



**Jones, Timothy Paul, et al. *Teaching the World: Foundations for Online Theological Education.*** Nashville: B&H Academic, 2017, 202 pp., \$24.99.

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### **Author's Profile**

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## Introduction

Teaching the World: Foundations for Online Theological Education is a practical guide for developing online programs and faculty that aims to prepare seminaries to train Christian workers, particularly those who may not have the luxury of attending residential programs. The book is co-authored by Gabriel Etzel, Timothy Paul Jones, Chris Jackson, and John Cartwright, and these authors seek to address how seminaries and faculty members can design online theological training programs.

The authors argue that even though a growing number of seminaries are offering online courses for the Church, they are motivated mainly by pragmatic reasons. These practical concerns led to programs focusing on merely transferring information instead of spiritually preparing Christian workers for ministry through spiritual formation and theological training. Furthermore, seminary faculty may become teaching machines rather than role models for students regarding spiritual formation. In contrast, the authors believe that any theological program, whether residential or online, must put biblical and theological foundations first over pedagogical and technological matters. On the other hand, seminaries should treat the local church “as an essential part of the curriculum” and serve the needs of the local church.

## Summary

The book contains practical steps for online program development, including its foundations, faculty, and classroom. The first chapter is “Past Patterns and Present Challenges in Online Theological Education.” It explains the precursors of online theological training, such as correspondence courses and distance learning courses, using cassette tapes, VCRs, etc. As mentioned above, the authors note that the decision to develop online programs is mainly

based on pragmatic reasons instead of biblical and theological foundations. Based on the analogical comparison, the authors argue that even though some scholars believe Paul's epistolary approach cannot be compared with modern-day online education, it does provide support for its use. For example, the authors maintain that Paul did believe that "his presence could be mediated using the epistle" (32; 47). Moreover, "in some circumstances, his personal presence would be less effective than an emissary or a letter (2 Cor 2:3–4; 9:5)" (33).

The book is then organized into three parts: Part One is "Better Foundations for Online Learning," in which the authors compare Pauline Epistles in theological training with online learning. The authors emphasize the importance of biblical and theological foundations and then explain the concept of absent presence and social presence and their significance for online training. They then clarify that social presence should be developed between students and faculty members to facilitate workable online training. They recommend a few steps for creating an online program, such as formulating an institutional online training strategy, selecting and equipping faculty members and students with social presence and other technological skills, and integrating face-to-face sessions into online training programs.

Part Two is titled "Better Faculty for Online Learning," and in this section of the book, the authors try to formulate theological guidance for faculty and their roles in online programs. Here, the authors argue that seminaries and their faculty members should (a) give priority to spiritual formation over the mere transfer of knowledge, (b) be role models of spiritual formation, and (c) uphold the biblical and theological basis for ministry. That said, the authors, therefore, suggest specific competencies necessary for an online faculty member. The online faculty should be transformed "from the conveyer of information to the 'creator of learning environments'"<sup>1</sup> (98). The

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<sup>1</sup> Referencing Lester Ruth, "Converting My Course Converted Me: How Reinventing an On-Campus Course for an On-Campus Course for an Online

online program student thus transforms from “a passive listener or reader to an active participant in the learning process” (99).

In the book’s final section, “Better Practices in the Classroom,” the authors underscore that staying within one’s ministry context makes online learning more effective. The authors explain that from a pedagogical viewpoint and a ministry context perspective, engaging in online theological training while serving in a local ministry is a better ministry training mix and is, therefore, beneficial to both the minister and the local church. The authors clarify that “it is the power of real mentors in real churches that takes personal development to a much deeper level” (162).

Typically, students in online programs have been engaged in ministry for quite some time, making them more mature. They are the experts in their local contexts and in pastoring their congregations. To facilitate deeper theological learning, online programs could integrate adult learning strategies and enable students to learn while remaining in their ministry contexts. On the other hand, the local church may serve as a partner in the online training without removing their pastors from pastoring the congregation.

The last chapter is “To Teach, to Delight, and to Persuade.” As in the first chapter, the authors argue that online programs are here to stay regardless of the arguments from those who state that online programs are not effective. Any seminary training, whether residential or online, can and should facilitate students’ spiritual and theological development. Nonetheless, online programs should not be a replacement for residential programs.

## Critical Evaluation

The book’s most valuable contribution lies in its emphasis on the biblical and theological foundations underlying online theological

training. It is imperative to ensure that any online theological training program is rooted in strong biblical and theological foundations and that it incorporates a rigorous and well-rounded curriculum that includes a focus on biblical studies, theology, and practically contextual ministry skills. The authors, in their insightful introduction, recognize the pressing need for theologically grounded online programs in Christian education institutions (1). In response, they devote an entire section, “Foundations for Online Theological Education,” to “seeking biblical and theological guidance in an area where there has been too little” (9). This deliberate focus on biblical and theological foundations sets the book apart and makes it a valuable resource for those seeking to engage in online theological training.

A notable feature of the book is the inclusion of a section titled “Opportunities for Application” at the end of most chapters. These sections offer practical guidance for readers, specifically ministry and seminary faculty and administrators, to apply the concepts discussed in the chapter. The authors provide practical steps for readers to discover, decide, and do in their own contexts. For instance, at the end of chapter two, the authors suggest that theological institutes and seminaries evaluate their online course syllabi to ensure that professors are effectively compensating for the absence of personal presence, using Paul’s epistolary practices as a model (36). This pedagogical approach helps readers to bridge the gap between theory and practice, enhancing the book’s usefulness for those seeking to engage in online theological education.

One area of concern for the book is that the authors have focused too much on analogical reasoning and comparison. For example, comparing the Pauline epistolatory practice with online theological training is not convincing. An analogical comparison may go both ways since there is no definite explanation of the practice. It may support the similarity of Paul’s epistolatory approach as a form of distance or online training, or it may not support it. Either way, the Bible makes it abundantly clear that we need to use “all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ” (Col 1:28). And that “all wisdom” is common sense both in the past and in the present,

which may include epistles and emissaries during the first century and online and distance training in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

An additional area for improvement would be for the book to address several critical and practical issues pertaining to local churches. Despite the potential for online programs to enable individual pastors to study while serving their congregations, the book does not provide adequate guidance on how pastors can effectively manage their responsibilities within the church while engaging in online theological education. Similarly, the book does not address the question of how seminaries can be informed of the needs of local churches when designing their online programs, which is a crucial aspect of ensuring the relevance and effectiveness of these programs. Considering the biblical imperative to love one another and work together in the Lord (John 13:34-35, 1 Corinthians 12:12-31), it is essential to carefully consider and address these practical issues in order to foster a successful partnership between local churches and online theological programs.

## Conclusion

All in all, the authors provide a rather comprehensive examination of the challenges and opportunities associated with online theological education, offering a wealth of insight and practical guidance for seminaries considering such programs. They emphasize the importance of prioritizing biblical and theological foundations over pedagogical and technical considerations, a suggestion that is both sound and timely. The book's organization and flow are logical and easy to follow, addressing a range of concerns that are likely to be encountered by faculty members and seminary administrators. The authors' expertise in distance and online theological training is evident throughout the text, particularly in their "Opportunities in Application" section and their recommendations for combining online theological training with face-to-face elements and partnerships with local churches. Overall, this book is a valuable resource and a good read that offers a helpful practical guide for those involved in online theological education.