

Teaching Theology from a Missional Perspective

John R. Franke, DPhil
Professor of Theology, Biblical Seminary



Theological Rationale

The impulse for a missional approach to teaching theology arises from the notion of mission as a central aspect of the character of God. This idea is captured by the term *missio Dei*, “mission of God.” It suggests that God has a particular concern in engagement with the world. The idea of mission is at the heart of the biblical narratives concerning the work of God in human history. It begins with the call to Israel to be God’s covenant people and the recipient of God’s covenant blessings for the purpose of blessing the nations. The mission of God is at the heart of the covenant with Israel and is continuously unfolded over the course of the centuries in the life of God’s people recorded in the narratives of canonical Scripture. This missional covenant reaches its revelatory climax in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and continues through the sending of the Spirit as the one who calls, guides, and empowers the community of Christ’s followers, the church, as the socially, historically, and culturally embodied witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ and the tangible expression of the mission of God. This mission continues today in the global ministry and witness to the gospel of churches in every culture around the world and, guided by the Spirit, moves toward the promised consummation of reconciliation and redemption in the eschaton.

This missional pattern is captured in the words of Jesus recorded in the Gospel of John, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you” (John 20:21). God is missional by nature. The love of God lived out and expressed in the context of the eternal community of love gives rise to the missional character of God who seeks to extend the love shared by Father, Son, and Holy Spirit into the created order. According to David Bosch, mission is derived from the very nature of God and must be situated in the context of the doctrine of the Trinity rather than ecclesiology or soteriology. In this context the logic of the classical doctrine of the *missio Dei* expressed as God the Father sending the Son, and the Father and the Son sending the Spirit may be expanded to include yet another movement: “Father, Son, and Spirit sending the church into the world” (David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991], 390). In this context, the church is seen as the instrument of God’s mission and its various historical, global, and contemporary embodiments may be viewed as a series of local iterations of God’s universal mission to all of creation.

This understanding of God as missional, arising from the very character of God’s triune life, has significant implications for our conception of the church and mission as it has been understood in the West. In reflecting on the missionary expansion of the church over the last two centuries, many missiologists began to be concerned about the particular shape of this missionary enterprise. It has become increasingly clear that Western mission has traditionally been very much a European-church-centered enterprise and that the gospel has been passed on in the cultural shape of the Western church. “The subtle assumption of much Western mission was that the church’s missionary mandate lay not only in forming the church of Jesus Christ, but in

shaping the Christian communities that it birthed in the image of the church of western European culture.” This understanding of mission, rooted in ecclesiology, has given way to a “profoundly theocentric reconceptualization of Christian mission.” In the words of the authors of *Missional Church*: “We have come to see that mission is not merely an activity of the church. Rather, mission is the result of God’s initiative, rooted in God’s purposes to restore and heal creation. ‘Mission’ means ‘sending,’ and it is the central biblical theme describing the purpose of God in human history” (Darrell L. Guder, ed. *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998], 4).

The perspective has led to greater recognition of the ways in which the Western church has tended to construe and articulate the gospel in ways that are more reflective of its particular cultural context and made the extension and survival of the institutional church its priority. It leads to the conclusion that “the church of Jesus Christ is not the goal of the gospel, but rather its instrument and witness. God’s mission embraces all of creation.” (Guder, *Missional Church*, 5). The extension of God’s mission is in calling and sending the church to be a missionary church in the cultures and societies in which we participate. However, this presents a challenge in that the formation and structures of the Western church are not missional, but rather have been formed and shaped in the context of a historical and social setting which for centuries considered itself formally and officially Christian. In this context the church was intimately involved in the shaping the religious and cultural life of Western society. This situation led to what is known as Christendom, a system of church-state partnership and cultural hegemony in which the Christian religion maintains a unique, privileged, and protected place in society and the Christian church is its legally and socially established institutional form. This model of the church, and the outlooks and intuitions that attend to it, are so deeply pervasive that even when the formal and legal structures of Christendom are removed, as in the case of North America, its legacy is perpetuated in the traditions, patterns, structures, and attitudes that are its entailments. The continuance of these intuitions and entailments of Christendom, even in the aftermath of its formal demise, can be described as “functional Christendom.”

In the ecclesiocentric approach to mission that characterized the church of Western culture and Christendom, mission became only one of the many programs of the church. Mission boards became common in the Western churches and these boards were entrusted to do and support the work of foreign mission. In this context Western churches understood themselves to be sending churches, and they generally assumed that the places to which they were sending workers were the distant, foreign, pagan parts of the world that would benefit from the influence of Western culture as well as the gospel. In a similar manner many churches developed home mission programs and strategies in order to confront and attempt to hold at bay the emerging secularism of society that threatened to undermine the legacy of Christian culture. These programs often involved significant political activism as an important part of preserving the ethos of a Christian society. However, in spite of all this mission-oriented activity, the church has been slow to comprehend that mission is not simply one of the programs of the church. Instead, mission is at the very core of the church’s reason and purpose for being and should shape all that the church is and does. “It defines the church as God’s sent people. Either we are defined by mission, or we reduce the scope of the gospel and the mandate of the church. Thus our challenge today is to move from church with mission to missional church” (Guder, *Missional Church*, 6).

The move from church with a mission to missional church has significant implications for the character of theology. Like the church, the impulses and assumptions that have shaped the discipline of theology in the West are those of Christendom rather than the mission of God. All of the loci of theology are still often taught and discussed from the vantage point of early modern debates and concerns with little reference to the missional character of God and the corresponding missional vocation of the church. Courses in missions or missiology are generally taught only in the practical theology department and, apart from a generic introductory course, are often thought to be primarily for those heading overseas. Rarely are such courses taught in the systematics department and the two disciplines, missiology and systematic theology, have generally evidenced little significant overlap and cross-fertilization. If theology is to serve the life and witness of the church to the gospel, and if we assume that, as J. Andrew Kirk puts it in *The Mission of Theology and Theology as Mission* (2), “the church can only exist as truly itself only when dedicated to the mission of God, a burning question ensues: How should one reinvent theology and theological education so that they flow naturally for an integral perspective on God’s consistent will and activity in the world?” Like the challenge facing the church in moving from church with mission to missional church, so the discipline of theology, if it is to serve the church and be faithful to its subject, must move from theology with a missions component to a truly missional conception of theology.

Pedagogical Implications

Commitment to missional theology entails the ongoing interaction between the gospel and culture, and this must be part of the teaching of missional theology. This reminds us of the contextual and local character of theology, and this awareness coupled with the dynamic relationship between gospel and culture raises a challenge for the practice of an appropriately catholic theology, the attempt to teach and bear witness to the one faith of the whole church. How do we do theology that is not simply accommodated to our own cultural assumptions and aspirations? Lesslie Newbigin has addressed this question by observing that while the ultimate commitment of the Christian theologian is to the biblical story, such a person is also a participant in a particular social setting whose whole way of thinking is shaped by the cultural model of that society in ways that are both conscious and unconscious. These cultural models cannot be absolutized without impairing the ability to properly discern the teachings and implications of the biblical narrative. Yet as participants in a particular culture we are not able to see many of the numerous ways in which we take for granted and absolutize our own socially constructed cultural model. Given this state of affairs, Newbigin maintains that the unending task of theology must be to be wholly open to the biblical narrative in such a way that the assumptions and aspirations of a culture are viewed in its light in order to find ways of expressing the biblical story in terms which make use of particular cultural models without being controlled by them. He concludes with the assertion that this can only be done if Christian theologians are “continuously open to the witness of Christians in other cultures who are seeking to practice the same kind of theology” (Lesslie Newbigin, “Theological Education in a World Perspective,” *Churchman* 93 [1979]: 114-15).

The commitment to remain continuously open to the witness of Christians from other cultures who are seeking to practice missional theology, as well as to the Word of God, suggests

an approach to theology that is inherently reformist. Or put another way, a missional theology must be a reforming theology in which the commitment to ongoing reform is part of its DNA. From this perspective, the following working definition is suggested as providing the framework for an understanding of theology that is inherently missional and reforming in accordance with the nature and character of the subject of theology, the triune God revealed in Jesus Christ, and its practitioners, finite and fallen human creatures who are intended to bear the image of God in the world: **Christian theology is an ongoing, second-order, contextual discipline that engages in the task of critical and constructive reflection on the beliefs and practices of the Christian church for the purpose of assisting the community of Christ's followers in their missional vocation to live as the people of God in the particular social-historical context in which they are situated.**

Following from these assumptions, I suggest the following pedagogical implications for the teaching of missional theology:

- The doctrine of God should be taught with explicit reference to God's missional character.
- The teaching of theology should be intentional in orienting all of the topics of theology in relation to the biblical story of the mission of God and its variegated witness to this mission in a variety of genres.
- The teaching of the doctrine of the church should emphasize the missional character of the church as the community sent by God into the world to extend the mission of Jesus.
- Theology teachers should become familiar with the literature of missions and the theology of mission and be intentional about assigning it and working it into class presentations and discussions.
- The teaching of theology should give explicit attention to the way in which theological issues and doctrinal positions bear on the mission of the church.
- The teaching of theology should be intentional about the implications of theology for holistic personal formation.
- The teaching of theology should give explicit attention to the ways in which theology functions in the formation of authentic missional community.
- The teaching of theology should be intentional in its engagement with contemporary culture.
- The theological traditions of the Western church should be subjected to critical scrutiny and be intentionally decentered.
- Theology teachers should become familiar with the theological literature produced by Christians from other cultural settings and be intentional about assigning it and working it into class presentations and discussions.