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will charge, prove and reward every theology; as Paul put it in [1 Cor. 3:12-14](#), 'If any man builds on this foundation [Jesus Christ] using gold, silver, costly stones, hay or straw, his work will be shown for what it is because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work. If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward.' To this climax of history, evangelical theologians may look forward with joy and comfort because the living Lord gives his promise also for their task of researching and teaching. 'And surely I am with you always,' he says, 'to the very end of the age.'

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The Future of Evangelical Theological Education

James E. Plueddemann

A VISION FOR THE FUTURE

Who is worried about the future of evangelical theological education? Theologians are usually enamoured of the ideas of the *past* and scarcely take time to reflect on the future. School principals are overwhelmed with *present* needs for funds, faculty, and facilities and don't want to be overwhelmed by hypothetical burdens of the future. Those interested in the future are professors of eschatology, arguing about whether the beast with the ten horns is the European Common Market, the Roman Catholic Church, or communist world domination.

Modern prophets seem strangely isolated from the pressing practical needs of theological educators. While futurologists prophesy catastrophic gloom and doom awaiting the world from the depleted ozone layer, drought, AIDS, and inflation, educators worry more about the future of the school mimeograph machine and whether the textbook order will arrive on time. Most people who study the future tell us how bad things are going to be, prescribing the drastic action we must take in order to survive the future.

Christians should have peace about the future because of their sure hope! From God's perspective the future is not out of control. But we must be reminded that the Lord of Creation uses his children to make a difference in the world. We are called by the power of God to change the world, not merely to adapt to changing gloomy future predictions. As theological educators, we must not merely react to the dire predictions of the future. We must, by the grace of God, *change* the future.

Theological educators can contemplate the future with three possible outlooks. They can actively continue as they are; they can react to problems as they arise; or they can take initiatives so that from a human perspective, the future will be *different* because of

what they do as educators. The first option is *active*, the second *reactive*, and the third *proactive*.

The Active View

The active view of the future can be compared to the work of sailors on a ship. They mop the deck, mend the sails and polish the cannon. But no one on this ship knows where the ship should be going. The sailors keep very busy. In fact many are suffering from overwork and burn-out. **p. 15** Captains are encouraged to take management courses on how to efficiently organize sailors. Cooks learn how to serve less expensive and more nutritious food. Gunners learn how to load more rapidly. More efficient but directionless activity is the goal for the future of this ship.

Another metaphor to describe the active view is that of the race horse. Trainers work to teach the jockeys better riding skills. They work to improve the diet, training and breeding of horses. But in the end, the horses merely run around in circles.

Theological schools can get so caught up with the present needs of survival that a concern for the future is neglected. There are seldom enough teachers or enough funds to run a school, leaving little time for the leisure and luxury of dreaming about the future.

Accreditation standards can be guilty of promoting the active view. We can work to improve the quality of libraries, faculty credentials, standards for incoming students and increased credibility—without really making a difference in the future. By the grace of God, many good things come out of our activity. But maintaining and improving theological education, while necessary, is not an adequate goal for the future. We must improve the quality of theological education as a means to change the future of the church, society and even eternity. We must have a vision of what we want the future to be, not merely a picture of how to adapt to what others imagine in the future. Too often evangelical theological education has been visionless activism.

The Reactive View

The fortress is an appropriate metaphor for many theological educators. They wait to see what the enemy does before they decide their strategy. Those living in a fortress don't need to strategize about the future. If the enemy attacks from one direction, the cannons will be moved to that side of the fort. If they come with tanks, use armour piercing shells. If they come with infantry, land mines and barb-wire fences will work. If the enemy uses airplanes, bring out the anti-aircraft guns. Strategizing becomes the activity of guessing what the enemy will do next.

It is important for theological educators to react to the heresies of the enemy. Many chapters in the Epistles are a reaction against heresies of the day. The Apostle Paul challenged Timothy to 'guard the Gospel'. Liberal theology which denies the deity of Christ, the inspiration and authority of Scripture, miracles, sin, and the need for the atonement has done tremendous damage to the Body of Christ over the centuries. **p. 16** The Evil One uses heresy as the primary weapon so there is a great need for educational institutions of the future to be strong fortresses. Future theological educators must be ready to react to unexpected theological attacks. But merely waiting to be attacked is poor strategy. Often the Enemy determines the complete curriculum for theological institutions. Students are taught answers to the heresies of the Middle Ages with little regard to current problems in the Church. While it is important for students to be aware of the theological problems of the past, future pastors need to teach in such a way as to grow strong Christians who will not be driven by every wave of heresy. Heresy is like sickness. But there is a difference between continually curing a sick person and promoting health. It is better to prevent sickness. While we need doctors to cure sick patients, we

also need those who will teach the basics of health. The fortress mentality waits for the next person to get sick in order to know what medicine to give.

Theological educators who react to false teaching build fortresses which protect the gospel from the last generation of heresies. But we must do more than wait for the next false teaching to arise, whether it be liberation theology, prosperity theology, or new age theology. Why wait for people to get sick before we think about health? We need theological educators who know how to react to heresy, but even more important, we need theological educators who know how to nurture healthy Christians, taking the offensive against the powers of evil.

The Proactive Way

Theological educators with a proactive view take the initiative to influence the future. A proactive theological educator is both active and able to react to unexpected heresy. But the proactive educator sees beyond activism and the narrow horizons of present problems. A proactive theological educator does not wait to react to the next problem, but has a vision for what the student, the school, the church and society can be, taking steps to make the future happen according to the vision. There is a dearth today of this kind of visionary strategizing for theological education.

A metaphor which helps to describe the proactive view is that of commando soldiers parachuted behind enemy lines. The squad is given the two-fold task of strengthening the resistance movement and doing as much covert damage to the enemy as possible, all the while waiting for the invasion of the King. What a vision for theological educators! Our educational task is to prepare guerilla forces who can [p. 17](#) win some of the enemy with the Good News, teach the struggling but loyal resistance movement about the King, and blow up enemy bridges. The coming of the King is sure, so victory is sure. What an exciting task is ours to be training commandos for the King!

Such a metaphor could revolutionize theological education. Schools would see accreditation not as a necessary and onerous bother, but as a tool for evaluating and improving the effectiveness of commando training. Faculty would be motivated to publish books and articles, not from a 'publish-or-perish' mentality, but so that valuable information and enemy intelligence could be shared among commando trainers. Schools would cooperate with each other and pray for each other, rather than compete for students, finances or status.

A VISION FOR BEING EVANGELICAL

The concept of what it means to be an evangelical has taken on a confusingly narrow technical meaning. British theologians may understand evangelicalism to be an American historical phenomena in reaction to 'modernism'. German church leaders might understand it to mean a specific Lutheran denomination. Fundamentalists often equate evangelicalism with the first slide on the slippery slope toward liberalism. Conservative reformed theologians tend to see evangelicalism as a recent schismatic event. Dispensationalists may limit evangelicalism to a specific brand of dispensationalism, and Pentecostals might not wish to consider themselves evangelicals. Latin American Christians may equate the word with Protestants in general. The average American might equate evangelicalism with money-hungry, immoral TV preachers or fight-wing politicians. Religious liberals might think of evangelicals as calloused bigots who are antipathetic to the social problems of the world.

If the term *evangelical* is so confusing, why bother with it? Is the Statistics Task Force of the Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization replacing the term with 'Great

Commission Christians'? These are defined as 'believers who take seriously the Great Commission'.¹ Such terminology is helpful for those who wish to allow Latin American Catholics to participate in strategy consultations. One wonders, though, if Mormons might consider themselves to be Great Commission Christians? How does the LCWE task force define the word **p. 18** 'believer'? and what does it mean to 'take seriously' the Great Commission? Even Muslims believe many of the teachings of Jesus, and are concerned with 'going into all the world'. Using the criteria of 'being serious' about teaching what Jesus commanded in all the world, could Muslims also be called Great Commission Christians? The term *evangelical* must be defined with theological criteria.

It is important that the future of evangelical theological education be based on good theology. Bad theology will cripple the church and make the future of evangelical education superfluous. It is important that a word be used that stands for historic, orthodox, biblical Christianity. If we teach heresy, it is irrelevant that we use effective educational methods in a proactive manner. The recent conference on Evangelical Affirmations held at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School may be a healthy step in the right direction.² This conference defined *evangelical* as 'one who affirms the full authority and complete truthfulness of Scripture'. They also affirm that 'the incarnation, substitutionary death, and bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ constitutes the gospel through which a gracious God reaches out to all humanity.... All those who are not born again are lost'.³ Evangelical Christians need to have a wholehearted commitment to theology that is clearly taught in Scripture, and gracious tolerance for differences in areas where Scripture is not clear. We must be intolerant of doctrines that contradict the clear teaching of Scripture, and tolerant with people who affirm teaching where Scripture is open to various interpretation.

Theological education is teaching about God—how to know and worship God, how to be adopted into his family, how to serve and love him. Theological correctness is more than a trivial denominational squabble; it concerns the correctness of our understanding of God and his plan for creation.

A proactive initiative for changing the future of theological education must be based on the objective truth of Scripture and historic orthodoxy.

A VISION FOR EDUCATIONAL RENEWAL

A proactive vision of the future from an evangelical perspective is necessary, but not sufficient for promoting a healthy and growing **P. 19** world-wide church. The learning/teaching process is the bridge between a proactive view of the future and the needs of the local church. The vision must be translated into educational aims and methods, or the vision will be powerless.

I stated in a previous paper, 'The Challenge of Excellence in Theological Education', that much theological education is not as effective as it could be. I suggested a paradigm shift, or a new way of thinking about knowledge and experience, about theory and practice.⁴ After spending many hours in dialogue with theological educators from Asia,

¹ 'The Amazing Countdown Facts!', *Mission Frontiers*, April–May 1989: 17.

² 'What Does It Mean to Be Evangelical?', *Christianity Today*, June 16, 1989: 60, 63.

³ 'What Was Affirmed', *Christianity Today*, June 16, 1989: 63.

⁴ Presented in Weissach im Tal, Germany, for the ICAA Consultation in June 1987, and subsequently published in *Excellence and Renewal*, ed. R. Youngblood (Paternoster, Exeter, 1988).

Latin America, Europe, and North America I am still convinced that renewal is needed and desired by most theological educators.

The ICAA *Manifesto on the Renewal of Evangelical Theological Education* is a worthwhile tool for generating dialogue between faculty, students and church leaders. The manifesto implicitly assumes felt needs in educational theory and practice for improving the future of theological education. Here are some examples of the educational concerns in the Manifesto.

Many theological educators feel that programmes are not adequately designed with ‘deliberate reference to the context in which they serve’. Many educators would like to do more to tie together the context with the subject matter. The effective teacher is a person who ties one end of a rope around the major themes of the local context, the other end around the truth of Scripture, and then through the power of the Spirit struggles to pull the two together.⁵

The manifesto also states, ‘Our programmes of theological education must orient themselves pervasively in terms of the Christian community being served.’ Yet many schools face a tension between the values of the church and the academic institution. I was consulting with a school in Africa where there was conflict between local pastors and the teachers. One teacher suggested that the school write two different goal statements, one to pacify the local pastors, and one to use for the scholars. While tension between scholars and practitioners is inevitable and healthy, most schools feel the need to do more to orient theological education to the needs of the church. p. 20

The investigations by Robert Ferris show that many schools are open and even anxious for aspects of renewal. He found the greatest discrepancy between actual and desired values in the areas of evaluating outcomes, having a holistic curriculum, and using creative teaching methods.⁶

PLANNING FOR RENEWAL OF EVANGELICAL THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

A desire to improve theological education is a most important step. Genuine change cannot be forced or legislated from accrediting agencies or from denominational boards. Renewal must come from the ‘inside out’ and not from the ‘top down’. Wholehearted renewal can’t be forced, even by the school principal or denominational president. The ICAA cannot legislate lasting renewal. A visionary leader *can* stimulate but not dictate renewal. But lasting renewal can come through dialogue—dialogue between faculty, administrators, church leaders and students. Dialogue can stimulate a shared vision for the future of theological education and then be a tool for strategizing ways to reach that vision.

It is best for faculty, administrators, church leaders and students to get away from the school for a week or a long weekend. It is difficult for the principal of a school to stay at the school and concentrate for several days without interruptions from cooks, family members, building contractors, prospective donors or plumbers. It may be best to begin with local personnel, but often a mix of people is healthy. For example, our Christian Education Department of Wheaton College went to Honey Rock camp for a long weekend.

⁵ This concept is explained more fully in the paper ‘Do We Teach the Bible or do We Teach Students?’ presented at the Evangelical Theological Society at Taylor University in the Spring of 1988.

⁶ Robert W. Ferris, ‘The ICAA Manifesto and Renewal in Theological Education: Clarifying Values and Planning for Change’ (Paper presented at the ICAA Consultation, Wheaton, IL, 14 June 1989).

All the Christian Education faculty and select Christian Education students were with us. We invited a faculty member from the theology department, and another from the psychology department. Several Christian Education faculty from other seminaries also went with us. We spent the weekend without formal papers or presentations. We shared our aspirations for the field and strategized ways of achieving some of our hopes.

There is a need for some structure in such gatherings, but not too much. The purpose is not to try to coerce faculty to 'buy into' the personal agenda of one leader. True renewal cannot be manipulated p.21 by a crafty leader. A valuable agenda for the dialogue retreat might be to reflect on the following model.⁷ For each of the questions it might be helpful to give people the opportunity to think individually, then in small groups and later in the large group. It would be ideal to spend several hours on each question. Ideas need to be recorded for the conclusions of the group. Comments can be recorded on large sheets of paper, on overhead transparencies or on a black board.

The areas for dialogue are illustrated by these nine boxes.⁸ The dialogue boxes can be used in a cycle, every few months, each year, or every five years. The order of where to begin is not important. You may wish to begin with question three and then move to question two and then one. You may even wish to begin with question six: what are our dreams for outcomes in the lives of our students?

	Current Situation	Plan for the Future	What Happened	Actually
Context	1	4	7	
Educational Activities	2	5	8	
Outcomes in students	3	6	9	

1. *What is our present context?* What are the needs of the church? The aspirations of students? The areas of expertise of faculty? Financial needs and resources in facilities? Where are the unreached in the country? What are the expectations of the government toward education? What are the anticipations of family members? What are the economic strengths and weaknesses in the country? What are the abilities and experiences of incoming students? Perhaps some of these questions are not important in your situation, and you should think through other questions that are more helpful.

By starting with the present context, the educational planning begins in the 'real' world of the present. It is fine for far-away committees to dream long-range plans, but practical planning for the future begins p.22 with an understanding of current strengths and weaknesses of the faculty, finances, students, buildings, water supply, and so on. At some point, a realistic and practical plan must seriously consider the present context.

2. *What are our present educational activities?* List all the courses you teach along with the major readings, papers, and practical assignments in each course. What ministry

⁷ The questions have been adapted from a curriculum evaluation model by Robert Stake, 'The Countenance of Educational Evaluation', *Teacher's College Record* vol. 68, 1967, pp. 523-540.

⁸ The model has been used by the author as a consulting tool for theological schools in Nigeria, Kenya, Zaire, Zambia, and Bolivia.

activities are built into the curriculum? What fellowship or discipleship opportunities are available for students and faculty? Think about the effects of the implicit curriculum. What are some of the influences of dormitory life, chapel services, meal opportunities, sports, and clubs? How does the library contribute to the learning of the student? If students are part-time, how does work experience outside of the formal education setting relate to the educational activities?

Do the educational activities reinforce each other? Is there a consistency between classroom activities, practical service assignments and the implicit curriculum of campus life? What could be done to make parts of the holistic educational experience strengthen each other?

3. *What are the present outcomes in the lives of the students?* Think about the students who have recently graduated. What are recent graduates doing now? Are some in ministry, church administration, further education, government, or in the private sector? What is their knowledge of the Bible and theology? What are their skills in preaching and teaching? What are their interpersonal and pastoral skills? Are you satisfied with their abilities in evangelism or church planting? What are their attitudes toward ministry? Are they continuing to study? Are their ministry skills improving? You can dialogue about your informal impressions about outcomes in the lives of students, or you can gather data through surveys.

Next, *evaluate* your answers to the first three questions. Look again at what you wrote on the black board, overhead transparencies, or on the large sheets of paper. What is important about your context? What are your current educational activities? What are the present outcomes in the lives of students? Then ask, 'Do these three logically fit together?' Are your educational *activities* tied to your *context* and to your *outcomes*? Use collective common sense. Think about the results of the school in the lives of the students. Will your graduates be able to make the contribution needed for the needs of your context? Do your answers to question three help solve the problems in question one?

It would be a good idea not to rush discussion on these first three questions. If possible, take a whole day to discuss not only how you [p.23](#) should answer the questions, but also to evaluate how the three parts of your programme build on each other, or how they do not tie together as they could. On the second day move on to the next three boxes. Think about the future. You may wish to plan for the next year, or for the next decade. Spend time in prayer, asking the Lord to give you wisdom and a sense of vision for the future. The future is dependent on the goodness and blessing of God. Questions about the future involve prayerful and visionary goal-setting.

4. *What are your assumptions and plans for the future context?* Some things about the context are out of your control. You are not in control of the economic or political stability in your country. But there are things you can hope to change. What are the assumptions about the nature of the church and the needs for evangelism in the future? What would you like the staffing situation to be in the next year or ten years? What do you expect the facilities to be next year or ten years from now? How many faculty could you anticipate for the future?

5. *What educational activities would you like to be pursuing in the future?* What are your hopes for the future? Would you like to add another academic concentration in counselling or Christian education? Should you upgrade the school to offer a bachelor's or master's degree? Would it be possible for you to offer a more structured internship as a part of the curriculum? Would it be possible to help faculty members do further education? Would you like faculty to spend more informal time in discipleship groups with students? Is there a short course faculty could attend to improve the quality of

teaching? Think about formal and non-formal educational activities. Ask the Lord to give you greater vision for the school.

Then ask if these activities fit your assumptions about the future context of the church, school and country. (Do your answers to question five tie in with the way you answered question four?)

6. *What are desired future outcomes in the lives of your students?* What kind of graduate would you like to see in the future? What kind of knowledge, skills, and attitudes would you like to see in your students? Should they be better at preaching, personal evangelism, interpersonal relationships? Should your students be better at organizing the educational work of the church? Would you like more of them to be able to get into advanced academic programmes? Spend time dialoguing about future outcomes. Prayerfully dream about what you would like the Lord to do in the lives of students through your educational programme.

Step back and *evaluate* your God-given wisdom in planning for the future. Does it make sense that you will have better preachers without [p. 24](#) a change in the educational activities? If outcomes in the lives of students are what you hoped for, will that help the church in your particular context? Try to make connections between all the boxes, as one question impacts another.

A year later it would be ideal if you could meet again and discuss what actually happened in your school as a result of your planning.

7. Were you able to predict the assumptions about the context? Did you finish the new classrooms? Did more prospective students apply for admission?

8. Did you actually carry out desired educational activities? Did you add the courses you hoped to add? Did you assign additional practical assignments for your course? Were you able to use new teaching methods in the course you taught? Did you institute better supervision for the internship?

9. Were the actual outcomes in the students what you hoped for? Did students get the kinds of jobs they desired? Did you see indications of as much spiritual growth as you anticipated? Did the outcomes in students make a contribution to strengthening the church?

We need a proactive, visionary view of the *future*, a solid commitment to *evangelical* theology, and Spirit-led *educational* planning. Without all three aspects theological education could become sickly with dangerous results for the church. With them, we can be optimistic about the future of evangelical theological education. We dare not fail! We must pray and work so that the future will be all that it can be.

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Reflections on the Future of Theological Education by Extension

Richard Kenneth Hart