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**CHURCH-BASED  
THEOLOGICAL  
EDUCATION:  
CREATING A NEW  
PARADIGM**

I've been asked to share with you an alternative model to the traditional, twenty-first century, Western model of theological education. We have entitled our model, "Church-Based Theological Education." The term emerged into importance in our own vocabulary about four years ago at a conference in New Haven, Connecticut, at the Overseas Ministry Study Center (OMSC). Ted Ward asked me to assist him in a seminar at OMSC, which turned out to be a gathering of many lay leaders from around the world, who were involved in theological education renewal of one form or another. The seminar was entitled "Alternatives in Theological Education: Reconciling the Differences." The consensus in regard to one particular movement—Theological Education by Extension (TEE)—exemplified the spirit of the entire seminar. It was generally assumed that TEE was on the decline, and in many places, rather than becoming the best of both worlds by supplying organized theological study in an in-service context, it actually became the worst of both worlds, marked by undisciplined, unaccountable study and poor mentoring of educational experiences. It was also very clear, at least from my observations of the discussions, that most were saddened by the potential failure of TEE to establish a new and viable theological educational model for the next century, in light of its promising beginning and its potential for bringing about badly needed reform of the Western model, especially as applied in the Two-Thirds World—a contemporary case of putting new wine in old wineskins.

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In one sense it is legitimate for me to call our model an alternative, because we are trying to create a model that will serve the church well in the next century. We are working with TEE groups and theological seminaries around the world in conjunction with our church-based training programs, building an effective network of church-based leadership training programs. Yet in reality, I am not up here only to share an alternative model with you but an alternative paradigm, for that is our model. It is my belief that most theological education renewal in the last few decades has centered around the adaptation and adjustment of an old paradigm, a paradigm that is likely to significantly impede the creation of radical new forms for the emerging needs of the twenty-first century. Let me be very clear about one point at this juncture, however. In calling for

the creation of a new paradigm for theological education, I am not at all calling for us to abandon the concept of *seminary*, a concept that, in one form or another, has been with us all through the centuries. Nor am I calling for elevating one form of education—nonformal—over the other two identifiable forms—formal and informal. I believe we need seminaries and have always believed we need seminaries. But the form they take, the paradigm in which they reside, is another matter altogether. Concerning this matter, I am convinced that our twentieth-century, institutional seminary model reflects the paradigm of the educational institutions of contemporary culture and are carriers of their values and often their diseases.

Painting the broad strokes of a new paradigm for theological education is not a small task and should not be approached naively or in isolation from either the church or the existing academy. On the other hand, it will not necessarily be arrived at from within, for large institutions rarely renew themselves in significant ways and almost never voluntarily shift to an entirely new paradigm. These broad strokes must draw upon the Scriptures and the history of theological education and be painted with a keen eye for the kind of leaders that are needed to lead the church in the next century. In building a new paradigm, we must understand something of the complexity of the problem or we will run the risk of repeating the TEE experiment, reducing our discussion to the pragmatics of training those who cannot come to our seminaries and rehashing the age-old knowing/doing problem. It simply is not enough to slightly rearrange Schierlmacher's fourfold curriculum design, polishing it with contemporary titles. Nor is it enough to extend our classrooms into the evening or into the four walls of a church. Often these discussions are driven more by financial than philosophical concerns.

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I believe Jonathan Chao, one of the great theological education minds of the Two-Thirds World, was right when he penned the following words as an expansion to the Lausanne Covenant in 1974:

“It is not possible to ‘improve theological education’ as suggested by the covenant, in isolation from its ministerial context. Rather, a complete, integrated approach to the development of indigenous leadership within the overall context of the church and her ministry must be undertaken.... A critical and historical analysis of the traditional missionary model of ministry exported from the West shows that it is built on the administrative structure reflecting the Roman mentality rather than on a functional structure of service as found in the New Testament.... This kind of rethinking, although by no means new, implies that any attempt to ‘improve’ the present form of theological education is not enough. What we need is not renovation, but innovation. The whole philosophy and structure of theological

education has to be completely reshaped.... If we reshape the ministry and restructure leadership training along biblical lines in the Third World, I believe that we will see the release of a spiritual dynamic in the churches that could produce a great awakening for world evangelisation.”<sup>1</sup>

An implication of Chao’s insights, written almost 20 years ago, is that our Western model, as well, needs the same kind of innovation, not merely renovation. To understand the complexity of creating a new paradigm for North American theological education, we must review two shifts, which occurred in the last two hundred years.

#### **A Critique of the Contemporary Paradigm:**

##### **1. It began as a well intended shift from the informal “parsonage seminaries” to formalized in-residence theological institutions.**

In the decades preceding the Civil War, the center of theological education moved from “parsonage seminaries” or “log colleges,” which required college or an equivalent education followed by divinity study under the tutelage of a minister, to formal theological institutions called seminaries, which required an in-residence training as preparation for future service. Prior to the formalization of seminaries, churches required divinity study after college. This involved anywhere from a few months to several years, two to three being the norm. The prospective minister supported himself by tutoring or teaching college, thus it was not truly an in-service, church-based model. It was church-based in the sense that a practicing minister mentored him through his studies, but it was not in-service in the sense that he was “in the ministry” with his mentor. The main philosophical reasons given for this radical shift from parsonage seminaries to institutional seminaries were that the formalization of training would do the following:<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>“Education and Leadership,” by Jonathan Chao, chapter 11 in *The New Face of Evangelicalism: An International Symposium on the Lausanne Covenant*, edited by Rene Padilla (IVP, 1976)

<sup>2</sup>An excellent summary of these reasons was given by Timothy Dwight, president of Yale College, in his address on September 28, 1908, at Andover Academy, entitled “A Sermon Preached at the Opening of the Theological Institution in Andover Academy,” September 28, 1808 (Boston, 1808). A summary of the reasons, given in his speech, for formalizing theological education can be found in “The Theological Seminary in the Configuration of American Higher Education: The Ante-Bellum Years,” by Natalie A. Taylor, in *History of Education Quarterly*, vol. 17, Spring, 1977.

- Give a sufficient length of time to study.
- Provide access to a good library.
- Promote the ability to specialize in an area of study.
- Allow greater devotion of all available time for study and teaching.
- Allow students to profit from other ministerial candidates, forming friendships that could promote harmony in the church.
- Promote unity and one-mindedness in the church by having ministerial students taught sound doctrine in one institution.

Within a little over three decades, over 50 theological seminaries were created in over 17 states. Most of these patterned themselves after the Andover model. There were several historical reasons that contributed to the enormous, early success and speed with which this needed paradigm emerged. Some of the more important reasons included the following:<sup>3</sup>

- The death of several prominent private divinity teachers.
- The demand for ministerial candidates increased greatly because of the revivals of the Second Great Awakening.
- Growing denominational consciousness and theological schisms.
- The growth in population and westward movement.
- The desire to improve theological education and professionalize preparation.
- The tremendous success of the Andover model.

As we seek to establish a new paradigm for theological education, we must take time to carefully reflect on the historical and cultural reasons why our current paradigm emerged. This will ensure that our new models incorporate the lessons of the past in a way that will protect the new models from old mistakes.

**2. Unaware to most, the desire to formalize and professionalize the ministry changed more than the form of theological education; it also changed its very nature. The study of theology shifted from a wisdom to an academic orientation.**

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The view of theology shifted from the disposition and orientation of the soul for the purpose of acquiring wisdom, which all men need for useful service of God in whatever capacity in society, to the mastery of academic disciplines—knowledge and information—as preparation for professional ministerial service or teaching in theological institutions. As the professional paradigm began to take shape, several attributes could be found in almost every model:

- Residential education became the accepted standard.
- Schleiermacher’s fourfold theological encyclopedia framed seminary curriculum.

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid, pp. 18–20.

- Mastery of academic disciplines became the goal, replacing the acquisition of sapiential learning.
- Pastors as mentors were replaced by professors and scholars.
- The degree system became the accepted standard of measuring preparedness for ministry.

Edward Farley, in *Theologia: The Unity and Fragmentation of Theological Education*, has done a masterful job of tracing the effect this new professional paradigm had on theological education and how it changed its very nature and goals. The change involved far more than just the change to an institutional form. The orientation of theological study changed from laying a foundation for the lifelong pursuit of wisdom to an intense mastery of academic disciplines. Theology lost its soul, and the pursuit of knowledge replaced the pursuit of wisdom. In building a new paradigm today, our problem is far more complicated than simply creating new cultural forms for doing theological education.

### **The Emergence of a New Paradigm:**

#### **1. Birth pangs indicating the emergence of a new paradigm.**

Significant “winds of change” have been blowing in evangelical theological education for almost two decades, putting more emphasis on the local church as the context of theological education and spirituality and godliness as the desired results of the study of theology. This can be seen in the TEE movement, in the extension and satellite school programs inaugurated by virtually all seminaries, in the creating of the D.Min degree, in the emergence of various nonformal theological education programs worldwide, and in the emergence of a significant body of literature critiqueing our current paradigm<sup>4</sup>. These changes are consistent with significant cultural and global changes, as we move from an industrial to an information and technological society.<sup>5</sup> Some of the main reasons for these shifts are the following:

- The enormous cost of doing theological education in our Western institutional seminaries.
- Graduates of formal institutions are often ill-equipped or lack the gifts and abilities to truly lead.
- The inability of formal structures to meet the needs of the rapidly expanding Two-Thirds World church.

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<sup>4</sup> See the list of works at the end of this article for some of the more prominent critiques.

<sup>5</sup> For an insightful treatment of the megashifts taking place in our culture and world as we move from an industrial to a technological society, see *PowerShift: Knowledge, Wealth, and Violence at the Edge of the 21st Century*, by Alvin Toffler (Bantam, 1990)

- The discipleship and church renewal movements, with their accompanying literature, are calling the church back to its roots of New Testament form and function and are significantly altering the way the church perceives and practices theological education.
- The emergence of the technological society, in which knowledge and information can no longer be contained and centralized but are rapidly disseminated across geographical boundaries through computer and laser technology.

**2. If existing theological institutions are to remain relevant, several megashifts must take place. When these are all pulled together, they become the broad strokes of a “paradigm shift” for theological education.**

A strong case can be made for the fact that we are entering a new era of theological education. A new paradigm is emerging. Western, evangelical seminaries must shift to a new paradigm if they expect to be relevant in the twenty-first century. Already many larger churches are training their staff from within.<sup>6</sup> Our Western institutions are generally regarded as ineffective and inappropriate for the Two-Thirds World, where the focus of theological education will most likely reside in the twenty-first century, if for no other reason than sheer numbers. Only those seminaries who are willing to create a new paradigm and make radical decisions are likely to be thriving at the turn of the century. Among our recommendations are the following:

- A shift from traditional, academic-based accrediting systems to church-based assessment procedures, which accommodate formal, non-formal, and informal forms of theological preparation (Collins, 1979<sup>7</sup>)
- A shift in emphasis from the residential, for-service model to a church-based, in-service model of ministry preparation.
- A shift of the foundational training back to local churches, with seminaries assuming a resource role to the churches.

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<sup>6</sup>This is evidenced by the response of churches and theological institutions to such groups as Leadership Network. The very idea of a summit attended by large church pastors and seminary administrators to discuss needed changes in theological education is an amazing sign in and of itself. Today's seminary graduate is often too expensive for the rural church, unprepared for the megachurch, and not respected by the university academy. This alone will force radical change.

<sup>7</sup>Randall Collins has written an extremely important research book entitled *The Credential Society: An Historical Sociology of Education and Stratification* (Academic Press, Inc., 1979). I was first introduced to this work in an extensive conversation with Tony Campolo, who insisted I read it before progressing further with our assessment system. At the end of his first chapter “The Myth of Technocracy,” after presenting a mass of research, he concludes, “In sum, shifts in the proportions of skilled and less skilled jobs do not account for the observed increase in the educational level of the American labor force. Economic evidence indicates no clear contribution of education to economic development beyond the provision of mass literacy. Education is often irrelevant to on-the-job productivity, and is sometimes counter productive. Specifically, vocational training seems to be derived primarily from work experience rather than formal school training. The actual performance of schools themselves, the nature of the grading system, and the dominant ethos among students suggest that schooling is very inefficient as a means of training for work skills.”

- A shift of the primary ministry context of professors back to local churches, becoming resource scholars and mentors for training proven and gifted leaders in churches.
- A shift from centralized staff to a decentralized staff, moving them back into strategic local churches around the country.
- A shift away from costly institutional overhead by selling unnecessary properties related to large in-residence programs and focusing on serving as resource centers to area churches.
- A shift from a fragmented curriculum based on Schleiermacher's four-fold model, to a model more consistent with the unfolding agenda of the Scriptures and current needs of churches (Farley, 1983).
- Specifically, a shift from a curriculum based on systematic theology to a curriculum based on biblical theology and theology in culture, relevant to the belief framework of a given culture (Conn, 1984<sup>8</sup>).
- A shift from an academic, testing course design to a wisdom, problem-posing course design model (Freire, 1984).

These recommendations cannot be treated in this essay; each deserves its own essay, if not its own book, dedicated to assessing its validity. The works cited above, by author and date, are noted at the end of this article and are listed for the purpose of supplying a seminal work as a starting point for thinking about how to go about this shift.

### **A New Paradigm for a New Millenium: Church-Based Theological Education**

We are in the process, with many others throughout North America and the world, of building a church-based paradigm, which we hope will serve churches well. We are one of those churches and provide a prototype and a network for those with similar assessments and needs. From this network has emerged this paradigm. We are calling the new paradigm "church-based theological education."

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<sup>8</sup>Harvey Conn argues persuasively in *Eternal Word, Changing Worlds*, 1984, both correcting and building upon the work of Charles Kraft, that our systematic theology categories are far more culturally specific than any of us are aware, and that these categories are not appropriate to many cultures in which we need to enter today. Careful and disciplined biblical theology, together with a thorough examination of the culture in which one ministers, are the needed ingredients in building a relevant "belief framework in culture," or doing theology in culture in a way which relates to the predominant world views of those being ministered to.

## 1. The Basic Idea of Church-Based Leadership Development

The term *church-based* in reference to leadership development is being used in at least two different ways in evangelical circles today, and the meanings operate within two different paradigms. *Church-based* to some means moving a seminary inside the four walls of a church building while continuing all of the formal and institutional aspects of a traditional seminary. *Church-based*, as we are using it in this new paradigm, means something quite different. Two key factors enter into our definition of *church-based*.

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First, the idea of seminary is not necessarily antithetical to the idea of church-based. As the American Heritage Dictionary points out, *seminary* has two specific references:

- A school, especially a theological school for training priests, ministers, or rabbis.
- A place or environment in which something is developed or nurtured.

It is this second and more foundational meaning that is consistent with our definition of church-based leadership development.

Second, the ideals of the core principles found in the letters to the first churches (especially Ephesians) and to church leaders (Timothy and Titus) point to the biblical nature of leadership training being church-based.<sup>9</sup>

- Training took place in the context of the ministry.
- Training was viewed as an entrusting of the ministry to faithful men by faithful men who were doing the work of the ministry.
- Confirming of those trained was fundamentally the responsibility of leaders at a local church level.
- Training of leaders was not viewed as an end in itself or as an entity separate from the church, but it was always understood to be a matter of establishing churches.

The conclusion, then, is that leadership development in the Early Church was church-based at its core. The church-based training of the Early Church was clearly understood as a flexible leadership development strategy rooted in the life and ministry of local churches, in which “gifted men” (Ephesians 4:11; 2 Timothy 2:2) entrusted more and more of the ministry to other faithful men while they themselves remained deeply involved in the process of establishing churches. This type of paradigm we are calling *church-*

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<sup>9</sup> These principles are a condensation of an extensive treatment of Paul’s philosophy in establishing churches and training leaders found in BILD International’s Church-Based Leadership Training Manual and one of the foundational courses entitled Pauline Epistles: Strategies for Establishing Churches.

*based.* The extension of the formal theological seminary into the four walls of a church building through various forms of extension would more accurately be referred to as *church-housed*.

*Church-housed:* Bringing theological education, which is essentially based in an institutional or organizational model, inside the four walls of a church building. The leaders of local churches are involved only in a token way; instruction is given primarily through a formal mode of lecture; and assessment is made primarily through testing.

*Church-based:* Building a training strategy that grows out of the life of local churches and takes place in the context of laboring to establish local churches. Leaders are vitally involved in the training process as learners among learners; learning is stimulated through discussion and debate; and assessment is made primarily through articulation of issues and implementation or application of personal or corporate strategies. Those involved in the training process model, entrust, and mentor faithful men who have demonstrated leadership ability and desire.

## **2. A Church-Based Theological Education Network for the Twenty-First Century:**

When applying this concept to the local church, it seems prudent, if not necessary, to develop a broader network to facilitate the continuity and perpetuity of sound leadership training yet still maintain the centrality of the local church. The following is a possible shape of such a network:

- Regional resource hubs in the United States and around the world, which are based in key churches or a localized community of churches, which are capable of housing extensive resources, hosting conferences, and maintaining an on-line computer center.
- Teams of church-based, gifted leaders who share a common vision and understanding of the plan and purpose of God for the Church, supported by their churches to participate in the resource network. They will conduct on-site seminars, assist in establishing churches and training leaders, and oversee the academic development of exceptional leaders who are seeking to become part of this “missionary professor” network.

- A core curriculum designed to facilitate ordered learning at the foundational level, conducted by church leaders, taught in a flexible, “problem-posing” style in the context of the local church ministry.<sup>10</sup> Churches in each culture would be challenged to develop specialized courses to address the issues and needs of the church and its outreach in its own culture.
- A prudent stewardship strategy for sharing the costs associated with necessary travel, seminars, and regional resource and computer centers.
- A publishing house that publishes works that emerge from local churches that are deep in truth and sound doctrine; and resources, journals, and books that emerge from writing guilds sponsored by the network.
- A church-based assessment and recognition system, which assesses the level of preparedness, achieved through the network and its participating churches.

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At BILD International, we are working to create such a model. The essentials of the model are explained in detail in our 16-page prospectus and accompanying material and more in-depth in our *Church-Based Leadership Training Manual* and *Formal Program Training Manual*. The core ingredients of our model include the following:

- A 10-year church-based strategy guide for churches.
- A 30-course core curriculum and lifelong learning update system.
- A comprehensive seminar training network.
- A comprehensive church-based assessment strategy built around a life development portfolio, with a minimum of seven years ministry experience built into the assessment.
- An online computerized resource center.
- A publishing and translation network.
- An international network of resource scholars.

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<sup>10</sup>BILD International is one-third of the way through the process of creating a core curriculum for use in church-based leadership training programs. It involves a 30-course core curriculum, built on a problems-posing, project-oriented model. Each course contains a mini-library. Upon completion, the curriculum will constitute over 10,000 pages and over 400 authors, at a total cost, counting field testing, of just over \$2,250,000.

- An international network of individual churches and associations of churches.
- An interface strategy with theological seminaries, graduate schools and Bible colleges, and other training organizations.
- The cultivation of church-based regional resource centers, a new generation of seminaries.
- An international network of such resource centers for the purpose of writing, holding councils, and sharing resources.

There is a great crisis in leadership throughout our country today. There is the same crisis in the church as well. One proof? Evangelical churches are looking to professional marketeers for models. The church has traditionally looked to its learning centers for leadership—to seminaries. But today it seems that their leaders are so trapped by institutionalism and enormous financial pressures, that they have little time for innovative leadership. We must break out of that old system, which is killing education and leadership development and design a new paradigm that is consistent with both biblical principles and the megashifts taking place in our culture. Our Western seminaries are enormous resource hubs with a wealth of resources, but they are virtually untapped by the evangelical church because of all the monolithic institutional forms and trappings. These resources need to be shifted to a new paradigm.

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Whether this attempt at sketching the broad strokes of a new paradigm comes to fruition is not the main point. Change is on the horizon. It appears to be far more than renovation. We need innovation. We need new paradigms for a new age, which are in tune with the realities of the megashifts from an industrial to a technological society; in tune with the realities of the world becoming a global village, in tune with the needs of the Third World, and in tune with the guiding principles of New Testament ministry.

It has been a privilege to speak to all of you, for education is often best understood by those in your discipline, and new paradigms for theological education are more likely to emerge from your faculty lounge discussions than any other.

### Seminal Research Works:

#### Books:

1. *Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education*, by Edward Farley (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983).
2. *The Fragility of Knowledge: Theological Education in the Church and the University*, by Edward Farley (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988).
3. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, by Paulo Freire (New York: Continuum, 1989).
4. *The Credential Society: An Historical Sociology of Education and Stratification*, by Randall Collins (Academic Press, 1979).
5. *Eternal Word and Changing Worlds: Theology, Anthropology, and Mission in Dialogue*, by Harvie M. Conn (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Corporation, 1984).
6. *Powershift: Knowledge, Wealth, and Violence at the Edge of the 21st Century*, by Alvin Toffler (New York: Bantam Books, 1990).
7. *The World Crisis in Education: A View from the Eighties*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).
8. *Piety and Intellect: The Aims and Purposes of Ante-Bellum Theological Education*, by Glenn T. Miller (Scholars Press, 1990).
9. *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, by David J. Bosch (New York: Orbis Books, 1991).

#### Articles:

1. "The Rise of Theological Schools in America," by William Warren Sweet, from *Church History*, vol. 6, 1937.
2. "The Theological Seminary in the Configuration of American Higher Education: The Ante-Bellum Years," by Natalie A. Naylor, in *History of Education Quarterly*, Spring, 1977.
3. "Can Church Education Be Theological Education?" by Edward Farley, in *Theology Today*, vol. 42, 1985.
4. "Education and Leadership," by Jonathan Chao, in *The New Face of Evangelicalism: An International Symposium on the Lausanne Covenant* (Illinois: IVP, 1976).
5. "Church-Based Leadership Training: A Proposal," by Jeff Reed, in *Words of Fellowship*, Fall, 1988.

### Additional Material Relevant to This Paper:

1. Surfacing the Issues: Issues and Questions Relevant to Theological Education Reform
2. The Separation of Life and Theology (Doctrine) From the Life and Ministry of the Churches
3. The Life Development Portfolio: A Creative Assessment Alternative

(These and other materials are available from BILD International upon request.)