

## Teaching Theology in another Culture

### Considerations for those hoping to serve in theological education overseas

1. Theology seeks to make sense of God's eternal revelation about Himself, the world and humankind. It is not, in itself, that revelation. So theology inevitably is a human construct and will (and should) reflect the historical and cultural particularities of the one doing it.

It is all too easy for a Westerner who has studied theology in his/her own country to reproduce it 'as-is' when they come to teach overseas, not realising that perhaps there are important issues in the local context that remain unaddressed, or particular ways of thinking that are different from the rather 'linear-logical' ways that we may be used to in the West.

Unless the theological educator enters the host thought-world and works from within it, the resulting theological 'product' will remain Western or 'foreign'. It will therefore be important for you to do all you can to become familiar with the host culture, making friends with local people, observing and listening to what constitutes their real world, because it is that real world, and not another, that the unchanging Gospel of Christ needs to engage with if it going to transform it.

Some mission agencies wisely insist that a theological educator should not plunge straight in to teaching theology, but should spend the first year in a preparatory ministry that will enable them to get amongst ordinary people where they are. Only then will they be able to teach on their wave-length.

2. Theology and language.

In many countries, a citizen of the land will grow up speaking several languages. Typically, the language used in centres of theological study and training will not be the mother-tongue of any one of the ethnic groups of the land, but an 'official' or 'national' language, usually one of the European languages such as French, English, or Spanish. Not only does this permit students from diverse ethnic backgrounds within the country to study together using a commonly shared language and have access to the many resources in that language, but also it is considered to enhance the international 'standing' of the centre.

The problem with this is that often the resultant theological understanding does not engage with the deepest level of the heart, and furthermore, students find it difficult to communicate the theological truths they have learned about in the 'official' language in ordinary everyday vocabulary with their fellow-countrymen in their mother-tongue.

It is sadly possible for theological and biblical thinking to take place in an 'upper level' and not really engage with the heart and with behaviour. The higher the academic level, the greater the danger of this dislocation. This is not to dismiss national-language theological colleges but to recognise the challenge of keeping them 'rooted' in the soil!

So the expatriate theological educator will be well-advised to try to learn a local language, or at least encourage his/her students to get out regularly amongst 'ordinary' people, and reprocess and re-express their theological understanding using their mother tongue.

3. Teaching theology or teaching students?

The considerations in 1 and 2 (above) can cause the aspiring theological educator to be daunted and discouraged. How can an expatriate teacher ever really penetrate the thought-world of others in such a different cultural context?

There are several comforting elements that can encourage the would-be theological educator:

- a. Doing theology is not so much a product as a process. As theological educator, you will not seek merely to transfer a theological content to your students, but rather to develop in them a way of acquiring theological understanding.

Often what is more important than the 'right' answers is to ask the right questions. The theological educator can encourage the students to ask questions which relate to their context and then to seek for the answers themselves within the Bible. This encourages a process of guided discovery that is far more effective than dictated instruction. And it means that the theological educator does not need to have all the answers.

- b. The Holy Spirit, who leads the believer into all truth, can be trusted to be at work in the students. Their Biblical and theological understanding does not need to be simply 'mediated' to them by a Western teacher. The challenge for you as teacher is to help bring about a theological understanding that can be truly 'owned' by the student.

- c. The students will learn more by who you are 24/7 than by what you say in the classroom. This is at once daunting but also encouraging; I do not need to have all the answers to be a good theological teacher. Even more important is to be a person who lives out the life of Christ before the student and others.

Gordon Molyneux 2009

## Urgent Prayer Need

Bingham Academy in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, urgently needs a [French teacher](#) to join their staff team in August. Pray that God will provide the right person to meet this need.