

“Should Missionaries Skip Seminary?”

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I recently had the privilege, along with a fellow DBTS graduate and close personal friend, Juan Moreno, to travel to India in order to visit Daniel Kumar, another graduate of DBTS. Daniel serves as the president of Grace Baptist Ministries of India and of the Grace Baptist Theological Seminary. Pastor Moreno and I preached and taught in a pastors' conference at the seminary and participated in the graduation exercises. This is a truly exciting ministry that God has raised up in south India and is using in a mighty way to train men and plant churches. It is a great privilege to have even a small part in it.

God is graciously using DBTS to prepare His servants for global ministry. Through His help, we have graduates planting churches in a growing number of foreign fields. Most of these graduates are doing pioneer work in areas that are in desperate need of the gospel and solid biblical teaching. They are laying the foundation for church planting that, if the Lord tarries, will bear much fruit in the years ahead.

Although it is still common for some to suggest that missionaries don't need a seminary education, my understanding of the task and my experience on mission fields leads me to a quite different conclusion. The heart of missions is church planting, and missionary church planting has added challenges not normally faced by American church planters. Most church planters in the United States remain on as the church's pastor, but missionaries don't plant churches in order to serve as their pastors. That means that the missionary church planter must also take up the challenge of training a national to become the church's pastor.

Unless the missionary serves on a field where a Bible college or seminary exists, the missionary must provide that prospective pastor with all of his biblical and theological training. It seems, at least from my experience, that this reality is not taken as seriously as it ought to be. If the first generation of national pastors is weak biblically or doctrinally, the long-term negative effects on that mission field will be great. If anyone needs solid seminary training, it is someone who must not only do the work of planting churches, but also handle the great burden of training pastors. At the very least, we ought to question the thinking that suggests someone needs to get a seminary education and some experience as an assistant before he can pastor a church, but suggest just the opposite for someone going to the mission field!

Practically speaking, a good seminary education also pays other great dividends for future missionaries. The time it takes to obtain solid seminary training also allows the missionary candidate to mature personally, spiritually, and to lay a solid foundation for his marriage and family. While I cannot verify it with documented data, I wonder if the high dropout rate after the first term of missionary service isn't influenced by these very factors. Given all of the adjustments that confront new missionaries upon their arrival on the field, it hardly seems the best time to be “breaking in” their marriage! Also, the time invested in seminary provides valuable experience in the local church that better prepares the candidate for his ministry, including deputation. Likewise, by persevering through the rigors and challenges of seminary,

the missionary candidate demonstrates proven character that adds credibility to his desire to do missionary work.

It has been a great joy to see the Lord increase the number of future missionaries who are studying at DBTS. I know that I am partial, but I believe they have made an excellent choice that will prepare them well for the task and also provide them with wonderful side benefits. Our prayer is that God will call even more to the fields of the world and lead them to an education at DBTS on the way there!