THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION AND GLOBAL MISSIONS

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The globally connected world provides both an exciting and daunting prospect for those who think and write about missions and theology. It is exciting in that we have the intersection of multiple cultures and worldviews that can enrich how each of us studies and expresses our knowledge and belief about God. There are Christians in some contexts, for example, who face significant persecution for their belief in a Christian God. They may provide others in less persecuted contexts with a deeper and fuller understanding of belief in God when suffering is required. On the other hand, it can be daunting when an emphasis on human cultures causes us to develop theological beliefs and understandings that are man-centered rather than God-centered. Our theology then is fashioned according to human understanding, which means that as our understanding changes, so does our theology. Darrell Whiteman proposes another way of looking at this tension when he says, "The good news of globalization is that it is now easier for a hermeneutical community to exist that is global in scope and character, and people can test local expressions of Christianity against the universal body of Christ. The bad news is that people are likely to try to dominate the conversation from a position of power."[1] If, as he suggests, it is theology from the West that most likely will try to dominate, how do Western theologians, missionaries, and institutions find their proper place in global theological education?

God, in all his fullness, existed before any human knowledge or understanding, which means that any cultural expression must submit itself to the idea that it is partial, limited by man's fallen nature, and fully

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[1]Darrell Whiteman, "Anthropological Reflections on Contextualizing Theology in a Global World," in Craig Ott and Harold A. Netland, eds., *Globalizing Theology: Belief and Practice in an Era of World Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 65.

dependent on God's revelation of himself. Within this tension between God's revelation and our human understanding, we appear to have an unprecedented opportunity to advance theological education. This is unprecedented in the sense that with a modern globalized world, we now have the technological capability and connectivity that allows us to communicate with almost any context in the world. Western-based theological education has traditionally taken a "come and study with us" approach. So, students from all over the world have come to our institutions, and for several years have removed themselves from presence and participation in their home context. While this remains a significant avenue, because of new technologies we now have a blossoming theological education that is more "we'll come to you" in its approach.

Should not theologians from the West then go into the mission field, in both short and long-term capacities, with both anticipation and humility, seeking to share sound biblical theology with the new context? How much should they allow the new context to take the lead in developing its theology? It comes down to the question of how much theology should come from outside, and how much from inside. The purpose of this article is to examine these fields of tension in the hope of discovering implications for Western theologians' and institutions' involvement in global theological education. These implications are fundamental to the missionary endeavor given that a goal of missions is the growth of indigenous churches that hold to sound biblical theology. Even though various scholars will be referenced, the perspective in this article is specifically evangelical, holding to a high view of the Bible, which understandably would raise questions for those outside an evangelical position. In the second half of this article, particular contexts in Africa, India, and China will be presented to examine and analyze how these fields of tension manifest in various contexts.

FIELDS OF TENSION IN GLOBAL THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

When examining the spread of the gospel to the nations and cultures of the world, missions historian Andrew Walls points out the constant challenge of balancing between what he calls the *indigenous* principle and the *pilgrim* principle.[2] With the indigenous principle it is understood that a person does not live in isolation, but as a part of a culture and society which impacts and conditions the way they both conceive and conduct

[2]Andrew Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History* (Marynoll: Orbis Books, 1996), 7-8.

their lives. Missions must consider this so that the gospel can find a place in the culture and society where it can speak to and influence from within. Another way of thinking about it is to consider how the gospel can make itself at home within the culture. The discipline of missiology builds ideas and concepts around this which introduce terms such as "contextualize," "localize," and "indigenize." Biblical examples, such as the methods of Jesus and Paul, should be studied and consideration given to how prescriptive or descriptive these methods are for the way we engage in missions today. Similarly, examples throughout mission's history are analyzed to discover successes and failures. This then brings the discussion to the other side of the coin, which is the pilgrim principle.

The pilgrim principle is based on the idea that when a person becomes a Christian, they take on a new identity which finds its home in God's kingdom. Such a person is now first and foremost a citizen of God's kingdom, which is distinct from the world around them. Jesus affirms this distinction in John 18:36: "My kingdom is not of this world."[3] Evidence for this is also found in Jesus's prayer for Christians in John 17, where he twice uses the phrase, "they are not of the world." The implication is that even though Christians must live within a culture, they never really feel at home. Building on this is the idea that the more they grow into their identity in God's kingdom, the more distant they become from any other kingdom. Missions then are impacted by this so that they call people to come out of a primary allegiance and identity with the culture and worldview into which they were born. They are now pilgrims in this world on their way to the complete fulfillment and expression of God's kingdom in heaven. This is not only future oriented but is also found in living out kingdom lives and principles while on the pilgrim journey. One of the clearest biblical supports for this is found in the prayer Jesus taught Christians to pray, when he said "Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven."[4]

The need to balance the indigenous principle with the pilgrim principle has clear application to evangelism, discipleship, and church formation in missions, but what of theological education? Does theological education have a place in this discussion, or is it mostly pilgrim in nature? Is it something to be inserted after the other indigenous components are in place? The pilgrim nature of theological education seems to be reinforced

[3]All Scripture are from the Holman Christian Standard Bible.
[4]Matthew 6:10.

by the absence of foundational biblical concepts in other religions. My argument is that in the context of another religion, theological principles and categories, such as the Trinity, soteriology (in particular salvation by grace alone), and ecclesiology, need to be introduced as something fresh and new. Even the word, "Trinity," may need the indigenous language to come up with a new term or phrase to communicate a biblical meaning. Several voices in mission theory and practice, however, are uncomfortable with the idea that theological education by its nature is pilgrim and prefer not to pay significant attention to the indigenous context.

John A. Mackay, who served as a missionary and later as Princeton Seminary president, proposed two ways of approaching theology. These two approaches illustrate the interaction between the indigenous and the pilgrim principles. The first approach he called the *balcony*, where theological education takes place from the position of a spectator looking down at those who are trying to live out the Christian life in their context. The second approach is referred to as the *road*, where theological education happens amid life with all the challenges and concerns of the immediate context.[5] Taking inspiration from Mackay, Latin American theologian Samuel Escobar asserted, "Therefore, as Latin American thinkers we chose to do our theology not contemplating Christ from the comfortable distance of the balcony, as secure easily received orthodoxy, but following him on the troubled roads of our Latin American lands."[6] In a similar vein, Lamin Sanneh pushes back against a pilgrim approach as he argues for the power of Bible translation. He proposes that if we acknowledge the validity of all cultures and languages in being able to express the Christian faith, then we must consider the idioms and values of each culture.[7] What is needed is the translation of the Bible into the vernacular, accompanied by a freedom to let the local context interact with the Bible and so express theology in their own terms. This also means that those looking in from the outside need to suspend judgment found in terms such as "syncretism," and rather humbly acknowledge the self-theologizing of others.

Andrew Walls puts this need for a theology on the road in a positive perspective when he proposes:

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[5]John A. Mackay, *A Preface to Christian Theology* (New York: McMillan, 1941), 27-30.

[6]Samuel Escobar, "Doing Theology on Christ's Road," in Jeffrey P. Greenman and Gene L. Green, eds., *Global Theology in Evangelical Perspective: Exploring the Contextual Nature of Theology and Mission* (Downer's Grove: IVP Academic, 2012), 71.

[7] Lamin Sanneh, "The Significance of the Translation Principle," in Greenman and Green, *Global Theology in Evangelical Perspective*, 35.

> Just as when the gospel crossed the frontier into the Hellenistic world there was an explosion of theological activity that gave us the great creeds and the beginnings of what one may call classical theology, so the biblical and Christian interaction with the cultures of Africa and Asia has begun to open a whole range of new theological issues and the possibility of fuller and clearer thought on some old ones. …We can expect, and rejoice in, a vast expansion of theological activity.[8]

If Christian theologians all over the world opened themselves up to this idea, then the argument is that we are all better off. The blind spots in one cultural context can be addressed by theological insights from a different cultural context. This requires that theologians in each context humbly, for mutual edification, become willing to participate in theological conversation. No singular context is thereby left to try and figure out theological challenges on its own, but theologians in each context consult with other contexts. In response to critical issues, such as the prosperity gospel, human needs, and relativism, we can rely on theologians from all over the world to provide insights in how to address these challenges.

Stephen Bevans, in his explanation of various models of contextual theology, describes what he calls the "Synthetic model." This is meant as a way of synthesizing different approaches. In particular, "it takes pains to keep the integrity of the traditional message while acknowledging the importance of taking all the aspects of context seriously."[9] In his explanation of this model, Bevans points out how both insiders and outsiders to the culture have a role to play in developing theology, but he cautions that insiders must take prominence. Theologians from all over the world then help each other to produce a better understanding of theology. In a mission context where the gospel has only begun to see its first fruit, this means that theological education from the West must be complemented by insights from other non-Western Christian traditions. This does seem to be very positive. Yet where is the voice of caution that we can thereby drift into a man-centered approach to theology?

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[8]Andrew Walls, "The Rise of Global Theologies," in Greenman and Green, *Global Theology in Evangelical Perspective*, 33.

[9]Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009), 89.

The caution here concerns the problem of drift. It is unlikely that a seismic change in theology would suddenly take place in this model. In the discipline of missiology, for example, theology on the road discussions cause a rethinking of what constitutes the Great Commission. Injustice and human suffering as well as growing ecological issues prompt discussions as to whether our mission should be defined by Matthew 28:18-20 or by 2 Corinthians 5:19 and Colossians 1:20. The latter two texts produce a focus on reconciling and peacemaking at all levels, including with God through the gospel, with others through justice and human rights, and with the environment through creation care. These are each noble and good pursuits, but do they each come under the definition of "mission?" Rather, might some of them constitute the fruit of mission? When Jesus gave the Great Commission, did he leave some things out so that we need to turn to other texts rather than Matthew 28:18-20 on its own? Will we reach a time when planting trees is deemed to be fulfilling God's ultimate mission?

An example of going along that road of drift is addressed by Shaun Shorrosh in the growth and acceptance of a sacred/secular divide among Arab Christians in the Middle East. The road for these Christians is one where they are a small minority in a majority Muslim context which is hostile towards the Christian faith. He points out that an ecclesiology has developed where all active ministry is seen as the exclusive domain of the full-time clergy and that the laity is there to provide passive support. Any growth in the Kingdom of God comes through the clergy, with no confidence or expectations expressed for the laity.[10] Shorrosh attempts to address the drift into an unbiblical division between the sacred and the secular. These are important questions if we are to take up the challenge of keeping theology God-centered while trying to do it on the road.

THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION IN CONTEXT

The growth of Christianity in the Global South shows a maturing non-Western church that is calling for its voice to be heard.[11] This raises a significant proposition in this discussion, namely that theology is *translatable*. Timothy Tennent defines theological "translatability" as "the ability of the *kerymatic* essentials of the Christian faith to be discovered

[10] Shaun Shorrosh, "The Impact of the Sacred/Secular Divide on Gospel Transmission by Churches in the Arab World" (PhD Dissertation, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2022).

[11] "Global South" is one of the terms used to describe Christianity outside of the West. Broadly speaking, it covers the Latin American, African, and Asian contexts.

and restated within an infinite number of new global contexts."[12] As challenging as it might appear, the concept of the Trinity is therefore able to find meaningful expression in every context. The implication is that as each context undertakes this challenge it also enriches the overall understanding of God the Trinity so that no one context can declare that they have the final, conclusive word. Keeping our caution in mind we need to also declare that God has the final and conclusive word on this and other theological concepts and that our discovery in each context is not adding to or improving on this.

Are we able to arrive at a position that sees God as using the various cultures of the world as a means of confirming his eternal, unchanging truths found in the Bible? Tennent's example of the concept of sin helps to illustrate this.[13] Western-based Christianity takes an approach that focuses on sin as resulting in guilt before a holy God and as requiring atonement for that guilt. A non-Western context which is based on shame and honor points out how sin has brought us shame before a holy God and even more that we have dishonored the Triune God. This means we are not only guilty because of sin, but we also have a broken relationship with God due to the shame and dishonor that accompanies sin. All of this is a confirmation of what the Bible teaches about the concept of sin. As Gene Green explains, "So we read together with hope for a more complete understanding of the faith in the present, which anticipates the full revelation on Christ's advent."[14]

The growth of Christianity in China has been remarkable and remains a cause for celebration. Despite opposition in various forms, there appears to be a threshold that has been crossed so that under God's sovereignty Christianity is there to stay. Amid this, there are theologians and institutions within and without China who are trying to keep up with the developments. These represent different theological positions and mostly fall in place somewhere between the balcony and the road. Theologians from the outside, especially the West, are likely to be challenged by some of the inside/road approaches such as what Khiok-Khng Yeo calls "Christian Chinese Theology."[15] He explains how highly valued the Confucian scrip-

[12]Timothy C. Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 16.

[13]Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity*, 97.

[14]Gene Green, "The Challenge of Global Hermeneutics," in Greenman and Green, eds., *Global Theology in Evangelical Perspective*, 53.

[15]Khiok-Khng Yeo, "Christian Chinese Theology," in Greenman and Green, eds., *Global Theology*

tures are in Chinese culture and suggests that the promises found in these scriptures are only fulfilled in the Bible. He argues for "an interscriptural reading between these two texts, with the hope that the Bible will be expressed using Confucian language, and the Confucian ethics will be fulfilled by the gospel."[16]

Is this acceptable theology on the road or does the road need to have boundaries? Is the road wide enough to allow a text other than the Bible to be elevated as a source of God's truth? Here is where Lamin Sanneh would caution the outsiders not to judge these Chinese theologians by using terms such as "compromise" and "syncretism." Yet a theological fundamental of evangelical Western theology is *sola Scriptura* (i.e., the Bible alone possesses sufficient authority). It may be that Western theologians misunderstand the nuances of the Chinese position so that for the Chinese they would argue that they do hold to *sola Scriptura* without any compromise. Is it reasonable for Western theologians to challenge these Chinese theologians to abide by this standard and remove themselves from any elevation of the Confucian writings to the level of Scripture, whether that elevation is real or apparent? Theology in the West has had to deal with the position of the Bible, dealing with questions of its inerrancy and infallibility, but it has dealt less with its comparison to other scriptures that exist in a culture. This is, however, the reality for the Chinese and others in the Global South. If theological education is extended from outside does it need to consider and attempt to address this Chinese context? Is it even valid for outsiders to do this? Collaboration does seem to be the right approach here where the outsiders/mission theologians can help to preserve and promote theological foundations, while the insiders contend for an indigenous application.

An example from Africa is the formation of the Africa Baptist Theological Education Network (ABTEN).[17] This network is about five years old and involves individuals and institutions with a commitment to theological education across Africa. These are both people and institutions indigenous to Africa as well as those from outside who share a confession of faith found on the abten.org website. Together they collaborate with the mission "to impact local African churches through Baptist theological institutions, by strengthening and promoting sound, missional and contextual

in Evangelical Perspective, 102.

[16]Yeo, "Christian Chinese Theology," 107.

[17]Details about this network can be found at www.abten.org.

theological education that is rooted in the Bible and responsive to African socio-cultural realities." African theologians in this network have produced works including, Moses Audi, "Academic Integrity in African Context;" Jacob Kasule, "Diversified Missional Theological Education;" Elizabeth Mburu, "Regaining the African Theological Voice;" and Bazil Bhasera, "African Theology and Ecclesiology."

Of particular significance is an ABTEN book titled *The Abandoned Gospel*. It is composed of chapters written by ABTEN theologians and directly confronts Neo-Pentecostalism and the prosperity gospel. Audi, for example, in his chapter on salvation, points to the challenges of African life which prompt a theology from Neo-Pentecostalism. This Neo-Pentecostalism grounds salvation in this life, placing the temporal over the eternal. Its concept of salvation is primarily how God delivers from all physical and spiritual problems in this life. As an African scholar living and ministering in that context, Audi can expose and address that problem in a way impossible for a remote Western scholar. The nuance and richness of the African perspective would be lost if such a book were produced in and by Western theologians who look from the balcony. Being produced from the African road it becomes a useful resource for any other context dealing with this issue. What cannot be overlooked is that many of the theologians who are active in ABTEN completed their studies in Western institutions. How much did this influence their interpretation of the African experience? If their Western study experience did not remove them from being able to apply biblical truth to their African context, then it seems reasonable to conclude that the Western institution has made an appropriate contribution.

Confessions is a model that is used to promote the development of theology in India.[18] Testimonies from several participants show that once a foundation for discipleship and church has been laid, potential leaders are given intensive workshops where they develop their theological confessions. In a workshop on the Trinity, for example, they work in groups with the missionary/outside theologian giving them a list of Bible passages that speak to the unity, essence, and function of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. In their groups, they come up with how, in their language and context, they would express these biblical truths. The groups present to each other, and then everyone as a whole works on a final statement

[18]Due to the sensitive situation in India this model is not publicized, and those who use it request anonymity.

that confesses their belief about the Trinity. This usually takes two days. They then commit to returning to their locations where they teach the confession to the believers. During the two days, the outsiders are in the room but are only consulted when needed. Is this a good example of theology on the road while keeping the Bible in the center and outsiders on the periphery? Is the eventual goal to have indigenous Indian theologians in the room as the consultants, or will there always be value in having an outsider voice? Collaboration in this kind of context, done with the right spirit, should always be better than trying to construct theology in isolation. This suggests itself as a valuable model for those called to theology in a mission context.

These are just a few examples that show the activities that are taking place and the questions that are being asked as Christians embrace mutual participation in the journey of global theological education. We seem comfortable in the approach to theological education that sees Western theologians and institutions helping to provide a foundational core, and then letting each context make its application. But are we comfortable with the idea that we all need help with understanding the core of our faith? Will we together collaborate on the universal, within agreed boundaries established through evangelical belief and practice, and then promote individual application to the immediate in each context?

THE ROLE OF THE WEST IN GLOBAL THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

Acknowledging that updated statistics are not readily available, can it reasonably be considered that in the evangelical world theological education has aspects that remain Western driven? These would include students who apply to institutions for formal study where the number of non-Western students applying to Western schools exceeds the number of Western students applying to non-Western schools (in person or online). It would also apply to the production of theological materials such as books, dissertations, and articles, which are then translated into other languages. Most of this production seems to be from the West to the Global South. If this proves to be true then what has not yet shifted to the Global South as its center is theological education. Tite Tienou provided insight into this when he wrote in 2006, "It is also clear that Christian scholarship and theology are not yet endeavors in which scholars and theologians from

Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Pacific Islands participate fully."[19] Although time has passed, the question is whether this situation remains the same. The Lausanne movement is a good example. This movement has been very intentional in including and allowing participation from the Global South. It appears to have succeeded in representing evangelical Christianity from all over the world. Despite this, its senior leadership team over the decades of its existence until the present indicate they were predominantly educated in the West.[20]

For evangelical theologians all over the world, a vital component of this discussion has to do with the preservation of biblical theology. The preservation principle would argue that God in his sovereignty raises up movements at various times in a variety of cultural and geographic locations to preserve biblical theology. The African Anglican experience is a good case in point. Olayemi Fatusi, in his dissertation "Crowther Goes to Canterbury: A Historical Analysis of Ajayi Crowther's (1810-1891) Missiological Practices and the Anglican Decade of Evangelism (1990-1999)," points out how evangelical Anglicans in Africa are challenging those who first brought them the gospel to return to their biblical roots.[21] His evidence suggests that it is the African Anglicans who have taken on the responsibility and role of preserving biblical theology in the Anglican church. Giving this a universal application we would say that when Christianity in a particular geographic and cultural location pursues a man-centered theology, God may allow this while at the same time inspiring a God-centered theology in another context. We may end up highly concerned and pessimistic in the context in which we are immersed as we see a move away from biblical theology, but we need to be encouraged by the larger context of God's kingdom, believing that he is preserving biblical theology. This optimism may even be to the point where such preservation of truth increasingly shows itself as Christianity grows and reaches into all corners of the earth.

If we commit ourselves to a God-centered approach in theological education, then Western theologians and institutions must recognize their

[19]Tite Tienou, "Christian Theology in an Era of World Christianity," in Ott and Netland, eds., *Globalizing Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 45.

[20]J. E. M. Cameron, *The Lausanne Legacy: Landmarks in Global Mission* (Oxford: Dictum Press, 2023), Appendix 1.

[21]Olayemi Olusola Talabi Fatusi, "Crowther Goes to Canterbury : A Historical Analysis of Ajayi Crowther's (1810-1891) Missiological Practices and the Anglican Decade of Evangelism (1990-1999)," (PhD Dissertation, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2017). http://aaron.swbts.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&site=eds-live&db=cat03589a&AN=swbts.b1862806.

calling and responsibility to preserve and *proclaim* biblical theology. This should occur within the context of all the issues and questions raised in this discussion so that our preservation and proclamation are covered in humility and servanthood, knowing that our participation in all the other contexts of the Global South will in turn benefit us in our preservation and proclamation. A God-centered approach also keeps us optimistic as we realize that, even if our immediate context faces opposition to preservation and proclamation, nevertheless there are other contexts where God is compensating for this. As Western theologians and missionaries, our temptation in all of this is one of control. But will we allow the Global South to participate as equal partners and forego our impulse to be in control? Some look at our track record and doubt whether this is possible; however, we must hold out hope that under the lordship of Christ and the illumination of the Holy Spirit we can do so.