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MISSIONS AND THE SEMINARY CURRICULUM

CHARLES R. TABER

Evangelical churches and church agencies have shown a commendable zeal in promoting foreign missions. Through missionary conferences, missionary publications, and other means, the needs of the world have been kept before the Christian community, and thousands of young people have been induced to give their lives for overseas service.

Unfortunately, this excellent emphasis on promotion, motivation, and recruitment has not been matched by a corresponding interest in the training of missionary candidates. Personal experience, observation of and conversation with dozens of missionaries of many boards and fields, the results of an abortive study attempted several years ago by the writer and Phil Landrum, the perusal of a dozen representative seminary catalogs, and the findings reported in a recent book by Bailey and Jackson¹ all confirm a sad diagnosis: neither seminaries nor mission boards, the agencies most directly concerned, have shown a serious interest in making sure that missionaries were competent as well as spiritual. As a result, many sincere missionaries are working at less than their full potential, and some are actually obstacles in the Lord's work.

Fortunately, there has been lately an apparent awakening on the part of some boards and some seminaries. A recent series of articles in World Vision Magazine attests to a promising ferment.² It is the purpose of this paper to make concrete proposals as to what a seminary curriculum suitable for the training of missionaries should look like. It is based on three premises. First, a standard seminary curriculum is not by itself adequate. Second, it is the joint responsibility of seminaries and boards to provide the needed training. Third, prospective pastors will also benefit from this curriculum revision.

THEOLOGICAL CURRICULUM

The theological curriculum is the foundation on which the education of both pastors and missionaries must be built. It comprises Biblical studies, doctrinal studies, and historical studies.

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Biblical studies. This is the area most adequately covered by the present curricula. There is need, however, to give increased attention to the light afforded by studies of the cultural setting of the Biblical account. Not only would the missionary preacher, teacher, and translator be helped in finding the real significance of some feature, but the preacher at home would be spared a large dose of unconscious eisegesis if each recognized the profound differences between various cultures. Biblical languages, which could have been handled here, will instead be treated later, under the heading "linguistics."

Doctrinal studies. In this area, the sector which most needs strengthening is the doctrine of the Church. On the one hand, ecclesiology is too often treated as an appendage to a one-semester course in soteriology or eschatology. The course, as outlined, is static and structural: the origin of the Church, the membership of the Church, its organization and officers (with consideration of the controversies about church government), its ordinances, etc. On the other hand, the theology of missions (or missionary principles, or the indigenous church) is handled as a separate, unrelated, superficial, and essentially remedial course. What is needed is not the neglect of what is presently emphasized, but the completion of the lop-sided and fragmented picture. The static and structural view of the Church must be supplemented by the dynamic and functional view of the Church. Not only does the Church have relations to its Lord, and internal relations among its members, but also external relations to the world. The Great Commission, Pentecost (not merely as a convenient beginning date!), the teaching of John 17:11, 14-16 concerning the tension of being in the world but not of it--these belong in a dynamic treatment of the Church in relation to the world. And this, if anything, is the theological foundation of missions. As Herbert C. Jackson has said, "The missionary obligation of theology is that of constituting theology not as a set of formulations but as a dynamic inquiry functioning always at the frontiers where Christian faith meets unfaith. . . ." ³ The point that needs to be emphasized is that at the theological level there are no differences between sending church and receiving church, between home and foreign field, between full-time and part-time worker. These are all practical matters, of importance in their place. The duty of theology is to transcend these superficial differences and to see the Church as a whole in relation to its Lord, to its members, and to the world.

There would be no reason for the existence of separate courses in the theology of missions--if the central course in ecclesiology did its duty.

Historical studies. What is true of doctrine is also true of history. There is no real justification for offering one course in (western) church history, and another in the history of missions. The latter too often tends to become a Protestant hagiography of western missionaries. Here also there is desperate need for an integrated treatment of the whole Church as manifested through time and throughout the world. Courses in world history on secular campuses are gradually being freed from occidental provincialism. It is time courses in church history were too, by recognizing the work of God the Holy Spirit in many places and times and kinds of people.

PRACTICAL CURRICULUM

A prospective pastor must have help in bridging the gap between the material which has been given him in an academic setting and his functioning in the practical setting of a congregation. He has to learn to apply theological truth to practical situations and problems, to deal with people in terms of their felt needs and in ways they will understand. To this end, the curriculum comprises a measured dose of homiletics, practical theology, and so forth. And we assume a general orientation in psychology, sociology, and philosophy, so that he can understand what makes this society and culture function as it does. The pastor must be taught how to guide a committee and how to officiate at a funeral; he must be instructed in the ethics of his calling and in his legal and civic duties and rights.

Now if all this is necessary for a man who is already thoroughly integrated into his own native society and culture--and it is--how much more essential should it be for someone who is called to work in an alien milieu, in which world view, values, customs, and institutions are radically different. We tend to overlook how enormous are the aspects of culture which we share with members of our society but not with members of other societies. We have been so conditioned by them that they determine our thinking in many ways, just as the lenses of the writer's glasses determine his vision. And in much the same way, we are not really conscious of them; we tend to consider them an immutable part of the nature of things. They are the frame of reference, not subject to change.

But precisely these factors, most completely internalized into a person's psychological make-up, most completely pervasive and determinative, and most completely unconscious, are the factors which differ from culture to culture, and which must be brought into the open and understood if any effective and profound change is to be introduced. It is relatively easy to induce a man to change some external aspect of his behavior, and missionaries sometimes settle for that. It is a different matter, and one that calls for deep insight and sympathy, to introduce change where the Holy Spirit wants to introduce change--at the core of a man's thinking.

It is to assist the missionary candidate in this vital area of effective communication that courses in cultural anthropology, linguistics, and regional studies are essential.

Cultural anthropology. Courses in cultural anthropology are designed to make the student aware of and sensitive to the enormous variability in human culture, especially in the areas of world view, religion, values and ethical norms, social structure, and manners and customs. The aim is to help the student to gain in some measure a more objective view of his own culture, so as to learn to overcome its inherent biases and blind spots and to develop a proper humility in place of his previous total ethnocentrism. He must learn to understand the cues which people give as to their reactions, attitudes, and relationships, so as to avoid faux-pas and needless offense. But even more than this partial divorce from his own culture and understanding of the alien culture, a good course in anthropology should help the missionary candidate to overcome culture shock and to identify himself gradually with the people whom he wishes to serve, to become in some sense one of them, to "become all things to all men" in a

given society. As Sister M. Cuthbert says, "It has always been known and appreciated that in order to witness the gospel to a people, it is required not only to know and live that gospel but also to know and live in a communion of experience with that people."⁴

Linguistics. It would seem axiomatic that no effective missionary work can be done in a language foreign to the people. Yet some missionaries have defended the position that they must work in English (or French, as the case may be) because the languages involved were too hard to learn! It is hard to see why such people go to the field at all. But the position of some boards, in looking for short cuts and cut rates in language learning, is not too much better. There is simply no royal road to language learning.

There is, however, a discipline which can immediately help the missionary in improving the productivity of language learning: linguistics. By providing a measure of understanding of the principles underlying both the universal and the variable aspects of human languages, linguistics can help both the Bible student at home and the missionary preacher, teacher, writer, and translator to gain profound insights into the material he is working with. A seminary should, of course, provide first-rate work in Biblical languages. And any missionary who might conceivably be involved in a Bible translating project should by all means study these. But beyond this, a seminary should not try to teach specific languages. A sound course in introductory linguistics will more than repay itself in efficiency and effectiveness when the missionary begins to learn a language on the field, often in most unfavorable circumstances. As Gleason has pointed out, linguistics can contribute to the ministry of the Church in the work of exegesis, translation, and preaching and teaching; in internal communication within the parts of the Church over the world; in understanding the nature of theological language; and in the witness of the Church to the world.⁵ Beyond its application to missions in a narrow sense, linguistics justifies its inclusion in the seminary curriculum on many grounds.

Regional studies. It is essential that missionaries gain some knowledge of the history, geography, economics, government, institutions, etc. of the fields to which they will go. Because of the great variability in this area, it may be necessary in some seminaries to handle these studies through reading courses or tutorials.

Miscellaneous. Time in the seminary curriculum is too precious to spend on such things as the mechanics of mission structure and polity, what to take to the field, etc. Such matters are best handled by the board through suitable pamphlets.

Every opportunity should be provided for missionary candidates to become closely acquainted with international students or other nationals from their prospective fields. Such contacts can be most helpful and illuminating in supplementing the insights of the more general and abstract courses.

CONTINUING TRAINING

It is the conviction of the writer that, given careful planning and ruthless elimination of non-essentials, the program outlined above could be offered within the standard three-year

seminary program. It would mean a common theological core for pastoral and missionary students, and separate practical programs.

But this is not enough. According to Bailey and Jackson, "A glaring lacuna in missionary preparation and stabilization is the almost total failure to make use of the first furlough in a way advantageous to these ends."⁶ Once a missionary has been on the field, he is in a position to profit greatly from further opportunities for specialized academic study. No missionary training program is complete that does not make provision for the missionary to spend at least a semester in serious study and research under competent guidance. Insights can be gained which would be impossible without the combination of field experience and academic stimulation.

FACULTY AND FACILITIES

The only legitimate obstacle to the implementation of such a program is the acknowledged difficulty in finding competent personnel. The requisite combination of field experience, academic competence, and personal and spiritual qualities is not common; where it is found, the person who combines them is irreplaceable. But mission boards will need to make such people available, perhaps through the judicious use of extended furloughs, and seminaries will have to make room for them. The alternative is stagnation in this vital area.

CONCLUSIONS

This report has been much too brief. Some will doubtless feel that some points have been skimmed, others that assertions are made without sufficient backing. Both failures are acknowledged, and the writer can only refer the reader to fuller treatments elsewhere of various aspects presented here. The point to be made is that the training of missionaries demands the best facilities and the most imaginative planning of which we are capable. It costs no more, in dollars and cents, to send to the field and support a competent missionary than an incompetent one. And the Church cannot afford the negative effect on its witness of people who in all sincerity do not know what they are doing. The program outlined is a difficult one, but the cost of failure makes it imperative.

DOCUMENTATION

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2. Don W. Hillis, "Is the Great Commission a Lost Cause?" World Vision Magazine, (June 1964), p. 4; David A. Hubbard, "Seminaries and the Great Commission," World Vision Magazine (September 1964), p. 6,7; Hugo H. Culpepper, "Missions and the Seminaries," World Vision Magazine (January 1965), p. 6,7; John Schmidt, "Missions in our Seminaries: a Proposal," World Vision Magazine (April 1965), p. 8-10,29.
3. Herbert C. Jackson, "The Missionary Obligation of Theology," Occasional Bulletin (New York: Missionary Research Library), Vol. 15, No. 1, reprinted in Practical Anthropology, Vol. 12, No. 3, (May-June 1965), p. 129.
4. Sister M. Cuthbert, "Anthropology in Mission Training," Anthropological Quarterly, Vol. 37, No. 1 (Jan. 1964), p. 28.
5. H. A. Gleason, Jr., "Linguistics in the Service of the Church," Hartford Quarterly, Vol. 1, No. (Fall 1960), reprinted in Practical Anthropology, Vol. 9, No. 5 (Sept.-Oct. 1962), pp. 205-219.
6. Bailey and Jackson, op. cit., p. 73.