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A Biblical Vision for Theological Higher Education ¹

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God predestined Christians “to be conformed to the image of his Son” (Rom 8:29).² This truth clarifies the need for Christian education, since, as John Kilner notes, “humanity’s creation in the image of God concerns what people can become, based on who they are now.”³ With this, Jesus’s call to “love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength” (Mark 12:30) further calls for Christian education and justifies the concept of the theological college. From this perspective, Nathan Finn asserts:

Christian higher education is a uniquely academic form of Christian discipleship that builds on and extends the formation that happens in local congregations, directing its application into many of the disciplines and professions to which believers are called. As such,

¹The author presented an earlier form of this address to the leaders of Rift Valley Theological College in Shashamene, Ethiopia, May 15, 2021. On the increasing priority of Christian education and theological colleges in non-Western contexts, see Joel A. Carpenter, Perry L. Glanzer, and Nicholas S. Lantinga, eds., *Christian Higher Education: A Global Reconnaissance* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014). I thank my research assistants Brandon Benziger, Tyler Hall, and Charles Musil for their feedback and suggestions on this essay.

² Unless otherwise noted, all Scriptural translations are from *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007).

³ John F. Kilner, “Made in the Image of God: Implications for Teaching and Learning,” in *Christian Higher Education: Faith, Teaching, and Learning in the Evangelical Tradition*, ed. David S. Dockery and Christopher W. Morgan (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 103; cf. John F. Kilner, “Humanity in God’s Image: Is the Image Really Damaged?,” *JETS* 53 (2010): 301–17; John F. Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny: Humanity in the Image of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014).

our schools are part of the mission of the triune God to redeem the lost and restore the created order to its original and ultimate intention to glorify him.⁴

Against this framework, the twenty-first century is experiencing a theological famine, even among professing evangelical churches.⁵ Some estimate that eighty-five percent of church leaders worldwide today have no theological training, which usually invites false teaching, corruption, and shame.⁶ Yet Paul's charge remains: "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth" (2 Tim 2:15). Similarly, Jesus called his church to "make disciples of all nations," part of which includes "teaching them to obey all that I have commanded" (Matt 28:19–20).

Theological higher education is one of God's means today for helping local churches equip new generations of leaders who themselves can train others to treasure Christ and make him known throughout the world (2 Tim 2:2). Theological colleges (or seminaries) are also strategic mobilizing centers for worldview formation by which men and women become equipped with knowledge and wisdom to proclaim Christ's kingdom through word and deed in the domain of darkness (Eph 3:8–10; Col 1:13; 2:1–3).⁷ These schools may be accredited or unaccredited, and

⁴ Nathan A. Finn, "Knowing and Loving God: Toward a Theology of Christian Higher Education," in *Christian Higher Education: Faith, Teaching, and Learning in the Evangelical Tradition*, ed. David S. Dockery and Christopher W. Morgan (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 55.

⁵ David Bebbington synthesizes evangelical distinctives as biblicism (the authority of Scripture), conversionism (the need for regeneration), crucicentrism (cross-centeredness), and activism (esp. mission as disciple making). David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s*, 1st ed. (Florence: Taylor and Francis, 2003), 1–19; David W. Bebbington, "About the Definition of Evangelicalism . . .," *Institute for the Study of American Evangelicals* 83 (2012): 1–6. See also the essays by Albert Mohler and Kevin Bauder in Andrew David Naselli and Collin Hansen, eds., *Four Views on the Spectrum of Evangelicalism*, Counterpoints (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011).

⁶ Figure taken from <https://trainingleadersinternational.org/85>.

⁷ This study uses the category of "theological college" for all post-secondary institutions (certificate, undergraduate, and graduate) centered on God's Word to equip Christians, train ministers, and clarify how God holds all things

they may be independent, denominational, or local church based. Regardless, faithful theological higher education can benefit Christ's universal church and serve as an agent for extending the church's mission on earth. This conviction drives this study, which addresses the following six areas:

1. The place of theological higher education in church history
2. Scripture as the foundation of theological education
3. The supreme goal of theological higher education
4. The process of theological education
5. Objectives and assessment within theological education
6. Theological higher education and the church's mission

1. The Place of Theological Higher Education in Church History

Nathan Finn helpfully defines *theology* as “thinking rightly about God and his world for the sake of living rightly before God in his world.”⁸ The psalmist captures the essence of theology when he asserts his desire to dwell in Yahweh's house “to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and inquire in his temple” (Ps 27:4). By its nature, theology is different than any area of inquiry, for the study is less about investigating and more about receiving for a greater good. As Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920), Prime Minister of the Netherlands, notes:

Theology is a science which ... is distinguished from all other sciences by this fundamental point, that it does not occupy itself with the knowledge of the creature, but of the Creator; hence of a God who, as creator, cannot be included in the range of the creaturely.... In all other sciences man observes and thoughtfully investigates the object, and subjects it to himself, but in theology the object is active; it does not stand open, but gives itself to be seen; does not allow itself to be investigated, but reveals itself; and employs man as instrument only to cause the knowledge of its Being to radiate.... In giving us theology, God ... wills that the knowledge

together in Christ and the implications of this truth. People today commonly use the term “seminary” for graduate education devoted to training ministers of God's Word; the title comes from the Latin term meaning “plant nursery” (*seminarium*), which implies a breeding ground for fruitfulness.

⁸ Finn, “Knowing and Loving God,” 41.

of his Being shall be received by us; and that, having been cast into the furrows of our minds and hearts, it shall germinate; and, having germinated, that it shall bear fruit to the honor of his name.⁹

The term “college” comes from a Latin term meaning “partnership” (*collegium*). From early days in the Medieval Era, colleges were educational organizations made up of people who partnered together to train for a common task or in a common discipline. In contrast, the term “university” derives from the Latin term meaning “the whole” (*universitas*), and the ancients originally linked the university to the study of God’s universe in all its aspects. Already in the Middle Ages those in the West considered theology to be the queen of the sciences and the theological college (or seminary) to be at the center of the greater university.¹⁰ The reason relates to the nature of revelation.

Specifically, to think rightly about God requires considering his two spheres of revelation—his works and words, the world and the Word. The Word is part of the world even as the theological college is part of the greater university. Yet always and properly the theological college ought to remain at the center of every other academic field because Jesus, the living Word, “fills all in all” (Eph 1:23) and “in him all things hold together” (Col 1:17) and because God’s written Word most clearly and infallibly clarifies why this is so and what the implications are for every other aspect of reality—whether mathematics, science, music, philosophy, history, literature, or the like. Theological schools seek to train students to know and love the most important thing about every

⁹ Abraham Kuyper, “The Biblical Criticism of the Present Day,” trans. J. Hendrik de Vries, *BSac* 61.243 (1904): 410–11.

¹⁰ Bruce Shelley writes, “The supreme task of the [medieval] university was to understand and explain the light of God’s revealed truth.... The chief doctrines of the Christian faith were regarded fixed. The purpose of discussion was to show the reasonableness of the doctrines and to explain their implications.” Bruce L. Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language*, 5th ed. (Nashville: Nelson, 2021), 66–67. Moreover, John Kilner helpfully observes: “Bringing Christ into the picture renders a Christian university a true university, in away that a secular university is not; for a true *university* must be equipping students with a full *universe* of ideas rather than leaving out of consideration something as crucial as the one who holds the universe together (Col. 1:17).” Kilner, “Made in the Image of God,” 113.

discipline—God, from whom, through whom, and to whom are all things (Rom 11:36).

With respect to God's works, Nehemiah praises: "You are the LORD, you alone. You have made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them; and you preserve all of them; and the host of heaven worships you" (Neh 9:6). Yahweh declares, "I am the LORD, and there is no other, besides me there is no God.... I form light and create darkness, I make well-being and create calamity, I am the LORD, who does all these things" (Isa 45:7). In view of God's bigness, the Preacher urges: "Consider the work of God: who can make straight what he has made crooked? In the day of prosperity be joyful, and in the day of adversity consider: God has made the one as well as the other, so that man may not find out anything that will be after him" (Eccl 7:13–14). Right now, Jesus is speaking all things into being—the most distant stars and the smallest grains of barley, every rose petal and a swallow's song—indeed our every breath. "He upholds the universe by the word of his power" (Heb 1:3). If he stopped speaking, creation would stop existing (cf. Job 34:14–15).¹¹

As for God's words, Jesus prays, "Sanctify them in your truth; your word is truth" (John 17:17). Similarly, the apostles recognize that "all Scripture is breathed out by God" (2 Tim 3:16) and that within the biblical text "men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Pet 2:21). All God's words are "perfect ... sure ... right ... pure" (Ps 19:6–8). "Scripture cannot be broken" (John 10:35), and by his precepts God gives life (Ps 119:93).

Only through God's Word do creatures rightly understand God's perspective on the world. Therefore, God's Word must stand at the center of theological higher education, informing all disciplines and embodying the highest priority of administrative, faculty, study, and financial resources. While so much education in our world has departed from God's Word as the central and unifying element to all disciplines, the warning of Martin Luther (1483–1546), seminal figure in the Protestant Reformation, continues to matter today:

¹¹ On God's overarching sovereignty over his creation, see John Piper, *Providence* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020).

I would not advise anyone to send his son to a place where the Holy Scriptures do not come first. Every institution where the Word of God is not taught regularly must fail.... I greatly fear that the universities, unless they teach the Holy Scriptures diligently and impress them on the young students, are wide gates to hell.¹²

2. Scripture as the Foundation of Theological Education

Scripture must stand at the center of the theological school's curriculum and community, for Scripture is the only infallible guide for all human faith (doctrine) and practice (ethics).¹³ As John Woodbridge attests, "Scripture, the central focus of which is Christ, constitutes a *norma normans* ('the determining norm'). It rules over all human opinions, church traditions, church doctrines, creeds, and academic disciplines ('science,' or natural philosophy; liberal arts)."¹⁴ In Wayne

¹² Martin Luther, *To the Christian Nobility* (1520), in *Luther's Works*, vol. 44, *Christian in Society I*, ed. James Atkinson (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966), 202. For a number of overviews of how Luther's words have proved true, see James Tunstead Burtchaell, *The Dying of the Light: The Disengagement of Colleges and Universities from Their Christian Churches* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998); George M. Marsden, *The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); George M. Marsden, *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Carl R. Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2020); George M. Marsden, *The Soul of the American University Revisited: From Protestant to Postsecular* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).

¹³ The "Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy" (1978) states: "Infallible signifies the quality of neither misleading nor being misled and so safeguards in categorical terms the truth that Holy Scripture is a sure, safe, and reliable rule and guide in all matters. Similarly, *inerrant* signifies the quality of being free from falsehood or mistake and so safeguards the truth that Holy Scripture is entirely true and trustworthy in all its assertions. We affirm that canonical Scripture should always be interpreted on the basis that it is infallible and inerrant" (<http://www.bible-researcher.com/chicago1.html>).

¹⁴ John D. Woodbridge, "The Authority of Holy Scripture: Commitments for Christian Higher Education in the Evangelical Tradition," in *Christian Higher Education: Faith, Teaching, and Learning in the Evangelical Tradition*, ed. David S. Dockery and Christopher W. Morgan (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 61.

Grudem's words, to speak of Scripture's authority means that "all the words of Scripture are God's words in such a way that to disbelieve or disobey any word of Scripture is to disbelieve or disobey God."¹⁵

God's Word must be the core of theological higher education, for through it alone does Christ build his church (Matt 16:18) by enabling people to know God and to live for him in his world. Scripture is necessary for every stage of the Christian life in this age—rebirth, sanctification, and perseverance.

1. *Only through his Word does God grant rebirth in Christ, making saints out of sinners* (cf. Ps 119:93; Gal 3:2; Jas 1:18). Paul says, "Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ" (Rom 10:17). Similarly, Peter tells his believing audience, "You have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God" (1 Pet 1:23).
2. *Only through his Word does God empower saints to greater holiness* (cf. Ps 119:50; 2 Pet 1:4). Thus, Jesus prays, "Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth" (John 17:17). Paul also notes how God's breathed-out Scripture is "profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work" (2 Tim 3:16–17).
3. *Only through his Word does God sustain saints to glory* (cf. Deut 8:3; Rom 1:16; 2 Tim 3:15). Paul tells the Ephesian elders, "Now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified" (Acts 20:32).

John Sailhamer has helpfully termed the theological school a "textual community."¹⁶ He writes, "The central task of the seminary always remains the same—the interpretation of Scripture."¹⁷ He adds, "By

¹⁵ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020), 62.

¹⁶ On the term "seminary," see footnote 7.

¹⁷ John H. Sailhamer, "The Nature, Purpose, and Task of a Theological Seminary," in *The Seminary as a Textual Community: Exploring John*

viewing the written Word of God as a component in a larger whole of the seminary text-community, ... all departments which participate in the seminary curriculum share the same theoretical task (interpretation of texts) and differ only with respect to the aspect of the social structure (text-community) where it is applied.”¹⁸ Significantly, a right and full understanding of Scripture is only possible when “spiritual people” engage the “spiritual truths” it embodies (1 Cor 2:13–14). That is, as Paul notes regarding the unbelieving Jews inability to read Moses’s old covenant material rightly, “Their minds were hardened. For to this day, when they read the old covenant, that same veil remains unlifted, because only through Christ is it taken away” (2 Cor 3:14). The theological college (or seminary) must be a truly *Christian* community.

Institutions of theological higher education serve the church and families for the sake of the broader world, all under God’s Lordship in Christ. Because the church is the guardian of Scripture (1 Tim 6:20; 2 Tim 1:12, 14) with the principal responsibility of making disciples of Jesus (Matt 28:18–20), the theological college (or seminary) is accountable to the church to maintain theological faithfulness and to mobilize for the greater global mission of kingdom advance.¹⁹ Furthermore, because local congregations provide context to see family instruction flourish and to see it completed into adulthood (e.g., Deut 6:6–7, 20–25; Ps 78:5–8; Eph 6:1–4), the theological school rightly supplies a context for aiding the most central components to Christian maturity, all within the broader academy and world. Figure 1 attempts to show how the theological college, centered on Scripture, serves both the church and wider world.

Sailhamer’s Vision for Theological Education, ed. Ched Spellman and Jason K. Lee (Dallas: Fontes, 2021), 14–15; cf. 24.

¹⁸ Sailhamer, “The Nature, Purpose, and Task of a Theological Seminary,” 4; cf. 11.

¹⁹ See Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert, *What Is the Mission of the Church? Making Sense of Social Justice, Shalom, and the Great Commission* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011).

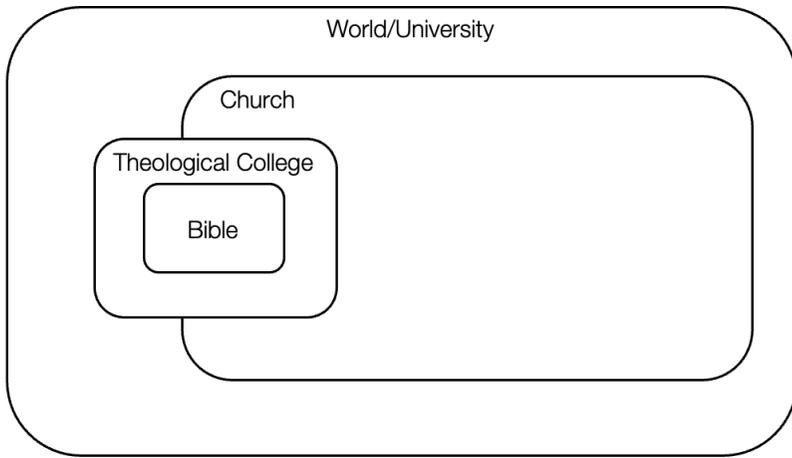


Figure 1. The Theological College (or Seminary) in Relation to the Church, World, and Scripture²⁰

Finally, in a day when so many local congregations have untrained leaders, theological higher education bears the vital task of training new generations of ministers. Amid the rising waves of Protestant liberalism in the West and writing about the role theological schools to equip the church's ministers, Benjamin B. Warfield (1851–1921), Professor of Theology at Princeton Seminary, claims, “A low view of the functions of the ministry will naturally carry with it a low conception of the training

²⁰ A similar figure appears in Sailhamer, “The Nature, Purpose, and Task of a Theological Seminary,” 27. Sailhamer writes, “The model of a seminary intersecting with the church rather than embedded within it is not only more flexible but also provides a wider base for fulfilling the seminary’s legitimate commitments to other realms, such as Academia.” *Ibid.*, 39–40. Sailhamer’s perspective stands against that of Philip R. Davies, *Whose Bible Is It Anyway?*, 2nd ed. (London: T&T Clark, 2004). For helpful responses to Davies, see Francis Watson, “Bible, Theology, and the University: A Response to Philip Davies,” *JSOT* 21.71 (1996): 3–16; Mark W. Hamilton, “The Bible and the Common Good: Meditations on Teaching Scripture in the Christian University,” *ResQ* 52 (2010): 193–206; George H. Guthrie, “The Study of Holy Scripture and the Work of Christian Higher Education,” in *Christian Higher Education: Faith, Teaching, and Learning in the Evangelical Tradition*, ed. David S. Dockery and Christopher W. Morgan (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 84–88.

necessary for it.”²¹ If ministers are to be merely overseers of religious programs, agents designed to advance modern culture, or inspirational speakers, then certainly an intimate knowledge of Scripture is unnecessary. But if ministers are called to be specialists in God’s Word and winsome advocates for the truth, everything changes. As Warfield says,

If the minister is the mouth-piece of the Most High, charged with a message to deliver, to expound and enforce; standing in the name of God before men, to make known to them who and what this God is, and what his purposes of grace are, and what his will for his people [is]—then, the whole aspect of things is changed. Then, it is the prime duty of the minister to know his message; to know the instructions which have been committed to him for the people, and to know them thoroughly; to be prepared to declare them with confidence and with exactness, to commend them with wisdom, and to urge them with force and defend them with skill, and to build men up by means of them into a true knowledge of God and of his will, which will be unassailable in the face of the fiercest assault. No second-hand knowledge of the revelation of God for the salvation of a ruined world can suffice the needs of a ministry whose function it is to convey this revelation to men, commend it to their acceptance and apply it in detail to their needs.... For such a ministry ... nothing will suffice for it but to know; to know the Book; to know it first hand; and to know it through and through. And what is required first of all for training men for such a ministry is that the Book should be given them in its very words as it has come from God’s hand and in the fulness of meaning, as that meaning has been ascertained by the labors of generations of men of God who have brought to bear upon it all the resources of sanctified scholarship and consecrated thought.²²

²¹ Benjamin B. Warfield, “Our Seminary Curriculum,” in *Benjamin B. Warfield: Selected Shorter Writings*, ed. John E. Meeter; 2 vols. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2001), 1:369 (orig. published in *The Presbyterian* [Sept 15, 1909], 7–8).

²² Warfield, “Our Seminary Curriculum,” 1:372.

Similarly, serving as Professor of New Testament at Princeton Seminary, J. Gresham Machen (1881–1937) stresses that a preacher is true to his calling only if he succeeds “in reproducing and applying the message of the Word of God.”²³ That is, the Bible “is not merely one of the sources of the preacher’s inspiration, but the very sum and substance of what he has to say. But if so, then whatever else the preacher need not know, he must know the Bible; he must know it first hand, and be able to interpret it and defend it.”²⁴

The living God has given the trustees, administrations, and faculty of theological colleges the sacred task of training leaders who can serve both the church and broader world by knowing God, by valuing him and those made in his image, and by faithfully proclaiming God’s Word, guarding the truth, and shepherding God’s flock. With respect to an elder in the church, Paul stresses how he “must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it” (Tit 1:9). Paul also tells Timothy, “What you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also” (2 Tim 2:2). Paul trained Timothy, whom the apostle commissioned to train others, who in turn would be equipped to train others. Four generations of teachers are mentioned in this single verse, and theological schools must serve churches by assisting in training “faithful men” who can train others also.²⁵

Paul clarifies part of what he means by “faithfulness” later in the chapter: “Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth” (2:15). There is a right way and a wrong way to handle God’s Word,

²³ J. Gresham Machen, “The Minister and His Greek Testament,” in *J. Gresham Machen: Selected Shorter Writers*, ed. D. G. Hart (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2004), 211 (orig. published in *The Presbyterian* 88 [Feb 7, 1918]).

²⁴ Machen, “The Minister and His Greek Testament,” 212.

²⁵ The apostles also rejoice in seeing Christian women equipped in God’s Word. While stressing the need to maintain complementary roles within corporate worship (1 Cor 14:34–35; 1 Tim 2:12), they celebrate how Priscilla and Aquilla together taught Apollos in private (Acts 18:26), how Timothy’s Jewish mother and grandmother trained him as a child in the Old Testament Scriptures (2 Tim 3:15; cf. 1:5), and how older women were to teach younger women (Tit 2:3–5).

and if you handle it in a way that God does not approve, you will be ashamed at the final judgment.²⁶

Peter also says, “There are some things in [Paul’s letters] that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures” (2 Pet 3:16). Institutions of higher theological education bear the high task of equipping men and women who are neither ignorant nor unstable but who wrestle hard with God’s Word until they understand it. Peter further asserts, “Whoever speaks, [do so] as one who speaks oracles of God” (1 Pet 4:11). Christian teachers have authority only in so far as their words derive from, explicate, or apply God’s Word—never going “beyond what is written” (1 Cor 4:6). Otherwise, the result will be our own destruction. As James warns, “Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness” (Jas 3:1).

The Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, is authoritative because “all Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (2 Tim 3:16). In the prophetic writings, “men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Pet 1:20–21), and therefore the very words and not just the ideas come from God (1 Cor 2:13). And because the very words of the living God fill the Scriptures, every part “endures forever” (Ps 119:160) and is “pure” (12:6), “true” (119:142), and “right” (119:172). Part of the role of the theological college is to equip men and women who can declare “the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27), unveiling God’s purposes culminating in Christ from creation to consummation.²⁷

There is no greater need in this age than to faithfully proclaim and live out God’s authoritative and inerrant Word. The Bible is foundational to all of life, and this demands that theological colleges (or seminaries)

²⁶ Every minister does not need to study the Scriptures in the original languages, but some ministers in every generation must to preserve the integrity of the truth. For more on this, see Jason S. DeRouchie, “The Profit of Employing the Biblical Languages: Scriptural and Historical Reflections,” *Them* 37 (2012): 32–50; cf. Enoch Okode, “A Case for Biblical Languages: Are Hebrew and Greek Optional or Indispensable?,” *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology* 29.2 (2010): 91–106.

²⁷ For more, see Jason S. DeRouchie, Oren R. Martin, and Andrew David Naselli, *40 Questions about Biblical Theology*, 40 Questions (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2020).

have robust confessions of faith that root the school in the great evangelical Christian tradition, that clarify the common doctrine that is treasured, and that set the perspectival guard rails that no faculty member can cross.²⁸ The administrators and professors must be those whose teaching and scholarship aligns with Paul's resolve: "We have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God" (2 Cor 4:2). In service to Christ's church, theological institutions must "guard the deposit" God has entrusted to his disciples and avoid the type of "irreverent babble and contradictions of what is falsely called 'knowledge'" (1 Tim 6:20; cf. 2 Tim 1:14).²⁹

3. The Supreme Goal of Theological Higher Education

The Bible is foundational to theological training and is the means for seeing souls saved and sanctified. Yet the highest goal of theological education must ever remain to know Christ, be conformed into his likeness, and make him known. Paul says of his own mission: "We have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of [Christ's] name among all the nations" (Rom 1:5). The

²⁸ Historically, the central tenets of the Great Tradition as testified to in the Nicene Creed (381), the Chalcedonian Definition (451), and, more recently, the Lausanne Covenant (1974) have supplied a unifying expression of core Christian doctrine. For an overview, see Finn, "Knowing and Loving God," 44–56. Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary where I teach is strongly a confessional institution that embraces the *Baptist Faith and Message 2000*, the *Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy*, the *Danvers Statement on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, and the *Nashville Statement on Human Sexuality*. Theological colleges will help preserve doctrinal fidelity by hiring faculty whose ministries already prove their joyful and convictional affirmation of such statements of faith and by ensuring regularly that the faculty continue to joyfully uphold them.

²⁹ For more on Scripture's authority and place in all Christian education, see D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge, eds., *Scripture and Truth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983); David S. Dockery, *Christian Scripture: An Evangelical Perspective on Inspiration, Authority and Interpretation* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1995); D. A. Carson, ed., *The Enduring Authority of the Christian Scriptures* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016).

mission of making disciples exist because worship doesn't.³⁰ One day there will be no more need for theological higher education, but worshiping Jesus—"for the sake of his name"—will last forever.

Education is a foundational aspect to all human existence. As those made in God's image, we are born to learn, to discover, to grow, and to know—all to display God's glory in Christ by resembling, representing, and reflecting him in this world. And all education should be Christian education, for learning, as with everything else, finds its source, context, and goal in Christ. "For by [the Son] all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together" (Col 1:16–17). We are to "take every thought captive to obey Christ" (2 Cor 10:5), his word is to dwell richly in our hearts (Col 3:16), and we are to do all our words and deeds in his name (3:17). John Kilner rightly warns, "Teaching with no mention of Christ cultivates in students the view that there is secular truth and there is Christian truth, with Christ having no necessary relevance to secular truth."³¹ Yet such is not the case.

Jesus holds everything in this world together—birds and bees, wind and waves, trash and transportation (Col 1:17). The quest to know what is true, therefore, is a quest ultimately to know more of Christ, who "upholds the universe by the word of his power" (Heb 1:3).

Every star in the sky, every note that is sung,
every bird that flies, and every game that is won ...

Every business transaction made, every news broadcast recorded,
every brick that is laid, and every sock that is sorted ...

Jesus reigns at the bus stop and at the stop light,
in the hospital and over the bomb-filled night.

Whether on the playground or in the lab,
in the bedroom or in the cab,

³⁰ Adapting a phrase from John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad! The Supremacy of God in Missions*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 15.

³¹ Kilner, "Made in the Image of God," 112.

Jesus Christ is preeminent, upholding and guiding everything.
And because of this, knowing him is of surpassing worth.

Because Jesus is supreme over all things, Paul justly and necessarily approached all of life as Christian education: “I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord” (Phil 3:8). This quest did not separate him from the real world, but rather compelled him to see all things through Jesus. “I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor 2:2). On this verse, D. A. Carson writes:

This does not mean that this was a new departure for Paul, still less that Paul was devoted to blissful ignorance of anything and everything other than the cross. No, what he means is that all he does and teaches is tied to the cross. He cannot long talk about Christian joy, or Christian ethics, or Christian fellowship, or the Christian doctrine of God, or anything else, without finally tying it to the cross. Paul is gospel-centered; he is cross-centered.³²

The “whole counsel of God” that Scripture discloses magnifies the majesty of Jesus over all things. All history (Mark 1:14), the Mosaic law-covenant (Rom 10:4), and many prophetic predictions (Acts 3:18) point to Jesus, and in him every promise becomes Yes (2 Cor 1:20). Keeping God’s word central requires that the theological college, and indeed the broader university, also keep Christ central since only through beholding his glory are we “being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another” (3:18).

Paul would say that coffee and peach cobbler supply opportunities to praise the Giver of what is good (1 Tim 4:3–4). “So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Cor 10:31). Similarly, the apostle would say that life’s pressures and worries become opportunities to thank God and pray. “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God” (Phil 4:6). Furthermore, Paul would tell us that suffering enables us to rejoice in Christ’s power to sustain. “But

³² D. A. Carson, *The Cross and Christian Ministry: Leadership Lessons from 1 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2004), 37–38.

[the Lord] said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me” (2 Cor 12:9). John Piper rightly notes:

God created the world and inspired the Scriptures and is guiding history to its consummation for one ultimate purpose, namely, to share with his creatures the ultimate pleasure that he has in admiring his Son, the radiance of his own glory (Heb 1:3). Therefore, the ultimate reason that [theological education] exists is to live and teach in such a way that students will see Jesus in every subject as infinitely admirable and thus to share in the pleasure that God has in admiring the glory of his Son, and then be equipped to spread that everywhere.³³

The educational task of higher theological education must be more than giving people tools that will enable them to live, as if something in this temporary earthly sphere was the ultimate end. No, *the Lord establishes theological institutions to provide students with those things that make life worth living*—to give them a biblical vision of reality for Jesus’s glory, to help them grasp the treasure of the gospel in their jar of clay, and to empower them through skill training, instruction, and modeling to study, practice, and teach God’s Word throughout God’s world in a way that will honor the One who has spoken and mobilize others to do the same.³⁴ Faculty must teach students to think about truth, values, and worldview in relation to Christ, and from this framework to consider how any subject matter bears on people’s lives. As

³³ John Piper, “The Consummation of History and the Admiration of Christ,” Inaugural Convocation Address, October 3, 2010, Bethlehem College & Seminary, <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/the-consummation-of-history-and-the-admiration-of-christ>.

³⁴ Speaking out against the secularization of Christian education, Machen declared in 1918, “The real trouble with the modern exaltation of ‘practical’ studies at the expense of the humanities is that it is based upon a vicious conception of the whole purpose of education. The modern conception of the purpose of education is merely intended to enable a man to live, but not to give him those things that make life worth living.” Machen, “The Minister and His Greek Testament,” 211.

Dockery notes, “Faculty ... should be encouraged to explore how the truth of the Christian faith bears on all disciplines.”³⁵ He continues:

The Christian faith, informed by scriptural interpretation, theology, philosophy, and history, has bearing on every subject and academic discipline. While at times the Christian’s research in any field might follow similar paths and methods as secularists, doxology at both the beginning and ending of one’s teaching and research marks the works of believers from that of secularists.³⁶

Only with such a perspective will the theological college truly strengthen the church and be part of extending Christ’s kingdom.

4. The Process of Theological Education

Every theological college must develop in at least three spheres, as represented in the resolve of the priest-scribe Ezra. In Ezra’s day, as in our own, there was a great need for spiritual leadership. We are told that Ezra was “a scribe skilled in the Law of Moses” (Ezra 7:6). We then read that the Persian king granted Ezra’s every request and that his ministry flourished “because the [good] hand of the LORD his God was upon him” (7:6, 9). Ezra 7:10 then provides the reason for this divine favor: “For Ezra had set his heart to study and practice Yahweh’s law, and to teach both statute and rule in Israel” (author’s translation). Study → Practice → Teach ... in that order. This was the nature and process of Ezra’s approach to education, and each stage grew out of his commitment to God’s Word.³⁷

³⁵ David S. Dockery, “Christian Higher Education: An Introduction,” in *Christian Higher Education: Faith, Teaching, and Learning in the Evangelical Tradition*, ed. David S. Dockery and Christopher W. Morgan (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 30.

³⁶ Dockery, “Christian Higher Education,” 33.

³⁷ The discussion that follows develops the three stages of Ezra’s resolve using six habits of mind and heart found first in John Piper, *Think: The Life of the Mind and the Love of God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 191–98. These include observing, understanding, evaluating, feeling, applying, expressing. I have adapted them here and linked them to the order of Ezra’s resolve. See also Guthrie, “The Study of Holy Scripture and the Work of Christian Higher Education.”

Study

Institutions of theological higher education must seek to equip men and women *to study* God’s Word. If theology concerns thinking rightly about God to display God faithfully, Dockery is correct that a key task of theological schools is to nurture “Christian thinking and thinking Christianly, learning to think carefully, creatively, and critically, seeking to engage the academy and the culture.”³⁸ The principle object of inquiry is Scripture, and professors must teach students how to observe carefully what the text says and how it says it. Then one must understand rightly and evaluate fairly. These three elements of study—observing, understanding, evaluating—should guide all spheres of education, whether the object of inquiry is the Word or the broader world. Yet in relation to Scripture, these three activities involve a movement from exegesis to theology.

In exegesis, one assesses the genre, structure, grammar, and historical and literary contexts of a given passage. Then in shaping theology, one considers how the passage contributes to the Bible’s storyline climaxing in Christ (biblical theology), what the passage teaches with respect to doctrine (systematic theology), and how the passage relates to today (practical theology).³⁹ Study is about observing carefully, understanding rightly, and evaluating fairly, and professors across the range of theological disciplines must create assignments that help students study well.

Practice

Next, the theological college (or seminary) must equip men and women *to practice* the truth of God’s Word by helping them feel appropriately in accordance with the truths they have studied and apply wisely all that has been observed, understood, and evaluated. Jesus regularly tagged the religious leaders of his day “hypocrites” (e.g., Matt 15:7; 23:13, 15, 23, 25, 27, 29, 51) because “faith apart from works is useless” (Jas 2:20). John Kilner affirms that “character development and

³⁸ Dockery, “Christian Higher Education,” 29.

³⁹ For more on this process, see Jason S. DeRouchie, *How to Understand and Apply the Old Testament: Twelve Steps from Exegesis to Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2017); Andrew David Naselli, *How to Understand and Apply the New Testament: Twelve Steps from Exegesis to Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2017).

faith formation must have their place alongside intellectual growth as aims of Christian higher education.”⁴⁰

For example, Paul says, “Note then the kindness and severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God’s kindness to you, provided you continue in his kindness. Otherwise you too will be cut off” (Rom 11:22). Paul’s words are a warning, and having studied them, our first step in applying them is feeling appropriately. We should fear the Lord, and then we must flee from wickedness. God takes sin seriously, and so should we!

The psalmist declares, “[Yahweh’s] delight is not in the strength of the horse, nor his pleasure in the legs of a man, but the LORD takes pleasure in those who fear him, in those who hope in his steadfast love” (Ps 147:10–11). Can you stand in awe of the fact that the God who made heaven and earth would take pleasure in you? And having felt this awe, may you fear him, hoping in his unchanging and never-ending love.

Teach

Finally, the theological college must equip men and women *to teach* the truths of the Word to a world in need. This teaching can come through sermons, but it also appears in books, podcasts, Sunday school lessons, counseling appointments, coffee meetings, etc. Students must learn to express in speech and writing all that they have studied and practiced and to do so in ways that others can know and enjoy the accuracy, clarity, truthfulness, preciousness, and helpfulness of the truths.

Synthesis

Paul elevates character traits in his requirements for the “noble task” of overseer/elder in God’s church:

Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God’s

⁴⁰ Kilner, “Made in the Image of God,” 109.

church? He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil. (1 Tim 3:2–7).

Paul supplies a similar account in Titus 1:6–9. Considering this, George Guthrie is correct that Christian higher education must seek “to advance the kingdom of God through thinking and living Christianly in and about the world. Faithful teaching should lead to faithful being, both for the teacher and the student in Christian higher education.”⁴¹

Far too many teachers engage in their task before having adequately studied, often resulting in them speaking things God never said and thus elevating their authority over God’s. Others start teaching before having personally applied God’s Word, and by this they become hypocrites promoting holiness with their lips when their own hearts are far from God. Still others apply without having studied, and by this they allow their own definitions of right and wrong to guide their conduct rather than God’s revealed Word.

The Lord’s good hand gave favor to Ezra because he studied, practiced, and taught God’s Word. This pattern of theological education has long guided my own approach to ministry, and I commend it here. The theological college (or seminary) must help students (1) observe carefully, (2) understand rightly, (3) evaluate fairly, (4) feel appropriately, (5) act wisely, and (6), express effectively.⁴²

5. Objectives and Assessment within Theological Education

As noted, local churches complement family discipleship and extend it into adulthood, and theological institutions serve churches in this task. Because the human family provides a pattern for the household of God (e.g., 1 Tim 3:4–5, 15), God’s instructions to the kingdom-community at large can help clarify the function of the theological school.

Theological education needs biblically grounded objectives that provide measures for assessing students’ growth. Psalm 78:5–8 supplies

⁴¹ Guthrie, “The Study of Holy Scripture and the Work of Christian Higher Education,” 99.

⁴² See Piper, *Think*, 191–98 for a development of all six of these habits of heart and mind.

four such objectives and provides a helpful starting place for education seeking Christ's glory.

[Yahweh] established a testimony in Jacob and appointed a law in Israel, which he commanded our fathers to teach to their children, that the next generation might know them, the children yet unborn, and arise and tell them to their children, *so that they should set their hope in God and not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments; and that they should not be like their fathers, a stubborn and rebellious generation, a generation whose heart was not steadfast, whose spirit was not faithful to God.* (Ps 78:5–8)

With a vision of equipping generations to know what is true and the One who is truth, Psalm 78:7–8 declares that parents should teach youth God's instruction so that they would (1) set their hope in God, (2) remember the works of God, (3) follow the ways of God, and (4) remain faithful to God. In seeking the obedience of faith for the sake of Christ's name among all the nations (Rom 1:5), theological colleges must seek to develop students who hope, remember, follow, and remain faithful.

Hoping in God

Paul says, "Whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope" (Rom 15:4). Left to itself, the world is without hope, but in God through Christ there is living hope (1 Pet 1:3). All the promises of God are "Yes" in Jesus (2 Cor 1:20), and all authority in the universe belongs to Jesus (Matt 28:18). Therefore, *all things* are possible with God. Reconciliation after a broken relationship is possible *because of Jesus*. Healing can come after deep loss *because of Jesus*. Sustaining grace in suffering can be found *because of Jesus*. In every theological school, professors must enter the classroom with the Bible open to help students gain hope in God, and to instill with them a message of hope for a broken world.

Remembering the Works of God

God gives his Word so that we can know and remember what he has done. History manifests God's works, and his Word is the inspired and authoritative guide for understanding rightly how to perceive them. Both

the Word and the world are essential for knowing God, and remembering his works is central to who we are to be as humans. Judges warns how quickly people can forget God: “And there arose another generation after them who did not know the LORD or the work that he had done for Israel” (Judg 2:10). God’s call to theological institutions, therefore, is to train men and women who know who God is and what he has done. “Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come” (1 Cor 10:11). “Consider the work of God!” (Eccl 7:13).

Our eternity rides on whether we recognize and delight in God as Creator, Judge, and Redeemer. When we forget that God designs trees and trout and taxi cabs to get us to Jesus, we put ourselves in danger, for Paul declares that “the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against *all* ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who ... did not honor ... God or give thanks to him” (Rom 1:18, 21). When we fail to embrace that God purposes tsunamis and tumors and torture to get us to Jesus, we miss that Christ’s power is magnified in our weakness (2 Cor 12:9–10) and that “to live is Christ and to die is gain” (Phil 1:21).

The theological college (or seminary) must determine to raise up a generation of men and women who remember their Creator (Eccl 12:1)—the “God who makes everything” (11:5)—and honor him accordingly.

Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! “For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?” “Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?” For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen. (Rom 11:33–36)

Following the Ways of God

Theological students must follow God’s ways. “As he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy’” (1 Pet 1:15–16). As the theological school assists Christ’s church in making disciples, the college (or seminary) faculty must teach students to obey all that Jesus commanded (Matt 28:20). The goal is not merely to instruct; we instruct to see people obey. “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Matt 4:4). Jesus prays, “Keep them from the evil one,” and then he

says, “Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth” (John 17:15, 17). Holiness grows as we connect with the Word of truth, and the enemy is overcome through the Word of truth.⁴³ Through Scripture we encounter Jesus, and as we behold his glory, we “are transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another” (2 Cor 3:18). Through their lives and profession, many faculty members proclaim to their students: “This is the will of God: your sanctification” (1 Thess 4:3). And may we all live with the recognition that there is a “holiness without which no one will see the Lord” (Heb 12:14).

Remaining Faithful to God

Finally, the psalmist urges readers not to be like their “stubborn and rebellious” fathers “whose heart was not steadfast, whose spirit was not faithful to God” (Ps 78:8). Moses confronted his generation who continually complained amid suffering and longed to return to the “ease” of slavery in Egypt. He declares to them, “You are a stubborn people,” and then asserts, “From the day you came out of the land of Egypt until you came to this place, you have been rebellious against the LORD” (Deut 9:6–7). Jesus notes how some “hear the word,” “endure for a while,” and “then when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away” (Mark 4:16–17). Still others “hear the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it proves unfruitful” (4:18–19).

Thanks be to God that “you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers ... with the precious blood of Christ” (1 Pet 1:18–19). In Jesus, new trajectories are set, such that “our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin” (Rom 6:6).

The history of Christianity is wrought with failures of leaders like Demas who, “in love with this present world” (2 Tim 4:10), fall away just as “the sow, after washing herself, returns to wallow in the mire” (2 Pet 2:22). “They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us” (1 John 2:19).

⁴³ See Jason S. DeRouchie, “Greater Is He: A Primer on Spiritual Warfare for Kingdom Advance,” *SBJT* 25.2 (2021): 21–55.

In contrast, faculty and administrators of theological schools must, with Moses, choose “to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin” (Heb 11:25). Moses “considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward” (11:26), and this should be the witness and the charge of every Christian educator. The author of Hebrews urges,

Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end. (Heb 3:12–14)

With this, “[God] has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire” (2 Pet 1:4). “Now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life” (Rom 6:22). May institutions of theological higher education be tenaciously committed to remaining faithful to God, preserving truth, nurturing love, and valuing integrity that seeks Christ’s glory above all else.

6. Theological Higher Education and the Church’s Mission

In “making disciples of all nations” (Matt 28:19), the church’s quest is “to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of [Christ’s] name among all the nations” (Rom 1:5).⁴⁴ Missions for the sake of the Messiah’s glory is a key goal of “the gospel of God ... concerning his Son” (1:1–3), and it must be a core component not only within the curriculum but also in the fabric of the faculty of any theological college (or

⁴⁴The phrase “the obedience of faith” probably means “the obedience that always flows from faith” progressively over time. So, e.g., Richard N. Longenecker, *The Epistle to the Romans: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 79–82; Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, BECNT, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018), 40; Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter to the Romans*, NICNT, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), 50–51.

seminary).⁴⁵ As Bruce Ashford remarks, “Higher education should be treated as a significant part of the Christian mission and a strategic component of Christian cross-cultural missions.”⁴⁶ Students in theological colleges should be awakened to God’s heart for the nations for the sake of worship in courses devoted to biblical and theological studies, church history, biblical counseling, preaching, ethics, music, and missions.

By his blood Christ “ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation” (Rev 5:9). Believing this truth, theological colleges must instill a Christological global vision within students marked by the conviction that to “understand the Scriptures” testifies to a message of the Messiah and missions: “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sin should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem” (Luke 24:45–47; cf. Acts 26:22–23).

Every theological institution’s academic program should develop a rich theology of tribulation that equips men and women to “rejoice” in suffering for the sake of the church, to “toil” to “make the word of God fully known,” and to proclaim Christ by “warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom” so as to “present everyone mature in Christ” (Col 1:24–29). The curriculum should motivate some to become Paul-like frontier missionaries (Rom 15:2; cf. 2 Cor 10:16), others to be Apollos-like follow-up missionaries (1 Cor 3:5–6; cf. Acts 18:27–28), and still others to be Timothy-like long-term discipling-shepherd missionaries (1

⁴⁵ Making disciples of Jesus (Matt 28:19) and bearing witness to him (Acts 1:8) comprise the church’s distinctive mission. See Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert, *What Is the Mission of the Church? Making Sense of Social Justice, Shalom, and the Great Commission* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011); cf. Timothy Keller, “The Gospel and the Poor,” *Them* 33.3 (2008): 8–22. See also Jason S. DeRouchie, “By the Waters of Babylon: Global Missions from Genesis to Revelation,” *MJT* 20.2 (2021): 6–30.

⁴⁶ Bruce Riley Ashford, “Missions, the Global Church, and Christian Higher Education,” in *Christian Higher Education: Faith, Teaching, and Learning in the Evangelical Tradition*, ed. David S. Dockery and Christopher W. Morgan (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 525–26.

Tim 1:3; cf. Acts 16:1).⁴⁷ Yet still others should be motivated to help shape local churches that are mobilizing centers that send others “in a manner worthy of God” and “support” them (3 John 6b–8). Such support includes helping missionaries through advocacy and financial provision (Rom 15:24; 1 Cor 9:11; Gal 6:6; Tit 3:13) and contributing financially to the needs of those they are serving (Rom 15:25–27; 2 Cor 8:1–5; 9:2, 6–15). Through such means churches and missionaries become partners in the gospel (Phil 1:5) and “fellow workers for the truth” (3 John 8).⁴⁸ Faithful theological higher education must embrace God’s heart for the nations and awaken within ministers-in-training a recognition that they will be goers, senders, or disobedient.

Conclusion

Theology ever remains the queen of the sciences, and theological educational institutions maintain their vital place in partnering with local churches in equipping men and women who can train others to treasure Christ and make him known. The theological college (or seminary) must be an educational institution guided by studying, practicing, and teaching God’s Word before a world in desperate need of its life-changing power. Students must learn to study by observing carefully, understanding rightly, and evaluating fairly. They must then practice by feeling appropriately what they have observed, understood, and evaluated, and then by acting wisely. Finally, they must teach what

⁴⁷ Paul planted the church in Corinth (Acts 18:1–17), and after he left, Apollos ministered there (19:1; cf. 1 Cor 3:5–6). In Ephesus, Apollos showed up first (Acts 18:24–28) and was followed by Paul (19:1), whose ministry resulted in “all the residents of Asia hear[ing] the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks” (19:10). That Paul stayed in Ephesus for three years (Acts 20:31), declaring the kingdom and proclaiming the whole counsel of God (20:25, 28) shows that his goal was not simply reaching but teaching to “present everyone mature in Christ” (Col 1:28). Such truths must color our understanding of his driving vision for frontier missions (Rom 15:2), which itself must include the planting of healthy churches (Eph 4:11–14). In contrast, Timothy left his home in Lystra (Acts 16:1), traveled with Paul for a time doing missionary work in various places (16:3–5), and then with Paul’s encouragement settled away from his home in Ephesus to shepherd the young church (1 Tim 1:3) after its founding with its own outreach (Acts 19:10) and elders (20:17).

⁴⁸ See John Dickson, *The Best Kept Secret of Christian Mission: Promoting the Gospel with More Than Our Lips* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013).

they have observed, understood, evaluated, felt, and obeyed, and they must do so in compelling and faithful ways. And you will know that your educational process is effective as you see students hoping in God, remembering God's works, following God's ways, and remaining faithful. May Christ's church be the frontrunner in seeking to curb this world's theological famine, and may God raise up or reform many institutions of theological higher education to aid churches in seeking the obedience of faith for the sake of Christ's name among all the nations.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ In my first pastorate, I created and oversaw a non-accredited theological institute within a local church; to consider what this could look like, see J. T. English, *Deep Discipleship: How the Church Can Make Whole Disciples of Jesus* (Nashville: B&H Books, 2020). I also was a founding faculty member at Bethlehem College & Seminary, which is a church-based, accredited school; for its biblical foundations, see Piper, *Think*, and <https://bcsmn.edu/>. My present institution, Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, is part of the Southern Baptist Convention and has undergone its own reboot and reformation; for the story, see Jason K. Allen, *Turnaround* (Nashville: B&H Books, 2022).