PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

Christians have been learning for mission since the time of Jesus. It was one of the key objectives of his own ministry that his followers should share the message of God’s love with other people. In the immediately following generations that passion for learning was never lost, but over the centuries the missional focus gradually diminished and learning about the faith became either an end in itself or a way of training individuals to sustain the life of the church.¹ There was nothing wrong with either of these things, indeed they were the natural outcome of Christendom, a world in which all citizens were assumed to be Christians and in which intellectual endeavour in many subjects was expanding exponentially.

As Europeans explored other parts of the world, the realisation that not everyone was a Christian eventually inspired the establishment of specialist mission agencies whose concern focused on distant places where the spread of Christianity might also be a “civilising” influence on other apparently primitive cultures. In the decade following World War I public perception of the church changed significantly, but the inherited paradigm of theological education as “the method of the maintaining and perfecting of the church”² continued as if nothing had happened and theological learning happily existed in its own cultural bubble. In the early 1930s theologians were falling over themselves to align with Rudolf Bultmann’s programme of “demythologisation” apparently without noticing that at the very same moment Einstein’s research was moving science in an opposite direction, which just happened to coincide with a growing interest in psychic phenomena and the paranormal among the general public – trends that subsequently combined with other cultural factors to produce whole generations who would leave the church behind and become the mission field of the future.

That future has been upon us for at least the last 50 years, but it is only relatively recently that church leaders have woken up to the importance of being equipped for mission as well as maintenance.³ There is widespread recognition that things need to change, but we do not begin with a blank sheet – something that is true of society more widely, though it is easier to make a completely fresh start in that context just by abandoning old ways and adopting something new. In the church, however, there is a conviction that what we do today should be recognisably continuous with the past, and in working out the implications of that we tend to struggle with differentiating between the good news of God’s love in Jesus (which doesn’t change) and the cultural trappings which have communicated that message appropriately to previous generations.

Henry Ford famously declared that “history is more or less bunk”⁴ and though we might feel more comfortable with affirming that “those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it”⁵ one of the lessons of history is that prior to the 20th century our forebears seem to have known how to contextualise the gospel in their own time and place, which means that if we fail to do likewise we are not at all continuous with our own Christian past. When we ask about contextualisation in relation to theological education, though, the answer is not entirely straightforward as the context is itself ambiguous. We are in a liminal space where there is widespread agreement on the need to prioritise learning for mission and explore new ways of being church, though alongside this the paradigm inherited from Christendom survives (and in some places thrives) so there is still a need for traditional ministry styles and skills even as we look beyond what we now have in order to create new spaces in which the Spirit of God might bring to birth forms of Christian discipleship and community that can speak more convincingly into the changing culture. Though all would agree that the creation of new things is at the heart of the tradition (Isa. 43:19, Eph. 4:24, Heb. 8:13, Rev. 21:5, etc), moving from theological theory to practical outworking can be threatening because by definition the new


² The phrase used by Schleiermacher in the mid-19th century in an effort to place practical learning as an equal partner to a more theoretical approach, though in the event it was the theory that took precedence with the practical being very much application of the theory: see F D E Schleiermacher, Die Praktische Theologie (Berlin: G Reimer, 1850), 27–28.

³ A church report published in 1945 highlighted the need for evangelism, but for a variety of reasons never got the attention it deserved. See Church of England’s Archbishop’s Commission on Evangelism, Towards the Conversion of England: a plan dedicated to the memory of Archbishop William Temple (London: Press & Publications Board of the Church Assembly, 1945).


⁵ George Santayana, The Life of Reason (New York: Scribner’s, 1905), 284.
means innovation and change, and the fact that the world is itself changing at breakneck speed and in unpredictable ways only serves to elevate that threat. Some rare individuals might be capable of combining missional innovation with institutional maintenance but in essence they are different callings. This distinction is recognised in talk of a “mixed economy” of church, and therefore of styles of ministry and by inference of what learning for missional innovation might look like, though we have yet to become fully comfortable with what that means and how it might be implemented. Perhaps that is a good thing, as we can all swap notes and learn from our mistakes: my observations here are offered as a contribution to an ongoing conversation, and are unlikely to be even my own settled conclusions let alone the final blueprint for missional learning. They certainly raise questions about curriculum design and pedagogical process that cannot be addressed here.

CHALLENGES FOR THE SYSTEM

The starting point for any sort of structured learning is always going to be recruitment and selection, which puts the spotlight on the criteria that might match the diversity of the mission field with a corresponding diversity of styles and attitudes among those who engage with our training programmes. The introversion of traditional clergy is well documented, and the typical learning pattern offered in theological education suits that sort of person with its emphasis on bookishness, on solitary reflection in the library, and on personal attainment that can be assessed individually. There is of course nothing wrong with being an introvert: the first page of the Bible (Gen. 1:27) affirms that we are all made in the divine image, in all our diversity. But if church caters for only one sort of personality type, then no matter how successful we might be, we will only ever touch those sections of the population who are like us. I suspect that this has been a significant factor in church decline throughout the late 20th century, though this is not the place to explore that further. I have been involved with encouraging and facilitating creative mission for much of my adult life, and it seems obvious to me that missional leaders are generally not introverts, nor do they learn through the isolated individual pursuit of knowledge for its own sake. They recognise the need for innovation, and they know that most innovation comes about through collaboration with others. They learn through teamwork, tackling problems with colleagues and doing so in open conversations, not by retreating into libraries to come up with bright ideas that can be shared in what is often an adversarial setting of college seminars in which people pit their wits against one another in order to produce a hierarchy of winners and losers. To put it simply, if somewhat bluntly, many of the skills that characterise the work of successful missional pioneers are not highly regarded in the world of academic theology. Collaboration is of the essence in problem solving, and in many cutting edge areas of professional education (medicine, architecture, engineering, to name a few) that is taken for granted. But in theological education (and the humanities more generally) if a student works with others and incorporates their insights into her own work, she is more likely to be accused of cheating than praised for being a team player. Yet team players are what we need to be effective in mission in today’s culture.

All this can be distilled into one simple question: in identifying a missional learning paradigm, will we be guided by the past or by the future? Looking to the past in order to discover what is worth knowing, and therefore what should be taught and learned, works tolerably well in a stable culture where change is continuous with the past and to some extent predictable. Today’s world is not like that: change is discontinuous, rapid, and unpredictable, and to empower leaders in this sort of world we need to start not with the past but with the present and the future. I may not agree with Henry Ford’s opinion that there is nothing to be learned from the past, but I am more in tune with what he went on to say (and which is rarely quoted): “We want to live in the present and the only history that is worth a tinker’s dam is the history we

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6 A term originally coined by Rowan Williams, and aptly defined as “... the truth that no single form of church life is adequate on its own in the development of mission to our diverse culture. We need traditional forms of church life but we will also need new forms of church to connect with different parts of our society.” Steven Croft, ‘What counts as a Fresh Expression of Church?’, in Louise Nelstrop & Martyn Percy (eds), Evaluating Fresh Expressions: explorations in emerging church (London: Canterbury Press, 2008), 5.

7 Largely due to the researches of Leslie J Francis who has a formidable database of clergy from around the world research going back thirty years or more and reported in very many publications. For a typical report, see Leslie Francis & Raymond Rodger, ‘The personality profile of Anglican clergymen’, in John Swinton & David Willows (eds), Spiritual dimensions of pastoral care (London: Jessica Kingsleys Publishers, 2000), 66–71.

8 There is a substantial body of research exploring this question: see most recently Leslie J Francis, Howard Wright & Mandy Robbins, ‘Temperament theory and congregation studies: different types for different services?’, in Practical Theology 9/1 (2016), 29–45, and the extensive bibliography there.
make today.” The way we understand and utilise the resources inherited from previous generations must be focused through the needs and opportunities of the present and the future. I wonder if that is an application to theological education of Jesus’ teaching about law and gospel (Matt. 5:17)? It is certainly the case that, however we care to interpret it, Jesus’ message had a consistently future focus, encouraging us to imagine what we might yet become rather than languishing in what we have been. In the rest of this article I want to reflect on what that might mean in terms of learning for mission, and suggest that far from jettisoning the tradition, it will involve excavating it in more creative ways that might well reveal treasures that would otherwise go unnoticed but which can provide the foundation for a missional paradigm in a fast changing world.

To express it in a different way, what would education for mission look like if our foundational question is not so much “what do we need to know?” but “how do we need to act?” Or, if you like, what are the core skill sets and competencies that are essential for missional leaders? With 12 years of experimentation in fresh expressions of church behind us, there is a broad consensus emerging in relation to the key attributes that will equip pioneers in this missional enterprise. None of them are particularly surprising, and many of them correspond to key qualities that we should in any case already be promoting as they are fundamental gospel values.

**WHAT DO WE NOW NEED TO KNOW?**

It is almost a century since Karl Barth first spoke of the need to read the Bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other, and that requirement still holds good even if we might wish to add TV, movies, and social media alongside the newspaper. There has been a tendency to prioritise the Bible over the newspaper and in doing so we have produced whole generations of Christian leaders who know a great deal about the Bible but have very little understanding of the culture, and what they do know is often angled towards high culture rather than the sort of pop culture that is most likely to be embraced by a majority of their fellow citizens.

**A. DISCIPLESHIP**

So how much do missional leaders need to know about the Bible in order to communicate its message appropriately? I wonder if a better way of articulating this question might be to speak of discipleship rather than Bible, as the one surely embraces and includes the other. It might seem obvious that missional leaders need to be disciples, but that statement at once takes us beyond mere understanding of the Bible and places the emphasis on action and wisdom as well as knowledge and learning. To be effective witnesses in today’s world, we need to encourage the conscious combining of reflection and action: more colloquially, mission is not only about talking the talk (though it can include that) but crucially about walking the walk.

Finding an appropriate balance between the talk and the walk presents a particular set of questions in the context of any sort of educational curriculum. Whether intentionally or not, our inherited paradigm has tended to assume that theological education is about training the next generation of scholars. When I was a student, it was taken for granted that I would learn Hebrew and Greek, and do so not as a minority interest but as discrete subjects within the framework of my education. As it happens, I turned out to be rather good at both of them, and I would be the last person to argue that careful scholarship is of no value. The reality however is that for most of my peers in those Hebrew and Greek classes, it was something that they soon discarded because they never quite grasped any of it in the first place, and some of them found that such detailed study of the Biblical text, far from making them better Christians, actually distracted them from the more important business of developing a holistic understanding of their faith. Ultimately, discipleship is a bit like dancing: you won’t learn it from a book, but by living it. But there is a relationship between intellectual knowledge and discipleship, neatly summed up by Anselm (1033-1109) in the Latin motto *fides quaerens intellectum* (‘faith seeking understanding’). When he spoke of ‘faith’ he was not meaning ‘the faith’ as an intellectual entity, but rather what today we might call ‘discipleship’, that is an active following of Jesus and, as if to underline the priority of discipleship, when he wrote of the Trinity he insisted that “with whatever degree of certainty so important a matter is believed,

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9 The original context for this was most likely conversations with students, as reported in an interview in 1963: “Barth recalls that 40 years ago he advised young theologians to ‘take your Bible and take your newspaper, and read both. But interpret newspapers from your Bible.’” For the full article, see ‘Barth in Retirement’ in *Time* LXXXI/22 (May 31, 1963). http://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,896838,00.html accessed online September 20, 2016.
Nowadays there is a good deal of talk about formation and calling, but it is often the poor relation in terms of the content of theological programmes, even being outsourced to other agencies as not being academic enough to form part of a degree. This is another place where we could learn from other professionally oriented disciplines like medicine or architecture, where there seems to be no problem about recognising practical skills as appropriately academic. In our context, unless the development of discipleship is a core concern, no amount of biblical or theological knowledge is going to equip us for the missional opportunities available to us. Of course, different people find that different things enrich their spiritual development. I recall a retreat with a group of clergy where we were working on this very thing, and one person there could make no sense of all the talk of the history of spirituality, nor indeed of learning from the spiritual practices of others – until we came to a session on playfulness in which we explored colours, and that suddenly transformed everything for him. Shortly after that I decided to read through the gospels and asking one simple question of every story: what exactly was going on here, in terms of the playful human interaction between Jesus and those whom he encountered? That is a missional question and it changed the way I understood the texts, though I soon discovered that it was not generally well received in the academy (where it is perceived as “too confessional”) nor in some church circles (where it can be regarded as “too subjective”). The academy has spent the last 200 years prioritising critical questions about history and dogma, and one of the challenges in nurturing discipleship within an educational context is avoiding the temptation to turn spiritual formation into yet another purely cognitive exercise in which we learn things like the history of spirituality, or models of pastoral care, or even by sampling experiences of different spiritual practices. There is nothing wrong with any of those things, but what we should be doing is creating spaces within which an individual’s own sense of calling can be both enhanced and monitored. With very little ingenuity this is one of those points where creative use of the Biblical tradition, intertwined with personal experience, can provide a significant catalyst to that “growth in wisdom and understanding” which not only characterised Jesus’ own journey but also undergirded the way he nurtured his disciples.

B. CULTURE

Separating discipleship and culture can help to highlight particular issues, though we should never forget that discipleship itself is a culturally specific category and spiritual formation is not something that can easily be transferred from one culture to another because it is the product of interpersonal interactions at a given time and place, all of it viewed through the focus of the Christian tradition – which itself is not as simple as it seems, as the lens through which we see the tradition is also culturally determined. This poses particular challenges for pedagogical practice which there is no space to explore here. But one thing is clear: in relation to all these interwoven aspects of culture, one of the most important practical skills for today is listening. We are all familiar with the notion of the missio Dei, the understanding that mission is God’s work and our role is to identify God’s activity within our own contexts and to align ourselves with that rather than regarding ourselves as doing a good turn for an otherwise inactive God. The two-way listening to Bible and newspaper commended by Barth requires the spiritual gift of discernment to identify where God is at work, alongside skills in cultural analysis to enable us to engage effectively. To be effective in mission we need to speak in ways that make sense in the immediate context of an individual’s life as well as within the cultural context, and when we read the Bible with this in mind it has plenty to offer us. Jesus’ message focused on the possibilities for change and new life that are embodied in the terminology of “the kingdom of God” – a concept that could occupy an entire article in itself, but here I’m thinking of it in the generic terms I learned from my friend Ian Fraser who describes it as “God’s way of doing things”. Jesus consistently paid attention to his context, and so he speaks of fish and fishing when talking to a fishing community (Mark 1:14-19); with rich folks the talk is about money (Mark 10:19-31).
As we wrestle with the ambiguities of our own cultural context, we can do worse than reflect on the contrast between 2 Kings 9:30–37 where the violent death of Jezebel is depicted as divine justice, and Hosea 1:4 where the very same incident is denounced as contrary to the will of God.

C. PERSONAL CHARACTER
This is not an exhaustive list, but three things stand out as key missional characteristics:

Partnerships
One of the key lessons of the last decade or so has been the rediscovery of teamwork as a core element in successful mission. Church leaders can see this as a threat, not least because of the way it has been used as a tool for managing decline, with parishes rationalised and clergy organised into teams where the outcome is that fewer people are doing more work. Another reason why teams are often suspect is our inherited individualism, which has deep roots not only in the sort of theology that values personal salvation over against the ecclesial community, but also in academic assessment practices which can make the apocalyptic separation of sheep and goats seem remarkably benign. We have been conditioned by upbringing and education to believe that problems are solved by individuals going into their inner cave, working out solutions, and then telling others what they have decided. But wherever we look in the New Testament, we find teams at work. Jesus and Paul were both inspirational individuals who would no doubt have accomplished much had they worked alone, but they intentionally established teams and worked collaboratively not only with the members of those teams but with anyone else who shared aspects of their vision. The need for collaboration is more than mere pragmatism, and is actually a theological imperative in the strict sense of the word, based on the very character of God as Trinity and the divine action characterised as the *missio Dei*. This is another theme where the Bible can be a helpful dialogue partner, as Raymond Fung demonstrated almost a quarter of a century ago in his ground-breaking book *The Isaiah Vision*.13

Play
According to Maximus the Confessor, “we should consider our life as a game played by children before God”14 and knowing how to play is a key attribute for anyone seeking to engage missionally with today’s

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14 *Ambigua* 261-262a.
culture, whether that manifests itself as not taking ourselves too seriously or more proactively engaging in the sort of creativity that we find in the prophets and Jesus. The very mention of them highlights again the resilience of the tradition: whenever I come across those statements by Jesus about the first being last and the last being first (Matthew 19:30) I always imagine him moving people around from first to last, and vice versa, much like the holy fool of the middle ages.¹⁵

**Hospitality**

Relationality is at the heart of God, and therefore ought to be a core value of mission, showing itself in the way we value people. Writing of his own missional disposition, St Paul has no hesitation in using some very intimate metaphors: the breast-feeding mother and the caring father (1 Thess. 2:6-12). To develop that level of concern requires more than learning about theories of pastoral care because it is about personal disposition as well as professional provision. In a day when personal relationships are so disconnected – as much inside the church as elsewhere – the development of hospitable attitudes is an essential component of mission.

**IN CONCLUSION**

I have suggested here that while cultural sensitivity and awareness is vital for missional education, how we approach this can be resourced from within the historic tradition though it will require a different methodology than the one we have inherited from the immediate past, where the technicalities of critical thinking – whether in relation to the provenance of Bible books or the philosophical roots of dogma and apologetics – have regularly been prioritised over discipleship and spiritual nurture. Somewhat to my surprise, I have ended up with a threefold paradigm that might superficially look a bit like what Schleiermacher proposed using the image of a tree with roots, a trunk, and branches,¹⁶ though I would make the Bible the root, church history the trunk, and practical missional ministry the branches, and in relating them one to another I would work in reverse by beginning with the crown of the tree (branches) and view the other two from that perspective. But to do that is well beyond the scope of this article, and requires further reflection on curriculum design and a pedagogical process to match.

¹⁵ The subject of creative playfulness in relation to mission and the Bible is explored more fully in my *The McDonaldization of the Church* (London: DLT 2000), 112-132.

¹⁶ Schleiermacher regarded the roots as philosophy, the trunk was historical studies (a category that for him included Bible and systematic theology), and practical theology the branches (which was only ‘practical’ inasmuch as it concerned itself with the normative form of church life). See Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Brief outline of the study of Theology drawn up to serve as the basis of introductory lectures*, translated by William Farrer (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1850), originally published in German in 1811.
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