

Missiological Education in the Bible College Tradition

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In his *Concise History of the Christian World Mission*, the late Dr. J. Herbert Kane listed the Bible Institute Movement, the Faith Mission Movement, and the Student Volunteer Movement, as three important movements destined to have a significant bearing on the course of Christian missions in this century (Kane 1978, 101).

Although in time all three came to be predominantly North American phenomena, their impact was global. Each originated in the late nineteenth century but did not come to full fruition until the early twentieth century. Whereas by mid-century the Student Volunteer Movement, gaining momentum, had evolved into the Bible College Movement.

The relationship between this movement and the Faith Mission Movement, of which the China Inland Mission, founded by J. Hudson Taylor, was the prototype, became increasingly intertwined (Frizen 1992, 30-32). Significant numbers of missionaries serving under these agencies were trained in Bible institutes and Bible colleges.

For instance, between 1890 and 1976, over 5,400 alumni of Moody Bible Institute had served as missionaries under 245 mission agencies in 108 nations throughout the world. More than 2,000 of those were engaged in active missionary service at the time of the 1976 study. By the fall of 1992, a total of 6,455 alumni had served under more than 250 agencies in a total of 146 nations. Of these, 3,147 currently serve as missionaries.

While it is true that, historically, most of the missionaries active in the Faith Mission Movement have been trained in Bible institutes and Bible colleges, it is also true that many denominations, both large and small, have relied to varying degrees upon graduates of these institutions to fill the ranks of their missionary forces.

This chapter will focus on North American institutions. This is not to deny or downplay the contribution to missiological education of the Bible schools of continental Europe and the British Isles, many of which predate the North American schools. Though neither as numerous nor as large as their North American counterparts, several of them have played a major role in the preparation of missionaries. The author also recognizes the existence of many evangelical training schools in Asia, Africa, and Latin America that are involved in missiological education. Often, the older, more established schools among them reflect the models and patterns of the schools in Europe and North America from which their founders graduated. However, with the explosion of cross cultural missionary activity in the two-thirds world, new models of training are merging which draw from, yet move beyond, the patterns inherited from the Bible College Movement (Taylor 1991).

The purpose of this chapter is to explore the role of the North American Bible college tradition in missiological education. Today, the Bible College Movement is no longer limited to undergraduate instruction. Increasingly, it includes both graduate-level

training programs and, in some cases, graduate schools, which have grown out of the Bible college tradition and partake of its evangelistic, devotional, disciplined ethos, among others distinguishing features.

DEFINITIONS AND CHARACTERISTICS

In the North American context, a Bible college is a specialized, professional school at the undergraduate level that seeks to prepare students for ministry-related vocations through biblical, professional, and general studies. In addition, most Bible colleges stress both the cultivation of the spiritual life and hands-on Christian ministry assignments.

Bible colleges can be seen as comparable to theological seminaries, except that seminaries operate on the graduate level. Both Bible colleges and seminaries are single purpose institutions with a heavy concentration in biblical/theological studies. The relationship between these training institutions has tended to be complementary rather than competitive (Brereton 1990, 65). Schools in the Bible college tradition have sought to train what Dwight L. Moody called “gap men,” persons who could carry out ministries requiring training beyond what local congregations could offer but not requiring seminary education. Historically, Bible colleges have offered a wider range of vocational training programs than most seminaries, which until very recently have tended to focus on training for the pastorate (Kallgren 1988, 32). Bible colleges and the Bible institutes which preceded them have emphasized the need for home and foreign missions, evangelism, and Bible teaching, as well as pastoral work in neglected congregations.

Like Christian liberal arts colleges, Bible colleges are undergraduate institutions. However, according to Allison (1984, 3), they can be contrasted with Christian liberal arts colleges in at least three areas: first, Bible college objectives center primarily on vocational Christian service; second, Bible college curriculum insists on a required Bible/theology core for every student and the Scripture as the integrative element in the curriculum; and third, Bible college vocational preparation requires all students to be active in some form of Christian service during their studies.

Although institutions related to the Bible college movement have evolved over the years, and although they serve a variety of sponsoring groups with diverse purposes, two clearly identifiable distinctions continue to be worthy of mention: accessibility and brevity. First, the schools which make up this movement sought to be accessible both in terms of the students they accepted and the delivery systems they employed. They aimed to train all whom God was leading into active Christian service regardless of educational level, chronological age, gender, and life circumstances.

Although most schools in this tradition now require a secondary education for admission, this was not always true. Originally, those who enrolled

were of disparate educational backgrounds and the school leaders recognized this by providing a variety of routes for those with college, high school, or only grammar school educations. Training school graduation might mean earning a certificate, a diploma, or later on a degree... No onus attached itself to those who dropped in and out (Brereton 1990, 64).

Chronologically, students in this tradition tended to be older than those entering more traditional colleges or universities. Often students were mature persons responding to the call to Christian in later life.

Accessibility extended to women. Contrary to the practice of most seminaries, which did not admit women, the Bible college tradition opened the door of ministry training to women, usually on equal terms with men. Unlike most seminaries of the time, women were involved in teaching and other leadership positions. At one time Johnson Bible College had a women president and at least one school, Columbia Bible College, was founded entirely by women.

Furthermore, in their attempt to make training accessible to as many as possible, regardless of life circumstances, schools in the Bible college tradition provided alternative educational delivery systems: evening courses, extension programs, correspondence schools, publications enterprises, and in some cases, even radio stations. Sometimes these alternate delivery systems developed in the direction of traditional residential education. For instance, many Bible colleges began in churches as evening Bible classes of laypersons. Often they met for an hour or two for a fifteen-week term.

As courses were added and the offerings were organized into a curriculum, the programs came to be identified as Bible training schools. The next step up was to become a day school, and eventually a fully developed Bible college. This is an ever-recurring development (Witmer 1962, 122).

However, in many cases the alternative delivery systems continued, and even expanded, alongside the development of the residential day-school programs.

Second, brevity was a hallmark of these training schools. "The student should not get entangled in what Jane Addams called the 'snare of preparation' and thus kept unduly long from the mission field until all fervor had been burned out" (Brereton 1990, 64). Allison (1984, 11) argues that the long delay required by advanced training does not serve to integrate real life with classroom studies "and may in fact be disoriented to those who may have been interested in a cross-cultural ministry." Rather than four years of university and three years of seminary, Allison advocates (1992, 1) a four-year Bible college missions program and a one-year graduate program as the preferred road of pre-field missionary training. It enables the prospective missionary to arrive on the field sooner and with less debt, "still a *learner* rather than a leader who doesn't yet speak the language."

ORIGIN AND HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

The Bible Institute Movement emerged in the 1880's. A. B. Simpson founded the Missionary Training Institute (now Nyack College) in 1882 in New York City. Dwight L. Moody established the Training School of the Chicago Evangelization Society (now Moody Bible Institute) in 1886 in Chicago. A. J. Gordon began the Boston Missionary Training School (now Gordon College) in 1889. Johnson Bible Institute (now Johnson Bible College) followed in 1893, Toronto Bible Institute (now Ontario Bible College) in 1894, and Providence Bible Institute (later Barrington College) in 1900. Although many of the smaller denominations and new religious groups of the time did establish Bible institutes to train persons for ministries not requiring a seminary education, most of the early schools were not under denominational control. Kallgren comments:

The early institutes offered basic training in English Bible, doctrine and Christian ministry skills, all within an ethos of personal piety and a love for the lost. Though the facilities were humble, the founders' dedication and zeal left their mark on the world (1991, 27).

Allison identifies the rise of the Bible College Movement with the shift in American education away from traditional classical studies and toward more practical vocational programs. Their development coincided with the rise of the new land grant colleges. "Bible colleges grew out of this environment, providing a practical, vocationally-oriented alternative for students whose occupational choices centered around church-related ministries" (1984, 3).

Beginning in the late 1920's, some Bible institutes began to expand their programs to four full years, adding sufficient liberal arts subjects to the curriculum to enable them to grant the baccalaureate degree. Johnson Bible College, a restorationist school founded in 1873 in Memphis, Tennessee, apparently was the first to do so. About the same time, Dr. Robert C. McQuilkin, one of the prominent pioneers in this development, desired to combine the spiritual benefits of the Bible Institute Movement with the cultural benefits of the liberal arts college. In 1929 he secured state approval for Columbia Bible College to offer a baccalaureate program centered in the Bible. Other schools soon followed suit.

In 1940 the number of Bible colleges had proliferated and their academic quality increased to the point where accreditation became an important issue. This led, in 1947, to the founding of the American Association of Bible Colleges (AABC), which more recently has linked itself globally to similar associations through the International Council of Accrediting Agencies. The first twelve schools were accredited by the AABC in 1948.

The movement continued to grow. The greatest increase in the number of new schools took place in Canada between 1931 and 1950, when 35 were founded, and in the United States between 1941 and 1960, when 106 opened their doors.

Today there are 93 colleges accredited by the AABC. Total enrollment in these schools in the fall of 1991 was 25,419, a decrease of 2,314 over the previous year. In addition to the accredited schools, there are four candidates and six applicants for accreditation. Enrollment figures are based on full-time equivalency (FET).

As the educational level of their constituency increased and the need for advanced training became apparent, a growing number of these schools added graduate programs, departments, and divisions. Columbia, in 1936, was the first to do so. Others have since developed full-fledged seminaries offering the M.A., M. Div., or Th. M. degree and in some cases even the D. Min. However, such advanced training generally partakes of many of the characteristics which historically have characterized the Bible college tradition.

MISSIONARY TRAINING

The explicit purpose of many Bible institutes and Bible colleges has been to train home and foreign missionaries. Many of the early schools even carried the word *missionary* in their names. Kallgren points out that among the objectives recommended as being normative for Bible college programs, the manual of the American Association of Bible Colleges includes “to instill a vital missionary vision and dedication for world wide service” (1988, 37).

Witmer insists that the Great Commission is the *raison d'être* for Bible institutes and colleges:

It is the base of reference for the direction, the purpose and the subject matter of Bible college education. The founders and their successors were dominated by the conviction that the church is under a compelling obligation to make the gospel of salvation known to all mankind. This mission begins with the man next door and extends to the “utmost part of the earth” (1962, 103).

Witmer further maintains, and I agree with him, that “Bible institutes and colleges have made their most significant contribution to evangelicalism in the preparation of Protestant missionaries.” At one time 15 percent of the entire Protestant missionary force were alumni of either Moody Bible institute or Prairie Bible Institute (Witmer 1962, 111).

From its very roots in the ministries of A. B. Simpson, D. L. Moody, and A. J. Gordon, the Bible college tradition had included a strong missionary thrust. For instance, Witmer writes of A. B. Simpson that he “had a deep concern for the peoples and nations that had never been touched by gospel light” (1962, 24). Toronto Bible Institute (now Ontario Bible College) came into existence in response to the lament of J. Hudson Taylor that out of five hundred missionary candidates, many had to be turned down for lack of adequate Bible preparation.

Among the marks which characterize missionary training in the Bible college traditions, I want to emphasize four.

Biblical

The mastery of the Bible in the vernacular language is central to the curriculum. Whatever additional fields of study the schools in this tradition may offer, a major in Bible is invariably required. This is a matter of principle. Students are taught to grasp the whole of the Scriptures and encouraged to preach and teach the Bible in the vernacular language. Courses in inductive Bible study and methodology using the vernacular are part of nearly every curriculum. While at least one or both of the original languages of the Bible may be required at the undergraduate level, they are nearly always viewed as supplementary rather than foundational to ministry. Even at the graduate level, in-depth Bible survey and Bible exposition courses occupy considerable room in the curriculum.

Practical

In the Bible college tradition, training occurs not only in the academic program, but in all those experiences which contribute to the preparation of students for effective Christian living and service. There is strong emphasis on practical training and skill development. “How to “ courses on teaching and music skills such as song leading, form curricular staples, although some schools even offer specialized courses on missionary medicine, aviation, radio broadcasting , and accounting.

Students are involved continuously in Christian service or practical work or field education. To be enrolled is to be involved in ministry. Historically, morning hours were spent in the classroom, while afternoon and evening hours were divided between study and practical work. Practical work is not just pastoral work, Sunday School teaching, or youth group leadership in a local church context. Rather, it frequently involves Christian work beyond the ecclesiastical structures with marginal, often unchurched people: Bible Club teaching, open-air preaching, prison visitation, tract distribution, personal evangelism of total strangers, and rescue mission work.

The emphasis on practical ministry is seen not only as part of the training process, the acquisition of skills for future ministry, but also as a normal expression of the Christian life. “Christian service,” says Witmer, “is not merely training for the postgraduate future; it is an outlet for the impulse to share and to serve during student days... glorifying God and ministering to human need, not mere practice” (1962, 138).

Contextual

The contextual nature of education in the Bible college tradition and the courses which emerged to equip students to minister practically led to unexpected pioneering innovations. Brereton captures this dynamic well when she states that these

Training schools pioneered in the field of religious education-however rudimentary a training school course in “sociology” or “pedagogy” might appear with later standards. But the pioneering grew out of judgment about the needs of new constituencies and new missionary fields, not out of any interest in curricular innovation for its own sake (1990, 64).

Interestingly enough, in contrast to liberal arts and land grant colleges, many of these training schools were located in the heart of major, often industrial cities. Training took place in a cultural mosaic and exposed students to the demands of urban ministry. “Dwight L. Moody’s compassion stirred him to do something about the neglected, unevangelized masses in the urban centers of America and Britain... There was a critical lack of personnel” (Witmer 1962, 24). Thus, Bible college graduates were at home in an urban world and in touch with the masses of working-class people as they sought to make relevant an old message in a new context.

Many schools in the Bible college tradition incorporate summer service on cross-cultural missionary teams as part of their training process. Often, faculties other than the missions professors are involved. N. Sanford Good, Missions Chairperson at Lancaster Bible College, writes:

This program has grown and has had a major impact on the campus. Last year we received over eighty applications for the forty-two openings we had on the five teams... Along with these teams, we still have individuals going out for the whole summer. Next year we are planning to send out seven teams. I will lead three of them and four other faculty members will lead the other ones (1992, 2).

Spiritual

The Bible college tradition emphasized spiritual formation in the form of the cultivation of personal piety. Personal godliness was stressed as indispensable to effective ministry. Many Bible colleges were influenced by the Keswick Movement. Personal devotions and corporate worship were often an enforced part of the curriculum. Classes customarily commenced with Bible reading and prayer, often for missionaries. Brereton points to an informal curriculum which coexisted with the formal one:

They met in prayer meetings, listened to missionaries on furlough, perused letters from their peers who had preceded them to the mission fields, received support from each other during spiritual crises and regaled each other with accounts of their trials and triumphs in city mission...The faculty encouraged and participated in this strenuous and dedicated atmosphere (1990, 65).

CURRICULAR DEVELOPMENT

As early as the mid-fifties, the Evangelical Foreign Missions Association (EFMA), while acknowledging the validity of wide variations in curricula and time required to train missionaries, agreed “that a missionary, apart from training for specialized ministries, needs considerable preparation in other areas to serve effectively in a foreign culture” (Witmer 1962, 113). In a pamphlet, *Preparation of Missionaries in Bible Institutes and Bible Colleges*, EFMA listed the following course areas as essential:

History of Missions, Principles and Practices (including the Indigenous Church), Bible Basis (Philosophy) of Missions, Anthropology, Non-Christian Religions, Languages (Phonetics and Linguistics), Area Study, and Hygiene and Sanitation.

While missions executives favored the inclusion of a mission major in the Bible college curriculum, “many educators facing the problem of balancing maximum content with the limitations of time, favored a minor” (Witmer 1962, 113).

Allison, in his paper “Academic Preparation for the Missionary of the 1990’s,” however, strongly defends the Bible college tradition and the mission major. In response to the objection: “A missions (missiology) major doesn’t prepare you to do anything specific. How can you ‘mish’?” Allison explains that, among other things, “mishing” is all about a complex process involving (a) entry into a vastly different culture, (b) learning one or more new languages, (c) thinking in new thought forms, (d) working to contextualize the gospel, (e) leaving family, friends and one’s own culture, and (f) coping with culture shock (1984, 6).

He goes on to compare favorably the professional training of medical doctors with the missionary training provided by an undergraduate missions major followed by subsequent graduate work which integrates academic studies with experience.

Although schools in the Bible college tradition are not liberal arts colleges, missionary educators underscore the importance of such general education courses as political science, history, sociology, and a thorough knowledge of English. Also, great emphasis is placed in training in effective communication.

SOME OBSERVATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

First, the roots of the Bible college movement lie in the fertile soil of the evangelical awakenings of the late nineteenth century and in the increasingly pragmatic and vocationally oriented educational currents of that time. This contrasts sharply with the common view that Bible colleges were alternative educational institutions, often obscurantist in mentality, which developed at the height of fundamentalist-modernist controversy as a refuge intending to seal youth from the corrupting influences of liberal secular culture by enveloping them in the cocoon of an evangelical sub-culture. Rather, historical investigation indicates that the Bible college movement predates the

fundamentalist-modernist controversy. Early schools in this movement involved many institutions from the historic denominations and those denominations themselves developed educational institutions along the same pattern for the training both of YMCA workers and of missionaries. Only at later periods in its development did the Bible college tradition become the almost exclusive educational arm of the fundamentalist and Pentecostal churches.

Second, the Bible college movement produced a vast array of men and women who served to establish and nurture great Christ-ward movements around the globe. In the judgment of Brereton (1990, 28), these persons did not generally become elite leaders, but they certainly qualified as lesser leaders and valued workers in the movements. In fact, many of those in the Bible college tradition who did go on to evangelical liberal arts colleges and evangelical graduate schools and seminaries often did emerge as international leaders.

Third, the impact of this movement on theological education around the world is unmistakable. Many of the institutions established for the training of Christian workers are patterned after schools in the Bible college tradition. At its worst this imitation has been slavish and unresponsive to contextual factors – the imposition by well-meaning missionaries who sought to clone their alma mater. In many cases, however, the imitation reflects the methodological and strategic creativity aimed at making training of leadership for the masses both practical and accessible to the whole church. Evening Bible schools, intensive courses, theological education by extension, correspondence, radio Bible classes – all of the above draw from the best of the Bible college tradition.

Fourth, the dynamic and practical training programs found among such rapidly growing younger Western-based (but rapidly internationalizing) mission agencies such as Operation Mobilization (OM) and Youth with a Mission (YWAM) bear a striking resemblance to the early Bible institutes rather than the more developed Bible colleges of North America. Also, we are witnessing, particularly among large congregations, the emergence of a new church-based Bible Institute Movement, which has many parallels to earlier training models.

Finally, the jury is still out on the future shape of missiological education in the two-thirds world. Only now are missionary training institutions developing amid the burgeoning missionary movement emerging in those parts of the globe. To what extent they will adopt the patterns of missiological education as practiced in the Bible college tradition and to what extent they will navigate new courses in the uncharted water of the next century is yet to be determined.

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Notes

1. Frizen (1992) points out that the founding officers of the Interdenominational Foreign Missions Association (IFMA) were deeply involved in the Bible Institute movement. His book provides a thorough discussion of the Nondenominational Missions Movement in the United States and Canada.
2. Telephone conversation with Dr. Ray Badgero, Moody Bible Institute, on September 16, 1992.
3. According to Brereton (1990:55), the early North American schools were modeled after “certain European institutions that trained missionaries and other religious workers. The conservatives were not alone in their admiration the European Schools. American Protestants of diverse persuasions – motivated by a common interest in missions – acclaimed the European schools for being fast, effective, and practical, and began establishing similar institutions in the United States.”
4. Brereton (1990:55) cites A. B. Simpson, who describes missionary training colleges as “institutions less technical and elaborate than the ordinary theological seminary, and designed to afford the same wants of the large class, both men and women, who did not wish formal ministerial preparation, but an immediate equipment for usefulness as lay workers.”
5. Telephone conversation with secretarial staff of the American Association of Bible College (AABC) on September 11, 1992.
6. According to Brereton (1990:39), “The early Bible or religious training schools, products of the 1880’s and 1890’s, were not even founded by fundamentalists as such – no such designation existed then – but rather by men and women who considered themselves simply earnest and mission-minded Protestants.
7. A matter of concern among missionary educators is the apparent gradual decline in enrollment among the accredited Bible colleges in North America. This is coupled with declining percentage of students who are specifically preparing for missionary service in these institutions. The upward mobility of the evangelical population and the economic uncertainty of the times have led many Bible colleges to move toward more diverse educational, focus similar to that offered in Christian liberal arts colleges. While continuing to insist that every student major in Bible, they have introduced into their curriculum additional majors in a variety of disciplines, often education or business administration. In a few schools missions courses are no longer required of all students but are available only as free electives.