Rethinking Reproducibility:
An Equipping Model for Missionary Theological Educators

Phil Barnes and Will Brooks

Published in *Global Missiology*, www.globalmissiology.org, April 2023

Abstract

Reproducibility has often been reduced to the ability to simply replicate what has been taught. However, true reproducibility is the ability to produce or create something new in a new context. This article argues, then, that the central task of theological education in missionary contexts should be to locate, equip, and empower God-called individuals with theological aptitude, servant attitudes, and missional awareness to carry on the task of the Great Commission.

Key Words: character, competency, mobilization, reproducibility, theological education

Introduction

When church-planting missionaries are sent out, they enter a new cultural context in which they seek to share the gospel, disciple believers, plant churches, and then train leaders for those churches. The long-term goal for cross-cultural missionaries is typically not to lead the churches they plant but to raise up indigenous believers to lead those churches. For a variety of reasons, the missionary will not stay among the people forever. These reasons include lack of long-term visas, security issues, family pressure, health challenges, declining health of parents, and even interpersonal conflict (Pearce, 2022).

To speak of missionaries in this sense does not only envision U.S.-Americans going to other places. In today's world there are Chinese reaching Pakistanis, Brazilians sharing the gospel in India, Malaysians planting churches in North Africa and the Arabian Peninsula, Nigerians sharing Christ in North America, and in several of these examples (and in many others) these missionaries are sent for a time to reach people, plant churches, raise up leaders, and then eventually leave.

This missionary's need to exit should shape how the missionary approaches each aspect of the missionary task. For example, since the missionaries know they will eventually exit, they point these new believers to the Bible when they have questions instead of directly answering their questions. They train these new believers to read and interpret Scripture without the missionaries' guidance so they know how to answers questions that arise long after the missionaries leave. Thus, the missionaries' plan for discipling believers or training leaders must consider the real possibility that the indigenous leaders will be leading the church without the missionaries nearby.

How, then, does a missionary train leaders in such a way that prepares them for the reality that the missionary will not always be around? Some have argued that creating simple and reproducible training materials is the way to accomplish this goal (Anderson, 2022; Culbertson, n.d.; Watson & Watson, 2014). In other words, making the training curriculum simple and providing the materials in a way that disciples can quickly and easily pass them on to others will ensure that indigenous leaders have material to teach others if the missionary exits.

When it comes to theological education and leadership training, though, this article argues that this type of reproducibility is not the most helpful standard of evaluation and that one-size-fits-all programs come up short of producing mature disciples. Instead of focusing on how quickly

indigenous trainees or students can disseminate the content created by the missionary teacher, missions sending organizations and their missionaries should utilize an equipping model that provides nationals with the exegetical skill and theological ability to produce their own content. Instead of asking "Is it reproducible?" missionaries should ask of a training plan, "Does it equip them with the theological and exegetical skills they need?" A second question is, "Do these new leaders have the attitude and awareness they need to carry on the task of the Great Commission after the missionary returns to Malaysia, India, Nigeria, or wherever 'home' might be?"

Toward that end, this article argues that missionary teachers should recognize three realities about theological education and training. First, developing theological aptitude is more important than disseminating previously developed theological formulations. Second, seeking out and fostering students with a servant attitude is more important than finding students with charisma and natural leadership abilities. Finally, promoting missional awareness of the unfinished task of world missions is more important than crafting one-size-fits-all missions strategies to be used in any and all places in the world.

Theological Aptitude

First, developing theological aptitude matters more than disseminating pre-determined theological formulations. When considering the issue of how to train leaders for a newly planted church, there are two extremes to be avoided. On one hand, the missionary may want to keep the training as simple as possible so that, as a result of its simplicity, the training may be shared with others quickly. Anderson argues for this approach when he states, "If your disciples cannot immediately teach what you teach to others, you need to simplify" (Anderson, 2022).

At the other extreme, when training leaders for a newly planted church, missionaries may feel that these leaders need an extensive amount of *information* to lead effectively. As a result, they prepare a curriculum with excessive content. Some missionaries still see this approach as reproducible, though, since they give the leaders their notes at the end of the course and expect them to use those notes to teach others. However, this approach confuses the ability to teach with the ability to mimic. Benjamin Bloom developed a model known as Bloom's taxonomy which demonstrates that this kind of mimicking is at the lowest level of learning and that educators should strive to create learners who can do more than merely understand and even apply. Bloom believed that the highest level of learning and comprehension was demonstrated when the learners became creators themselves (Armstrong, 2010; Brooks, 2019, pp. 182-183).

An element of truth lies in both extremes: missionaries do need to train leaders in a way that equips them to teach others without an endless equipping, and leaders for these newly planted churches do need adequate content. The problem lies in an understanding of reproducibility where the missionary determines how much content is necessary, unilaterally teaches that content and determines how long the equipping process should continue, and then encourages the sharing of that content in the specific way he/she has prepared it. This approach has a low view of indigenous believers where all they are expected to do is learn the missionary's pre-packaged content and disseminate it to others.

In fact, at the beginning of the twentieth century, Roland Allen lamented the same type of attitude in the missions strategies of his day. He wrote,

> If the first converts are taught to depend upon the missionary, if all work, evangelistic, educational, social is concentrated in his hands, the infant community learns to rest passively upon the man from whom they receive their first insight into the gospel.... A tradition very rapidly grows up that nothing can be done without the authority and guidance of the missionary, the people wait for him to move, and the longer they do so, the more incapable they become of any independent actions.... The fatal mistake has been made of teaching the converts to rely upon the wrong source of strength (Allen, 1962, p. 81).

Allen's point, though, should not just be applied to consider how quickly the indigenous leader is given the freedom to disseminate the pre-determined content. It should also be applied to the question of who determines the message to be shared.

In contrast to traditional understandings of reproducibility, genuine reproducibility sees the indigenous leaders as equal partners and *contributors* to the global theological discussion. Training leaders in missionary contexts means equipping leaders to think theologically, to interpret Scripture on their own, and to apply the truths of Scripture that are significant to them and their churches (and not just those questions the missionary thinks are important). Instead of simply giving leaders "the answers" to important theological questions, they need to be equipped to do theology on their own. In other words, missionaries should aim for the highest level of Bloom's taxonomy and strive not for content disseminators but content *creators*.

One biblical example of the need for theological aptitude comes from Acts 20 and Paul's speech to the Ephesian elders. On one hand, Paul emphasizes several times how much he taught them, for example, "I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable" (20:20) and "I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God" (20:27). Clearly Paul did not shy away from teaching or providing content that was helpful for the Ephesian leaders. At the same time, Paul knew a day was coming in which "none of you among whom I have gone about proclaiming the kingdom will see my face again" (20:25). He thus taught in a way that equipped them with the necessary skills and abilities to lead the flock in his absence—hence he could say, "I commend you to God and to the word of his grace" (20:32).

On a personal level, even though I (Will) am a missiologist, I mainly teach biblical studies in Asia. Even still, the missionary vision of raising up indigenous theologians drives how I teach biblical studies in this context. For example, I often teach a class on 1 Peter, but instead of teaching in a way that says, "Here's what 1 Peter means, now go and share that with others," I equip them with the exegetical skills that they can answer the question, "What does this text of 1 Peter mean" for themselves. Doing so also equips them to ask and answer the same question when they study other NT epistles. Clark Sundin makes a similar point in his article concerning developing leaders by teaching theological processes (Sundin, 2022). Perhaps what is most exciting about this whole process is seeing former students of mine who have become the teachers of this course and others. Moreover, even though they learned from me, they are developing their own teaching materials and sometimes coming to different conclusions about the text than I do.

Additionally, one significant problem with the one-way information transfer approach where the missionary determines what must be taught and shared is that in these contexts formerly untouched by the gospel, missionaries themselves have much to learn from indigenous believers. For example, in thinking theologically about the context, indigenous leaders will need to consider from a biblical perspective a host of issues in their context such as polygamy, ancestor veneration, bribery, fear of the spirit world, drinking of blood, and use of tattoos. While the missionary may

assume knowing the biblical content that addresses those issues, the indigenous leaders will know the context better. To adequately address these issues, the missionary must first learn from the indigenous leaders and then work together with them as partners.

Seeing indigenous leaders as valuable contributors to this process or to the larger process of contributing to the global theological conversation requires them to have a high theological aptitude. Thus, disseminating or reproducing the missionary's pre-determined content is not enough. Indigenous church leaders and theologians must be equipped to think theologically about their context and the world.

Servant Attitude

"But what we suffer from today is humility in the wrong place. Modesty has moved from the organ of ambition. Modesty has settled upon the organ of conviction; where it was never meant to be. A man was meant to be doubtful about himself, but undoubting about the truth" (Chesterton, 2022, p. 39).

An overemphasis on reproducibility has the potential to overvalue the cognitive and competency aspects of a leader and miss the character traits that Scripture emphasizes—such as humility and a spirit of service. Thus, in addition to emphasizing theological aptitude, missionary theological educators should focus on seeking out and fostering students with a servant attitude and a humble spirit. As indicated by the above quote from G. K. Chesterton, humility, however, has often been misunderstood to lack conviction. Theological educators should *not* seek to promote a lack of theological conviction in their students. Instead, they should seek to promote faithfulness to Christ and his Word. In a world obsessed with celebrity and measurable results, theological students need to train themselves to be faithful and humble.

In somewhat of a rebuke against some traditional goal-setting concepts, Plueddemann writes, "Traditional high-context cultures ignore formal evaluation, preferring intuitive value judgments, but learning in context is too unpredictable for SMART objectives" (Plueddemann, 2018, p. 133). SMART goals are specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound. They are typically used by businesses to ensure that they are connecting with the world in tangible and practical ways. Plueddemann has the issue of measurability in view when he writes, "Measurement is important for the pilgrim educator, even though it is seldom quantifiable" (p. 134). Plueddemann goes on to give examples of some of his learning objectives and then writes, "Notice that none of my learning objectives meet the criteria of SMART goals or Mager's standards for instructional objectives. It would be easy for me to write SMART objectives for the course, but I'm aiming at something more profound and important" (p. 139).

The eleventh chapter of Hebrews teaches that the metric of Christian ministry is faithfulness, not measurable results. Focusing on faithfulness is what it means to be a servant of Christ. Verses 32-35a recount the stories of great results. Faith conquering kingdoms. Mouths of lions being shut. Promises being obtained. A temptation is to stop right there in the middle of verse 35 and define ministerial faithfulness by these results. Some insist that faithfulness will always yield the kind of results described in those verses. Indeed, the glorious truth is that faithfulness does *sometimes* yield these results. However, the text does not stop there. In verses 35b-37, we see some other faithful ministers who did not see lions' mouths shut nor foreign armies put to flight. These verses teach an inconvenient and uncomfortable truth for those who promote a reductionistic understanding of missions and evangelism. Ministerial faithfulness sometimes results in people being stoned and

sawn in two. These individuals are just as faithful and true as the others who received their dead back to life. The primary metric of Christian ministry being faithfulness rather than outward results is consistent throughout the NT.

An initial pair of examples to consider are the "Sons of Thunder"—James and John. When first reading the Gospels, one might assume that these two individuals will play significant roles in the Early Church. These two brothers are frequently mentioned alongside Peter as part of a group of three who are especially close to Jesus. However, these two men of God do not have the same experience. In fact, James is killed in Acts 12:2—his ministry is very short-lived. Despite being part of Jesus's inner circle along with Peter and John, James dies a violent and tragic death before the gospel really begins to go to the ends of the earth. Meanwhile, James's brother John writes five of the 27 books of the NT and is probably the only one of the Twelve who does not die a violent death. John not only writes these five books: he also plays an important mentoring role in the Early Church. His disciples and in turn their disciples help to form the Early Church and its theology.

Second are the examples of Stephen and Philip. One chapter after being put forward as a servant of the church, Stephen preaches a wonderful sermon which basically outlines the history of the children of Abraham and points out a pattern of disobedience and lack of faith throughout their history. As a result, Stephen is stoned to death. Stephen is not killed in spite of his faithfulness. He is killed *because* of his faithfulness. A less faithful sermon would likely not have resulted in his death. Meanwhile, his fellow deacon Philip serves the Lord for many years—having a long ministry in Samaria. Acts 21:8 records that he even has four daughters who enter the ministry. Philip's faithfulness results in another generation of evangelists. Meanwhile, Stephen's faithfulness results in a bruised and blooded corpse. The outward results of faithfulness are not guaranteed.

A final example is another set of brothers—Peter and Andrew. While one might think that Peter was the first to meet Jesus, in fact, as recorded in John 1:4-42, Andrew is the one who brought Peter to Jesus. Despite being the first Apostle to have met Jesus, Andrew is a relatively unknown figure in the Bible. Peter becomes the first among equals as the leader of the Twelve and as the Apostle to the circumcised.

In each of these pairings, the more famous was not more faithful just because he is more well-known. More famous does not equal more faithful. This brief survey of these pairings leads to that conclusion—as does Hebrews 11:38-39. While the "them" in verse 38 is clearly referring to the second group (the ones who suffered and were killed), the "of these" is equally clearly a reference to both groups (including all the way back to the beginning of the chapter where Abraham, Moses, and the others that were named). Noteworthy is how the higher praise is for those who suffered and died. Furthermore, there was something missing among all of these—something left for "us," or all of Christ's followers throughout the succeeding generations.

Hebrews 11:40 speaks of the benefit of these earlier servants' faithfulness to later generations. Those of us living after Jesus's First Coming can see now that we are in a privileged position. These earlier heroes described in Hebrews are made perfect by us their successors—the ones who have inherited the promise. In Hebrews 12:1-2, equippers of Christ's servants are given at least two applications for perfecting the earlier saints' example of faithfulness. First, those of us who teach must train our students to avoid sin and hindrances (which are not always the same). Such training and growth may seem obvious, but, as John Owens said, "if we are not killing sin then sin

will be killing us" (John Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold, 24 vols. (Edinburgh: Johnstone & Hunter, 150-1855; reprint by Banner of Truth Trust, 1965, 1991), 6:9). One way that both teachers and students might sin (or at least be easily entangled) is by comparing our lives and ministries to others—this is always a trap. Second, we must train our students to keep their eyes in Jesus (v.2), for two reasons. First, Christian servants seeking to be faithful need Christ's indwelling presence. Looking to Jesus is in keeping with his promise in the Great Commission in Matthew 28 to be with his people always, as well as Jesus's promise in Acts 1:8 to empower his witnesses. Second, all of us who are Christ's servants inevitably fail to be perfectly faithful and must remember our identity in Christ. For those of us who are in Christ, the Father does not look at us with our own righteousness but as we are clothed in the righteousness of Christ.

During my (Phil's) time in Sub-Saharan Africa, I had the opportunity to train many different men and women for ministry. A few of them are thriving in ministry, have seen their churches grow, have planted new churches, or have moved into positions of influence and power in their respective areas. However, this kind of measurable and objective success is not the case for most of them. Instead, the majority are *faithfully* laboring in churches but are not seeing thousands of individuals converted or hundreds of churches planted. Instead, they are simply ordinary pastors and servants of Christ in ordinary places. Others have gone to their graves serving in humility and faithfulness. Each one of these will be told, "Well done, good and faithful servant." Our task as theological educators is not to locate and/or motivate the extraordinary. Our task is to faithfully serve those who will faithfully and humbly minister wherever the Lord plants them.

Missional Awareness

A third reality of theological education and training is that students need missional awareness more than pre-packaged strategies. When I (Phil) taught Introduction to Missiology in Africa, the students' first assignment was to read Conrad Mbewe's article on "Seven Lies I Once Believed about Missions" (Mbewe, 2017). In this article, Mbewe introduces and refutes seven presuppositions about missions that he, as an African Christian, once believed. The first among those falsehoods is the idea that "We Africans were at the end of the process of missions." Mbewe bemoans the sad truth that, overall, African churches are not expected to participate in global missions. From Mbewe's experience, there was a gap in expectations when it came to African churches being involved in missions. The missionaries did not expect African churches to become intercultural missionaries to unreached peoples and places. Whether implicitly or explicitly, Western missionaries have often communicated this false and destructive idea to our brothers and sisters in the Global South. It is time for Western missionaries to emphasize that *all* believers in *all* churches have been given the wonderful honor to take part in the Great Commission. Being involved in intercultural missions to unreached peoples and places is not something that churches do once they have evangelized their owns towns and villages. It is not something that churches get around to once they have sorted out all their theological questions and conundrums. The task of making disciples of all nations is a task for all believers and all churches everywhere. One shining example of a Global South mobilizer is Rev. Reuben Cachala of the Assemblies of God in Malawi. Rev. Cachala travels around Malawi and teaches a course that he designed that challenges and encourages Malawian churches to be involved in frontier missions—telling Malawian church leaders that they are expected to a part of reaching the unreached with the gospel.

In addition to the gap in expectations, there is also a gap in information. Many of my (Phil's) theological students in Malawi were shocked to find out that there were places where it was illegal

to tell someone else about Jesus. They were grieved to discover that becoming a Christian can be a death sentence for individuals in some places. They had no idea that hundreds of millions of people have never even heard the name of Jesus or know what the Bible is. Creating missional awareness became one of my central goals during my time in Sub-Saharan Africa. The African-led Movement for African National Initiatives (MANI, 2018) is an encouraging example of how Global South churches can and will develop and implement missionary strategies for how they will be involved in taking the gospel to unreached peoples and places in places like North Africa, North Korea, and North Carolina. However, before they can do that, they must be *aware* of the tragedy of lostness around the world. One of our central tasks as theological educators and missionaries from the West working among Global South churches is to raise awareness of these opportunities to proclaim the glory of Christ. The sheer number of believers in the Global South positions the churches there to have almost unlimited potential (Perbi & Ngugi, 2022, p. 90).

Conclusion

Reproducibility, as it is often understood, is not always a valuable tool used to measure what it takes to find and train mature Christian disciples who are ready to lead their churches. Speed should not be the primary metric when evaluating how profitable a certain method of training is. Instead, missions sending organizations and their missionaries should create and implement a model that gives priority to theological aptitude, exegetical skill, humility, and missional awareness. In doing so, the missionary's goal is clarified to be faithful to Christ, his Word, and his mission.

References

Allen, R. (1962). *Missionary methods: St. Paul's or ours*? Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

Anderson, C. (2022). "How to assess reproducibility at every level." Retrieved from https://www.dmmsfrontiermissions.com/reproducibility-disciple-making-movements

Armstrong, P. (2010). "Bloom's taxonomy." Center for teaching, Vanderbilt University. Retrieved from https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/blooms-taxonomy/

Brooks, W. (2019). "Theological education as integral component of world mission strategy," in *World mission: theology, strategy, & current issues*, ed. Callaham, S. N. & Brooks, W. Bellingham, WA: Lexham.

Chesterton, G. K. (2022). *Orthodoxy*. Nashville, TN: B&H Academic.

Culbertson, H. (n.d.). "Infinitely reproducible patters." Retrieved from https://home.snu.edu/~hculbert/infinite.htm

MANI (2018). Movement for African National Initiatives official website. https://maniafrica.com/

Mbewe, C. (2017). "Seven lies I once believed about missions." *Sola 5*. Retrieved from https://sola5.org/seven-lies-i-once-believed-about-missions/

Pearce, P. (2022). "Exit: training and trust." *Great commission baptist journal of missions*, Vol 1, No 1. Retrieved from https://serials.atla.com/gcbjm/article/view/3054

Perbi, Y. & Ngugi, S. (2022). *Africa to the rest: From mission field to mission force (Again)*. Maitland, FL: Xulon Press.

Plueddemann, J. E. (2018). *Teaching across cultures*. Grand Rapids: InterVarsity Press.

Sundin, C. (2022). "Why we are in Crete: leadership development as preparation for the unexpected." *Great commission baptist journal of missions*. Vol 1, No 2. Retrieved from https://serials.atla.com/gcbjm/article/view/3230/4118

Watson, D. & Watson, P. (2014). *Contagious disciple making: leading others on a journey of discovery*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.