

A BIBLICAL PROPOSAL FOR THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION IN MISSION

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Theological education is essentially absent from most missiological discussion, despite standing at the center of the Great Commission. In response, founded upon trust in the full authority and sufficiency of all of Scripture, this article presents a biblical proposal for theological education in mission. This call to action lays out a biblical vision for the theological education of missionaries and those whom they serve on the mission field. May the church return to its mission and teach all the nations to keep all the commands of Jesus, to the end of the age.

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Mission: Obeying the Great Commission

Even a cursory glance at missiological literature reveals that missiologists do not agree upon a great many aspects of their field, including its very nature and definition.¹ In response, this article proceeds from a central premise and its corollary. The central premise is that authoritative and sufficient Scripture teaches that the church's mission is to obey Christ's Great Commission.² The corollary is that a sure sign of mission activity according to the Great Commission is that mission takes place in harmony with all other biblical teaching as well.

¹ Mission is neither inherently undefinable (David J. Bosch) nor “everything” (C. J. H. Wright). See David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, American Society of Missiology Series 16 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991), 9; Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God's People: A Biblical Theology of the Church's Mission* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 26.

² Wright argues against the idea that Great Commission passages, or any other “list of texts,” provides proper biblical grounding for the church's mission. See Christopher J. H. Wright, “Mission as a Matrix for Hermeneutics and Biblical Theology,” in *Out of Egypt: Biblical Theology and Biblical Interpretation*, Scripture and Hermeneutics 5, edited by Craig Bartholomew et al. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 102–43 (esp. 109–13).

Accordingly, the first section below briefly surveys the Great Commission to determine how the church—and specifically, missionaries—should obey it.³ The following section then steps back to consider how missionaries should train toward their task, a sacred calling assigned in the Great Commission and elaborated upon in the rest of Scripture. Then the final section steps ahead to the mission field and considers how missionaries should train leaders for the new churches they plant.

The Great Commission

Great Commission texts include Luke 24:45–49, John 20:21–23, and Acts 1:8, but the Great Commission’s most classic expression is Matthew 28:18–20.⁴ The single command within Matthew’s Great Commission passage is “make disciples,” with three key actions (“go,” “baptize,” and “teach”) expressed by participles. “Go” is mandatory; the disciples must “go” for disciple making to take place among “all the nations.”⁵ Then “baptize” and “teach” are also necessary actions, for they explain how one makes disciples of Jesus. Baptizing new followers of Jesus is a one-time act at the beginning of their discipleship.⁶ Then “teaching them to keep all that I commanded you” is a continual activity as Jesus promises to be present with His church “even to the end of the age.”⁷

Training of Missionaries

Teaching Jesus’s disciples among “all the nations” certainly entails the church evangelizing and teaching those closest at hand: people who are culturally similar and geographically nearby, and thus easiest to reach. Yet “all the nations” also includes “all” who are far away. Going to “all the nations” demands that the church send out missionaries to cross boundaries of nation-states, cultures, ethnicities, and languages. Their destination can be any place where people have not bowed the knee to Christ, including places of greatest need such as pioneer mission fields where the Gospel has not yet reached anyone. Of such people Paul asks, “How will they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how will they hear without a preacher? And how will they preach unless they are sent?” (Rom 10:14b–15a). Before cross-cultural

³ For further development of the ideas summarized in this introduction, see Scott N. Callaham, “Make Disciples: What the Great Commission Means and What We Must Do,” forthcoming in *Biblical Missions: Principles, Priorities, and Practices*, edited by Mark Tatlock and Chris Burnett (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2025).

⁴ Mark 16:15–18 appears in the traditional “longer ending” of Mark. No material follows Mark 16:8 in the earliest manuscripts of the Gospel of Mark. See Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1994), 102–7. Ramm uses the spurious endings of Mark to illustrate the principle that “No doctrine should be constructed from an uncertain textual reading.” See Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation: A Textbook of Hermeneutics*, 3rd rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1970), 183.

⁵ See discussion of the function of the three participles and refutation of the popular translation “as you go” in Cleon Rogers, “The Great Commission,” *BibSac* 130 (1973): 258–62 (esp. 261–62).

⁶ For the role of baptism within Great Commission obedience see John Massey and Scott N. Callaham, “Baptism as Integral Component of World Mission Strategy,” in *World Mission: Theology, Strategy, and Current Issues*, edited by Scott N. Callaham and Will Brooks (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2019), 149–75.

⁷ This article cites Scripture from the Legacy Standard Bible.

international missionaries depart for the mission field, the church should evaluate their qualifications and train them for their crucial task.

Qualifications for Missionaries

At the very outset of discussion of qualifications for missionary service it is essential to emphasize a fundamental attribute to which churches and missionary sending agencies devote all too little attention: that a missionary candidate must be a Christian. Discerning whether a missionary candidate is truly regenerate is urgent, and not because hordes of adherents of world religions or cult groups are attempting to infiltrate Christian missionary organizations. Instead, it is necessary to ensure that a missionary candidate is saved due to the deceitful human heart (see Jer 17:9) that beats in time with the universal, innate religiosity of human beings.⁸ Unregenerate religious people may profess faith in Christ, get baptized, join churches, admire scriptural teaching, reform their behavior to align with Christian social and ethical principles, and even graduate from Christian seminaries and become ministers. They “fit in” as “cultural Christians.” They experience God’s common grace afforded to all humanity, and they even desire to go on the mission field. Yet in the case of these unregenerate religious people, the Holy Spirit has not brought them to the end of themselves and granted them new life in Christ. In a word, they do not believe the Gospel. Rather, alongside Scripture they pay “attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons” (1 Tim 4:1). Scripture’s judgment upon them in 1 John 2:18–19 stings; as false teachers, they are “antichrists,” and at the most elemental level they are “not of us.” For the sake of the world church and the urgency of the call of the Great Commission, churches, seminaries, and missionary sending agencies must screen those who aspire to serve on the mission field for true faith and allegiance to Christ.⁹

Regarding born-again missionary candidates, people whose lives are impossible to explain apart from the Gospel, introductory textbooks and guides to mission typically cover qualifications as an element of missionary preparation. Categories of qualifications may address the physical, academic, vocational, and spiritual spheres of life. Regarding spiritual qualifications, one author sets out as components of a missionary candidate’s spirituality “a genuine conversion experience,” “knowledge of the Scriptures,” “assurance of divine guidance,” “a strong devotional life,” “self-

⁸ Calvin wrote that “the mind of man is ... a perpetual manufactory of idols.” See John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3 vols., trans. John Allen (Philadelphia: Philip H. Nicklin and Hezekiah Howe, 1816), 1:115. In editions with differing pagination, see Book 1, Chapter 11, Section 8.

⁹ John Wesley volunteered for missionary service before his conversion. Wesley’s diary records his anguish on 1 February 1738, “that I who went to America to convert others, was never myself converted to God.” His footnote for this statement reveals doubts even about his self-admission of lostness: “I am not sure of this.” Yet in the same lengthy entry he later wrote, “I want that faith which none can have without knowing that he hath it (though many imagine that they have it, who have it not).” See John Wesley, *The Journal of John Wesley: As Abridged by Nehemiah Curnock* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1963), 36–37. For a secular perspective on the phenomenon of unbelief in ministry, see Daniel C. Dennett and Linda LaScola, “Preachers Who are Not Believers,” *Evolutionary Psychology* 8 (2010): 122–50.

discipline,” “a heart of love,” and “some success in Christian service.”¹⁰ These spiritual attributes are indeed desirable on the mission field, though in the end they are evaluated subjectively and are likely to manifest in varying degrees from missionary to missionary. Usually not mentioned in mission textbooks are objective biblical qualifications for missionaries.

Asserting objective biblical qualifications for missionaries may raise eyebrows among mission agencies accustomed to assessing missionary candidates according to their own organizational standards. When drawing up such standards, mission agencies should keep in mind Jesus’s directive in the Great Commission: make disciples. Jesus commands disciples to make disciples, who in turn will make disciples in an ongoing chain of disciple making until His return. In the Great Commission Jesus assigns disciple making to His redeemed people, with the result that Jesus’s new disciples must gather into local churches with the rest of the redeemed. In some cases, biblically faithful local churches in some mission fields stand ready to receive new converts as members and to continue discipling them. Yet in some other areas biblically faithful churches are inaccessible or non-existent. In such situations, missionaries must plant new churches.

These newly planted churches need leaders. According to contemporary mission philosophies that prize rapid reproduction of churches through “people movements,” missionaries should draw “new believers into leadership roles through participative Bible studies.”¹¹ The missionary never teaches, but instead mentors these emergent new church leaders.¹² A surprising number of mission agencies endorse these behind-the-scenes, catalytic, non-Bible-teaching strategies, despite their lack of precedent in Scripture. “People movement” philosophies invest leadership in freshly converted people with a natural bent toward leading, trusting that they supply what a foreign missionary inherently lacks: the in-group identity that allegedly fosters the rapid propagation of Christianity within that discrete people group.¹³

In stark contrast, Scripture assigns church leadership to elders, each of whom can hold “fast the faithful word *which is in accordance with the teaching*, so that he will be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to reprove those who contradict” (emphasis added; Titus 1:9). Obviously, a new convert who has received no teaching himself would not be able to satisfy this requirement. Furthermore, Scripture

¹⁰ J. Herbert Kane, *Life and Work on the Mission Field* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 23–35, esp. 32–35. Note that Kane does not mention a specific missionary calling as a prerequisite for missionary service. For reflection upon missionary calling see Zane Pratt, M. David Sills, and Jeff K. Walters, *Introduction to Global Missions* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2014), 1–15.

¹¹ Contemporary “people movement” philosophies include CPM (Church Planting Movements), DMM (Disciple Making Movements), and IM (Insider Movements). Regarding the importance of rapid reproduction, see V. David Garrison, *Church Planting Movements* (Richmond, VA: International Mission Board, 1999), 36. See the definition of a Church Planting Movement on p. 8: “a rapid and multiplicative increase of indigenous churches planting churches within a given people group or population segment.” For a description of question-based, non-directive, participative Bible studies, see V. David Garrison, *Church Planting Movements: How God is Redeeming a Lost World* (Bangalore: WIGTake Resources, 2004), 315–17.

¹² Watson and Watson directly deny that missionaries should “preach or teach.” See David L. Watson and Paul D. Watson, *Contagious Disciple Making: Leading Others on a Journey of Discovery* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2014), 127.

¹³ Acts 8:9–24 relates the story of an in-group natural leader among the Samaritans named Simon, who apparently came to faith in Christ and received baptism, but was in fact a false convert.

explicitly prohibits new converts from becoming elders lest they “become conceited and fall into the condemnation of the devil” (1 Tim 3:6).

According to the teaching of authoritative and sufficient Scripture in the Great Commission, missionaries baptize and teach new disciples. Then as the Holy Spirit draws new disciples to come to faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, the missionary gathers them into churches, leads these churches, and trains biblically qualified leaders—elders—for these churches. In order to plant and lead churches, as well as to train elders with integrity, missionaries should themselves meet the qualifications of elders found in 1 Timothy 3:2–7, Titus 1:6–9, and 1 Peter 5:2–4.

An immediate objection to elder qualification for missionaries arises; missionaries need mission-field based support for their church planting work, often from those who do not meet the qualifications of elders. These support workers could be attorneys, information technology professionals, medical personnel, aviators, Bible translators, accountants, schoolteachers, and so forth. They may be men who lack the training or spiritual gifting to teach the Word of God, or they may be women.¹⁴ Yet these support workers can be vital in sustaining the work of missionary church planters, because they free these missionaries from urgent secondary concerns so that the work of the Word of God may continue unimpeded.¹⁵ Therefore, these workers should not view their contributions as somehow unimportant, unspiritual, or non-theological. In fact, as many of these support workers as have the potential and biblical qualification to serve as elders, they should train toward serving in that capacity as God allows. A key tool for equipping missionaries to plant and lead churches as elders is theological education.

Theological Education for Missionaries

Just as the field of missiology faces an identity crisis when untethered from Scripture, the enterprise of theological education also lacks coherence apart from a biblically driven agenda. To illustrate with one recent example of incoherence due to lack of anchoring in the Bible, a past leader of the Asia Theological Association relates his “disillusionment with theological education in general” resulting from encounters with the administrators of two seminaries. These leaders opposed his suggestion to cancel class in order to have students join “right-thinking citizens” who were engaging in protest actions on the streets of their city.¹⁶ This seminary-accrediting-agency head judged that “serious incarnational engagement in the life of a nation” would be more

¹⁴ “Husband of one wife” is one of the qualifications of an elder (1 Tim 3:2). 1 Tim 2:12 also informs the role of women on the mission field, for in this text the apostle Paul prohibits women from teaching men. Regarding women teaching women, often women on a missionary team can be in closer contact with host nation women for evangelism and discipleship than would be appropriate for men. For a historical survey of women missionaries, see Ruth A. Tucker and Walter L. Liefeld, *Daughters of the Church: Women and Ministry from New Testament Times to the Present* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 291–327.

¹⁵ Freeing ministers of the Word from urgent secondary tasks prompted the early church to appoint the first deacons (or perhaps proto-deacons) in Acts 6:1–6.

¹⁶ Paul Cornelius, “Rescuing the Mind from Academics: A South Asian Perspective on *Missio Dei* and the *Telos* of Theological Education,” in *Equipping for Global Mission: Theological and Missiological Proposals and Case Studies*, Evangelical Missiological Society Monograph Series 32, edited by Linda P. Saunders, Gregory Mathias, and Edward L. Smither (Littleton, CO: William Carey, 2024), 19.

helpful in formation for “ministry and mission” than the seminary curriculum.¹⁷ Then as for training needs for missionaries in particular, a “people movements” advocate asserts that the “principle of group conversion ought to be the fundamental principle of missionary work everywhere” and finds it inexcusable that missionaries should receive theological education that does not impart “special knowledge of anthropology, sociology, and non-Christian religions.”¹⁸

An implicit assumption of both the above-mentioned seminary accreditor and the “people movements” missiologist is that the Holy Spirit-inspired Word of God is not of supreme value or authority in theological education. Instead, they advocate familiarity with culture as paramount. Now, keeping abreast of current events within one’s environment (such as mass street protests) certainly fosters situational awareness, and familiarity with principles of “anthropology, sociology, and non-Christian religions” can aid in living cross-culturally and contextualizing the message of Scripture without compromising the truth (see Acts 17:16–34). That said, faithfulness to the Bible’s transcultural message must remain the passion of the missionary such that Scripture exercises control over contextualization of the missionary’s message.¹⁹ Since communicating the message of authoritative and sufficient Scripture is central to the Great Commission, theological education for missionaries should produce cross-cultural disciple making expositors.

1. Theological Education for Cross-cultural Missionaries

The first of the three main characteristics of the “cross-cultural disciple-making expositor” is the capacity to work cross-culturally. At first glance, it may seem that some aspects of cross-cultural missionary field work are outside the scope of theological education. For example, a missionary may need business acumen to operate a “platform” company, official certification as an engineer or a language teacher to acquire a visa, or an accredited graduate degree in a secular field in order to live and work in a certain mission field. On the one hand, in God’s sovereignty, it is quite possible that the best path toward earning these credentials runs through receiving training from a non-Christian institution.

On the other hand, missionaries should rethink “secular” aspects of pre-mission field training in light of the hard cultural turn against Christianity throughout much of the world in recent years. In this present “negative world,” public educational institutions indoctrinate students into anti-Christian, state-imposed moral systems with (anti-)religious fervor.²⁰ The ways that schools in more conservative communities versus those in more progressive communities treat orthodoxies such as critical social justice, advocacy of unfettered access to government subsidized abortion, and the latest dictates of liberal politicians and the LGBTQ+ movement are remarkably similar and differ only in their degree of advocacy.

¹⁷ Paul Cornelius, “Rescuing the Mind from Academics: A South Asian Perspective on *Missio Dei* and the *Telos* of Theological Education,” 19.

¹⁸ A. L. Warnshuis, “Group Conversion,” in *Church Growth and Group Conversion*, J. W. Pickett et al., 5th ed. (South Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1973), 19.

¹⁹ E. D. Burns, *Ancient Gospel, Brave New World* (Cape Coral, FL: Founders, 2021), 25.

²⁰ Renn popularizes the concept of the “negative world” in Aaron M. Renn, *Life in the Negative World: Confronting Challenges in an Anti-Christian Culture* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2024).

One might raise the objection that engagement with hardline anti-Christian worldviews on a university campus develops competence in cross-cultural witness and thus would be an experience to seek out rather than to avoid. Yet in military terms, this course of action is like sending recruits from boot camp into hand-to-hand combat against the enemy's special forces. The predictable result is not training, but slaughter. Instead, in the "negative world" more than ever before, Christians should consider bringing their "secular" education into contact with the realm of theological education. Accordingly, future mission field workers should ideally acquire skills for cross-cultural living from institutions such as a Christian university.

A Christian university can provide a host of options for optimal equipping, such as an excellent faculty within a needed "secular" field of study. A well-resourced Global Studies program in a Christian university could also offer training in cultural anthropology and language acquisition, or even teach one of the world's widely spoken strategic languages.²¹ Furthermore, Global Studies faculty who are veteran missionaries can provide encouragement through mentoring and lead international mission trips to help future missionaries gain experience applying learned skills in an actively missional context before arrival on the mission field.

2. Theological Education for Disciple-Making Missionaries

Perhaps following graduation from a Christian university, a concentrated period of explicitly theological training can build upon the Christian worldview foundation set by earlier equipping. The first of the two major purposes of this formal theological education is to train disciple-makers. According to the Great Commission, the definition of disciple making among all nations is to baptize and teach all that Jesus commands.

"All that Jesus commands" must include "first order" Gospel doctrines that define Christian orthodoxy.²² Scripture itself speaks of "first importance" teachings, which center upon Christ: His death, burial, resurrection, and post-resurrection appearances (1 Cor 15:3–8). Furthermore, teaching a "different gospel" than the Gospel Paul proclaimed results in blanket condemnation (Gal 1:6–9). The clear implication is that disciple-making missionaries must teach new believers the Gospel message in full alignment with Scripture, with no admixture of error.

Furthermore, disciple-making missionaries must baptize. While the English word "baptism" is malleable enough to communicate a wide array of literal and metaphorical meanings, the semantic range of the word in Biblical Greek is narrow. In the Bible, baptism means "immersion."²³ Therefore, baptism for new disciples requires immersion of the body in water. The burial drama acted out in immersion (Rom 6:4) stands behind the metaphorical imagery of baptism in Scripture, such as

²¹ An example of a textbook that bridges the fields of anthropology and mission is Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985). An example of a language textbook that trains students for specifically Christian use of language is Wang Shuguang, *Chinese through Scripture* (Aurora, IL: Kharis, 2022).

²² Albert Mohler popularized the concept of a three-tiered "theological triage" on his blog. See <https://albertmohler.com/2005/07/12/a-call-for-theological-triage-and-christian-maturity/>. Accessed October 19, 2024.

²³ See BDAG, s.v. βαπτίζω.

the Messiah baptizing with the Holy Spirit and with fire (Matt 3:11, Luke 3:16).²⁴ All this is to say that baptism is extremely important—important enough to be a component of the very mission of the church, and also for Jesus to tie baptism to the Trinity (a “first order” Gospel doctrine) in Matthew 28:19.

Baptism is an act that preaches the Gospel, but it is not the Gospel itself. Put another way, baptism is not a “first order” doctrine in that it does not *save* a sinner but rather *displays* the salvation of a sinner. Therefore, theological education that leads to disciple making, as well as the churches that result from disciple making, must commit to “second order” doctrinal stances such as baptism as well. It follows that theological education and mission must be confessional. Trans-denominational parachurch organizations may have their place, but that place is outside of theological education and work on the mission field.

As discussed to this point, theological education for disciple-making missionaries must include first order and second order doctrines. Yet “all that Jesus commands” encompasses still more. Jesus’s teaching, and direct teaching about Jesus as the culmination of God’s salvation plan for all peoples, fill the entire New Testament. In addition, Jesus teaches that “all the Scriptures” contain “things concerning himself” (Luke 24:27). Furthermore, 2 Timothy 3:16–17 directly addresses the significance of “all Scripture” as “God-breathed and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be equipped, having been thoroughly equipped for every good work.” Should any doubts remain about the relationship between Jesus and even the least-cited and least-read texts in the Bible, in the Great Commission Jesus reminded His followers who He is, saying, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth” (Matt 28:18). Jesus is God, therefore the Holy Spirit-inspired Word of God is Jesus’s word. The entirety of Scripture is the proper focus of theological education for disciple-making missionaries.²⁵

Theological education for disciple-making missionaries should of course include subjects that are Scripture-driven but not Scripture themselves, such as the missionary work of the church. Yet before proceeding to discuss these extrabiblical elements of theological education, it is helpful to restate that the Bible is authoritative and sufficient for all of life, and that includes mission. Missiology is not an independent discipline that opens access to previously unknown insights into God’s plans for the world, and mission must never displace Scripture at the center of theological education for missionaries.²⁶

One can visualize the generative effect of Scripture upon mission with the image of a droplet falling into an undisturbed body of water. The droplet is Scripture itself. The first ripple produced by the impact of the droplet is the fruit of interpretation of

²⁴ Objections to biblical baptism that call upon extrabiblical or pragmatic considerations (as well as systematic theologies of baptism built upon these considerations) undermine the authority and sufficiency of Scripture for the doctrine of baptism.

²⁵ Waltke and Yu write, “Every sentence of the Bible is fraught with theology, worthy of reflection.” See Bruce K. Waltke and Charles Yu, *An Old Testament Theology: An Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 21.

²⁶ See the mission-centric proposal in Jeffrey P. Greenman, “Mission as the Integrating Center of Theological Education,” in *The Bible in World Christian Perspective: Studies in Honor of Carl Edwin Armerding*, ed. David W. Baker and W. Ward Gasque (Vancouver: Regent College Press, 2009), 193–210.

biblical passages. The second ripple is the Old and New Testament theology that arises from biblical interpretation. The third ripple is biblical theology, which traces the voice of the Holy Spirit throughout the Old and New Testaments that together form the canon of inspired Scripture. The fourth ripple is systematic theology, which organizes theological concepts into doctrines. Subsequent ripples outward are the realm of applied theology, where such fields as church history, philosophy of religion, Christian ethics, preaching, and mission reside.

Mission thus stands as a subsidiary field of applied theology, an exciting subfield where disciples of Jesus obey Him and put theology in action. These disciple-making missionaries need as firm a grasp as possible upon the Heavenly Father-ordained, Christ-exalting, Holy Spirit-driven theology-in-action that they are obeying in the Great Commission. Theological education for disciple-making missionaries must therefore extensively train in Scripture (the droplet) and its effects (the ripples), all the way to mission. Then as disciple-making missionaries obey the Great Commission, they will revel in “all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Col 2:3) in Christ and pass these treasures on to the next generation of Jesus’s disciples whom the Holy Spirit will draw near on the mission field.

3. Theological Education for Expositor Missionaries

Preaching is a Great Commission act according to Luke 24:47, which reads that “repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in [Christ’s] name to all the nations.” The verb of proclamation here is κηρύσσω, which in Luke and Acts has to do with Gospel proclamation (Luke 4:43–44, 8:1; Acts 8:4–5), teaching (Acts 28:31), and synagogue preaching (Luke 4:44, Acts 9:20, cf. Acts 15:21).²⁷ Beyond the act of preaching the Gospel that the Holy Spirit uses to draw people to faith in Christ, missionaries have the responsibility to preach in the churches they plant, for they are the founding elders of those churches. Therefore, these cross-cultural disciple-making missionaries must be expositors, and their theological education should prepare them to preach, “accurately handling the word of truth” (2 Tim 2:15).

Now before this essay advances a single sentence further, one should acknowledge that even the suggestions that a missionary should be a preacher, and furthermore that as a preacher he should rightly wield the tools of the preaching trade, are essentially absent from modern textbooks on mission.²⁸ Yet there is an aching need for biblically and doctrinally faithful proclamation of the Word of God in churches on the mission field. There appears to be an unfortunate disconnect between the command of Christ in the Great Commission and the many strategies that missionaries craft for their work on the field. To receive inspiration from missionaries

²⁷ Christopher A. Beetham, ed., *Concise New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis*, s.v. “κηρύσσω” (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2021), 456–59 (esp. 458–59); Gerhard Friedrich, “κηρύσσω,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964–76), 3:697–718 (713). Note that Mark 16:15 also uses κηρύσσω.

²⁸ A welcome step in the right direction is brief mention of the need for missionaries to use “proper biblical exegesis” as they interpret the Bible within its “linguistic, cultural, and historical setting” in *Missions*, Gailyn Van Rhee, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 286.

who embrace their call to preach the message of the Bible, it is unfortunately often necessary to turn to biographical works on long-dead missionaries.²⁹

Contemplating missionary preaching naturally calls to mind the dynamic of language; a missionary preaches in vain if he does not speak the language of the people on the mission field. Using a human or even a machine translator often carries a risk of mistranslation or some critical “loss in translation.”³⁰ Furthermore, praying for the apostolic gift of tongues to preach in unlearned languages is both futile and a potential disqualifier from ministry due to serious misunderstanding of biblical teaching on the gifts of the Holy Spirit.³¹ Indeed, the need for missionaries to preach in the language of the people they serve is obvious and pressing. Cross-cultural international missionaries must arduously cross a “language bridge” to the people’s cultural setting rather than expect the people to cross that bridge to the missionaries. That said, there is another culture-spanning language bridge that modern-day missionaries seldom cross, and refusal to cross it speaks volumes about one’s attitude toward preaching the Bible. This is the bridge of the biblical languages: Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek.

Unfortunately, preparing sermons from the inspired biblical text in the original languages is not as widespread as preferred.³² This reality, in part, seems to suggest that knowledge of the biblical languages may be suited to academic commentary writers, but not necessarily to preachers. It is as if the unavoidable losses in translation that are present in all modern Bibles are not worth the awareness of the missionary expositor. Yet neither the translated Bible in the missionary’s native language (“language A”) nor the translated Bible in the language of the people he serves (“language B”) are capable of being perfect transmitters of meaning from the ancient manuscripts to the modern reader. They are translations, after all. Furthermore, one could easily posit a scenario on the mission field in which “language A” and “language B” Bible translations disagree on the meaning of a particular passage. Either both, one, or neither is in error, depending on issues of translation that an expositor cannot understand without recourse to the original language text.

The prospect of greater faithfulness to that original language text, and teaching its meaning accurately on the mission field, should provide key motivation for

²⁹ See for example E. D. Burns, *A Supreme Desire to Please Him: The Spirituality of Adoniram Judson*, Monographs in Baptist History 4 (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2016), 84–86.

³⁰ For helpful guidance for preaching with the help of a human translator when circumstances demand it, see Pat Gustin, “How Not to Get Lost in Translation,” *Journal of Applied Christian Leadership* 4 (2010): 126–30. The present state of technology does not support machine translation for preaching. For a study demonstrating the inadequacy of machine translation when lives are at stake, see Breena R. Taira et al., “A Pragmatic Assessment of Google Translate for Emergency Department Instructions,” *Journal of General Internal Medicine* (2021): n.p.

³¹ Regarding the refusal of some missionaries to study Chinese in the expectation that the Holy Spirit would miraculously impart the language, James Hudson Taylor commented, “How many and subtle are the devices of Satan to keep the Chinese ignorant of the gospel.” See Alwyn Austin, *China’s Millions: The China Inland Mission and Late Qing Society, 1832–1905*, Studies in the History of Christian Missions (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 222. See also a survey of false claims of speaking unlearned languages in Gary B. McGee, “Shortcut to Language Preparation? Radical Evangelicals, Missions, and the Gift of Tongues,” *IBMR* 25 (2001): 118–23.

³² For a popular-level meditation on the importance of biblical languages in ministry see John Piper, *Brothers, We are Not Professionals: A Plea to Pastors for Radical Ministry* (Nashville: B&H, 2013), 98–105.

biblical language study.³³ The flame of that motivation must burn bright enough in missionaries' hearts to prioritize maintaining command of the biblical languages after formal study is complete.³⁴ Otherwise, the rigors of ministry—and modern language learning!—on the mission field will rob the missionary of hard-fought gains in familiarity with the inspired Word.

The missionary has a sacred duty, a duty that calls for wrestling in prayer, to employ his hard-fought gains in the vocabulary, grammar, and syntax of the biblical languages rightly to cross the culture-spanning language bridge to the ancient world of the Bible. The process that enables interpreting the biblical text as much as possible according to the intent of its human and divine author is “grammatical-historical interpretation.” As for the “historical” element of “grammatical-historical interpretation,” it certainly helps to cultivate knowledge of “biblical backgrounds”: the thought worlds of the ancient Near East for Old Testament interpretation and that of Greco-Roman culture for New Testament interpretation. The significance of biblical backgrounds now granted, it is important to note that most sources of information about these ancient worlds are extrabiblical and therefore not inspired. In contrast, the most significant element of background for any biblical text is the canon of inspired Scripture. For example, the most important component of New Testament background is inspired: the Old Testament.³⁵ Furthermore, the Bible advocates the concept of the full sufficiency of Scripture in 2 Peter 1:3: “His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the full knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and excellence.” Trust in the authority and sufficiency of Scripture demands that the senior partner of “grammatical-historical interpretation” must be “grammatical,” which fixes primary attention upon the biblical text itself.

The utterly non-creative, workmanlike discipline of drawing out meaning from biblical passages may not appeal to the postmodern imagination. Yet the crying need of the mission field is not impressionistic appropriation and exploitation of Scripture, with results that “fit” pet doctrines of the missionary or prevailing socio-cultural settings. In fact, the message of Scripture should not comfortably conform to any cultural status quo. Instead, “The word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Heb 4:12). The divine Word exposes sin and calls for repentance, and just as the

³³ For a recent defense of the pressing need for biblical language knowledge among preachers, see Irvin A. Busenitz, “Lifting the Veil: Original Languages and the Pastor-Theologian,” *TMSJ* 34 (2023): 79–90.

³⁴ Helpful resources for maintaining biblical language knowledge include Accordance and Logos Bible software, reader's editions of the Old and New Testaments, the five volumes of the *Two Minutes a Day* book series by Jonathan G. Kline, and devotionals such as Jacob N. Cerone and Matthew C. Fisher, *Daily Scripture: 365 Readings in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2021). If a means of connecting to the Internet is available on the mission field, missionaries can also access the Daily Dose of Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek websites and subscribe to the associated video streaming channels, which feature new 1–3-minute videos each weekday that walk through Scripture passages in the biblical languages.

³⁵ The dynamic of “scriptural exegesis of Scripture” in which the New Testament interprets the Old carries on patterns of interpretation present within the Old Testament itself. Later Old Testament passages draw upon earlier ones in a harmonious crescendo of special revelation. See Gary Edward Schnittjer, *Old Testament Use of the Old Testament: A Book-by-Book Guide* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2021), xvii and *passim*.

missionary could be God’s chosen instrument to deliver this message, so could the missionary be one of the greatest obstacles to its clear communication, if not properly trained in Scripture. Theological education for missionaries should teach grammatical-historical interpretation to help the missionary extract himself as much as possible from the message God sends him to preach.

Having determined the meaning of the biblical text through self-denying, non-creative means, the missionary should creatively marshal every element of his theological education and his walk with God through life to present the Bible’s message to the people he serves on the mission field. He faces a daunting task: communicating biblical truth in a language of which he is likely a much poorer speaker than his listeners, and within a rhetorical package that his audience must understand despite holding few if any socio-cultural touchpoints in common with the missionary. The Holy Spirit often imparts grace in this difficult process: the grace of heightened focus and effectiveness in using the language of the people in preaching God’s Word, and also hyper-awareness of weaknesses in doing the same. Awareness of one’s weaknesses in preaching prevents the missionary from any claim to mastery of the art of preaching in the language of the people, and assures everyone that any positive spiritual result that comes from mission field preaching is completely due to the action of the Holy Spirit (see 2 Cor 12:9). The Spirit calls specific people to preach specific messages from Scripture to specific audiences in specific circumstances, and it is a humbling and joyful experience for the missionary to be so called.³⁶

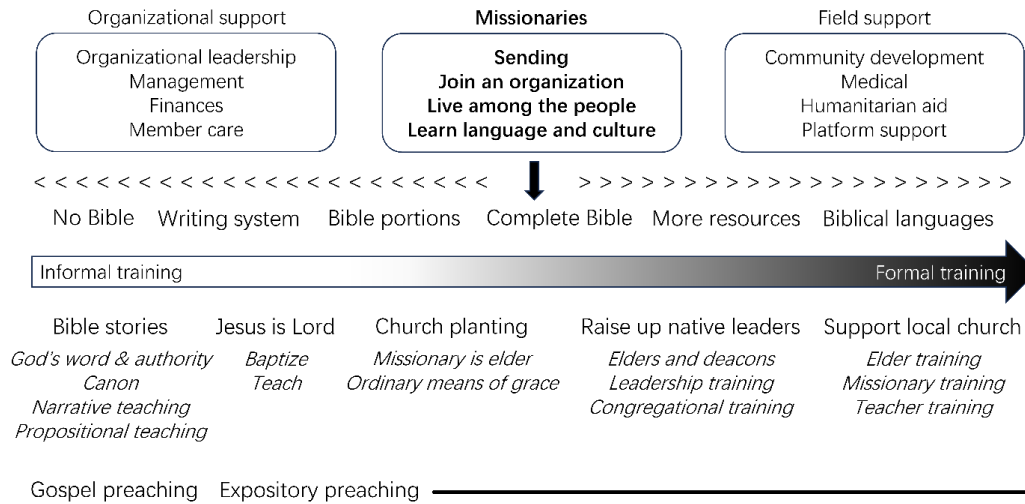
Mission Field Training of Disciples

Teaching “to keep all that I commanded you” is a responsibility of churches throughout the lifetime of disciples, thus theological education stands at the center of missionary obedience to the Great Commission on the mission field. Yet theological education for new disciples on the mission field will necessarily take a different form than the theological education that equipped the cross-cultural disciple making expositor missionary sent to them. Furthermore, the theological training needs of an infant church on the mission field will differ from the needs of a mature, missionary sending church that it will one day become. Established churches on the mission field will stand somewhere on a spectrum of maturity between these two extremes, and their theological training needs will likewise differ. The following discussion addresses how missionaries should provide theological education on the mission field in obedience to the Great Commission. Reference to the figure “World Mission Strategy” below may assist in tracking with this discussion.³⁷

³⁶ Expositor missionaries, like all expositors, should deliver the message God has birthed and grown in his heart through careful study of the Bible. Pragmatic shortcuts like plagiarizing the sermons of others make one a “peddler” of God’s Word (2 Cor 2:17). See David Schrock, *Brothers, We Are Not Plagiarists: A Pastoral Plea to Forsake the Peddling of God’s Word* (Cape Coral, FL: Founders, 2022).

³⁷ The author developed this diagram for the World Mission course held at China Reformed Theological Seminary in Taipei, Taiwan from May 27–31, 2024.

World Mission Strategy



Cross-cultural disciple-making expositor missionaries are the group in the center top of the diagram. These missionaries receive support from missionary organizations they join, as well as from those who keep these organizations running (top left). Missionaries also benefit from the work of field support personnel (top right). Yet throughout this article, the term “missionary” has meant cross-cultural disciple-making expositors who carry out the Great Commission on the mission field.

The solid black down arrow signifies the point at which the missionary enters the culture of the people he serves.³⁸ The arrow can appear anywhere (signified by the chevrons) along a spectrum of engagement characterized by the material on the bottom half of the diagram. The first line in this bottom half has to do with the mission field church’s engagement with the Bible, ranging from none at all (meaning that there is no Bible in the people’s language) to the advanced point when mission field church leaders receive training in the biblical languages. The horizontal gradient arrow depicts the level of formality of theological education that will accompany various developmental stages of the missionary’s work, which appears in the next line of text. These developmental stages track the work of the missionary from telling Bible stories, through planting and leading churches, to performing a mostly supportive role for the host culture church. The text in italics further fleshes out what takes place in each developmental stage. Finally, the bottom line characterizes the missionary’s preaching through the development of the host culture church. For the sake of addressing all church development stages, the following sections place the missionary’s entry point at the far left of the diagram, in pre-literate oral culture with no Scripture in its language.

³⁸ This “entry” is the beginning of the missionary living among the people he serves and learning their language and culture. The whole life dedication of cross-cultural disciple making expositor missionaries stands in stark contrast to that of a “nonresidential missionary” championed in V. David Garrison, *The Nonresidential Missionary* (Monrovia, CA: MARC, 1990), 13–14. This executive consultant-like networking role is neither missionary nor missionary support in the terms of this article.

Informal Theological Education: Storying

Every cross-cultural disciple-making expositor missionary must be a theological educator, including the missionaries who provide informal training to pre-literate oral cultures. They should tell Bible stories that communicate the nature and authority of God and His Word, span the canon, and unfold the grand metanarrative of Scripture from the Bible's own standpoint.³⁹ Naturally, Bible stories as "stories" will take a narrative form. Narrative is a powerful means of communication in any culture, and narrative carries particular potency in oral cultures.⁴⁰ Yet the Bible also contains propositional truth embedded within narrative, such as God's moral law summarized in the Ten Commandments. After narrating the engraving of the Ten Commandments by the finger of God in Exodus 31:18 and before an account of the dramatic shattering of the tablets at the foot of Mount Sinai in Exodus 32:19, missionaries should teach the Ten Commandments themselves.

Whenever a missionary tells Bible stories in pioneer church planting work, from time to time, in a culturally appropriate way, the missionary should take care to refer to the written text of the Bible as the source of the stories. The reasons for this reference include the fact that the stories themselves are extracts from Scripture and not Scripture themselves. A further reason for pointing to written Scripture is to stoke yearning for Scripture in the local language. The missionary takes the first steps toward realizing this dream of local language Scripture by creating a writing system. The writing system should use an alphabet rather than ideograms, and unless there is an overriding cultural reason to choose Arabic, Cyrillic, or an Indic script like Devangari, the writing system should employ the Latin alphabet, at least as a starting point. The choice of the Latin alphabet is aspirational, for it is a gateway to the world church's lingua franca: English. The missionary may dream toward the day when, in the sovereignty of God, the descendants of the people he is serving might travel to his own homeland to evangelize his descendants.

Missionary preaching from the beginning of cultural engagement should follow the apostolic evangelistic preaching pattern in Acts of urging repentance from sin, belief in Jesus as Savior and Lord, obeying Jesus, and baptism.⁴¹ When the Spirit grants repentance and regeneration, people respond in faith and receive immersion into "the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit" (Matt 28:19). Discipleship has begun! Gospel proclamation through exposition of "the whole purpose of God" (Acts 20:27) should then be the norm for missionary preaching.

Somewhat Formal Theological Education: Scripture

As the Holy Spirit enables the harvest of new believers on the mission field, the missionary should establish a church to gather them in Christian community. Under

³⁹ Jackson Wu, "Biblical Theology for Oral Cultures in World Mission," in *World Mission: Theology, Strategy, and Current Issues*, edited by Scott N. Callaham and Will Brooks (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2019), 269–89.

⁴⁰ Walter J. Ong and John Hartley, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, 30th Anniversary Edition (New York: Routledge, 2002), 136–52.

⁴¹ Chad Vegas and Alex Kocman, *Missions by the Book: How Theology and Missions Walk Together* (Cape Coral, FL: Founders, 2021), 153–54.

the missionary's shepherding as elder, the church should develop its spirituality around God's gift to the church of the ordinary means of grace. The Word of God takes deep root in the hearts of people when they take it in regularly together, celebrate baptism and the Lord's Supper together, pray together, sing praise to the Lord together, and practice church discipline together. In the atmosphere of participation in these ordinary means of grace, translating the Word of God accurately into the local language takes on special urgency. As Scripture portions pass reviews of accuracy and proper use of the local language, they can become the focal point of more formalized theological education. Just as Scripture was the focal point for the theological education of the missionary, so it must be also on the mission field. Providing that the missionary's Bible storying laid a foundation of love for the Old Testament that informs the new church's reading of the New Testament, the missionary may decide to translate the New Testament first. The day that the new church can hold in their hands a New Testament in their own language, that they helped to translate, is truly a day to celebrate. Translating the New Testament must remain an intermediate goal, however, because the new church needs the remaining three-quarters of the Word of God in the Old Testament.

In concert with working on Bible translation, the missionary should raise up native leaders for the new church. Like the missionary himself, they must meet biblical qualifications: a process that takes time.⁴² The missionary should grow the disciples in the church to the degree of maturity in the Word of God that there is an abundance of men who are elder qualified, such that choosing among them who should be elders and who should be deacons becomes difficult. With the help of new elders, the missionary should train leaders for Bible study groups and provide congregational training on Scripture driven evangelism. These kinds of training should seem familiar to the congregation, for they see others around them putting this training to use.

Returning to the selection of new elders, these elders must preach. The missionary has already been demonstrating expository preaching throughout the process of the growth of the church, so providing training on text-driven preaching is a logical next step. The missionary must provide as many exegetical resources as possible in the local language, always remembering that Scripture handled rightly (2 Tim 2:15) is the best resource for expository preaching. This training continues until the church and the missionary discern that native elders are ready to assume leadership of the church.

Formal Theological Education: Seminary

Truly treating Christians on the mission field as brothers and sisters in Christ entails utter rejection of paternalistic thinking. Put positively, missionaries should

⁴² "People movements" mission philosophies radically contradict Scripture on this point. The popular training model T4T employed in the Church Planting Movements methodology wrenches apart the elder qualifications passages, asserting that the Titus 1 elder qualifications do not require screening out new converts from consideration as in 1 Timothy 3:6. This line of thinking claims that Titus 1 provides teaching on elder qualifications for new churches, and 1 Timothy 3 contains teaching on elder qualifications for more mature churches. See Steve Smith and Ying Kai, *T4T: A Discipleship ReRevolution* (Monument, CO: WIGTake Resources, 2011), 265–76.

invest in local believers in order to maximize the glorification of God in their lives. This process of glorifying God is truly a work not of finite human ability but of the infinite power of the Holy Spirit. After all, as Scripture teaches, it pleased God to transform a great enemy of Christ and the church (Saul of Tarsus) into an apostle to the Gentiles. Missionaries should pray incessantly for those whom they serve, mourning those who fall away and celebrating those whose potential to serve God and bring Him glory may well eclipse that of the missionary himself (see Phil 2:3).

All this is to say that the greatest need of an established church on the mission field is to add spiritual depth through formal theological education.⁴³ Formal theological education on the mission field should resemble the equipping that produced the cross-cultural disciple-making expository missionaries who brought the Gospel to the field, planted churches, and passed on church leadership to local elders. This is because mature churches on the mission field must now raise up their own elders, missionaries, teachers, and other believers as Christianity sends down deep roots into the local cultural setting. These mature churches have grasped the baton passed from “so great a cloud of witnesses” (Heb 12:1) that came before them, and they must take full responsibility for obeying the Great Commission.

The chief characteristic of formal theological education on the mission field must be unshakable trust in the authority and sufficiency of Scripture. Furthermore, formal theological education on the mission field must also be confessional, with adherence to primary and secondary doctrines of the Christian faith firmly grounded upon Scripture. Bible saturated theological education will imbue grammatical-historical interpretation in students, such that they will spot the twisting of Scripture in evangelical feminism, critical social justice, the Charismatic movement, the New Apostolic Reformation, Word of Faith teachings, deliverance ministries, and the myriad forms of mysticism such as the Spiritual Formation movement.⁴⁴

Missionaries should throw open the doors of knowledge of Scripture all the way to the pinnacle of theological education: training in the biblical languages. The purpose of this training is to shift church leaders’ practice of grammatical-historical interpretation from their translated Bible to the inspired text in the original languages. The limited number of exegetical resources available in non-European languages mandates a “barefoot” model of biblical language training.⁴⁵ In this “barefoot” model, church leaders develop the ability to read and interpret the original language text with reference to their biblical language training materials and their translated Bible. The intimacy with the Word of God that comes from interpreting it through the biblical languages then drives the mission field church to further Great Commission obedience. Following the pattern of churches who brought the Gospel

⁴³ The phrase “all the nations” in Matthew 28:19 vividly pictures the breadth of Gospel advance, and “teaching them to keep all that I commanded you” describes the depth of Gospel advance in the Great Commission. This insight derives from a Chinese student whose name the author must withhold for security reasons.

⁴⁴ Jesus modeled dependence on God and His Word over against Satanic trampling upon the Word in Matthew 4:1–11, Mark 1:12–13, and Luke 4:1–13.

⁴⁵ An illustration of the paucity of exegetical resources in non-European languages is the case of Chinese. More than a century following the publication of the classic Chinese Union Version Bible translation, as of the writing of this article there is still no Biblical Hebrew lexicon available other than those based on Strong’s Numbers, an inherently unreliable system for exegesis.

to them, the mission field church sends its best leaders to join the worldwide force of cross-cultural disciple-making expository missionaries, joyfully being Jesus's witnesses "to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

Conclusion

Since the impartation of the Holy Spirit of God to all the people of God at Pentecost, the redeemed of all nations have shared God's own empowerment to carry out their mission, the Great Commission. As the church obeys the Great Commission, according to Jesus, the gates of Hades will not overpower it (Matt 16:18). This article has laid out a proposal for theological education in mission, inviting the church to commit wholeheartedly to teach all nations to keep all the commands of Jesus "even to the end of the age."