



Choosing Among Costly Futures: *The Accrediting Association of Bible Colleges Enters the Twenty-First Century*¹

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Entering its second half-century of service, the Accrediting Association of Bible Colleges (AABC)² has undertaken a long-range planning venture by considering its options for the new century just ahead. This report culminates an effort of more than two years' inquiry into the perspectives of the member institutions, reflected largely through interviews of the presidents, interpreted through an assessment of trends in the member schools, the condition of the churches in North America, and the place of Bible college education in today's world.

The choices among alternative positions, policies, and practices for the years ahead include a variety of options, each of which carries a price-tag. Even the choice to make no changes and thus *to persist in the present* while the future arrives carries a heavy cost: the likelihood of demise. The research underlying this report shows no inexpensive choices, nor does it provide "sure-to-succeed" stratagems.

Wise deliberation is needed. "Considering the costs" is a biblical approach to planning for making such choices. To honor the Christian values upon which the AABC is pledged to operate, changes are overdue.

Conflicts Inherent in the Cause

AABC is a service agency of and for the Bible institute and college movement. Its history is grounded in four realities:

1. AABC came into being fifty years ago to fulfill the quest of Bible institutes and Bible colleges for credibility in the educational marketplace.
2. Most AABC member institutions had their origins in simpler forms of educational processes, strongly emphasizing the practical over the scholarly and theoretical.
3. AABC provided an alternative identification and cooperation for institutions that had been conceived as *different*, not mainstream.
4. AABC's member institutions and the organization itself--its policies, standards, and practices--represent a conviction that the Bible college model is more valid than mainstream models and thus provides a preferred fulfillment of godliness in higher education.

Reflecting on these realities one by one reveals the serious conflicts that lie in the path of the continuation of the AABC and, possibly, the continuation of the particular sector of the Bible college movement that is represented by the AABC.

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² AABC is now known as the Association of Biblical Higher Education (ABHE)

1. Credibility in the educational marketplace

To a far greater extent than is generally acknowledged, Bible colleges have come to be driven by values, concerns and issues that are not central to the needs of the church. Accreditation itself embraces educational values and socio-political values which are often inconsistent with the value system of the Kingdom of Heaven. Most particularly, the individualism and self-serving which constitute common requisites for academic success even at a Bible college are at odds with the gospel's emphasis on selflessness and motivations to serve others.

2. Emphasizing the practical over the scholarly and theoretical

Graduate schools are emerging within many Bible colleges. Some Bible colleges are separating the Christian life emphases from the academic emphases, contributing to the students' embrace of dualism. The Hebraic epistemology of knowing as actualized behavior is steadily assaulted by testing systems and academic honors which put priority on verbal responses and intellectual exercises.

3. Conceived as different, not mainstream

Few Bible colleges are willing to pay the price to remain out of the mainstream. Today's Christian community is being propagandized into seeing itself as being able to command attention and demand leverage. Thus the trend is toward similarity rather than dissimilarity with mainstream educational purposes and ideals. The Bible colleges are tempted to yield to this temptation just as surely as striving for "contemporary styles of worship" tempts the churches toward mainstream society's showmanship.

4. The preferred fulfillment of godliness in higher education

Snobbery and alienation are ever-present temptations in the academic world. Scholars learn to adopt a posture of superiority from which it is difficult to promulgate servant-leadership. Excellence in the name of Jesus Christ is not the same as top-rate scholarship. Although in rare cases a person may exemplify both, one or the other holds a transcendent place in the person's value system. How well are the Bible colleges fulfilling their task in the development of godliness?

THREE MAJOR CHOICES

Reflecting the findings of the interviews and questionnaires, the conclusions of the research can be summarized in three alternative scenarios for the near future of the association. In the sections following, each of these three *futures* is described, followed by the indications from the data, and supplemented by a synopsis of probable costs.

Future I: A Status Quo Organization, by Intention or Consequence

Recent rough seas have destabilized the AABC. Threats to the legal authority to exist as an accreditation body have created widespread anxiety within member institutions. The prospects of shrinking membership and rising costs have added to the uneasiness. Will AABC survive? If it does what will it look like? What alternatives might the member institutions find or create in order to fulfill the important client expectations about valid and valuable higher education? These expectations of students, their parents, supporters, alumni, and the marketplace for graduates center on the mystique of an institution's "being accredited" and a substantial list of more concrete expectations including transferability of credits facilitating relocation in another institution for completion of a degree already begun, acceptance into graduate-level degree programs, eligibility and access to loan and grant funds, especially those that are regulated under federal and state laws, and assurance of the validity of the institution among its peers. Concern about the need for comradeship and mutual support in these days of shifting social and political positions about civil rights and responsibilities has motivated support for AABC. The concern is so great, in fact, that there is a widespread willingness to overlook

the evidence that AABC is not well positioned and has been inadequately staffed to provide such defenses as may be needed. “Any port in a storm” is far better than having no defense.

Indications supporting this scenario

The anxious climate supports an acceptance of the *status quo*. One does not wisely move from one canoe to another while in the rapids. It is hard to argue that some untried alternative would provide better defense or greater strengths. Since the shrinking number of member institutions is a widespread anxiety, the best future for AABC is one that holds to “core values,” stabilizes in terms of known verities, and retains as many as possible of the present member institutions. This scenario calls for an accrediting association that does little more than maintain standards among the member institutions. AABC would not be expected to develop or to promote any frontiers for Bible-college types of education.

The major issues with which this *status quo* AABC will need to wrestle within the next ten to twenty years would include the inter-institutional conflicts arising from expansions and diversifications of perhaps one-third to one-half of the member institutions. To a greater extent than is recognized, there are already many institutions whose “cutting edge” is in various new educational enterprises other than the core Bible college. Especially in various forms of graduate education, Bible colleges are becoming more diverse. Thus many institutions are finding that new responsibilities demanding time, attention, and resources are cutting into the avowed centrality of the Bible college philosophy of curriculum and educational style. For some, this pressure will force compromises that, in turn, will create issues of flexibility and reinterpretation or change of standards. Thus, even with sympathy for the *status quo*, members will find new threats mounted against historic technical criteria. It will become necessary for AABC to accept the reality of a significant portion of its membership insisting on waivers and exceptions as their conditions for continuation of membership in AABC.

The larger and stronger institutions are most likely to push for flexibility and freedom to innovate. Already there are many Bible schools discovering the importance of new educational marketing, especially toward degree completion and pre-professional educational specialties. The *status quo* scenario will be least comfortable for these expanding and entrepreneurial member institutions.

Thus the *status quo* scenario must anticipate a period of increasing conflict, coupled with no reasonable anticipation of increased membership or resources. Meanwhile, the newfound vitality of the Christian liberal arts colleges will absorb the frustrated “drop-outs” (students and institutions) just as surely as the regional accreditation associations will eagerly welcome “dual accreditation” as the doorway to the capturing of former AABC member institutions.

Probable costs

The probable costs of *Future 1* for AABC include steadily dwindling membership and the increased investment of organizational resources into defensive, fence-mending activities.

A troubling cost is apt to be the increasing unpopularity of creative thinking and problem-solving. If the organization persists in its style of policing standards in the role of community law enforcement, more and more schools will discover the greater support and encouragement available through the regional accreditation associations.

The greatest cost: It is only slightly sensational to suggest that this scenario, *Future I* might cost the Accrediting Association of Bible Colleges its life.

Future II: A Radically Transformed and Expanded Association

Intriguing parallels between the end of this century and the end of the last century can be traced. For the Bible colleges and institutes it is and was a great period of expansion. At the ends of each of these two centuries one would likely find two high-water marks in the numbers of emergent

Bible colleges and institutes (if there were then or now any reliable way to count them). Similarly, a common feature of both these historical moments is and was the involvement of local churches--churches of all sorts--in the sponsorship of various ways and means to provide biblical grounding and rudimentary skills for lay persons and for those who are hearing the call of God to dedicated ministry.

Anecdotal reports of the increase abound, especially from urban centers across the world, and Christians who move around among various manifestations of the church are seeing the concrete evidences. Amidst all of this, the formal institutions are hardly growing and their attempts at broader outreach often are marked by all the insights and intercultural skills of the colonial era in world missions.

Indications supporting this scenario

Among the newer members and aspiring members of AABC are several multi-ethnic and minority-group institutions. Yet according to the AABC Subcommittee on Ethnic Diversity, very little specific initiative has been made by the organization to encourage and appropriately nurture emergent Bible institutes and colleges among urban minorities.

Probable costs

One of the most likely costs of this otherwise promising future is resistance and discomfort, perhaps more covert than overtly evident, from institutions whose historical monoculturalism and regional biases may be threatened. Further costs are certain to be substantial, because many institutions in this category are in need of substantial subsidy and sponsorship from within the AABC. (The board could establish a Commission on Emergent Bible Colleges and seek foundation grants for this substantial new thrust.) A more difficult cost will be the modification, adaptation, and subdividing of categories of membership and specific standards in response to the differing images and ideals of ministry education which must be accepted and represented.

Future III: An Association for Programmatic Accreditation

Even as BIOLA (now BIOLA University) left AABC as a result of its increasing institutional complexity and diversification of mission, many other institutions within the next decade will move from their previously singular purpose and highly focused ministry in order to grow into a broader sphere of educational services. The common image within AABC interprets this evidence of institutional maturation as an unfortunate spiritual decline (the “slippery slope toward Christian liberal arts”). Again, using BIOLA as an example, the decline into secularism and loss of emphasis on that Bible as content has not followed, nor has an ascendancy of the *liberal arts* dominated. To this day, resident historians and leaders of BIOLA commonly assert that BIOLA is uniquely a founding member of AABC that did not become a Christian university by first becoming a Christian liberal arts college.

The argument against AABC’s delimiting itself to the accreditation of programs of Bible studies and degrees within a variety of types of institutions has been grounded on two premises which are no longer substantial: 1) that AABC is concerned for the entire institution and *all* of its programs, and 2) that an institution that does not maintain a singular emphasis on Biblical content--a Bible major for everyone--is outside the parameters of “God’s best.”

The first of these premises is hollow, inasmuch as many of the stronger AABC institutions are eagerly and experimentally pushing into graduate degrees--outside AABC’s present jurisdiction. The second premise always has been used primarily as a sort of chip-on-the-shoulder to challenge the Philistines to knock it off. To the extent that it is not inherently arrogant and an offense to the gospel, it has at least the effect of making AABC appear to be an affiliation of *true believers* (in Eric Hoffer’s sense) who disdain the efforts of others. The fact that AABC has come to tolerate the changing

emphases within some Bible colleges is a promising lesson. *Future III* accepts the fact that relating to the secular society is an essential characteristic of the gospel—one that requires a constructive engagement rather than a smug aloofness. As one case, consider what Moody Bible Institute would *not* be doing today if it had been narrowly and simplistically faithful to the visions of its founders. Consider the dilemmas and potentialities for contradiction: here, in an institution centered on the meaning of the gospel of Jesus Christ for those on the streets of Chicago, one finds today everything from a nationwide radio network enterprise to a worldwide publishing establishment. Yet in the Bible college core, Moody has accepted the dualism of an administrative structure in educational management which differentiates accountability for the *academic* and the *ministry* components.

This third of the three scenarios of the future for AABC would accept such changes as both inevitable and appropriate. Instead of holding unrealistic and nostalgic images of a bygone era, AABC in *Future III* would focus on the core of Bible content, disciplines of the Spirit-centered life, and the social environment of Christian virtue and aspiration. AABC thus would become a specialized accrediting association, operating in a greater number and a greater variety of institutions, including many of those who have left the association as their missions and mandates have outgrown the former AABC with its whole-institution scope.

Indications supporting this scenario

Many presidents of member colleges are still uncomfortable with the idea of “programmatic accreditation,” but at the same time, many are wondering how long they can justify paying assessments to two accreditation associations. Surely the time is at hand when the subordination of AABC to the regional association is a necessary discussion. The issues of expansion, diversification, and the necessity to meet the various needs of new categories of students are forcing institutions to rethink their positions on the ways to interpret and apply the biblical studies requirements.

Probable costs

The major cost would be reduced scope and breadth of influence. For example, no longer would AABC enter into issues of whether or not a member institution should expand its mathematics curriculum nor the issue of how many credit hours in Bible should be required for the precertification program for secondary English. This cost would be perhaps gratifyingly offset by gaining an involvement in the development of effective and substantial Bible curricula in a wider variety of educational institutions.

As a result of this narrowed domain of concerns, fees to the member institutions would need to be reduced. The recovery of memberships from among the departed former-members would likely be slow and thus a period of three to five years would likely force very lean budgets.

Offsetting this leanness would be a much narrower set of staff, consultancy, commission, and site-visit tasks. As a specialized and program-focused accreditation organization, AABC could be substantially less costly to operate.

These three *Futures* are surely overly simplified, perhaps to the point of caricature. Nonetheless, at least these three images of the future of AABC need to be sharpened by the board of directors and the executives of the organization in an effort to steer toward a worthy investment of time and energy for the years ahead.

A WAKE-UP CALL

The study of institutional opinions and socio-political positions of the member institutions has revealed a strong central tendency on many matters that will affect the future of the Accrediting

Association of Bible Colleges in the near future. One of the major challenges to institutional leadership within the next two-to-four years will be the reorientation of AABC from its posture of isolated self-satisfaction to a burden of concern for the newer sectors of educational development that are emerging in service to the church

In his Urban Update (Summer, 1997) Doug Hall writes:

We have just identified about fifty church-based Bible institutes in the greater Boston area. This is a sign of a maturing church system, which provides lay training opportunities for men and women who want to improve their ministry skills.

Boston's church growth has been spurred thus far by unity. For example, we have many churches sharing space in Boston. As many as five churches of different denominations share the same building. (Groups are working closely together, because it is the only way to get things done here. It is the nature of the city . . . Can we help the training institutions to work together and share resources? If so, then we have increased the potential for longterm growth of Christianity in the city.

To this end we have brought together all the major accredited, evangelical institutions to talk about it. We are now taking steps to introduce the Bible institutes and church-based training systems to each other with the hope that they will begin to work together, too. Together we are starting to envision many ways to benefit urban churches, Bible institutes, and colleges through encouraging greater cooperation and teamwork.

This is how you get things done in the city. This is what God blesses.

(Emmanuel Gospel Center, Boston)

THE MOST COSTLY FUTURE OF THE AABC

From his many years in urban ministry leadership, Hall puts his finger on three urgent problems, each with important implications for AABC. These problems represent the difference between having and not having a significant role to play in the twenty-first century.

1. The mass of Bible college and Bible institute initiatives has moved back into local churches--and the churches are more diverse than ever.

Just as surely as the "modern missionary era" has been characterized by movement of the missionary development and sending tasks out of the local churches and into institutions established by corporate clusters of churches to do the jobs *for* them, even so the development and equipping of pastoral leadership in the churches has, over that same 200-year period moved ever so surely from the direct and intimate responsibilities of local churches into school-type institutions assigned to do the job *for* them. In the middle of this two-century era many churches changed their minds and tried to recover the initiative in leadership development and in missionary activity. Thus was born the church-based Bible institutes, and the local churches' resurgence as missionary development and sending agencies.

And so it is again. Initiatives are moving back into local churches. The superchurches have the resources to do it for themselves. Most prefer to propagate for themselves rather than to trust any other agency or school to do it for them. The small churches catch the spirit as well and often put their efforts together around the Biblical teachings about the distributions of the gifts of ministry and service within the local church. The outcomes range widely from very classical but very narrow new seminaries to veritable reincarnations of some of the early-day lay institutes, consisting of little more than fervent and frequent learning-bees from the traditions of early New World community ethos.

There is no apparent counter-movement, and the peak has surely not been reached. To the extent that Bible-based functional learning can be adequately fulfilled within the context of the doing of ministry, there is much in these trends that honors God and strengthens the church.

2. The future of the nation and of most of the world has moved from rural and small-town to urban settings.

Modern cities are inherently interracial. The AABC arose to serve a movement that was far more homogeneous. Complexity of today's urban society has been only slightly embraced by the typical AABC institutions. Even the Bible colleges actually located in cities identify far more with the former majorities than with the emergent "minority" sectors which, especially if taken as a whole, have become the new majority. Consequently, the AABC and its member institutions are better positioned to deal with the *world that was* rather than the *world that is becoming*.

In the United States and in much of Canada, the growth of cities has also resulted in the relocating of rural conservatism into rings of the more affluent around the urban cores. Unlike the majority of the cities of the world where the wealthy live in opulence at the center and the poor sprawl in wads and strings all around them, the American suburb is the new center of the well-washed. Some institutions have found it "necessary," for various reasons to "escape urban blight." It would be unfair to presume a racial separatism as motivating force in every case, but very few would sincerely contend that socio-cultural distance is unrelated.

Just as Jesus deliberately moved his disciples into regions, homes, communities, and neighborhoods where they would learn to deal effectively with their own prejudices and aloofness, the opportunity is at hand for the Bible colleges to do the same. Whether every college needs to become multicultural is not the main issue. **The AABC *does* need to become multicultural**—with sincerity of purpose and with grace of style as befits those who serve the Lord Jesus Christ.

Standing at the side of the road and claiming to be open and responsive is not enough. It will take change, inside and out. It will take initiative. It will take planning. And most especially it will take a responsible willingness to listen and learn. AABC can be of service to the emerging institutions, many of whom look today like our own institutions looked eighty years or more ago, in their earlier church-based forms. The Board must find a way to sub-divide the association so that unreasonable and unrealistic standards for the emergent institutions are avoided.

If not able to get a general consensus on a carefully wrought strategy of broadening the membership and recovering the motivations of the association's earliest days, then AABC may need to face the possibility of its own irrelevance in the twenty-first century.

3. Cooperation is urgently needed if institutions are truly to serve the church.

Hall laments, "We may see major Christian institutions . . . competing over what they want, or fighting over students."

Hall's observations can be interpreted as a call from God to a renewal that centers on the deliberate recapturing of the original ethos and mission of AABC. Underlying Hall's three explicit problems is an evident reality which, if taken seriously, could jump-start the shrinking organization. AABC needs a spiritual renewal. The sense of history and the continuity of God's purposes as recognized by the majority of the member institutions may provide the right basis for the needed changes.

The Overlooked Hypothesis of Institutional Aging

The current tension within the Accrediting Association of Bible Colleges is possibly the result of a common pattern of growth and maturity of the Bible colleges themselves. While not suggesting that any two member institutions are exactly alike in their pattern and stage of growth, it very well may be that there is an underlying structure that many or most of the colleges are manifesting as they age.

Each college moves through this developmental pattern at its own rate. A college may linger long in a given stage; some rather old institutions are still in *Stage One*, finding themselves under no

intense pressure to expand. Other colleges, while relatively young, have rushed their way through each of the stages and are now forced to be transformed into universities in order to cope with their difficult dealings with conflicted accountability (*Stage Four*).

The existence of such a pattern or *life cycle* has been suggested in the research literature of institutional education. Abundant evidence has emerged from the present AABC research. Only the fervency of faith in the Bible college as a unique and isolated form of higher education has blinded the association to this probability. Surely the adding and losing of specific member institutions in the past dozen years has been a “handwriting on the wall.”

In the examination of data from 97 AABC Bible colleges, the following four stages are evident:

Stage One—Founding to Expansion. Usually demanded by the discovery that undersize educational institutions are exorbitantly expensive, most colleges--but not all--promptly get in the habit of assuming that expansion is a very good thing.

Stage Two—Expansion to Diversification. Expansion inevitably leads to the discovery of other markets--others who need education, but toward somewhat different goals, and who bring somewhat different previous experiences and skills.

Stage Three—Diversification to Specialized Division. Diversification cannot be managed coherently unless the institution is properly sub-divided and has become specialized in its structure. Some of the oldest and strongest of the Bible colleges now neatly carve their educational purposes into two curricular emphases—the academic and the Christian service, each of which reports to very different administrative units within the institution.

Stage Four—Specialized Division to Conflicted Accountability. The major reason for the current emergence of universities is that when a college attempts to meet the professional and technical standards of highly specialized divisions, it simply cannot handle the accountabilities in a unified manner. The overly sanctified ideal of the university as a “unified diversity” is rarely more than a myth, even within the emerging Christian universities. It is more honest, perhaps, to move toward a university structure as an acknowledgment that singular unification is an unreachable abstraction, and that effective encouragement of the various components of the institution requires that each has some degree of autonomy. Hence, each reports to differing agencies of accountability. And here, of course, lies the grave of unified intellectual accountability. Having one accrediting agency for the whole of a university is simply not feasible.

This hypothesis rather well accounts for much of the evidence of speciation and variety among the AABC institutions. It also dramatizes the now compounded tasks of the association itself.

For example, two substantially different views of the AABC’s responsibility come from *Stage One* and *Stage Three* (the stages that account for the majority of the member institutions). From the viewpoint of *Stage One*, the association provides even the small and minimally expanding college a safe haven. It does so by suppressing the deviations and the messing about that the larger and more diverse colleges are inclined to get into. From *Stage Three*, on the other hand, this alleged “messing about” is the very thing that demands understanding, encouragement, and constructive guidance from the association.

One of the most significant messages that springs from this conclusion is that AABC should expect to have *alumni*, former member institutions, that become universities. Only if the organization becomes programmatic (*Future III*) can it expect to maintain permanent affiliation with the more aggressively growing and developing colleges. They are becoming universities.

Good News About the Bad News: the Author’s Plea

In certain of the ancient Greek city-states the traditional method of discouraging bad news was to promptly execute the bearer. Today, in these allegedly more enlightened times, it is devoutly to

be hoped that a more graceful means of coping will be sought. Be assured that the messenger not only means well, but that he bears the credentials and reputation of a friendly ambassador.

Most evaluative studies that do not confirm the pre-conceived conclusions held by the decision-makers are relegated to the high shelf to gather dust. Although this research was intended to aid the AABC board in its planning for the future, and thus not essentially evaluative, the weight of difficult issues could reduce its impact on the association to the level of a trivial itch. The author of this report fervently urges that the responsible decision-makers should see the conclusions and recommendations in a perspective larger than the mundane preoccupation with making the AABC live through one more budget year without collapse. The future of this sector of Christian higher education is at stake.