

Why Bible College?

By Mike Raiter, Principal of the Bible College of Victoria

“Graham, how did Bible College prepare you for work in Pakistan?”

“Mike, nothing can prepare you for work in Pakistan!”

And Graham was right. Indeed, it is true not just for Pakistan. We have not yet devised the training which fully prepares people for the many and diverse challenges that they will meet when they engage in cross-cultural ministry.

So, why bother with training? In particular, why bother with preparing oneself for cross-cultural service by spending some time on theological studies?

Before I attempt to make a case for preparing oneself by pursuing some study, let me first mention two common criticisms of Bible College and then two necessary qualifications.

Two Common Criticisms

First, there is an increasing number of cross-cultural workers who have pursued little or no formal study and who would testify that they're coping just fine. Theological training, some say, is simply not necessary.

Second, there is a growing degree of cynicism about Bible colleges. Indeed, a number of wounded graduates would testify that some college experiences do more harm than good. Even if you emerge with your faith and passion for mission intact (and that's not a given), the cloistered hours you've spent with your head in the theological clouds may

have removed you from real life and turned you into an irrelevant, armchair academic. In short, Bible and theological colleges can, at times, do more harm than good.

Two Necessary Qualifications

So, in the light of those two often-heard criticisms, let me make two necessary qualifications.

First, my conviction of the importance of theological training is not blanket or uniform. The amount of training people need differs, according to the nature of the work they will be doing. Of course, if a significant part of the ministry is word-based (teaching, discipling, church planting, translation) then some serious study is non-negotiable. If the ministry is focussed more on expressing Christ's love through one's professional skills, or serving in a support role, then the amount of training needed may be less than others require. But let me emphasise that's less training, not no training. I'll explain why in a moment.

I began my cross-cultural service working with missionary children in Pakistan. I spent only two months in cross-cultural preparation and left without any Bible training. My intention, initially, was for just one term of service, and I was able to competently fulfil my role as English teacher. Mind you, on the numerous occasions when I was asked to preach and teach the Scriptures, I was aware of the lack of theological resources upon

which I had to draw. I may not have been to Bible College before I left for Pakistan, but I was in no doubt where I'd be going when I returned home.

Second, it goes without saying that you must select a college and a course that will actually fire your missionary passion, not diminish it. The course must help you to grow in both your understanding of the gospel and your confidence in its power to save. The college must draw you closer to God and, by God's power, give you a better understanding both of his character and purposes, and the kind of life he wants you to lead. One's choice of college, then, must be made carefully and prayerfully.

Developing a Christian Mind

Having said all that, why do cross-cultural workers need to do some theological training? Here are three reasons.

First, living in one's own rapidly changing culture is difficult and complex enough. Living in another culture is even more challenging. There are a great many issues which require a mature and biblically-informed Christian mind. How far can I go in contextualising the gospel? What is the relationship between preaching and teaching the Word and performing deeds of compassion? Is 'tentmaker' just another word for a covert missionary, and how can I minister with integrity? How do I interpret all the statistics of rapid church growth throughout the world? Why does God send revival to one people group

and not another? How do I make sense of spiritual warfare? What priority do I give to the needs of my family? How do I respond to the overwhelming poverty that I now confront on a daily basis? Such questions are just a few of the issues a cross-cultural worker will confront.

The world does not need trite, superficial, clichéd answers, but mature, biblically-informed, and wise reflective responses. A theological education won't necessarily provide the answers to all these questions – and the thousand more that life in the West never prepared you for – but it will help you develop the kind of transformed Christian mind that can begin to work out appropriate and godly responses.

Second, and following on from the first point, it is imperative that we learn to deal with differences. How do I work beside believers whose theology I find myself at odds with? How do I cope with very different worship styles? Different views on leadership? Different evangelistic strategies? What are the essentials and what are the negotiables in Christian belief and practice?

There are some missionary candidates who are unable to work alongside people with whom they differ theologically. The right kind of Bible College environment can help students meet those of different backgrounds, learn to get along together, and help them to begin to work through these critical issues before they arrive on the 'mission field'.

Third, increasingly it is recognized that people today need what's called 'soft skills'. That is, not just the 'hard skills' like language learning, how to prepare a Bible study, how to raise support and write a prayer letter, but 'soft skills' like active listening, treating people respectfully, maintaining a consistent life of Christian integrity and prayerfulness. Many of these skills can be developed in the community life of a college environment.

Actually, if ever the time cried out for missions to require people to be equipped theologically for world mission, then that time is now. The issues are becoming more complex and, sadly, biblical and theological illiteracy is on the increase.

"So, Graham, was Bible College a waste of time."

"Not for one moment. Those years were critical in adequately preparing us for the challenges of cross-cultural service."

