

## HIGHER EDUCATION AS MISSION

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### ***Abstract***

While missiologists have been paying attention to business as mission, few have studied the value of securing teaching positions in foreign secular universities as a missionary method. This article bases “Higher Education as Mission” on the Apostle Paul’s four-fold taxonomy for reaching the educated and uneducated at home and abroad. Teaching in universities can be a legitimate platform for gaining an entry point in restricted access countries. More than that, as Christian scholars pursue excellence in their own academic fields, they can model to the future elites of societies what it means to follow Jesus in every aspect of our lives.

While the apostle Paul’s calling was to be an ambassador to everyone, he imagined reaching people in distinct categories. Paul said, “I have a great sense of obligation to people in our culture and to people in other cultures, to the educated and uneducated alike” (Ro 1:14 NLT). This fourfold taxonomy of peoples is more than just a creative way to express “everyone.” Paul wanted the Roman people to know that he feels obligated to people of all classes of society, including all education levels, in all parts of the world “to preach God’s Good News” (Ro 1:15).

In this article, we will describe how “Higher Education as Mission” can reach one of Paul’s categories of people—the most educated abroad. First, we will outline why secular universities are a prime place for this type of outreach and will briefly discuss some advantages and perspectives regarding Higher Education as Mission. Then we will raise some of the dangers of

the method and will discuss the future of higher education as a method for reaching elites abroad. We will begin with the apostle Paul, who was one of the greatest missionary strategists.

### **THE APOSTLE PAUL'S FOUR CATEGORIES OF PEOPLE**

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Stan Wallace suggested that in Romans 1:14, we see that the apostle Paul sensed an obligation to preach the Good News to four categories of people.<sup>1</sup> The first category is the uneducated people in Paul's own culture. While he could have increased his social capital by only pursuing the educated people in Rome, Paul made it clear that he felt obligated to preach the Good News to both the educated and uneducated there. Jesus' ministry was a great example of treating both equally. Jesus talked with women in lower classes, he dined with hated tax-collectors, and he challenged the wealthy and the educated religious. Uneducated people are not as popular in any society, and Paul wanted the people in Rome to know that he felt an obligation to the often forgotten uneducated. All people in Rome were within Paul's target audience to preach the Good News.

Second, Paul felt a sense of obligation to preach the Good News to the uneducated in other cultures. Despite the enormity of the Roman Empire at the time, Paul felt an obligation to reach those who were even beyond Rome with the Good News.

Third, Paul felt a sense of obligation to the *educated* people within the Roman culture. Some versions of this verse use the term "civilized world" or "Greeks" instead of "this culture," and some use "wise" instead of "educated." Nevertheless, Paul felt obligated to preach the Good News to these elites at home.

The last category of people Paul was obliged to reach was the educated in *other* cultures. Paul helped Roman Christians understand that people of other cultures are just as important as the Romans. In sum, Paul tried to highlight the idea that all people, no matter their culture or educational achievements, are equally important to him and to God.

### **ARE CHRISTIANS REACHING THESE FOUR CATEGORIES OF PEOPLE?**

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Do Christians in today's world feel this same sense of obligation as Paul? What has been the Christian response to reaching the four categories of people Paul described in the first chapter of Romans?

Many ministries and organizations are working on reaching the most uneducated people at home by distributing food and clothing and provid-

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<sup>1</sup> Stan Wallace, "Global Scholars 101," *Global Scholars*, accessed November 4, 2016, <https://www.global-scholars.org/global-scholars-101/>.

ing housing needs to the homeless. Furthermore, there are ministries that develop trade skills, such as carpentry, for those without such education. Similarly, there are many ministries that focus their efforts on the uneducated abroad. Many organizations provide relief efforts in times of natural or civil disaster. Some send teachers to provide basic education and training in health, finance, and the arts. Still others work to provide theological training in contexts where such education is not available. While there is always more that can be done in this area, many ministry organizations focus on the uneducated in other cultures.

By contrast, fewer ministries focus on the educated people either locally or abroad. Some college-age ministries within local churches focus on ministering to university students, and a few para-church organizations focus specifically on ministering to university students and faculty. However, fewer ministries seek to minister to the educated in other cultures.

Some of the para-church university ministries have international reach and have been successful in preaching the Good News to university students. However, few strategically place Christians in positions of influence among the educated in other cultures. What kind of influence would a Christian economist have on economists in other cultures? Might a Christian geophysicist be God's mouthpiece to geophysicists in other cultures? In the university, can Christian professors have influence on students inside and outside the classroom, which leads to sharing the Good News? Churches and Christian mission organizations need to feel the sense of obligation that Paul felt and find ways to preach the Good News to them. All four categories need attention, but this category is lacking the same attention as the other three.

## UNIVERSITY STUDENTS ARE IN A PERIOD OF OPENNESS

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The time one spends at university is a state of openness in which there are reformulations of the learner's understandings and shifts in his outlooks.<sup>2</sup> The liminality among university students is a key opportunity to introduce them to Christianity and the Good News. First, university students are entering adulthood. During this time, young adults are forming opinions, shaping values, creating lasting friendships, and developing their minds. Second, the university students are usually separated from their parents by geographical distance. This separation can open greater opportunity for the students to ask questions about life, society, and God. Third, the university experience challenges students to think deeply, to study, to research,

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<sup>2</sup> Jan Meyer and Ray Land, "Threshold Concepts and Troublesome Knowledge: Epistemological Considerations and a Conceptual Framework for Teaching and Learning," *Higher Education* 49, no. 3 (2005): 373-388.

and to write. These challenges bring on stress and uncertainty, and many students need someone they trust to give advice. Fourth, many university students respect their professors and can be transformed by such influential persons.

### **UNIVERSITY STUDENTS ARE EVERYWHERE**

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In 2011, approximately 183 million students were enrolled in universities worldwide.<sup>3</sup> Since the United States had approximately 20.3 million university students in 2013,<sup>4</sup> this means there are approximately 160 million university students in other cultures. This is a large target audience of people who are especially open to trying out new ideas like Christianity.

### **THE UNIVERSITY-EDUCATED GO ON TO HAVE INFLUENCE**

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The educated population in the world is the population involved in policy making, which affects society. If policy makers, leaders, and instrumental influencers are Christians or had exposure to the positive effects of the gifts of the Spirit, society may change in a positive way.

This is one of the primary reasons why it is important to have Christian educators in secular universities. Being an educator, not just a campus minister, is a great opportunity to address the educated in other cultures. Christian educators in the United States should heed Paul's great sense of obligation to the educated in other cultures and find ways to connect to them.

One misunderstanding about Christian educators in secular universities is the need for formal theological training prior to being sent out as an ambassador of Christ, which is not necessary to share the Good News with the educated in other cultures. Theological training is beneficial, but the Christian church must not require it for those who are called by God to preach the Good News to all people in all cultures. Instead, a thorough vetting process should be in place to make sure the one who goes is a Christian who correctly understands God's story.

God can and will use Christian educators in all disciplines to share the Good News to the educated in other cultures. Christians who teach engineering can have great influence on non-Christian engineering students through various means. Some of these engineering students will go on to have significant influence in others' lives. Likewise, Christians who teach business can

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<sup>3</sup> Wolfram Alpha Knowledgebase, 2016, accessed December 6, 2016, <http://www.wolframalpha.com/input/?i=how+many+students+in+the+world/>.

<sup>4</sup> National Center for Education Statistics, "Table 105.20," 2015, accessed December 6, 2016. [http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d15/tables/dt15\\_105.20.asp?current=yes](http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d15/tables/dt15_105.20.asp?current=yes).

make an impact on future business leaders who might influence hundreds or thousands of people. No matter the discipline, Christian educators in secular universities can have significant influence for today and the future.

### **THE WHOLE FAMILY CAN MINISTER TO THE MOST-EDUCATED**

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In addition to all that Christian educators can do in reaching the educated in other cultures through teaching and research, their family members can also participate in the work by inviting students to the home, by going out for a picnic with students, by helping with laundry or other personal needs of students, or simply by being safe people with whom to talk. I (Lewis) am the spouse of one such educator. When we first moved to a new culture, I did not know what I would do with my time. Before long, some university students learned that I have a particular skill that they wanted to learn. Five years later, I see how God has used me and my skill to address the obligation to reach the educated in other cultures with the Good News. I have many opportunities to share Jesus' love with the students. This is just one way which God allows me, as family of the educator, to be involved in reaching the educated in another culture.

### **HIGHER EDUCATION AS A BUSINESS-AS-MISSION MODEL**

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Some Christian educators in overseas, secular universities see their work under the umbrella of business-as-mission (BAM). In this case, their "business model" is to educate students in a given discipline. Yet, unlike most BAM cases, Christian educators do not need to become experts on local laws to start and operate their own businesses, because the universities where they work have already worked out these regulations. Also, the university is sometimes willing to help with the transition period of obtaining a visa, moving to a new country, and settling into a home.

### **HIGHER EDUCATION AS A PLATFORM MINISTRY MODEL**

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Some might see Christian educators in overseas, secular universities as a platform-model ministry. Platform ministries are those ministries that give the missionary a platform from which they can minister. This is similar to the BAM approach; however, the university platform is not seen as a ministry in and of itself. It is simply the catalyst to get the missionary among the target people and can give status in the community. Those who engage in platform ministry often make a clear distinction between their occupation and ministry. Most of the ministry opportunities cannot happen at work, but work is the platform that gives the missionary a context to fulfill this "obligation" to preach the Good News to the educated people in society.

## HIGHER EDUCATION AS A HOLISTIC MINISTRY MODEL

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Some see higher education as a holistic approach to missionary work. Holistic ministry focuses on people's whole state of being instead of only their spiritual state. Many Christians and missionaries focus primarily on conversions. The task for these missionaries is to share the Good News with non-Christians. A holistic ministry focuses on a person's soul, but also the mind, body, and overall well-being. The rationale for holistic ministry is rooted in the understanding that God created human beings, not just souls, so Christians should care for the whole person.

Christian educators care both for people's minds and their futures. Education is mind-engaging activity in which people learn, gain knowledge, and develop understanding. Students' minds grow and develop, and new ideas are brought to light. Minds and knowledge are valuable to God. In Proverbs, it is written, "The discerning heart seeks knowledge, but the mouth of a fool feeds on folly," (Pr 15:14 NIV). Later in Proverbs, the writer again noted the importance of gaining knowledge, "The heart of the discerning acquires knowledge, for the ears of the wise seek it out" (Pr 18:15). There is great value in gaining knowledge. The writer of Proverbs stressed the immense value of knowledge when he wrote, "lips that speak knowledge are a rare jewel" (Pr 20:15). When the Pharisees asked Jesus, "'Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?' Jesus replied: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment.'"

John Piper wrote a book dedicated to the importance of using the mind titled, *Think: The Life of the Mind and the Love of God*.<sup>5</sup> In this, Piper explores how Christians can love God through engaging the mind. God values minds, and a holistic ministry will value them, too. Additionally, when the students graduate from university and enter the workforce, they can initiate change. Thus, for an educator to participate in developing the minds of people means that the educator is involved in future change. Lord willing, such changes will be God-honoring changes in local communities and in the world. This leads to the final method of community transformation.

## HIGHER EDUCATION AS A COMMUNITY TRANSFORMATION MODEL

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Others see the work of Christian educators in overseas universities as a way to bring about Christ-like community transformation. They provide quality education, positively influencing the lives of future leaders, shaping the worldviews of the future generation, and softening a generation to the person and work of Jesus. First, quality education will bring about posi-

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<sup>5</sup> John Piper, *Think: The Life of the Mind and the Love of God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011).

tive change in society. Second, the upcoming leaders of a society will steer their community in the future. The leaders will evaluate existing policies and seek to implement new policies. Having a positive influence on future leaders while they are in university will shape how they will make those decisions.

Third, the Christian educator can provide biblical teachings on various topics within the classroom that will shape the worldviews of the next generation. This leads to the fourth way Christian educators bring about community transformation, and that is through softening a generation of hearts to Jesus. Exposing university students to Jesus, his life, and his teachings will serve to soften their hearts toward him in the future. As a generation of university students enters society and starts families of their own, they will have had exposure to Christians and to Jesus, which God may use to turn a generation (or more) toward himself. The work of an educator has immediate and long-term effects, and God can water the seeds planted during the university experience in innumerable ways in the future.

#### **HISTORY SHOWS THE SUCCESS OF HIGHER EDUCATION AS MISSION**

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History has seen the great value of universities—the educated in all cultures. Many important discoveries have happened on university campuses. Additionally, universities have been an epicenter of change in Christian thought and missions. Hodge wrote an online article about how most of the universities in the United States and United Kingdom that started around the period of Enlightenment originally were faith-based, Christian institutions.<sup>6</sup> In fact, some of the most prestigious universities have a strong Christian heritage that has diminished in recent decades. Christians need to re-enter the arena of world-class scholarship through excellent teaching and research around the world.

Universities have seen great revivals with long-lasting effects. Ministries such as InterVarsity and the Urbana Conference are some of the results of what God has brought about through university students. The students who engaged in these great revivals were committed to seeing God work through them and through their university to change the world. I believe the university can continue to be the place where great revivals occur and where world-changing ministries begin.

Many missionaries understood the importance of higher education. Christian missionaries have founded universities around the world that have resulted in societal change, especially in East Asia. Woodberry noted

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<sup>6</sup> Bodie Hodge, “Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Oxford—Once Christian?” *Answers Magazine*, June 27, 2007, accessed November 13, 2016, <https://answersingenesis.org/christianity/harvard-yale-princeton-oxford-once-christian>.

several societal changes that were brought about because of the higher educational institutions that were started by missionaries.<sup>7</sup> These changes include increased social mobility, new opportunities for women, promotion of health and hygiene, and printing presses built for books, which resulted in increased literacy in society. Perhaps this method of founding new universities is not feasible like it was in the past. However, Christian educators can continue to foster new societal changes through engaging the educated in other cultures by teaching in universities and supporting student-led programs that may lead to revivals and global change.

### **DANGERS OF HIGHER EDUCATION AS MISSION**

Every strategy or approach has its down sides. Obviously, teaching in secular universities does not fit the image of the “real” missionary who pioneers unchartered territories, or creates written languages, or plants churches.

Also, Higher Education as Mission is a relatively new method of reaching people around the world with the Good News, and therefore does not have significant missiological research behind it. Some may argue that the focus is on teaching and not on “real” ministry. Rather than bifurcate the sacred (ministry) from the secular (work), we should recognize that God sees both as ways to glorify and worship him (e.g., 1 Co 10:31). Third, there may not be a need for foreign educators in certain universities. This is a possibility in some contexts; however, many universities worldwide are hiring educators. While some university educators are qualified at home, they may be unskilled at teaching cross-culturally.

The true value of the Higher Education as Mission method can be difficult to measure. How do you measure community transformation? Given that traditional mission organizations are funded by donors, they want to be able to show in measurable ways if and how they are effective. Higher Education as Mission relies heavily on relationships, and relationships are difficult to measure, though not impossible. Thorough reports from the field that summarize teaching experiences and the development of significant relationships will provide insightful information to measure the effectiveness. Many of the results of years of teaching students and influencing their lives with the Good News of Jesus will be reaped in future years through slow and subtle community transformation.

Although there are most likely more critiques of this method, the Higher Education as Mission method is not going to address the totality of the missionary enterprise. It will not reach many in the world who are suffering

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<sup>7</sup> Robert Woodberry, “The Social Impact of Missionary Higher Education,” *Christian Responses to Asian Challenges: A Globalization View on Christian Higher Education in East Asia* (2007): 99–120.



physically from poverty and poor conditions. Many methods and ministries are already working in this arena. The purpose of this method is to provide one way that Christians can address the significant obligation to reach the educated in other cultures.

## THE FUTURE OF HIGHER EDUCATION AS MISSION

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Many highly educated Christians will desire to work and teach cross-culturally as their life's ministry. Governments will continue to recruit educators from the West to raise their country's level of education. Many of these universities will provide Christians with access to highly restricted contexts through work visas as long as they are teaching.

To be effective, Christians in higher education need to close the gap between their work-life and ministry-life so that their work and ministry integrate. Christians who pursue advanced degrees should strive to work at high-caliber institutions that are recognized around the world.

The model of Higher Education as Mission can be replicated for other vocations and industries. For example, Po recognized that lay professionals in many vocations have opportunities to share the Good News in restricted-access contexts.<sup>8</sup> Christians who are highly skilled physicians will be able to connect with other respected physicians around the world, just as businesspeople can connect with other businesspeople. Christians must be creative and find ways to continue to reach the educated in other cultures. The need is great, but the laborers are few.

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<sup>8</sup> Ming-Suen Po, "God's Creative Mission for Lay Professionals," *Missiology* 32, no. 1 (2004): 57–69.

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