

**Opportunities and Challenges  
for Theological Education  
at the Beginning of the Third Christian Millennium**  
By **Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.**

Let me begin by thanking ATA, its leadership and members, for the privilege of speaking with you today. I am not a member of your association. Rather, I have been a professor of Old Testament Studies at Reformed Theological Seminary in the United States, a member of the Association of Theological Schools. I continue to serve as Adjunct Professor there. So, I come to you with a keen awareness that I am a guest, a kindly welcomed guest, but a guest nonetheless.

At the same time, I should mention that I have taught short theological courses more than twenty-five times in eight nations represented by ATA. Currently, I serve as President of Third Millennium Ministries, an organization that provides seminary-level, multimedia, theological curriculum free of charge. Our curriculum is currently in translation in over twenty languages, including Mandarin, Mongolian, Hindi, Modern Standard Arabic, Bahasa Indonesia, and English. Our faculty represents more than ten denominations, including representatives of four of your member countries, and is currently used in church leadership development in over 180 countries, including eight countries represented by ATA. So, while I come to you as an outsider, I also come as a colleague who shares your commitment to theological education in this part of the world.

I have been asked to address the subject of the opportunities and challenges of theological education at the beginning of the third Christian millennium, especially in the light of my experiences in multimedia curriculum development as President of Third Millennium Ministries for the last 15 years. I come as one who wants to join with you in meeting the needs for theological education in Asia and around the world.

I once had a conversation with the leader of a large network of churches in one of the nations represented by ATA. Over dinner, the conversation turned to the enormous burden he felt for providing theological education for the thousands of pastors who served in his network of churches. At one point, I asked him, "How many pastors do you need to educate each year?"

His response was surprising. "I need to educate 10,000 pastors every year." Then he looked at me with a slight grin and asked, "What do you think I should do?"

“Ten thousand?” I asked.

“Ten thousand,” he nodded confidently.

I took a deep breath and responded as best I could. “Let me put it this way,” I said. “I think I know what you should not do. Don’t do what we have done in the West. We know the results of that.”

My answer shocked my friend. In his mind, traditional theological education in the West was ideal. So, I had to point to certain inadequacies in the educational system that has been so much a part of my life. I am happy to say, however, that as our conversation went on, he and I agreed that God has mercifully enabled theological educators in the early decades of the third millennium to deal with these inadequacies, if we are willing to seize the opportunities that lie before us.

For our purposes here, I will touch on the opportunities and challenges of overcoming two critical weaknesses in traditional Western theological education that I had in mind that day: first, its scarcity; second, its quality.

### **The Scarcity of Theological Education**

My friend knew all too well the scarcity of traditional theological education. He wanted it for his 10,000 pastors, but the best he could do was to fund one seminary with 35 students. The major portion of that expense was used to bring in Western professors and Asian professors from North America, but that is as far as his desire for a Western-style education could take him. I wish his situation was unusual, but it is not. In fact, unless we see a radical change, the scarcity of theological education will only worsen in the near future.

My own concern about the scarcity of educational opportunities for church leaders rests on my understanding of the mission Christ gave us in Matthew 28:19-20. The mission he gave to the church was twofold. On the one side, we are to seek conversions to the Christian faith. As Jesus put it, “baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.” But our mission is also educational, “teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you.” Clearly, theological education for church leaders is one facet of the second category, but the two categories always go hand in hand. As followers of Christ spread the good news of the Kingdom throughout the world, they are also to attend to the educational needs of those who come to faith in Christ, including their leaders. But herein lies the heart of the problem. In recent history, where the church is growing most rapidly in the world, there is the least opportunity for the theological education of church leaders.

As early as 1998, Ralph Winter estimated that “there [were] 2,000,000 functional pastors with no formal theological education.”<sup>1</sup> This estimate reflected the need for extending theological education decades ago. Everyone with exposure to the global church knows firsthand that our systems of pastoral education have underserved vast segments of the body of Christ. Despite the heroic, sacrificial efforts of countless Christian teachers who have tried to deal with this need, our attempts have been far from adequate. Seminaries have multiplied in places like North America where there has been modest growth or even decline in the church. But opportunities for theological education in regions with comparatively rapid church growth are few and far between. In parts of Asia and Africa in particular, the current need is overwhelming.

Should we expect this situation to change in the future? I am afraid not. From all reliable estimates, the scarcity of theological education will only increase. To be sure, it is likely there will be more education available in historically underserved regions of the world. Yet, its scarcity is likely to increase because the church will continue to grow rapidly in those regions, and the number of educational opportunities will fall further and further behind.

The Atlas of Global Christianity<sup>2</sup> provides us with a sense of this increasing scarcity. It estimates the following growth patterns for the church between 2010 and 2050. Assuming that there are no unexpected global catastrophes or massive movements of God’s Spirit, the Atlas forecasts these patterns of growth:

#### **Growth Patterns for the Global Church**

	<b>2010<sup>3</sup></b>	<b>2050<sup>4</sup></b>
North America	283 million	331 million
Oceania	28 million	35 million
Europe	586 million	508 million
Latin America	549 million	694 million
Asia	352 million	595 million
Africa	495 million	1 billion

If these estimates are anywhere near correct, then between 2010 and 2050 the greatest growth of the church will take place in Latin America (145 million), Asia (243 million) and Africa (505 million).

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<sup>1</sup> Ralph Winter, “The Largest Stumbling Block to Leadership Development in the Global Church: Needed: A Revolution in Pastoral Training,” *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 20.3 (2003): 92.

<sup>2</sup> Todd M. Johnson and Kenneth R. Ross, *Atlas of Global Christianity 1910-2010* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009)

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 9.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 45.

These numbers reflect the challenge we face as theological educators today. In effect, the region of the world that ATA serves will have an estimated 595 million Christians by 2050. Of course, this number includes every branch of the Christian church, but they still give us an ominous portrait of our task. With a conservative estimate of 1 pastor for every 100 Christians, this means that Asia will need roughly 5.95 million pastors in 2050. The numbers are even greater in Africa. At the same rate, one billion Christians in Africa will require roughly 10 million pastors. I do not think it is an exaggeration to say that we will not be able to erect a sufficient number of traditional theological institutions to deal with these kinds of numbers in the next 37 years. The scarcity of theological education will continue to increase in these parts of the world unless we find a more adequate strategy.

So, what's the problem? We do not lack good intentions. I do not doubt that all of us would like to see this scarcity diminish. The primary problem is the amount of money required to operate learning communities that imitate traditional Western seminaries. It is so costly that we simply cannot afford enough schools to meet the need. In the West, our traditional seminary system has become so inextricably bound to this costly model that we have come close to making scarcity a virtue. For example, in North America, non-English speaking communities where evangelicalism is growing rapidly are still grossly underserved. This failure has resulted from a system that has embraced scarcity as a way of justifying high per capita costs. Like gold and silver, theological education is costly because it is scarce. On a global scale, the results of this economic model are obvious. The body of Christ simply cannot afford to educate the vast majority of church leaders around the world. Despite the generosity of donors and the sincere efforts of our institutions, theological education remains largely available to only a very small, highly privileged minority.

Now, I assume that most of us find the exclusion of the vast majority of Christian leaders from sound evangelical theological education unacceptable. But the pressing question is this: What can be done to make education available to the millions who need it, or dare I say, who deserve it?

Let me first point out a couple of dead ends. On the one hand, the convenience of modern global travel will not solve the problem. It is wonderful that so many theological educators travel to teach either short-term or long-term in underserved parts of the world. I do this, and I encourage others to do this in increasingly greater numbers. Yet, it is obvious that the mobilization and maintenance of the massive army of teachers required for this task is simply not possible.

Another dead end in my estimation is the publication of books. If you are anything like me, books have played a vital role in your concept of theological education. I believe in traditional publishing efforts and the global distribution of books. Yet, one of the realities we must face is that many, if not most of the church leaders of Asia's 595 million — and of Africa's one billion — Christians in 2050 will not be highly educated. It is not a question of intelligence. They will be capable of learning theology, but their formal

education will limit their ability to learn theology by reading. In my own experience in North America, even students who have strong formal educational backgrounds usually need someone to vet and explain much of the information that is available in books. As important as it is to provide books for church leaders, books will not meet the need.

What then should we do? As you can imagine, I am convinced that a well-designed, multimedia curriculum can help us meet the enormous need for theological education around the world. From my experience over the last 15 years, I have learned that such a curriculum can be delivered to large numbers of students, and it can cover a wide range of educational levels.

Now, the qualification of “well-designed” is essential. I have come to a number of conclusions about the characteristics of multimedia curricular design that can help us overcome the problem of scarcity.

1. It must be designed for multiple delivery systems.  
Different segments of the church have different levels of access to technology, and technology is always changing. Unfortunately, many mediated curricula are severely limited because they have been designed for only one or two levels of technology. To deal with technological diversity and change, a curriculum must be deliverable in as many formats as possible: text only, audio only, hard video (DVD, flash drives, hard drives, etc.), internet downloads and streaming, mobile devices of every sort, and satellite television broadcast.
2. It must be multi-lingual.  
The curriculum must be expertly translated into the languages of the students by translators who hold advanced degrees in theology.
3. It must be multi-cultural.  
By this I mean that the curriculum must be created and presented in conjunction with scholars and other church leaders from different parts of the world. This feature will maximize the usefulness of the curriculum in various cultural settings.
4. It must be easily contextualized.  
The curriculum itself should include opportunities for substantial commentary and discussion by scholars and other church leaders from the cultures in which it is used.
5. It must be multi-denominational.  
If large numbers of church leaders are to be reached, the curriculum must emphasize what is common among evangelicals and respectfully represent a broad range of evangelical traditions.
6. It must be easily enhanced.  
Mediated curriculum must be designed to go through revisions in order to stay current.

7. It must be iconographic.  
That is to say, the visual portions of the curriculum must consist primarily of engaging and stimulating graphics. It must not be primarily a video recording of a professor lecturing.
8. It must be granular.  
In other words, its units must be relatively independent so that they can be used in different combinations to meet the requirements of different settings.
9. It must be andragogically sound. Andragogy, adult learning theory, is far too underutilized in theological education in general, but it is especially important for the design of mediated curricula. Among other things, mediated curricula should include interactivity, flexibility, immediate reinforcement, manifold accessibility, and the like.<sup>5</sup>

As I have interacted with theological institutions around the world about this proposal, two objections often arise. The first objection usually comes from professors. They often fear endorsing a program that depends heavily on a mediated curriculum because it will be of a lower quality than their on-campus programs. I agree that in education, quality and quantity are inversely proportional. So, I share this concern. I am convinced, however, that institutions can maintain the value of their on-campus programs by offering separate certifications for programs that depend heavily on a mediated curriculum.

The second objection usually comes from administrators of theological institutions. Producing multimedia curricula with the qualities I have just outlined is expensive. So, it is likely that most institutions will not want to invest the funds required. Yet, the expense of producing high quality multimedia curricula is manageable, if theological institutions share these costs with others through partnerships. Moreover, the ongoing expense of running such a program can be met by low per capita costs through its scalability.

In the end, the mission of the church requires us to look for solutions to the scarcity of theological education today and in the future. We live in a day when it is possible to saturate the globe with sound biblical and theological education. It is within our grasp to provide every leader of the church the opportunity to receive the basic content of a theological education in his or her own land and language, and together we can find ways to do it.

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<sup>5</sup> See for instance, Malcolm S. Knowles, *Andragogy in Action: Applying Modern Principles of Adult Education* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1984). Knowles suggests 4 principles that are useful for understanding how adults learn. First, adult learners need to participate in the planning and evaluation of their learning. Second, learning activities must be based on experience, even when learners make mistakes. Third, learning should have an immediate impact on their lives. Fourth, adult learning should focus on solving problems rather than content delivery.

## The Quality of Theological Education

You will recall that I said to my friend, “Don’t do what we have done in the West. We know the results of that.” When I offered that advice, I also had in mind a second inadequacy of traditional Western theological education: the quality of what we provide.

As I visit with professors and administrators of well-established theological schools in my country, one issue comes up time and again. Our institutions are receiving pressure from the churches they serve to provide their students with more practical theology. This is nothing new. It’s been around for a long time. Yet, I am convinced that theological educators are now in a position to deal with this issue more effectively than ever before.

Once again, we should turn to Christ’s declaration of our mission in Matthew 28:19-20. We have already suggested that theological education for church leaders must go wherever the gospel goes. At this point, however, let me stress that Jesus commissioned the church “to teach everything I have commanded you.” That is to say, theological education should reflect the breadth of what Jesus taught. Frankly, Jesus’ teaching was much broader than what traditional theological education usually offers. And when we coordinate what Jesus said with the qualities that Paul’s Pastoral Epistles establish for church leaders in 1 Timothy 3:1-13 and Titus 1:6-9, it is apparent that much more should be taught than what normally passes as a theological curriculum.

Most theological institutions in the West recognize that education must address a broad range of issues if they are going to prepare students for effective service in the church. This range has been described with different nomenclature, but it may be represented by three general categories: theological and biblical content, ministry skills, and the personal development of the student.<sup>6</sup>

By content, I have in mind the acquisition and retention of theological and biblical data. By ministry skills, I mean an assortment of abilities: biblical interpretation, preaching, teaching, counseling, planning, managing, interpersonal skills, and the like. By personal development, I have in mind the enrichment of students’ character, the sorts of psychological, attitudinal, emotional, moral and spiritual maturity that effective ministry requires. It goes without saying that these three areas are highly interdependent. Strength in each area depends on the strength of the others. Weakness in one area will weaken the others. Educational theorists have emphasized this integrality for so long that it is common knowledge.

While many of us acknowledge that all of these areas are important for church leaders, we also realize that traditional theological education in the West has, with rare exceptions, given far more attention to one than to the others. We have stressed

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<sup>6</sup> Although these kinds of things have been said in educational literature for decades, I am indebted to my teacher and colleague John Frame for shaping me in this area through this tri-perspectival model. See John Frame, *Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Philipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing, 1987), 73-75.

content acquisition and retention. To a lesser degree, our institutions have given a measure of attention to ministry skills. But we have given even less attention to the personal development of students. In short, ministry skills and personal development have been neglected in favor of an emphasis on content.

Now, in my country, theological institutions approach this problem in a number of ways. Some have self-consciously determined to narrow their focus almost exclusively to content and to rely on the church to deal with pastoral skills and personal development. A few have tried to lengthen their programs or have their students pursue degrees in counseling to fill out their education. Most institutions, however, have tried to give more time in the curriculum to ministry skills and personal development, but they have run into strong resistance, especially from faculty.

Here is the problem as I see it. Those of us engaged in academic theological and biblical studies, including myself, know that there is so much content for students to learn in our disciplines that we cannot imagine giving up any of our time in the curriculum to practical theology. We all know how difficult it is to distill our disciplines to something that we can present in the few contact hours we have with students. How can we possibly do with fewer hours in the curriculum?

Permit me to make this suggestion. We already have too few hours with our students to transfer an adequate amount of data in our classrooms. We have been dealing with this problem all along. And how have we managed it? We have students read books that increase the acquisition of content. To put it another way, we offload some of the data transfer to reading so that we may stay within the confines of our limited contact hours. For this reason, what I am about to propose is not as radical as it may seem.

In effect, my proposal is that we now have the opportunity to offload even more of the transfer of content to time spent outside of class through multimedia curriculum. Creating a multimedia curriculum has the advantage of vetting and presenting information in ways that students can easily comprehend. In fact, a recent study published by the U.S. Department of Education compared the acquisition and retention of data delivered in live classrooms with the same data delivered through mediated curriculum. The results strongly suggest that students acquire and retain data through mediated curriculum as well as, if not better than, through live classroom presentations.<sup>7</sup> In addition to this, the recent global phenomenon of the “flipped classroom” has pointed in this direction as well. More formal studies must be done to verify results, but initial

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<sup>7</sup> Barbara Means, Yukie Toyama, Robert Murphy, Marianne Bakia and Karla Jones, *Evaluation of Evidence-Based Practices in Online Learning: A Meta-Analysis and Review of Online Learning Studies*. Department of Education (ED), Office of Planning, Evaluation and Policy Development, 2009.



claims on the success of the “flipped classroom” popularized by the Khan Academy support these findings.<sup>8</sup>

This is not to suggest for a moment that multimedia curriculum should replace teachers in classrooms. Instead, it is to argue that the content learned through mediated curriculum can actually enhance the classroom experience. Rather than spending large amounts of classroom time simply introducing information, we can use multimedia curriculum in our established schools to open classroom time for attention to the implications of our subject matter for the kinds of ministry skills and personal development that are so essential to leading the church.

Up to this point, I have focused on ways in which we can improve our existing theological institutions through the use of well-designed multimedia curricula. Needless to say, improving theological education in existing institutions will benefit the global church. Yet, my chief interest is in how these outlooks apply to learning communities in regions where there is a dearth of educational opportunities.

Let me describe a challenge that the body of Christ often faces in areas where there has been little or no educational opportunities for church leaders. Many of these communities have senior, experienced church leaders who have much to offer younger students and pastors. Their strengths, however, are typically much more in the areas of ministry skills and personal development than in theological and biblical content. In fact, senior leaders in these regions are often in as much need of theological and biblical content as their less-experienced counterparts. As a result, these senior leaders often hesitate to form learning communities for less experienced leaders because they feel inadequate to provide the content that is often expected. In these kinds of situations, multimedia curriculum can be of great help. Rather than spending their time preparing lectures on academic subjects, senior leaders can rely on mediated curriculum to deal with theological and biblical content and concentrate their time with students on ministry skills and personal development.

I have seen this scenario in action in a number of places. In these situations, the local senior leaders have little or no time to prepare formal lectures on academic subjects, but they are gifted in pastoral skills, and they have spiritual maturity. These senior leaders rely on mediated curriculum to deal with the basic biblical and theological content both for themselves and their students. They spend their time with their

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<sup>8</sup> Sonjay Gupta, “Khan Academy: The Future of Education?” *60 Minutes*, March 11, 2012. Retrieved from <http://www.cbsnews.com/video/watch/?id=7401696n&tag=contentBody;storyMediaBox;> Pascal-Emmanuel Gobry, “What is the Flipped Classroom Model and Why Is It Amazing? (With Infographic),” *Forbes*, Dec. 11, 2012. Retrieved from <http://www.forbes.com/sites/pascalemmanuelgobry/2012/12/11/what-is-the-flipped-classroom-model-and-why-is-it-amazing-with-infographic/>; Ted Ward, “Things You Should Know About... Flipped Classrooms,” *EDUCAUSE*, Feb. 2012. Retrieved from <http://net.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/eli7081.pdf>.

students focusing on the implications of that content for ministry skills and personal development. These situations give me hope that we may be able to overcome the reluctance of many senior leaders to create and supervise learning communities because they feel inadequate for the task.

Wherever the Christian faith goes, there will always be a need for human teachers to inform, clarify and explain the content of theological and biblical studies. Yet, just as the rise of literacy and the movable-type printing press greatly diminished the need for living human beings to transfer basic theological data to students, in the age of multimedia curricula, the need for living persons to transfer basic data has diminished even further. And this is wonderful news! Now, theological educators in well-established schools and fledgling learning communities can spend much more of their time with students on specialized subjects and on the application of theology and Scripture to ministry skills and personal development.

Of course, this opportunity presents a great challenge to theological educators. Many of us will have to change who we are, what we teach and how we teach. We will have to give attention to our own ministry skills and personal development so that we have something to offer our students. That is a frightening thought for many of us, but it is what future church leaders need from those who teach them. What they need from us is the wisdom we have acquired over the years so that they may stand on our shoulders and further the cause of Christ around the world. As I once told a good friend who recently put some of his New Testament lectures to multimedia, "From now on, your students will not need you to repeat the information you have taught for decades. What they will need is you, to look into your life, to see your weaknesses and strengths, to imitate you as you imitate Christ." The same is true of all of us. As overwhelming as the thought may be, our students need teachers who are filled with Christ's Spirit who will become their friend, their model, and their advisor. This is our great opportunity as Christian educators living at the beginning of the third millennium.

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