was extensive, comprehensive, and helpful in ascertaining the perspective of nationals on the need for theological education and their perception of the IMB's withdrawal from theological education.

Rankin's purpose for appointing Lawless, according to the BP reporting, was "a way to connect overseas mission opportunities with Baptist seminaries and partners here in the States as well. Lawless will represent the IMB as a liaison to all six SBC seminaries in encouraging their partnership and involvement with overseas seminaries." BP reported Rankin as also saying, "I am excited about the momentum of a Great Commission resurgence in our convention that would see stateside churches and denominational entities claiming more ownership of our mission task and becoming more strategically involved around the world." In this same article IMB leader, Ron Wilson, echoed that sentiment by stating, "I see this role as a great connecting

role, connecting with U.S. seminaries to be involved with overseas seminaries and all of it together.” Clearly, the goal, as expressed by Rankin, was to connect seminaries in the states with the needs on the field and *not* to enlarge IMB’s direct involvement in theological education by appointing more theological educators to the field or to support and expand ongoing efforts. This is a crucial point of difference in philosophy that reveals the avoidance and outsourcing approaches among IMB leadership as it relates to theological education. Lawless’s report submitted after his initial assignment, however, called for the IMB to take a more integrative approach. As noted earlier, Lawless reported, “I unreservedly encourage potential partners, *including the IMB*, to provide the requested Bible scholars for these institutions [Bible colleges and seminaries]” (emphasis mine).

Under the position of Global Theological Education Consultant are regional theological education consultants and connectors with the IMB. They are the ones most connected to the needs for theological education on every continent. These consultants, many of whom have advanced theological degrees, are passionate about training national leaders and equipping them with the tools necessary to become active participants in the global task of making disciples of all nations. They have made constant and earnest pleas to seminaries to be more involved in sending faculty to teach short-term courses and offering assistance in any way possible. They also have offered theological training as time and circumstance permit. These connectors have at times played an integrative role by pushing for more appointments through the IMB for theological educators. The problem stems in part from the relatively few connectors compared to the global need and the resistance to an integrative approach from some quarters of leadership that represent the older CPM paradigm.

The upside of these requests to seminaries is the engagement of seminaries on a greater level than ever before in the global task of theological education. Faculty with no overseas cross-cultural experience have increased their awareness of the global need and have also developed a greater appreciation for the increasing cross-cultural dimension to theological education in their own classrooms due to rise of ethnic minority enrollment in residential theological education.

The downside is that as a global theological education strategy, short-term courses are taught through translation by individuals who do not know the language and the culture. They also are not in ongoing discipleship relationships with those whom they teach. As a result, they will be very limited in making a long-term impact through short-term engagement. In short, relying on seminaries in the USA to shoulder the global burden of theological education is far beyond institutions’ capabilities and far short of an appropriate level of engagement for a mission organization tasked with making disciples of all nations.

Since the appointment of Chuck Lawless as Global Theological Education Consultant, theological education as a missions strategy has been

primarily engaged at the level of connecting the needs overseas with seminaries and partners in the states, which is the primary task Lawless has been given. But due to the nature of consultancy positions, the organization has not made great strides to translate this momentum into the appointment of more field personnel who are dedicated theological and biblical trainers. Lawless's team, however, has been working closely with seminaries in the states and in time this could lead to more appointments to theological education roles. Glimmers of hope do exist for the organization's move into a more integrative approach to theological education and missions strategy. A strong undercurrent, however, still exists in current IMB strategy that is resistant to devoting more IMB resources to theological education because of the CPM influence with its emphasis on speed.

Roland Allen's reflections on Paul are often used as a model for those who value speed at the expense of deep-level discipleship and leadership training. Reflecting on Roland Allen's legacy and teaching, Michael Pocock observed,

Some who have read Roland Allen's work have concluded that they could work as rapidly as Paul, establishing churches in a few weeks or months and move on to other regions. Roland Allen would never have advocated the precipitous abandonment of newly established churches. His overarching conviction that the Holy Spirit is capable of instructing new believers would not have led him to leave new believers and churches without guidance. What he did advocate was the willing transfer of authority, responsibility, and self-support to young churches before the missionary was obligated unwillingly by circumstances to do so.¹¹

Chuck Lawless makes a similar observation,

The point is clear: despite his [Paul's] commitment to taking the gospel where it had not been preached (Rom. 15:20), Paul neither ignored nor abandoned the churches he planted. Via personal visits, correspondence and representatives, he stepped back into the lives of his churches when necessary. Even in cities such as Philippi and Thessalonica where Paul spent only a brief period, he left behind leaders who would minister in his place.¹²

Included within the need for guidance for new believers and new churches would certainly be leadership development. Lawless points to Paul's mentoring of young leaders like Timothy as the legacy of leadership development that Paul left behind for us today, which involved a significant

¹¹Robert L. Plummer and John Mark Terry, *Paul's Missionary Methods: In His Time and Ours* (Downers Grove: Il, 2012), 158.

¹²*Ibid.*, 225.

investment of his time in teaching and modeling.¹³

A Way Forward

The situation of churches in the New Testament churches repeats itself in the explosive growth of churches in the global south. New churches need Holy Spirit-gifted leaders who need to be able to divide rightly the Word of God to God's people. Churches engaged in making disciples of all nations are obliged through the command of Jesus Christ to offer such teaching and training in order that they may know and obey the whole counsel of God. With the explosion of evangelical growth in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, the crying need for the delivery of various forms of theological and biblical training is self-evident. The only question that remains is not "If?" but "How?" should we address the need in western evangelicalism in general and Southern Baptist missions in particular. How will we contribute to feed the theologically and biblically hungry around the world? I will offer a few suggestions:

1. Craft a new strategy for the twenty-first century that places making disciples at the forefront and not speed as its core value. Mentoring/discipling relationships are the most valued commodity in kingdom work and in the long run will yield more fruit than speed-based approaches. View theological education as under the umbrella of making disciples.
2. Transform the existing position of Global Theological Education Consultant into a full-time senior strategist role. A global theological education strategist can assist in designing an integrative approach to theological education that could guide the IMB in appointing new or reassigning existing personnel into cross-cultural theological education roles, listening and responding to the needs of indigenous leaders for training, and working closely with Affinity Group Strategy Leaders to ensure that theological training needs are engaged and tailored to the local context.
3. Require field missionaries in "front-line" roles to complete a seminary degree. Though the standards are tightening, currently one can serve as a field missionary without a seminary degree. With the complexities of today's missions field, missionaries are called upon to serve many roles and need the training to fill these roles competently. Nationals will look upon all missionaries with seminary training as a resource for training leaders. Education is valued in most parts of the world. The reality is that nationals will view those who have degrees as qualified to speak into the lives of church leaders. Every missionary should be equipped to provide biblical and theological training and

¹³Ibid., 227-34.

- have it as a part of his ministry toolbox.
4. Empower current theological-education consultants not only to assess needs and connect those needs with seminaries in the states, but to write job requests for full-time theological and biblical training roles. Instead of calling them *consultants*, they should be called *strategists*. Theological-education strategists will not just outsource but also integrate theological education into the core missions strategy of the organization.
 5. Free current missionaries with advanced theological degrees to engage more deeply in theological education with indigenous leaders. The IMB already has missionaries who have completed or are pursuing advanced theological degrees. Allow this force to be harnessed for the multiplication of theologically-trained leaders.
 6. Bring missionary theological educators in the IMB together regularly for summits on theological education. Cross-cultural theological educators can share experiences, present papers, and discuss conventional and unconventional strategies and models for equipping leaders. Include national partners, retired missionaries, missions faculty from the seminaries, and seminary students pursuing advanced degrees to join the conversation.

Concluding Remarks

The missiological divide regarding theological education as a missions strategy stems in part from a redefinition of what Jesus meant in the Great Commission by “teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded” (Matt 28:20). Those who shun theological education tend to emphasize “teach them to *obey*” rather than the integrative approach that emphasizes the fullness of Jesus’ words, “teach them to *obey all that I have commanded.*” I consider theological education to be under the rubric of the command of Jesus to teach. I also think that “all things that I have commanded” to be mean “teach them the whole counsel of God.” Jesus taught his disciples for three years while living and doing ministry with them. Paul also embodied the same concern to have ongoing input into the training of leaders. He said to the Ephesian elders that he had not shrunk from teaching them the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27). The CPM ethos redefined the meaning of Jesus’ command to “teach them to observe all things that I have commanded” to a formula for teaching nationals to obey the basic principles of small-group formation. The fear has been in the CPM paradigm that if you teach them doctrine from the Bible or theology, then you will distract them from implementing the fast-paced principles that will lead to church planting movements.

Since the shift in the epicenter of evangelical Christianity has taken

place from the West to Latin America, Africa, and Asia, a multiplication of leaders has taken place and with it the need for strategic involvement in the training of leaders who will be co-laborers in the great task of making disciples of all nations. In the Global South, evangelical Christianity is growing alongside a rapidly rising Islam. Within the evangelical movement many competitors have arisen to challenge the biblical moorings of new, emerging and established Bible/Gospel-centered communities of faith, such as radical Pentecostalism, the Prosperity gospel, and neo-Pentecostalism. With the challenge of these competitors comes the need of missionaries serving in these areas to be able to train theologically and equip biblically church leaders to understand and handle the Word of God accurately, rightly dividing the Word of truth.