

Theological Education as Mission

Christopher J. H. Wright*

Abstract: The Great Commission clearly specifies “teaching” as one key element of the church’s mission. Yet theological education (as a significant dimension of the church’s teaching function), is often sidelined by those committed to mission, and theological educators themselves often fail to see the missional significance of their calling. This paper challenges these failures and explores what goals and outcomes, according to the Bible, should be the fruit of faithful teaching in church or seminary, using Abraham, Moses, and Paul as paradigmatic examples.

INTRODUCTION

Who are we (as Christians) and what are we here on earth for? These two questions are the simplest way I have found to help Christians understand the identity and mission of the church. To answer them from the Bible means to understand how God called his people into existence in order that we should participate with God in his great agenda for the world—the blessing of all nations and the ultimate redemption of all creation. At its simplest, a biblical ecclesiology must be missional. We are God’s people created and called by God for God’s purpose and God’s glory, both in history and in the new creation. The Cape Town Commitment puts it like this:

God calls his people to share his mission. The Church from all nations stands in continuity through the Messiah Jesus with God’s people in the Old Testament. With them we have been called through Abraham and commissioned to be a blessing and a light to the nations. With them, we are to be shaped and taught through the law and the prophets to be a community of holiness, compassion and justice in a world of sin and suffering. We have been redeemed through the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and empowered by the Holy Spirit to bear witness to what God has done in Christ. The Church exists to worship and glorify God for all eternity and to participate in the transforming

* Christopher J. H. Wright, Ph.D., is Global Ambassador and Ministry Director, Langham Partnership, London, United Kingdom.

mission of God within history. Our mission is wholly derived from God's mission, addresses the whole of God's creation, and is grounded at its centre in the redeeming victory of the cross. This is the people to whom we belong, whose faith we confess and whose mission we share.¹

The church of today, then, 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 participate in God's mission in the world, for the sake of God's redemptive purpose 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 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 the teaching of 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.

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, "the ministry of teaching", I intend it to have a broad meaning. It includes the regular preaching of pastors in churches, other church-based courses of study and training, and also the formal world of theological education in Bible Colleges and seminaries. This includes all the ways, formal and non-formal, short-term, and long-term—in which the teaching ministry can take shape within the church.

THE BIBLICAL IMPORTANCE OF TEACHING AMONG GOD'S PEOPLE

The Bible provides robust support for this conviction:

The Old Testament

"The Old Testament is the oldest and longest programme of Theological Education." This remarkable affirmation was made by

Theological Education as Mission

Professor Andrew Walls in an unpublished presentation given at the Mission Leaders Forum at the Overseas Ministry 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”). He gave his people priests as teachers of the Torah, and 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 always a return to the teaching of God’s word. God’s people were supposed 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.

Jesus

It is no surprise then that Jesus spent years doing exactly the same—constantly 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 was 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. Teaching was at the heart of Jesus’ mission and ministry.

Paul

The importance of biblical teaching in the missionary work of Paul can hardly be missed. There is his personal example of spending nearly three years with the churches in Ephesus, teaching them “all that was needful” for them, as well as “the whole counsel of God,” and combining that with systematic teaching in the public lecture hall (Acts 19.8–10, 20:20, 27). There was his personal mentoring of Timothy and Titus to be teachers of the Word. There was his mission team, including Apollos whose primary training, gifting and ministry was in church teaching. Apollos’s missional curriculum in Corinth included Old Testament hermeneutics, Christology, and apologetics (Acts 18.24–28). And Paul insisted that his own work as a church-planter and Apollos’s work as a church-teacher (watering the seed) “have one purpose” (1 Cor. 3.8). Evangelism and theological education are integral to each other within the mission of the church.

The Bible as a whole, then, highlights the importance of teaching and teachers within the community of God's people—teaching that is rooted in, and shaped by, the Scriptures and which in turn brings health and maturity to God's people and shapes them for their missional life in the world. 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.

The Cape Town Commitment carefully expresses this vital link:

The New Testament shows the close partnership between the work of evangelism and church planting (e.g. the Apostle Paul), and the work of nurturing churches (e.g. Timothy and Apollos). Both tasks are integrated in the Great Commission, where Jesus describes disciple-making in terms of evangelism (before 'baptizing them') and 'teaching them to obey all that I have commanded you.' Theological education is part of mission beyond evangelism.²

The mission of the Church on earth is to serve the mission of God, and the mission of theological education is to strengthen and accompany the mission of the Church. Theological education serves *first* to train those who lead the Church as pastor-teachers, equipping them to teach the truth of God's Word with faithfulness, relevance and clarity; and *second*, to equip all God's people for the missional task of understanding and relevantly communicating God's truth in every cultural context. Theological education engages in spiritual warfare, as "we demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ" (2 Cor. 10.4–5).

A) Those of us who lead churches and mission agencies need to acknowledge that theological education is intrinsically missional. Those of us who provide theological education need to ensure that it is intentionally missional, since its place within the academy is not an end in itself, but to serve the mission of the Church in the world.

B) Theological education stands in partnership with all forms of missional engagement. We will encourage and support all who provide biblically-faithful theological education, formal and non-formal, at local, national, regional and international levels.

Theological Education as Mission

C) We urge that institutions and programmes of theological education conduct a ‘missional audit’ of their curricula, structures and ethos, to ensure that they truly serve the needs and opportunities facing the Church in their cultures.³

D) 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.⁴

THE MISSIONAL GOALS OF THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

Since theological education is an integral part of the wider ministry 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?⁵

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.

Abraham: Teaching for Mission, in a World of Many Nations

Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation, and all nations on earth will be blessed through him. 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. (Gen. 18.18–19)

In a world going the way of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 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 instruct and 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 create a nation chosen in Abraham and taught by him? 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. Abraham is the launchpad of the mission of God.

There is, then, a *universal and missional context* here to the teaching mandate given to Abraham. Notice that Abraham was to instruct 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. This long-term eschatological vision is clearly expressed in the syntax and logic of verse 19. There are three statements in verse 19 joined together by two "so that's." "I have chosen him, *so that* he will direct . . . *so that* the LORD will bring about what he has promised," God's election flows through human teaching within God's people towards God's ultimate mission of blessing all nations.

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 many 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. That fundamentally missional purpose of teaching surely still applies to the goal of theological education within the church.

Moses: Teaching for Monotheism in a World of Many Gods

There is a strong emphasis on teaching in Deuteronomy. 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. And then 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') (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 only one God exists, but the

Theological Education as Mission

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 that 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 missional 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 for the sake of the nations who had yet to come to know this truth about the living God.

Paul: Teaching for Maturity in a World of Many Falsehoods

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' (Col. 1.6).

The kind of church growth Paul prayed for was *growth in maturity*. Here's how Paul describes the kind of qualitative church growth that he prayed for in his churches. In Colossians 1.9–11 Paul prays for three kinds of maturity.

- i. 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.
- ii. Paul wants them *to live by God's standards* (v. 10). That involves their practical lives and moral choices and behaviour.

iii. Paul wants them *to prove God's strength* (v. 11). That involves their spiritual commitment to Christ and perseverance despite 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? Through sound teaching by those whom Christ has gifted to the church. Paul instructs Timothy and Titus to be teachers themselves, and trainers of teachers, with a view to *opposing false teachings and practices* of all kinds. Then as today, Christian believers were surrounded by competing worldviews 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 very 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. This combination is the main thrust of Ephesians 4.11–16.

The unique ministry gifting of pastor-teachers, according to Paul is precisely to equip the rest of the people of God 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.

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 own calling is not to *do* all the mission or ministry themselves, but to

Theological Education as Mission

train and equip the rest of God's people for mission and ministry in the world?

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

- a) 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);
- b) 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
- c) so that God's people as a whole should *grow to maturity* in the understanding, obedience and endurance of faith, and in effective mission in the world (the Pauline goal).

The question we have to ask of our theological educators at this point, then, 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 these biblical objectives? 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 pastoral and teaching ministry in the churches, who are:

- a) 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.
- b) 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, nationalism, etc.).

c) 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*?

THE CONTEMPORARY NEED OF THE CHURCH

The *Cape Town Commitment* identifies several ways in which we, as Christians, have failed to live up to our calling.

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.⁶

What has contributed to this 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

Theological Education as Mission

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 missionally focused Bible 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. Here is an extract from a document I found among his papers, dated 1996, expressing his personal vision for the work of Langham Partnership (which he founded).

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. But it is very close to how the Apostle Paul also saw the primary task of those who were appointed as elders and pastors within the churches. After all, 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 Titus 1.6–9.

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. 2.2,15; 3.15–4.2; Tit. 2.1–15). 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 give very careful attention to two primary things. a) *personal godliness* and b) *ability to teach the Bible*. 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.

Theological Education as Mission

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. And good comprehensive training for pastors should undoubtedly pay attention to all of these in some measure. 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).

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. That in itself would go a long way to restoring the missional nature of the church to a more central place in the overall objectives of theological education. After all, whether as churches or as institutions of theological education, our primary aim is surely to be co-workers with God in the great cosmic mission of God himself, in God's strength and for God's glory.

Endnotes

¹ Cape Town Commitment I.10a. This is the statement from the Third Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization, Cape Town, 2010.

² Colossians 1.28–29; Acts 19.8–10; 20.20, 27; 1 Corinthians 3.5–9

³ The Cape Town Commitment IIF.4

⁴ The Cape Town Commitment IIF.4. 2 Timothy 2:2; 4:1–2; 1 Timothy 3:2b; 4:11–14; Titus 1:9; 2:1 (biblical references are part of the original).

⁵ 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

⁶ Cape Town Commitment IIE.1

