

When Bible Training Falls Flat

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I returned from two conferences last month, both focused on the global spread of the gospel and mentoring believers deeper in their faith. One had a specific track on biblical or theological training, and the issue came up at the other gathering as well. Each meeting had a decent-sized group of participants attending from Africa, Latin America and Asia. They recognize this has been a problem for years.

It seems like we could have “solved” the training issue many years ago. While there are always new believers and younger generations that need disciplined and trained, (don’t we all!) compared to Bible Translation or starting new fellowships, it seems much more “solvable.” And, so many materials have been produced and translated – though less has been locally contextualized. Plus a *lot* of people focus their ministry on training! I’ve seen and heard of *many* cross-cultural global workers and leaders who focus on training of some kind. Add to that many pastors – who often take their Western developed training focus to some willing trainees around the globe!

It raises the question: **Why are there still problems with believers not knowing and living out the Scriptures?** Including leaders and pastors! Here are a few of my thoughts on training. My first point relates to the *materials* that tend to be used and the second to the *methods* used to teach the material. Then, I’ll give an introduction to three related documents which are also posted here.

- **Materials** are usually produced *outside* the culture where the training is happening. This is partly because our seminaries tend to be focused on being sure students get doctrine and not as much on teaching students how to continue to learn from and study the Scriptures deeply, grow spiritually under pressure and teach effectively. I have pleaded with seminary students in the West, *not* to merely teach from their seminary class notes in other cultures. If someone serving cross-cultural does not learn language and culture, I have little hope they will communicate well or that it will have lasting impact. Teaching on any subject, be it the Bible or leadership, needs to be shaped for the context.

If a global, cross-cultural mission worker does not learn language and culture, I have little hope they will communicate well.

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- **Methods** are often ineffective. This is true in most school classrooms in the U.S., not to mention all who copy us. And most national leaders have been trained in Western methods. Almost all of us grew up learning in a classroom, and until later in College, that was with a bunch of others the same age. Is that a good way to teach or learn. One problem is that we aren’t able to grow from the wisdom and experience of those just a bit older than us. Nor do we learn to mentor those a bit younger. While it is handy and efficient to teach a bunch of people all at once, it

assumes that the students are at the same level. Perhaps more foundational is that the *actual design* of a curriculum is *not* something most teachers know how to do well.

Add to that the changing global generational shifts. People everywhere are reading less and less. Even then, once ideas are taught, there is little opportunity to apply it to real life. If we don't apply it, we don't really learn it.

Just the other day, I was talking with a current seminary student, who came back for some training after serving 7-years cross-culturally. He is smart, gifted at language learning and really frustrated with how things are taught at the well-known seminary he is attending. He has no problem with the theological approach of the school but noted he would redesign *the whole program*. As it is now, it ends up training the students: 1) to learn the theology but not really engage the issues, and 2) to do what they see the faculty doing, namely: teaching in a seminary. For some, that is all they see! Usually, they aren't trained by active pastors, nor church planters or evangelists or.... It was the same for me in seminary 40 years ago. If it were not for my exposure and engagement in a local church and missions ministry, before and during seminary, I would not have seen different roles modeled for me.

To the Research...

To examine the effectiveness of Bible Schools in East Africa, U.S. workers who had served in well-known theological colleges there wondered about the impact of the training they had given their lives to. They had hints that things were not what they had hoped. While the study was done in 1994, I haven't seen evidence that things have changed much in traditional institutions.

You can read the attached documents, which include: 1) some analysis of this study¹ (as shared through an email thread), and, 2) a *Mission Frontiers* article by the author of the study, and, 3) a book review I wrote, for the *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* on another approach.

• **Remember, you can post your comments below.** •

Here is a summary of the survey:

1. The East Africa study surveyed 643 students at 11 Bible colleges (four were not 4-year Bible colleges) about what was happening in their home churches. Most were residential schools, but they were producing pastors whose sermons were repetitive and not reflecting ongoing Bible study. Many served more than one church, and thus taught in each church less than weekly. Some had additional bible studies, some did not. They were not starting new ministries to serve their churches.

Except at one school!

• At that school, they ran modular two-week classes. When they returned to their local, ongoing ministry, their teachers would travel out to visit them and coach them in their ministry. These pastors were leading and creative. They were learning new things about the Word and

¹ I have posted an email thread I received early in 2,000. I've removed all email addresses and other header information.

thus preaching fresh sermons. They were encouraging people in ministry and helping start new ways for their churches to reach out.

2.

In a 2003 *Mission Frontiers* article, Roger Coon wrote up some reflections, called: “Equipped, or Drilled? Pastoral Training in the Third World: Illustrations from Africa.” It also draws from the survey.

3.

Last, I was asked to review the book *TEE in Asia: Empowering Churches, Equipping Disciples*.² Since I had studied the beginning of the TEE movement as part of my thesis on Ralph D. Winter’s life,³ I was very encouraged by what is happening in what is now called Tools to Equip and Empower.⁴ This kind of equipping is adjusted to the context and language. Since I wrote this review, the book has been expanded. At one of the events I mentioned above, I met two leaders who are involved and I hope to engage with this network in the future.

We all need to be willing to re-examine our models for preparation and training — no matter the location or cultural context. It is encouraging that some are looking at various ways to train people who are engaged in ministry. It takes hard work. Teaching involves mentoring, mutual learning and accountability, all in the context of ongoing relationship.

THANKS for reading, please comment and let us know your experiences...

² Ed. Hanna-Ruth van Wingerden, Tim Green and Graham Aylett (2021). *TEE in Asia: Empowering Churches, Equipping Disciples*. Langham Global Library – Langham Publishing.

³ Parsons, G. (2012). *Ralph D. Winter; Early Life and Core Missiology*. Pasadena, WCIU Press.

⁴ EMQ, July–September 2022, 58:3, p. 71. TEE is an acronym that has been known as Theological Education by Extension for more than 60 years. Of course, it has always been more than theological training, so I like the Ephesians 4 language of equip.