

## *Missional Church and the Doctor of Ministry Degree*

George R. Hunsberger, Ph.D.

Professor of Missiology  
Western Theological Seminary  
Holland, Michigan

**Abstract:** It is the thesis of this essay that educating clergy in the absence of focal attention to *ecclesiology* is insufficient. Further, it argues that it is a distinctly *missional ecclesiology* that holds particular promise for the critical moves necessary if ecclesiology is to be taken seriously. The essay offers three lines of exploration to demonstrate the kinds of critical moves implicated when a missional ecclesiology is taken seriously in advanced programs for clergy learning: *practical theology* viewed in ecclesiological perspective; *contextual theology* viewed in missional perspective; and *contextualization* viewed in eschatological perspective.

The aim of the Doctor of Ministry (D.Min.) degree is to nurture critical theological reflection on (in, for, from?) the practice of ministry. By accreditation standards, the typical student who embarks on such a degree has previously achieved a post-baccalaureate professional degree in ministry (the M.Div. or its educational equivalent) and has had at least three years of ministry experience following the degree. That is to say, students welcomed into D.Min. degree programs have generally been in, and now hold, some accountable, professional role of ministry understood in vocational terms—usually in the sense of employment. Whether ordained or not, whether for salary or by tent-making, whether in parish pastoral roles or a range of other specialized ministries, the word *ministry* in the name of the degree indicates clergy or those of a similar role and vocation.

Quite understandably, such students enter a D.Min. program seeking advanced learning and growth in a range of pastoral arts, pastoral practices, and matters of pastoral character and integrity. In a basic sense, the degree is about them and what they do. That is not to say it has no larger frame of reference – their spiritual journey and calling, the social context of their life and work, and the needs of those who comprise their ministry setting. But essentially, it is most normal for their expectations to be about what they need to learn that will improve their competencies for fulfilling their ministry well.

Equally, a D.Min. program will find it normal to give focal attention to clergy identity and practice. Our programs give special attention to the student's spiritual autobiography and sense of calling, equip students for social and cultural analysis, and nourish capacity for critical theological reflection. We nourish imagination for the character of leadership required in today's contexts, and we open up avenues for further cultivation of the pastoral arts. D.Min. education, like other graduate professional programs in theological education (M.Div., etc.), tends largely to be about who the minister is and what the minister does. There are good reasons for that to be so. And yet, there are reasons to wonder whether something very fundamental may be missed if that is the extent of it.

The publication in 2006 of *Educating Clergy: Teaching Practices and Pastoral Imagination* provided for theological educational institutions an engaging, fresh look at preferred outcomes and effective pedagogies in theological education (Foster et al. 2006). The fruit of collaborative research, the book engaged matters of clergy formation

in discipline after discipline, from the vantage point of educators in multiple religious traditions, Christian and otherwise. The faculty on which I serve found it useful to read and ponder the book together, chapter by chapter. Especially helpful was its practical imagination for excellence in classroom teaching, and we were challenged by its echoing invitation to attend to the public role of clergy, beyond the roles they fulfill in their respective religious bodies. The book served as a wonderful catalyst for reflection on our shared commitment to formative education.

However, as we moved through the book, a number of us began to have the uneasy feeling that something was missing. Conspicuous by its absence was reflection on the congregation, the parish, the religious community. It was about what clergy do. It seemed as though educating clergy for their professional roles could be done quite apart from serious attention to the identity and role of the congregations with which clergy are in one way or another related. Even with respect to the new accent on public presence, there seemed little or no imagination for a congregation's public presence, simply for that of the clergy person. This felt all the more odd since congregations already live in those public spaces every day.

It is the thesis of this essay that educating clergy in the absence of focal attention to *ecclesiology* is insufficient. This is as true for advanced pastoral learning as it is for initial formation. Further, I suggest that it is a distinctly *missional ecclesiology* that holds particular promise for the critical moves necessary if ecclesiology is to be taken seriously in advanced programs for clergy learning.

## Missional Ecclesiology

The terms need some preliminary definition. By *ecclesiology* I mean more than comparative polities or doctrinal distinctives, important as they are. I am referring to something more basic – the church’s self-understanding. Who are we, and why are we? Why are we here at this time and in this place? To what end? These are the foundational and perennial questions to which every Christian community gives some answer. Even if it cannot articulate its answer, its character of life will of necessity be embodying some sort of answer. Its answers are its ecclesiology – whether in conscious discernment or in unconsciously assumed patterns of life.

Here is the rub. It is not in question whether our students and their communities have an ecclesiology. It is more a question whether their ecclesiology is the fruit of conscious discernment and therefore commitments made and practices established. In the absence of conscious discernment and action, a community will none-the-less live its life out of some ecclesial imagination. Too often, however, that will be a default mode shaped not only by long histories but by contemporary twists and turns of powerful cultural notions about what a church is and what it is for.

Clergy surely must ask similar questions about their own identity and role. Who are we, and why are we, and to what end are we? But I submit that these questions cannot be answered with any degree of theological – or even practical – adequacy apart from an ecclesiological discernment of the communities with whom they live. Ministerial identity is an expression of the church’s reason for being, not the reverse. Clergy roles are derived from a rationale for being the church, they do not constitute that rationale.

The *missional church* movement of recent decades arose precisely around the matter of ecclesiology. On the one hand, we had lost our way. The operative ecclesiologies saw the church to be a place where certain things happen, a voluntary association of individuals acting in rational self-interest, a chaplaincy to a supposed Christian society, or in the end of it all, a vendor of religious goods and services in a religious economy (cf. Finke and Stark 1990). Each powerful, each losing its supposed benefits, each hard to shake off. All embedded together in a web of what was no longer working, which left the churches with more and more unease, feeling we had been shaped by another era, and by forces other than our birthright.

On the other hand, theological resources for a re-rooting of the church were largely depleted. As had been gradually dawning upon the churches of the West for over half a century, viewing the church as an institution that was at the same time the agent of mission and its final goal no longer served well in a world beyond the formal colonialisms upon which the church's practice of mission had rested for five centuries. More ancient ecclesial imaginations – developed in the churches of Rome and of Eastern Orthodoxy and reformulated in a variety of ways in Protestantism – helped only to a point, because they had been developed in a very different kind of world from the one we now inhabit.

The *missional church* movement, drawing upon a range of biblical and theological developments in the twentieth century, had as its seminal point of origin a careful listening again to the gospel, as if for the first time (cf. Brownson 1999). There, it was evident, was to be found what always, everywhere, provides the essence of what makes

the church *church* – its origins in the gospel, in the saving action of God in Jesus Christ (Kung 1967, 3-14). Moreover, this originating *good news* is what Jesus announced over and over again: “the kingdom of God has come near.” That is the meaning of his presence and actions, and it is on that basis that the call is made to everyone: “repent and believe in the good news” (Mark 1: 14-15). This was the message Jesus was commissioned to proclaim (Mark 1: 38) and it was the message he placed on the lips of his disciples (Luke 10:1-12). The essence of the church in any and all of its historic forms is its origination in this gospel. Every Christian community springs from it, its existence hinges on it, and its mission is set by it. It is birthed by the reign of God that in Jesus Christ has intruded from the future, and pressed into its service.

Here lie the foundations for renewing the church’s sense of identity and role. Jesus was clear in numerous ways that it was this coming of the reign of God that gives birth to the church and orients its life and vocation. As Jesus was sent by his Father, he said, so he sends us. The divine intention is clear: “repentance and the forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations. You are witnesses of these things.” (Luke 24:47-48). It is in this way that the church knows who it is, and why it is, and for what purpose it exists. The church is formed by the Holy Spirit to represent the reign of God in life, word, and deed (Hunsberger 1998). We are witnesses to the reign of God, not its makers or its owners.

Of course, there are many takes on the precise nature of the church’s witness vocation, particularly as it plays out in diverse contexts. That is why this missional assertion is not some new slavish, lockstep, vision for the church or an *a priori*

determination of its forms and features. Every community of Christ's followers will find answers unique to itself: why has God placed us *here*; and why *now*, why *us*, for what *purpose*?

Church and mission, ecclesiology and missiology, are inextricably bound together. That is what the phrase *missional church* intends to assert. It would be a mistake to leap past the ecclesiological implications of the church's God-given missional nature and focus primarily on mission activities, as some voices in the conversation seem to do. The phrase is not intended to speak narrowly about generating fresh motivation and action for fulfillment of the assigned mission, as though the church is a convenient company of prospective volunteers to be mobilized for the task. Rather, the phrase underscores that missional deeds and words arise from a community that embodies the very way of life to which its deeds and words point, a community that by its nature *is* a witness. Mere activism is not sufficient.

Equally, though, it would be a mistake for the church to stay hunkered down engaging what a missional rationale means for its identity and character, honing its inner life accordingly, as though that can be done apart from the very engagement in and with and for the world which its missional nature implicates! If mere activism is not sufficient, neither is aloof passivity. A witness community is forged in the crucible of public life and deeds and words of witness.

The sort of missional ecclesiology I am representing here, I believe, is an essential and fruitful dialogue partner for doctor of ministry education. To illustrate that claim, I offer three lines of exploration that will demonstrate the kinds of critical moves I believe

are implicated when a missional ecclesiology is taken seriously in advanced programs for clergy learning. The three relate to elements present in some way in many, if not most, D.Min. programs: *practical theology* as an academic discipline; *contextual theology* as a focal practice; and *contextualization* as a motif and rationale.

### **Practical Theology in Ecclesiological Perspective**

The D.Min. is at its foundations a degree in practical theology, in character if not in content. That is to say, not many D.Min. students will focus their program on the discipline of practical theology itself, mastering its literature and engaging issues of its definition, methods and aims. But it is in the nature of the degree to cultivate the habits and practices of practical theologizing, informed by the discipline and by ranges of corollary disciplines – theological and sociological. The integration of social research and theological inquiry lie at the core of D.Min. education.<sup>1</sup>

In his helpful book *Practical Theology: An Introduction*, Richard Osmer portrays practical theology as an interpretive art in four movements corresponding to four core tasks, each responding to a distinct question about a situation or moment in ministry practice that requires interpretation and response (Osmer 2008). In summary, they are:

- The descriptive-empirical task, answering the question, “What is going on?”
- The interpretive task, answering the question, “Why is it going on?”
- The normative task, answering the question, “What ought to be going on?”
- The pragmatic task, answering the question, “How might we respond?” (2008, 4)

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<sup>1</sup> Two recent publications make a major contribution to the issues at stake in the “integration” of social research and theological inquiry (Ward 2012 and Scharen 2012). In each volume, scholars and practitioners present essays on “ecclesiology and ethnography,” relevant not only to D.Min. work in general but to the argument of this present essay.

Understanding the discipline in this way enables Osmer to commend what he takes to be the qualities of a good practical theologian: priestly listening, sagely wisdom, prophetic discernment, and servant leadership.<sup>2</sup>

Osmer's primary concern in this book is to identify the essential nature of the field of practical theology and the work of the professional practical theologian. At the same time, he adds as a corollary that "the same structure of practical theological interpretation in academic practical theology characterizes the interpretative tasks of congregational leaders as well" (2008, 12). Only occasionally does Osmer acknowledge that practical theologizing is the vocation not only of the professional academic practical theologian and of the pastors and congregational leaders trained by them, but of the whole church, the *laos* of God. He says of "priestly listening," for example, that it "is, first and foremost, an activity of the entire Christian community, not just its leaders. It reflects the nature of the congregation as a fellowship in which people listen to one another as a form of mutual support, care, and edification." (Osmer 2008, 35).

This is precisely where a robust ecclesiology might (must!) burst more fully into the conversation. What if practical theologizing were not construed primarily as the work of the professional academic plying the trade of the guild, nor of the pastoral agent and other congregational leaders in a congregation, each in their own way providing for congregations the listening, wisdom, discernment and leadership they need? What if instead the portrait were inverted and the congregation itself were recognized to be a

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<sup>2</sup> Something akin to Osmer's model can be found in the work of many others in the field. Paul Ballard and John Pritchard, for example, construe what they call the "pastoral cycle" as a movement through four stages: experience, exploration, reflection and action (Ballard and Pritchard 1996). For a critique showing some of the dilemmas and limitations of such a fourfold structure, see Pete Ward 2008, 34-36.

theologizing community, the active agent under God that practices the art of practical theological interpretation, continuously growing its capacities for serious, contextual, and faithful listening, wisdom, discernment, and service? What if the center of concern for developing capacity for practical theologizing were to be the congregation, and pastoral agents and congregational leaders and academic practical theologians knew themselves to be in service to that?!

Of course, a vision for the theologizing vocation of the church reaches beyond the field of practical theology, and beyond ecclesiology as one of the loci of theology. It has to do with recovering a sense of the congregation *as* theologian, recognizing that the Holy Spirit creates the church to be the unique community that hears and embodies and expresses the gospel of Jesus Christ. This, after all, is what theology is, at its base. The Indian lay theologian and ecumenical leader M. M. Thomas said once in my hearing, on the heels of an intense theological discussion, "There is after all only one theological question. What is the gospel?" And it is intended that the congregation take up that question daily to discover all the nuances of the gospel that shape its own life and enable it to give a winsome expression of good news to those with whom it shares public life. Practical theology, together with other sectors of the theological curriculum, helps the church fulfill its calling to do that.

The congregation is begging for its rightful place as the acting subject of theologizing, day in and day out, in thought and in action. For a pastoral agent who gives place to the congregation's theologizing vocation, practical theology will not be what she or he does *in*, or provides *for*, or offers *to* the congregation. The pastor will

move a step farther on and seek to cultivate hearty theologizing practices in the habitual life of the congregation.

I have learned a lot from the Latin American theologian Pablo Richard about pastoral patterns that affirm a Christian community's theologizing and allow it to flourish. Some years ago, I was one of thirteen invited to participate in a three day retreat he led. Based on his experience as a trainer of Base Ecclesial Community leaders throughout Latin America, he led us through the fundamental movements of an ordinary gathering of one of the communities. He demonstrated, and later described, his own pastoral practice as both a trained theologian in the Roman Catholic Church (with a doctorate from the Sorbonne in France) and as a regular member of one of the base communities near his residence in San Jose, Costa Rica. He said that he makes a clear delineation between the way he will function in the group's gathering and the way he functions in other situations. In the group, he is one person in the circle of perhaps 20-25. He participates as they pray a text of scripture, as they analyze their reality, as they seek God's will for them, as they listen to scripture, and as they decide what to do. In the group, he is not the expert who has the answers. He is simply a participant. Outside the group, of course, he functions in his vocation as a theologian with special training and gifts for the community. He is there to interact with the directions in which their theologizing leads them, able to bring that into conversation with churches past (history) and churches scattered elsewhere across the earth today (ecumenics). He sees each of his two roles to be essential and dialogic, requiring the discipline to know which one is for now and which for another time.

Richard illustrates the selfhood of the people of God in yet another way when he writes about what he takes to be three discrete “hermeneutical spaces” for the interpretation of scripture. He defines a hermeneutical space to be

that institutional *place* where a specific interpretive *subject* gets its identity, proper to that place and different from any other subject. This space makes a certain *interpretation* of the Bible proper to that place and different from those other interpretations made in other hermeneutic *places*. Our interpretation of the Bible depends on the place where we find ourselves. (Richard n.d.)

Richard identifies two traditionally accepted hermeneutical spaces. One is the academic space, where “the subject of the Bible’s interpretation is the expert, the exegete, the biblical professor, the graduate of biblical sciences and other related sciences.” Another is liturgical space, in which the ordained priest or authorized layman reads and interprets the Bible “in the context of the ordinary teaching and magisterial function of the church.” These remain legitimate, useful, and necessary in Richard’s view. But he observes further that “The reading of the Bible in community is beginning to provide a third new and just as legitimate and necessary space for the experience of and the correct interpretation of God’s Word.” This he calls “*communitary space*” (cf. Hunsberger 2011; quoting Richard n.d.). He elaborates:

The community, inasmuch as it is a direct and representative expression of the Church as the People of God, is the space par excellence for spiritual, mystical, prophetic and apocalyptic creativity.... In this space *the subject* of the interpretation of the Bible is neither the exegete (academic space) nor the ordained minister (liturgical space) but the community itself. (Richard n.d.)

It is quite clear that Richard neither negates nor dismisses the academic or clerical roles and contributions. But he argues against the tendency for those contributions to work in a way that disallows the community's proper hermeneutical role.

### **Contextual Theology in Missional Perspective**

In the summer of 1976, I was enrolled in a D.Min. seminar at San Francisco Theological Seminary entitled "Mission and Ministry in the Local Congregation." It was taught by a New Zealander, Graeme Ferguson, then Principal of the United Theological College in Sydney, Australia. Often since that time, I have found myself returning to the careful ways he made use of case-study method in that seminar. The case method itself was not so unique at the time.<sup>3</sup> But the ecclesiological and missiological grounding he provided placed it in the much larger frame of *contextual theologizing*.

In a subsequent publication, Ferguson described the case-study method he used in this way.

The theological analysis took a familiar form, namely, first, an analysis of the phenomenon under discussion and an explication of the elements making up the situation; then a raising of the questions as to what the Christian community thought it was doing in the situation; the third element was to clarify the significant theological questions to which the situation gave rise; fourthly the group tried to bring to bear the relevant Biblical word on the situation and fifthly to focus the biblical response with the current self-understanding of the Christian community on the one hand, and with the significant questions arising out of the context on the other (Ferguson 1978, 177).

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. the case conference method commended by James D. Glasse in *Putting it Together in the Parish* (1972).

A closer look at the way he guided our use of the method will make it obvious that the fundamental movements of the case method parallel Osmer's depiction of the structure of practical theology, but also that Ferguson presses farther into ecclesial rootedness in the use of the method and probes the demanding theological work it implicates for congregations and their leaders.

### CONTEXTUAL THEOLOGIZING: THE METHOD

*The aim is not to resolve issues – but to clarify, focus, and energize.*

1. What is happening? Our stories, describing the circumstances.
2. What do we think we are doing? Our interpretations, how we *have been* thinking, theologizing – actually!
3. What is the biblical Word? The objective reference –
  - the illumining word
  - demanding obedient response
  - bringing affirmation and critique
  - within the tradition of faith
  - within the tradition of mission
  - within the tradition of God's activity.
  - A. Clarifying the theological issues.
  - B. Mustering the biblical images.
4. What difference does it make? The impact, if we believe it and follow it.
5. Then, decisions to be made!<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps most tellingly, the language of “we” and “our” signals that this model is something a community does. Certainly, we pastors in the seminar were being led on that occasion to identify, describe, and reflect upon a case in ministry practice to present to our peers for their collegial responses. But the language itself led us to prepare the

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<sup>4</sup> From class lecture notes (Ferguson 1976), as summarized and interpreted by George R. Hunsberger.

case as far as we were able in the perspective of the congregation's stories and interpretations, its theologizing and discerning. And it made obvious that while the method is beneficial as a pastoral model, it is more ultimately important as a congregation's theologizing model.

Also, Ferguson's rendering of the case method steers away from focusing on matters concerning the internal life of a congregation (though it may be used fruitfully there as well). It brings more frontally to view the circumstances, the context in which a church lives its life and calling. It pulls away from the drift toward organizational well-being as the ultimate end and wonders more about the nature of the congregation's responses within the public paths of its life. It asks what must be done there in this specific context.

Further, the language of the model signals that what is involved is a critical engagement between context and Scripture, between past stories and present challenges, between currently (and maybe unconsciously) practiced theologies and newly discerned commitments. It pursues neither solutions to problems nor strategic plans, but faithfulness to the biblical word. Ferguson underscores how challenging this is for a community.

The difficulty comes when one attempts to relate the biblical word to the significant questions in an integral manner. This is not a matter of marrying stories with stories or traditional theological responses with new questions. It is far more a question of perceiving a significant context, authentic and complete in itself, which illumines a radically different context both culturally and theologically (1978, 177).

For Ferguson, the case method he commends may itself be a “contextual theologizing,” but only meaningfully so when practiced by a community defined by its relation to the gospel and by its missionary calling. He is careful to present a textured ecclesiology as the frame for grasping what is at stake when we speak of contextual theologizing. That frame may be summarized in the following way:

#### ELEMENTS IN THE LIFESTYLE OF A MISSIONARY CHURCH

- ❖ Confidence in the Gospel
  - A community under grace: a history / an acceptance / a place.
  - “My church is the result of the gospel!”
- ❖ Openness to the Future
  - Participation in the mission (the “future”) of God.
  - At the cost of every part of the tradition.
- ❖ Life in the Present
  - Neither hiding in the past nor escaping into the future.
  - Affirming discipleship in the broken here and now community.
  - “Moving into the future, making the past”

*a people...together (summoned)...with a history...moving into the future (sent)*<sup>5</sup>

The church is both the result of the gospel and participates in its representation in the world. It lives “with a history” and “into the future.” It has been summoned and sent. And this by a God who has enacted grace, who fulfills purposes, and who pledges a future. Congregations who depend on such a God find their participation in God’s mission unfolding in the daily routines of contextual theologizing.

D.Min. studies by their very nature have to do with both context and theology. But the manner of their interaction is not self-evident, nor can methods for relating them be

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<sup>5</sup> From class lecture notes (Ferguson 1976) as summarized and interpreted by George R. Hunsberger.

neutral. A neutral method rests on believing something as much as does any other method. As has been suggested by others, at the very least it makes a difference whether or not a sociological and/or theological methodology rests on a sense of divine agency.<sup>6</sup> Certainly, Ferguson's missionary ecclesiology does, and he illustrates how important a contribution such a missional perspective provides for bringing context and theology into fruitful and relevant engagement.

### **Contextualization in Eschatological Perspective**

It is characteristic of our various efforts in D.Min. education that the context in which ministry takes place will be accented. We encourage students to discern and interpret social context. We cultivate their capacity for social analysis, ethnographic exploration, narrative inquiry, action research, and more. We guide them to attend to the cultural character and social location of the congregation or institution in which they are ministering, and of the wider social reality in which those institutions are located. We do this in the belief that such things matter. The context of ministry has something to do with the meaning of ministry.

We also seek to foster critical theological reflection of the sort that unites social knowing with theological knowing. As was intimated above, contextual theologizing that unites the two is never as easy as it would seem. Natural instincts would tend toward drawing on biblical theological elements that seem to have similarity to aspects

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<sup>6</sup> In his book *Practical Theology and the One Body of Christ*, Thomas Hastings probes what he calls "the cultural captivity of contemporary North American practical theology" in which, he argues, it has come to be nearly impossible to attend in any serious way to divine agency (2007, 1-11).

of the context and therefore have capacity to lend meaning, or using elements in one's particular theological tradition to determine or justify particular responses in the context. Less natural are the processes for a deeper dialogue of text and context in which there emerges both fresh theological insight and more nuanced contextual interpretation. But that is precisely what we seek to nurture.

In the field of missiology, this is called contextualization. The term itself was coined in the early 1970s by Third World theologians participating in a study program of the Theological Education Fund (TEF), an ecumenical agency seeking the advancement of theological education in the Third World. They coined the term in order to thicken the texture of previous understandings of the cross-cultural interaction of the gospel with human cultures. Shoki Coe highlighted the shared concern. He and his companions felt with increasing force the difficulties associated with the dominant metaphor of the time, "indigenous, indigeneity, indigenization." They believed the metaphor was a static one, that "indigenization tends to be used in the sense of responding to the Gospel in terms of traditional culture. Therefore it is in danger of being past-oriented" and incapable of accounting for the "new phenomenon of radical change" in the post-colonial world (Coe 1976, 20).

Missionary theologian Lesslie Newbigin summarizes what was at stake in the shift to new terminology:

Older discussions used such terms as indigenization, adaptation, and accommodation. The reasons for dissatisfaction with these words are twofold. In the first place they have tended to relate the gospel to past traditions and to underestimate the forces in every society which are making for change. In the second place they have sometimes

seemed to imply that what the missionary brought with him was the pure, unadulterated gospel, and that “adaptation” was thus a kind of concession to those who had not the advantage of having a Christian culture.... The word “contextualization” seeks to avoid both these dangers and to direct attention to the need so to communicate the gospel that it speaks God’s word to the total context in which people are living and in which they now have to make their decisions. (Newbigin 1989, 142).

The operative phrases are these: “total context,” and “their decisions.” Recognizing such accents as these in the more rigorous missiological sense of the term, it is amazing how empty contextualization sounds in many popular appropriations of the word. It is not uncommon to hear someone say about their innovative ministry initiative or new form of church, “We are contextualizing the gospel to reach a new generation” or “The church has to contextualize itself to the culture of the people it desires to reach.” The use of the term trades on its apparently self-evident rationale for doing things differently, for adapting traditional forms of words, for introducing new musical styles, for re-configuring forms of Christian community, and for all things innovative. But in the end, it seems the word is used for little more than “fitting” the message of the gospel or styles of being church to the preferences and comfort zones of a particular people group. Its function is little different from the way the notion of contextualization is now being picked up and utilized in marketing theory such as that espoused by Ron Rogowski and Stephen Powers: “in order to succeed in today’s digital environment, firms must deliver smarter, more customer-centric interactions that feel like they are tailored for each user. How? Through contextualization: tailored, adaptive, and sometimes predictable digital experiences” (2013).

We have to ask: What is the way of the gospel? What is the way of God in the movement of the gospel from one person to another, from one society to another, from one culture into another? What is the way of the Spirit who oversees and empowers that dynamic? One thing it is not is marketing.

What quickly becomes apparent in the popular uses of the idea of contextualization is that the notion of culture is a thin one, having more to do with surface expressions than substance or depth or significance. Absent is a grasp of what anthropologists help us to understand about what constitutes the culture of a given people. Nor does the conversation reflect a wider grasp of the social currents of change and ambiguity that comprise a context – as was the concern raised by the TEF theologians. “Total context” calls for something deeper, something bigger than immediate observables to which the gospel can be fitted so that it sounds and feels relevant.

What is also missed is the shift Newbigin signals with the phrase, “their decisions.” Contextualization, in his sense of it, has to do with a shift with respect to the acting subject who does the contextualizing. While it has implications for someone transmitting the gospel, its emphasis is on those appropriating it.<sup>7</sup> It is fundamentally about the decisions of the people to whom the gospel comes – whether in a faraway society or a generational portion of a society close at hand. The gospel addresses them and calls for conversions in their ultimate loyalties. The receiving people are the ones who most indelibly discern the meaning this gospel has for their culture’s beliefs and

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<sup>7</sup> Lamin Sanneh offers the particular language used here. Instead of interpreting the history of the worldwide spread of Christianity from the perspective of “the Christian discovery of indigenous societies,” and thus stressing “external transmission,” he commends interpreting it from the perspective of “the indigenous discovery of Christianity,” stressing “internal appropriation” (Sanneh 2003, 55).

practices. They will see how it comes to bear on their context, and how their context illumines meanings in the gospel others may have missed. The Holy Spirit leads them to put this gospel into their own words, and form faithful practices that indwell it. Inevitably, their words and practices will be uniquely particularized (“inculturated”) in terms of their culture and context, while bearing the distinctive marks of loyalty to Jesus as Lord of all.

A messenger (a youth pastor, a worship leader, a church planter, an evangelist, a chaplain) must of course do what can be done to communicate the gospel in terms comprehensible in the linguistic and cultural frameworks of a people. But in the end, the messenger knows that the form of witness to the gospel he or she is able to give has itself been formed in and by his or her own culture. The ultimate work of establishing the way the gospel “contextualizes” itself in another particular culture, the messenger will understand, lies with the Holy Spirit who brings about life-giving faith in the hearers and leads them to authentic ways to express and embody the message.

Newbigin stresses this point, recognizing how much the encounter of gospel and culture is alive in every place, among every people. This is true for those in the West, no less than anywhere else. It is a theological implication of the incarnation to recognize this. “Neither at the beginning,” he says, “nor at any subsequent time, is there or can there be a gospel that is not embodied in a culturally conditioned form of words. The idea that one can or could at any time separate out by some process of distillation a pure gospel unadulterated by any cultural accretions is an illusion” (Newbigin 1986, 4).

This point is lost on many in the popular conversation, who add an emphatic disclaimer (“We are not changing the gospel...”) to their declaration of contextualizing intent (“...we are merely translating it into language people can understand”). But translation is never *merely*. The gospel is always expressed in some culture’s terms, and every gospel translation produces a fresh expression of it. Missiologically grounded contextualization theory affirms that the Bible is “that body of literature which – primarily but not only in narrative form – renders accessible to us the character and actions and purposes of God” (Newbiggin 1986, 59). That origin does not change. But contextualization theory recognizes that the gospel’s transmission is always in translation, always in the form of words of some human culture’s way of speaking and thinking. When that is recognized, contextualization provides a more hearty sense of the ongoing theologizing life of every community that believes and bears the gospel it has heard from faithful witnesses across some boundary of culture and language. It describes the perennial conversation in which every Christian community is daily engaged, an inner dialogue between the gospel and the culture it shares with all others in its social space. Its public witness among others derives from its own inner dialogue.<sup>8</sup>

Contextualization rightly understood, I suggest, is not pragmatic but eschatological. By that I mean that contextualization unfolds in the momentum of the mission of God. It is the vocation of every Christian community. By it, the gospel takes up residence in culture after culture, welcoming the gifts of every nation. Contextualization moves by

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<sup>8</sup> See Hunsberger 1996 for a more extensive treatment of the manner in which the church sits both on the culture side and the gospel side of the gospel-culture encounter.

the impulse of the trajectory set by the good news – the fulfillment of the purposes of God for the healing of the nations and the reconciliation of all things.

When Shoki Coe and his TEF companions coined the term “contextualization,” they also coined another term that marked their proposals as eschatological: “contextuality.” “Contextuality,” Coe says, “is that critical assessment of what makes the context really significant in the light of the *Missio Dei*. It is the missiological discernment of the signs of the times, seeing where God is at work and calling us to participate in it” (Coe 1976, 21). In one respect, this may relieve those who feel the daunting nature of the task to ‘know the context’ – as if it must be known exhaustively before any response may be made! More importantly, however, it provides an angle of critical reflection, a discriminating principle that focuses what is most essential to discern about the context. What is it in this context that is really significant *in light of* the mission of God, i.e. the coming reign of God. Knowing a context hinges on knowing its relationship to what is coming in the end. This is what it means to say that contextualization is eschatological.

If the question commended by Coe and his companions is asked early and often, then contextual *theologizing* is inherent in the process from the outset. It doesn’t have to be *brought in* somehow at the end. Social knowing and theological knowing are of a common bolt of cloth.

## **Conclusion**

It is from the African continent that a concluding word may helpfully be added. It comes from Jurgens Hendriks of Stellenbosch, South Africa, who has for a number of

years led an important coalition of theological schools in the southern African region. The name of the coalition suggests its orientation: Network for African Congregational Theology (NETACT). In the context of his work in NETACT and on the Faculty of Theology of Stellenbosch University, Hendriks has sought to define a methodology for “doing theology in an African context,” which he construes to be “a personal and congregational way of living.” He summarizes the methodology in the definition he proposes for doing theology:

- Theology is about the discernment that takes place in faith-communities
- That leads to their active involvement in church and society
- This being their reaction to the presence of a triune, missional God
- Who speaks to us through scriptures and tradition
- In our context
- And who beckons to us from the future (Hendriks 2004, 34)

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