

When Bible Training Falls Flat

By GREG H. PARSONS

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I'm returning from two conferences, 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. The issue came up at the other gathering as well. Each meeting had a large group of participants attending from Africa and Asia, who recognize this has been a problem for years.

It seems like we could have "solved" the training issue many years ago. Compared to doing Bible translation or even church-planting, it seems much more doable. So many materials have been produced and translated—though less has been locally contextualized. And a *lot* of people focus on training! I've seen *many* cross-cultural global workers get involved in training of some kind later in their ministry, not to mention many pastors.

It causes me to ask: Why are there still problems with believers, including leaders and pastors, not knowing the Bible? Perhaps you have some thoughts? I'll mention how to comment below.

Here are my thoughts:

- **Materials** are usually produced *outside* the culture where the training is happening. While mobilizing seminary students in the West, I have pleaded with them *not* to merely teach from their seminary class notes. If a global, cross-cultural mission worker does not learn language and culture, I have little hope they will communicate well. Teaching on any subject, be it the Bible, or leadership, or... needs to be shaped for the context. But you won't know how to do that if you don't understand the language and culture.

- **Methods** are ineffective. This is true in *most* school classrooms in the U.S., not to mention all who copy us. We all went to school and learned in a classroom with a bunch of others, but that doesn't mean that is a good way to do it. It is handy and efficient to teach a bunch of

people all at once, but it assumes that the students are at the same level. And, the *actual design* of a curriculum is *not* something most teachers know how to do well.

These cultural sensitivities, along with global generational issues, make it even more challenging. People everywhere are reading less and less. Even then, once ideas are taught, there is little opportunity to apply them to real life. We all know if we don't apply something, we don't really learn it well.

Just yesterday, I spoke with a mission worker who is back from international service for seminary training. He is sharp, gifted at learning languages and really frustrated at the approach to how things are taught at the well-known seminary he is attending. He doesn't disagree with the theological approach but said he would redesign the whole program. Now, he reflected, it ends up training the students to teach in a seminary. That is what they see. They don't see a pastor or church planter.

One serious study looked at the effectiveness of Bible schools in East Africa. U.S. workers who had served in well-known theological colleges there wondered what the impact of their work was. They had hints that things were not what we would all hope. While the study is a bit old (1994), I haven't seen anything that shows things have changed that much.

Below is a summary. You can read the details of this study and post your comments on the Ralph D. Winter Research Center website at: rdwrc.wciu.edu (look under Current Missiology for the title of this article).

Summary of Study

The East Africa study surveyed 643 students at 11 Bible colleges (four were not four-year Bible colleges) about what was happening in their home churches. Most were residential programs, 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, *except at one school*.

At that school, they ran modular two-week classes. When they returned to their local, on-going ministry, their teachers would travel out to them and coach them in their ministry. These pastors were leading and creative. They were learning new things about the Word and thus preaching fresh sermons. They were encouraging people in ministry and helping start new ways for their churches to reach out.

Recently, I've found additional hope in the Tools to Equip and Empower (TEE) movement. I was asked to review the book *TEE in Asia: Empowering Churches*,

Equipping Disciples (Langham Publishing, 2021.) Since I studied the beginning of the TEE movement as part of my thesis on Ralph D. Winter's life, I was very encouraged by what is happening now with TEE. At the October conferences, I met some of those who are involved and I am encouraged with what I see in this extensive network.

I hope and pray we will be willing to examine all of our models for preparation and training—no matter the location or cultural context. We can and must do better. 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.



You can find additional materials just posted on this subject at the newly launched Ralph D. Winter Research Center website, at: rdwrc.wciu.edu. ☒

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