Enabling Congregations to Become Theological Communities

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KEY-WORDS: Adult Christian Education, social responsibility, worship, fellowship, community, priesthood of all believers, discipleship, narrative, contextualization

Introduction
At the height of the ‘Adult Christian Education’ movement which swept through churches around the world a generation ago, Findley Edge proposed the idea that every local church should be a miniature theological seminary.¹ He envisaged a new period of growth in faith as a result of all people being engaged in biblical study and reflection upon many practical implications of their faith, ranging from the nature of the church through to skills in pastoral care and evangelism. Edge saw a great need for the church to become a mature community, conscious of its identity and purpose: ‘It is imperative that we become a people who understand who we are, who God is, what God is about in the world and what God is calling us to be about in the world.’² Outlining the core curriculum of the local church as theological seminary, Edge identified five areas: Bible, theology, church history, missions and ethics.³ In fact, however, most local churches do not see themselves as theological seminaries. On the contrary, there is much to suggest that pastors and local church leaders see theology, church history and

2 Edge, The Greening of the Church, p. 37.
3 Edge, The Greening of the Church, p. 181.

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many aspects of biblical studies as irrelevant to their concerns.  

Stanley Grenz and Roger Olson challenge the contemporary church with their small book, *Who Needs Theology?* Their answer is that every Christian needs theology in order to live as a disciple of Jesus. But this idea can make sense only when theology itself is seen as directly related to the living witness of Christians, individually and collectively. They begin with a distinctive description of theology, which conveys this purpose and relationship:

Christian theology is reflecting on and articulating the God-centred life and beliefs that Christians share as followers of Jesus Christ, and it is done in order that God may be glorified in all Christians are and do.  

Here, theology is seen as enabling people to discover and articulate the nature of their shared life and beliefs as followers of Jesus. When seen in this way, it is difficult to imagine why any Christians might object to theology!

Edward Farley has written extensively on the history of theological study and has documented the shift of theology from its natural environment, the churches, into the formal contexts of the academy or university, and away from the life of the people into the formal and professional training of pastors or 'ministers'.  

As a result of these changes, theology is seen as something pastors study prior to or at the beginning of their life in ministry. Here the 'banking' view of knowledge contributes to the perception of theology as a body of information stored up and then used (or ignored) when the person moves on from study to practice, from theory to action.  

If theology is to make a constructive and enriching contribution to church life generally, and not just to the training of pastors before their life in ministry, we must move beyond some of the negative perceptions and polarizations to see how the very life of every local church itself involves theological tasks—most fundamentally the challenge of living with and responding to God.

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*A constructive possibility: a vision of the church with God*  

Doing theology can assist the local church to become a community of biblically formed and socially responsive Christians, continually engaged in discerning the presence and call of God to them and, both individually and collectively, responding in worship and service. These are the characteristics of a healthy church and these should be the objectives of theological work within local church communities.

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4 Evidence that theology and biblical studies are considered by some pastors to be 'unhelpful' in ministry is presented by Gilbert Rendle, 'Reclaiming Professional Jurisdiction: The Re-Emergence of the Theological Task of Ministry', *Theology Today* 59.3 (Oct. 2002), pp. 408–420, p. 417.


The most crucial ingredient in this vision of a church is the notion of being *biblically formed*. I have carefully avoided the term ‘informed’ here, preferring the word ‘formed’. What is crucial here is the need to avoid an idea of the Bible as offering us information, which we may seek to discover, learn, teach and ‘apply’. The contemporary paradigm of knowledge as information implies that the person who possesses the information is in charge, because of their expertise. Instead, I am drawing upon a New Testament idea of God’s word indwelling each of us and all of us. ‘Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly’ (Colossians 3:16). This verse has two crucial features. First, it sits within Paul’s teaching about a spiritual style of living. Clothed with love, with Christ's peace dwelling in our hearts, we are asked to live in compassion and humility. We are also asked to allow, to permit, Christ’s word to dwell in us, with all its depth and riches, and it is thus that the Christian community will be able to be thankful, to teach one another in wisdom—all this is a collective life-style, not an individual achievement—and to express this life in thanks and praise. The element of the *passive voice* is crucial here; this word of Christ is not something we control or possess. It is the word of Christ, which is to dwell within us and to do its work within us. A biblically formed community is, then, one which seeks to be indwelt by Christ’s word and spirit, its life formed by his will and way.

A second vital feature of this community is that it will be *socially responsive*. As Jesus himself came to the people and “went about doing good” (Acts 10:38), so too the Christian community is not one which hides in a holy huddle. It is called to be leaven in the society and a light for the world. Christian obedience is not only to be lived within the community of the church but is to be practised within the wider society. To do so, the church must be socially aware and responsive. Again this is not just a matter of having information. Rather it is about being constructively engaged, responding to a social situation (of need, opportunity or protesting wrongs) in light of the word of Christ.

These elements, biblical formation and social responsiveness, presuppose a conviction about God. The life of the church indwelt by the word of Christ and responding to social situations in the light of that word is a life engaged with God. Here we are speaking of a living God who is present and dynamic, a God who is active both within and beyond the church. The living God of the scriptures is a God who does new things and calls on the people to see these possibilities and to respond in hope (Isaiah 43:19, for example). Therefore, to know God requires more than the study of the past, whether it is texts from the past (the Bible) or doctrinal formulations from the past. Those forms of study, rightly understood, call forth knowledge of the living God in the present. In this vision of the church the ‘authority’ rests with God in the present, not with what God has said in the past only. The reason we attend to God’s revelation in the past is in order to discern God’s presence and call now. This is where authority lies: in God’s call to be responsive, faithful, active and hopeful in the present. In discerning this call, the church is guided by the authority of the scripture and its continuing call in the present, rather than by the tradi-
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ations and formulations of the church in the past. This is not to say that past formulations are negated or unhelpful, but rather that a premium is placed upon being responsive to the scripture in the present. This is our authority here and now, because God is present and active, calling us to faith now.

As a consequence, in this vision of the church the knowledge of God is the privilege and task of all the people. All the people are invited and enabled by God’s Spirit, given and signified in their baptism, to discern the presence and call of God. All the people are to be immersed in the life of God, to live their baptism as a way of being in the world, individually and collectively. As such, all the people are called and enabled to see where God is active in their place, their relationships and their community. All are called to name God, not simply to speak about God but to identify God, to say what God is like and how God is moving, calling, giving and asking, comfort and redeeming people, sharing in their struggles, provoking new ventures, and so on. This is what theology means: to know and name God, to discover who God is with and for us, and to see our lives and our world in that light.

This church and these people will, then, live in tune with the Holy Spirit, whose life in the world is to make Christ known and to evoke the life of a community in which Christ dwells as word of life. A people alive to the Spirit will live, at least partially, in conformity with Christ. His word and way will bear fruit here, as the harvest of the Spirit.

We can bring these tasks of the church into focus by suggesting several questions which can serve as criteria to guide a theologically aware Christian community. The church should continually be asking itself:

- Where is Christ moving in our situation?
- What is God saying to us, now?
- What is the Spirit calling us to take notice of, to respond to, to discover or do, in conformity with Christ?
- What then shall we do—individually, collectively and cooperatively?

Getting from here to there: what we can do.

It is vital to recognize that only God can evoke these things. They are the gifts and fruits of God the Holy Spirit. But we can allow these things or we can resist them.

To begin, we need to recognize that all Christians are theologians, though not all in the same ways. Some know God more intellectually; some more emotionally; some use words; some are not able to articulate their knowing in words but speak eloquently in deeds of service and love. All know God and show forth the truth and wisdom which has been given to them. All are ‘theologians’. Some will resist this name; some are more intentional than others about trying to understand their faith, others ‘just get on with it’. But all have insights and contributions to make to a community which is biblically formed and socially aware, in its response to the living God.

To unpack this shift from the ‘professional’ view of theology to the vision of all people as theologians, several other elements are crucial. First is a rediscovery of the priesthood of all Christians as central to the character of the
church. While we regularly affirm this idea, we do not seem very clear about what it really means. The central idea is drawn from the teaching of 1 Peter 2:5–9. It offers a vision of the whole church, collectively, as a priesthood. The entire Christian community is a royal priesthood. This is a collective image and draws upon ideas of the nation of Israel as a priestly kingdom (see particularly Exodus 19:5, 6). The new people, the royal priesthood, are to act out their faith, to show forth the ways of God. This is a priesthood of overt, social and communal life-style.

The Protestant Reformation introduced a renewed focus on the idea of the priesthood of all the faithful. For Luther, every Christian has an equal part in the priesthood of the church and thus all have a part in the church’s crucial activities, preaching and teaching, baptizing and sharing communion, praying and growing in faith.' Furthermore, all have a vocation, a calling. All are to offer their lives, no matter what work they do, as parts of the collective priesthood of the church. Not all are called to be pastors in the church, but all are called to lives of ministry as the church. This ministry may be worked out at the office or school, shop or sportsground, as much as the work of a pastor or preacher. In all these vocations, we are to exercise the priesthood of the whole church. This vision of the church sees all the people as being the church wherever they are, not only when we are gathered 'at church'.

I find it helpful then to speak of the life of the church as an ebb and flow between the gathered church and the dispersed church. Neither on its own is 'the real church'. The church is and must be both. The church gathers for worship, for fellowship and support, teaching, fun, fund-raising, collective service and mission activities, and so forth. The dispersed church includes all those other things we have mentioned already: home life; neighbourhood; local, national and international citizenship; recreation; work; commerce; education; leisure, and more. In these activities, we act as individuals and we participate in many other communities and sub-cultures. Here too we are 'the church'. And in both dimensions, gathered and scattered, we are seeking and serving God, knowing God and contributing to the continuing theology of the church.

It is crucial to this vision of the church, then, to say that God is not known only in the gathered life of the church. God is present and may be known in many places and forms, and thus it is the task of the whole church to discern this presence and to name God, to know what God is doing and to ask the critical theological, ethical and churchly question: what therefore is God calling us to be and to do, in response to God's presence and way in our situation?

One consequence of this collective priesthood is that we can see the gathered life of the church as a continuing conversation, in which all the people can be engaged. From their daily lives of activity and spiritual discernment,