

Is Training Nationals Really Missions?

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As a missionary whose primary ministry is not church planting, we have often confronted spoken or unspoken disapproval. We have been exposed to churches and individuals that think that anything that is not directly related to church planting is not really missions. So, in this session we seek to tackle that question: Can we consider training nationals a missionary endeavor?

Baptist Fundamental Missiology

Because of our Baptist emphasis on the local church, we have emphasized the concept of church planting in our missiology. Most of our missions' dollars go to support church-planting missionaries. It is proper that church planting should be the primary focus of our missional efforts because the local church is the locus of God's activity today.

However, this emphasis has created a culture where many pastors categorically reject theological training as missions. Their logic goes something like this: "All we see in Scripture is church planting. I don't see Bible Colleges in the Bible. Therefore, I will only support missionaries who are involved in church planting. If they want to train nationals, it should be done within the context of the local church or through a Bible Institute that is based in the local church." In this way they delegate theological training of nationals to second-class missions and practically categorize it as unbiblical. This same mentality can be seen in many mission boards.

The Double-Standard

To me there seems to be a double standard. Many pastors would not consider supporting missionaries whose primary ministry is education because they only support church planting. At the same time, they have a Bible college diploma hanging on the wall behind them. When analyzing the ministries of these same pastors, you will not find any signs of a Bible Institute in their ministry where they are earnestly preparing men for ministry. Theological training outside of the local church is acceptable for themselves and for their churches (in the United States) but is unacceptable on the mission field.

When it comes to mission boards, those mission boards that repeat the "CPM Only" mantra are also guilty of a double-standard. Some mission boards only send out missionaries that are involved in church planting. One mission board director told me, "We only do church planting," as if in some way ministerial training institutions were unbiblical. While dismissing national training as unbiblical, what biblical basis can you find for the missionary agencies?

At times this same sort of double-standard can be seen in the philosophy held by some mission boards which only send out missionaries that are involved in church planting. One mission board director told, "We only do church planting," as if in some way ministerial training institutions were unbiblical. Yet one must ask, "Where does the mission agency appear in the Bible?" The attitude often communicated is that Bible colleges on the mission field are unbiblical while mission boards are biblical.

The reality is that in modern-day United States, Bible Colleges are simply the best practical means for training men for ministry. In many ways this is a reflection of our changing culture. For many centuries, men were taught the necessary skills for their jobs in what were called apprenticeships. Young men were contractually bound to a craftsman and learned their trade from him. In our modern culture, most people learn their trade (even for jobs that require manual skills—like carpentry or welding) in a university or technical college setting. The formal academic setting allows professors to train students to

a higher degree of proficiency in specialized areas. An expert chemist can help his students achieve greater skill in chemistry than the local Wal-Mart pharmacist, even though the pharmacist may have the “hands-on experience.” Ultimately, who do you want training your pharmacist? The specialist or the general practitioner? In the same way a professor can more adequately prepare men in certain specialized ministry fields than your average local church pastor, just as the local church pastor can more adequately prepare men for certain aspects of practical ministry.

Something similar can be said about mission boards. In the Bible, the local church is the only sending agency to be found. However, mission boards meet many practical needs aiding the missionary and the local church. For example, many churches are unprepared to handle the administrative duties involved in sending out missionaries in today’s world (with international health insurance, VISAS, the IRS, establishing support levels, etc.). Mission boards are often the best practical means for carrying out missions in our culture. In the same way, ministerial training institutions are often the best way today to prepare men for ministry (at least in the technical or specialized areas of ministry).

Does extra-biblical equal unbiblical?

We have already mentioned that as Baptists, we pride ourselves on holding closely to Scripture. We affirm that Scripture is our only rule of faith and practice. That everything we do has a biblical basis. Many of our arguments against infant baptism and denominational hierarchies are based upon an idea that because these things are extra-biblical they must be unbiblical. We claim that we have a Scriptural basis for all that we do. Yet we must recognize that there is some room for practical and cultural adaptations of Christianity. If we analyze our own practice of Christianity, we will see many cultural adaptations that are extra-biblical: church choir, taking up offerings during the services, Sunday school, camps, bus ministry, Christian schools. The list could go on. We commonly accept these extra-biblical practices and few people would call these ministries unbiblical or refuse to support these activities. They are simply the best practical means of carrying out what we understand Scriptures calling us to do. The extra-biblical is not necessarily unbiblical.

Is theological training really Scriptural?

Some segments of Christianity dismiss ministerial and theological training as heady, dangerous and harmful. Other churches dismiss “irrelevant doctrine” in favor of “truly significant” self-help psychology. This doctrinal vacuum has robbed the modern day church of its spiritual vitality and distinctives. In Scripture we find a great emphasis on doctrine and on training men for ministry. Paul, Peter, John, and Jude all express concern for the accurate transmission of the doctrinal content of the Faith. A small sample could include: 1 Tim. 1:18; 4:6; 2 Tim. 1:14; 2:2, 13-4; 3:14; Titus 1:5, 9; 2 Pet. 3:1-3; Jude 3, 5, 20. The question is how can we most effectively transmit the doctrines of the Faith to future generations? What is the best model? Does Scripture have a particular model for us to follow?

Does Scripture dictate a model for ministerial training?

The best way to answer this question is to analyze the instances in Scripture where we see preparation for ministry. These can be found primarily in three different places: the sons of the prophets, Christ and the disciples, and Paul’s ministry in Ephesus.

1. The prophets taught young men the ministry of prophecy.
 - a. The sons of the prophets were bands of prophets that ministered under a master prophet.¹

¹John W. Hilber, “Diversity of OT Prophetic Phenomena and NT Prophecy” in *Westminster Theological Journal*, 56:2 (Fall 1994): 243-258.

- b. The master prophet trained these young men for prophetic ministry.²
 - c. While we don't know when these originated, these bands of prophets date back at least to the time of Samuel (when Saul was said to belong to "the prophets" on several occasions—1 Sam. 10:11-12; 19:24).
 - d. The ministry of Elisha provides us with more information about the sons of the prophets. Their dependence on Elisha's leadership is evidenced by a "son's" widow asking him for help (2 Kings 4) and the whole band looking for him to provide food (2 Kings 4) and lodging (2 Kings 6).
 - e. In this model, the sons of the prophets seem to be stationary. The prophet travels as his ministry requires, while returning to the "campus" where the "sons" (*i.e.* students) are located. (2 Kings 2:3, 5; 4:38; 5:22; 6:1)
2. Christ taught the disciples for several years, providing them with intensive ministry training.
 - a. While this might not be like the type of training that is received at Bible College, it was intensive, serious training. It definitely went far beyond the "couple hours a week" approach common in many Bible Institutes.
 - b. A.B. Bruce, in his classic book *The Training of the Twelve*, states: "Both from His words and from His actions we can see that He attached supreme importance to that part of His work which consisted in training the twelve. In the intercessory prayer, He speaks of the training He had given these men as if it had been the principal part of His own earthly ministry. And, such, in one sense it really was."³
 - c. In this model the Teacher and His disciples travel around, mixing practical and theological training as the situation allowed it.
 3. Paul taught at the school of Tyrannus (Acts 19:9-10)
 - a. Church tradition states that Paul taught for 5 hours a day (11am to 4pm), during the mid-day break caused by the heat.
 - b. While we don't know what exactly he taught, he was teaching the disciples and specifically preparing them for ministry. We know this because Ephesus became a major center of church planting activity (v. 10). Some have suggested that the churches of Revelation 2 and 3 and Colossae and Hierapolis were founded at this time.⁴
 - c. In this model, the teacher was stationary (for a period of several years), while qualified students were sent out from Ephesus to minister in the surrounding areas.

Conclusion: Scripture highlights the importance of intensive ministry training, but we can find varying approaches. Scripture does not seem to dictate one particular model to follow. This suggests that some cultural adaptations were acceptable and necessary in NT times and should also in modern Christianity, including the formation of Bible Colleges in the United States and abroad.

Are theological schools really necessary on the foreign field?

Quality theological training is greatly needed, both in the United States and in foreign countries. Even as the spiritual health of the American church depends upon it, so the spiritual condition of other countries hinges upon the doctrinal foundation that is laid by men in ministry. The absence of this foundation will ultimately undermine the effectiveness of foreign churches. Theological schools are necessary because:

²Leon J. Wood, *A Survey of Israel's History*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 276.

³A.B. Bruce, *Training of the Twelve* (Grand Rapids: Kregel 197), 13.

⁴John MacArthur, *Acts 13-28* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1996), 174.

1. They allow quality theological education to take place.

While many missionaries desire to train national men for ministry, rarely can missionaries who are not focused on ministry preparation carry out *quality* preparation. This is true because of many factors:

- a. A lack of time due to the many demands of the ministry.
- b. A lack of the teaching gifts and theological orientation (in the missionary)
- c. A lack of the theological training in the missionary's preparation

In spite of their best efforts, many missionaries (who only have college training themselves) produce national pastors that are less prepared theologically than the missionary. When the missionary retires, he leaves the unprepared national in charge of the Bible Institutes, and further lowers the level of theological preparation. Instead of becoming the training grounds for well-prepared ministers, these Bible Institutes engage in a downward spiral that perpetuates the theological immaturity and the personal eccentricities of zealous but inadequately trained men.

2. They avoid the missionary "Superman" syndrome.

Missionaries face many difficult and time consuming tasks. Church planting in a foreign country requires monumental efforts. Time and energy must be expended to disciple new converts (who many times live in cultures that have no concept of what it is to "be a Christian"). Cultural and linguistic challenges sap additional time and energy from the missionary. Many missionaries are forced to personally carry out many aspects of the ministry which their American counterparts would never do (in addition to the more "normal" pastoral duties, missionaries often have to do maintenance, pick up and drop off church members, help elderly people in the church who are neglected by their children, etc.). In addition to all of this, the CPM Only-ism of American pastors and mission boards exerts pressure on them to train nationals while refusing to support the mechanisms that can do this most effectively. The devastating results are several:

- a. The missionary cannot do well any facet of the ministry because he is doing too many things.
- b. The training he does impart is usually less than top-notch. The nationals that go into the pastorate are poorly equipped to handle the practical realities of the ministry or the doctrinal landmines laid by Satan (charismaticism, neo-evangelicalism, etc.)
- c. The overly-busy missionary neglects his family, leading to disqualification from ministry because of marital or parenting problems.

3. They avoid the pitfalls of bringing nationals to the United States.

Many groups and schools have sought to solve this dilemma by bringing nationals to study in Bible Colleges in the United States. While this worked for some, for many it did not work.

- a. Nationals arrived in the United States with every intention of returning but are allured by American comfort and prosperity.
- b. The training received in the US prepares them to minister in an American ministry paradigm that is very different from the ministry paradigm in their country (like full-time pastorates).
- c. Nationals return to their countries with an American mindset that negates many of the benefits of having nationals minister in their own culture (including the fact that other nationals can simply dismiss what they teach as "American").

An interesting footnote on this subject is that the only reason that nationals are sent to the United States is because we haven't invested the time and resources to help them develop quality education in their own countries.

4. They allow for replacements for retiring missionaries and diminishing American missional efforts.

While on deputation, I grew weary of hearing speakers attempt to motivate believers to go to the mission field by citing statistics something like these: "After WWII, 50,000 American

missionaries went to the mission field. Currently only about 7,000 missionaries are on deputation. With the older missionaries now retiring, who is going to replace them?” While it is sad that American missional efforts are declining, this type of emotional manipulation (I mean, appeal) fails to comprehend the goals of missiology. No one should have to replace these older missionaries. They should have replaced themselves by training nationals to carry on the work.

In summary, theological training is essential for the theological maturity, numerical growth, and eventual perpetuation of national churches. As American churches, we cannot be so short-sighted as to miss the value of theological training on the mission field when theological training institutions have been so important for America.

*Born in Spain to missionary parents, **Matthew** spent most of his growing up years on the mission field. While attending college in the United States, Matthew developed a burden for training nationals at a high theological and practical level. In 2002, Matthew and Susan moved to Monterrey, Mexico, to minister at the Christian University of the Americas, where Matthew serves as executive vice-president and the chair of the theology department. Matthew and Susan and their three children are also involved in planting a church in Santa Mónica, a neighborhood on the outskirts of Monterrey.*