

The Missiological Future of Theological Education

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Introduction

The American Church finds itself in a precarious position. Based on current statistics, each year 2.7 million people cease to be part of a local church community and 4000 churches close their doors. Beyond this, 85 percent of all our churches are classified as stagnant and dying.¹

Statistics such as these are now widely acknowledged; prompting many to conclude that the American Church is in a state of crisis. The way in which this crisis is interpreted by many, however, is that Christianity is losing its central place within culture and therefore its power and influence as well. This reaction betrays a paradigm of thought shaped powerfully by the assumptions and characteristics of Christendom, a cultural framework that inclines us to believe that faithful witness and mission, the very vitality of the Church, is somehow bound up with its central place in society.² Interpreted in this way, a great number of people have proposed a variety of pragmatic solutions (many even under the all-too-abused banner of “missional”) meant to help the Church rebuild and reassert itself in response to what might be described as something of a “cultural earthquake” as Christendom crumbles and we begin to try and make sense of our new Post-Christendom context.

In contrast, while we wholeheartedly agree that we are indeed in the midst of a cultural earthquake, we believe that these statistics are better read as symptoms of a deeper problem. Rather than working toward solutions aimed at helping the Church maintain or regain its position of power and privilege at the center of society, our contention is that a more faithful posture, in the midst of this cultural earthquake, is pausing to ask what God is saying and doing and how God is calling us to respond? It is when we adopt this sort of posture, one which places more emphasis on and trust in God’s work in the world than it does on own power and security, that we believe it becomes increasingly clear that the crisis we face is not so much a mere cultural challenge to overcome, but akin to some of the great “cultural earthquakes” of Christian history, a divine opportunity to reconsider who God is, the nature of God’s work in the world, and what both mean for how we understand and practice what it means to be God’s people. In short, we suggest that Christendom, far from being a favorable cultural condition, has actually done great harm by obstructing, if not our-rightly challenging, visions of the intrinsically missional nature of God, the gospel, and the Church. In other words, the crisis we face is not one of pragmatics, but of missional theology.

Obviously, these statistics most directly address the state of the Church in America. However, as seminaries are traditionally the institutions we look to for the shaping and provision of church leaders, it is the arena of theological education that this paper seeks to address. The missiological crisis of Christendom not only affected the Church, but also bore corresponding implications for seminaries and indeed our systems of theological education in general. As such, we believe that a massive re-imagining of the nature, purpose, and practice of theological education is in order.

¹ <http://www.intothyword.org/apps/articles/default.asp?articleid=36557&columnid=3958>, accessed 9/9/11.

² It should be noted that “Christendom” is invoked here in reference to its symbolic, as opposed to specifically historical, import. The intricacies of tracing out the historical nuances of the relationship between and implications of Christendom, Constantinianism, the Enlightenment, modern philosophical thought, etc. are important, but beside the central point of this paper. “Christendom,” can be rightly seen as a cultural reality and perspective that facilitates the Church’s posture of supposed cultural hegemony in Western culture. It is this perspective and posture, which obfuscate the missional nature of God, the Church, and theological education.

Simply put, the guiding thesis of this paper is that to the extent that our current systems of theological education have been shaped by Christendom presuppositions, they have lost their missiological bearings and are wholly inadequate to prepare Kingdom leaders (Part 1). Incremental changes and clever adaptations to these current systems only serve to distract from the opportunity we have before us to develop a Kingdom, and therefore missional, vision of theological education (Part 2). At the heart of this vision is the conviction that the proper telos of theological education is an “accreditation” of students based not merely on the degrees they earn, but on the development and fit of their character and competency for life and leadership in the Kingdom of God (Part 3). To this end, we argue that a missional vision of theological education will be praxeological - aimed at training reflective practitioners, mobilizational - aimed at training missionary leaders, and spiritual - aimed at training Kingdom citizens (Part 4). At the conclusion of this paper we will offer an example of a model of theological formation that we believe exemplifies many of the characteristics of the vision argued for here (Part 5). We begin, therefore, by briefly outlining the implications of the “missiological crisis” of Christendom for theological education.

Part 1 | The Missiological Crisis of Christendom for Theological Education

Christendom presents what we are calling a missiological crisis for theology, the Church, and theological education, primarily, because it assumes a privileged place for the Church and Christianity at the center of and throughout culture. Given this basic assumption, mission, as a texture which ought to mark all of our theology and practice, is lost or seen as irrelevant. We will come to issues of theology and ecclesiology in the second part. Here, we wish to highlight just three of the ways that Christendom has subverted the natural missiological shape of theological education. To begin with, the lack of a missiological focus to theological education has resulted in systems that are largely theoretical. Following this primary disposition, Christendom-shaped systems of theological education impart to students a skill-set that is essentially managerial. Both of these characteristics flow from the errant drive and vision of preparing leaders as religious professionals for a context in which the central place and authoritative role of the Church within culture is mistakenly (and harmfully!) taken for granted.

First, we note that as Christian education and training for ministry was abstracted from the actual practice of ministry and participation in mission, it became patently theoretical. To illustrate this point, consider the reflection one Christian leader who was asked to express her thoughts about flaws within our current systems of theological education.

I went to a secular university and was involved in a Christian ministry and church during my 4 years of college. I think I graduated much more equipped to ‘do ministry’ than some of my friends who went to a Christian school and got a degree in Christian ministry. Why do I say this? I learned by doing ministry and living my life alongside non-believers instead of from a textbook. A lot of my Christian-schooled friends graduated without a single non-Christian friend and no clue how to relate to non-Christians.

While this example is perhaps not universal, it was by no means a unique or solitary response to this question. We find it greatly disconcerting that rather than focusing on graduating those of whom it can truly be said, “they are a friend of sinners,” as it was of Jesus, we have actually designed entire systems of theological education predicated on removing people from natural contexts of mission and ministry where theological formation of this sort can take place.

A second consequence of Christendom for theological education is that apart from a missiological aim and with the expectation of the Church existing powerfully at the center of culture, the skill-set acquired by seminarians might best be described as managerial.³ Consider this observation of one pastor on his own seminary experience,

I was told in seminary that I should spend one hour of sermon prep for every minute I will be preaching. For many of us that means we should spend 20-30 hours preparing sermons! [sic] This approach poses some serious problems for me. First of all, I have other pastoral responsibilities. Second, I am bi-vocational so I barely even have that much time to give to everything I do. For those two reasons alone, there is just no chance I am spending thirty hours a week prepping for a sermon on Sunday.

The presumptions of this suggestion are staggering. Not only does it take a Sunday-centric approach to ecclesiology for granted, assuming an abundance of people to serve as an audience for a Christian monologue, but it relegates pastors to their study for the bulk of the week, dislocating them from involvement in the lives of their congregation, not to mention their community.

Finally, inasmuch as Christendom might be described as a cultural condition that subtly (or perhaps not so subtly) co-opted, and thereby domesticated, the Church into a system of coercive power, ministry became professionalized. And in line with the dominant evolution of higher education, theological education became increasingly, and in some cases exclusively, intellectual.

To illustrate this point, consider the fact that the characteristics of graduation requirements for Christian institutions are nearly entirely the same as those of secular institutions. In other words, in our hasty attempt to match the intellectual dimension of higher education in general, we mimicked the emphasis on the markers of intellectual mastery: the successful completion of courses, exams, and papers rather than, in a manner more befitting the nature of Christian education, the markers of spiritual maturity, Christ-like character, and the competency to actually do what we have supposedly been trained for in the power of the Spirit. As will become clearer below, ours is not an anti-intellectual argument. Yet, there is perhaps no greater evidence of deficiencies in our current systems of theological education than the inundation of churches and Christian organizations with leaders who possess advanced degrees, but lack correspondingly advanced spiritual wisdom, maturity, and ministry competency.

Summary

Christendom has given rise to what can be described as a missiological crisis. To a large degree, the Church in Western culture lacks a missional ecclesiology to guide it amidst the cultural earthquake we find ourselves in. Worse, the systems of theological education that we have relied upon to shape and equip our leaders, also lack a missiological basis to guide their own identity and function. We believe that the great benefit of our current cultural earthquake is the way in which, if we have eyes to see, God is pulling back the curtain on some of our most cherished

³ This managerial skill-set is expressed in at least two different ways. For those who lead non-denominational, evangelical churches (especially megachurches), there is a major desire for seminary programs that emphasize leadership. Here, what is of most importance, from a managerial perspective, is a capacity to run an organization well and to help it grow - a CEO/manager model. On the other hand, mainline Protestant churches are more concerned with pastors who can manage congregations by focusing on and tending to internal needs - a spiritual caregiver/manager model.

assumptions, exposing the ways in which Christendom obscured our vision of the *missio Dei* and its relevance for how we understand the Gospel and the Church. Over and above its implications for our theology and ecclesiology, this (re)discovery has great significance for our centers of theological education as they seek to prepare leaders for life and ministry unencumbered by the trappings of Christendom. Thus, we believe that one of the most significant tasks before us is developing a Kingdom-oriented vision of theological education that is thoroughly missiological.

Part 2 | Toward a Missional Vision of Theological Education

Our aim in the first part of this paper was to illustrate how Christendom influenced our systems of theological education away from their proper missiological orientation and shape. In this second part, we seek to articulate how a recovery of the *missio Dei* leads to a renewed vision of both the Gospel and the Church. This renewed theological vision is what we suggest enables us to move toward developing a re-imagining of theological education that is more faithful to the missiological nature of the Kingdom of God.

Missio Dei

As Christianity and the Church have been and increasingly are pushed to the margins of our society, we have been given the gift of perspective. It is from the margins that we are better able to return to a way of seeing, understanding, and knowing God that was obscured within Christendom. As the Church is stripped of its cultural power and privilege, it is increasingly possible for us to re-discover that God is fundamentally a missionary God. Moreover, as we observe the manner in which divine sending takes place, we note a repeated pattern of God operating out of a position of humility and weakness rather than power and dominance.⁴ This missional understanding of God is neither new nor novel. Quite the contrary, it was the reality of their status as a persecuted and marginal group that enabled the people of God, for most of biblical history, to understand not only *that* the God we worship is fundamentally a missionary and sending God, but to grasp *the nature* of Christian mission and sending as well. This theological vision, a fundamental reorientation for much of Western Christianity, has far-reaching implications for how we understand, among other things, the Gospel as well as the Church.⁵

The Gospel

The primary implication of this missiological reorientation of our theology for the Gospel centers around discipleship. If discipleship is rightly understood as the process or lifestyle by which we are increasingly able to know God as well as receive and respond to the good news of God's invitation to enter into God's Kingdom and mission in the world, then any version of the Gospel that isn't a call to discipleship, that leaves discipleship as optional, is not the Gospel that Jesus preached nor does it bear any significance to the Kingdom he inaugurated. Sadly, the dominant vision of the Gospel throughout Christendom made it possible to believe that salvation was something that one could have apart from submitting one's whole life to the rule and reign of God. Discipleship was abstracted from the Gospel, leaving us without much need to speculate as to why the Church in Western culture finds itself unable to faithfully interpret and helpfully respond to its present situation. Christendom has left us lacking for a practical as well as

⁴ Philippians 2:5-8 is perhaps the prime example of this reality.

⁵ For additional perspective on this issue see, Bosch, David J. 1982. "Theological Education in Missionary Perspective." *Missiology* 10, No. 1: 13-34.

theological vision of life-in-Christ as life-as-mission. The rise of a Gospel that was not a call to discipleship led to the malformation of our ecclesiologies, both in theory as well as in practice.⁶

Ecclesiology

Inasmuch as a re-discovery of the *missio Dei* has implications for understanding the Gospel as an invitation to a life of discipleship, it holds enormous relevance for how we understand and practice being the Church. This connection is paramount because while our primary concern is with the future of theological education, we believe this future only matters insofar as it is both rooted in and aimed toward a vital relationship with the Church - the separation of which was yet another result of the assumptions of Christendom. Devoid of a vision of God as a missionary God and an understanding of the Gospel as an invitation to discipleship, the Church within Christendom lost sight of its calling to live as a people sent into the world as a sign and foretaste of God's coming Kingdom.⁷ In place of this vision, the Church, by and large, sought to leverage the position of power and privilege afforded it by the cultural reality of Christendom. Only now as the secularizing forces of our time are beginning to show their power are many beginning to question this exchange. The development of missional ecclesiologies faithful to the *missio Dei* and the Gospel as a call to discipleship necessitate a re-imagining of theological education as it seeks to shape and equip leaders along these lines.

Summary and Implications for Theological Education

Of course, a full-scale treatment of the *missio Dei* and its implications for the Gospel and our ecclesiologies is beyond the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, we believe the implications of these brief observations for the arena of theological education offer more than enough rationale for us to have serious doubts about the ability of our current paradigms of training to cultivate leaders whose formation for life and ministry coheres with a missional vision of God, the Gospel, and the Church. More importantly, we believe they begin to help point a way forward as we seek to re-imagine theological education along exactly these lines.

Under the auspices of Christendom, our perception, even if unstated, was that what we really needed in terms of leaders were those who could skillfully manage and maintain the place of the Church within culture. It was this perceived need that served to shape our centers of theological education and the programs they offered. Our contention is that because of the crumbling of Christendom, or more accurately, in response to what many perceive God is revealing in the midst of this cultural earthquake, our current models of theological education must be entirely re-imagined if they are to faithfully serve the missional purposes of God, the good news of the Kingdom, and the Church. With this theological vision as a backdrop, we suggest that a Kingdom-oriented vision of theological education will be guided and judged, primarily, by its ability to equip leaders with the sort of character and competency that Jesus sought to instill in his own disciples. This is the subject of our next section.

Part 3 | Character and Competency: From Graduating Seminary Students to Commissioning Kingdom Leaders

⁶ Though not aimed at implications for theological education, Scot McKnight's most recent publication, *The King Jesus Gospel: The Original God News Revisited*, offers a fuller treatment of this topic.

⁷ For more on this topic see, Guder, Darrell L., and Lois Barrett. 1998. *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*. Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., a landmark text upon which scores of additional volumes have drawn in contributing to the field of missional ecclesiology.

We began by noting a number of the ways in which Christendom gave rise to systems of theological education that lacked a missiological impetus. As this impetus and its implications for theology and ecclesiology are reclaimed amid the collapse of Christendom, we are invited, even compelled, to re-imagine what the nature, purpose, and aim of theological education truly is. Extended discussions of these important topics is beyond the scope of this paper, but suffice it to say, we believe that at the very core of the nature, purpose, and aim of theological education is the cultivation of Kingdom-oriented character and competency.

What About Knowledge?

Before unpacking what we have in mind when we talk about Kingdom-oriented character and competency, it may be helpful to address what, for many, is an immediate concern and question. “What about knowledge? Aren’t seminaries the institutions that we count on to impart knowledge to our leaders?” To this, we are quick and eager to offer a sincere reply of, “Absolutely!” Seminaries serve the church and her leaders well by being institutions whose faculty are rooted deeply in Christian history, theology, biblical studies, etc. These resources are patently necessary in the cultivation of mature Christian leaders.

However, we must be equally quick to point out that currently, the majority of our seminary programs place almost exclusive emphasis on the conveying of information across a handful of pre-defined theological disciplines.⁸ Students move along in the seminary system by virtue of their successful completion of course requirements, typically assessed by either their ability to pass written exams or to write well. Shamefully, what this means is that it is entirely possible to be a seminary graduate who, while possessing vast amounts of religious information, possesses neither the character that Jesus sought to instill in his followers, nor the competency to lead in the most basic aspect of Kingdom mission, making disciples.⁹ As a result, our churches and Christian organizations are, in far too many instances, led by those who possess the academic credentials required by a Christendom-shaped ecclesiology, but lack the character and competency to serve faithfully as Kingdom leaders.

The problem is not only the lack of attention given to issues of character and competency, but the fact that without these as the primary features of theological formation, the Kingdom usefulness of “Christian knowledge,” is stripped of its worth. To be blunt, we might suggest that the passing on of Christian knowledge to those who lack the character and competency out of which it might be put to use is akin to passing along car keys to someone who is clearly drunk – they may be able to use the tool, but if nothing horrible comes to pass, it will be by sheer grace. Thus, if the resource of Christian knowledge, available through seminaries, is to be used faithfully and unleashed to its full potential, our main task must be to re-imagine systems of theological education that have as their primary aim, the cultivation of Kingdom-oriented character and competency.

Kingdom-Oriented Character

It may be important to clarify what we mean by *Kingdom-oriented* character and competency. In both cases, we are guided by the notion that the present availability as well as the eschatological coming of the Kingdom of God was central to everything Jesus was, said, and did. Jesus came

⁸ For more on this problematic aspect of theological education see, Farley, Edward. 1983. *Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education*. Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press.

⁹ It is perhaps the most potent indication of the disastrous effects of Christendom that Jesus’ final command to his disciples of, “Therefore go, make disciples of all nations...” (Mt. 28:19) has played so minor a role in the shaping of our ecclesiologies and systems of theological education.

and announced the nearness of the Kingdom. Jesus prayed that the Kingdom might be made manifest “on earth as it is in Heaven.” Jesus’ ministry and teaching revolved around the power-of and life-in the Kingdom. And when Jesus sent his disciples into mission, it was to proclaim the Kingdom of God in deed and word. From this, it is plain to see that the Kingdom doesn’t just have a missional component to it, but in connection to God, the missionary King himself, its very nature and essence are missional. Whereas Christendom was more or less a static reality that required people to manage and maintain it, the Kingdom is a dynamic and missional reality that requires leaders who have the character to receive and embody it as well as the competency to live, and train others for life, in it.

Therefore, if the formation of Kingdom-oriented character is to come to the fore as we re-imagine theological education along missional lines, we must begin to ask of our Christian institutions, “Does this school and its’ programs produce leaders who have the character of Jesus? Do they love? Are they kind? Are they compassionate? Do their hearts break for the brokenness in the world? Do they do Kingdom things even when it’s hard? Do they do the right thing when no one is looking? Do they care for others more than for themselves? Are they prone to constantly empty themselves so there would be more of Jesus?” In terms of identifying Kingdom leaders, we find these questions to be far more compelling than the one that predominated within Christendom, “Do they hold an accredited degree?” Asking these sorts of character-oriented questions on the back-end will inevitably lead us to ask similar ones on the front-end. “What might a system of theological education that is designed to help students cultivate Kingdom-oriented character look like?” “What kinds of faculty are required if character development is to be a hallmark of everything we do?” “How does a commitment to the centrality of character development impact our advertising, recruiting, and admissions procedures?” These are not easy questions, but from our perspective, they are among the most pressing and important.

Kingdom-Oriented Competency

The formation of character is only one half of the equation, however. We also wish to suggest that the conferral of a degree from a theological school should mean not only that you have increasingly taken on the character of Jesus, but also that you have developed the competency of faithful and effective Kingdom leadership. Here, the questions that ought to occupy our attention in evaluating emerging leaders are, “Do they have the ability to do the things that Jesus did and called his followers to do? How good are they at hearing and discerning the voice of God and responding in loving obedience? Can they make disciples as Jesus made disciples? Are they able to train, empower, and release the people of God as missionaries in their every-day comings and goings as Jesus did? Do people regard them as having a spiritual authority beyond their education?” As was the case above, these assessment-oriented questions necessitate the asking of imaginative questions at the outset such as, “What is the nature of programs which seek to educate students *through* (and not just *for*) the practice of ministry?” “Given the present and emerging challenges of Christian life and ministry, what does competency look like for seminary students?” “How should we understand, support, and enhance the relationship between faculty, students, and ministry contexts?” More questions of course could and should be asked along these lines, but these serve to illustrate just how different this perspective on the nature, purpose, and aim of theological education is from dominant paradigms, which give little or no attention to issues of Kingdom-oriented competency.

Summary

To sum up, we believe that the fundamental role of theological education is to come alongside the Church to provide a matrix for the advanced formation of Kingdom-oriented character and

competency in its emerging leaders. It is within this matrix that a rigorous, even scholarly engagement with biblical studies, theology, church history, etc. is properly rooted. Apart from this matrix, continuing to emphasize the sheer conveyance of information and ideas is actually to do violence to the nature of a properly missional vision of theological education. Gone are the days that seminaries could exist as institutions that served the Church simply by graduating students to fill pre-defined roles and needs within a firmly entrenched Christian system. What we need now, truly, what we have always needed, are theological schools that are prepared to accept the more challenging invitation of truly commissioning Kingdom leaders by re-imagining programs and supporting structures specifically designed to help students take on the character and competency of Jesus. This is no simple task, but in the following section we will suggest three principles that we believe will mark the missional vision of theological education argued for here.

Part 4 | Missiological Principles of “Kingdom Accreditation”

As was argued above, in accommodating itself to the assumptions and characteristics of Christendom, the Church lost its vision of God as a missionary God, which resulted in an understanding of the Gospel divorced from discipleship. This had grave consequences not only for our ecclesiology, but also for the shape and practice of our system of theological education, which sought to prepare leaders for these Christendom-shaped churches. As we consider these consequences, the question isn't *if* seminaries and their programs are formational. They always are. The better question is, “*Are* seminaries and their programs helping students develop the kind of character and competency needed to serve faithfully as Kingdom leaders?” We simply don't find this to be the case. Besides the plethora of anecdotal and qualitative evidence we could cite to this effect, this reality is also attested to by the fact that 75percent of pastors say they feel “unqualified or poorly trained by their seminaries” to lead their churches well.¹⁰

The task before us then, is to identify educational principles guided by a theological vision of the *missio Dei* as it relates to both the Gospel and the Church that can give shape and substance to processes of theological formation that are able to help students develop Kingdom-oriented character and competency. Other principles could be added, but for now we would like to suggest that a vision of theological education that is guided and shaped by a missional vision of God, the Gospel, and the Church will be praxeological - given to the training of reflective practitioners, mobilizational - given to the training of missionary leaders, and spiritual - given to the training of Kingdom citizens. Each of these principles is meant to work hand-in-hand with the others toward the same formational aim we see that Jesus had for his disciples.

1. Praxeological: Training Reflective Practitioners

As we look to Jesus for a model of forming disciples, one of the very first things that we see is what we might call a praxeological dimension to formation. We have in view here that way in which Jesus invited his disciples into a lifestyle that featured an ongoing interaction between being taught, engaging in the practice of Kingdom ministry, and being led in an intentional process of reflection and integration.

Whereas theological education within Christendom has been largely theoretical, imparting vast amounts of ideas and information into the minds of seminary students and then turning them loose to try and apply it to a ministry context after they graduate, we suggest that a Kingdom-

¹⁰ <http://www.intothyword.org/apps/articles/default.asp?articleid=36562&columnid=3958>, accessed 9/9/2011.

oriented vision of theological education compels us to train reflective practitioners whose learning and formation take place praxeologically. While other changes are surely called for, we suggest that theological formation that is praxeological calls for elongated programs, training by missionary theologians, diversified learning environments, a high degree of attention to contextualization, and an emphasis on creating learning communities.

- **Elongated programs of theological formation.** Whereas many seminaries seem to be spending their energy trying to find ways to help students achieve degrees more quickly, a praxeological orientation calls for more integrated, and therefore elongated, programs. Obviously an elongated program delays the conferral of a degree, but under the vision of theological education suggested here, the idea isn't getting a degree so that you can begin to do ministry, but beginning to do ministry so that you are rooted in the proper context for theological education and formation in the first place. Our processes of theological education should be more robust, not less. We believe that students should actually read more, write more, discuss more, reflect more, and do ministry a lot more often. We need to give them the time and the space to do all of these things well. If the end goal is not the conferral of a degree but actually becoming a certain kind of person, there simply are no shortcuts to be taken.
- **Training by Missionary Theologians.** A praxeological orientation towards theological education will require a faculty composed not mainly of traditional academic scholars, but of missionary theologians - those whose ability to guide and shape others flows from their own praxeological formation. Again, we are not suggesting that scholarship does not have its place; we are simply saying that the right kind of scholarship will always be driven by and focused on its implications for the life and ministry of the Church. Thus, we are compelled to ask whether or not those who are trained and formed by traditional PhD programs are the best candidates for the kind of mentors/teachers needed to equip those who embrace this vision of theological education. Instead, might it be the case that the sort of faculty necessary in this re-imagining of theological education will be marked more by their spiritual authority and the extent to which they embody the character and competency we desire to see students develop than by their academic achievements alone?
- **Diversified Learning Environments.** Learning theory suggests there are three ways we learn: the passing on of information, apprenticeship to learn certain skill-sets, and immersion. The best learning experience occurs when there is a dynamic interplay between all three. Driven by Christendom presuppositions, our current systems of theological education are designed to do the first, pass on information, but give no real attention to issues of apprenticeship or immersion experiences. A praxeological orientation to theological education will require that our seminaries create all three kinds of learning environments for their students. The issue here isn't merely the lack of second and third environments, but the fact that that apart from them, the relevance of time spent in the first environment loses the impact it ought to have.
- **Issues of Contextualization.** Ministry never occurs in a vacuum. Students don't just need to learn *what* to apply to their ministry context, which under the current paradigm of theological education they may not even have; they need to learn *how* to apply it to their ministry context, which we are suggesting as a prerequisite. This implies not only the need for missiologically-driven advances in models of distributed learning, but calls for a greatly enhanced focus on the part of instructors and the designing of programs with regard to the application of theological learning to specific ministry contexts. Another

way to say this is that a missional vision of theological education that is praxeological will demonstrate a high value for the incarnational nature of Christian learning and formation.¹¹

- **Learning Communities.** A core component of a praxeological orientation to theological education is the importance of learning in community. Whereas we wholeheartedly agree that there is a unique and important place for those regarded as experts in their field who can offer their wisdom, experience, and insight as they guide students in their formation as Kingdom leaders, there is an equally important and formative dimension to theological education that is rooted within a community of learning. In line with the realities of Kingdom ministry, which always call for a collaborative approach to tasks and problems, seminary students should increasingly develop a capacity to embody an open and discerning posture towards the insights and critiques of their peers. Flying in the face of traditional assessment criteria that are nearly exclusively predicated on one's individual academic performance, a core component of assessing the formation of Kingdom leaders will have to do with their posture toward and interaction with others in a learning community.¹²

2. Mobilizational: Training Missionary Leaders

A second principle driving this missional vision of theological education drawn from the life and ministry of Jesus is that of being mobilizational. We use the word mobilizational to point to the way in which Jesus sought to equip his disciples to not only carry forth the mission he had been given, but to become the kinds of people capable of equipping still others to do the same.

One of the most disastrous effects of Christendom upon our systems of theological education has been the unhelpful assumption that the Church does and *should* exist at the center of our society. Under this vision, seminaries have equipped leaders who would excel at managing and maintaining this system. As the *missio Dei* and its implications for the Gospel and the Church come back into focus in Post-Christendom, we submit that our systems of theological education must be re-imagined for the purposes of training missionary leaders. These will be leaders whose concern and skill-set revolve not around managing churches as part of a culture believed to be “Christian,” or even further, around church growth, but around mobilizing the people of God for participation in God's mission in the world. We submit that a truly mobilizational system of theological education will be, among other things, affordable, accessible, designed to prepare leaders as cultural pioneers, and judged on its ability to cultivate leaders who are competent to make disciples and mobilize others for faithful participation in God's mission in the world.

- **Affordable.**¹³ Unless you happen to live in a certain place, going to seminary requires the time and expense of uprooting your life and moving to another location. In addition, the

¹¹ Living into this sort of vision will mean that increasingly, centers of theological education will see having a ministry context as a prerequisite for admission into its programs. In addition, this value should compel centers of theological education to put significant amounts of time and resources into establishing truly meaningful relationships and partnerships with local churches and ministry organizations in which students who don't have their own ministry context might not just do occasional internships, but root the entirety of their educational process.

¹² Here, we suggest that where theological schools continue to offer residential options, they will do well to structure them around a more monastic model where students come to be immersed in an integrated program of sharing life, resources, learning experiences, and diversified endeavors in ministry and mission.

¹³ This issue alone calls for an entirely different paper. On top of addressing the problems associated with merely affording a theological education if we call into question the wisdom of taking out loans and factor

vast majority of seminary students are completely on their own to figure out how to pay for a seminary education. A staggering number of students carry an enormous amount of debt for years, if not decades, following the completion of their program.¹⁴ Not only is this problematic because of the current costs of seminary education,¹⁵ but increasingly, attaining a seminary degree does not translate into a proportional ability to get any job, let alone one that will alleviate students of their debt.¹⁶ Moreover, because seminary degree programs remain, in large part, shaped by the assumptions of Christendom, students may quickly discover they are ill equipped to faithfully engage with the practical realities of ministry in Post-Christendom (see footnote 6 above). In order to be truly mobilizational, it is incumbent on us to re-imagine systems of theological education that are vastly more financially sustainable.

- **Accessible.** Lack of proximity to the kinds of formational education that we are talking about isn't just an affordability problem; it's also an accessibility problem. While we applaud the efforts of the increasing number of seminaries that value distance and distributed learning opportunities, we would suggest much more innovation is required. Increasingly, seminaries need to embody in themselves the kind of character they should be instilling in their students. In other words, just as we need to mobilize leaders, we also need to imagine what it might mean to mobilize theological education itself. Institutions of theological education that are truly mobilizational will happily release power and control as they give their time and energy to initiatives that make quality theological education more accessible even if they don't directly benefit. The future of theological education belongs to those groups and institutions who care more for the work of God's Kingdom than they do their own.
- **Prepare Cultural Pioneers.** The ecclesial vision of Christendom provided for a system of theological education that mainly had in view the creation of Christian leaders who might well be described as managers or custodians of the church at the center of culture. But, with the significant shaking occurring as we move from Christendom to Post-Christendom, the maps we previously used for theological education prove unhelpful and misleading. In direct juxtaposition to a Christendom-shaped reality, a missional understanding of God and the Church compel us to give our time and attention to the equipping of missionary leaders capable of pioneering in a world without maps. This will require the re-imagining of structures and programs that are designed to impart to students, missionary, as opposed to managerial, skill-sets.

in the reality of pay scale and the availability of financially sustainable ministry careers, we must also consider the huge number of seminary graduates who aspire to "tent-making" industries as a theological, as opposed to merely financial, decision. The import of these factors is that a full re-imagining of theological education along missional lines goes beyond developing an alternative vision of training full-time vocational ministers or Christian educators to embracing the responsibility of imparting students with entrepreneurial and marketable skill-sets outside of the Christian world. This could lead to further developments in the breadth of faculty employed by Christian schools, the creation of joint programs between seminaries, universities, and theological and trade schools, and still further innovation.

¹⁴ Over 40% of seminary graduates carry over 10K in debt, nearly 20% with more than 30K. See <http://www.goingtoseminary.com/educational-debt-incurred-at-seminary/>, accessed 9/9/11.

¹⁵ On average, tuition and fees for university-affiliated MDiv programs are over 16K per year while those at independent and college-affiliated schools are just under 13K. These figures increase sharply for advanced degrees. See "2010-2011 Annual Data Tables," available from <http://www.ats.edu/Pages/default.aspx>, accessed 9/9/11.

¹⁶ On average, a recent seminary graduate can expect to make around 37K per year as a pastor. See <http://www.goingtoseminary.com/educational-debt-incurred-at-seminary/>, accessed 9/9/11.

- **Cultivate Disciple-Makers and Mobilizers.** With reference back to the theological vision of the intrinsically missional nature of God, the Gospel, and the Church articulated above, a final aspect of theological education that is mobilizational is the central importance of equipping leaders to be disciple-makers and mobilizers of God’s people for mission. However a particular person might be individually gifted, their ability to leverage that giftedness in concert with the biblically unifying commission to “go and make disciples of all nations,” is a fundamental marker of their fit for Kingdom ministry. Said another way, we suggest that a profound understanding of one’s giftedness and a correspondingly profound track record of the exercise of that giftedness as a means of making disciples and mobilizing people and communities for mission ought to be seen as a basic requirement for the completion of and seminary program.

3.Spiritual: Training Kingdom Citizens

As important as we believe praxeological and mobilizational principles are for a vision of theological education that has in view forming Kingdom leaders, they are not enough by themselves. Just as Jesus’ efforts to train and form his disciples would have had no ultimate significance apart from their connection to God and God’s work in the world, so too are the efforts of seminaries wasted apart from this same connection. Therefore, a final principle that we believe must be stressed if seminaries are to do their part in shaping leaders who possess the character and competency necessary for leadership predicated on a missional vision of God, the Gospel, and the Church is that every component of theological education must be spiritual in both origin and aim. Spiritual, of course, can mean many things. For us, it simply means that everything about what theological education is and does, ought to be predicated on the centrality of a vibrant and growing relationship with the triune God and his work in the world.

Having lost its proper missiological shape, theological education within Christendom made it possible to separate ones intellectual development from ones spiritual maturity. This is a dichotomy that our centers of theological education must repudiate if they hope to lend any support to the shaping of leaders for Kingdom ministry. Perhaps the greatest opportunity being afforded us by God amidst the cultural earthquake we are experiencing is that of recovering a vision of the people of God as resident aliens, a Kingdom people living in the midst of a world that is loved more deeply than it is fallen. A vision of theological education that seeks to equip men and women to serve as leaders within this way of seeing and engaging the world calls, at the very least, for processes of theological formation that shape convictions, impart spiritual knowledge, re-frame our relationship to Scripture, and embrace the irreplaceable role of the Holy Spirit.

- **Shaping Kingdom Convictions.** As theologian James McClendon once said, “Convictions are not so much things that we have but things that have us.” Within the dominant ecclesial paradigm of Christendom, great emphasis was placed on ensuring that our Christian leaders possessed all the right answers. As important as we believe Christian doctrine and truth are, if we fail to cultivate leaders who are as *convicted by them*, as evidenced by how they translate into their actual lives, as they purport to be *convinced of them*, we will only continue to contribute to the collapse of Western Christianity. If seminaries are to make any sort of meaningful contribution to the mission and witness of the Church in Western culture, they must show primary concern, not only for the information that their graduates possess, but for the convictions that will shape, drive and sustain them through all the trials and tribulations of not only ministry in a Post-Christian

context, but amidst the sort of suffering and persecution which the Bible tells us always accompanies faithful witness.

- **Imparting Spiritual Knowledge.** Seminaries and churches are full of people who know plenty of things about God. What our seminaries and churches seem in desperate lack of are people who truly *know* God in the way the Apostle Paul speaks of when he says, “I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death...”¹⁷ What we have to accept is that this kind of “knowing” cannot be manufactured or controlled. The impartation of spiritual knowledge is finally the work of the Holy Spirit as we live in relationship with God and participate in his mission in the world in the way of Jesus. Thus, it is incumbent upon seminaries to create environments where God can do this kind of work in shaping Kingdom leaders.
- **Re-framing Our Relationship to Scripture.** It should go without saying that in the endeavor of theological education to contribute to the shaping of Christian leaders, there is no text more important or sacred than the Bible. Unfortunately, the experience of many a seminarian is that the Bible is reduced to little more than an object to be examined and dissected. This phenomenon, like others mentioned previously, stems from an errant vision of who God is, the nature of the Good News, and how these things translate into our ecclesiology. For, when we begin to read the Bible as, on the one hand, the story of God’s mission in the world, and on the other hand, a picture of the reality into which we are invited, it is we, and not only the Bible, that become the object of theological scrutiny. Furthermore, when you abstract an engagement with Scripture from a predisposition towards inviting the work of the Holy Spirit, we miss God’s intention for this discipline. Therefore, in terms of truly honoring a spiritual disposition towards theological education, not only will the Bible occupy a primary place throughout the whole of our programs as opposed to being confined to individual courses, it will increasingly need to be seen as the very story out of which seminaries derive their own identity, purpose, and function.
- **Embracing the Irreplaceable Role of the Holy Spirit.** On account of Christendom’s errant separation of one’s intellectual development from their spiritual maturity, the role and work of the Holy Spirit within systems of theological education and formation has been downplayed if not completely cast aside. Our prevailing systems of theological education train and equip people to be leaders in such a way that they assume an ability to succeed based upon their own intellectual capacity and/or skill-set rather than upon their ability to discern the Holy Spirit’s leading and therefore upon the Holy Spirit’s power rather than their own. We suggest that to the degree that centers of theological education want to contribute to preparing leaders for faithful service as Kingdom citizens, they must re-imagine theological education in such a way that the work and role of the Holy Spirit in the theological formation of leaders, as well as in the world, will be given primary attention.

Summary

These are just a few of the principles that we believe will guide the missiological future of theological education. We are suggesting that to the extent that centers of theological education would like to play a role in helping to form and shape Kingdom leaders, they will need to leverage their resources and influence, irrespective of the responsiveness of conventional

¹⁷ Philippians 3:10 (NIV).

accrediting standards and bodies, along these lines.¹⁸ Put bluntly, while seminaries may find ways to continue to exist as institutional bodies, their only real future, from a missional perspective, lies in their ability to substantively contribute to the formation of leaders who are marked, more than anything else, by the development of their Kingdom-oriented character and competency. These are a few of the principles that we believe can facilitate that vision.

One of the great travesties of our current Christian landscape is that emerging leaders often feel like they have to make a choice between “going to seminary” because it will help them achieve the sort of “accreditation” that many denominations and organizations still require of their leaders or “going into ministry” in order to serve and grow in Kingdom-oriented character and competency as a disciple. Our contention through this paper has been that as Christendom crumbles amidst the cultural earthquake we are currently experiencing, God is revealing the ways in which our loss of a vision of the *missio Dei* and its relevance for how we understand the nature of the Gospel and the Church has resulted in ecclesiologies and systems of theological education that lack a proper missiological shape. As we re-imagine theological education along the lines of God’s Kingdom and God’s mission in the world, our hope and prayer is that these emerging leaders wouldn’t feel like this is a choice they have to make. Instead, we envision truly missional systems of theological education, so radically committed to a Kingdom vision of accreditation and to commissioning Kingdom leaders on account of their character and competency rather than their GPA, that ministry becomes the context for all our education and formation as we train reflective practitioners, that the aim of our education is the mobilization of God’s people for loving and faithful service as we train missionary leaders, and that all of this emerges out of a vibrant and growing relationship with the triune God as we train Kingdom citizens. Our final section is meant to provide a basic sketch of one model that we believe is succeeding in these ways.

Part 5 | One Small Step Forward: 3DM Learning Communities

We fully recognize that what we are calling for here has far-reaching implications and addresses complexities that are beyond the scope of this paper. Furthermore, we recognize that on account of how new and potentially foreign the theological vision driving this proposal may be for many leaders, churches, and schools, a full understanding of its practical implications will necessitate long and patient discernment. To see this vision realized will take years of commitment, faithfulness and integrity. But, as with all things, it begins with one step forward. On that count, we’d like to offer an example of how the ministry of 3DM and Northern Seminary are partnering to move in this direction. It will not accomplish all that we have set forth in this paper, but we do believe it is a bold step and carries us forward in the right trajectory.

3DM & Learning Communities

3DM is an organization that trains people in discipleship and mission for an increasingly Post-Christian context. Their primary means of training is through Learning Communities, a two-year track for leaders and churches. In these Learning Communities, church leaders learn from and come to embody the principles and practices of 3DM leaders and their apprentices who draw

¹⁸ We note here our appreciation for the efforts and guidance of accrediting bodies such as the Association of Theological Schools. We likewise note that to the extent that they seek to serve the purpose of the Kingdom, centers of theological education are responsible, first and foremost, to the mission God has imparted to them and not accrediting bodies. Our aim is not the neglect or abandonment of accrediting standards or bodies, but the right ordering of allegiances. We must ensure that our standards of accreditation serve our mission, not vice versa.

from thirty years of experience in the crucible of Post-Christian Europe where less than one percent of the population is part of a church community.

Northern Seminary

Northern Seminary is a seminary outside of Chicago, Illinois that seeks to embody a missional vision of theological education and is focused on equipping leaders for ministry in and to an increasingly Post-Christian culture. On top of beginning to innovate its existing programs, Northern has begun to establish partnerships with Kingdom-minded ministries and organizations such as 3DM in an attempt to move toward the missional vision of theological education outlined above. Among other benefits, these partnership-driven programs give Northern students the ability to earn all or a major part of a seminary degree apart from institutional residency.

In the context of Learning Communities, 3DM uses diversified learning contexts, ongoing personal mentoring and a variety of other formational tools akin to what we have described above to shape and equip leaders with the character and competency required for Kingdom ministry. To this already incredibly helpful training track, Northern is seeking to add value by incorporating advanced theological reflection, formational exercises, and the guidance of missionary theologians.¹⁹

To better describe how this partnership is a step towards a realization of a Kingdom re-imagining of theological education, allow us to describe the ways in which this two-year journey seeks to embody the principles stated above:

Training Reflective Practitioners: How does this partnership embody a praxeological approach to theological education?

1. In order to be part of a Learning Community, students must already be serving in a church or ministry context or be willing to start one. This prerequisite not only guarantees that all of their learning can be immediately applied to a concrete ministry context, but that context itself will shape and inform the questions and concerns that they bring to the learning experience.
2. Because those who participate in Learning Communities as student scholars are required to give a significant amount of time and attention to actually doing Kingdom ministry, they cannot be “full-time” students. Thus, learning that would ordinarily be “completed” in three quarters or less is spread out over the course of two years.
3. Learning Communities feature diversified learning environments. Over the course of two years, student scholars engage with the three learning contexts of information, apprenticeship, and immersion through four rhythmically offered intensive experiences (modules), weekly cohort phone calls for the purposes of mentoring, coaching and discipleship, and engagement with strategically selected readings through peer as well as personal reflection, writing, and oral exams.
4. Each of these learning environments are led by missionary theologians who are not only experts in their field, but have been chosen because they reflect the kind of character and competency we believe should be reflected in these student scholars. While not embodying a

¹⁹ Once final details of the partnership between 3DM and Northern Seminary are complete, those who participate in the scholar track of a 3DM learning community will have the option to use their experience toward the completion of a full Certificate, nine master’s courses, or the ministry portion of a DMin degree.

fully life-on-life paradigm of education, the regular, personal interaction these students have with these mentor/teachers far exceeds that of typical seminary programs.

5. Learning Communities offer additional value in as much as all learning is based on the cultural factors unique to these students. In the first place, the unique contextual and cultural factors of the student's ministry context serve as the backdrop for all of the questions and observations they bring to the Learning Community. Moreover, the nature of education and formation in the context of Learning Communities is predicated on the student's ability to immediately apply all of their learning to their specific ministry context.

Training Missionary Leaders: How does this partnership embody a mobilizational approach to theological education?

1. The Learning Community model of theological education is more affordable for two main reasons. First, because student scholars are expected to remain in their job, the place they live, and their ministry context rather than relocate to study full-time. Second, because it is fully expected that the church or ministry context that each student scholar represents is willing to invest financially in their growth and development as a leader.

2. Because Learning Communities intensives take place in church buildings across the country for just four days at a time, they are much more accessible than standard forms of theological education. In addition, this model makes theological education more accessible by augmenting face-to-face interaction with regular electronic communication and phone calls.

3. Over the course of two years and four different Learning Community modules, each student scholar is guided through a process of developing strategic plans for their own ministry context. In this way, rather than seeking to be guided by the maps of others, they are learning to become cultural pioneers who possess the skill-set of a missionary rather than a manager.

4. Because the rigorous theological reflection that student scholars are engaged with is rooted in concrete ministry contexts and predicated on them actually doing what they are studying (building a discipling culture, multiplying missional leaders, launching missional communities, and establishing centers of mission), student scholars increasingly become experts, not only of relevant information, but in terms of their capacity to make disciples, mobilize people for God's mission in the world, and train others to do the same.

Training Kingdom Citizens: How does this partnership embody a spiritual approach to theological education?

1. In answering this final question, it must be pointed out that whereas much of the first two principles can be achieved structurally, the faithful accomplishing of this aim has mainly to do with the quality and character of the faculty guiding and assessing students through their process of theological education. All the best content and delivery methods simply can't take the place of faculty mentors who are concerned with and capable of shaping the Kingdom convictions of their students. This is a work mediated by the Spirit through relationships.

2. Over and above any other skills that Learning Communities would seek to pass on, the primary focus is helping student scholars to grow in their ability to listen and respond to God. In Learning Communities, this happens through faculty mentors and peers helping one another constantly and carefully attend to God by asking what God is saying and doing in their lives and then developing plans for responding.

3. The defining mark of those who live under the rule and reign of Christ is the unparalleled attention that they give to being conformed to the image of Jesus as they live and minister in his way and in his strength. This value is highlighted in the teaching offered at Learning Community intensives as well as through the use of a character and competency rubric that is used to guide and assess the development of student scholars.

4. In the context of Learning Community modules, study of Scripture is incorporated in such a way that student scholars are led to reflect on the degree to which their lives and ministries reflect the God's design for them. Dwelling in and studying Scripture is something that features throughout the entire Learning Community rather than simply one piece of it.

Conclusion

We know full well that this one practical step forward does not represent the depth of change that is needed within our current system of theological education. But we do believe it is a significant step forward in the right direction. Our hope is that as more and more students join us in participating in these Learning Communities, God will increasingly give us wisdom and insight into further steps forward as he leads us into a faithful embodiment of what theological education needs to be and look like if it is to contribute meaningfully to the health, vitality, and faithfulness of the Church as it finds its way in the context of Post-Christendom. When all is said and done, our one simple aim is to do what we can to help cultivate leaders who possess both the character and competency necessary for those who would lead us into a journey of knowing and following God as his mission in the world moves forth and unfolds.

We hope you'll join us in this important conversation.

Visit: thefutureoftheologicaleducation.com to view a video we have created as a companion piece to this paper and to add your questions and thoughts.