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by Michael W. Goheen

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Systematic Theology Under Attack

Today systematic theology is under attack in many circles. It has been knocked off its privileged perch for a variety of reasons. John Goldingay speaks for many that “if systematic theology did not exist, it might seem unwise to invent it.”¹ We are in a new *postmodern climate* that distrusts both reason and all totalizing systems structured by human rationality. There is suspicion that the systems of theology are less systems found in Scripture and more products of creative human construction. Moreover, there has been a recovery of the *storied shape of the Scriptural canon* accompanied by a deepened awareness of the *diversity of literary genres*. The Bible is not simply a data dump of theological propositions,² nor a storehouse of isolated theological facts waiting to be arranged coherently by the systematic mind, nor a book with theological pieces of a jigsaw puzzle waiting to be assembled.³ The Bible is in its overall shape a story of redemption with many genres that equip us differently to live in that story. Kevin Vanhoozer criticizes the approach of “large swaths of the Western tradition” with their reductionist view of revelation which sees “the task of theology” as consisting “in mining propositional nuggets from the biblical deposit of truth.”⁴ It is not so evident today that the Scriptures can be reduced to propositional nuggets of truth. Rather the overall storied form of the scriptural canon consisting of many literary genres is exactly what we need and what God wanted us to have. A final critique is that much systematic theology is abstract and therefore *unhelpful and irrelevant to the pastoral and missional life* of the church. As Vanhoozer suggests, “Laypersons in the church would perhaps have been within their rights

1. John Goldingay, “Biblical Narrative and Systematic Theology,” in Max Turner and Joel B. Green, eds., *Between Two Horizons: Spanning New Testament Studies and Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 138.

2. Michael Williams, “Systematic Theology as a Biblical Discipline,” *All for Jesus: A Celebration of the 50th Anniversary of Covenant Theological Seminary*, eds. R.A. Peterson and S.M. Lucas (Fearn, Ross Shire: Christian Focus, 2005), 203. He critiques this view.

3. Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 29. He affirms this view.

4. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “Lost in Interpretation? Truth, Scripture, and Hermeneutics,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 48, no. 1 (March 2005): 94.

to bring a class-action suit against systematic theologians for criminal pastoral and missiological negligence.”⁵

Should we then abandon systematic theology as a product of the Enlightenment? Or can it be re-envisioned to serve and equip the church in its missional vocation? I believe we need to pursue the latter option. And one of the most helpful voices for helping us along this path is Harvie Conn, former professor of mission at Westminster Theological Seminary, who sets a “new course” for theology.⁶

Harvie Conn and a New Course for Theology

The question might be asked why Harvie Conn? Conn was a missionary in South Korea for 12 years and returned to teach at Westminster Seminary. He taught there for 27 years (1972–1999) during the “glory days” of the seminary’s life. Mark Gornik makes the remarkable statement that Conn “may well have had the widest and most significant influence of any professor in the history of Westminster Theological Seminary.”⁷ Wilbert Shenk, perhaps the most influential American missiologist alive today, once said that Conn had one of the most brilliant minds of any 20th century missiologist in the United States. These two statements alone warrant a closer look at Conn’s legacy.

But why Conn *on theology*? Even though his reflection on hermeneutics and theological method are quite sophisticated—after all, he was first hired at Westminster Seminary to replace Cornelius Van Til teaching apologetics and theology—this did not remain Conn’s primary area of academic expertise. So why did he wade into such controversial and deep waters? What motivates him to take up this task of setting a new course for theology? His primary concern is transparent: all attempts to construct a timeless and universal theology 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.”⁸ Conn’s cross-cultural experience enabled him to see the ways Western theology had capitulated to the idolatrous currents of its culture and its debilitating influence on the church and its mission.

Conn’s concern for the renewal of theology can be captured in this way. Churches in the urban setting require faithful leaders who can lead those churches

5. Kevin Vanhoozer, “One Rule to Rule Them All? Theological Method in an Era of World Christianity,” *Globalizing Theology: Belief and Practice in an Era of World Christianity*, ed. Craig Ott and Harold A. Netland (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 93.

6. Harvie M. Conn, “Theology and Theologizing: A New Course,” in *Eternal Word and Changing Worlds: Theology, Anthropology, and Mission in Dialogue* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 209–260.

7. Mark Gornik, “The Legacy of Harvie M. Conn,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 35, no. 4 (October 2011): 216.

8. Conn, *Eternal Word*, 223.

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to embrace their missional vocation. The problem is that the theology that most pastors receive do not do that; in fact, they inhibit that calling. Conn's concern is fundamentally ecclesiological and missiological: what kind of theology will form leaders and churches to faithfully carry out witness in life, word, and deed in the cities of the world?

The "question is not simply, or only, or largely, missions and what it is. The question is also theology and what it does."⁹ This statement is important. We can talk a lot about mission by piling up courses in the practical theology department on every aspect of the missional task of the church. And that is important. But the further issue is *what is theology and what does it do?* Theology will either nurture or undermine the missional calling of the church. The scholastic theology Conn sees at work in his own Reformed family erodes the church's missional identity and vocation. It will be difficult, if not impossible, for more discussion on mission to restore that calling if missiology must swim against such powerful theological streams. The whole theological enterprise needs to serve the vocation of God's people.

In my estimation one of the richest contributions Harvie Conn can make to the global church today is helping us to rethink the nature and purpose of theology.¹⁰ One of the richest chapters he ever wrote addresses the topic.¹¹ It was also the topic of his "extraordinary inaugural address"¹² as professor of missions.¹³ In these two places, and in a number of others scattered throughout his large literary corpus,¹⁴ Conn challenges certain traditional ways of doing theology and suggests a new course. His thinking was decades ahead of his time and deserves careful attention.

Global and Ecclesial Context

Conn sets his discussion in global and ecclesial context. This new context calls for a new course for theology and theologizing. He wrote almost four decades ago and so

9. Harvie M. Conn, "The Missionary Task of Theology: A Love/Hate Relationship?" *Westminster Theological Journal* 45, no. 1 (Spring 1983): 7.

10. This article is the reworking of a chapter in a book to be published in South Korea co-authored with Kuk Won Shin entitled *A Gift Worth Preserving: The Legacy of Harvie Conn for Today*. Moreover, Conn has been helping us at Missional Training Center to rethink the nature and purpose of theology as we forge a missional curriculum for theological education.

11. Conn, *Eternal Word*, 209–260.

12. Gornik, "Legacy," 215.

13. Conn, "Missionary Task of Theology," 1–21.

14. Other noteworthy discussions of theology by Conn include "Contextual Theologies: The Problem of Agendas," *Westminster Theological Journal* 52, no. 1–2 (1990): 51–63; "Contextualization: Where Do We Begin?" in *Evangelicals and Liberation*, ed. Carl E. Armerding (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977), 90–119; "Contextualization: A New Dimension for Cross-Cultural Hermeneutic," *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 14, no. 1 (January 1978): 39–46; "Theologies of Liberation," in *Tensions in Contemporary Theology*, 3rd rev. ed., ed. Stanley Gundry and Alan Johnson (Chicago: Moody Press, 1979), 327–434.

issues have changed. However, there are two aspects of the context he sketched that remain important for today.

The first is the shift of the Christian axis from the global North and West to the South and East, from Europe and North America to Africa, Asia, and Latin America. This shift is much better known today. When Conn wrote over three decades ago it was the best-kept secret of missiologists. His extensive missionary experience in South Korea, and his extensive involvement working with theologians and churches of the majority world, challenged his own Western ethnocentric biases. Their cultural and political situation along with their experience of deep social and economic deprivation set a different context for theology. They raised different questions and offered compelling critiques of Western theology. This new setting of the global church raises the question: How do various cultural contexts and diverse contextual theologies reshape the theological enterprise?

The second feature is the growth of serious self-evaluation taking place in the evangelical theological community as it is released from the grip of the Enlightenment on theology. Various evangelical theologians were questioning whether the formulations used to protect biblical authority had imported alien assumptions. For many, including theologians, missiologists, and Third World leaders, it seemed that idolatrous Enlightenment presuppositions lurked beneath the surface of common theological methodology, of epistemology, and of theological formulations. The rationalism of the West, for example, reduced the Bible to a system of theological propositions. Conn queries, “Have we propositionalized revelation into an acultural vacuum?”¹⁵ Have we adopted an Enlightenment view of timeless propositional truth to guard the universal and transcultural authority of the Bible? Have we protected the authority of Scripture by lifting the Bible out of the very cultural contexts in which it has come to us? And how has that shaped our hermeneutical task? Have we neglected our cultural horizon when we have approached the text of Scripture? And is this what has led to the importation of Enlightenment assumptions? Are we unaware of the complexity of the hermeneutical task of merging two cultural horizons—ours and Scriptures? How will taking cultural context more seriously, both in our theological formulations and in our interpretation of Scripture, shape a new course in theology?

Historical Perspectives

Conn believes that in times of its greatest glory theology has always been contextual reflection *in* mission and *on* mission. It takes seriously both the universal truth of the gospel and the missional vocation of the church in the various cultures of the world. It is from this standpoint—gospel, mission, and the church in many cultures—that he offers insights on historical theology.

15. Conn, *Eternal Word*, 215.

Conn's point of reference is John Calvin's "missionary theologizing."¹⁶ Calvin was an example of missionary theology because "he tried to apply the gospel to his own time and place."¹⁷ He struggled and wrestled with the gospel in its original cultural context until he could hear the biblical author speak to Calvin's own time and place. Calvin radically departed from the scholastic origins of theology as an academic discipline in the twelfth and thirteenth century universities. Then theology was in the grip of Aristotle's philosophical approach to truth that sought objective theological knowledge by means of abstract definitions. In this approach, truth is lifted above history and shorn of all context and relationships—God is defined in his essence, for example, rather than in his acts in history or in his covenantal relationship with humankind and the world. Calvin's approach confronts this abstract approach to theology with a more pastoral and contextual concern.

Conn believes that Reformed theology lost these insights of a missionary theology in the years that followed Calvin and returned to this essentialist approach. He cites as an example a theologian popular in his circles—Louis Berkhof. Theology had become again "some sort of comprehensively universal science" that mirrored Aristotle's view of truth rather than Biblical truth. This theological approach is also reflected in the way that creeds are used and understood. "Our creedal formulations, structured to respond to sixteenth-century cultural setting and its problems, lose their historical character as contextual confessions of faith and become cultural universals, having comprehensive validity in all times and settings. . . . What we are concerned with is how we have diminished their historical, contextual character. The creed as a missionary document framed in the uniqueness of a historical moment has too often been remythologized by white paternalism into a universal essence for all times."¹⁸ Conn wants theology to reflect on the gospel as it is deeply rooted in each cultural context faithfully addressing the issues and concerns of that place and time to equip the church for its mission.

He turns to a fascinating line-up of theologians who have begun to challenge the scholastic paradigm. He mentions G.C. Berkouwer's pastoral method as one example of theology that moves beyond the essentializing approach to theology. Berkouwer is concerned to hear Scripture as the address of God in context rather than a book of abstract and timeless truths. Similarly, John Frame defines theology as "simply the application of Scripture to all areas of life."¹⁹ Such a definition makes context central to theology. Conn reaches all the way back to 1894 to quote the great Dutch Reformed theologian Herman Bavinck who attributes the misery of the American

16. Conn, *Eternal Word*, 217. Conn did his Th.M. thesis at Westminster on John Calvin's theology.

17. Conn, *Eternal Word*, 217.

18. Conn, *Eternal Word*, 221.

19. John M. Frame, *Van Til: The Theologian* (Philipsburg, NJ: Pilgrim, 1976), 25. Quoted in Conn, *Eternal Word*, 220.

Presbyterian Churches to a theological uniformity that hinders ongoing renewal and thwarts diverse theological expressions arising out of varying contexts.²⁰

Conn adds to these theologians the voices of Third World church leaders. They are critical of theology that is “the construction of a logically coherent system, organized around a Western historical agenda insisted upon as universal by the Western church.” They have discovered that “systematic theology is not simply a coherent arrangement of supracultural universals. It is a compilation of the Western white history of dogma. And that history, in the process of compilation, has lost its missiological thrust.”²¹

Two-Thirds World theologians understand better than Western theologians that theology is both contextual and missional.²² And so, they have rightly resisted the universal claims made for Western theology. Of course, the theological systems of the West are deeply contextual as well. It is just that Western theologians who adopt a scholastic method lose sight of this and claim comprehensive universality for their contextual theologies. And many leaders from the non-Western churches will rightly have none of it.

Four Characteristics of Faithful Theologizing

What kind of theology did Conn hope to see? The first clue is to note his distinction between theology and theologizing, and for his preference for the term “theologizing.” Theology indicates a finished product while theologizing refers to the ongoing task of doing theology in each place and time. Of course, the activity (theologizing) will always issue in the result (theology). Yet the problem is that using the term theology can give the wrong impression that our task is done by simply appropriating a theology formed once and for all in the past. It is “nothing less than taking a living, vital tradition, drowning it in the embalming fluid of scholastic objectivity and then presenting it to the student as the ‘real thing.’”²³ By contrast, at the heart of Conn’s concern is that theologizing is an ongoing task in every context—in fact, that is its very nature.

What are the characteristics of faithful theologizing? Certainly, first and foremost, theology must be *biblical*. He highlights Calvin’s “battle cry of *sola*

20. Herman Bavinck, “The Future of Calvinism,” *The Presbyterian and Reformed Review* 5, no. 17 (January 1894): 23. This article can be found online: <https://commons.ptsem.edu/id/presbyterianrefo5171warf-dmd002> (accessed 29 January 2022). Quoted in Conn, *Eternal Word*, 222. Bavinck makes even stronger statements about the need for a contextual theology in his “Foreword” to *The Wonderful Works of God* (Philadelphia: Westminster Seminary Press, 2019), xxxii–xxxiii.

21. Conn, *Eternal Word*, 222–23.

22. Conn, “Contextual Theologies,” 61–62.

23. Conn, *Eternal Word*, 303.

Michael W. Goheen: *Theology in a Missional Mode: Harvie Conn's Contribution Scriptura*²⁴ and then refers to the uniqueness of the Reformed faith as “*sola et tota Scriptura* (Scripture alone and all of Scripture).”²⁵ Theology must first be “rooted in biblical revelation” while “addressing our real contexts.”²⁶ Scriptural rootedness undergirds all else. But Conn’s concern is that theology must be biblical in more than its *content*; it must also follow the Bible in the *way* it speaks the truth.²⁷ An Aristotelian approach to truth that abstracts truths from their historical contexts as well as their creational and covenantal relationships must be challenged by the way Scripture comes to us in a redemptive-historical narrative.

All theology would claim and strive to be biblical, of course. And much theology would even want to attend to the Scriptures as the true story of God’s mighty historical acts to restore his creation. And so, the term “missionary” becomes important for Conn to indicate something more. He speaks of the Calvin’s “missionary theology” and “missionary theologizing.”²⁸ But what is packed into that adjective “missionary”? Today there is much discussion about missional theology. How is Conn using the term? A careful reading reveals three further characteristics.

Theology should be *formational*. Theology cannot be reduced to passing along accurate information although it will not be less than that. Theology must have power to form and equip God’s people for their missional calling. He states that the “ultimate test of any theological discourse, after all, is not only erudite precision but also transformative power.” He then quotes Latin American theologian Orlando Costas, “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.”²⁹

Faithful theologizing will be *contextual*. Theology is contextual in two senses: “Theology *speaks out of* the historical context; and theology must *speak to* that context.”³⁰ Theology must be addressed to the current issues that churches face in their missional calling. One might rephrase a popular comment by 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, which operates with an unexamined understanding of truth as timeless, will pass off a contextual theology from another time or place as universal theology. Yet this

24. Conn, *Eternal Word*, 216.

25. Conn, *Eternal Word*, 223.

26. Conn, “Contextual Theologies,” 63.

27. My colleague Michael Williams speaks helpfully of the *pedagogy* of Scripture. Theology is not just biblical if it faithfully reflects the propositional content of Scripture; it must also present that truth *the way* Scripture does.

28. Conn, *Eternal Word*, 217.

29. Orlando Costas, “Evangelical Theology in the Two Thirds World,” *TSF Bulletin* 9, no. 1 (September–October 1985): 10. Quoted in Conn, “Contextual Theologies,” 63.

30. Conn, “Contextual Theologies,” 61. My emphases.

is an illusion born of a Greek view of truth where one misunderstands theology to be an “abstractionist task, a searching for essences untouched by the realities of the cultural context.”³¹ Theology is always contextual; it brings the enduring light of Scripture to bear on the church’s mission in a particular setting.

The final mark is that theologizing is *missionary*. Conn uses the term “missionary” in two different senses. The first is a broader use that refers to theology in its *goal* to equip the church for its mission. In this case missionary theology is also formational and contextual. The second and more narrow use of “missionary” refers to the *content* of theology that takes seriously the central thread of the biblical story that the church has a vocation to make known the gospel to the nations. Much theological orthodoxy lacks this orientation to the world. And so, missional theology will be a gadfly to theology insisting that it constantly attend to the scriptural theme “among the nations” at every point.³² “Missiology stands by to interrupt the theological conversation at every significant moment with the words *among the nations*.”³³ The task of the theology must take account of the missional vocation of the church amidst the nations.

Six Criteria for Faithful Theologizing

The most creative and substantial contribution Conn makes to a new course in theology and theologizing is found in the six criteria he sets out for faithful theologizing. Each of these criteria presses his concerns for a biblical, formational, contextual, and missionary theology from different perspectives.

Biblical-Theological

The first criterion for theology is that it must be biblical-theological. By biblical-theological Conn refers to a theological discipline that, in the Dutch Calvinist tradition of Herman Ridderbos and Geerhardus Vos, traces the progressive unfolding of revelation in the history of redemption. Conn notes John Murray’s concern about the “tendency to abstraction”³⁴ in much systematic theology, that is, the “tendency to dehistoricize, to arrive at ‘timeless’ formulations in the sense of topically oriented universals.”³⁵ In fact, he wonders if systematic theology has become “so captive to the encumbrances of Western categories and methodologies that we must now . . .

31. Conn, “Contextual Theologies,” 59.

32. Conn, *Eternal Word*, 224.

33. Conn, *Eternal Word*, 306.

34. John Murray, “Systematic Theology,” in *The New Testament Student and Theology*, John H. Skilton, ed. (Nutley, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1976), 30.

35. Conn, *Eternal Word*, 225.

Michael W. Goheen: *Theology in a Missional Mode: Harvie Conn's Contribution* discontinue its use.”³⁶ He sees the appropriation of a biblical-theological approach as an effective antidote to theology as a universal comprehensive science.

With his appropriation of biblical theology, Conn is challenging two assumptions of much Western systematic theology. The first is that truth is found in timeless theological ideas that somehow stand above history and are shorn of any cultural context. And second, the Bible is a dogmatic handbook filled with such theological ideas. The kernels of timeless theology are wrapped in cultural husks. Over against this Conn argues that truth is found precisely in God's mighty acts in history especially in Jesus Christ and that the Bible is a book that records these events as he moves history toward its goal of restoration. It is a book of redemptive-history not a book of theological truths.

Biblical theology thus provides a more faithful way of doing theology. It is more sensitive to the dynamic and narrative character of truth since revelation is not ideas but historical events. Biblical theology can do justice both to the unity of truth and the diversity of the human settings in which that truth is contextualized. Unity is not found in a universal system in Scripture. Rather that unity is found in the person of Jesus Christ and the events of his life, death, and resurrection as the climactic center of a comprehensive story. The redemptive-historical narrative unfolds in four stages: hidden and promised in the Old Testament, fully revealed in Christ, *made known in all the cultures of the world*, and finally consummated at his return.³⁷ The key is the third stage between Jesus's resurrection and the consummation characterized by mission and contextualization—“made known in all the cultures of the world.”

The key to faithful theologizing is eschatology, mission and contextualization. The canonical diversity of the New Testament witness is found in its contextualized witness to the finished work of Christ at this already-not yet stage of redemptive history. We live in the same era as the apostles, and so we can look to see how they worked with the gospel and did theology. Contextualization of the gospel in various settings was constituent to their apostolic task; it is an activity that precisely characterizes this third stage of redemptive history—“made known to the cultures of the world.” Contextualization is necessarily characteristic of this period: “Contextualization then is covenant activity taking place between the ‘already’ of redemption accomplished in Christ and the ‘not yet’ of redemption to be consummated in Christ.”³⁸

The New Testament writers were concerned to make known the work of Jesus Christ in particular cultural settings. And so are we! We share the same subject (Christ) and the same methodology (making known Christ in various cultural settings). With the New Testament writers “we share a common contextual, hermeneutic interest.”³⁹ As Peter and Paul brought the gospel to bear on various settings to form the church

36. Conn, *Eternal Word*, 228.

37. Conn, *Eternal Word*, 226. My emphasis.

38. Conn, *Eternal Word*, 226.

39. Conn, *Eternal Word*, 227.

for its missional calling, so our theology is to do the same. “Paul’s ‘task theology’ is a biblical pattern for our own theologizing.”⁴⁰

This era of redemptive history is fraught with danger. Contextual theologizing “reminds us of the ease with which our perceptions of the gospel can be deeply influenced by unconscious impositions of cultural and sociostructural perspectives on the biblical data.”⁴¹ Perhaps this is the main reason a scholastic approach is so enticing; it seems to protect against this risk of cultural distortion. It gives the illusion of keeping truth pure from the relativities of culture and history. And yet this does not protect against accommodation but rather mistakenly universalizes a single contextual theology. Nevertheless, the perils associated with attempts to faithfully contextualize the gospel in various cultural settings should not lead to timidity or avoidance of the task; contextualization is unavoidable and the only way forward for a faithful theology. It should bring humility with our own formulations since only the Bible has completely faithful contextualizations. And it should also bring patience and generosity with others—“Let him who is without ideology cast the first stone.”⁴²

While we share the same redemptive-historical era, the same gospel, and the same contextualizing task as the New Testament writers, Conn warns against a total identification of our theologizing with theirs. Our theologizing is dependent upon and derivative of theirs. Theirs is God-breathed and completely faithful while ours is always tentative and in need of correction. Yet the New Testament authors provide a model of theologizing that can help us escape the cultural captivity of Western theology.

Covenantal

The second criterion for theologizing is that it is covenantal. Conn is concerned to counter an understanding of theology that has been affected by the rationalism of Western culture which makes truth a matter of propositionally correct statements. It stands as objective truth that is free, not only of a particular context, but also of any kind of response. Truth as rationally exact doctrinal assertions then calls forth a theory-praxis dichotomy so the abstract truth may become relevant to us today by way of application as a second step. The propositionally accurate doctrines form the theory side of the dichotomy; what must now be done is to apply them to a particular setting. Theologizing then falls prey to this dichotomy as it is reduced to merely the theoretical side—formulating true theological statements. While this may be partially correct it is a long way from a biblical understanding of truth. He counters this comprehension of truth with the notion of covenant.

40. Conn, “Contextual Theologies,” 62.

41. Conn, *Eternal Word*, 226.

42. Conn, *Eternal Word*, 229.

There are two closely related dimensions to the way Conn employs covenantal to characterize theology. Truth is always *relational*. That is, the Bible is the personal address of God to humanity; it is “the call of the covenant Suzerain for the expression of our covenant faithfulness in a God-centered way of living.”⁴³ This is precisely Berkouwer’s concern to which Conn refers earlier. Berkouwer protests an objectivist understanding of Scripture and counters it in his theological method. “The single most influential theme in all of Berkouwer’s theology is generally considered to be the co-relation of faith and revelation. Berkouwer’s thinking constantly moves between the two poles of the believing man and the revealing God. . . . Berkouwer is not concerned with the Bible as a source of knowledge and information concerning divine matters, but as the word from the living God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ addressing us. This means that from the side of man there must be a faith to co-relate with this divine address.”⁴⁴ Our first response to Scripture is not rational comprehension of theological propositions but faith, love, and obedience to God’s address. Theology works within and as part of this dynamic of God’s address and our faithful covenant response.

Truth is not only relational but also *transformational*. Truth is not merely the conveyance of information that must then be applied to life as a second step. Rather God’s covenant address demands a faithful response. Truth is not just about getting our doctrine straight and then once we do, figuring out how it might be applied. Rather it is about reflecting on God’s address amidst our living, acting, and doing the truth within each setting. Theology is not an abstract discipline but one that conscientizes the Christian community to live faithfully in their place. Conscientization is “the awakening of the Christian conscience to reflection and action in God’s world” under the comprehensive authority of the Scriptures.⁴⁵

This has implications for our theologizing. It will mean taking our praxis seriously as the context for theological reflection. Conn addresses two misunderstandings of the word “praxis.” The first is that of Liberation Theology which it is indebted to Marx’s economic and dialectical interpretation of history. What liberation theology has right is that all theological reflection is done in a particular context with a commitment to one side in the struggle of history. Marxism misinterprets the ultimate struggle of history as economic.⁴⁶ Theological reflection on the gospel shapes a people to faithfully take the side of God’s kingdom in the cosmic battle with the kingdom of darkness for creation. The second misunderstanding is to use praxis as a synonym for

43. Conn, *Eternal Word*, 229.

44. John Timmer, “G. C. Berkouwer: Theologian of Confrontation and Co-Relation,” in *Reformed Journal* 19, no. 10 (December 1969): 18.

45. Conn, *Eternal Word*, 310.

46. Harvie Conn, “The Mission of the Church,” in *Evangelicals and Liberation* ed. Carl E. Armerding (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1979), 73.

practice or application that preserves the theory-practice dichotomy. Theology is the first theoretical step and praxis becomes the applicatory second step to our practice.

Over against this Conn defines praxis in terms of commitment to a full-orbed covenantal obedience situated in a particular cultural context. That is the praxis out of which true theology comes. Keeping covenant is “reflective commitment in praxis.”⁴⁷ “Reflective” constitutes the theological dimension. Following Orlando Costas, theology “is rather a reflection that takes place in the concrete missionary situation, as part of the church’s missionary obedience to and participation in God’s mission and is itself actualized in that situation.”⁴⁸ Theology, then, has the goal of forming a people by making them aware of what it means to be faithful to the gospel: “theologizing becomes more than the effective communication of the content of the gospel to the cultural context; it becomes the process of the covenant conscientization of the whole people of God to the hermeneutical obligations of the gospel.”⁴⁹ Theology 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.

Theologizing is the whole process that studies and reflects on Scripture out of a commitment to God’s mission in a particular setting to shape God’s people for their missional calling. Thus, theologizing is never finished: “Theologizing is the task of each new generation standing in its particular moment in history. It searches the Scriptures in order to discern the will of God and strives to receive guidance on its way toward the obedient life that must be pursued within the concrete issues of the world’s concrete cultures.”⁵⁰

Culture-Specific

A third norm for faithful theologizing is that it is culture-specific. If theology is contextual and formational, then it must be relevant in every cultural setting; it must address the people of God living in a specific culture. Conn points to the way that the different canonical Gospels select and arrange historical material to address specific audiences as an example of how biblical authors made the gospel relevant. He comments that again the Scriptures “provide us with a model that calls for contextual rootedness in addressing the Word of God to human cultures.”⁵¹

But the attempt to be relevant raises an enormous tension: how can one be relevant in contextualizing the gospel when it takes form in each culture that is itself deeply idolatrous? The problem here is precisely the eschatological tension of belonging to

47. Conn, *Eternal Word*, 233.

48. Orlando Costas, *Theology of the Crossroads in Contemporary Latin America* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1976), 8. Quoted in Conn, *Eternal Word*, 232–33.

49. Conn, *Eternal Word*, 231.

50. Conn, *Eternal Word*, 233.

51. Conn, *Eternal Word*, 236.

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the new creation but continuing to live in the old age. This is what Lesslie Newbigin calls the “painful tension” in the context of a Christian desire to be faithful in Indian culture when the idolatrous caste system is pervasive and inescapable.⁵²

Are there biblical guidelines for resolving this tension? Conn turns to the notion of Christian liberty and the issue of eating meat offered to idols in 1 Corinthians (8:1ff; 10:23ff) and Romans (14:1–15:7). In his discussion he draws out two helpful insights. First, there remains much creational good and truth in every culture. Therefore, it is unnecessary and even counterproductive to reject aspects of culture that exhibit the structural good of creation. Second, idolatry has twisted all of culture and created opposition to the gospel. In this case, one must be willing to stand against that true offense to the gospel. Conn works with an underlying distinction between the good creational structures within each culture and its religious and idolatrous misdirection, a distinction that is characteristic of J. H. Bavinck.⁵³

Such a distinction between structure and direction is based on Conn's understanding of the relationship between religion and culture dependant on Bavinck. Here we encounter significant insight into a missional understanding culture that is often missed. It is common to see religion as one more cultural activity alongside of others. Conn follows Bavinck in seeing religion as the deepest directional power in culture underlying all other activities and institutions. Bavinck states that “culture is religion made visible; it is religion actualized in the innumerable relations of daily life.”⁵⁴ Explicating this statement Conn stresses “the core place of religion in the structuring of culture's meaning and usage.” Religion is “not an area of life, one among many, but primarily a *direction* of life . . . Religion, then becomes the heart of culture's integrity, its central dynamic as an organism, the totalistic radical response of man-in-covenant to the revelation of God.”⁵⁵ He offers a diagram with three layers (figure one). The middle layer details the various aspects of human life—their physical, lingual, and aesthetic but also social, rational, economic, etc. functions. The outer layer illustrates that these abilities take cultural form because human beings live in community. This outer layer expresses the concrete institutions, customs, practices, and habits of a culture. The inner core is religion, idolatrous beliefs that shape the various aspects of culture. Religion is a power flowing from the heart that (mis) directs all areas of human culture. For Conn, “worldview dimensions” is the way the

52. Lesslie Newbigin, *A South India Diary* (London: SCM, 1951), 49.

53. The structure-direction distinction is best known from the work of Albert Wolters, *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005). Wolters, according to his own testimony, makes that distinction on the basis of J. H. Bavinck's notion of contextualization.

54. J. H. Bavinck, *The Impact of Christianity on the Non-Christian World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949), 57.

55. Harvie Conn, “Conversion and Culture: A Theological Perspective with Reference to Korea,” in John Stott and Robert Coote, eds., *Down to Earth: Studies in Christianity and Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 149–150.

religious direction of the heart integrates and shapes all other dimensions of human existence. He writes that a worldview is a “comprehensive belief-framework that colors all of a person’s activities. It is a communal direction of the heart, a framework of belief-commitments commonly held by a community of like mind. It includes a person’s act of believing, the heart’s integrator for all other acts and functions. It includes also the set of beliefs and values flowing from that act of believing.”⁵⁶

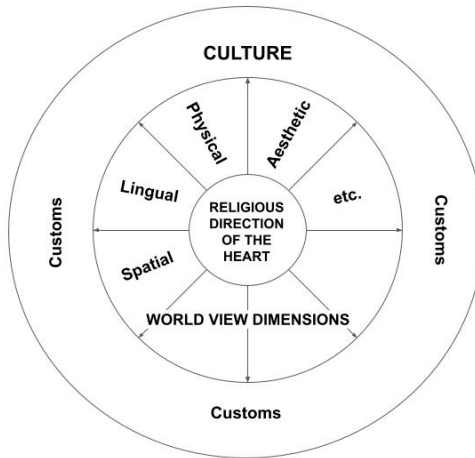


Figure 1. Core Place of Religion

This understanding of culture allows us to see how each aspect of culture is the product of healthy development of creational potential *and at the same time* a product of idolatrous twisting. These must be distinguished even while they are woven together. It is not easy to separate the creational good from the idolatrous direction. A theology that struggles to form the people of God in a particular cultural setting must be engaged in a rigorous dialogue with culture to discern the structure and direction. The dialogical character of all theologizing must be a dialogue not only within the Christian church—where much theologizing has been done—but also a dialogue with the world, “the culture, the religion, the politics, the economics, the social system.”⁵⁷ It will be a dialogue that struggles to discern the creationally good and the idolatrously deformed in culture. And it is precisely this kind of dialogue that will keep theology fresh and relevant continuing to address the current issues needed to shape the people of God in each context.

56. Conn, *Eternal Word*, 319.

57. Conn, *Eternal Word*, 241 quoting Charles R. Taber, “Limits of Indigenization in Theology,” *Missiology* 6, no. 1 (January 1978): 75.

Confessional

The fourth criterion for faithful theologizing is that it is confessional. Conn affirms that theological reflection is an elaboration of our confession of loyalty to Jesus Christ. It both affirms what we believe and does so publicly to the world. Conn narrows his discussion immediately to his own ecclesial context where confession has taken concrete form in the various Reformed confessions of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. He sees these confessions as examples of theologizing, the articulation and elaboration of confessional loyalty to the gospel.

He is concerned that both the nature of these confessions formed in the *corpus Christianum* and the way the contemporary Reformed churches have received these confessions poses a great danger to faithful theologizing. He affirms the importance of confessions if they are understood in a faithful way. He notes three characteristics of what faithful confessions, and hence faithful theologizing, should be.

The first is the *contextual character* of confessions. “Their richest service,” says Conn, “lies in their function of translating the gospel to address the needs of their own day and cultural context. ... Creeds, as an expression of the confessional character of all theologizing, are ‘historically situational.’ They are human acts of confession of God’s unchanging good news, addressed to specific human cultural settings.”⁵⁸ Confessions seek to grasp the message of Scripture in a particular setting, and insofar as they do so they also bear witness to the universal validity of the gospel. The danger is that over time churches who adhere to these confessions minimize their contextual character and maximize their universal dimension. Thus, they become the doctrinal standard for all people in all places at all times.

The second is the *topical* nature of confessions. It is precisely the contextual character of confessions that leads to the specific topics and themes that are treated in the confessions. For example, even though the kingdom of God is the central theme of the entire New Testament there is little attention paid to it by Reformed confessions.⁵⁹ The topics treated are those that need to be affirmed, explicated, and defended at that point in history.

The final characteristic of confessions is their *evangelistic focus*. A confession must always be made with an eye on unbelievers; confession is always made amidst the world. To illustrate the way this focus has been lost, Conn adopts a threefold list of the use of confessions: a witness to the world of Christian belief; an instrument to instruct the church in those beliefs; and the test of orthodoxy for members especially leadership. The element of witness to the world—the first use—enjoys greatest prominence in the earliest years of a confession’s life but over time it is the last two that come to predominate as the doctrinal standards of an introverted church.

58. Conn, *Eternal Word*, 241.

59. Herman Ridderbos makes same point in “Church, World, Kingdom” in *Justice in the International Economic Order* (Grand Rapids: CRC Publications, 1980), 19.

The problem of an evangelistic focus is not found just in the historical appropriation of confessions; the original confessions themselves lack an evangelistic dimension. Framed in the *corpus Christianum* where the horizon of the ends of the earth was eclipsed, the confessions project an image of the church talking with itself rather than the church confessing its faith before the world. As these confessions guide the church, they produce indifference toward mission among those who adhere to the confessions. The evangelistic focus of the church, already lacking in the confessions, fades even more over time. “Creeds and confessions fashioned in a Western *corpus Christianum* and minimizing the evangelistic dimension of theologizing” cannot carry out the theological task of shaping a people for their missional calling.⁶⁰ Theologizing that follows in the same path will also be inadequate to the job.

Communal

A fifth requirement for faithful theologizing is that it be communal. Confessing our faith and reflecting theologically on that confession in a particular context is not an individualistic endeavor; rather it is a communal task and process. Conn is concerned here with the looming threat of parochialism—the isolation of theology in one particular culture or socioeconomic class that allows it to become distorted by the idolatry endemic to that particular segment of the church.

He deals with two aspects of a communal dialogue that are especially urgent. The first is a cross-cultural dialogue between churches in various cultures of the world. Specifically, Conn divides the church between the West and non-West or Third World and argues for a dialogue that is mutually enriching and corrective. The second aspect is a dialogue with the poor and those on the margins that will make the needy a fundamental category in theology.

Conn’s discussion in the early 1980s reflects a situation different from today. It more commonly known today that the church outside the West surpasses the Western church in numbers and vitality, and further it now has significant spiritual and intellectual resources to challenge, enrich, and correct the West. Nevertheless, we can say with sadness that we are a long way from the mutuality and interdependence needed for such a dialogue. My own experience tells me that many still are unaware of the riches of differing theological traditions outside the West. Conn speaks of a “theological racism”⁶¹ that assumes that Western-style theology is automatically superior and normative among churches in all cultures. Moreover, the problem is not with the West alone; the younger churches have often merely acquiesced to this superiority.

Conn does not want to discourage the churches outside the West from learning from the Western theological tradition. After all, it bears witness to the ecumenical

60. Conn, *Eternal Word*, 246.

61. Conn, *Eternal Word*, 250.

Michael W. Goheen: *Theology in a Missional Mode: Harvie Conn's Contribution* character of the Christian faith and universal truth of the gospel. But this requires a mutually correcting dialogue among the churches from all cultures.

If our confession and theologizing is to be truly communal it must not be only Third World churches that are needed as full dialogue partners; it is also the poor, oppressed, and marginalized. If theology takes seriously the cultural context, then the gospel must address “social, political, and economic questions: wealth and power, power and powerlessness, privilege and oppression, white and non-white. How will theology be done from ‘the underside’?”⁶²

The problem for many Western evangelicals is that our dualism that sequesters spirituality from these cultural dimensions and our fear of the social gospel renders us incapable of responding to this challenge. Conn turns to Third World evangelicals to teach us the importance of the poor in our theologizing. At this point, his twofold concern for both non-Western churches and for the poor as dialogue partners merge. Specifically, he points to the 1982 *Seoul Declaration: Toward an Evangelical Theology for the Third World* as a shining example of the way theology takes seriously the social, political, and economic structures in theologizing.⁶³ As the document details the theological agenda in Asia, Africa, and Latin America it is issues of economic injustice, oppression, totalitarian ideologies, poverty, urban growth, consumerism, and the arms race, among other issues, that are at the forefront. Conn asks: “Why, by contrast, do we read so seldom and so late of a similar agenda for doing theology in the West?”⁶⁴

The problem is our economic and social location that deeply affects what we see and know. He asks how the Western church can more deeply identify with the poor and oppressed so that these issues shape our theology. His answer is by seeking solidarity with them. But he also again points to Third World theology: they can point out our limitations and compromised accommodation; they can offer new models of authentic contextualization in this setting; and they can offer new patterns for radical discipleship. If theology in the West is to be protected from an idolatrous parochialism it needs both the non-Western church and the poor as equal dialogue partners.

Prophetic

The final norm for faithful theologizing is that it be prophetic. Theology may not baptize the agendas of human culture but must reflect the inevitable confrontation of culture with the gospel. Since Conn sees the gospel as wide as creation—salvation is the restoration of all things including human culture—and since he also sees the religious core of culture as idolatrously shaping every aspect, there will necessarily be a missionary encounter, a clash between two comprehensive visions of life.

62. Conn, *Eternal Word*, 253.

63. A copy of this document can be found online at <http://www.internationalbulletin.org/issues/1983-02/1983-02-064-the.pdf> (accessed 29 January 2022).

64. Conn, *Eternal Word*, 254.

“Our hermeneutical quest must challenge the values and standards of the culture in which it is being done that mirror the demonic and dehumanizing forces of sin and rebellion against God.”⁶⁵

He borrows a term from liberation theologian Juan Luis Segundo—“hermeneutic of suspicion.” A hermeneutic of suspicion brings us to our own contextualization of the gospel with the suspicion that all of us are captive to ideologies. “All of us are captive to ideologies. The task of ‘hermeneutical’ suspicion is to confront those hidden ideologies.”⁶⁶

Scholarly reflection and theologizing are not exempt from our cultural and ideological assumptions. Our hermeneutical methods cannot neutralize their powerful effect. Thus, good theologizing struggles to understand one’s own context in order to uncover the underlying idolatrous assumptions that are concealed and have blinded us to what we need to see.

Yet prophetic theology is not just negative—that is, suspicion of our idolatrous assumptions. It is also the positive and hopeful reshaping of our imagination, the re-narrating our lives by the biblical story. We do not dwell on compromising accommodation to cultural idolatry with immobilizing despair but theologize in the confident hope that the gospel may liberate us from bondage to idolatry.

Legacy for the Global Church Today

Today there is a renaissance in theology. A spate of new theologies has rolled off the press in the last decade especially in the Reformed tradition. It seems that our new cultural setting has made more folk aware that there is a need for fresh theologizing. Sadly, many have simply looked backward and been an exercise in reappropriating the theologies of the past. Many of these Reformed theologies are warmed over sixteenth and seventeenth century systems, formulations, and confessions rather than fresh encounters with the text of Scripture in a new day. A contextualized theology of the past is resurrected to provide certainty in times of postmodern uncertainty.

Conn saw clearly the many factors required for new theologizing. But instead of settling for past reiterations he proposed a new course that is faithful to the Bible, relevant to the cultural context, and empowering for the church’s mission. I believe that some of his most crucial work is here and that we can learn much from his deep reflection on theologizing.

Perhaps Conn’s legacy for the global church can be observed by noting three problems with much theology today. First, it is *not narrative and missional*. The narrative structure of the Christian faith in Scripture is cosmic-communal-personal. Yet this canonical structure is often ignored. Rather systematic theologies are structured on the basis of individual salvation and miss much of the biblical

65. Conn, *Eternal Word*, 258.

66. Conn, *Eternal Word*, 259.

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story. It is simply inattentive to the narrative, eschatological, and missional shape of the Christian faith. Conn's criteria for theologizing will go a long in correcting this reduction.

Second, much current theology is *not dialogical*. It is based on a faulty notion of truth and consequent epistemology. Truth is found in timeless ideas and the theological method enables the theologian to mine these truths and organize them into a self-evident system of universal and comprehensive truth. There is no recognition that the very system already reflects the cultural interests of the West. But when one believes that truth is timeless and the mind capable of simply producing a system that reflects that truth, there is no need for correction. The theologian feels no need to dialogue with theology from other cultures, from other theological traditions, from other times in history, and with the poor and marginalized for the sake of enrichment and critique. Yet it is precisely here where we'll see our blind spots and receive new insight into Scripture.

Finally, much current theology is *not contextual*. It is still fighting the same battles and not current ones. For example, the Christological questions of the first few centuries often dominate: how can Jesus be both God and man? We cannot lose or forget what we have learned from those early years of struggle. Rather in our pluralistic environment today questions of how to speak of the finality of Jesus, for example, are the urgent questions that should shape our Christology.

When we eschew contextualization, we lose the opportunity to confront the idols that shape our theology. I have taught a course for many years on non-Western theology. Many Asian, African, and Latin American theologians share common critiques of Western theology: it is rationalistic, individualistic, spiritualistic, and dualistic. But if our theologies are not dialogical and prophetic, we are in no position to hear these critiques.

Conn has been able to combine two things that are unusual: a historically orthodox approach to theology (he was, after all, ordained in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, a small and quite conservative confessionalist Presbyterian denomination) along with a recognition that we must always be contextualizing. This means constantly wrestling with the text of Scripture, and in the process reworking this tradition in new situations for the sake of faithfulness to our missional calling. Conn's insightful reflection on theologizing points to a faithful way forward today.