**Teaching Mission**

**How Can We Evangelicals and Orthodox Do This Better Together?**

**Lausanne Orthodox Initiative Conference, Cambridge, UK, September 7, 2017**

**Dr. Joseph William Black**

Senior Lecturer, Faculty of Theology, St. Paul’s University, Limuru/Nairobi, Kenya

Deputy Dean, Makarios III Patriarchal Orthodox Seminary, Nairobi, Kenya

I have a confession to make. In more than 23 years of formal education, including a Masters of Divinity from a leading Evangelical seminary in the US, I have never had a course in missions or missiology. In ten or so short-term mission trips that I either participated in or led, I read some articles but was never exposed to formal training. In all my preparations for full time missionary service I somehow managed to avoid ever reading *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement* (Winter et al. 2009). And as first a Protestant missionary engaged in theological education in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia and now as an Orthodox Christian engaged in theological education in Nairobi, Kenya, I have never been to any conference, much less taught a course on missions or missiology. Don’t get me wrong. Some of my best friends are missiologists. I’ve even published a few papers and have a blog that might be accused of being missiological in nature. But my point in all of this is to suggest that, with respect to theological education, with respect to teaching mission, I would like to suggest that there is a difference between teaching mission and, dare I say, missions. But before I can say that, there are some assumptions clouding the discussion that would be good for us to acknowledge and engage.

First, notice that I have slipped away from the currently approved word ‘mission’ into using the word ‘missions’ which was abandoned by academics and denominational leaders some years ago. For some time the two words were used interchangeably, but less and less in the journals and official publications of Christian organizations. Evidently, ‘missions’ with it’s implications of cross-cultural evangelism and ministry was deemed too limiting. Somebody felt left out! The churches’ mission surely includes whatever the church does to reach out, it was argued. This was further modified to include whatever the church does. Work trips to the inner city, picking up trash along the highway, visiting nursing homes, and if one is American, voting Republican or voting Democratic (depending on one’s denomination), singing in the choir or the worship team, all of it is just as much the mission of the church as the cross-cultural variety. But as you can imagine, as with every inclusive expansion of definition, if everything becomes mission, the term becomes meaningless and actually nothing is mission anymore. ‘Missions’ as envisioned by successive attempts by Christians to respond to the Great Commission becomes increasingly a marginalized subset of mission. In other words, why should anybody bother with global missions when what we are doing right here at home is mission too? For example, in his attempt to say something significant about ‘mission’, Kirk defines the term out of all relevance when he says:

Mission is the fundamental reality of our Christian life. We are Christians because we have been called by God to work with him in the fulfillment of his purposes for humanity as a whole. Our life in this world is life in mission. Life has a purpose only to the extent that it has a missionary dimension. (Kirk , 1999, 31)

This is lovely, lofty rhetoric, and is clearly aspirational. But it may not even be meaningful, not just in the context of theological education, but in the ordinary churches whose members seem to live in a different reality. Moreover, with the emphasis on ‘mission’ increasingly diluted, the impetus to be aware of, much less engaged in the *global* mission of the church fades away.[[1]](#footnote-2) But because my passion and experience lies with the cross-cultural version of the Church’s mandate to be salt and light, for the purposes of this paper I am reverting to the older, and in my opinion, more appropriate word of *missions* to describe what it is we are being asked to cooperate over. We can cooperate over the upcoming Vacation Bible School or this year’s ethnic food extravaganza, but it does sort of miss the point. The narrower understanding of missions has broad support in more Evangelical Protestant circles, and it is not without strong advocacy among some Orthodox Christians, albeit expressed within an Orthodox perspective (Federov, 2005, 6).

Secondly, we need to acknowledge that teaching ‘mission’, by which I am going to assume that as academics we mean teaching ‘missiology’, we are dealing with an academic field that hasn’t been around all that long. Even as recently as the 1980s and 90s, journals were publishing anxious articles like Jan Jongeneel’s ‘Is Missiology an Academic Discipline?’ (Jongeneel, 1998) James Scherer’s, ‘The Future of Missiology as an Academic Discipline in Seminary Education;’ (Scherer, 1985) or R. Langmead’s ‘What is Missiology?’ (Langmead., 2014) Scherer himself admits that he was unable to come up with a ‘fully agreed definition of what missiology is’. (Scherer, 1985, 445) And with any area of study that raids as many disciplines as ‘missiology’ (history, theology, ecclesiology, Biblical studies, anthropology, sociology, medicine, development, education, etc.), a degree of confusion is to be expected.

I am making a third assumption, namely that the lack of cooperation between Evangelicals and Orthodox in many things, not just teaching missions, exists for a reason. I am my own best example of this, in that when I converted to Orthodoxy in 2011, my evangelical graduate school of theology fired me, as did the evangelical mission to which I belonged for twelve years. And while my academic colleagues were happy to have me stay on, my administrators in both cases felt I posed a grave threat to their fundraising capacities. So that was that. Fear of offending rich donors aside, the problem between our movements, fundamentally, has to do with the different ways our traditions have of construing authority and salvation, among other things.[[2]](#footnote-3) We haven’t cooperated with missions in the past because we did not think it was possible. And it may still be impossible for these very reasons. But resolving those issues to everybody’s satisfaction is not my brief. So I am going to continue to talk about how Orthodox and Evangelicals can teach (and even do) missions together, as if we can.

Fourthly, I am assuming that by teaching missions together, both Orthodox and Evangelical, we are talking about teaching in the organized, educational context of theological education. This is a natural assumption, as theological colleges, with their curricula, their faculty, their facilities and their students provide a ready context, a captive audience for teaching subjects such as missions.

The theological education industry in the west has done a superb job of adopting and co-opting the categories, strategies and methodologies of Western secular higher education, and of conforming their courses and programs and degrees so that they are acceptable to the latest education theories and the appropriate accrediting bodies, which are themselves acceptable to the education gods to which the West has bowed down for several centuries now.[[3]](#footnote-4) Those of us who are teachers and administrators almost never stop to think about this. It is simply our given. And our students are too busy chasing their diplomas to question the bigger agendas that they have somehow wandered into.

Over the past century, however, a creeping professionalism has seized most of the Christian denominations of the west.[[4]](#footnote-5) And with it has come the need to provide professional academic training and credentials, ones that impressively mimic all of the other more secularized professional and academic programs.[[5]](#footnote-6) Hence the evolution of small Evangelical theological seminaries into academic powerhouses in their own right. Think of Fuller, think of Trinity, think of Gordon-Conwell, think of Asbury and Wheaton, just to name a few of the more widely known Evangelical schools. The chosen way for Evangelical theological education to become more respectable in the larger world of the western scholarship conglomeration is to become more like the more secular academic institutions around them, from administration to curriculum to standards, to degrees, even to when it comes to publishing or perishing. Everything about the current theological educational experience has been parsed and regularized and categorised and then passed on to professors who produce lectures that themselves must pass scrutiny, and who must produce assignments and exams that are themselves moderated.[[6]](#footnote-7) But because our schools and even we carry the label ‘Christian,’ we can even redefine theological education so that it becomes not just ‘ministry’, but ‘mission’ itself, with bonus points if it takes place on a *bona fida* mission field (Penner, 2005). The reason I know this is because it also describes my life in Ethiopia and Kenya. I am a senior lecturer in a faculty of theology, and there is constant pressure to meet approved academic standards, to adhere to a blizzard of regulations imposed by the government, and document supervisions and make exams conform to standards. And one might think, well of course this is normal. The sooner African schools can demonstrate capacity to maintain quality programs, the better. But the problem is we have learned nothing from our past. The very fact that we have aligned Christian preparation for ministry with the Western higher education juggernaut sends matters in a direction never even conceived for most of Christian history. The history of ‘Christian’ colleges and universities is not very comforting if one is looking for success stories of the power of Christian influence. Sadly, the influence more often flows the other way, with avowedly Christian schools becoming less so as the pressures of accommodation and finance exact their toll.[[7]](#footnote-8) Just as in the history of higher education in the West, the preferred road of current African theological education inexorably vacates God from both education and society. The number of Pentecostal and Evangelical megachurches, with all their shouting and dancing may be multiplying in cities like Nairobi and Addis Ababa, adept at making a name for themselves but promoting a self-centred and privatised version of religion that’s big on personal experience but void on any real impact on their communities and the society for Christ. But such Christianity, to redirect Shakespeare, is full of sound and fury, signifying nothing. And our imported theological education industry is doing nothing to stop it and is, if anything, seduced by their so-called ‘success’ and enabling it. As Stanley Hauerwas observes in a short sharp review some years back,

the question remains whether Christian universities could produce a historiography in which God appears as something more than a God-belief by some people - that is, a God of the gaps…. If the Christian university is to have anything interesting to say, it will do so because the knowledges that are shaped by its practices help us see that God matters. (Hauerwas, 1994, 16)

In the current theological education enterprise, both in the West and in Africa, God matters less and less, except as perhaps a personal good luck charm or a kind of celestial vending machine who helps me get what I want, I mean, need. And despite their skill in producing professionalized clergy for the professionalized ministerial positions described by contemporary search committee job descriptions, one could argue that the difference such institutions are making in the effectiveness and impact of the Christian churches they supposedly serve is increasingly marginal. Anecdotal experience indicates a similar trajectory in Kenya and Ethiopia, at least. And it’s a trend to which the Orthodox Churches are not showing any immunity as well.[[8]](#footnote-9)

So given the challenges and shortcomings of the Western academic model of theological education, whose idea was it to import western academic educational assumptions and western academic institutional models into Ethiopian and Kenyan contexts? Let me state my just mentioned concern in a different way. The great irony is that, Western Christians may have demonstrated a capacity to reproduce the academic institutions of their secular counterparts, Western theological educators may be able to produce courses and lectures and write learned articles and books, Western theological seminaries may graduate hundreds and thousands of students who then take their places in the religious infrastructure of America and Europe, but are all these lectures, all these courses, all these graduates making a real difference in their churches? Are we seeing a growing impact from this well-educated body of clergy in the wider societies? Are local churches being strengthened? Are people being effectively reached for Christ? Have they been part of the solution? Or are they part of the problem? Can you now begin to see the irony, indeed the hubris, of importing a model of theological education into east Africa that does a good job of making good academic institutions but not so good in actually helping Churches and helping Christians become like Christ? Not only that, but we have willy nilly assumed that our Western structures, our Western institutions, our Western curricula - you know, the same ones that have been so effective for our Western churches - we have assumed that these are what the doctor ordered for the burgeoning churches of Africa.

That was certainly what I thought in 1980 when I, as a university student, spent a summer living with a Kenyan pastor and his family in the middle of the Great Rift Valley in Kenya. I was astonished at how much my pastor was able to do, pastoring 5 separate congregations and having only an 8th grade education. I sensed a call that summer to be a missionary and I determined that the best way I could help was to get both ministerial experience and theological education and then go back and train pastors. Notice that I assumed that theological education was a universal, that what worked for me in America would be perfect for the future leaders of the church in Kenya. As time went on and I got pastoral experience and I became theologically educated, I realised that there were probably plenty of Kenyans who could train pastors at the level of my friend. What they needed was to be able to offer theological education at the highest levels to that the churches of Kenya would no longer lose their best people to programs in Europe and the USA, who would get their Masters and PhDs and then find reasons to stay and never go back home. Instead if we could train these men and women in Kenya, then they would stay and have an impact for good on their churches. That was the intention.[[9]](#footnote-10)

It turns out that ‘theological education’ as we understand it today is a Western-generated need answered by a western-generated solution.[[10]](#footnote-11) There are at least a dozen Protestant evangelical theological colleges and universities in Kenya competing for the same circle of students. The Orthodox seminary in Kenya operates at a lower level (sub-diploma), but we put our students through a similar array of courses and use the same classroom model of teaching as do the Protestants and Catholics in Kenya, as well as the Orthodox seminaries in the US. All of us follow the Western model, and all of us process our students through our theological education curricula and award our diplomas. But all of us in Kenya are also on the same professionalization-of-the-ministry track that the West has been on, and with the same results.[[11]](#footnote-12) Theological Education across the board is not making anybody more godly or Christian. We are training them to do the tasks expected of them in the ministry positions they are expecting to be hired to fill. And even this we do not do very well. Instead, by giving our students diplomas and credentials, theological education is enabling our students to ascend the ladder of professional success in the churches more rapidly. Which I suppose is something.[[12]](#footnote-13) However noble the original motivation behind theological education was to begin with, it’s not what we are doing now.[[13]](#footnote-14) Or as Hendriks (2013:824) states, ‘The seminary is a product of late Christendom and modernism. It usually forms denominational proselytes and Western proselytes.’ And I am pretty sure this is what we are *not* meant to be doing.

That’s why I’m having trouble with this topic, *Teaching Mission - How can we do this better?* Because the whole premise, while understandable, is in my opinion, fatally flawed. I mean, I could get my Orthodox people to work with your Evangelical people and we could come up with a conference to bring a constellation of Evangelical stars and Orthodox stars to come to my little seminary or your big graduate school and talk about missions present lectures to our students and faculty and then we could declare victory and go home feeling like we accomplished something. But all we would have done is give our participants the idea that if they heard a couple of speakers and sang some inspiring songs, then they have learned something about missions and we can check that off our list, the same way we do with systematic theology, or Old Testament studies, or homiletics. Been there, done that, tic. You may now call me theologically educated.

Or what about our chosen topic, teaching missions? All of our Western seminaries offer courses in mission/missiology/missions, as do all our Western seminaries established in Africa. There is even discussion in some circles about redefining the entire theological education task in a missiological direction.[[14]](#footnote-15) But if taking a course does not translate into developing a missions perspective or a heart for the global lost or a desire to help the struggling Christians and churches of the developing world, or hearing God’s call to serve as an actual missionary to Leicester here in the UK, then we may have fulfilled our course requirements, but has it made any difference?[[15]](#footnote-16) I hear echoes of the preacher in Ecclesiastes here - meaningless, meaningless, everything is meaningless.[[16]](#footnote-17)

Which is why I’m not going to suggest that cooperating on some theological education project is our brief nor should it be. Instead, I am going to suggest we do something that will sound radical, but which is actually the New Testament way of doing things. It’s actually the preferred way of learning for most of Church History. When it comes down to it, it’s actually we who are the aberration, who have equated courses and classrooms with learning, degrees to calling, and education to spirituality, and to ruinous effect when it comes to both individual and corporate Christianity, in the West, at least.

My suggestion is that instead of teaching missions together, we *do* missions together. When Jesus wanted his disciples to learn about preaching and exorcism and teaching and miracles and prayer, after he showed them he sent them out on their own local mission tours in Galilee. And then he debriefed them. Paul and Barnabas didn’t just offer seminars on Jewish and Gentile evangelism, or give lectures on the Old Testament in the New, they took people with them. John Mark, Timothy, Sosthenes, Titus, Aristarchus, Priscilla and Aquila, etc, etc. I hate to say this, because I am a professional theological educator, but most of what we are teaching our students may satisfy our job descriptions and our course descriptions, but it is useless for our churches and what they are facing, and it’s not doing very much for theosis or sanctification or for the advancement of the Kingdom of God. There is a place for academic study. But it was never meant to be THE WAY we train people for ministry. Just ask Jesus. But this academic program of theological education has all but replaced the dominical mandate to be disciples and to make disciples, at least in the places with which I am familiar.

I have a PhD from this university (Cambridge University). But I did not learn missions in any of my studies. Rather I learned about missions from living with my Kenyan mentor, the one with the 8th grade education, from following him around, visiting homes with him, playing with the neighbourhood children, preaching under his encouragement, praying with him and his family, as well as doing battle with contextual parasites like giardia, amoeba and malaria.

So if you want to learn about what Orthodox missions is all about, come live with me for a couple of months and experience what Orthodox life and mission is all about. The same for my Orthodox colleagues. Forgo the conference. Go live with an Evangelical missionary. Do ministry together. In both cases, we will learn more by doing with each other, by being with each other, by experiencing with each other, by talking to each other, than we ever will in our offices and classrooms.

In all of this I’m circling around to where I myself began many years ago. As a university student I was involved in InterVarsity Christian Fellowship. It’s those four years as a student and four years after when I served as a staff worker where I probably grew most as a Christian. And it wasn’t because I attended classes or conferences or seminars. Instead I learned how to study the Bible by being given the opportunity to lead Bible studies. I learned how to share my faith by being given the opportunity to talk to other people about Christ. I learned how to be a leader by being given the opportunity to be a leader. I learned how to give talks by being given the opportunity to give talks. And I learned how to make disciples because a couple of men were willing to invest their lives in me. Admittedly I did this in an Evangelical context. It would be another 27 years before I would convert to Orthodoxy. But discipleship is not something Evangelicals do, nor is it an Orthodox prerogative, *discipleship is Christianity*, New Testament apostolic Christianity. It’s what Christians are called to be. It’s what Christians are called to do.

We have lost this in our theological education industries, and the absence of discipleship in our churches and in our theological education programs is producing all manner of sterile, inert and even bad fruit. We are pursuing different ends from what we find in our New Testament. We chase money and numbers and equate that with success. And our churches reflect our priorities, but I don’t think anybody would accuse our churches of being models of spiritual health, of New Testament priorities, much less fountains of living water for our neighbors or the unreached worlds beyond. There is a reason for this. Our members cannot go any further than our leaders. And our theological education system simply does not lead people closer to Christ. It’s not what our education system is designed to do. It does happen, but almost accidentally, and not on account of theological education.

So this is my challenge. If we want to teach mission, and do it together, why not do so in the way demonstrated by Jesus, in the way demonstrated by Paul and the other apostles, in a way that some of the Evangelical parachurch ministries like InterVarsity Christian Fellowship and the Navigators have understood?[[17]](#footnote-18) In a significant way, the theological education industry has made what we call ‘preparation for ministry’ way too easy. And so it is totally understandable if some of us are thinking, this is completely impractical, it’s too hard, it requires too much, it’s way too costly. But I’m not much bothered by that. Because anytime we move towards engaging with Jesus and something of the Way, the Truth and the Life that He is, we discover that the ways of professional success, the ways of this world and the way of the cross are not often compatible and that we have a choice to make.

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1. This is not just a mainline Protestant issue, but a trend within Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism. Federal states that ‘according to the broad definition, the whole life of the Church is mission. “The Church is mission” - this is what Catholic theologians also maintain. When we think of the Church’s mission in Russia or the mission of Christianity in the world, we are thinking primarily of the Church’s task as a whole. (Federov, 2005,4) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. See, for example, Dick Peace’s (2004) ‘Conflicting Understandings of Christian Conversions: A Missiological Challenge’, which helpfully identifies the differences in the multitude of Western Protestant and Catholic perspectives on conversion. Protestants, of course, are unable to speak with one voice on most issues involving theology and praxis. But their fundamental principles are essentially those of the Roman Catholic tradition. Peace is less successful in his attempt to understand Orthodox soteriology, focusing as many do on the externals and seeking to draw conclusions from them rather than understanding the radically different way Orthodox theology perceives salvation. Kallistos Ware provides a more sure guide to Orthodox soteriology and thus the Orthodox understanding of conversion. See Ware (1996) *How Are We Saved?: The Understanding of Salvation in the Orthodox Tradition,* which is a simple and clear explanation of salvation as the Orthodox have always understood it. This inability on the part of Western Christians, both Protestant and Roman Catholic, to fathom just how different the Eastern Christian tradition is from their own assumptions, is a major barrier that prevents more effective cooperation and meaningful engagement between the traditions. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Lesslie Newbigin gives a good example of both an awareness of the professionalizing role of theological education and of the assumption that this is still, despite the shortcomings, the best way to proceed in the West certainly, and in the rest of the global church as well. (Newbigin,(2008/1978). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. See, for example, John Piper’s *Brothers, We Are Not Professionals: A Plea to Pastors for Radical Ministry* (B&H Books, 2013/2002), an Evangelical take down of the creeping professionalization of Christian ministry and its consequences for Evangelical churches. This is not just a 21st century concern, but has been a tendency in every culture where Christian ministers are concerned about attaining respectability. (Derwyn, 2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. And now theological educational institutions have adopted the quality assurance program with a vengeance. On the face of it, assuring the quality of one’s program and what the students are receiving is an obvious and commendable thing. But it is also just one more piece of the wider culture’s way of doing education these days that Christian schools have adopted as if this is the way things must be done. Christian theological education is firmly a part of the wider Western education project. Whether or not that is a good thing is a question too few are asking. As an example of what an argument for quality assurance in theological education, see Bill Houston’s ‘What is “Quality” in Theological Education?’ (2013:875-880) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Despite Andrew Walls’ (2013) attempt to find trace continuity in theological education from the earliest attempts of the Church Fathers to the monasteries of both East and West to the post-Reformation realignment of Roman Catholic projects to the Bible Schools, colleges, seminaries and universities of today. there really is no precedent for the modernist methodologies and underlying assumptions that mark theological education today. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Jurgens Hendriks also traces the history of theological education through the difficulty cultural, political and intellectual histories of the West and states that through this history ‘The [Western] church was compromised and discredited. The Western seminary is a product of this history carrying its DNA structure in its bones and fiber.’ (Hendriks, 2013:820) [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. In contrast to the dechristianisation of the church and its institutions, including theological education, of which the professionalisation of Christian ministry (among other things) is a symptom, Orthodox theology (if not practice) sees a reverse process as being the goal of Christian mission. This includes not just individuals becoming Christians, but society and culture itself becoming Christianized. See Federov’s discussion. (Federov, 2005, 8-9). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. And this continues to be the intention, not just in Kenya and Ethiopia, but across the continent. See, for example, Simon Gilham’s (2012)’The Quest for Appropriate Models of Theological Education for Africa’. Gilham comes closest to stating the issue clearly: ‘For many years now the need for appropriate theological education and training of pastors in Africa has been well recognised. Whilst there are some elements of the situation in Africa that are unique to that continent (and further issues that are specific to various countries and regions within Africa), the need for appropriate models of theological education and training for Christian pastors is a universal one. Indeed any study of theological education which dealt with the African situation in isolation from the rest of the world would necessarily end up focus- sing on the specifics of implementation rather than on the underlying models and assumptions. These models and assumptions in large part have been imported wholesale from other parts of the world. In some cases they are given ‘national dress’, but all too often even this simplest attempt at contextualisation is neglected. The result is that many African pastors have been trained in western academic institutions that were transplanted into their countries. Those who best come to terms with the philosophy and style of education they find there, may well be the least able to return to minister effectively in their own communities).

There is much that can and should be done to more adequately ‘contextualise’ the models of theological education that western missionaries experience at home and take with them to Africa. Rather than focus on this re-dressing of models however, this essay will concern itself with the more fundamental question ‘what are the appropriate models of theological education for Africa?’ (2012, 25) Gilham’s solution is to make the imported model work better rather than question it’s fundamental usefulness. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. As with Evangelical theological education, it is beyond my scope to go into any detail here on the history of theological education among the Orthodox. For an overview of the history of Orthodox theological education in Russia, for example, see Federov, (2005),10-25. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. The same methodology of theological education is being pursued in many other African contexts as well. See Michael McCoy’s ‘Restoring mission to the heart of theological education: A South African perspective’ (McCoy, 2005, 1-8). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. Many people, both African Christian leaders and missionaries alike have been frustrated with the current model of theological education system. The reason I can say this is because of the sheer number of attempts to make theological education fit better in the African context. Theological educators such as Mombo and Chesworth (2013), Mumo (2013), Noll (2013), West (2013), Storey (2013), G. Bediako (2013a/b), Oduyoye (2013), Taylor and Dunsmuir (2013), Phiri (2013), Agbi-Awume (2013), Mbaya (2013) and Dube (2013) have all chronicled innovations in theological education across the Africa continent, and the fact that they were asked to provide these accounts gives an indication as to just how acute and widespread the need is to address the gap that exists between the means and what is produced. In other words, however beneficial people have found theological education to be, its presence in Africa, at least, has provoked both a crisis as well as many attempts to make it work in whichever local context it is done. All of these attempts are starting with the same set of assumptions and working with the same essential model, whilst trying to tweak it. My point is that the model itself is the issue and that no amount of tweaking will correct what is a congenital flaw. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. Florenskii gives an assessment of the Christian world that could just as easily apply to theological education: ‘it is rotten to the core because it lacks the activity of Christ and has not the courage or honesty to admit the rottenness of its faith.’ Pavel Florenskii, *Sobranie sochinenie (Collected Works),* Moscow, 1994*.* Quoted in Federov (2005), 10. The Christian world, and Christian institutions have therefore a massive credibility problem. As Federov observes, ‘The events of the twentieth century (world wars, and the cruelty and barbarity of those who call themselves Christians) have done much to corroborate that assessment.’ Federov (2005), 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. Peter Rowan asks ‘How does [mission] relate to a Christian seminary and its theological curriculum? If we are participating in the *missio Dei*, and if we believe that the church is God’s agent in the working out of the *missio Dei*, then in our seminary training our aim is to bring ourselves, our students and the church we serve, back to the flaming centre of the Christian message: Jesus Christ, the lord and saviour of the world.’ (Rowan, 2007, 15-16) Rowan assumes that this can be accomplished within the existing theological education mechanisms, and that what is needed is for theological educators to ‘integrate a missiological perspective into what we teach’. But no course, and even no curriculum has been observed sufficient to accomplish the fundamentally spiritual goals set for them. Courses and curricula cannot transfer anything but knowledge, which is not bad. It’s just it’s not enough. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. Dietrich Werner, the World Council of Churches director of Global Theological Education, assumes that theological education as currently practiced across the globe is making a difference and that all that lacks is that we do a better job at it. And so his paper ‘Theological Education in the Changing Context of World Christianity: An Unfinished Agenda’ is all about identifying the shortcomings of the theological education project and fixing them, and that this will go far towards addressing the challenges faced by the global church. But Werner assumes that what is primarily a Western education project is the panacea for what ails the churches across the world. He quotes with approval the 1938 Tambaram World Mission Conference statement that ‘The weakest element in the enterprise of Modern Missions is theological education.’ (95-96) And he goes on to say that the same could be said today. But I would contest the claims that if we just do theological education better, then we will see the results that we want. If theological education was going to succeed, it would have done so already. But just trying harder and being more earnest about it will not enable a system that is fundamentally misfitted for the task to succeed. (Werner, 2011, 92-100) [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. I am not the first or only one to be disturbed by these things. James Nathaniel Amanze, in his article ‘Paradigm Shift in Theological Education in Southern and Central Africa and Its Relevance to Ministerial Formation’ asks similar hard questions, but the solution is to tweak the Western theological education project as if it is a necessary given. (Amanze, 2009). John Pobee also makes a searing critique of the missionary Christianity imposed on African pluralities, but he strangely doesn’t see his own subsequent dependence on Western ecumenical bodies and theological constructs as also a symptom of the greater problem. Theological education and mission are simply translated out of the conservative missionary context of their origins into the ecumenical, theologically liberal (in the Western sense) and still thoroughly Western assumptions of the contemporary Western academic scene. See John S. Pobee, ‘“Stretch Forth Thy Wings and Fly” Theological Education in the African Context’ in *Handbook of Theological Education in the World Christianity: Theological Perspectives–Ecumenical Trends–Regional Surveys,* Regnum Books International (2010): 337-345. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. See, for example Merkle’s discussion of the Apostle Paul’s ongoing relationship with his Asian and European converts as both theological education and discipleship. (Merkle, 2005) [↑](#footnote-ref-18)