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Philosophy of Theological Education and Leadership Development: A Perspective from Bethany Baptist Church

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Very few needs are more pressing for the church of Jesus Christ than that of producing trained, qualified, humble, godly leaders who can competently shepherd and oversee the precious flock of God. Acquiring these leaders is proving more and more difficult. The young men of my generation are not pursuing ministry in the same numbers that our fathers did.

A recent Barna study has concluded that only 1 in 7 pastors are under the age of 40¹, prompting Barna president David Kinnaman to say that the aging pastorate “represents a substantial crisis for Protestant churches.”² Mike Hess states, “We are facing an unprecedented crisis of pastoral shortages. There seem to be more churches than qualified and willing pastors.”³ He concludes that this “appears to be a reality across the spectrum of theologically conservative ministries today” regardless of denomination. The problem is every bit as grave internationally. Mission agencies are reporting some of their smallest candidate classes in history⁴.

Not only are we failing to produce the *quantity* of leaders necessary, we are also failing to produce the *quality* of leaders necessary. Sin and scandal rock the American pulpit. The scriptural qualifications for an elder found in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 are now dismissed as an impossible ideal. All this prompts Jeff Reed to conclude, “The greatest need of the evangelical church worldwide seems to be that of training spiritual leaders. From Burma to Africa, from Rumania to the United States, the Church is suffering from a dearth of qualified, mature spiritual leaders.”⁵

Perhaps it’s time for churches to take a serious, prayerful look at how we train pastors and missionaries. Since the end of the American Civil War, the church in the United States has largely been dependant on formal learning institutions, such as Bible colleges and seminaries,

¹“The Aging of America’s Pastors”; <https://www.barna.com/research/aging-americas-pastors/> (Accessed 3/21/18)

²Ibid.

³Mike Hess, “The Growing Crisis of Pastoral Shortages”, in *The Baptist Bulletin* (Jan/Feb 2019)

⁴This is based on multiple conversations I’ve had with people in the missions community. In particular, this came up during a workshop given by Gary Anderson, president emeritus of Baptist Mid-Missions, during the 2017 Refresh Conference at Faith Baptist Bible College & Theological Seminary (Ankeny, IA). C. Gordon Olson also addressed this issue in *What in the World is God Doing?*, p. 313. His statistics are several decades old but I doubt the situation has improved much. If anything, it’s probably worse.

⁵Jeff Reed, “Church-Based Leadership Training: A Proposal”, from *Words of Fellowship, Vol. 1, No 1* (Ames, IA; BILD International, 1988)

to train Christian leaders⁶. There's no doubt that God has faithfully used this paradigm for nearly two centuries. But as our culture experiences major shifts, it's important for us to carefully reevaluate our approach to theological education and leadership development in light of scriptural principles and patterns.

Bethany Baptist Church has entered into the fray with the formation of our Theological Education And Mentoring (TEAM) Work program. TEAM is a unique church-based theological education program that mentors and equips perspective pastors and ministry leaders within the context of authentic ministry. This is not simply a "church-housed" program that tries to duplicate seminary within the four walls of a church building. It's an entirely unique approach to Christian education that is sourced in the life and ministry of the local church. TEAM is not a "parachurch" organization, but an "in-church" structure that is accountable to the church, managed by its pastors, and rooted in authentic ministry.

The purpose of this article is to provide a basic overview of the philosophy of education utilized at Bethany Baptist Church. I want to be very clear that this is not a "hit piece" on Bible colleges and seminaries. I'm grateful for good institutions of Christian higher learning. I believe that they do and will continue to provide a valuable service for Christ's cause. At the same time, I also believe that it is critically important for local churches to reclaim their central role in the training of future leaders.

Core principles

Before moving on, it's important to define just what I'm advocating for. I want to list a few tenets of Bethany's approach to theological education. The remainder of this article will be spent defending those tenets from the Scriptures and from practical observation.

Tenets of Bethany's philosophy of theological education:

1. Theological education and leadership development must be based in the life, ministry, and authority of the local church. This means more than having a "church-housed" education program. Rather, it requires the development of a robust "church-based" education program that is rooted in the organic ministry of the church family.
2. The primary objective in training future pastors is to foster ordinate affections and spiritual maturity. While academic knowledge and practical skills are extremely important, they must be developed in conjunction with love for God and spiritual discipline. Failure to take seriously the need to train the affections will result in "pastors without chests" and churches steeped in pride, legalism, elitism, and showmanship⁷. We believe that the family and the local church are uniquely suited for developing the

⁶Jeff Reed, "Church-Based Theological Education: Creating a New Paradigm" (Ames, IA; BILD International, 1992) p. 3-4

⁷For a fuller study of this concept I recommend C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* and David deBruyn, *The Conservative Church*.

affections and can accomplish this end in a way that parachurch organizations are unable to replicate.

3. Theological education is a natural and necessary extension of the Great Commission. This is where our philosophy of education intersects with our philosophy of missions. We believe that churches have a responsibilities to *do* missions as well as *support* missions. This requires that pastors and missionaries be trained within the congregation in order to carry out the goals of Great Commission ministry.
4. Pastors and churches need to have a multi-generation vision. This requires churches to train leadership from within so that the vision and mission of the church can be effectively perpetuated into future generations.

These statements are the building blocks of Bethany's approach to education and pastoral training. We believe that these tenets are rooted in biblical principles and produce many practical advantages. We will spend the rest of defending these claims.

Scriptural basis

Some may be surprised to hear me say that the New Testament has a lot to say about theological education. After all, there's no mention of colleges, degrees, professors, or diplomas. This is very true. But the New Testament does have a lot to say about the need for training qualified leaders and it gives us insight into how that goal was achieved.

I'll be looking at many of the practices of the apostles and their churches and attempting to draw principles from those practices. I'm not arguing that we are required to do something just because it was done in the First Century. However, I do believe that these practices give us insight into a Spirit-inspired, supra-contextual philosophy of leadership development that is normative for all churches in all time. In other words, I don't believe that everything the apostles did was simply out of convenience or necessity. I believe that there were God-honoring principles that drove their approach to Christian education. I further believe that all churches have a duty to also apply those principles to their own context.

I want to make three observations about New Testament theological education.

New Testament education was heart-centered

In 1 Timothy 3, the apostle Paul outlines the qualifications that a man must meet in order to be a bishop/elder/pastor. It is striking to note what categories these qualifications fall under. There are two things that a potential pastor is to "do". He's to manage his own house well (1 Timothy 3:4) and be apt to teach (1 Timothy 3:2). Being "apt to teach" implies that the pastor must know something in order to teach it. But it's also worth noting that, despite its obvious importance, academic knowledge is not explicitly mentioned anywhere in the text. Aside from the two tasks a pastor must complete, the rest of the qualifications center on character issues - what goes on in pastoral candidate's heart.

We believe in the vital importance of sound doctrine and a robust understanding of academic truth. But we also want to have the same emphasis that the New Testament has when it talks about developing leaders. The New Testament puts the emphasis first on character, then on giftedness, and lastly on academics. Our goal is not to pull down sound doctrine, but to elevate the importance of godly character and ordinate affections.

There are many Bible colleges and seminaries that do an excellent job of teaching sound doctrine. But they are handicapped in how well they can shepherd hearts and provoke good character. Their emphasis is backward to the biblical pattern - academics is the primary emphasis, followed by pastoral skills, and then godly character. I do not blame colleges for this. The university was not created produce godly character (God gave other institutions for that). It was formed to facilitate academic learning. While it can do a very good job in that area, its very nature hampers its ability to foster ordinate affections.

TEAM is designed to give students the best of both worlds. We aim to provide a robust theological education in an environment that sharpens character and trains the heart. Students undergo regular character assessment done by themselves and their pastor. This is an uncomfortable but profitable exercise of applying the qualifications of God's Word to the present situation.

Beyond the systematic discipleship that takes place, there's the intangible element of having an education experience that is immersed, not in a peer environment, but in a ministry setting. Students fellowship with pastors, visit with experienced Christians, learn self-sacrifice, and experience the joys and struggles of service all in the context of local church ministry.

The TEAM Work program is designed to educate the heart as well as the head. We believe that the New Testament not only allows for this approach, but requires it. It's vitally important that we train a generation of Christian leaders who not only have sound doctrine but also sound affections.

New Testament education was church-based

Educators, Christian and otherwise, are beginning to recognize the importance of creating the correct context for learning. They call this approach "situated learning"⁸ "which essentially means that educators pay attention to the context as well as the content to make sure that they match in a manner to optimize development."⁹ While it's important to have correct teaching, it's equally important to make sure that this information is transmitted in the correct context.

⁸Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation* (New York, NY; Cambridge, 1991)

⁹"[Practicum Manual](#)" (Ames, IA; BILD International, 2016) p. 6

In what context did the apostolic church train its leaders? In Acts 13:1, we see a team of qualified leaders shepherding the church at Antioch. Where did these leaders come from? In Acts 11:26, we're told that Paul and Barnabas devoted an entire year to teaching in Antioch. The verse is clear that this teaching happened in conjunction with their being "assembled with the church". It seemed likely that Simeon, Lucius, and Manaen were trained by Paul and Barnabas in the local church context. As they were taught, they eventually became not only pupils of Paul and Barnabas but their peers and fellow leaders (Acts 13:1).

In Acts 14:23, Paul appointed elders at his church plants. Where did he find so many qualified leaders? Again, we are left with the conclusion that Paul trained these pastors from within the congregation. In the previous verse, the activities of the missionary team is described: "Confirming the souls of the disciples, and exhorting them to continue in the faith, and that we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God." (Acts 14:22 KJV) Leadership training was a natural and necessary outpouring of Paul's teaching ministry.

But not only is church-based theological education modeled in the New Testament, it is implicitly taught as well. Churches are called to teach the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27) and all that Christ taught (Matthew 28:20). Would not theological education and pastoral training be included in God's "whole counsel" and "all things" that Jesus taught? Therefore, providing robust theological education and leadership training is not optional for churches. Local churches have a biblical responsibility to teach the full spectrum of Christian truth, including the higher forms of education.

Pastors are to take the lead in the church's theological education process. Paul had mentored and trained Timothy to be a minister of the gospel (Acts 16:1-5). Toward the end of his life, Paul instructed Timothy to continue the pattern. "And the things that thou hast heard of me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also." (2 Timothy 2:2 KJV) Four generations are in view in this verse. This command requires all pastors to have a multi-generational strategy for equipping "faithful men" to pass on Christian truth. TEAM Work is the application of the vision of Bethany's pastors to accomplish that end.

Throughout history, the church has taken seriously its responsibility to train leaders. From the school at Antioch to the academy at Geneva, churches throughout time have worked hard to equip ministers. While acknowledging the use of parachurch entities throughout history, historian Howard Rowdon states the normality of training ministers as they minister. "But in principle, training for the ministry belongs to the ongoing work of the ministry. Danger, if not disaster, is not far away when it becomes isolated, and exists as an end in itself. The importance of training 'on the job' is shown by the persistence throughout church history of the curacy method. In-service training is no new idea."¹⁰

¹⁰Harold H. Rowdon, "Theological Education in Historical Perspective," *Vox Evangelica* 7 (1971), p. 87

Kevin Bauder acknowledges the vital, biblical importance of the local church in leadership development. He starts, "Every New Testament congregation must take seriously its responsibility to instruct future generations of leadership. The church is so important as a center of biblical and doctrinal nurture that it cannot be replaced. No other institution can take over this responsibility. None should try."¹¹ Unfortunately, most churches today have lost the vision for a robust Christian education strategy. Jeff Reed says, "Churches have almost universally abdicated their central role in training leaders, both for ministry in their own generation as well as the generation to come. Just as parents give up their vital role for the spiritual training of their children to the church Sunday School, so the churches give up their role in training leaders to institutions such as seminaries and Bible colleges...Until leadership training becomes a vital ministry of those leading in our churches, and by implication a ministry of the whole church, we will continue to experience a severe leadership shortage in churches around the world, both in this generation and in generations to come."¹²

Bethany Baptist Church is attempting to retake that ground through our TEAM program. We are not saying that Bible colleges and seminaries can't play an important role in a person's theological education. We are saying that the local church *must* also play an important role in theological education. Biblically, the church is the only institution on the planet that is required to train men for Christian service. This is a mandate we take seriously.

We also see great practical value in training Christian leaders in the context of real ministry. Where better to prepare men for service in the church than the church itself? Perspective leaders can directly apply what they're learning to a real-life church situation. Life, ministry, and education flow together to create a learning experience that cannot be manufactured in a classroom.

New Testament education was missions-oriented

Missions and theological education are inherently tied together. To do missions you need missionaries. To plant churches you need church planters. To lead churches you need church leaders. If churches are going to be proactive in doing missions (not merely supporting missions) then they must take leadership development seriously.

As has been stated before, I believe that leadership development is presumed in the Great Commission. Just prior to His ascension, our Lord Jesus gave His disciples their marching orders for this age. "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I

¹¹Kevin T. Bauder, "It's Not a Cadillac! Part Four: Where Should We Learn?", from *In the Nick of Time* (Plymouth, MN; Central Baptist Theological Seminary, 2018);

<https://centralseminary.edu/its-not-a-cadillac-part-four-where-should-we-learn/> (Accessed 8/23/18)

¹²Jeff Reed, "Church-Based Leadership Training: A Proposal", from *Words of Fellowship, Vol. 1, No. 1* (Ames, IA; BILD International, 1988)

have command you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.” (Matthew 28:29-20 KJV)

An essential part of the Great Commission is to teach all that Christ commanded His disciples. This is a broad task, encompassing the whole of Christian doctrine and practice. Higher theological education and pastoral training would certainly be included in it. In short, part of missions is to train missionaries.

Training leaders was a key part of Paul’s own missionary strategy. We see it in the appointment of the elders in Acts 14:23 and his mentorship of Timothy and Titus. It was this multi-generational vision that allowed the Early Church to effectively reach the world for Christ.

If modern day churches are to going to be able to reach our community, region, and world with the Gospel we must also be in the business of training future leaders. Local churches routinely pass on this responsibility to other institutions. The result has been a fundamental disconnect between the *mission* of the church and *members* of the church.

We desire to bridge that gap by training leadership within our own congregation. This enhances our own ministry by nurturing Christians who can help meet the needs of the ministry. It also facilitates our mission, outfitting us with church planters who can take the Gospel to the surrounding areas. Furthermore, it gives us a recourse that sister-churches can utilize to fill pulpits and pastorates.

Church-based leadership development is the natural by-product of a missions-oriented, church planting mindset. Those who go through our TEAM program are not merely given a certificate. They’re trained for war. They’re given the tools they need to take part in the glorious mission Christ gave to His churches.

Benefits

The main reason we approach leadership development the way we do is that we believe it is the most biblical method. This does not mean that we think that other approaches are anti-biblical. But we do believe that our approach is true to specific New Testament principles that should govern the way we do theological education.

But in addition to being biblical, we also believe that a church-based approach to education makes good practical sense. We want to highlight a few of the benefits of participating in a church-based leadership development program.

Ordination

One of the unintended consequences of taking theological education outside of the church is that the process of appointing a pastor has become less secure. In the New Testament, it appears

that church members were appointed to positions of leadership within their own congregation (Acts 13:1, 14:23).

But more importantly, 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 lay out very specific qualifications that all pastors throughout time must meet. Churches have a moral and scriptural obligation to appoint ministers that, to the very best of their knowledge, meet these criteria. These criteria are very specific and focus almost exclusively on character qualities. In order for a church to evaluate a pastoral candidate against these qualifications, they are required to know intimate details about his marriage, family, and personal life. They need to be able to see him in a variety of different contexts and situations.

But, in the system used to select pastors today, it's almost impossible for churches to gain this kind of knowledge. Pastors send their resume to a church they have little or no intimate knowledge of. He then is interviewed by a pulpit committee made up of people he doesn't know. He fills out some questionnaires and answers questions from the congregation. In all this, the congregation knows very little about the candidate except for what the paperwork says and what little they could gain from the one or two sermons he preached to them. For his part, the perspective pastor knows little about the culture, philosophy, and makeup of the congregation he's about to devote himself to.

Someone has said that this method is like going out on a blind date and deciding the next day whether or not to get married. There's simply no way that a congregation can evaluate a potential pastor to the extent that the Scripture requires without a meaningful relationship. While we sometimes have no choice but to use this method, there's usually a better alternative. When churches raise up leaders from within their own congregation, there is that deep relationship that allows for a more thorough evaluation. The church has had time (possibly years) to see the candidate conduct himself in his life, marriage, family, ministry, and work. They have the information needed to make an accurate assessment of his qualifications.

This approach also creates a continuity of vision and mission between pastors. There's not a disruption every time a new pastor is installed. Likewise, because they already know each other, pastor and church can transition easily into new roles. Rather than changing pastors every three years, churches had establish a multi-generational philosophy that can even outlive individual pastors.

I believe this method works better for both pastors and churches and is the best way to ensure that pastors measure up to biblical standards.

Accountability

If the primary (though not exclusive) aim of pastoral training is to foster biblical character qualities, than our approach to leadership development must create an atmosphere that encourages spiritual growth. We believe the church is one of the best contexts in the world for this kind of growth.

By doing theological education as an extension of church ministry, a student has the natural accountability that comes from interacting with the family of God. Not only does he receive regular instruction from pastors and ministry leaders, the natural “family dynamics” that take place in the local church are specially designed to create an environment of accountability.

Most college students spend the majority of their time with people their age. While this is not altogether wrong, we believe there is considerable value in interacting with people of different age groups. It creates a more balanced view of life and restricts some of the sinful tendencies that all peer groups are prone to. Accountability and sharpening is interwoven into the very fabric of the TEAM program.

Connected to this is the invaluable process of mentoring. The name of our leadership development program is *Theological Education And Mentoring*. We believe that mentoring is just as important as theological education. The Bible seems to present a model where theological education happens in the context of heart-on-heart mentoring. It’s impossible to overstate how valuable this is. There’s no better way to prepare for ministry than to get next to a minister.

Experience

For most people pursuing vocational ministry, their education is segmented. First, they receive their academic training. Then they might do some kind of internship to get practical experience. With TEAM Work, those two elements are integrated together.

This has two major benefits. First, this gives much more time for ministry experience. The entire learning program is centered around gaining ministry experiences. It’s not tacked on as an afterthought. It’s an essential part of the entire training experience. Second, it allows academic learning and practical learning to feed off and inform each other, providing a more comprehensive educational experience.

It should be noted in all this that the experiences students gain are not “busy work” activities manufactured to fulfill a requirement. It’s authentic ministry. Students will be filling roles that need filled and making real contributions to a local church.

When pastoral training is delegated to parachurch organizations, ministry has to be simulated rather than organically appearing as a natural part of the education. Most Bible colleges require students to participate in “Christian ministry”. This is certainly better than nothing and the effort is praiseworthy. However, when theological education is removed from the local church, two less-than-ideal consequences occur.

First, the ministry experiences are often forced and contrived. Students strunge around for a ministry to fulfill before the deadline. The needs of church are secondary to the needs of the

student. The job exists for its own sake, rather than helping to fulfill the mission of the church. But in church-based theological education, the ministry experiences are driven by the real and organic needs of the church. Nothing has to be forced. Ministry experience is the natural by-product of church-based training.

Second, this sort of imposed ministry experience often competes with the ministry of regular church members. Students can easily become the primary church workers, while regular, more permanent members don't get as much experience. All the preaching opportunities are reserved for the young Pastoral Studies major. College students are preferred for teaching Sunday school and other duties. But when your theological education students are church members, there's no conflict. Students fit into the natural ministry of church, enhancing the ministry of their fellow members.

Missions

We believe that every church and every pastor should be doing missions, not just supporting it. But, as has already been stated, missions requires missionaries and church planting requires church planters. Without a robust leadership development program, most churches don't have the men they need to fulfill these missional objectives.

The current model requires churches to send their best people out of the church in order to be equipped for more effective service. This puts local churches at a disadvantage and keeps them from spreading the Gospel as effectively. Training pastors and missionaries within the church allows local churches to be much more involved into the Great Commission. Students serve *in* the church until they are sent *by* the church (Acts 13:1-3). The local church is central to the missionary enterprise.

The drive behind church-based theological education is missional. Raising up leaders and missionaries from within the congregation allows local churches to play a central, proactive role in the evangelization and discipleship of their community, region, and world.

A personal testimony

"Yes, but does it actually work?" That seems to be the critical question that gets asked whenever the subject of church-based leadership development comes up. Is this all just an idealistic fantasy that ignores the realities of the real world? Can this approach actually train up qualified pastors and missionaries who have the skills and knowledge to minister in reality?

I not only believe that the principles behind this kind of education are sound but that they actually do work in the real world. I can attest to this personally. I received the entirety of my theological education in a church-based context (first through the Antioch School and then through TEAM Work). I'm personally very grateful that God led me to this approach and for the practical benefits I've received from it.

I'm sure I would have loved Bible college. But looking back, I can see how the environment might have been personally dangerous for me. Studying the way I have has not only given me the tools I've needed for ministry, it also forced me to confront heart issues. This combination of education and sanctification has proved invaluable as I've entered into pastoral ministry.

I believe that the New Testament gives us many principles that should motivate churches to proactively train the next generation of leaders. Our approach to theological education should recognize the centrality of the local church and the importance of ordinate affections. Bethany's Theological Education And Mentoring Work program is designed to do all that while providing students with quality, seminary-level training to prepare them for life and ministry.