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Enabling Congregations to Become Theological Communities

Frank Rees

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

1 Findley B. Edge, *The Greening of the Church* (Waco: Word Books, 1971).

2 Edge, *The Greening of the Church*, p. 37.

3 Edge, *The Greening of the Church*, p. 181.

Frank Rees, *TheolM*, PhD (Manchester), is the Dean and Professor of Systematic Theology at Whitley College, the Baptist College of Victoria, in Melbourne, Australia. He has pastored local churches in Australia and more recently has served as 'Theologian in Residence' at a number of other churches. His research interests include contextual approaches to Christology and Ecclesiology, and he has an interest in developing theological work in cooperation with colleagues in the Asia-Pacific region. He serves on the Doctrine Commission of the Baptist World Alliance and has been President of the Australian and New Zealand Association of Theological Schools. Along with many journal articles, he edited and contributed to *Fair Dinkum Ministry: Stories of Authentic Australian Spirituality and Struggle* (Spectrum Publications, 1999); his most recent book is *Wrestling with Doubt* (Liturgical Press, 2001).

many aspects of biblical studies as irrelevant to their concerns.⁴

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.⁵

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'.⁶ 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 polarisations 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.

A constructive possibility: a vision of the church with God

Doing theology can assist the local church to become a community of *bibli- cally 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.

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.

5 Stanley J. Grenz and Roger E. Olson, *Who Needs Theology? An invitation to the study of God* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1996), p. 49.

6 See particularly Edward Farley, *Theologia: the fragmentation and unity of theological education* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983).

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-

tions 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, comforting 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 cri-

teria 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 re-discovery 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.⁷ 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,

⁷ Luther expressed this idea in a number of places, but most explicitly in *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (1520). See *Luther’s Works, Volume 36*, edited by Abdel R. Wentz (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), especially pp. 138–141.

the people come to worship and to share the needs and concerns of their lives. But here they also encounter the word of God preached and shared in the common life and story of the church and together, through preaching, prayer and discussion these many stories of God are woven into one conversation and one discovery of God's presence and way in the present time and situation. This conversation is the theological life of the local church.

It is important to recognize that we are not here advocating a church life which ignores the past and abandons the historic wisdom and formulations of the churches in earlier times. To do so would be foolish and would produce a repetition of so many of the mistakes we imagined we could avoid by ignoring that history. What is necessary here is the theological freedom to receive the wisdom of the past without being bound to fixed forms or structures. Indeed, one of the great gifts of the discipline of theology is precisely to preserve that wisdom and to pass it on, ideally in ways which do not seek to bind the church to the past but rather use that wisdom to inspire and guide the church to be free for God in the present. The church's tradition can be seen in terms of fixed formulae and a fossilised faith. When it is, it is rarely a help and if this is what theology sees as central then most people will find no value in it. But if the history of our faith is seen as the story of a living tradition of people like ourselves learning from God and offering their wisdom to us in our own journey, it may be a rich resource of inspiration and guidance.

The central task: Reading the Bible together

Evangelical Christians seek to be people who read the Bible together, in order to be formed by it as followers of Christ. That is to say, they seek to be people in whom the word of Christ dwells, in whom the Spirit is evoking conformity to Christ and in whose lives, individually and collectively, the way and purposes of God are paramount.

To fulfil this fundamental purpose of knowing and responding to God, it is essential that we re-discover the Bible and its place in the life of the church, not just in individual Christian lives. The Bible does not primarily offer us information, even information about the life and words of Jesus (though of course it does this!). Gaining 'Bible knowledge', in the sense of information is not the central purpose here. Rather, what we are seeking is encounter with God, in a way that shapes and directs our lives, individually and corporately.

Markus Bockmuehl has written of the biblical texts as having 'an implied reader', who is always a disciple.⁸ The Bible implies readers who are seeking God and seeking to live in response to God. God has so guided the authors of the Bible that the focus is always upon what is ahead of us: the text is calling us, the readers, forward. James McClendon has articulated a similar

⁸ Markus Bockmuehl, 'Reason, wisdom and the implied disciple of scripture', in David Ford and Graham Stanton (eds), *Reading Texts, Seeking Wisdom* (London: SCM Press, 2003), pp. 53–68.

view, in summarizing what he sees as the distinctively 'baptist' style of being the church, which he distinguishes from the 'catholic' and 'protestant' styles.⁹ McClendon proposes a hermeneutical principle which encapsulates the baptist stance: 'the present Christian community is the primitive community and the eschatological community'.¹⁰ In this view, a contemporary group of disciples is in effectively the same situation as the first hearers of the gospel. They are equally competent to receive and respond to the biblical call and invitation, allowing themselves to be directed by the text and by the Spirit towards God's promised future.

Discipleship, then, is the critical factor in our reading and this is what must characterise our communities of faith. Becoming theologically aware is really the same thing as becoming communities of disciples who read the Bible together and seek to respond to God's presence and call. Disciples always are learners. We are always in the situation of seeking guidance, wisdom, insight. To seek God through the study of scripture is also to be directed to the world, to our situation: it is to see that God is present not only in the past but is active, inviting, healing, challenging, enabling, in the present. The Bible points us forward to what God is doing in the world and calls us

to participate in this way of life, a life with God.

To become a theologically aware community is to engage, centrally, in the kind of biblical reading which not only 'studies' the text but allows the text to speak to us and direct us towards what it promises. This allows the word of the Scriptures to have active authority in our lives and communities. It sets our priorities and direction. To discern this, we will need more than textual study. We need also the guidance of the Spirit and thus the collective sharing and decision of the community. The authority of the Bible is exercised through our reading and studying, praying and discussing together, and through this process coming to a decision. This affirmation of God's word and calling to a community, in their situation and time, is what it really means to speak of the 'authority' of the Bible. Here the word of God is really directing and forming our life together, our life with God.

It is important to recognize that reading the Bible together in this way will give rise to some difficult questions. It is crucial that pastors and leaders have an appropriate sense of the role of theology as a *critical* discipline and are able to ensure that the negative connotations of such 'criticism' are avoided or overcome. What is called for is a constructive exploration of the situation of the community, not in terms of a negative critique. Though there will be a need for prophetic protest in some situations, maybe all situations, the primary focus must be upon the positive invitation of God, the good news which calls us forward. In this sense, reading the Bible together calls for a critique of our situation and

9 McClendon purposely uses lower-case letters to distinguish his styles of church community from the names of specific denominations.

10 James W. McClendon, *Systematic Theology, Vol 1, Ethics*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986), p. 31.

of our own response to that situation and to the promise and call inherent in the word of God. We must consider what we are called to do and to become and thus what we are called to change, to leave behind or to challenge, in order to go with the way of God.

Some examples of what might be done to become theologically responsive communities

Here I would like to identify and explain briefly a number of possible activities which, in various situations, might be used to encourage and nurture the kinds of biblical responsiveness described above. In no sense is this an exhaustive list and always these activities need to be adapted to a local situation. Most I have seen to be very helpful in a variety of situations.

1. *Preaching, teaching and small group studies* should all be directed toward the overall purposes we have described. This requires planning, purpose and leadership, to encourage appropriate emphases. Here the central purposes and themes must be:

- Christian life as discipleship;
- Church understood as discerning community;
- Priesthood of all believers affirmed as the collective responsibility;
- The mission of the dispersed church seen as theologically significant.

The crucial factor here is seeing the text as a living word in the present and seeing the present alive with the same reality, the same God who is revealed in the text. As a result, pastors and teachers will encourage all partici-

pants to see themselves as engaged in a living theology. Faith and life, theology and practice, thus come together and affirm one another.

2. *Church life as story-telling*: A vital expression of a theologically aware and responsive community is the sharing of stories about God and God's presence. Here are a few possibilities:

- 'Insights' segment in services: very short talks by people, sharing where God is present, what God is like, in their daily lives, at work, home, neighbourhood. History segments which relate the story of this church, this place, these people;
- Church reports written and told as the story of theological response: that is, the story of the church year told as a story of people with God;
- The history of each church written as the story of theological response;
- Similarly, new proposals for mission activities, church programs and other developments in the local community can be presented in terms of the continuing story of the church's engagement with and response to God.

3. *Specific activities encouraging spiritual awareness*:

- Workshops responding to God's presence in our daily experience;
- Taking an 'exegetical walk' around the local church's neighbourhood: discovering who is here and what is happening, and relating these activities to theological themes, biblical stories;
- Some introductory classes in biblical imagination: reading the Bible in ways that connect stories with our living experience now: where is God, who is God, what is God like

in this passage? Where is God, who is God, what is God like in our situation now? What guidance does this reflection offer for our living?

4. Providing specific opportunities for theological study, in a wide range of activities and levels:

- For Deacons, Elders or other leaders: a workshop describing the priesthood of this local church, and exploring how the gathered life can contribute to the dispersed and total priesthood, and how the dispersed life can be expressed in the gathered life;
- Some classes, forums, films, workshops on specific and theological ideas: what does it mean to be a disciple? what is the church? living with questions; living with difference;
- Making available short papers on specific topics, and encouraging people to read them;
- Identify some internet resources, such as transcripts of radio talks, or short papers, appropriate for people to read;
- Establish an on-line forum for discussion and response to studies, sermons, etc.;
- Invite a college teacher to be a scholar in residence for a month—and perhaps do this every year, with a variety of contributions;
- Hold one weekend per year which is a ‘teaching’ weekend;
- Encourage those interested and capable to engage in tertiary study of the Bible and theology;
- Invite a theological college to conduct a diploma or degree class on site at your church, in an area of interest, such as biblical studies, pastoral care, mission, theology,

spirituality, etc. etc.

In addition, many of these same activities may be used in encouraging a deeper social awareness. Here too a wide range of resources, speakers and materials may be judiciously used to stimulate and encourage responsiveness. Not least of all these resources will be the daily experiences, at work and at home, of the people themselves. When they discover that their experiences are welcomed as contributions to the spiritual life and discernment of the church, they will become very positive and pro-active agents in this process. It will no longer be necessary for pastors to ‘push’ the issues or try to stimulate awareness.

Unlike Findley Edge’s proposals, I have not suggested a ‘curriculum’ as such for the local church and its developing theological awareness. Rather, I see it as the task of the leadership within each local community to discern together those things which will nurture that community’s life with and in responsiveness to God and its mission in that context. There are many resources and many supportive guides for those who seek them. What I do not recommend is that pastors and leaders adopt a program or pre-packaged course of studies from any other place and use it without first relating it to their own people and situation. To do that is to avoid the responsibility of leadership and the great excitement of working together as a theological community. It may seem easier, but in effect it impoverishes the church. The challenge, then, is for pastors and leaders to become facilitators of the life of the church as a biblically formed, socially aware and theologically responsive community.