

The Mission of God as the Focus for Theological Education

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This paper has two principal facets. First, the Mission of God, *missio Dei*, as the focus and basis of the mission of the church. Second, an exploration of that as the proper focus for theological education, with special reference to ministerial formation. I will spend relatively little time on the first facet, being content to affirm it rather than defend it. Its main purpose here is to provide the basis for examining the implications for theological education of placing mission at the centre, allowing it to come in from the edge where it has tended to sit for too long.

However, before going further, let me make some initial affirmations :

First, the church is mission and mission is of the very essence of the church. That is not to argue for a church-centred mission. For the mission is God's not ours. We are called into God's saving purposes not only to be benefitted by them, but also as those actively involved in them. John Pobee from Ghana has spoken of mission as interpenetration, as *perichoretists*, a mutual encounter between God and the world, and God and the world through the people of God.

Second, mission is people. It involves building up community in the light of the sovereign rule of God, with its demands of love, truth, righteousness, justice, freedom, reconciliation and peace. It means being part of a people who recognize God as creator and saviour, who is leading us to a new heaven and a new earth. People are primary theological datum. Their "hopes and fears of all the years" are crucial elements in theological reflection. Both mission and theology must take seriously *where* people are and precisely *how* they are. For that is where the gospel reaches them. People hear the gospel in the midst of their own culture and social contexts. That does not mean that the gospel does not challenge or change those cultures or contexts. Indeed, to use a phrase from the Willowbank Report, a process of living interaction proceeds.

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Third, we are called to work with God in bringing the whole of creation to Him through Christ, for all things are summed up in Christ. This does not mean we should be insensitive to all the ways in which God has worked in creation and amongst all peoples throughout the ages. I recently heard Preman Niles speak of his late father D T Niles complaining of folk who spoke as if God had only arrived in Asia in the late 18th Century and pointing out the God had been there for an awful long time. It was Jesus Christ who had been late in arriving ! (Even there we would need to be careful to remember that christian work in Asia goes back a lot longer than is sometimes acknowledged in Western attempts to trace the history of that region).

Fourth, we live in a world in which the church of Jesus Christ is found on all six continents. No serious contemporary reflection on the work of God can be undertaken without taking this wonderful fact into account. Nor is it worthy if it does not pay attention to the voices of all the christian peoples of the world, especially those who have been silent and distant. They include women, black people, the marginalised and hosts of other hidden peoples. Frequently they speak from the countries of the south where most christians are new to the faith and bring new questions tackled in fresh ways, providing important new insights. Often they speak in the midst of poverty and struggle, reminding us that in spite of economic growth, and widespread industrialisation in the world, the majority of its people remain poor, oppressed and marginalised. For christians who follow the Lord and serve the gospel which addresses the lost, the last and the least in society this is an overwhelming challenge. What is it to preach the gospel, to do our theology and our ministerial formation in global and local contexts of profound destitution ? And what is it to do so in ways which do justice to the cry of the poor and to the alternative approaches to theology which have arisen in their midst ? These questions are even more pressing when we add to them the insights of the sociology of knowledge. There is simply no possibility of hiding away in neutral enclaves.

Fifth, we live in a pluralist world where christian faith is not the only faith. In many of the contexts today other faiths are present and we cannot work out our obedience to the Lord ignoring this fact. We cannot speak of the kingdom, of justice, of peace, of forgiveness and reconciliation with no ears for anyone other than ourselves and as if no one else is listening. In the city of Birmingham where I live there are substantial numbers of muslims, hindus, sikhs, buddhists and others. What is it to undertake ministerial formation where christian faith is

perceived as but one of several religious options available. In other contexts christian faith is simply in the minority. Perhaps more difficult is the reality where no religious options are being sought. How should we do our theology and ministerial formation in contexts where God is left out of consideration as huge decisions affecting millions of people are made? Some of us welcomed secularisation, but learned to fear secularism. But in Britain we also face a new challenge of signs of a profound religious search, frequently on the part of people whom we had thought were not religious at all. So it might surprise you to know that we have begun to look again at the phenomenon of folk religion which is present in most countries and is now enjoying new life in my own. As with the matter of social location these cultural challenges are ones we cannot and should not ignore. There is little point in attempting to reflect and act in our own contexts if we are not willing to interact with them critically.

Sixth, these preliminary affirmations demand a well formed ministry. Forming people, ordained and not ordained to participate in God's mission, is a crucial challenge for ministerial formation. That formation is not an end in itself. It serves the participation of the people of God in God's mission in today's world. This does not deny that the church has institutional features. But it does attempt to recover the understanding and experience of the church as the people of God. The Protestant Reformation pointed us in that direction with its important emphasis on the Priesthood of all believers. In modern times documents of Vatican II reveal an emphasis on the truth of church as the people of God. A number of ecumenical documents reveal a similar emphasis, not least in *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* from the WCC. Amongst evangelicals there has been a widespread recovery of the truth that ministry and missionary obedience belong to all God's people. If the Reformation helped to recover the truth of the priesthood of all believers, in recent times we have begun to recover the truth and experience of the ministry and mission of all believers.

I. Mission Dei as the Focus for Mission

Part of this brief section on the Mission of God is based upon a chapter of *Transforming Mission*, the magisterial work by the late Professor David Bosch. It seemed an appropriate way both to honour him and to acknowledge one's debt to his many scholarly works, his missionary zeal and his gracious christian character. One of his last major commitments outside

of South Africa, before his tragic death last year, was in offering a lecture at St. Andrew's Hall, Selly Oak, to mark our 25th anniversary. It had the poignant title, *The Vulnerability of Mission*.

The concept of missio Dei emerged in the 20th century. Both previous and contemporary missionary praxis were being examined with the critical tools of biblical study and systematic theology. In the process the understanding grew that mission was an activity of God himself. Bosch traces the unmistakable influence of Karl Barth in this thinking, an influence which reached its zenith at the Willingen Conference of the International Missionary Council, in 1952. Although the term itself was not used, the sentiment behind was expressed, that mission is derived from the very nature of God. The picture was being filled out. Now, to the classical understanding of *missio Dei* as God the Father sending the Son, and God the Father and Son sending the Holy Spirit, was added the new emphasis on Father Son and Holy Spirit sending the church into the world. Thus mission means being caught up in "the sending of God." God has the initiative. Our mission has no life of its own. Its authenticity, its vitality and its purpose are all derived. The flow from God, ever the tireless missionary urging the creation towards its salvation and wholeness, like a mother who though she puts the child beyond herself, from then on keeps up a constant vigil and ministry of encouragement towards it.

However, we have to be careful here. To speak of being drawn into the *missio Dei* could carry with it dangerous undertones of triumphalism, all the more perverse if they are accompanied by identification with processes of political, economic and cultural hegemony. That was one of the most horrific features of the so called age of discovery, followed by a long period of domination and colonisation of the New World by the nations of the north. Latin America was subdued and taken over as part of a dual project of extending the possessions of the European monarchs and the founding of a new christendom. Cross and sword sailed together and the Christ who first trod the shores of the New World wore the semblance of the bearded *conquistadores* who came covered with armour and looking for gold. It is no coincidence that the Christ they depicted was often a helpless babe or a hapless victim on a cross. I will not dwell here on modern examples of attempts to co-opt theology to provide the bulwarks and sustaining inspiration for oppressive and violent regimes. So in speaking of the *missio Dei* we have to be vigilant lest in seeking to earth it historically we fall prey

to the spirit of this age and to idolatry. That may be why at the Willingen Conference, although the original studies were prepared under the theme *The Missionary Obligation of the Church*, the final documents were circulated with the title *Missions Under the Cross*.

In summary, this new concept understands mission not as an activity of the church, but rather as an attribute of God. Bosch quotes Moltmann : "*It is not the church that has a mission of salvation to fulfil in the world. It is the mission of the Son and the Spirit through the Father that includes the church.*" It is a movement from God to the world with the church as the chosen instrument. Indeed, because there is mission, there is the church.

The concept gained widespread acceptance in protestant, catholic, orthodox, ecumenical and evangelical circles. This may account for a gradual change in terminology. The plural *missions* began to be subservient to the singular *mission*. The missionary activities of the church (*missiones ecclesiae*) continue. But it is mission in the singular which is primary and missions flow from it. Thus Stephen Neill's famous statement : "*The age of missions is at an end ; the age of mission has begun.*" Bosch observes :

The primary purpose of the *missiones ecclesiae* can therefore not simply be the planting of churches or the saving of souls ; rather it has to be the service to the *missio Dei* representing God in and over against the world, pointing to God, holding the God-child before the eyes of the world in a ceaseless celebration of the Feast of the Epiphany. In its mission, the church witnesses to the fulness of the promise of God's reign and participation in the ongoing struggle between that reign and the powers of darkness and evil."

An important consequence of this has been the focus on the world and on human history as the arena where God is at work. That work takes place not only in the church or indeed only through the church. I am reminded of the words of John Stott :

"Our God is often too small because he is too religious. We imagine that he is chiefly interested in religion — in religious buildings (churches and chapels), religious activities (worship and ritual) and religious books (Bible and prayer books). Of course he is concerned about these things, but only if they are related to the whole of life . . . The value of religious services is that they

concentrate into an hour or so of public, vocal, congregational activity the devotion of our whole life."

One of the developments in understanding the *missio Dei* seemed to go much further. It might be the case that some christians concentrated on God and the Word with their backs to the world. But there were others who in their anxiety to affirm that God works in th world sometimes openly other times secretly, tended to leave the church out of the picture. There was a period when in conciliar circles it appeared that the church was unnecessary for the *missio Dei*. The debate has continued and it may show that even widely accepted concepts can sometimes be used by groups with opposing views about mission and the church. But as Bosch concludes, the notion of *missio Dei* has helped to strengthen the understanding that the church is not the author or indeed the bearer of mission :

"Mission is primarily and ultimately, the work of the Triune God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier, for the sake of the world, a ministry in which the church is priveleged to participate. . . . Mission has its origin in the heart of God. God is a fountain of sending love. This is the deepest source of mission. It is impossible to penetrate deeper still ; there is mission because God loves people."

II. *Missio Dei* as the Focus for Theological Education

As the modern missionary movement grew in influence and pace it proved necessary to reflect upon it and to include its insights and experience in theological education and ministerial formation. But it was not an easy task. After all many mission agencies had sprung up as para church entities outside the institutions of the churches. Further, the missionary movement had not sprung up as the outworking of a change of heart in the theological institutions. Mission appeared to be "over there," it was ministry which was the main focus of theological education.

One of the most important and interesting studies on the entrance of mission perspectives and teaching into theological studies can be found in the two volumes of Olav G Mykelbust's work *The Study of Missions in Theological Education*. In it Mykelbust traces the story with special reference to Alexander Duff's chair in Evangelistic Theology at New College Edinburgh. In so doing he offers a comprehensive and well documented picture of the progress towards integrating mission perspectives in theological education in many countries, up till the mid

1950's. That integration was uneven and the process of entry extremely difficult. Mission, missions, missionary praxis and theory did not find open doors as they attempted to find their place in the theological sun. Indeed the process is still going on and we ponder that we do well to recall what David Bosch wrote in an article in 1982 :

"The theologian must not forget that the early Christian mission was the progenitor of theology ; that the church was by circumstances forced to theologize ; that theology, biblically understood, has no reason to exist other than to critically accompany the church in its mission to the world . . ."

That may be so, but as Bosch also observes in the same paper "*The present division of theological subjects was canonised in a period when the church in Europe was completely introverted.*" By the time mission related issues attempted to find a place, the heavyweights of Bible Study, Systematic Theology, Philosophy and History had already secured central places in the scheme of things. In the 19th Century they were joined by Pastoral Studies, which in the recent climate of a more pragmatic approach has been coming in from the periphery to enjoy a more central place. Worship, preaching, ethics have also appeared on the scene. You only have to attempt to add other disciplines to the list to perceive that mission appeared to be just one of many seeking admission. Before outlining some of the ways it has been included, let me mention some common criticisms of theological education/ministerial formation.

1. *Limited Integration* There is a high degree of compartmentalisation in theology. This may be the influence of the natural sciences where to achieve depth there has to be a sacrifice of breadth, breaking things down into their component parts. As the years increased and specialisation continued it is simply the case that too often scholars do not know what is going on in other fields and do not attempt to relate their studies to other disciplines. That is sad enough for the scholars. It is even more tragic for the students who are sometimes left to make the connections for themselves.

2. *Dominated by Datum from the Past* There is a a lot of work on ancient texts and the conceptual thinking of other writers. There is much value in that work but it can cause a distortion by separating theology from praxis, giving the impression that first you work out your theology and then at a later time look for some way in which to apply it. Thus, theology is more to be learned than to be done. It can also lead to confusing tennis matches between the scholars in which

spectators are left looking left, then right, right then left until a point is scored on one side of the net or another ! Worse still is the tendency to exclude voices from the margin in the debate. Thus John Mbiti complains of the danger that we can have more fellowship with heretics long dead than with the living faithful of the Church today in the so-called Third World.

3. *More Pastoral than Missionary* On his election to the chair of Evangelistic Theology at Edinburgh Alexander Duff commented that it has always intrigued him that throughout his theological studies at St. Andrew's University he had not heard even a single reference to the subject of world evangelization. More recently Kenneth Cracknell in England has written :

"The real business of theological education was to train 'pastors' the main concerns were with preaching, the sacraments and discipline. Not to detract from the importance of the pastoral office, nor to minimize the task in theological education of nurturing pastoral gifts, it still seems this emphasis in the British tradition has obscured the realization that Britain, like the whole of Western Europe, is *pays de mission* with far more sheep outside the fold than the few who actively take part in the flock of Christ."

4. *Professionalisation of Theology* I must be careful here. Many of us would be happy to be known as theologians, or at least as theological teachers. And I hope we can always be the very best at that as it is possible to be. Excellence is not the problem. But the caste of professional theologians sometimes gives the impression that theology is a very difficult club to join. As we have already hinted in point 2 above they can spend a lot of time talking only to each other. So much so that in some circles to say a conversation is 'theological' is the same thing as saying it is irrelevant ! A group of Third World theological educators spent two months visiting British theological institutions. In the report they wrote, apart from observing that mission still appeared to be merely one amongst many disciplines, they wondered whether the strong links with the secular university system was not being maintained at too high a price in sacrificing freedom to determine the content and structure of ministerial formation. I believe we do need rigour in theological study. There is still a place for the scholars. But that place should be closer to all the other folk doing their theology in the church and in the world. I have been very influenced by the trends and insights from Latin American theology and church experience,

particularly from the Basic Ecclesial Communities. I would like to cite Carlos Mesters as one example of what I mean. Mesters is a biblical specialist working amongst the poor and marginalised in Brazil. This experience has had a powerful influence upon his own reflections, enabling him to do his theology at the cutting edge between faith and life. But much more important than that is the fact that as he does so he sits in the midst of the people as they do their theology together. In this case I am not sure who is opening the eyes of whom? It is frequently an experience where the evangelisers seem to get every bit as evangelised themselves in the experience. For the poor, often see life, history, the gospel and God, from a perspective which the non-poor find it very difficult to see. In any case, the world will frequently come to its conclusions about what we believe, where we stand, by watching very carefully where we are and what we are doing. There is sometimes a dissonance between what we say and what we do. But there is nothing like the same degree of disparity between what we do and what in truth we believe. This leads us to the fifth and final point in these observations.

5. *The Myth of Neutrality and the Need for Hermeneutical Commitment* No knowledge is neutral or value free. Sadly not always have theologians been sufficiently aware of the extent to which society determines their discipline. To help us in grappling with this problem it is necessary to seek an integration with other disciplines, not least those which study human society. Indeed, the social sciences as a whole have exerted enormous and important influence in this century, every bit as important as the influence of psychological studies. At a deeper level we need to enable folk to be aware of the underlying forces which shape society. As we grapple with the faith, seeking to uncover its message for us; we also need to come to grips with our particular reality. As we do so we need to be willing to act upon the understanding which emerges and to reflect on how that action turns out in practice.

II.1 Ways of introducing mission into theological education programmes

1. *Extra Courses* Very often the process is begun by asking folk with specialist knowledge to come in and teach mission related subjects. Often they appear as an options on the curriculum. So many people do not study them.

2. *As Part of Another Discipline* Bosch has said that this means that "missiology does not stand on its own ; it has to

earn legitimacy by being introduced into the theological curriculum as an appendix to an approved theological discipline." For example it can be included in Systematic Theology or as part of Pastoral Theology. Very often it is included in courses on Church History. It is also possible to include elements of mission in a variety of other programmes. Gustav Warneck had three main facets for the study of mission — the History of Mission (part of Church History), Biblical Foundations for Mission (part of Biblical Theology) and the Study of Missions (within Pastoral Theology). This is better than option 1 but still means that mission does not stand out on its own and is easily squeezed out of the picture, particularly if the specialist concerned has no particular mission interest or expertise.

3. *As a Discipline in its Own Right* There are many examples of this approach. Professor Bosch was Head of the Department of Missiology in the University of South Africa. At Selby Oak Colleges we have a Department of Mission in which we share of Professor of Mission with the University of Birmingham. These are expensive approaches. In some cases, where this option was taken the specialists concerned, many of whom were folk who had been working in other countries, found it difficult to be accepted on equal terms with their other colleagues in other disciplines. One of my own friends, on hearing I was about to become Principal of a missionary college and to join the staff of a department of mission lamented how sad it was that I would be giving up theology for something far less demanding.

4. *As a Dimension in all Other Disciplines* This is the option which is claimed for the majority of British theological colleges. Mykelbust felt it was a good example of British preference for the *via media*, none of the German systemisation or the North American activism for them ! In their influential and provocative report *Theology on Full Alert* Cracknell and Lamb, whilst accepting some of the benefits of this approach, plead for its renewal :

"For our part we would want the so-called integrationalist approach to be thought through again and revived. We do not wish missiology to be added to the programme but rather that all theological questions should be thought about from the point of view of the theology of mission."

The Third World theological educators who visited Britain in 1987 had made similar recommendations in their Report *Partners in Practice*. In adopting the Report and affirming the fundamental importance of the *missio Dei* for theological education, the British Council of Churches recommended the creation of "integrated courses in which different disciplines relate together, teaching staff collaborate and account is taken

of the experience and context of students. There is much to commend this, but Bosch warns that on the whole theological teachers are not adequately aware of the missionary element implicit in theology nor do they have the knowledge to teach the subject.

5. *Combining 3 and 4 above* This was suggested by Mykelbust — “the answer to the question here raised is, *not* independence or integration, but independence *and* integration. David Bosch writes :

“Missiology should provoke theology as a whole to discover anew that mission is not simply a more or less neglected department of the church’s life which only enters on the scene when a collection is taken. Missiology is not simply yet another subject but a dimension of theology as a whole, an indispensable dimension which must preserve the church from parochialism and provincialism. It constitutes a ‘test of faith’ for church and theology.”

“This implies that missiology has in the first place a critical function and operates as a leaven in theology — sometimes as a gadfly. It causes unrest, a rustling among the dry bones, articulating mission as the conscience of the church, for it always questions, uncovers, digs down, prods and irritates. It scrutinizes the church and proclaims it guilty. No group of people can ever hug God’s mission to themselves or boast of having accomplished it. It is dynamite, and unless we handle it in a proper manner it will explode in our faces.”

A number of denominations have begun to link mission and ministry together, in an effort to avoid the unhelpful separation in these areas. This means that in theological education both mission and ministry inform the agenda for theological formation.

6. *New Models* My colleague and friend Andrew Kirk, Dean of Mission at Selly Oak Colleges suggests the the real problem is not that there is not an adequate place for mission in theological education/ministerial formation. The models on which they are based need to be broken, not reshaped. He suggests four key stages. First, Social and Cultural Awareness and Analysis, beginning with the experience and knowledge of the participants. Second, a study of Mission to produce an initial grounding for the work of the church in the world. Third a Process of Interaction to integrate the understanding of church and society with insights from biblical, historical and missiological studies. Fourth, dealing with the questions, which emerge, using hermeneutical principles, historical and cultural

analogies and critical evaluation of historical developments. Where possible this would take place alongside involvement in ministry/mission and from that would come additional questions on social ethics, pastoral counselling, cultural conditioning and the renewal of the church. It would be possible for participants to concentrate on particular subjects over a period, more than is possible in existing models.

Kirk's latest diagram is set out below. (1) I am also noting two others included in Laurie Green's book *Let's do Theology*. Diagram (2) is from the Basic Ecclesial Communities in Latin America. The final one (3) is from Green's own experience in the Aston Training Scheme in Birmingham.

Diagram (1)

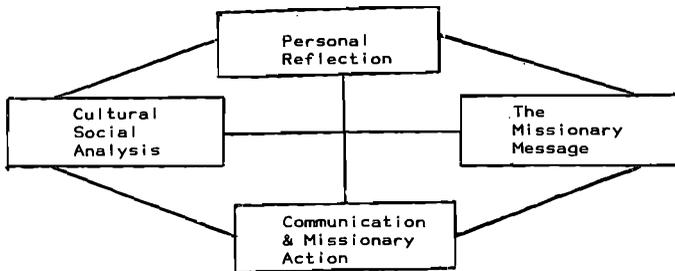


Diagram (2)

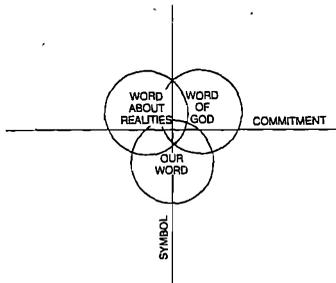
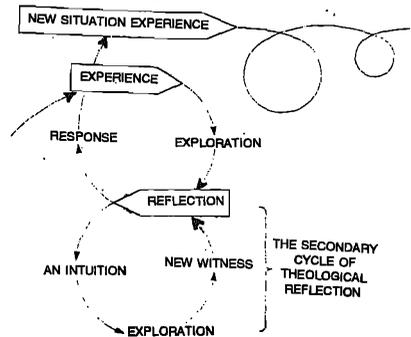


Diagram (3)



I do not offer much prospect of the traditional model being broken so radically. But I do think we need to bear these alternatives in mind as important for uncovering appropriate ways of doing theology in the theological community *par excellence*, the local church.

We live in an age where the missionary task still stretches out before us. We have been reasonably good at helping folk to feel at home in the church. But we are set in the midst of the world and need to help people work out their christian obedience there. Jesus said "*as the Father has sent me, so I*

send you," and in recent times we have emphasised Mission in Christ's Way. That emphasis does not only apply to the church in its missionary action and ministerial practice. It also applies to the church in its theological reflection and in its theological preparation for mission and ministry. So in addressing the theme of the Mission of God as the Focus for Theological Education we are only wanting to be as missionary oriented in theological education as we would want the church itself to be. We ought not to urge the church to move out and join with God in his mission to the world, if we are unwilling to live out the implications of that in our own work as theological educators.

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