“The Christians’ Callings in the World”
Pastoral Formation for Missional Vocation

Darrell L. Guder

This challenge of rethinking a seminary’s academic mission in our changed social context has led a cluster of North American seminaries to join together in a process of research and experimentation, asking the question, How does the seminary prepare its graduates for faithful ministry in the changed context in which we find ourselves today?

In the last decades, the world of higher education has been preoccupied with the theme “outcomes.” Given the cost and the demands of advanced education, there is enormous pressure on the academy to generate clearly defined outcomes, to plan their educational programs with these outcomes as their objective, and to validate their efforts with evaluation procedures that assess whether or not those outcomes have been satisfactorily attained. Only by virtue of such demonstrations of accomplishment can the continuing investment in higher education be justified. The canons of accreditation have thus, in the last years, been defined by the priority...
of outcomes formulation and assessment. Since theological seminaries are part of
the world of higher education, and want to be recognized as such, they are affected
by these expectations. For many academic disciplines, this emphasis upon out-
comes and their evaluation is not overly problematic. But for theology and aca-
demic theologians, it is a real challenge. Theological seminaries educate men and
women to serve as pastoral leaders in the church. This academic guild has under-
stood that the “outcome” of its educational work is the credentialed candidate for
ordination. The master of divinity degree is the standard academic credential for
ordination to pastoral office, and it is in most theological institutions the largest
program. This is still true, even though the range of possible professional options
after seminary has expanded, and in many seminaries today only about half of
the graduates actually proceed on to congregational ministry in some form. How,
then, does the seminary or school of theology and ministry determine whether its
formation of such pastoral leaders has been carried out successfully? How does
one define the academic formation of church leaders as an academic “outcome”?
And, to name the greater challenge, how does one credibly evaluate what one has
accomplished?

**Academic Formation and Outcomes**

It can be argued that the outcomes of seminary education cannot be determined
until years after commencement. One has to look at the ministry that a graduate
does in order, slowly and carefully, to determine whether or not the academic
formation was sufficient to the task—whether the graduate’s life and work validate
his or her (costly) theological education. It is only after the graduate has worked
ten or more years in the ministry that such an evaluation is possible. Until recently,
that has not been a particular problem for the administrators and professors of
theological seminaries. They build, after all, on centuries of experience, during
which the theological understandings of ordered ministry and its practice have
developed within well-developed structures—that of the established Christian
church with the privileges and protections of official partnership with the state
and society. The theology and practice of ordered ministry (“office”) are defined
by the various ecclesiological traditions that have developed over the centuries of
western Christendom. Of course, those theologies and practices of ordered ministry,
while remarkably stable, have gone through major changes wrought by events
like the Protestant Reformation, the Council of Trent, the Wesleyan revivals, and
the separation of church and state in many western nations. But those called as
experts in the various theological disciplines (Bible, church history, doctrinal
theology, practical theology) to teach future pastors have inherited and worked
with a relatively stable set of understandings of what pastoral leadership requires
by way of formal educational preparation. The professors of seminaries could
legitimately claim to understand what their graduates needed to know and what skills they needed to have in order to function within the institutional churches of western Christendom. The established structures of Christendom governed the outcomes of theological education. The ordination standards of a particular church or denomination defined what was expected of the seminary, and if the schooling resulted in candidates’ passing their ordination examinations, then the outcome was validated as satisfactory, and the system was clearly working.

**Paradigmatic Change in the Church**

The fact that those stable structures of western Christendom are, depending on the particular context, gradually or rapidly disintegrating constitutes a profound challenge to that system and those assumptions. The ecclesial world into which seminary graduates go today is characterized by rapid and often traumatic change. The “career path” of the Master of Divinity is no longer either clearly defined or guaranteed. The future shape of the institutional church, especially the vast range of Protestant denominations, cannot be defined in advance. It is not an exaggeration to speak of the phase in which western Christianity finds itself at a time of “paradigm shift,” often spoken of as “the end of Christendom.” As the secularization of society has developed in ever-increasing stages, the study of this phenomenon has become a dominant theme among, especially, sociologists of religion (Martin, 2005 and 1969).

The challenge is not merely one of sociological investigation of processes of change in the way that religion functions in western societies. The issues are fundamentally theological and focus upon the basic understandings of the meaning and purpose of the Christian movement within human history. In the missiological debate spanning the twentieth century, a seismic shift took place in the theological understanding of the church and its task, especially in western contexts. To summarize what is by now a broadly held consensus, the church can no longer understand its own institutional maintenance as its reason for being. Rather, the church must understand itself within the larger theological context of God’s mission for and throughout the entire world. The church can no longer think of itself as an end in itself but rather as part of God’s work of healing and reconciliation of all creation. This paradigmatic change in the church’s theological self-understanding parallels and interacts with the phenomenon of contemporary secularization: in a relatively short period of time, the western world, which once described itself as “Christian,” has “secularized” and become again a mission field, and a particularly difficult one. The challenge to the churches descended from and shaped by Christendom is to become a “missionary” church in these mission fields. For that to
happen, the theological formation of the churches’ leaders will need to be rethought.

*The Christians’ Callings in the World*

This challenge of rethinking a seminary’s academic mission in our changed social context has led a cluster of North American seminaries to join together in a process of research and experimentation, asking the question, How does the seminary prepare its graduates for faithful ministry in the changed context in which we find ourselves “after Christendom.” In the preliminary stages of this process, Catholic Theological Union, Fuller Theological Seminary, Luther Seminary, Princeton Theological Seminary, and for a while Yale Divinity School explored the issues related to this challenge as they expressed themselves in the distinctive ecclesial and academic culture of each institution. The participant found that, in general, there was widespread awareness among seminary faculty and administrators that the social and ecclesial context of ministry was changing rapidly, the student populations we were teaching were also changing, and the outcomes of seminary education needed to be reviewed and probably reformulated in light of those findings. There was also the candid admission that these insights were *not*, in general, leading to major reshaping of seminary curricula or educational outcomes. The dominant culture of these seminaries was still shaped by the legacy of Christendom. It began to become clear that the challenge was going to be one of changing that culture!

With the help of an initial grant from the Lilly Endowment, representatives of the five schools (in the process, Duke Divinity School replaced Yale Divinity School) investigated, debated, drafted, and ultimately consolidated their findings into a major grant proposal submitted to Lilly under the project title, “Christians’ Callings in the World.” In this preliminary process, a theological consensus emerged which shaped the project design that ultimately resulted. This consensus is represented by the focus upon “Christian calling,” and it reflected major convictions that characterized the missiological discussion that had been going on both within late western Christendom and in the global church since the 1910 Mission Conference in Edinburgh (Bosch, 336; 457–467). The focus upon calling (or vocation) stressed that the church was the result of God’s action, who calls together a people to serve his purposes for the world. This called-out people, the *ecclesia* (the core concept of that term is “calling”), exists to serve as the Spirit-empowered witness to God’s saving purposes accomplished in the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ. Those purposes are focused upon the world, and the church is sent (“mission” means “sending”) into the world as “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people,” with the express purpose that it may “proclaim...”
the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Pet 2:9). This movement toward a “missiological ecclesiology” is a major shift in the way the Christian movement has understood its institutional shape and action. Whereas those earlier stable structures of Christendom assumed that the church’s purpose was primarily its preservation and maintenance, it was now becoming clear that the church as Christ’s body existed to continue his ministry as his witnesses, as “Christ’s letter to the world” (1 Cor 3:2-3). For the participating seminaries, this consensus around the theme of calling meant that the longstanding focus upon the graduates’ theological competence and ministry skills was going to be subject to profound revision.

One substantive aspect of the research and drafting process was the “baseline study” conducted with four of the schools by Robert Wheeler (Catholic Theological Union). In intensive conversations with representative groups on each campus, Wheeler accumulated a textured account of the strengths and weaknesses of each institution’s engagement with the missional challenges confronting the churches which they served. In an exercise led by him, each of the seminary groups formulated a definition of the “Christian Calling in the World” as, in their view, it might be formulated in each institution (these formulations were not official statements of the seminaries but rather an outcome of the baseline study discussion conducted by Wheeler). The four texts are instructive:

- Catholic Theological Union: “Baptismal calling of the Christian to engage in secular activity intentionally as a disciple of Christ.”
- Princeton Theological Seminary: “The Christian calling is to bear witness to Jesus Christ in everything, to everyone, in every way.”
- Luther Seminary: “God calls all Christians through the Gospel to participate in the creative and redemptive mission of God in the world.”
- Fuller Theological Seminary: “God is present in the world reconciling the world to himself in Jesus and gives to us a calling through the Spirit to participate in God’s ministry of reconciliation.”

These four formulations all disclose the shift from a focus upon the institutional church as the point and purpose of theological education, toward God’s mission in and for the world and the church as its instrument, sign, agent, and witness—sent into that world. This consensus is seen in the language of “secular activity,” “bearing witness to Jesus Christ . . . in every way,” “participating in the creative and redemptive mission of God in the world,” “participating in God’s ministry of reconciliation.” If this thrust outward toward and in the world defines the church’s purpose and action, then what does that mean for the understanding and practice of leadership within the church? How do the various traditions of ordered ministry relate to this ecclesiological shift? Most importantly, how does this reorientation
of the purpose of ordered ministry within a church called to “sentness” relate to the task of theological formation of ordained ministers?

**Vocation as Dominant Theological Motif**

As the drafting process advanced, informed by Wheeler’s findings as well as many other contributions from representatives of the (by now) five schools, the thrust of the envisioned research project began to coalesce. Not only did the theme of calling (vocation) emerge as the dominant theological motif for the understanding of the church. That emphasis upon calling was clearly to be understood to be corporate before it was individual—it has primarily the called community, the *ecclesia*, in view. The called community is most concretely experienced in the local congregation (Bosch, 378–381). The calling of each Christian person to become part of God’s missionary people incorporates that person into the called community (many agree that this is the primary purpose of baptism). The purpose of every called community is to continue the witness to Christ which brought it into existence in the first place. This is fundamental to the apostolic faithfulness of any particular Christian community. Each community carries out that witness in two interactive ways: through the visible practices of the community as a public event and through the witness of each member in his or her particular “sentness.” Thus, the project planning group began to emphasize the importance of the apostrophe in the project title: Christians’ calling in the world. This emphasis constituted a critique of the dominant individualism of much western Christian thought which not only has neglected mission in its ecclesiologies but has also tended to emphasize the individual and personal aspects of the salvation of God, at the expense of the good news that God’s love purposes the healing of the entire creation.

The research proposal that emerged out of this process has an unavoidably polemic dimension. “The goal of the grant, therefore, must be to change our schools’ cultures in order to support Christians’ calling in the world” (“Narrative Proposal [NP],” 8). The need for that change is demonstrated by an “irony” that characterizes theological education in this period of late or post-Christendom:

At the heart of this grant proposal, then, is an irony, one that every minister experiences and one that theological schools have until now neglected. On the one hand, theological educators teach that God works through the lives that God’s People lead outside of the church walls. But, on the other hand, theological schools invest in students who will devote the bulk of their efforts to doing labor that happens within the church walls. (NP, 1)

The crux of the proposal is the reorientation of understanding of the purpose of the church’s gathered life, and thus of its ordered leadership when gathered.
The church exists primarily for the purpose of witness to God’s love in Christ to be carried out in the world into which it is sent. In the words of the NP, “Seminaries believe that the work that ministers do on Sunday morning within the church walls should prepare the People of God to participate in the Mission of God throughout the week” (2). For the theological formation of such ministers, this changed understanding means that the outcome of the seminary educational process is not merely the competent graduate. The outcome is the equipped people of God, scattered in the world, serving God’s mission “among the nations.” The gathered church is, then, not an end in itself but essentially related to what happens when its membership is scattered. This is the crucial outcome of theological education that needs to define the curriculum and the pedagogy of the seminary. But how can that happen? How can the “lay apostolate” (to use a Roman-Catholic term) or the “priesthood of all believers” (to use a Reformation term) or the “theology of the laity” (to use a contemporary ecumenical term) become the intentional focus of theological education? It is the intent of this research project to investigate the entire educational process in our seminaries and to propose ways to change it so that laity equipped for witness in the world will be the articulated and guiding outcome of our academic efforts. We are assuming that ministers “have the responsibility to equip the People of God to do the work of mission” (NP, 2). Now how will they be equipped for that responsibility by their formation as masters of divinity?

**Reorientation of Seminary’s Goals and Outcomes**

In the process of developing this proposal, the drafters agreed that there were four streams of inquiry that contributed to this reorientation of the seminary’s goals and outcomes: vocation, mission, the work lives of Christians, and the ecology that nurtures every Christian. The engagement with these streams has shaped the proposal but not exhausted their discussion. In the implementation of this proposal in the five institutions, these areas of inquiry will continue to be probed. They serve as thematic tools to analyze what our curricula currently intend and accomplish, and they provide insight for the revision of curricular goals and pedagogical methods. They present an opportunity for faculty from all disciplines to interact with the “call for a change of culture” by drawing their various areas of content and methodologies into discussion with these themes.

In each of the traditions represented by the participating seminaries, there are distinctive resources and insights linked to these themes. Part of the research process now ongoing is to draw out these distinctive resources and make them a formative part of the institutional discussion about its goals and outcomes. There is a rich theology of vocation to be examined. The challenge is to move from discussions of vocation that treat the theme in isolation to an engagement with Chris-
Christian vocation that integrates our understandings of God’s saving purposes for creation, God’s actions in calling a people to serve those purposes, the purpose of that calling and its concrete impact upon Christian life and practice, and the significance for the church of its definition as a “called” community. This will entail study of calling in the biblical narrative. Understandings and practices of calling that have emerged over the history of the church will need to be investigated both as resources and as problems. It is particularly important in the theological formation of ministers that the understanding of general calling be well developed before focusing upon the specialized calling of particular people (ordained “officers” of the church). There are links to be made between this discussion and the meaning of baptism as general ordination to Christian service. Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s radical reclamation of discipleship as a calling is one of many resources for this undertaking. Karl Barth’s insistence that vocation be understood as an essential aspect of the theology of reconciliation, together with justification and sanctification, will be a provocative challenge that could enrich the process. If the desired outcome of the process is the equipping of the members of God’s people for their calling in the world, then the task for the minister will be to facilitate and guide the formation of members so that they understand themselves as called in every dimension of their lives.

**Christians’ Calling as “Sentness”**

The engagement with the theological theme of calling inevitably merges into the discussion of mission. The outcome of the missiological discussion summarized above has been the understanding that God’s calling is to God’s mission, that to be called is to be sent. The calling to be a witness to Jesus Christ (Acts 1:8) is translated into action by Christian living and acting in the world that demonstrates God’s love made real in the good news of Jesus Christ. The biblical understanding of “sentness” is comprehensive: there are not some activities and practices of the Christian life in which witness happens. Rather, the entire life of the Christian is claimed by God as evidence of God’s love in action. To understand calling and “sentness” in this way will have broad implications for the formation of ministers. The challenge begins within the theological seminary. One of the unavoidable questions that this project must raise in our five institutions has to do with the way in which the seminary’s life embodies the centrality of calling and “sentness.” How do we equip each other for our shared vocation as Christ’s witnesses in our life as an educational community? Seminary is not preparation for a ministry that will happen later; but is already an arena for the practice of Christian calling as “sentness” to one another. Thus, our investigation of Christian calling as it relates to our syllabi and pedagogies will need to be expanded to its relationship to our life together, our decision-making, and our corporate behavior. If our graduates
are to serve as catalysts for communities of called and sent witnesses, then their first practical training for that task is given in the seminary community in which they are studying.

The stream of reflection on Christian witness in the workplace is informed by a great deal of literature that needs to be part of the project’s implementation. There is a tendency to separate the sacred and the profane that obstructs responsible Christian witness in the world of work. The culture of the gathered congregation needs to be transformed so that its members recognize that what they do together is directly related to how they live their lives when scattered in the world. The process of making disciples happens in the gathered church so that its members can continue their apostolic witness in their daily places of ministry. For the minister, this will mean biblical and theological formation that equips members to see themselves and to understand their lives as agents of God’s love in the world. It will require a different kind of conversation in the gathered church: not a retreat from the challenges and problems of weekday lives but an honest engagement of those challenges in prayer, biblical formation, and worship. How do we equip future ministers to lead congregations in such a way that the members are being equipped to live out their callings in their diverse worlds? The answer to that question will profoundly shape how we teach preaching, worship, sacramental practice, biblical formation, doctrine, pastoral care, and congregational administration. If the congregation understands itself a called and sent community, then everything it does when gathered relates to how its members function as witnesses when scattered.

The ecology of vocation has to do with the distinctive networks of seminaries, colleges, congregations, denominational agencies, and even the parachurch organizations, that shape and enrich the Christian’s life. As part of the project, we are investigating how formation for Christian calling can be enriched by creative ways to integrate congregational ministry into the classroom and the classroom in field education. For some of our institutions, there are important linkages between colleges that send students to our campuses that could be intentionally strengthened through emphasis upon Christian calling and the equipping of missional equippers.
In the initial phase of this five-year project, the participants analyze their institutions’ curricula and goals in light of the commitment to the formation of congregational equippers for Christian calling. They examine already-existing resources in the explicit and implicit curricula of their schools for the focus upon Christian calling. They are encouraged to envision and attempt innovations that will translate this theological agenda into the students’ formation, and they have resources provided to assist them in doing this. Working in teams within the institutions, and in the annual gathering of all the teams, the project participants support and advise each other in their various experiments. Together with the provision of resources for experiments, there is also the critical feedback and the encouragement to take risks—factors that are essential to constructive change. The methodology envisioned can be described as the cultivating of an “intrapreneurial community of practice and a strategy for cultural change,” by fostering rigorous analysis and creative innovation through intentional focus upon the theological commitment to Christians’ calling in the world.

Opportunities to draw colleagues into the process will be sought. If the goal is to change the culture of the institution, then this will only happen as these convictions about the formation of our graduates as equippers for lay ministry become a shared contagion. Thus, the experimentation should lead intentionally to integration of the findings of the experimental phase into the seminary’s culture: its drafting of its goals and objectives, its formulation of course design and syllabi, and its assessment of its work as evidenced by the graduates who are equipped to function as congregational equippers. Finally, the project foresees intentional dissemination of its findings and initiatives so that seminary education in general can be helped more effectively and faithfully to “equip the saints for the work of ministry.”

The “Christians’ Callings in the World” project is a bold challenge to traditional expectations of the outcomes of theological education. It “seeks to strengthen the ability of theological schools to prepare graduates who, in turn, prepare all of God’s People for their worldly vocation” (“Proposal Summary Worksheet,” 2). The outcome of seminary education is, thus, not the competent graduate so much as it is the congregation equipped by that graduate so that its members can be “Christ’s letter to the world.”

References


“Narrative Proposal.” Unpublished essay submitted to the Lilly Endowment by a working group made up of representatives of the five seminaries, entitled “Christians’ Callings in the World,” as part of the grant application.

“Proposal Summary Worksheet.” Unpublished document submitted to the Lilly Endowment as part of the “Christians’ Callings in the World” grant application.