

A summary of the November 29, 2006 meeting between some Biblical Seminary teachers and a number of Bible Fellowship Church pastors and elders, held at Biblical Seminary

Reported by Louis Pronnicki, with helpful corrections and suggestions from Dr. John Studenroth and Dr. David Dunbar

This meeting was a response to a four page letter written by Pastor Louis Pronnicki and Elder Keith Howland (Biblical, 1999) over concerns that they had regarding changes at the seminary. About 40 BFC people attended this meeting. The seminary was represented by its president, Dr. David Dunbar (DD), and two of its faculty, Dr. John Franke (JF) and Dr. Todd Magnum (TM). Other Biblical professors were also in attendance.

Dr. David Dunbar gave the opening talk on how the seminary got to this place. DD graduated from BTS in 1972 and returned to serve as its president in 1986. "Where are we going with this? I don't know." But neither did Abraham when he set out (Heb. 11:8) "We've started a process, and we are willing to go where God leads us."

Where are we? How did we get here?

The 1980's was the culture of narcissism. The same problem existed in the evangelical church: we were (and are) developing spiritual narcissists!

He saw that there was no "pure" expression of Christianity, and this was new to him.

At Trinity Seminary, he was challenged to do theology with missions at the center.

DD: Classical theology, including reformed theology, has little place for missions. (e.g. If you want to do missions, don't read Luther)

The 1990's saw the postmodern shift, which raised needed questions.

The "modern" paradigm needed to be challenged. Certain "modern" aspects in our churches needed to be corrected.

The end of Christendom: Our culture is following the secular influence of Europe. A lot of our church practices are based on the assumption that we are living in "Christendom," which is rapidly fading. We have lost our "home court advantage", and soon we may not enjoy tax exemption for pastors and churches, for example.

Have we been training leaders (in seminary) for a culture that does not exist anymore? Are the tools and methods we have been training people with been made obsolete?

The "Missional Church" conversation: Leslie Newbigin; GOCN (Gospel and Our Culture Network); this conversation happened earlier in the mainline churches.

How does the gospel engage and challenge the culture? (And we *will* challenge Postmodernity, and not give it a free pass.) What does it mean for the church to be missional, to move from "Missions: to mission"? DD notes: Darryl Guder's book entitled "Missional church: A vision for the sending of the church in North America" (1998, Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publ. Co.) was "the most exciting thing to hit my [radar] screen in 25 years!" (If you only read one book on DD's "Missional Church Bibliography", make it *this* one!)

2000 to the Present

The Biblical Seminary board wrestled for 5 months with these issues and then decided

to become a place where people could get trained to engage and challenge the culture with the gospel of Christ. (See quote from Tim Keller on "The church is in trouble")

Maybe you (the BFC) can help us to this. The church and seminary cannot be independent of each other.

Biblical Seminary feels like a pioneer in this, admitting that the future is unclear.

The emerging church discussion is not as important for BTS as the missional aspect is.

D. A. Carson's book is not enough to read; B. McLaren's books are not enough to read. Much of the conversation is happening in blogs, and we must read them.

His dream: What if the BFC wrestled with all this stuff and appointed a study committee, which read the books on this, and conversed about it, and slowly worked on this....

This is not the latest seminar or method. This is re-thinking theology and mission from the vantage point of where the church ought to be.

There is no "once-for-all theology."

In the past, Biblical's hermeneutic was done based on enlightenment thought, not on a missional basis.

Example of reading John 17 changes when you look at it missionally, as opposed to Calvinistically. DD said that he never read this prayer before as a mission prayer. The gospel is the message we live out as a community, not a bare-bones verbal message we give out.

Election is for mission, not for privilege. "I can't talk about election as I used to. Calvinistic election is too narrow." In John 17 sanctification is dedicating yourself to God's task of mission, for Jesus, and for us. "I commit myself to this mission."

Our churches have been distracted from the mission. We are to be united in this mission; churches are not just to make people "nice," with "good marriages."

A question and answer time followed, and just before we broke for lunch, Pastor Calvin Reed (who moderated the meeting) shared what a positive experience he had had in taking his D. Min courses at Biblical Seminary.

After lunch, **Dr. John Franke** spoke of the need for an on going conversation.

The Bible as God's Word is not under scrutiny; it is our interpretation of it that is under scrutiny. Doctrines are always up for discussion. JF addressed three areas:

1. Postmodernism (PM)

PM is a means to save the gospel from being domesticated by modernity. He wants to free up the gospel from our culture.

2. Karl Barth

Barth is better on PM than many evangelicals. Have we really understood Barth, with his view of both the objective and subjective aspects of the Word? We evangelicals have a problem today in failing to understand and articulate what Karl Barth was trying to say. When John Franke published his recent book ("Karl Barth for Armchair Theologians") which is JF's attempt to present a fair assessment of what Barth is really saying so that

evangelicals can more honestly and thoughtfully critique it, a spokesperson for the Karl Barth Society said, "YES! That's it! Now there's no more excuse for Karl Barth to be misunderstood!" For Karl Barth, the incarnation of Jesus is objectively true. But for that to become "revelational" requires a subjective moment. JF would NOT follow Karl Barth all the way (e.g. universalism.)

3. Brian McLaren

Brian McLaren is a good friend of JF, and he has been used of God to raise questions for all of us, and about how we are being heard by the culture. JF doesn't agree with everything Brian thinks or writes, even in *A Generous Orthodoxy* (GO), for which JF wrote the foreword. Biblical is NOT "going McLaren"! A key issue [that McLaren helps us with] is "How do people perceive us?" If poorly [e.g. angry, hateful, etc.], this is not good for the church.

Franke then responded to a number of items which Lou Prontnicki and Keith Howland had written in a letter of Oct. 5, 2006. I do think the Spirit speaks through culture... I am driven to my views because of how the NT uses the OT (example of Ps. 8 and Hebrews). That same pattern continues today... So we need to ask "What is the Spirit of God teaching us today, as we move into a new cultural setting?" God continues to speak today in the same manner as He did in the first century, (when the NT was being written). God can speak to us in culture (general revelation)...but we look at this through the lens of Scripture. It is one and the same. I am committed to conversation as a means to doing theology.... each of us must see ourselves as being fallible.

A pastor from the Congo said, "There was no space in modernity for me to be both a Christian and an African." Hispanics feel the same way.

We must save the Gospel from its 'domestication' in modernity (e.g. capitalism as the only biblical way to do economics, a distinctly American idea?) We must 'relieve' the Gospel from its Anglo-American culture; American individualism has 'hijacked' the Gospel. And yet we must also realize that African culture can and does do the same thing [. . . hijack the Gospel.] Therefore we need a constant dialog. As Newbigin says, "Be open to Christians of other cultures as they seek to do the same task."

JF is thoroughly committed to the metaphor of 'conversation' for the work of theology. It is a note of great praise to God that Dr. J.P. Moreland (Biola) and Dr. John Franke (BTS) are continuing such a conversation in the next issue (Vol. 8, No. 2) of Philosophi Christi. These two scholars have reached agreement on one matter: namely that none of us should be "classical foundationalists." The question of "modest foundationalism" is not yet resolved. We all believe in 'truth/Truth', but how do we affirm it? All of us must understand ourselves as fallible.

Yes, there is the "offense and scandal of the Gospel", but that is the ONLY way for us to be properly offensive!

A question and answer time followed.

Dr. Todd Magnum

He expressed his perspective that all of the seminary's changes were biblical. No single perspective can capture the whole truth. We were given 4 gospels; I and II

Kings as well as I and II Chronicles, etc. God knew that a single perspective was not enough. In the old modernist approach at BTS, we tried to fuse the 4 gospels together. But the PM turn puts us in a better position to understand the multiple perspectives of Scripture (which are not contradictory.)

The Catholic issue. TM is trying to follow the Holy Spirit where He goes, including into Catholicism. (Read from Fr. Richard J. Newhaus, a former evangelical). TM sees God at work in the RC Church. BTS is on a trajectory, as it was when it left Westminster and when it left Faith Seminary.

A question and answer time followed.

Pastor Dick Taylor raised a question of “What about the possibility of a one day BFC Theological Discussion day, perhaps at and with BTS?”

My Impression: The BFC folks got a better understanding of how the leaders at Biblical Seminary are thinking, and why they have taken this route. It is clear that Dr. Dunbar wants Biblical to be a place where Christian leaders are trained to engage the culture with the gospel, and I think all of us can agree with that vision. The question is how that will be done. Perhaps it is fair to say that more of us are in agreement with the need to be missional, but less of us think that the baggage of the emerging church movement should be carried on. I believe that a number of us have concerns about connections with people such as Karl Barth and Brian McLaren, and what those connections imply about Biblical Seminary.

I was encouraged by Dr. Dunbar’s open invitation for us- the BFC- to dialogue with him and with the seminary, and to work with it as it seeks to grow and learn. The other professors also expressed this attitude.

Some questions and concerns were answered, but in the limited Q & A time, we were unable to delve into all the issues. There needs to be an ongoing conversation between Biblical Seminary and the BFC. Should that happen in a one day theological discussion, as Dick Taylor suggested? Should some of us petition Annual Conference to appoint a study committee on this matter? We need to move forward.

The e-mails that I have seen since that meeting reveal a wide spectrum of responses. This meeting was just another small part of the ongoing conversation.