

**An Evangelical Response to the Theme Six Paper:
Theological Education and Formation in Mission
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An Evangelical Response:

Evangelicals find much to appreciate and be grateful for in the Paper. We endorse its analyses and confirm the survey of current trends. We recognize ourselves in some of the warnings and accept its appropriate criticisms. We will give serious consideration to the thoughtfully presented recommendations.

Evangelicals share the Paper's commitment to the priority of theological education at the heart of the mission task. This is not surprising, given the intertwining of the roots from which both Edinburgh 1910 and the evangelical Bible Schools movements grew in the late nineteenth century, not to mention earlier missionary and evangelical theological education confluences from the start of the modern Protestant missionary movement.¹ Moreover, many evangelical theological education centres today see themselves as inheriting and developing the heritage of Edinburgh 1910 in their mission education emphases. So we appreciate the opportunity to bring an Evangelical response to the Theme Six paper.²

Since Evangelicals are characterized by and approach Theological Education with a number of distinctive concerns, we shall use an adaptation of David Bebbington's distillation of the four distinguishing marks of Evangelicals as our lens through which to comment on the paper.³

¹ For just one example, consider the role of Trevecca College established by Lady Selina, Countess of Huntingdon, founded in 1768 in association with the revivals of George Whitfield, and moved to Cheshunt, Hertfordshire, England, in 1792 to become a leading theological, ministerial and missionary training college of the Congregational Church throughout the nineteenth century, before moving to Cambridge in 1905 to become Westminster College. See John M. Hitchen, 'Training Tamate: The Formation of the Nineteenth Century Missionary Worldview: The Case of James Chalmers of New Guinea', PhD Thesis, University of Aberdeen, 1984: 465-522.

² In accepting this invitation to respond, we note a potential problem in categorization. We can differentiate Evangelical, Charismatic and Pentecostal groups in some areas of theological discussion. We also accept that some Theological Education schools differentiate themselves by claiming to belong to one of those three "camps", and by distinguishing themselves from one or both of the others. However, in some parts of the world, particularly Australia, New Zealand, and Melanesia, many theological Colleges serve all three of these groupings without distinction. Thus, while this response comes from an Evangelical background, it is not set over against either Charismatic or Pentecostal groups. We see both Charismatics and Pentecostals as sharing most of our Evangelical distinctives, and we share many of theirs. In our part of the world we work together as much as the constituent groups will allow.

³ David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s*, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989:1-2; for discussion of the groupings and emphases within Evangelicalism, John Hitchen, 'What It Means To Be An Evangelical Today – An Antipodean Perspective' in Two Parts, *Evangelical Quarterly* 76:1 (Jan 2004), 47-64 and 76:2 (April 2004), 99-115; for an attempt to address current trends in the movement, Brian Harris, 'Beyond Bebbington: The Quest for Evangelical Identity in a Postmodern Era,' *Churchman* Vol 122(3) Autumn 2008:201-220

1. *Evangelicals focus on Conversion and Mission leading to a holistic Life-Transforming Experience of Christ as we evaluate Theological Education:*

For us the Gospel is Central, therefore:

- a) We look for Theological Education that promotes the growth & missional involvement of the Church, by giving due priority to evangelistic proclamation, prophetic engagement with society, and humble service to fellow-humans. We would like a sharper emphasis on such criteria as one goal of contemporary Theological Education.
- b) We expect programmes that value the spirituality of Faculty & their commitment to Gospel priorities as crucial for quality Theological Education. So we evaluate theological education by asking:
 - “Does the programme prioritize personal spirituality and involvement in active witnessing to the faith when recruiting faculty and allocating faculty loads?”
 - “Does the Theological Education programme foster the flame of the Spirit in faculty and students, along with their submission to the Word of God; and encourage modelling of a radical discipleship?”
 - “How does the programme manage the tension faculty member face in balancing the responsibilities and expectations laid on them for teaching; researching; scholarly publishing; mentoring and pastoring students; spiritual sustenance, and involvement in missional witness?”
 - “How does the Theological Education institution protect its faculty from succumbing to academic occupational hazards such as:
 - i. Inappropriate desire for academic status, influence or power?
 - ii. Unwillingness or reluctance to be prophetic in stance and teaching?
 - iii. Failure to keep the warmth of the Spirit in teaching, in depth of relationship with students; in church involvement and in active missional outreach?
 - iv. Moving towards “professionalism” and “elitism” institutionally and personally as faculty?
 - v. Becoming a theological “in group” discussing amongst ourselves the issues we define as important, and not heeding the issues, concerns or questions of church, wider ecclesiastical groupings, society and needy humanity?”

The Theme Paper gives little attention to the spirituality and integrity of faculty as critical for quality Theological Education.

- c) We look for Theological Education that equips graduates with an in-depth grasp of the Gospel message, and provides the contextualization and communication skills to effectively present this Good News in our pluralistic societies. The paper makes only passing reference to the tension inherent in Theological Education curriculum goals between academic formation and formation for practical ministries. This will require cross-cultural communication understanding and skills, translation competence to bridge from theological language to everyday life-situations, and bi-cultural relationship skills for effective witness to the Gospel in the multi-cultural and multi-faith twenty-first century worlds we inhabit. But building depth of theological appreciation of the Gospel, and developing these communication skills need to be integrated into the whole curriculum, not left as optional “field-work” extras. The helpful discussion of distance Theological Education and electronic learning in Section 3.9, could also be extended to include intentional formation of such ministry skills. Embracing multi-cultural relationships as cohorts of fellow

students, and creating partnerships with local churches may need to be incorporated as methods of achieving such better balanced academic and ministry-skill formation.

- d) We would, as Evangelicals, commend the Paper's rigorous questioning of the relationship between Theological Education and University control (Section 3.4). We recognize there is a contribution to Theological Education to be made by secular university departments of religion and theology, particularly where mutually respectful partnerships exist between church and academy. But we are grateful for the Paper's bold challenge for churches to take ownership of the Theological Education task and to ask the hard questions about the tone and goals of Theological Education offered outside church authorized institutions. An evangelistic cutting edge and prophetic, missional, and pastoral application can be lost by trusting the Theological Education task to non-church related bodies.
- e) The Theological Education curriculum needs adequate attention to missiological understanding of the processes of religious change, and therefore of conversion, as amply illustrated from the history of mission encounter in a range of cultural settings.
 - An adequate TE curriculum will investigate the reasons for Evangelical and Pentecostal schools in the South having been effective in addressing pre-Constantinian church situations, as the paper highlighted at 2.3. One reason for this may be that Evangelicals and Pentecostals take seriously the ontological reality of the spirit world, as Theme Two acknowledges for Pentecostals. In such primal religious and religious change situations, the traditional worldviews can retain their explanatory power and not be quickly replaced by an integrated biblical perspective. But historically, and this is the second reason for their effectiveness, Evangelicals and Pentecostals have presented the Gospel as a call for a change of basic religious loyalty – a conversion – so as to make Christ Lord of their cultural settings, not to withdraw from them. In such settings the Gospel is Good News indeed for those who have known the oppression of spirit powers, witchcraft and sorcery. For them the conversion call has focussed the choice between continuing to live under the power structures of the spirit world, or to discover the ontological reality of release and freedom in Christ. This level of loyalty transfer and subsequent life-style transformation is still fittingly described as conversion.
 - Similar challenges now confront mission in Western post-Christendom settings, with secular ideologies and new spiritualities functioning as religious structures of domination. So the call for a radical transfer of basic religious loyalty is demanded there too, for re-evangelization of secular post-Christian contexts.
- f) Evangelicals look for Theological Education that leads to what Darrell Guder calls, 'The continuing conversion of the church,'⁴ requiring the established churches to maintain their spiritual vitality and missional heart in each new generation.
 - Thus we would like to see a stronger emphasis on Theological Education enabling Western Christians to hear and heed the "boomerang challenges" coming back to the Northern churches from the more vital Christianity of the fast-growing and persecuted churches of the South. Challenges about Western individualism, rationalistic dualism, intellectual skepticism in handling biblical

⁴ Guder, Darrell L., *The Continuing Conversion of the Church*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000

texts, and questions like, “Why is it that where Theological Education is flourishing the church is not, and where the church is flourishing Theological Education is not?”

- Such ongoing renewal requires an emphasis on personal development for students and faculty through life-long learning, ongoing ministry enrichment, upgrading of both qualifications and competency of graduates; adequate care in faculty selection, and provision of professional development; mentoring, supervision; and pastoral care for faculty members in both North and South contexts.
- To facilitate this global cross-fertilization and ongoing renewal of church life we welcome Theological Education which is committed to publishing & promoting South-South as well as South–North theological interchange.

We would welcome greater emphasis in the Paper on these, for us, foundational matters.

2. *Evangelicals are known for their ‘Biblicism’, seeing the Bible as the authority for Christian faith and life and as central in the TE curriculum.*

- a) We would hope that the commitment to biblical authority that implicitly characterised Edinburgh 1910 might be addressed at this Centennial as an issue demanding serious theological attention in our TE programmes. The Theme One discussion in the preparatory volume fails to bring clarity regarding the place of the Scriptures in mission, thus highlighting the importance of this as a Theological Education issue.
- b) We accept the paper’s challenge and confess that despite our focus on Bible translation we, as Evangelicals, have not adequately addressed hermeneutical assumptions & contextualization issues in Mission;
- c) We want to bring a more richly nuanced Evangelical voice to the global hermeneutical discussion,
 - Particularly in shaping a ‘missional hermeneutic’ in exegetical methodology, and
 - Re-stating the role of the Spirit in ‘illuminating’ the supremely authoritative text where multiple theological authorities are treated as of equal value.
- d) We would welcome deeper biblical undergirding and discussion of the Paper’s implicit and often explicit assumption that a certain kind of ecumenical unity ought to characterize Theological Education globally. Evangelicals will welcome and participate in more dialogue and cooperation when they sense a depth of mutual respect and appreciation for their perspective.
 - This sense could be enhanced by a different tone in the proposal at 3.2, for a *Global and Regional forum on theological education* as a continuation from this Conference. The Paper suggests that the proposed Forum, “should cooperate with the WCC’s programme on Ecumenical Theological Education”, implying that other groups should automatically accept the direction of the WCC group. Or, again, the assumption that the Forum “can function as an enlarged framework of WOCATI” begs the question as to why Evangelicals have established their own alternative groupings, and whether they would want to be subsumed under WOCATI. As it stands, the proposal raises questions as to whether the chief body proposing the cooperation is only partially committed to it, or wants to dominate it, or has its own independent programme it expects the other cooperating bodies to support. Such less than open partnership proposals have not won

Evangelical support in the past. A more respectful approach may well lead to precisely these outcomes, but it is not wise to assume them as a precondition of the proposal.

- Similar open and more frank discussion is necessary to enable greater Evangelical participation in regional Theological Associations and Accrediting agencies, as suggested at 3.7. Evangelicals have both participated in and contributed to the strengthening of regional ecumenical Associations of Theological Schools, while at the same time they have also established their own parallel networks to more fully meet their needs. Evangelicals have valued Associations of Theological Schools' guidance in establishing criteria and developing standards for contextualized theological education and in developing study resources. We have, however, usually not encouraged the imposition of common curricula and still regard control of the heart of the teaching content in TE as vital to maintaining our priorities and ethos.
 - We note the way, at 2.9, the Paper laments the *Weakening of interdenominational cooperation and joint programmes in theological education* in ecumenical circles. Alongside that "weakening", the Evangelical interdenominational Bible Colleges movement has, in many cases, matured in the past thirty years to become interdenominational Theological Colleges and /or Universities, and may well have experience and insights which if shared appropriately with ecumenical interdenominational Theological Colleges could lead to mutual support and enrichment, as they each respond to financial restrictions in varying ways. Certainly, the disdain or lack of mutual respect which has characterized relationships between these two groups could be helpfully laid aside regionally and globally in our present context.
- e) We recognize we have much work to do on Biblical models for engaging with persons of other faiths in Theological Education:
- To more adequately reflect the diversity and nuancing of biblical teaching on attitudes to other religions;
 - To better reflect the "justice, courtesy and love," which Edinburgh 1910 showed the Bible calls for in inter-faith relationships;
 - To uphold with Christ-like courage and humility the uniqueness, supremacy and sufficiency of our Lord Jesus Christ as Saviour of all humanity; and
 - To move beyond the caricaturing often inherent in categorizing approaches under the terms: 'universalism', 'inclusivism' or 'exclusivism'.
 - Thus we welcome attempts to present fresh paradigms for inter-faith relationships which keep in balance the integrity of the Gospel and proper respect for the beliefs of others.

We also acknowledge the urgency of this work in the light of the new migration patterns in our globalizing world.

3. ***Evangelicals are 'activist' and entrepreneurial for the cause of Christ:***

- a) So, the Paper has challenged us to confess that in TE we have been:
- Quick to export our own methods, curricula and expectations of TE in our mission enterprise, and slower to listen, learn from, and adapt to the local cultural setting in some of our TE;

- Slow to equip, transfer responsibility to, and trust local leadership in TE, but also adept in equipping entrepreneurial visionaries for new ministries in and from their local settings;
 - Sometimes separatist and insular in TE, but at other times we have established strong interdenominational colleges with proven track records over generations of service;
- b) As Evangelicals we confess our “Activist” tendencies have meant we have sometimes contributed to the lack of depth, the lack of attention to contextualization, and failure to develop adequate teaching and learning resources. We have too often stood apart from cooperation for common standards, and helped escalate the prevalent fragmentation and inappropriate duplication of TE resources.
- c) But as our movement matures we also report that:
- We have proven and developing skills in drawing fellow-evangelicals into alliances and cooperative ventures for improving standards and quality of TE, as seen in the associations of Bible Colleges and Accrediting agencies, and TE funding agencies working globally; and
 - Many Evangelical schools are now committed to and working for new levels of integrated and mutually enriching TE in our regions by developing articulation relationships, mutual cross-crediting and seeking to pull our weight in accreditation agencies and processes where we are respected and welcomed.
- d) For *Viability in Majority World TE we need to enhance the Governance competency of Board members (referred to in 2.5), and professional competence of senior Faculty as well as addressing the financial viability issues raised at 3.10, p170*. Part of the viability problem is that local Board and Faculty members are being called on to carry simultaneously too many roles for which they are not adequately supported. They are expected:
- with only or mainly local experience, to develop contextualized curricula, pp163-4, and at the same time lead institutions into mutually enriching regional, and international relationships;
 - to bridge the gap between serious research-based theology and populist theologies in Christian literature, practical discipleship programmes, church worship styles and general standards of church life, 2.8, pp164-5;
 - to creatively develop new contextual TE models as an institution with often only, or primarily, Western educational experience, while at the same time achieving or maintaining international parity and carrying heavy local administrative duties. .

This people development needs equal research, resourcing and global interchange and support, to match that being proposed to ensure financial viability.

- e) We call for appropriate contextual criteria and competency standards for academic graduation qualifications with international recognition, as an aspect of Affirmation 3.3., p167: We need to break the Western hegemony on undergraduate and graduate criteria and standards for academic acceptability in TE around the globe. We call on some courageous Western schools to break the mould and set new patterns of academic excellence which recognize and reward more culturally diverse learning methods, more communally oriented assessment criteria; and more contextually flexible means of assessment to allow international recognition of the academic equivalence of alternative

epistemologies, pedagogies and assessment methodology. We seek not a less rigorous, but more flexible approach. Feminist and Indigenous educationalists have made a start in this direction. The new developments in qualitative research suggest possibilities. Biblical teaching on the equivalence in value, but diversity of form and expression of spiritual gifts lays the theological groundwork. But we need further courageous experimentation for more globally contextualized TE qualification standards. As Evangelicals we would gladly cooperate in regional TE association activities geared to implementing such better contextualized criteria and standards. (The paper hints at this need with its comments at 3.7, p169 “a system of assessment and institutional enhancement”, and at 3.9, p170 “common understandings of transferability and assessment of learning are still to be developed.”)

4. ***Evangelicals are committed to ‘Cruci-centrism’, seeing Christ’s work in his death and resurrection as the heart of the Gospel to which we witness, and the pattern and measure of our Christian lifestyles and ministry standards.*** So we look for TE which:

- a) Stresses consistency with the self-denying, self-sacrificing love of Christ expressed at Calvary, in:
 - Our institutional ethos and in the administrative practices of our Colleges;
 - Our teaching methodologies so that they genuinely serve, liberate and empower our students;
 - Our curriculum design, to ensure forgiveness and reconciliation flow from our learning and characterize our graduates’ ongoing service;
 - Our patterns of student formation and practical ministry formation; so that cruciform self-sacrifice and service become the norm rather than exception in the lives, life-styles and ministries of graduates; and in
 - Our relationships between faculty, staff, and students.
- b) Not only focuses on the culturally and contextually most relevant biblical metaphors to open up the local significance of the Triune God’s self-giving at the Cross, but also explores and explains the biblical fullness of diverse redemptive, reconciling and salvific metaphors expanding the meaning of the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.⁵

This kind of cruci-centrism in our Theological Education will enable us, like the Apostle Paul, and in line with the Edinburgh 2010 theme, to say we aim to make the word of God fully known and thus fulfill our Lord’s intention that “repentance and forgiveness of sins will be proclaimed in his name to all nations ... [As we become] witnesses of these things”.

These are emphases Evangelicals long to see enriching our TE. Again we thank those who have prepared the Paper which we shall continue to study and implement in our ongoing Theological Education for mission in the 21st Century.

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⁵ See J.M. Hitchen, 'Culture and the Bible - The Question of Contextualization'. Paper presented at the South Pacific Association of Bible Colleges' Biennial Conference, Adelaide, 1-5 July 1991. Reprinted in *Melanesian Journal of Theology*, Vol 8 (2) October 1992:30-52.