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WHY I DON'T HATE SCHOOL ANYMORE:
THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION AS MISSION

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This is the installation address given by Dr. Lee Beach on the occasion of his formal installation to the faculty of McMaster Divinity College on March 16, 2011.

Coming to the role of Assistant Professor of Christian Ministry at MacDiv is a special honor for me because this is my alma mater. I didn't need to think about whether to accept this role for very long. It took me half a second I think. I probably should have paused and requested time for prayer and deliberation before giving my answer, but Dr. Porter had barely got the invitation out of his mouth and "yes" was coming out of mine. The reason for such an immediate response is that I am so proud of this school. I think it is a special thing to graduate from this institution. I have been a part of McMaster Divinity for seven years, and being appointed to faculty here is a tremendous honor.

For some who have known me a long time this appointment may be a bit of a shock because I have not always had a positive relationship with academics. When I was a kid I hated school. I mean I really hated it. I would pretend to be sick to avoid going to school, concocting elaborate schemes and using desperate measures to try to convince my mother that I was too ill to attend classes. Of course my ploys rarely worked, so I usually showed up at school as required, putting in as little effort as possible. My high school career was no better; however my academic negligence began to catch up with me. In the province of Alberta where I grew up, the school system went to grade twelve. In the province of Ontario in those days the school system went to grade thirteen. We Albertans were glad that grade thirteen was not deemed necessary for graduation from high school. But for

me, after my twelfth year, a thirteenth year was deemed necessary if graduation was going to be an option!

In my last year of high school I came to faith in Jesus Christ and decided that I wanted to pursue pastoral ministry as a vocation. For me this meant attending Canadian Bible College for training. In my mind this was merely a means to an end. I wanted to go into full-time ministry and an undergraduate degree in theology was the appropriate way to go about preparing. Four years and I would be done with school forever! My first semester was a social success but it was an inauspicious start academically. My grade point average hovered around 1.17. I had been elected freshman class president by my peers that first semester; however the school had a rule that no student on academic probation could serve in student leadership so I was forced to resign my position. This bitter lesson did not bear much immediate fruit as my GPA rose only slightly in second semester to around 1.32. At the conclusion of my first year, the college offered me a sabbatical year for rest and reflection on my performance to that point.

I did finally graduate from that fine (and very gracious) institution, and when I did I was sure that I was never going back to school again. I had achieved my goal. I went from Bible College right into pastoral ministry and I was ready to get on with life in the real world.

However, pastoral ministry, while exhilarating, proved immensely challenging. About six years into my ministry I recognized that I needed help. I sensed a certain limitation in my ability to think theologically and handle the biblical text. I desired to go deeper. So I did what I had thought I would never do again: I went back to school, enrolling at Tyndale Seminary in Toronto. For the next nine years I chipped away at a Masters of Divinity degree, but this time with a different attitude and purpose, not just to get it done, but actually to engage in learning and development. When that journey ended I enrolled in the PhD program here at McMaster Divinity College, and for another six years I went to school and studied some more.

That means that for a kid who hated school, I have spent thirty-three of my forty-six years in school. Surely, this is the

justice of God at its finest! And now I have signed up potentially to spend the rest of my working life—in school!

How could I go from pretending to be sick to avoid school to spending pretty much my whole life going to school and ultimately choosing to invest the best years of my life in a school? The answer lies in that experience I had six years into my ministry and what has happened in my life since then.

The challenges of ministry are myriad and never more than today. There was a time, apparently before “my” time, when being a Christian minister was a highly respected occupation. The position of pastor and title of Reverend literally guaranteed that the bearer of that title would be accorded respect in the community. Ministry, like most work, was a bit more straightforward too. Larger segments of the population were inclined to attend church services; people looked to the church to answer their questions and help define public and private morality. Even many whose involvement in the church lagged had a basic knowledge of the Bible. There was a framework in place in society that at least gave the Christian minister a starting place for the work. This is no longer a valid assumption for any person in Christian ministry to make. I won't take time to catalogue even briefly the changes that have taken place in our society because I assume that we are all aware of how our culture has changed and continues to change at a rapid pace. I also assume that you are well aware of how these changes have dramatically affected the role and place of the church in Canadian society. The larger question is, how do we engage this culture and move the mission of the church, the mission of God, forward in these challenging days?

I want to say that if the church is going to meet these challenges effectively, theological education will have to be committedly missional in its orientation. By this I do not mean that seminaries need to teach about mission more, or that every lecture needs to be expressly missional. What I mean is that seminary education must be oriented to what God is doing in the

world and how we can participate in it.¹ It is an orientation to theological education that is steadfastly and consistently practice-oriented. This means at least three things, none of which is essentially new, that must be held as orienting paradigms for understanding the work of theological education in and on behalf of the church.

Ministry Practice Needs Theological Education

When I first entered pastoral ministry I was idealistic and filled with passion. In my denomination we used to talk a lot about the second coming, the return of the Lord, and it was always promoted (rightly) as an event to look forward to. Yet I secretly hoped that the Lord would hold off for a while. I wanted my piece of the action out there; I wanted to make my mark before the coming of that glorious day. I believed that I could change the world. Six years in to my ministry I was not so sure. My idealism had faded, I was a bit tired, and rather disillusioned because the world had not changed more thanks to my ministry. Now that does not mean that I still did not want to change the world, or that I had lost my faith in the church or my call to ministry. I had certainly struggled with those things, but largely they were still intact. Further, I knew how to run a youth program, I knew where to go to get new ideas, and I was not afraid to try new things. After more than five years as a youth pastor I became the senior pastor of a church and I started preaching regularly. I had a fair idea how to put a sermon together and what topics might be interesting to people. I could tell a story and an opening joke. I had some sense of vision of what the church could be and I had resources that gave me the latest ideas on how to lead the church. I believed in prayer and tried to practice that discipline faithfully as a part of my own spirituality

1. Banks, *Reenvisioning Theological Education*, 142. Also see Van Gelder, *Theological Education*. Van Gelder explores historical developments in the emphasis that theological schools have placed on ministry formation and offers some of the current reasons why missional concerns are increasingly at the forefront of theological institutions. See esp. 41–44.

and ministry. But I knew something was missing. I knew that I lacked a theological center for my ministry. I longed to be able to probe the biblical text more fully in order that it might yield something more sufficient for me to preach. I began to feel that my preaching and teaching were rather thin, and my ministry was as much about chasing after the next good idea as it was about a clear biblically rooted theology of ministry.

My ministry, and I think this is common in the contemporary church, was rooted in pragmatism and enthusiasm. Both are good things in themselves, I am all for ideas that work and enthusiasm beats cynicism most of the time, but without theology, ministry is thin and lacks the ability to face the challenges of the long haul. Preaching runs the risk of being moralistic, or worse, shrill.

This is where theological education becomes a necessary part of grass-roots ministry. In seminary I found people who modeled evangelical biblical scholarship that probed the text in ways that took the Bible seriously but opened it to me in ways that I always sensed were there but was never able to access myself. Further, they provided me with tools so that I could follow suit. Theologians broadened my understanding of the church's history and its doctrinal ideas, and professors who taught ministry practice modeled what it looked like when the theological disciplines were thoughtfully employed in the practice of ministry.

Anyone who says to me that seminary has little to do with ministry is talking to someone who found just the opposite. I literally rushed back from Tyndale Seminary in Toronto to my home in Cobourg with my head filled with ideas and my heart full of inspiration for the new possibilities created by my studies for the work I was doing as a pastor. My poor wife would have to endure a half-baked retelling of that night's lecture as I tried to articulate the things I was learning and how I thought they were going to work themselves out in our ministry. Often she would push back on my newly acquired ideas, asking hard questions and raising objections. This only served to sharpen my desire to grow further.

I clearly remember that after taking a course on the book of Genesis I led my congregation through that book by preaching a

series of sermons on it. One Sunday afternoon, one of the church elders called me and said how much he was appreciating the series. He said, "Your preaching has really taken off." Now there are a couple of ways one could take such a comment, but I chose to take it as a firm complement and did not mention that a large part of my preaching was simply me offering to my congregation the things my Old Testament professor had taught in the Genesis course! Another course I took on the Holy Spirit helped me understand in a whole new way that God was forming the church into his own people who were designed to be an expression of divine life in the world. This changed my understanding of pastoral work irrevocably and my ministry was never the same.

Seminary opened a whole new word to me. Part of the reason this was so radical to me was that clearly I hadn't paid very close attention in Bible College (I should have known some of that material already), but seminary was the world of the theological disciplines and they began to add a foundation to my ministry that bolstered my enthusiasm for ministry and reshaped my practice of ministry. That is why I am convinced that ministry practice needs theological education, because without it our enthusiasm can lead to bitterness and our pragmatism can lead to cynicism, but an ongoing engagement with the theological disciplines provides a deeper, richer paradigm out of which to do ministry.

Theological Education Needs Ministry Practice

I joke about the fact that it took me nine years to do my MDiv, but I took so long because the whole time I was doing it I was a full-time pastor. And frankly this is a pretty good model. As I have already mentioned, for me the classroom was never far from the church. There was little or no separation of these two for me. Every idea I heard in seminary went through the filter of ongoing pastoral practice. This was true for a significant part of my PhD studies as well. My education was shaped and informed by my experience as a working pastor. And I think this is how it should be.

If theological education is going to meet the challenges of our current context it will need to be very connected to ministry practice. This is true because formation for ministry is not a program, it is a process.² One is not prepared for ministry because one completes an MDiv or an MTS degree. In fact, that alone more likely leaves us completely unprepared for ministry. It is only as our theological education is combined with the experience of ministry practice that formation for ministry truly takes place. Robert Banks, himself a theological educator, has written, “theological education can only enhance ministry in progress, not prepare people for ministry.”³

Christian ministry is ultimately learned by doing, and any real working theology can only be formed in practice. Theological ideas that cannot be preached or applied in a church board meeting or pastoral care setting are not really worth all that much. The theology that we learn in the classroom has to be worked out in the practice of ministry. If enthusiasm and pragmatism need theology in order to make them mature, theology needs ministry in order to make it live. And thus, theological education must be missional in that it pushes us (always) toward praxis with a steadfast commitment to the realization that without practice our theological ideas have minimal value.

Paulo Freire, in his landmark book *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, reminds us that when words or ideas lack action they become mere verbalism. They become an “empty word,” that lacks any power to denounce or transform, “for denunciation is impossible without a commitment to transform, and there is no transformation without action.”⁴

I am talking to myself here, and I say this to our advanced degree students and our faculty as much as anyone else. Our energies in research and writing need always to have a view to mission, to some sense of the “so what?” There may have been a day when the church could afford to engage in scholarship for the sake of scholarship, when in a highly Christianized world,

2. Banks, *Reenvisioning Theological Education*, 136.

3. *Ibid.*

4. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 87.

adding to our knowledge for the sake of further intramural discussion may have been legitimate. But in our current context we owe it to the cause of the gospel to do our work with one eye on the missional outcome of our scholarship. How will it benefit the church in its mission? This also calls for more “perforated boundaries” between the classical disciplines of theological scholarship, allowing for a more dialogical approach to our work.⁵ I think that this leaves room for all kinds of scholarship to be done, but I pray that it will all be done with a deep sense that what is learned in theological education needs to be practiced if it is going to have any significant value in our world today.

*The Horizons of the Two Are Fused through Theological
Reflection on Ministry Practice*

I believe in theological education because what the church needs today more than ever are theologically reflective, theologian-leaders who can help the church in the midst of its tremendous challenges to embody the gospel and fulfill its twenty-first-century mission.

This is why I am committed to the action-reflection model that we employ in our ministry formation program here at MacDiv. It is predicated on the two assumptions made above: that ministry needs to be informed by theology, hence the work we do in the classroom is vital as it helps to equip us with the resources necessary for theological reflection, and that theology needs to be informed by ministry, hence the need for robust field work to be an ongoing part of theological education.

Of course, experience itself is never enough; it is only as we reflect effectively on that experience that true formation really takes place. The seminal work of Donald Schoen in his book *The Reflective Practitioner* offers a study of highly competent practitioners in five fields: architecture, engineering, therapy, management, and urban planning. Schoen demonstrates that what made the subjects of this study great at what they did was not their mastery of knowledge per se, or their academic

5. Van Gelder, *Theological Education*, 44.

backgrounds, but rather their ability to navigate the puzzles and dilemmas of practice through highly developed capacities for reflection on action.

In essence what Schoen, and others have demonstrated is that we learn not only from developing theory and testing it empirically, but from practice that is reflected on. In fact it may be that we have not really “learned” anything until we have practiced it and reflected upon it. But further, we may find that we can actually generate new ways of thinking and doing as a result of our reflection on practice.

In today's rapidly changing times, the ability to “learn as we go” and adapt to new sets of circumstances is crucial. Education becomes outdated. Consistent modes of doing often need updating or changing. To minister in today's world requires the ability to adapt our practices constantly to new circumstances and think in fresh, creative ways. Training received in 2011 probably won't work as well in 2031, or even 2021. This is a change in the last twenty-five years. Knowledge and practice did not evolve in nearly as rapid a way as it does now. While updating theoretical knowledge is also crucial, learning the art of reflection on action and how to increase our knowledge base through reflection on experience is a necessary life-long learning skill. In these days this is an essential skill for Christian ministry, to be able to reflect well, using the resources of theology (Scripture, tradition, experience, culture, reason, community) in order to allow ministry to mature and navigate the challenges of the context in which we now serve. It is in the act of theological reflection on ministry practice that the horizons of theology and practice are merged.

This means that theological education done missionally begins with practice. Our practice of ministry inevitably raises questions that call for theological answers. Our answers call for practice so that they may be tried, and a living theology can emerge that genuinely equips the church for its mission in the world. At the center of this is theological reflection on ministry practice. We practice theological reflection most effectively as we gain a depth of theological insight that is aided by both formal and informal theological education. This then enables us

to reflect well and creatively imagine new ways of doing ministry today so that the church is enabled in its mission. And this, once again, must be the goal of theological education: to empower the local church.

This is the heart of my sense of calling to this role at McMaster Divinity College. To paraphrase someone much wiser and more famous than I am, there is nothing like the local church when the local church is working well; it embodies the hope of the world.⁶ This is because:

- The church serves the poor
- It loves the outcast
- It speaks truth to power
- It makes room for sin, and flows with grace to the brokenness of all humanity
- It confronts wickedness
- It lifts up Jesus
- It loves unconditionally
- It lives out a humble righteousness and offers a better way to the world
- It teaches patiently
- It prays for healing faithfully
- It waits expectantly
- It walks hopefully like a pilgrim on a journey to a land of promise
- It gives generously
- It offers unselfishly
- It listens quietly
- It prays consistently

The church is the habitat of God in a world that he loves, and that he longs to know him. It is the bride of Christ, the hope of the world and the one to which we are called to give ourselves as the vehicle of our service.

6. Hybels, *Courageous Leadership*, 13–28.

Conclusion

This is why, when it is time to go to school, I don't pretend to be sick anymore. I don't hate school anymore because I am convinced that the seminary has a vital role to play in the mission of the church as it faces the great challenges of the twenty-first century in Canada today. The church needs pastor-scholars who can exegete the biblical text in ways that help people understand how the text relates to the realities of life in today's world. It needs pastor-theologians who can address the questions of postmodern, post-Christian culture with insight that is rooted in the tradition of the church and the language of today. It needs pastor-leaders who understand our history clearly enough that we will not easily repeat some of its mistakes, and help us recover other parts of it so that it can guide us as we write our own chapter of church history. We need pastor-practitioners who are able to reflect theologically on the experience of ministry and respond with practical wisdom so as to help show the way forward. And we need theological educators who will help to nurture these skills as they understand the deeply missional nature of their calling to serve in the academy.

I don't hate school anymore because there is no greater enterprise to be a part of than God's mission. I love school now. I love this school; McMaster Divinity College is a place that can help change the world. Although I am far more realistic now than I once was, I still believe that the gospel of Jesus Christ is the best hope for the world today, and theologian-pastors are the best resource that the church has to help the church proclaim and embody that gospel. My job is to help equip that kind of leader, and as God enables, to be that kind of leader. So I'm not "faking" sick anymore, because I don't want to miss one day around here if I don't have to.

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