



Missional Journal

David G. Dunbar, President

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This Country Has Tough Bones

Fans of Tolkien's epic tale *The Lord of the Rings* may recognize this line. In the second volume of the trilogy Aragorn, Legolas the elf, and Gimli the dwarf join with the Riders of Rohan to fight against the traitor Saruman and his army. They make their defense in a mountain fastness called Helm's Deep. Legolas is a woodland elf who is uneasy holing up in this network of caves, mountains, and ramparts, but Gimli has these reassuring words for his friend:

There is good rock here. This country has tough bones. I felt them in my feet as we came up from the dike. Give me a year and a hundred of my kin and I would make this a place that armies would break upon like water.

This interchange came to mind recently when someone told me that he was reassured about the seminary's commitment to the missional vision because of the convictions which undergird our pursuit of that vision. The convictions to which he referred are a group of theological affirmations developed in the course of several years of discussion between our faculty and the board of trustees. These convictions were officially approved by unanimous action of the trustees at a board retreat in June 2008; they represent the "bones," i.e. the skeletal structure that supports our work. Here is the document:

Convictions: Biblical Seminary

Biblical Seminary is an evangelical seminary committed to the gospel of Jesus Christ and a generously orthodox Christian faith for the purpose of preparing missional leaders to serve the church. We are intent on maintaining the following convictions in the life and work of our community:

The Missional Character of the Christian Church

We believe that the life and witness of the church should be thoroughly shaped by its participation in the mission of God to reconcile the world to himself in Jesus Christ and the call of Jesus to be the people of God sent into the world to proclaim and live out the Gospel.

The Primacy of Scripture for Christian Faith and Life

We believe that Scripture is inspired by God and is infallible and

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authoritative for the life and witness of the church throughout history and across cultures.

The Indispensable Significance of the Christian Tradition

We affirm the summary of Christian faith taught in the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed and are committed to seeking wisdom from the history and traditions of the church.

The Necessity of Cultural Engagement

We are committed to ongoing engagement with culture and the world for the sake of our witness to the Gospel and to continual learning from Christians in other cultural settings.[1]

In future issues of the Missional Journal I will discuss these convictions in greater detail, but in this article I will offer some general observations connected specifically with the opening paragraph of our statement:

1. **Biblical is an evangelical seminary.** Not a little ink has been spilled in the last 30 years in efforts to define the term "evangelical" and it is a term which still eludes precision. As we use the term it refers to a broad spiritual "family" or coalition of individuals, churches, and organizations. Members of the family usually exhibit several common traits:

First, they are gospel people. Gospel is the news about what God is doing in Jesus--his life, death, resurrection, and return--and all the extraordinary developments that flow from his coming. Take away this good news and Christianity is just another exercise in human self-improvement. At Biblical we are gospel people and so we keep Jesus at the center.

Second, evangelicals are conversionists. By that I mean that they stress a piety of life-change. This is partly the legacy of the revivalism that swept the Anglo-American world in the 18th and 19th centuries due to the influence of leaders like George Whitefield, John Wesley, and Jonathan Edwards. Revivalism says that the gospel is not just an interesting set of ideas or a theological check-list to which I give my assent; rather, the gospel is transformative, and the transformation begins with the individual who whole-heartedly believes the message and receives the gift of new life.

Exactly what this new life ought to look like is a matter of some divergence among evangelicals. This is not too surprising given the many different components of evangelicalism and the complex and intertwining historical roots of the movement. So Anabaptist piety takes a different shape from Charismatic piety, which in turn looks different from Reformed piety, and so on. But in the end evangelicals agree that the gospel has only truly been heard if it transforms life. At Biblical we are gospel people in this sense too.

Third, evangelicals are Bible people. Not all strands of the family read the Bible the same way. That is obvious with just a

little visiting at various family gatherings where you can hear very different (or even contradictory) interpretations of eschatology, spiritual gifts, leadership, creation, or human sexuality, to name just a few of the topics. But what unites evangelicals is the belief that Scripture must have an authoritative voice in determining how they think and act. As a result, the hearing, reading, and study of the Bible play a uniquely significant role in the piety of evangelicals. At Biblical Seminary we are Bible people.

2. **We are committed to a generously orthodox Christian faith.** I have written two earlier articles on this topic[2] so at this point we can be concise. The intention of the phrase "generously orthodox" is to describe the playing field for our school. The boundaries of the field are the boundaries of "right teaching" which is what we understand by the term "orthodox." I will speak more about this in a future article focusing on conviction three in our statement: *The Indispensable Significance of the Christian Tradition*. The point to be made is that we believe there is right teaching and wrong teaching, there is orthodoxy and heresy, and we know the difference. In other words, there are boundaries to the playing field and Biblical Seminary plays in-bounds.

On the other hand, we believe in a *generous* orthodoxy which means that we treat one another charitably as we play on the field. We certainly recognize that people sometimes step out of bounds--intentionally or accidentally--and yet our primary concern is not to function as referees but as players. It is one of the unhappy legacies of Christendom that many Christians have chosen to function as referees calling other Christians "out of bounds." The result? Too much time has been spent precisely defining the boundaries and pointing out the faults of other players. Generous orthodoxy means that we will concentrate more on being the players that Christ would have us be.

At Biblical we believe that God is calling the church in North America to understand that the culture around us is post-Christian. Ours is again a missionary situation which calls for an all-hands-on-deck effort of Christians across denominational and confessional lines. The point of generous orthodoxy is not just greater harmony among believers--not a bad idea!--but greater effectiveness of united witness for the sake of God's kingdom.

In an effort to model this generosity more effectively the board and faculty agreed to move the seminary to a larger playing field. The historical roots of our school lie in Reformed theology and the Westminster Confession of Faith. With the new statement we have expanded beyond the boundaries of Reformed theology. This does not mean that we are *against* Reformed theology; it simply means that Calvinism is no longer a requirement to serve on the faculty or board of Biblical. In fact, at our most recent meeting the board added its first Anabaptist trustee--a man who is passionate about the gospel and shares our missional vision for the church.

Sometimes I have encountered the question, Does missional really mean "B(b)iblical-lite" or "theology-lite"? My answer is, definitely not! On the contrary, if I may borrow the words of Gimli the dwarf, "this (missional) country has tough bones."

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be the name 'David', written in a cursive style.

[1] This statement with expanded paragraphs is signed yearly by all faculty and trustees. The expanded document may be found on the seminary web site: www.biblical.edu

[2][Missional Journal Vol. 1, no. 6 and 7](#)

