

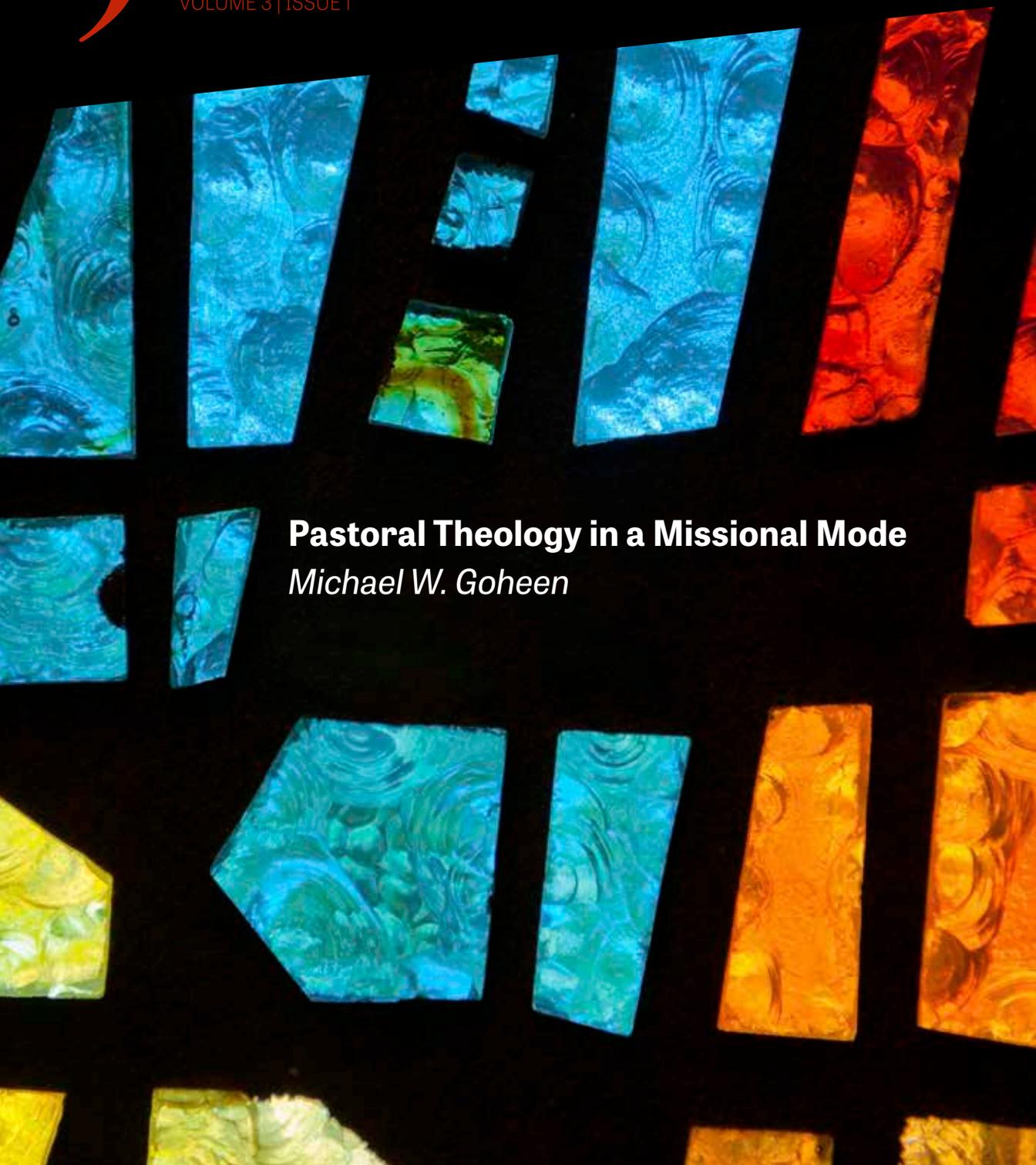
JBTS

VOLUME 3 | ISSUE 1

JOURNAL OF
BIBLICAL AND
THEOLOGICAL
STUDIES

Pastoral Theology in a Missional Mode

Michael W. Goheen



Pastoral Theology in a Missional Mode

MICHAEL W. GOHEEN

Michael Goheen (Ph.D. Utrecht) is Professor and Director of Theological Education at Missional Training Center, Phoenix and professor of missional theology at Covenant Theological Seminary, St Louis, Missouri.

Abstract: In this article I argue for the renewal of pastoral theology from a missional mode. This approach to pastoral theology offers rich resources addressing critical areas of contemporary concern. This article is more than just academic reflection. In fact, this reflects a curricular work in progress at Missional Training Center, Phoenix, Arizona—an extension site of Covenant Theological Seminary, St Louis, Missouri.¹ For the past six years we have been attempting some creative approaches to theological education based on the rich insights from the 1960s—1980s offered by Western mission leaders and Southern hemisphere church leaders on theological education in a missional mode. I am especially indebted to the insights of Lesslie Newbigin, Harvie Conn, and David Bosch, and will draw primarily on their work in this article.

I begin by briefly exposing the roots of this problematic view of pastoral theology. I then sketch the missional turn in the 20th century and note its considerable impact beginning with ecclesiology, and then on theology and leadership. This understanding of mission provides a solid theological foundation for the renewal of pastoral theology. Finally, I work out some of the significant implications of this missional turn for rethinking pastoral theology.

Key Words: Pastoral Theology, Missional Ecclesiology, *Missio Dei*, Pragmatism, Professionalization of Ministry

Introduction **Roots of Pastoral Theology Today**

Recently I spoke with a theologically astute young Brazilian pastor. He is pursuing a doctoral degree in pastoral theology from an American institution. He described the most recent courses he had taken, and after offering appreciative words on some of the wisdom he had gained, he offered a twofold critique. On the one hand, the courses were pragmatic, primarily concerned with skills and technique. The courses followed a methodology rooted in the social sciences; there was little theological reflection on the subjects. On the other hand, the courses were designed to be relevant for the

1. You can read more on our website: <http://www.missionaltraining.org/>

internal life of the institutional church. They equipped professional pastors to feed and care for the flock but lacked any missional vision for a world beyond the walls of the church. I believe these critiques are on target and addressing them is part of a larger agenda for the rethinking of pastoral theology today.

The pair of problems sketched by my Brazilian friend emerges out of the historical development of pastoral theology over the last two centuries. Pastoral theology initially arose out of a faulty theory-praxis dichotomy and subsequently was given its contours by the professionalization of ministry. Moreover, this whole process took place in the context of an ecclesiology that had lost its missional identity. Thus, to understand some of the problematic issues involved in pastoral theology today, we must look briefly at three crucial assumptions that shaped its historical growth as a theological discipline: a theory-practice dichotomy, a professionalized view of the pastoral ministry, and a non-missional understanding of the church.

A Theory-Practice Dichotomy

The discipline of pastoral theology—or, perhaps better, the aggregate of a number of disciplines gathered together within the theological curriculum under the rubric of ‘pastoral theology’—emerged out of the *theory-practice* dichotomy that molded the curriculum of theological education. Specifically, it developed in the 19th century when the fourfold pattern of theology arose especially under the work of Friedrich Schleiermacher and became the norm for theological education. There were three theoretical disciplines—biblical studies, systematic theology, and church history. The fourth, pastoral theology became a “bridge-building” discipline that connected to pastoral ministry the previously established abstract truth gained in the other theoretical disciplines.² In the 20th century, pastoral theology continued its development in this direction as it splintered into various sub-disciplines that followed the methods of the social sciences. Under the growing pragmatism of a postmodern culture impatient with all abstract theoretical reflection, pastoral theology “became more and more functional and pragmatic. Practical is that which can be *used* immediately and which *works* within a short period of time. With this emphasis, practical theology tends to lead to a ‘preoccupation with technique.’”³

The pragmatic nature of pastoral theology resulted from at least two factors. The first is the illegitimacy of the very dichotomy itself. Al Wolters rightly observes that this dichotomy is an “idolatrous perspective on the world” and a “distorted mind-set” shaped by a “humanistic thought-pattern.” The source of this dualism is “Aristotelian

2. Edward Farley, “The Reform of Theological Education as a Theological Task,” in *Theological Education* 1, (1981): 102–106. Emphasis mine.

3. Bernhard Ott, *Beyond Fragmentation. Integrating Mission and Theological Education: A Critical Assessment of Some Recent Developments in Evangelical Theological Education* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2001), 225; Farley, “Reform of Theological Education,” 105.

paganism, which made a god out of theory or analysis.” Aristotle “like many Greek philosophers before and after him, singled out one aspect of created reality, the reasoning function, and gave it the absolute status of God.” What creational capacity, the Greeks enquired, would enable the human being to rise above their creational status to universally valid truth? Reason or *theoria* is singled out as human function so capable of accessing timeless truth. “Having fallen into this idolatry of the rational, all the rest of human functions and activities are lumped together and are downgraded in comparison to it, and are mindlessly labeled the ‘practical.’” The very category of practical “in its value laden opposition to ‘theoretical’ is a pseudo-concept deriving directly from Greek philosophical idolatry.” The result of this false dichotomy is a constant pendulum swing back and forth between the exaltation of intellectual reflection and a pragmatism that rejects all theoretical activity as irrelevant or is at least suspicious of it.⁴

This partially explains why pastoral theology has become so pragmatic. There is no such thing as context-free or timeless theory; this is an illusion of the pagan Greek mind. All theoretical reflection as a human activity—and this includes all theology, of course—is embedded in the whole fabric of human life. And so all theological reflection necessarily *arises out of* some particular context. When theoretical reflection in biblical, systematic, and historical theology arises from an academic setting that has been disconnected from the church-in-mission it will naturally be irrelevant to pastoral ministry. All theological reflection is also *directed toward* some particular context. When the various branches of “theoretical” theology are directed toward the self-generated agendas of scholars, again naturally it will usually be irrelevant to pastoral ministry. No amount of bridge-building will be able to satisfactorily connect to pastoral ministry a theology conceived as timeless content derived from a different context. It is not hard to see why impatience with irrelevant theological reflection leads pastors down the road to pragmatism which rejects all theological reflection as unhelpful to ministry.

The Professionalization of Ecclesial Ministry

The *professionalization of ecclesial ministry* exacerbates the problem of pragmatism—this is the second factor. In the North American seminary model, the fourfold pattern of theology developed in the 19th century has been connected in the 20th century to a professionalized model of ministry. A professional in Western culture is a person with expertise in a narrowly defined field who plays a specialized role within society. A professional requires specialized knowledge and certain skills to fulfill this position, and this demands a long and intensive academic preparation in which the professional is trained for their role especially through the mastery of certain skills.

4. Albert M. Wolters, *Ideas Have Legs* (Toronto: Institute for Christian Studies, 1987), 7–9.

There are numerous problems with the professionalized approach to ministry.⁵ For our purposes here we can simply note that when the minister is considered to be a professional, pastoral theology is reduced to a process of passing along the necessary skills, know-how and needed information to qualify them for their specialized function. Not only does it stunt broader theological development, and potentially personal spirituality, it contributes to the pragmatic direction of pastoral theology. Pastoral theology delivers skills and techniques designed to equip the professional to fulfill their specialized task.

Non-Missional Understanding of the Church

This whole development of pastoral theology has taken place in the context of a *non-missional understanding of the church*. Winston Crum uses a helpful image to describe a full ecclesiology. He says:

The Church is rather like an ellipse, having two foci. In and around the first she acknowledges and enjoys the Source of her life and mission. This is an ingathering and recharging focus. Worship and prayer are emphasized here. From and through the other focus she engages and challenges the world. This is a forth-going and self-spending focus. Service and evangelization are stressed. Ideally, Christians learn to function in both ways at once, as it were making the ellipse into a circle with both foci at the center.⁶

Similarly Karl Barth claims that the church's "mission is not addition to its being. It is, as it is sent and active in its mission. It builds up itself for the sake of its mission and in relation to it."⁷ Both authors emphasize the two poles of the church's existence: the vocation of the church to make known the good news in the midst of the world and the importance of its inner, communal life to empower it for mission. Both the inner life and outward vocation are essential to the church's identity. If either is lost our ecclesiology is distorted.

Pastoral theology developed in a time when the pole of missional vocation was marginalized. Thus, pastoral theology was a matter of equipping the pastor for tasks within the institutional church primarily aimed at the goal of care for the members of the congregation. Preaching, worship, sacraments, counselling, pastoral care, and

5. E.g., Charles Van Engen, *Mission on the Way: Issues in Mission Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 244–247; Edward Farley, *Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 11–12, 115, 127–135; Harvie Conn, *Eternal Word and Changing Worlds: Theology, Anthropology, and Mission in Dialogue* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 278–282.

6. Winston F. Crum, "The Missio Dei and the Church: An Anglican Perspective," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 17, 4 (1973): 288.

7. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV, 1, 62, 2 (Peabody: Hendrikson, 2010), 725.

so on are treated, at best, simply as pastoral tasks that nurture the spiritual life of the congregation. This is the specialized expertise of a professional pastor.

Donald Messner rightly laments that “contemporary theological education has been oriented primarily toward the pastoral care of congregations, not the church’s mission to the world” and further warns that “ministry detached from God’s mission in the world is heretical.”⁸ This point can be well made by a brief reference to Karl Barth’s discussion of *beneficia Christi* (benefits of Christ) and sacred egocentricity.⁹ He asks a simple question: What does it mean to be a Christian? The “classic answer” is, to be a recipient and possessor of the *beneficia Christi*. Barth lists these benefits: regeneration, conversion, peace with God, reconciliation, justification, sanctification, forgiveness of sins, and more. All these come by grace as gifts of God in Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit in response to repentance and faith. Christians are those who have received these benefits. It is this that inspires the pastoral ministry of the church.

“There can be no disputing,” says Barth, “that something true and important is meant and envisaged in all this.”¹⁰ Yet if we are not alert it would be easy to make the reception, possession, and enjoyment of these benefits what is essential to being a Christian. Barth wonders: Can it really be the end of Christian vocation that I should be blessed, that I should be saved, that I should receive, possess, and enjoy all these gifts and then attain to eternal life without any regard for others? Does this not smack of a pious or sacred egocentricity? Would it not be strange and even contradictory that the selfless and self-giving work of God should issue in a self-seeking concern with our own salvation? Would not this egocentricity stand in stark contrast to the being and action of the Lord? Would this not turn the church into an institute of salvation that forgot its missional purpose in the world? Would this not make us *pure* recipients and possessors of salvation?¹¹ Barth rightly asks: “Is not every form of egocentricity excused and even confirmed and sanctified, if egocentricity in this sacred form is the divinely willed meaning of Christian existence and the Christian song of praise consists finally only in a many-tongued but monotonous *pro me, pro me*, and similar possessive expressions?”¹²

Barth’s critique stings because this is the vision that has informed much pastoral theology. Pastoral theology is shaped by the assumption that the fundamental task of pastoral ministry is to minister the means of grace to God’s people. But if it is left there, we betray the role and vocation to which God has called his people and their leaders in the biblical story. We are blessed to be a blessing; God works first *in* but then *through* his people. If I can rephrase a fitting comment by N.T. Wright: “The

8. Donald E. Messer, *A Conspiracy of Goodness: Contemporary Images of Christian Mission* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), 17, 21.

9. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV: The Doctrine of Reconciliation, Part 3, 2*, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1961), 554–569.

10. Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV, 3, 2*, 563.

11. Barth, *Church Dogmatics, IV, 3, 2*, 568.

12. Barth, *Church Dogmatics, IV, 3, 2*, 567.

church, believing that all the benefits of Christ were just for them, has betrayed the purpose for which God has given them. It is as though the postman were to imagine that all the letters in his bag were intended just for him.”¹³ How can pastoral theology takes a missional vision on board? How would this change the whole discipline? These are questions important for pastoral theology. However, before turning to these questions it is important to attend to exactly what we are talking about with the much-used word mission with a brief look at the missional turn in the 20th century.

The Missional Turn and Its Implications for Pastoral Theology

During the 20th century there was a recovery of the fundamental missional dimension of the Christian faith. This turn has manifold implications for pastoral theology. Indeed, this recovery of a missional vision is an important step on the way to the renewal of pastoral theology. In this section I will briefly sketch the recovery of mission and its importance as a theological foundation for pastoral theology.

***Missio Dei* and the Missionary Nature of the Church**

The year 1952 represents a convenient starting point because the shifts that took place in mission theology at that time had a widespread impact on many areas of theology and of the church’s life. That was the year the International Missionary Council met in Willingen, Germany, and proposed a new theological framework for mission. In the decade and a half up to this time massive changes had been taking place. The growing church in the non-Western world, the increasingly self-critical posture of the missionary movement itself on its own theological foundations, the loss of confidence in Western culture as in any sense Christian in the wake of demonic ideologies and rapid secularization, and the demise of colonialism all led to a crisis in understanding mission. The understanding of mission as only a cross-cultural activity initiated by mission organizations in the ‘Christian’ West and carried out in the ‘mission fields’ of the non-Christian non-West simply did not fit the reality of the mid-20th century. The task of Willingen was to draft a new theological vision for mission in the midst of this turbulent time.

The final statement adopted at Willingen entitled ‘The Missionary Calling of the Church’ begins: “The missionary movement of which we are a part has its source in the Triune God Himself.”¹⁴ Mission is not first of all a human enterprise; rather it begins with the work of Triune God. Mission has its source in the love of the Father

13. N. T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 108. In the original quote, he speaks of the covenant rather than the benefits of Christ.

14. Norman Goodall, ed., *Missions Under the Cross: Addresses Delivered at the Enlarged Meeting of the Committee of the International Missionary Council at Willingen, in Germany, 1952; with Statements Issued by the Meeting* (London: Edinburgh, 1953), 190.

for his world who sent the Son to reconcile all things to himself. The Son completed his work and sent the Spirit to gather his church and empower them for mission. The church is sent by Jesus to continue his own mission: “There is no participation in Christ without participation in his mission to the world. That by which the Church receives its existence is that by which it is also given its world-mission. ‘As the Father has sent Me, so send I you.’”¹⁵

This new framework for mission made clear that the starting point for mission was, first, the mission of God as narrated in Scripture, and second, the missionary nature of the church as it participates in God’s mission. Here we see a radical shift and also a remarkable widening of mission. A host of colonial and Christendom assumptions are shattered. Rooted in God’s reconciling mission the missional vocation of the church is no longer limited geographically to the non-West nor to certain intentional activities of outreach. Mission defines the identity of the church as given in the role it is called to play as covenant partners with God in his mission. Mission is to, from, and in all six continents.

It is often overlooked that this crucial moment coincided with the ascendancy of biblical theology. Brevard Childs observes three major elements of consensus in the biblical theology movement: 1) theological: the main character in the Bible is God who is acting in history; 2) narrative unity: the Bible is one unfolding story of God’s redemptive work that climaxes in Jesus Christ, and all books and events must find their meaning within this narrative context; 3) history: the redemptive work of God is revealed in his mighty acts in history especially in the death and resurrection of Jesus.¹⁶ All three of these components are present in an ecumenical document issued just three years before Willingen entitled *Guiding Principles for the Interpretation of the Bible* (Oxford, 1949). The statement affirms “the unity of the Old and the New Testaments is...in the ongoing redemptive activity of God in the history of one people, reaching its fulfilment in Christ.”¹⁷ Thus, as Willingen spoke of the redemptive activity of the triune God, it was not simply a theological formula of sending but is rather a historical record summarizing God’s long redemptive journey in the biblical story and the central role of God’s people in that story. The participation of God’s people in his mission must also be articulated in this narrative context. Their missionary identity issues from the role they play for the sake of the world in this story of God’s mission.¹⁸

This ‘Willingen moment’ is pregnant with significance for many areas of theology and the church’s life. This is not merely a matter of articulating a new

15. Goodall, *Missions Under the Cross*, 190.

16. Brevard Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1970).

17. Ellen Flesseman-van Leer, ed., *The Bible: Its Authority and Interpretation in the Ecumenical Movement*. Faith and Order Paper No. 99 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1980), 14.

18. See Michael W. Goheen, *A Light to the Nations: The Missional Church in the Biblical Story* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011) where I have worked this out in detail.

framework for cross-cultural missions traditionally conceived. This is a radically new understanding of mission teeming with implications far beyond the cross-cultural missionary task of the church. Willigen is doing nothing less than pointing us to a central thread of the story of the Bible that has been long neglected: God has taken up the people of God into his mission to reconcile all things to himself. This determines their very identity. This is nothing short of a sea change in understanding the very nature and vocation of the church that will have multiple ripple effects.

What is Mission?

The word ‘mission’ has been variously understood and sometimes quite badly misunderstood by both proponents and opponents of the missional turn. So it is important for this paper to articulate exactly what I mean by mission. Mission is the participation of the church in what God is doing to renew the whole of human life and the entire creation. What is the vocation and role that God has given his people? We can capture it in four phrases.

The church is *chosen by God for the sake of the world*. The church’s identity and role is found in terms of two orientations: toward God and toward the world. The church is oriented toward God to carry out and make known his purposes in the world. The church is also oriented toward the world as God is going to use the community he has chosen to bring about a comprehensive restoration and renewal to the whole creation and the entire life of humankind. Their responsibility to the world and existence for the sake of the world constitute God’s people as missional.

Second, the church is *blessed to be a blessing*. The biblical story begins with humanity blessed in the garden as they live in harmony with God, with one another, and with the non-human creation. Sin shatters that blessing and replaces it with a curse. God’s promise to Abraham is that he and the people that come from him will be blessed; that is, God’s creational *shalom* will be restored to them. But their blessing is *so that* they might be a channel of blessing to all nations. They are to embody God’s creational intent to which they have been restored and invite others into it. N. T Wright puts it this way: the people of God are to “model genuinely human existence”¹⁹ and “function as a people who would show the rest of humanity what being human was all about,”²⁰—all for the sake of the world. Restored to creational blessing can never be separated from being a channel of that blessing to those outside the covenant community. And, sadly, how often this happens!

The third expression that helps to capture missional nature of the church is that they are *a distinctive people on display to the nations*. This flows from what we have just said: God’s people are blessed and on display to the nations. They are to

19. N.T. Wright, *Scripture and the Authority of God: How to Read the Bible Today* (New York: HarperCollins, 2011), 51.

20. Tom Wright, *Bringing the Church to the World: Renewing the Church to Confront the Paganism Entrenched in Western Culture* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 1992), 59.

be distinctive as they reject the idolatry that is destroying the lives of their cultural contemporaries. Thus, we might say that God's people face in three directions: back to creation, forward to new creation, and outward to their contemporary cultures. Backward: they are to *embody* God's creational intention for humanity. Forward: they are to be a *sign and preview* of the coming new creation. Outward: they are to *engage and challenge* the culture and its idolatry.

Finally, I distinguish between a *missionary dimension and missionary intention*. This distinction emerged shortly after Willingen. It was clear that mission was broadening: mission was the whole life of God's people as a sign of the coming kingdom. However, the intentional activities traditionally associated with mission that had as their deliberate purpose the goal of bringing people to Christ—such as evangelism and cross-cultural missions where there was no witness to the gospel—needed to be maintained. There is a missionary dimension to the whole of the Christian life—the whole of life is restored for the sake of the world. But not everything the church does has the missionary intention of bearing witness to Christ so as to bring others to know him. And to lose these activities of intentional witness is a betrayal of the gospel.

A Missionary Ecclesiology

What does this new view of mission mean for the church? And, of course, our ecclesiology will determine ministry and pastoral theology. Hendrikus Berkhof has offered a systematic formulation of ecclesiology that takes seriously mission as central to its being. Indeed, he believes that mission must be the primary resource to revitalize ecclesiology. He argues that there is a “necessity of re-studying ecclesiology, in fact all of theology, from the standpoint of the [church's] relationship to the world.”²¹ He sets out to rethink ecclesiology from this standpoint.

Traditionally ecclesiological reflection has focused on the study of the institutional church, that is, on preaching and teaching, on sacraments and worship, on leadership and church order, and so on. His restructuring of ecclesiology divides the doctrine of the church into three main parts: institution, community, and mission. The church as institution is concerned with a totality of activities organized to be a means of grace that minister Christ to the congregation. He treats traditional themes like instruction, baptism, preaching, the Lord's Supper, pastoral care, and leadership. The church as community deals with the totality of personal relationships within the fellowship of congregations. The church exists as a community and each member has gifts to build up the others in the shared life of the community. And finally, he comes to the church as mission: here he treats the role of the church in the midst of the world in all the ways it functions as salt and light. While the institutional church had been

21. Hendrikus Berkhof, *Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Study of the Faith*, English translation (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 411.

the primary focus of ecclesiology from the early days of the church, the church as community had developed since the Reformation. As for the church as mission it had only been since the middle of the 20th century with the breakdown of Christendom that this has taken hold.

The order of Berkhof's ecclesiology is important: his overall treatment is first, institution, then, community, and finally, mission. The church's mission in the world comes last and he begins this new section: "As the institute mediates Christ to the congregation, so the congregation in turn mediates him to the world. In this chain the world comes last, yet it is the goal that gives meaning and purpose to the preceding links. Everything that has come before serves this goal."²² All that is done in the gathering of congregations—the means of grace, leadership, spiritual gifts, and relationships—form God's people for their missionary calling in the midst of the world. "Around the institution a congregation is being gathered, which subsequently is scattered among the peoples of the world as God's people. Whatever comes before, this final development is the goal. But without all the preceding the latter lacks roots, drive, and force."²³ The church as institution and community serves the church's mission in the world.

Defining the relationship of the church in terms of its calling in the world raises an urgent ecclesiological issue: what is the relationship of the church to the culture in which it is set? Berkhof argues that both "antithesis toward" and "solidarity with" is the only faithful stance.²⁴ There must be solidarity with our culture yet separation from its idolatry. The church may betray its identity in two directions. The first is "churchism" or "sacralization." This is when the church forgets its solidarity with its culture and "turns in upon herself as a bulwark in an evil world or, less aggressively, as an introverted, self-sufficient group, which is content with her own rites, language and connections." The second is "worldliness" or "secularism." Here the church abandons its antithesis toward culture and becomes "as much as possible assimilated and conformed to the world." In both cases the church "does essentially the same thing: she avoids the clash and the offense."²⁵ A true encounter with culture demands identification and rejection, yes and no, participation and withdrawal. Loss of either one is a recipe for unfaithfulness.

Pastoral theology has often been guilty, in Berkhof's terms, of "churchism" or "sacralization." That is, it is the church as institution and community turned in on itself and divorced from its missional vocation in the world that has guided pastoral theology. As Newbigin puts it, when the church takes this posture it "thinks primarily of its duty to care for its own members, and its duty to those outside drops into second place. A conception of pastoral care is developed which seems to assume that the

22. *Ibid.*, 410.

23. *Ibid.*, 411.

24. *Ibid.*, 415.

25. *Ibid.*, 421.

individual believer is primarily a passive recipient of the means of grace which is the business of the Church to administer.”²⁶

Missional Theology

The ripple effects of a new understanding of mission and the church were far reaching. There were at least four important areas where its impact was felt: hermeneutics, theology, leadership, and theological education. Indeed the implications of mission for all four have continued to work themselves out in the succeeding decades with a relentless historical logic. For our purposes in this paper it is important to note the implications of a missional ecclesiology for theology and leadership. After all, pastoral theology is first and foremost theology, and our understanding of the ministerial leadership will shape our pastoral theology.

If mission is a dominant motif in the biblical story, it is imperative to ask how this motif forms theological reflection on Scripture. The early pioneers of the Western missionary movement were primarily concerned with the pragmatics of carrying out cross-cultural mission. Little theological reflection on mission seemed necessary in view of the confident assurance of what they were doing. The crisis of mission in the early to mid 20th century raised new questions about the nature, goal, and validity of Christian mission. This produced a growing theological reflection on mission—a theology of mission. The theology addressed mission as one more theme in the Bible and asked ‘what is mission?’ However, the centrality of mission in the biblical story obstinately refused to be reduced to one more biblical theme. A growing chorus of voices called for something more radical—a move beyond a theology of mission to a missional theology. Harvie Conn insists that the “question is not simply, or only, or largely, missions and what it is. The question is also theology and what it does.”²⁷

‘Missional’ as an adjective here is not another minor sub-species of theological reflection like liberation or feminist theology. Rather it defines a constituent component of all theological reflection if it is faithful to Scripture. Thus, we are in need, says David Bosch, of a “missiological agenda for theology rather than just a theological agenda for mission; for theology rightly understood, has no reason to exist other than critically to accompany the *missio Dei*.”²⁸ Along the same lines Darrell Guder urges that the “formation of the church for mission should be

26. Lesslie Newbigin, *Household of God: Lectures on the Nature of the Church* (New York: Friendship Press, 1953), 166–167.

27. Harvie Conn, “The Missionary Task of Theology: A Love/Hate Relationship?” *Westminster Theological Journal* 45 (1983): 7

28. David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991), 494.

the motivating force that shapes and energizes our theological labors in all their diversity and distinctiveness.”²⁹

These authors are rightly reacting against a theology that “received its main features [during] the period in which Christianity had practically ceased to be a missionary religion.”³⁰ Both the nature and purpose of theology and its main curricular divisions were formed at a time when the church had lost the horizon of mission from its existence. A major problem was that “the present division of theological subjects [were] canonized in a period when the church in Europe was completely introverted.”³¹

Missional theology is a theological task that probes the implications of the church’s missional vocation as it participates in the *missio Dei*. The question is what difference does it make *for theology* if the mission of God and the missionary nature of the church is a constituent thread in the biblical story? This question must address both the content and goal of theology. Obviously Scripture is the primary source and authority for theological reflection, and if mission is central to the Bible then theology must take account of this. Mission must inform the *content* of theology. One cannot follow, for example, covenant theologians who can theologize long about the covenant without ever taking into account the very missional nature of the covenant given to Abraham and Israel at Sinai—the blessing of the nations! Moreover, if the central identity of the church is missional then the question arises as to how theology equips the church for its vocation. Mission as a central scriptural theme, thus, must also shape the *goal* of all theological work. Thus, missional theology is the theological consequence of taking seriously God’s mission and the church’s participation in that mission.

This needs to be worked out in at least two areas: the congregational life of the church and the theological curriculum. And it is clear that both of these areas are very important for pastoral theology. First, how does the missional nature of the church impact the life of the congregation—its nurturing ministry, its vocation of witness, and its structures to enable nurture and witness? Second, how does the dominant motif of mission in the biblical story shape the theological enterprise—its content of the various disciplines (biblical studies, systematic and historical theology, church history, ethics and ecumenical studies, pastoral theology), its curricular division between theoretical theology (biblical studies, systematic theology, church history) and practical theology, its purpose, its unity, and its methodology? To quote the striking words of Harvie Conn: “Missiology stands by

29. Darrell Guder, “From Mission and Theology to Missional Theology,” *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin* XXIV, 1, (2003): 48.

30. Lesslie Newbigin, *Honest Religion for Secular Man* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966), 102.

31. David Bosch, “Theological Education in Missionary Perspective,” *Missiology* 10, 1 (January 1982): 26.

to interrupt at every significant moment in the theological conversation with the words ‘among the nations.’”³²

Those reflecting on missional theology did not simply add ‘for the sake of the world’ to existing theologies as missional icing on an otherwise existing theological cake. In fact, we hear a call for renewed reflection on the very nature of theology itself.³³ To what degree has Western theology been shaped by the idolatry of its own culture? The limitations of space do not allow us to wade into these deep waters here even though there are implications for pastoral theology. But we do need to at least note a couple of issues that were prominent in the writing of mission scholars and are relevant to our topic. Specifically theology must be both contextual and formational. Grasping these two characteristics of theology will challenge a theory-praxis dichotomy.

All theology is *contextual*. Perhaps this is one of the most important contributions that both mission theology and Third World theology can make to the West dominated as it is by pagan Greek thought. Missional theology rejects the notion of a *theologia perennis* or *confessio perennis*—a timeless theology or confession valid for all times and places—and is alert to the fact that all theology and all confessional statements take place in a particular historical and cultural context. There is no supra- or meta-cultural theology; in fact, it is dangerous to believe there is. All attempts to construct timeless and universal theology, says Harvie Conn, are “destructive of mission. Seeing theology as an essentializing science and the creeds as the product of that kind of theological reflection inhibits us as well from facing up to our own contemporary missiological task and its risk.”³⁴ Theology, which makes the claim to be timeless, is actually attempting to pass off a contextual theology from another time or place as universal theology. Yet this is an illusion born of a Greek view of truth where one misunderstands theology as an “abstractionist task, a searching for essences untouched by the realities of the cultural context.”³⁵

There is only theology that reflects on the gospel in a particular context and is directed to the particular needs of a church. While the gospel has universal validity our particular theologies and confessions do not. Theology is contextual in two senses: “Theology *speaks out of* the historical context; and theology must *speak to* that context.”³⁶ Latin American evangelical theologian Orlando Costas argues that theology is “reflection that takes place in the concrete missionary situation, as part of the church’s missionary obedience to and participation in

32. Conn, *Eternal Word*, 224.

33. An excellent example is Conn’s chapter “Theology and Theologizing: A New Course,” in *Eternal Word*, 211–260.

34. Conn, *Eternal Word*, 223.

35. Harvie Conn, “Contextual Theologies: The Problem of Agendas,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 52 (1990): 59.

36. Conn, *Contextual Theologies*, 61. Emphases mine.

God's mission and is itself actualized in that situation."³⁷ Theology arises out of and addresses the current issues that churches face in their missional calling. One might rephrase a popular comment attributed to Martin Luther: "If your theology deals with all aspects of Scripture with the exception of the issues which deal specifically with your time you are not doing theology at all." Theology is always contextual; it brings the enduring light of Scripture to bear on the church's mission in a particular time and place. While particular contextual theologies may well enrich churches in other cultural contexts—in fact, they always will if they are rooted in Scripture since the gospel is universally true—they will be formed by particular cultural traditions and missional contexts in response to the needs of the church in that setting.

The very nature of theology as contextual reflection on universally valid divine revelation urgently requires a threefold dialogue with Christians from other cultures, from other historical eras, and from other confessional traditions. If our theologies are not to become parochial and accommodated to the idolatry of our particular cultures we will need the mutually correcting and enriching voices of Christians from other settings.

Theology that is contextual in this sense will always be *formational*. If theology arises out of a missional context and is directed back to that context it will have transforming power. Theology is not just a matter of passing along accurate information although it will not be less than that. Theology must have power to form and equip leaders for their pastoral calling to lead missional congregations. Conn argues that the "ultimate test of any theological discourse, after all, is not only erudite precision but also transformative power."³⁸ Costas agrees: "It is a question of whether or not theology can articulate the faith in a way that is not only intellectually sound but spiritually energizing, and therefore, capable of leading the people of God to be transformed in their way of life and to commit themselves to God's mission in the world."³⁹

Conn borrows and transforms the notion of conscientization from liberation theology to describe the goal of theology. Conscientization is "the awakening of the Christian conscience to reflection and action in God's world" under the comprehensive authority of the Scriptures.⁴⁰ Theology, then, has this conscientizing goal of forming a people by making them aware of what it means to be faithful in each missional situation to the gospel: "theologizing becomes more than the effective communication of the content of the gospel to the cultural context; it

37. Orlando Costas, *Theology of the Crossroads in Contemporary Latin America* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1976), 8.

38. Conn, *Contextual Theologies*, 63.

39. Orlando Costas, "Evangelical Theology in the Two Thirds World," *TSF Bulletin* 9, 1 (September-October, 1985): 10.

40. Conn, *Eternal Word*, 310.

becomes the process of the covenant conscientization of the whole people of God to the hermeneutical obligations of the gospel.”⁴¹

Here theoretical reflection and missional praxis are much more deeply intertwined than is evident in a theory-praxis dichotomy that begins with abstract theoretical reflection, which is then applied as a second step to a particular context. Theological reflection arises out of a particular missionary situation in which we are committed to missionary obedience, and it has the goal of shaping the people of God for their missionary calling.

Missional Leadership

The missional turn leading to a renewed ecclesiology has also produced fresh reflection on ecclesial leadership. If the church is missional in its very nature the question arises as to what kind of leadership is needed for this kind of church? There is a growing sense among many after Willingen that a missionary understanding of the church demands new forms of leadership. For example, Lesslie Newbigin pressed this issue. A missional church demands a very different kind of leader than the maintenance church of Christendom. “We cannot talk long about ministry without talking about mission. Ministry must be conceived always in terms of the Church’s mission.”⁴² His repeated refrain is the “question that has to be asked—and repeatedly asked—is whether the traditional forms of ministry which have been inherited from the ‘Christendom’ period are fully compatible with the faith that the Church is called to be a missionary community.”⁴³

Both Conn and Newbigin set out to rethink ministerial leadership in a missional church. Conn sketches three concepts of ministry: minister as pedagogue, as professional, and as participant. His primary concern is that the first two images, the more traditional notion of ecclesial leadership, separates the minister from the missional calling of the church in the world.⁴⁴ Newbigin is likewise concerned about this. Two operative words repeatedly appear in his discussion of ministerial leadership to get at this issue: lead and equip. What is distinctive is the way he relates the two: leaders are those who lead first by following hard after Jesus in mission, and in the process equip others to follow after.

Two Scriptural texts undergird his notion of leading: “Follow me as I follow the example of Christ” (1 Cor 11:1); and Mark 14:42 which Newbigin translates “Come on: let’s go.” In this Marcan text we see Jesus leading by way of example as he goes to the cross. Newbigin draws on a picture of Jesus portrayed by the Italian

41. *Ibid.*, 231.

42. Lesslie Newbigin, *Priorities for a New Decade* (National Student Christian Press and Resource Centre, Birmingham, 1980), 8–9.

43. Lesslie Newbigin, “Developments Since 1962: An Editorial Survey,” *International Review of Mission* (January 1963), 8.

44. Conn, *Eternal Word*, 272–289.

director Pasolini in the movie *The Gospel According to Matthew*. Jesus is pictured as a commander leading his troops into battle. He goes ahead of the disciples leading them while throwing words of encouragement, instruction, and challenge back over his shoulder as they follow him in their missionary task. A leader is not “like a queen bee who remains at the center while the worker bees go out into the world.”⁴⁵ Nor is a leader “like a general who sits at headquarters and sends his troops into battle. He goes at their head and takes the brunt of the enemy attack. He enables and encourages them by leading them, not just by telling them. In this picture, the words of Jesus have a quite different force. They all find their meaning in the central keyword, ‘Follow me.’”⁴⁶

Newbigin makes a strategic choice with the word ‘leadership’ precisely because he wants to convey this notion of participatory engagement in leading. He recognizes that in the New Testament there are many metaphors for leadership: shepherds, overseers, watchmen, stewards, ambassadors, servants, and so on. He notes that the primary metaphor today is that of a shepherd with the term ‘pastor.’ He says, however, that the shepherd today conveys a very different picture than in biblical times. Then a shepherd was a king who governed his people and led them into battle. Leadership best conveys the combined notion of discipleship and leadership found in the New Testament.

As one who leads, a leader is also to equip others for the task. Newbigin uses many terms—serve, nourish, sustain, guide, enable, encourage.⁴⁷ He points to four ways a leader may equip the congregation: the ministry of word and sacraments to the congregation; upholding in prayer the congregation “by name before God as they go out into the world day by day to wrestle with the principalities and powers;”⁴⁸ providing “space” and structures in which training for cultural callings may take place;⁴⁹ being deeply involved in the ministry of the world themselves so that the first three are not to be carried out in a Christendom pattern. This will involve both engagement with the powers in a social and political setting and evangelism: a leader “should be ready himself to be engaged—as opportunity offers and calls—in direct evangelistic efforts or in pioneering movements of Christian action in the secular world.”⁵⁰ This does not mean that the minister is directly involved in all areas of

45. Newbigin, *Ministry* (Unpublished paper, 1982), 3.

46. Lesslie Newbigin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 240.

47. E.g., Newbigin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 234–241.

48. Lesslie Newbigin, “Bible Studies: Four Talks on 1 Peter,” in *We Were Brought Together*, ed. David M. Taylor (Sydney: Australian Council for the World Council of Churches, 1960), 119; cf. Lesslie Newbigin, *The Good Shepherd: Meditations on Christian Ministry in Today’s World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 143.

49. Lesslie Newbigin, “Episcopacy and Authority,” *Churchman* (1990) 104, 4, 338; *Good Shepherd*, 80–81.

50. Lesslie Newbigin, “The Bishop and the Ministry of Mission,” in *Today’s Church and Today’s World*, ed. J. Howe (London: CIO Publishing, 1977), 246; see also *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 240; *Good Shepherd*, 60–61.

culture. Rather as situations arise the leader is called to represent the whole church in challenging the idols and powers in public life.

Rethinking Pastoral Theology in Light of Mission

In this final section I address the question of the nature of pastoral theology⁵¹ or pastoral theologizing⁵² in a missional mode. I offer a framework along with suggestions at a fuller outworking in various areas via snapshot illustrations.⁵³ I suggest five components. First, pastoral theology is *theological reflection or theologizing*. This statement really needs much deeper reflection on the nature of theology than I can give it here.⁵⁴ Certainly, to say no more, theological reflection will always set issues in the ultimate context of the biblical story, and shed the light of relevant scriptural themes on the topic. But the main point to be made here is that when pastoral theology is considered to be simply skills and know-how shaped by the social sciences it has lost any status of being theology.

And more, it is dangerous to dispense with theology. Preaching must be anchored in sustained theological reflection on the nature of the gospel, the purpose and authority of the Scriptures, a rich and multi-faceted hermeneutic, the role of proclamation and teaching in the church, among other important fundamentals. These issues cannot be by-passed and reduced to communication theory with the assumption that they are covered in biblical studies, systematic theology, and other theological disciplines. Counselling must flow, likewise, from the nature of the gospel and how it is brought to bear in a formative way on people's lives. This is not to advocate the biblicistic and moralistic approach of some nouthetic counselling that rejects the creational insights of the social sciences. Psychology disinfected of its humanism by the gospel, for example, may offer much wisdom and can be drawn into reflection. But it must first be firmly embedded in the context of the biblical story. In all areas of pastoral theology theological themes such as ecclesiology in a broader context of the biblical story and the kingdom, the role of leadership in the congregation, the meaning of nurture in the New Testament, and so on will shape our practices. And to not attend to them in a focal way will allow certain unexamined theological assumptions to operate tacitly as an implicit background theology. It will also likely mean taking on board much of the idolatry of the social sciences.

Second, pastoral theology *equips leaders* for their callings in the church. This will mean, on the one hand, that pastoral theology is ongoing theological reflection on

51. I prefer the terminology of 'congregational theology' to pastoral or practical theology for various reasons.

52. Theology means a finished product. Theologizing highlights the ongoing reflection that must take place.

53. In this same journal Andrew Zantingh, Professor of Congregational Theology at MTC and Lead Pastor at the Journey Church will offer more concrete and extensive examples.

54. Conn, *Eternal Word*, 211–260.

the pastoral vocation and practice. It will be theological reflection that arises out of the setting of ecclesial leadership and is directed back to shaping it more faithfully. Our educational history has passed along a questionable legacy that separates our theological reflection from what may be called ‘skills’ and practices. Perhaps a term I encountered almost thirty years ago early in my academic career may be helpful. The term is designed specifically to move beyond a theory-praxis kind of dichotomy at work in the university. The context was the growth of professional programs in the university that focused on teaching ‘skills.’ The question was how to fit these professional programs into a liberal arts university with a tradition of theoretical reflection. The term offered as a way beyond this impasse was ‘serviceable insight.’⁵⁵ We need insight that enables us to serve Christ’s kingdom, and that insight may be focused theological reflection, and may also attend to practices in light of that reflection. We struggle under the authority and in the light of Scripture to reflect on what we are doing as leaders in God’s church with the goal of gaining insight that equips us to serve God’s people for the sake of the world. This sets all reflection on ecclesial leadership in a theological context as each aspect of pastoral ministry is brought under the searching light of Scripture. But the goal is how can one be a faithful leader in the church.

Third, pastoral theology *equips missional leaders for their calling in a missional church*. Here our ecclesiology deeply impacts our pastoral practice. If an ecclesiology that recognizes much of Berkhof’s concern as valid then the whole institutional and communal life of the church is to nourish the people of God with the life of Christ. But that is not an end in itself; we are blessed to be a blessing. Thus, the question must be pressed: how does an orientation to the world reshape preaching, pastoral care, counselling, formation, worship, sacraments—the whole breadth of areas often considered in pastoral theology? To take the example of pastoral care: Often this area is considered primarily in terms of care for various members. And when this is connected to a consumerist ecclesiology that sees the church as a vendor of religious goods and services, this vision of pastoral care can be deadly. What would pastoral care look like if the primary goal was to equip members for their calling in the world? How would a missional vision, moreover, reshape our practices on Sunday morning including preaching, liturgy, and sacraments?⁵⁶

There is much to explore here but to provide one example. An area of worship that has been part of the church’s liturgy for much of its history is confession of sin. In

55. *The Educational Framework of Dordt College*. <https://dordt.edu/sites/default/files/documents/imported/framework.pdf>. Accessed 23 September 2017.

56. See John F. Kavanaugh, *Following Christ in a Consumer Society* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2006; 3rd edition) 147–176, who reflects on how various Christian practices, including sacraments and prayer, can enable us to maintain Christian faithfulness in an idolatrous culture of consumerism. On this see also Benjamin T. Conner, *Practicing Witness: A Missional Vision of Christian Practices* (Eerdmans, 2011), and Jonathan R. Wilson, *Why Church Matters: Worship, Ministry and Mission Practice* (Brazos, 2006).

my own Reformed tradition, the service of confession might proceed as follows: call to confession, confession of sin, words of forgiveness and assurance, and possibly the call to walk in obedience. Such a way of proceeding will teach the members each Sunday that forgiveness of sins is simply a gift they can enjoy. However, if in our call to confession we remind the congregation that our failure to follow Christ is also a matter of unfaithfulness in our missional calling, and if we conclude the service of confession with a call to walk in obedience *for the sake of the world*, it would nourish a missional vision week by week.

Fourth, pastoral theology will equip leaders in three areas—nurturing ministry, missional vocation, and ecclesial structures.⁵⁷ One way of structuring pastoral theology in a missional way is to consider ecclesial leadership in terms of three areas. There is the nurturing ministry in the institutional and communal life of the church. Here many traditional areas are considered such as preaching, worship, sacraments, fellowship, pastoral care, formation, leadership training, equipping families, and so on. Again, as mentioned in the previous point the question must be pressed how these can be carried out within a missional vision for the church.

There is also the outward calling of the church. What is the role of leaders in equipping and leading the congregation in evangelism, mercy and justice, cross-cultural missions? But there are many neglected areas we need to consider if we take seriously our vocation in the world. For example, if our congregations are going to be a faithful presence they must live out a missionary encounter with the idols of culture. In this way, they must know their culture and religious vision shaping it. Also, the question of what it means to be a distinctive community in our particular cultural context is urgent. Finally, faithfulness in our vocations in public life is an important area.

A final area of pastoral theology would be a consideration of the structures that either enable or hinder the church from working out its nurturing life and its vocation in the midst of the world. On several occasions, Newbigin rightly pressed the question, “Does the very structure of our congregations contradict the missionary calling of the church?”⁵⁸ He charges that we “are saying that we have recovered a radically missionary theology of the Church. But the actual structure of our Churches ... does not reflect that theology.” The problem is that the “actual structures continue to placidly reflect the static ‘Christendom’ theology of the eighteenth century.”⁵⁹ Here we need to ask about congregational, leadership, ecumenical, missionary, and budgetary structures of our congregations. Our question is whether or not these structures enable the church to be faithful to its calling.

57. This is how I structured a course I taught at Calvin Theological Seminary from 2012–2015 entitled ‘Introduction to Missional Ministry’. It is also the way we structure the whole ‘congregational theology’ component of our curriculum at Missional Training Centre—Phoenix.

58. Newbigin, “Developments During 1962,” 9.

59. Lesslie Newbigin, *Unfinished Agenda: An Updated Autobiography* (Edinburgh: St Andrews Press, 1993), 148.

Fifth, as one thread in the seamless fabric of theology pastoral theology will be connected to and integrated with the other theological disciplines. Theological reflection in biblical studies, systematic theology, and church history will shape and inform pastoral theology. This is not to say that these areas of theology provide neutral theoretical grist for the practical mill of pastoral theology. It is the organic and connected nature of theological reflection or theologizing as a whole that means each area may and must contribute to the whole.

But there are two neglected areas within the theological curriculum that must be revived for the sake of faithful pastoral theology: cultural theology and spiritual formation. In the latter half of the 1960s, the missionaries and Third World theologians began to question Western practices of theological education, that would ultimately lead to the terminology of ‘contextualization’ in 1972. Their rethinking revolved around the insight that understanding cultural context could no longer be a side issue in training pastoral leadership.⁶⁰ Taiwanese theologian Shoki Coe believes pastoral leaders needed a “deeper understanding of the Gospel in the context of the particular cultural and religious setting of the Church, so that the Church may come to a deeper understanding of itself as a missionary community sent into the world and to a more effectual encounter within the life of the society.”⁶¹ Japanese theologian Kosuke Koyama argues that a missionary pastor needs “two kinds of exegesis: exegesis of the Word of God and exegesis of the life and culture of the people among whom he lives and works.”⁶²

The church will always embody the gospel in a particular cultural context. Our preaching, our forms of leadership and worship, our understanding of counselling and pastoral care—indeed, every aspect of our pastoral life will be shaped by cultural assumptions. Thus, it will be essential to be aware of both the creational and idolatrous currents at work in any culture if we are to be faithful to the gospel in our pastoral practice. The problem is that we are like fish swimming in our cultural waters unaware that it is polluted. How easy it is to take on, for example, Harvard business models of leadership within the church or therapeutic practices of pastoral care or entertainment features of popular culture in our worship with little critique of the idols that shape them? A study of culture, therefore, cannot be an optional extra in theological education but must inform theological reflection on pastoral theology.

Spiritual and moral formation is also important. If leaders are set aside for prayer and the Word (Acts 6:4), and if leaders must be examples in their godly conduct (1 Tim 3:1–8), then the intellectual formation and skills acquisition that has been the

60. See Harvie M. Conn, “Theological Education and the Search for Excellence,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 41, 2 (Spring 1979): 311–363.

61. Shoki Coe, “In Search of Renewal in Theological Education,” *Theological Education*, Vol. IX, No. 4 (Summer, 1973): 236.

62. Kosuke Koyama, *Water Buffalo Theology* (25th anniversary edition, revised and expanded; Maryknoll: Orbis, 1999 [1974]), p. 65. In fact, says Koyama, we maintain our “missionary identity” *only if* we are “entangled in” or “sandwiched between” these two realities.

traditional emphasis of pastoral theology is simply inadequate and even dangerous. Many questions arise as to how this might take place in the formation of leaders and this is not the place to enter the conversation. But reflection on the prayer and family life of the leader, as well as how they have learned to listen to God's address in Scripture, for example, needs to be part of that training.

Conclusion

The insights of mission leaders and Southern hemisphere leaders of a generation ago on the theological equipping of pastors still offers much to us if we are willing to listen. They can see the limitations and distortions of Western culture on our pastoral theology. No doubt it offers only one source for the renewal of pastoral theology. But if we are wise we will listen and ask if there is biblical insight that may make us more faithful.