

What's Wrong with 4,000 Pastoral Training Schools Worldwide?

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There are three drastic drawbacks pervasively embodied in pastoral training both at home and abroad. These are so serious that it is sad yet fair to say that the seminaries and Bible schools of the world are actually a surprisingly weak and often negative contributor to the growth of Christianity around the world.

Even though these schools may have excellent, well-prepared faculty and entirely valid intentions, usually they have most or all of three deficiencies.

1. Wrong Students. The most severe problem is the simple fact that 90% of the students in pastoral training are not the seasoned, mature believers defined by the New Testament as candidates for pastoral leadership. Both in U. S. seminaries and in some four or five thousand overseas Bible Schools, Bible Institutes, Theological Colleges, etc. the vast majority of the students will never be effective pastors, no matter what or how or where they are taught, simply because they may lack pastoral gifts, and at their age and level of maturity there is no way to predict that they will ever gain the essential gifts and maturity.

On the other hand, those church movements that are growing effectively depend primarily on the dynamics of the local church (not school admissions offices) to select leaders. Then, they expect the inductive process of local church life to train these leaders, as well as through whatever resources may be accessible to these home-grown leaders in the form of books, radio or quite often apprenticeship. They do not avoid or despise the schools. Their local leaders simply do not have access to the riches the schools possess. They have jobs outside the church as well as carry church responsibilities.

Can the schools make their riches available to pastoral leaders on the job? Yes and no. Theoretically yes, but they

don't know how, and they tend to feel it difficult to transcend the culturally-defined niche they are in. The global movement called Theological Education by Extension is by now well known. In India it has taken hold effectively in the form of a program encompassing 6,000 students called The Association For Theological Education by Extension (TAFTEE). But this program was not launched by any existing school, and its graduates are not routinely incorporated into existing denominations. The latter polite rejection becomes understandable only when you recognize that a large proportion of those studying under TAFTEE are people coming out of midlife, doctors, engineers, university graduates. Existing pastors who control the ordination process are mostly the output of traditional Bible Institutes or Seminaries, and may actually fear the competition of this non-traditional source of leadership. The typical TAFTEE grad-

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uate compared to the typical seminary or institute graduate is not only more mature but has more extensive secular education. This latter factor leads to the second aspect of this problem.

2. Wrong Curriculum. When Bible institutes first got started in America, judging by the pattern portrayed by Moody Bible Institute, founded roughly 100 years ago, the idea was to offer the study of the Bible to adults whose previous education, even as far back as 1900 had already been significantly secularized. The idea of supplementing the public

school curricula with Bible studies was a good one.

However, when the night school for adults, who already had some public school, began to be replaced by a daytime Bible school curriculum devoid of any other subject, a reverse censorship took place. Students exposed to nothing but the Bible, whether in Sunday School or Bible Institute, could never discover the profound impact of the Bible during the many centuries following it. If they did do any serious study in public schools or colleges concerning the "rise of Western civilization" or the history of the United States, those courses skillfully omitted the role of the Christian church unless negative. No corrective view existed in schools just teaching the Bible.

Today, the average missionary to, say, India, is very poorly prepared to answer the questioning of honest intellectuals who have heard that Christianity was a drag on scholarship, science and enlightenment, and has all along been an intolerant and oppressive force, launching both the "Crusades" and the Inquisition against Jews, Muslims and even other Christians. Why? Because the missionary's secularized education told him the same thing. To answer with an outline of Romans is not enough.

The right answer? Christian efforts to educate their young people, whether in Christian schools or home school programs, must be able to reintegrate the secular perspective about everything with a Christian perspective about all those same issues, specifically. This cannot be done in 30 minutes in Sunday School after 30 hours in the previous week of secular schooling, and on a totally different subject.

A student that comes home from school with the idea that William Jennings Bryan flunked the Monkey Trial needs to know that he actually won the case. To

learn on Sunday that David slew Goliath will do him no good on that point.

The student who hears that the Salem Witch Trial “shows what happens when religious people get control of the community” (as one textbook puts it) needs to know that Princeton University Press fairly recently came out with a restudy (Witchcraft at Salem) of the Salem event which showed that precisely the clergymen in Salem, who studied both theology and science at Yale, were the ones that insisted on a strict, scientific court trial which ended the hysteria that had been promoted by the businessmen in town. In that case, for that student to go to church and learn how Samuel chose David will do nothing to erase the Salem slur.

God has given us two “books”: 1) the Bible, which is a Book of Revelation, and 2) nature, which is His Book of Creation. He does not want us to slight either one. Yet the sad situation is that, in general, one major human tradition (the scientific community) is studying the second and despising the first, and another human tradition (the church community) is studying the first and ignoring the second. Yet, both are essential in understanding God and His will. The Bible itself affirms the second, “The heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament displays His handiwork (and) there is no speech or language where their voice is not heard (Ps 19:1).” Also, see Romans 1.

Thus, we run counter to the Book of Revelation itself if we do not rejoice in, and discern the glory of God in, His Book of Creation. We cannot fully declare the glory of God if we do not embrace science as a vast domain in which we can both see God’s glory and advance His Kingdom.

Some have suggested that there is both an evangelistic mandate and a cultural mandate. I see this as an artificial dichotomy. Being human we are likely to conceive of the redemption of *homo sapiens* as the primary concern of God. But the creation of *homo sapiens* is specifically the most recent divine strategy to hasten the advance of the Kingdom of God. Man was created to be responsible for all other created beings. His fall made him part of the problem. He passed from soldier to survivor. He was now no longer a chief means of the solution and he was

by no means a trustworthy custodian of life forms. Man was meant to be an ally in the redemption of Creation, not merely in his own redemption, although that is essential for his restoration as a worker in the Kingdom, or as a warrior on God’s side in the destruction of the works of the devil.

Fifteen of every seventeen Evangelical students is totally untouched by any Christian grade school, high school or college. At the very moment they study materials that have been secularized, whether American history or sociology or psychology or whatever, that is the time they need additional materials to round out and

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perhaps correct the picture. Furthermore, they cannot effectively study issues in secular books and only later find out the true picture. If this is the plight of those in the pew, it is all the more true of those who are diverted into alternative Bible Schools.

However, it is one thing to value both the Bible and the Book of Creation, and thereby to be able to present the full spectrum of the task of advancing the Kingdom of God through the schooling process. There is still something else.

3. Wrong Packaging. We live in a world which speaks specific languages and channels life in specific cultural patterns. It is a missionary principle to speak the language of the native. In this respect the entire Bible Institute movement falls desperately short. It may well be that most of the older Bible Institutes in the USA have converted over to a college tradition. But that has not yet more than begun to happen overseas.

In Bolivia a young man approached me and explained that after he had completed three years of public schooling a nearby Bible Institute had “stolen” three years of his life. After attending there three more years he did not emerge with a sixth grade diploma recognizable by the government. Now he was unable even to get a job in a car repair shop.

In a Southeast Asian country recently a faculty member of a Bible college shared with me the tragic fact that after graduating from this Bible college students were unable to enroll in the national university. The units and degree structure did not conform to the pattern of society.

Once it is understood that we have to present both the Book of Revelation, and the Book of Creation, we still need to offer that education in recognizable packages. Recognizable to whom? To the world, of course. It is a desperate mistake to suppose that a parallel but equal system is the answer.

The most extensive major cultural tradition ever developed in history is the university pattern. If Christianity has won astonishingly wide expansion into the world’s cultures, the university has even more greatly succeeded. The thousands of college graduate missionaries of the famed Student Volunteer Movement often thought that universities were part and parcel of the Kingdom of God, and did not always understand the strategy of what we call church planting. Their universities were often so successful that they attracted a mountain of non-Christians and the schools themselves eventually lost their faith, just as happened about the same time in the USA. That is something surely to be feared and guarded against. But is the answer to set up a separate system and offer non-standard credits and non-descript degrees which are not recognized in the larger society? Joel Carpenter’s recent study, “The New Universities,” demonstrates that if the missionaries are not going to establish university institutions national believers will. When I left Guatemala in 1966 the first Evangelical university in Latin America in many a year had just been established. Now it has fifteen thousand students. I was on the founding board, although I did not understand its significance. Now there are thirteen “new” Evangelical universities. In the same category Carpenter’s study finds 41 “new universities” worldwide.

But, if these schools rush to unmodified secular curricula, if these schools are not regarded as the right foundation for both lay people and ministers of the Gospel, we will simply see the perpetuation of a secular versus religious polarization. 🌐