Re-centering the Bible

in the missional goal of theological education

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**Introduction**

The church of today stands in spiritual continuity with the people of God throughout the Bible, as those whom God has called into existence in the great moments of election, redemption and covenant, to glorify and enjoy God for all eternity, and to participate with God in God’s mission within history – God’s mission of redemption and reconciliation for all nations and all creation. And in order to *be* such a missional community, God’s people must *live* worthy of their calling (Eph. 4:1). The church’s missional calling demands an ethical response. There is a message to be proclaimed *and* a life to be lived and they must go together. God’s people need to be “fit for purpose” - God’s purpose.

How are God’s people to be thus shaped for mission? One clear answer that the Bible itself gives is – through teaching by those whom God has given to his people for that purpose. In both Testaments, God’s people need godly teaching and godly teachers, and disaster strikes when both are lacking. And the primary focus of such teaching is the word of God in the Scriptures.

Now, the phenomenon we call “theological education” did not exist in Old Testament Israel or the New Testament church in the kind of formal structures and institutions we have developed in the history of Christianity. Nevertheless, inasmuch as theological education is one significant (and rather expensive!) dimension of the teaching ministry of the church, we are including it under that wider generic term. So then, when I use this phrase in this paper, “the ministry of teaching”, I intend it to have a broad meaning. It includes the regular preaching of pastors in churches, the long-term impact of scriptural liturgy, church-based courses of study and training, and also the formal world of theological education in Bible Colleges and seminaries. These are all ways - formal and non-formal, short and long-term – in which the teaching ministry can take shape within the church.

In this essay, we shall attempt to answer three questions:

1. Why is the ministry of Bible teaching so important in relation to the mission of the church?
2. What are the goals of the ministry of teaching in the Bible itself and how do they relate to our mission – particularly in relation to the goals of theological education?
3. And finally,how can we re-centre the Bible in our theological education?
4. **Why is the teaching ministry important for the mission of the church?**
5. ***Because the Bible says so***

The teaching of God’s word is integral to the growth and mission of God’s people. The Bible provides robust support for this conviction.

1. *The Old Testament*   
   The work of teachers and teaching is deeply rooted in OT Israel*.* It was an essential part of the way God called, shaped and educated his people. “The Old Testament is the oldest and longest programme of theological education.” This remarkable affirmation was made by Professor Andrew Walls (in an unpublished paper given at the Mission Leaders Forum at the Overseas Ministries Study Centre, New Haven, Connecticut). Throughout the whole Old Testament, for a millennium or more, God was shaping his people, insisting that they should remember *and teach to every generation* the things God had *done* (“what your eyes have seen”) and the things God had *said* (“what your ears have heard”). This is stressed again and again in Deuteronomy. God gave his people the Levitical priests as teachers of the Torah, and the prophets to call them back to the ways of God, and Psalmists and wise men and women to teach them how to worship God and walk in godly ways in ordinary life. When reformations happened in Old Testament times (e.g. under Jehoshaphat, Hezekiah, Josiah, Nehemiah-Ezra), there was often a return to the teaching of God’s word by the Levites (e.g. Neh. 8). God’s people were to be a community of teachers and learners, shaped by the word of God, as we see so emphatically in the longings of the author of Psalm 119. Israel’s mission was not to *go* to the nations (yet), but to *so live among the nations* that the name and character of Yahweh would become known among the nations. And teaching was necessary for that mission.
2. *Jesus*   
   It’s not surprising then that when Jesus came, he spent years doing exactly the same - teaching, teaching, teaching his disciples as the nucleus of the new community of the Kingdom of God. Even as a twelve-year-old boy he showed that he was rooted in the scriptures and able to engage with the rabbis in the temple.   
     
   And in the Great Commission, he mandates his apostles to teach new disciples to observe all that he had taught them (Matt. 28:20) – which was a lot! Teaching was at the heart of Jesus’ own mission and ministry, and he makes himself the model for his mandate. We are to make disciples the way Jesus made disciples – with patient teaching over time. It’s no good just bringing people to conversion and leaving it at that. The seed needs deep soil and good roots in order to bear fruit. Churches needs not only to be planted through evangelism, but also to be watered through teaching. Both evangelism and teaching are Great Commission mandates. And both are clearly also God’s will for his people. God is at work not only bringing people to faith in Christ, but also bringing them to maturity in Christ, through the work of the Holy Spirit within them, with his gifts, power and fruit in their lives. The ministry of teaching within the church is a participating in the process by which God himself brings his people to the fullness of maturity and Christlikeness. It is one way in which our mission shares in the mission of God. Theological education, then, (as the Cape Town Commitment says) is *intrinsically* missional, and should therefore be *intentionally* missional.
3. *Paul*When we look at Paul, we notice that teaching was integral to his whole life as a missionary church planter. Often he had to leave a newly-planted church quickly, under threat, but even then he would write to them to encourage and teach them. And when Paul had the opportunity, as in Ephesus, he stayed for nearly three years, during which he transformed a group of twelve disciples into a city church with several households and functioning elders. He later tells them that he had taught them not only all that was helpful for them, but “the whole counsel of God” – ie. the whole scriptural revelation of God’s great plan and purpose (Acts 20:20, 27).   
     
   And when Paul could not personally do the teaching, he ensured that it was done by others who were part of his missionary team, like Timothy and Titus. Or Apollos (from Africa), who was learned in the scriptures (i.e. the Old Testament) and a gifted teacher. Apollow gained further theological education at the home of Priscilla and Aquila (in Asia), and then went to Corinth (in Europe), where he systematically engaged in teaching that included Old Testament hermeneutics, Christology and apologetics (Acts 18:24-28). Later, when the Christians in Corinth divided into factions boasting loyalty to Paul or Apollos, Paul wouldn’t allow it. Yes, Paul and Apollos had had different parts to play. Paul was the evangelist church-planter. Apollos was a theological church-teacher. But they shared a *common mission*. Paul insists that the evangelist (planter) and the teacher (waterer) have “one purpose” - or a single mission (in Greek, “they are one”; 1 Cor. 3:5-9). The apostolic understanding and practice of mission clearly included systematic teaching of new believers, and the bulk of that teaching seems to have been a Christ-focused understanding of the mission of God as revealed in the Old Testament, leading to the inclusion of the Gentile nations and the vision and hope of Christ’s return and the restoration, reconciliation and redemption of all creation.

So Bible teaching within the church in all its forms, including what we would now call theological education, is an intrinsic part of mission. It is not an extra. It is not merely ancillary to “real mission.” The ministry of teaching has to be included within our obedience to the Great Commission. The Bible itself commands it.

1. ***Because the church needs it***

The Lausanne Movement’s *Cape Town Commitment* identifies several ways in which we, as Christians, have failed to live up to our calling. There is confession of *failure* (in repentance) as well as confession of *faith* (in affirmation). We have to confess that we Christians are not always particularly attractive in the way we live and behave, and that we simply do not look like the Jesus we proclaim.

When there is no distinction in conduct between Christians and non-Christians - for example in the practice of corruption and greed, or sexual promiscuity, or rate of divorce, or relapse to pre-Christian religious practice, or attitudes towards people of other races, or consumerist lifestyles, or social prejudice - then the world is right to wonder if our Christianity makes any difference at all. Our message carries no authenticity to a watching world.[[1]](#footnote-1)

But what lies behind these areas of failure? Surely the moral confusion and laxity of the global church is a product of a **“***famine of hearing the words of the LORD” (*Amos 8:11), that is, a lack of biblical knowledge, teaching and thinking, from the leadership downwards. As in Hosea’s day, there are many of God’s people who are left with *“no knowledge of God”* – at least, no adequate and life-transforming knowledge. And this is so for the same reason as Hosea identified, namely the failure of those appointed to teach God’s word (the priests in his day) to do so (Hos. 4:1-9).

Without good biblical teaching rooted in a missional hermeneutic (that is biblical teaching that is conscious of its own purpose, namely to shape God’s people for their mission in the world), people forget the story they are in, or never knew it in the first place. They may know that their sins are forgiven and they are “on the way to heaven.” But as for how they should be living now, engaging with God in God’s mission in today’s world – of that story and its demands and implications, they know nothing. Lack of missional teaching inevitably results in absence of missional interest or engagement.

Decades ago, **John Stott** believed that it was this lack of biblical teaching, more than anything else, that was to blame for the ethical and missional weakness of the contemporary church. And he believed that the key remedy, “the more potent medicine” as he called it, was to raise the standards of biblical preaching and teaching, from the seminaries to the grass-roots of the churches. He wrote:

If God reforms his people by his Word, precisely *how* does his Word reach and transform them? In a variety of ways, no doubt, including their daily personal meditation in the Scripture. But the principal way God has chosen is to bring his Word to his people through his appointed pastors and teachers. For he has not only given us his Word; he has also given us pastors to teach the people out of his Word (e.g. Jn. 21:15-17; Acts 20:28; Eph. 4:11-12; 1 Tim. 4:13). We can hardly exaggerate the importance of pastor-preachers for the health and maturity of the church.

*My vision, as I look out over the world, is to see every pulpit in every church occupied by a conscientious, Bible-believing, Bible-studying, Bible-expounding pastor. I see with my mind’s eye multitudes of people in every country world-wide converging on their church every Sunday, hungry for more of God’s Word. I also see every pastor mounting his pulpit with the Word of God in his mind (for he has studied it), in his heart (for he has prayed over it), and on his lips (for he is intent on communicating it).*

*What a vision! The people assemble with hunger, and the pastor satisfies their hunger with God’s Word! And as he ministers to them week after week, I see people changing under the influence of God’s Word, and so becoming more like the kind of people God wants them to be, in understanding and obedience, in faith and love, in worship, holiness, unity, service and mission.*

That was John Stott’s vision, which lies behind his foundation of the Langham Partnership and one of its three key programmes - Langham Preaching, establishing movements for hands-on, face-to-face training in biblical preaching in more than 60 countries around the world. Such a vision seems also to be very close to how the Apostle Paul also saw the primary task of those who were appointed as elders and pastors within the churches. And that brings us to the third reason why the teaching ministry is important for the mission of the church:

1. ***Because it is the priority for pastors and those who train them***

What should a pastor be *able to do?* What should a pastor-in-training in a seminary be trained and equipped to do? We can start to answer that question by consulting the list of qualifications that Paul gives for elders / overseers in the churches he had founded which were now being supervised by Timothy and Titus. We find extensive lists of qualities and criteria in 1 Timothy 3:1-10 and Titus1:6-9.

What is striking is that almost all the items Paul mentions are matters of character and behaviour – how they should live and conduct themselves and their families. Pastors should be *examples* of godliness and faithful discipleship. Only *one* thing could be described as a competence, or ability, or skill - ***‘****able to teach’* .The pastor above all should be *a teacher of God’s word*, able to understand, interpret and apply it effectively (as Paul further describes in 1 Tim. 4:11-13; 5:17; 2 Tim. 2:1-, 15; 3:15-4:2). The pastor’s personal godliness and exemplary life is what will give power and authenticity to this single fundamental task. The pastor must *live* what he or she *preaches* from the Scriptures. But preaching and teaching the scriptures is the fundamental task and competence for those who are called into pastoral leadership in the church. That is very clear.

So then, if seminaries are to prioritize in their training what Paul prioritizes for pastors, they ought to concentrate on two primary things: a) *personal godliness* and b) *ability to teach the Bible.*

Now of course there are many other things that pastors have to do in the demanding tasks of church leadership. They will need basic competence in pastoral counselling, in leading God’s people in worship and prayer, in management and administration of funds and people, in articulating vision and direction, in relating to their particular cultural context etc. But above all else, Paul emphasizes what they must *be* (godly and upright in their personal life), and what they must commit themselves to *do* (effectively preach and teach God’s Word).

Yet equipping future pastors with that skill of careful, diligent, imaginative and relevant preaching of the Bible seems sadly neglected in many seminaries. Or so it seems from the response I often get when, at a Langham Preaching seminar somewhere I ask participants who I know have already been to a seminary, “Did you not learn how to preach from Bible passages at seminary?” “Well,” comes the answer many a time, “we did have a course called “Homiletics”, but it was just ten lectures on different kinds of preaching. We were never taught *how* to move from a Bible text to a biblical sermon, or given any practice and assessment in doing it.” When I hear that, it points to a tragic abdication of what ought to be a primary responsibility - both for pastors themselves and for institutions that train them.

So, to be very frank at this point, whenever theological education neglects or marginalizes the teaching of the Bible, or squeezes it to the edges of a curriculum that has become crammed with other things, then that form of theological education has itself become unbiblical and disobedient to the clear mandate that we find taught and modelled in both testaments. Theological education which does *not* produce men and women who *know* their Bibles thoroughly, who know how to *teach and preach* the Scriptures, who are able *to think biblically* through any and every issue they confront, and who are *able to feed and strengthen* God’s people with God’s Word for God’s mission in God’s world – whatever else such theological education may do, or claim, or be accredited for, it is failing the church by failing to equip the church and its leaders to fulfil their calling and mission in the world. That kind of theological education is failing to fulfil the very biblical mandate for which it exists.

To conclude this first section, then, I am arguing that we must give greater priority to the ministry of scriptural teaching (a) because of the biblical mandate and examples, (b) because of the dire need of the church, and (c) because of the clear instruction of Paul that preaching and teaching the Scriptures should be a primary calling and competence of those who exercise pastoral leadership in churches.

1. **What are the goals of the ministry of scriptural teaching?**

As we have seen, the Bible affirms from very early on, and repeatedly in both Testaments, that God’s people need teaching and teachers, and that God’s people are vulnerable and endangered when teachers are either absent, or false and unfaithful. But we need to take a step further and ask what the ultimate goals of such teaching are.

What, then, are the *intended outcomes* of faithful and effective teaching, according to the Bible? What goals are we aiming at? What results should we want to achieve through the ministry of teaching? And since theological education is an integral part of the wider concept of teaching within the church, what should be the outcomes of theological education if it is going to truly reflect the goals of teaching that the Bible itself envisages? [[2]](#footnote-2)

I suggest three focal points. Each of the following sections is connected with a Bible character who was either commissioned to teach, or commissioned others to do so – *Abraham, Moses, and Paul.* And in each case there is a strong reason given for why such teaching matters in the context of our world.

Here, then, are three biblical outcomes of teaching:

a) *Mission*: in a world of many nations, the Abrahamic outcome.

b) *Monotheism*: in a world of many gods, the Mosaic outcome

c) *Maturity*: in a world of many falsehoods, the Pauline outcome

***a) Mission: in a world of many nations. The Abrahamic outcome.***

Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation, and all nations on earth will be blessed through him. **19**For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just, so that the Lord will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him. Genesis 18:18-19

In a world going the way of Sodom and Gomorrah (18:20-21; 19; Isa.1:9-23; Ezek. 16:49-50), God wanted to create a community that would be different - not just religiously different, but *morally and socially distinctive* (committed to righteousness and justice). That is the reason God chose and called Abraham and commissioned him to teach his own household and descendants (says v. 19).

But then, *why* did God want such a community to exist in the world? Why did God plan to create a nation chosen in Abraham and taught by him? God reminds us of God’s own purpose in verse 18. It was in order to fulfil God’s promise to Abraham, that through him and his descendants *all nations on earth would find blessing* (v. 18, echoing, of course, Gen. 12:3). That is God’s ultimate purpose.

There is, then, a *universal and missional context* here to the teaching mandate given to Abraham. And significantly this instruction to Abraham comes in Genesis – long before the giving of the law in Exodus. Already, however, the *ethical* content of the law (“way of the LORD”… “righteousness and justice”) is anticipated in the kind of teaching that Abraham was to give to his household after him. Abraham was to teach his people not only *about* God, but also about the ethical character of God and how God wants people to *live.* In other words, this is missionally focused ethical teaching to shape a people through whom God can fulfil his mission among the nations - a long-term eschatological vision no doubt, but clearly expressed in the syntax and logic of the verse. Notice the three statements in verse 19: “I have chosen him….he will direct…the LORD will bring about what he has promised,” joined together by two “so that’s.” God’s election flows through human teaching within God’s people towards God’s ultimate mission of blessing all nations.

This in itself shows that teaching (whether in church or in institutions of theological education) is never merely the imparting of cognitive knowledge, but the *shaping of character and behaviour*. The language of “walking in the way of the LORD” is common across the Torah, the prophets, the Psalms and wisdom literature.

So the *ethical purpose* of teaching in Old Testament Israel is governed by *the missional purpose* behind Israel’s existence in the first place. In the midst of the nations, *this* nation is to be *taught* how to live as the redeemed people of God, ultimately for the sake of the nations, and as part of the mission of God for the nations.

The ministry of teaching within God’s people, including theological education, is, as the Cape Town Commitment puts it, *intrinsically* missional. Its whole purpose is to serve the mission of the church. So therefore it ought also to be *intentionally* missional, since it seeks to train the people of God for their mission of life and work in the midst of the nations.

***b) Monotheism, in a world of many gods - the Mosaic outcome***

There is a strong emphasis on teaching in Deuteronomy. God’s word in its broadest sense (the knowledge of God’s mighty acts along with understanding of God’s law), must be *constantly taught to the people,* the whole people, and every generation of the people.

Moses himself is repeatedly presented in the book as the one who teaches Israel the requirements of their covenant God (to be followed by the Levitical priests, Dt. 33:10). And the primary content of Moses’ teaching was that YHWH God of Israel was *the one and only, unique and universal God, beside whom there is no other* (Deut. 4:35, 39). For that reason, the first and greatest commandment, as Jesus said, is to love that one whole single God with your one whole single self - with heart and soul and strength (Deut. 6:4-5).

And that primary love command is immediately followed by *the necessity of teaching* - teaching that is to apply to the personal realm (hands and foreheads), the family realm (the doorposts of the home), and the public arena (the “gate”).

**4**Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. **5**Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. **6**These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. **7**Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. **8**Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads.**9**Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates. (Deut. 6:4-9).

Such teaching was necessary because of the polytheistic culture that surrounded the Israelites. Monotheism, in its proper biblical sense (i.e. not just the arithmetical conviction that there is only one God, but the specific affirmation of the identity and universality of YHWH, God of Israel), is *not* an easy faith to inculcate or sustain (as the rest of the Old Testament shows). But since this crucial affirmation is both the primary *truth* *about God,* and the primary *obligation* *and* *blessing* *for God’s people* (the privilege of knowing, loving and worshipping the one true creator and redeemer God), then whatever threatens that biblical monotheistic faith must be vigorously resisted at any cost. Idolatry is the greatest threat to biblical mission, for God’s people cannot bear witness to the true and living God if they are obsessed with the worship of the gods of the cultures around them (whether in OT Israel or in today’s church).

So, the whole of Deuteronomy 4 is a sustained challenge to *avoid idolatry*, and the emphasis on *teaching* within the chapter is strong and repeated. It is worth reading the chapter carefully noting how the two themes (idolatry and teaching) are interwoven, since each is integral to the other. The way to avoid idolatry is to pay attention to the teaching; and the purpose of the teaching is to keep future generations from idolatry. The intention, goal and outcome of the teaching that God wanted to happen in Israel was to keep people from idolatry and preserve their monotheistic faith and covenant obedience.

If Israel were to be true to their mission among the nations, in such a way that the nations would ultimately come to worship the one true living God, then they – Israel - must preserve the knowledge and worship of YHWH alone. For that reason, there must be *teaching* from generation to generation of all that the God of Israel had *done* and all that the God of Israel had *said*. Teaching was essential to preserving their monotheistic stewardship, the knowledge of God that God had entrusted to Israel. The “theological education” of Israel had the missional intention of preserving their monotheistic faith for the sake of the nations who had yet to come to know this truth about the living God.

***c) Maturity, in a world of many falsehoods - the Pauline outcome***

When we talk about church growth, we usually mean numerical growth through successful evangelism and church planting. But if you had asked *the Apostle Paul,* “Are your churches growing?” I think he would not have understood the question in that way. For Paul, evangelistic growth was simply “gospel growth.” So he could write,

*the gospel is bearing fruit and growing* throughout the whole world—just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and truly understood God’s grace. (Col. 1:6).

The kind of church growth Paul prayed for was *growth in maturity*. Here’s how Paul described the kind of qualitative church growth that he prayed for in his churches.

**9**. We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives, **10**so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, **11**being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, (Col. 1:9-11).

In those few verses, Paul prays for three kinds of maturity:

1. Paul wants the believers in Colossae *to know* *God’s story* (v. 9; the will and purpose of God). That involves “head knowledge” of the whole great narrative of God’s plan revealed in the scriptures.
2. Paul wants them *to live by* *God’s standards* (v. 10). That involves their practical lives and moral choices and behaviour.
3. Paul wants them *to prove* *God’s strength* (v. 11). That involves their spiritual commitment to Christ and perseverance in spite of suffering.

So for Paul, growth in maturity could be measured: i) by increasing knowledge and understanding of the faith; ii) by a quality of living that was ethically consistent with the gospel and pleasing to God; and iii) by perseverance under suffering and persecution. And all of those would be necessary if the believers in Colossae were to participate in God’s mission in the surrounding pagan culture of their region.

But how will such Christian maturity be attained? Not surprisingly, through sound teaching by those whom Christ has gifted to the church. We could go to the Pastoral Epistlesand prove this point repeatedly through the many places where Paul instructs Timothy and Titus to be teachers themselves, and trainers of teachers,– all with a view to *opposing false teachings and practices* of all kinds. Then as today, Christian believers were surrounded by competing world-views and seductive alternatives to the true confession of faith. All kinds of false teaching were around. Then as today, the apostolic remedy and protection against false teaching was sound teaching rooted in the Scriptures.

Paul is even more clear about this in Ephesians. There he affirms that the teaching ministry within the church (within which we could now include the work of theological education), is *a Christ-ordained gifting*. Theological education is not an end in itself (that is the temptation of academia, which can easily become an idolatrous seduction), but rather *a means to an end,* namely the goal of equipping God’s own people for *spiritual maturity* and effective mission in the world.

**11**So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, **12**to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up **13**until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

**14**Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. **15**Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. **16**From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.(Eph. 4:11-16)

Let’s apply that text for a moment to the world of theological education, where future pastors are trained.

Doubtless some young graduates come out of seminary thinking they are God’s gift to the church! Well, they are right - but not in the sense they may imagine! They are not so much the gifted ones, as *the given* *ones.* God has not given *to* them all the gifts to do all *the* ministry themselves; rather God has given *them* as people (with their particular gifts) *to equip others for their ministry*.

So, the job of pastor-teachers, according to Paul (their unique ministry gifting, in other words), is precisely to equip the rest of the people of God (the saints) for *their* ministries - their many ways of serving God in the church and in the world. So, in theological education, we do not train people for a clerical ministry that is an end in itself, but for a *servant* ministry that has learned how to train disciples to *be* disciples in every context in which they live and move.

I sometimes say to congregations, “I hope you do not think that you come to church every Sunday to support the pastor in his or her ministry. It is precisely the other way round. The pastor comes to church every Sunday to support *you in your ministry*, which is out there in the world, in the front line of your every day life and work. *You* have the ministry, *you* have the mission, where it really counts. You need to be fed and taught and equipped for whole-life discipleship out there in the world, and it is the pastor’s job to do that. Make sure he or she does, and pray for them until they do!”

Are we teaching future pastors to think like that? Do we give them the missional task of training others for ministry and mission? Do we encourage and equip them to shape their preaching and teaching and pastoral ministry for that goal – to be equippers of the saints for *their* ministry? Do we inculcate in them the understanding that *their* mission is not to *do* all the mission or ministry, but to train and equip the rest of God’s people for mission and ministry in the world?

***John Stott – a neglected challenge***

This is a perspective that John Stott repeatedly pointed out through 50 years of writing (sadly on largely deaf ears). He insisted that, in biblical terms, pastoral ministry is not *the* ministry (certainly not the only one), nor are pastors the only people who “do ministry.”

We do a great disservice to the Christian cause whenever we refer to the pastorate as ‘the ministry’, for by our use of the definite article we give the impression that the pastorate is the only ministry there is… The fact is that the word ‘ministry’ is a generic term; it lacks specificity until we add an adjective.

…

There is a wide variety of Christian ministries. This is because ‘ministry’ means ‘service’, and there are many different ways in which we can serve God and people. [There follows a discussion of the events in Acts 6]. … It is essential to note that both distributing food and teaching the word were referred to as ministry (*diakonia*). Indeed, both were Christian ministry, could be full-time ministry, and required Spirit-filled people to perform them. The only difference between them was that one was pastoral ministry, and the other social. It was not that one was ‘ministry’ and the other not; nor that one was spiritual and the other secular; nor that one was superior and the other inferior. It was simply that Christ had called the Twelve to the ministry of the word and the Seven to the ministry of tables.

…

It is a wonderful privilege to be a missionary or a pastor, *if God calls us to it.* But it is equally wonderful to be a Christian lawyer, industrialist, politician, manager, social worker, television script-writer, journalist, or home-maker, *if God calls us to it.* According to Romans 13:4 an official of the state (whether legislator, magistrate, policeman or policewoman) is just as much a ‘minister of God’ (*diakonos theou)* as a pastor*.*

…

There is a crying need for Christian men and women who see their daily work as their primary Christian ministry and who determine to penetrate their secular environment for Christ.[[3]](#footnote-3)

And consequently, there is also a crying need for institutions of theological education to train future pastors to be *equippers*, pastors who have a high view of the calling and ministries of *all* God’s people, including the vast majority (98%) who are *not* pastors etc., but who are out there as salt and light in the world.

To summarize then, God has ordained that there should be teachers and teaching within the people of God:

1. so that God’s people as a whole should be a community fit for participation in *God’s own mission* to bring blessing to the nations (the Abrahamic goal);
2. so that God’s people as a whole should remain committed to *the one true God* revealed in the Bible (as YHWH in Old Testament Israel, and incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth in the New Testament), and resist all the surrounding idolatries of their cultures (the Mosaic goal); and
3. so that God’s people as a whole should *grow to maturity* in the understanding, the obedience and the endurance of faith, and in effective mission in the world (the Pauline goal).

Now then, if we think particularly of the world of theological education, and the work of Bible colleges and seminaries, the question we have to ask at this point is this:

What kind of graduates would we need to be producing from our programmes, if we wished to show that our theological education is being effective and fulfilling its biblical purpose? What should be our goal in our theological training, if we want to be faithful to the purposes for which God has ordained and provided for the teaching ministry among his people? What “outcomes” should we want to see emerging from our theological education investments?

Surely, it means that we ought to be seeing men and women who graduate and go out into their own preaching and teaching ministry in the churches, who are:

1. **committed to mission** (in all its multiple biblical dimensions): eager to participate with God in his mission and to lead the communities they serve in the mission entrusted to the church
2. **faithful to biblical monotheism**: totally committed to the God of the Bible alone, and able to discern and resist the false gods that surround us. This includes not only the ability to understand and defend the uniqueness of Christ in contexts of religious plurality (and where necessary to bear costly witness to that faith), but also the spiritual insight to discern many idolatries that are more subtle in all cultures (e.g. consumerism, ethnocentrism, etc.).
3. **marked by maturity**, in understanding, ethics and perseverance: able to do the things Paul urges Timothy and Titus to do; men and women who are taking care of their life and their doctrine, and building up others in maturity, by godly example and steady biblical teaching.

So I ask, is that actually the kind of *goal* we have in mind as we shape our curricula and construct our syllabi, and develop our lecture courses and hold our seminars and workshops – across the whole range of our theological disciplines and departments? Is that what we are trying to achieve?

Are we aiming to produce people who are *biblically mission-minded, biblically monotheistic, and biblically mature*?

If that is our aim, then one necessary component of achieving it will be to bring the Bible back to its central place both in the regular teaching and preaching ministry of local churches, and in the world of theological education in seminaries. And that leads us to our final question and answer.

1. **How can we re-centre the Bible in our theological education?**

If our theological education is to be effective in achieving the goals the Bible itself sets for it, then I believe that we need a re-centering of the Bible itself in all our ministry of teaching, and we need a more missionally integrated way of teaching it.

The Cape Town Commitment calls for this, quite emphatically, twice.

We long to see a fresh conviction, gripping all God’s Church, of the central necessity of Bible teaching for the Church’s growth in ministry, unity and maturity. We rejoice in the gifting of all those whom Christ has given to the Church as pastor-teachers. We will make every effort to identify, encourage, train and support them in the preaching and teaching of God’s Word. *(CTC IID.1.d.1)*

We long that all church planters and theological educators should place the Bible at the centre of their partnership, not just in doctrinal statements but in practice. Evangelists must use the Bible as the supreme source of the content and authority of their message. Theological educators must re-centre the study of the Bible as the core discipline in Christian theology, integrating and permeating all other fields of study and application. Above all theological education must serve to equip pastor-teachers for their prime responsibility of preaching and teaching the Bible. (CTC IIF.4.d).

So the *Cape Town Commitment,* like the Great Commission itself, brings theological education into the sphere of Christian mission, and then urges that it should be biblically rooted and centred.

In calling for a re-centering and re-integrating of the Bible, I mean two things:

* an integrated way of reading, studying, preaching and teaching the Bible itself
* *and* integrating a biblical perspective into all other areas of study.

***a) Missional integration of Biblical Studies***

The discipline of Biblical Studies has become very fragmented in many seminaries. First of all, into Old Testament and New Testament, but then also into further canonical sections of those, then further into a whole range of critical disciplines, languages, etc.

As a result, it is sadly possible for students to gain great expertise in various parts of the Bible, without having a thorough and integrated understanding of *what the Bible is as a whole.*

We need to help theological students - and ordinary Christians in our churches - to know that the Bible is

* **not** just a book a book full of *doctrines*, for systematic theologians to rearrange and order properly
* **not** just a book full of *promises*, for Christians to gain some comfort and “blessed thoughts” each day.
* **not** just a book full of *rules*, for some kind of ethical applications to the problems of life around us, by whatever system of hermeneutics we manage to get our ethics from the Bible.

Rather, God has given us his Word as a whole canon of scripture that is, fundamentally – **a story -** the grand narrative of God, creation, and the history of the world. The Bible has a coherent plot: a beginning, a problem, a promise of a solution, a climax and resolution, and final ending (which is a new beginning). The Bible is like a great ‘drama’ – in six ‘acts’ or stages. (see, Bartholomew and Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture)*

*1. Creation – 2. Rebellion – 3. O.T. Promise – 4. Gospel – 5. N.T. mission – 6. New Creation*

Reading and studying the Bible with this overarching framework in view at all times keeps us working with the direction of the text itself, and *aligned with the mission of God* (which is why this narrative approach has been broadly adopted by those seeking a missional hermeneutic).

So while, of course, it is necessary to get down deep into the exegesis of biblical texts from every part of the canon (with all the very specific and detailed work that requires, and all the disciplines we can bring to bear on the task), we must bring students back to the surface often – to survey their particular text within the wider flow of the whole narrative. What has already come before this text, where is it leading, where does it fit in the canonical framework, how is it integrated into the whole Bible story? I would love to see all seminaries teaching a required preliminary course on what it means to take the Bible as a whole, for what it is – the grand narrative of God’s mission – before getting down to the more narrowly focused work of exegetical and critical studies

What does this integrated reading of the Bible as a whole story do?

*i) It tells us the story we are in.*

We are *in* the story of the Bible - participating in act 5. We must live in the light of all the Bible tells us in its first four stages (acts 1 – 4), and in anticipation of what God will do at act 6. We live “within the story,” which means participating in the mission of God that the story is telling.

So living as a Christian is not just a matter of “applying this verse to my life” (as if my life was the central reality and the Bible must be applied in an adjectival way), but rather asking, “Where does my life fit into this great drama in a way that is consistent with the story of what God has done and plans to do? How am I implicated in this text, as a participant in the story of which it is part and to which I belong?” Those are fundamentally missional questions to ask.

*ii) It shapes our worldview*

Worldviews are basically shaped by narrative. That is true of all religions and philosophies. They have a “narrative” - by which they seek to answer questions about ourselves and the world in the past and present and what they expect in the future. The Christian faith, as a coherent worldview, answers all the fundamental worldview questions *from within the Bible story* – *as a whole* (from creation to new creation, with Christ at the heart of it). Once again, the Cape Town Commitment emphasises this narrative nature of biblical revelation and theology.

*The story the Bible tells.* The Bible tells the universal story of creation, fall, redemption in history, and new creation. This overarching narrative provides our coherent biblical worldview and shapes our theology. At the centre of this story are the climactic saving events of the cross and resurrection of Christ which constitute the heart of the gospel. It is this story (in the Old and New Testaments) that tells us who we are, what we are here for, and where we are going. This story of God’s mission defines our identity, drives *our* mission, and assures us the ending is in God’s hands. This story must shape the memory and hope of God’s people and govern the content of their evangelistic witness, as it is passed on from generation to generation.

(*Cape Town Commitment I.6B)*

So, then, the task of re-centering the Bible in the ministry of teaching, including theological education, means that we help our congregations and our students

* to inhabit the Bible story, and see it as *The Story* within which we live. We have to live in the world, but we do not live by the world’s story.
* to adopt the Bible’s wordview - in marked contrast to the worldview of whatever cultures surround us.

***b) Biblical centering of the whole curriculum***

This may seem the more challenging task, since it is inviting those who are not biblical specialists, but teachers of systematic theology, ethics, church history, pastoral studies, etc., *to see the overall biblical narrative as the governing paradigm*, for their disciplines.[[4]](#footnote-4)

This does not mean that the Biblical Studies department simply takes over the whole curriculum – any more than a missional integration means that the Mission Department takes over the whole faculty! Rather, it takes seriously our evangelical affirmation that the Bible is our sole authority for all our life and doctrine - i.e. including all that we teach.

I think this means, for example, that the teaching of *Christian doctrine* should show how the grand house of Christian theology in fact reflects the implications of every part of the revelation contained within the great Bible story. Systematic theology simply draws out the systems and themes and their implications that are built upon the whole story of what God has done and will do, according to the whole Bible. Doctrines express the truth revealed and the life required by that story, but the story has pre-eminence. That’s why it is the “canon” of Scripture.

It means, for example, that *church history* should be seen as the outworking of God’s mission in act 5 of the Bible story. The church has been living in act 5 since the day of Pentecost. So we can study and evaluate the subsequent history of the church in terms of its faithfulness or otherwise to the patterns already set in acts 1 - 4 and the expectation of act 6. We need to constantly assess the story of the church in the light of the story of the Bible – which is uncomfortable but necessary.

It means, for example, that in *ethics*, we help our congregations and students to bring every ethical issue into the light of every part of the Bible story - asking what light is shed on the issue by the implications of the great facts and truths of each section - all six acts. That is, we help them to *think biblically* about any issue, rather than be given answers to every issue.

The problem is that, in theological education, we are tempted to multiply the number of bolt-on courses on this or that new social or ethical issue that has just arisen in the world. Something else becomes “a big issue” in our context, and we feel we must add a lecture course on it to our already over-burdened curriculum, often squeezing out the biblical courses to make room. But of course, as soon as the students graduate and leave college some other “big issue” will hit them. Now they are stumped because they didn’t “take a course on that subject at seminary”.

Rather, we need to teach people how to *think biblically* about any and every issue that will arise. They need to have learned how to bring every issue into the light of all the key points along the Bible narrative and how to hear the major “voices” of the biblical canon. The Bible may not have a direct answer (chapter and verse) to the new problem, but by systematically shining the light of biblical revelation along the whole sweep of the canon on to the issue, they can generate an informed ethical response that can have some claim to being “biblical”.

I would love to see such a “whole-Bible approach” become characteristic of all theological education – across all disciplines, and indeed, of all biblical preaching and teaching that is planned over time in our churches. We should be learning together to read the Bible as a whole and to root our theology and our practice deeply in the “whole counsel of God.” We need to help our students and congregations see that the Bible is not just an *object* of their study (limited to when they are doing “Biblical Studies”, but rather that the Bible becomes the *subject* of their thinking – about everything. That is to say, the Bible is not just something we “*think about*”, but rather something we “*think with”.* The Bible informs and guides the way we think about everything else – whether in the class-room or in all the rest of life in the world.

I’d like to finish by saying, “I have a dream….” At least, I once *had* a dream, which I used to muse upon when I was the principal of All Nations Christian College in the UK. I dreamt of a “Bible College” which would be exactly and only that – a place where we would teach and study *only the Bible* together in depth, sequentially from the very beginning, and let everything else flow out of the exegesis, interpretation and application of the biblical text – inviting the experts in other disciplines to contribute as appropriate. And immediately you would be forced not only to be rooted in what the Bible says, but also to engage with all the issues that the Bible itself engages with. You would have to deal with monotheism and cosmology, issues of science and faith, the nature of humanity, the meaning and purpose of sex and marriage, the problem of evil, gender relations and disorder, creation care and ecological challenges, violence and corruption, ethnic diversity and conflict, urban development and cultural progress…

… and that’s before you even get past Genesis 1-11!

1. Cape Town Commitment IIE.1 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. These questions were very much to the fore at the Triennial Conference of the International Council for Evangelical Theological Education (ICETE), in Antalya, Turkey, 2015. See <http://www.icete-edu.org/antalya/index.htm>. The materials from the conference are available at: <http://theologicaleducation.net/articles/index.htm?category_id=77> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. John Stott, *The Contemporary Christian,* (IVP, 1991), pp. **XXX,** italics original. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. On this point, see for much more thorough analysis, Michael W. Goheen, “A Missional Reading of Scripture for Theological Education and Curriculum,” in Michael W. Goheen (ed.), *Reading the Bible Missionally* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016) pp. 299-329. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)