

What Practical Theology Can Learn about the Context of Contemporary Mainline Protestantism: A Conversation with Christian Smith

At Princeton Theological Seminary, I teach in the department of practical theology in the areas of education, spiritual formation, and evangelism. Practical theologians read sociology in order to understand the context of the church. One of my favorite sociologists is Chris Smith, and I regularly teach his books in my courses. I am particularly honored to be part of this event in which Chris is speaking, and I will share some of the things I've learned from him and others about our context that have shaped my understanding of the church. The frame for everything I say today can be summarized in two sentences:

The most important challenge we face today in mainline Protestantism is learning to see our own American context as a mission field. To respond to this challenge, we must help our members move beyond thinking of the church only as a place where they receive the benefits of God's salvation but as a community whose primary task is to give witness to the gospel.

To become witnesses to the gospel, or missional churches, requires three things in our context. First, we must build a much stronger sense of community in our congregations. Second, we must take Christian education far more seriously, projecting clear expectations that every child, youth, and adult will learn the basic story of the Bible, which narrates God's mission in the world and the church's role in this mission. Third, we must equip our members to engage in evangelism as part of their witness to the gospel.

Let's begin by exploring what I mean by building a much stronger sense of community in our congregations. In his book, *American Evangelicalism: Embattled*

and Thriving, Smith draws on his research in the *Evangelical Identity and Influence Project* to help explain why evangelicalism is thriving in contemporary America. In comparison to mainline, liberal, and fundamentalist forms of Protestantism, Smith's research reveals that evangelicalism is stronger along six dimensions: adherence to beliefs, salience of faith, robustness of faith, group participation, commitment to mission, and retention and recruitment of members.ⁱ He explains its strength with a subcultural identity theory of religious persistence, which he summarizes as follows: "Religion survives and can thrive in pluralistic, modern society by embedding itself in subcultures that offer satisfying morally orienting collective identities which provide adherents meaning and belonging."ⁱⁱ

I take this to mean that religious communities can do well in our pluralistic, secular society if they build a strong sense of community, what Chris calls "collective identity," among their members. People today yearn for a sense of meaning in their lives, just as they always have. There has got to be something more than grinding it out at work or hanging in there when your kids start giving you problems or your marriage grows stale. People long for some sense that their lives have a larger purpose. They also want a community where they are known personally and feel accepted and supported. They want belong to a real community that goes beyond the kinds of relationships they have at work or the gym or on-line.

Congregations that build a strong sense of community meet people's need for meaning and belonging. People identify with their congregation; it shapes the way they live. They have friendships in the congregation that support them when they're having problems and help them grow spiritually. The problem is that many

mainline congregations today are so loosely-bounded that their members don't really experience them as communities with which they identify. How do we begin to address this problem?

To me, it is all about the kinds of relationships we cultivate in a congregation. I want to describe four different kinds of relationships in a congregation that can build a stronger sense of community. I use the apostle Paul as my example, drawing on Glenn McDonald's book, *The Disciple-Making Church*.

First, we all need a spiritual mentor. Barnabas played this role in Paul's life. Barnabas was sent by the leaders of the Jerusalem church to work with the new Gentile converts in Antioch. He was the first person to take a risk on Paul. Remember, even after Paul's conversion, he was still viewed with suspicion in the church. Barnabas brought Paul to Antioch and invited to join him in his work. (Acts 11:25-26). At least once, they travelled to Jerusalem together, and the credibility attached to Barnabas became attached to Paul, opening doors for Paul in the church. They traveled together on missionary journeys, starting new churches.

All Christians need a Barnabas in their life: a person who mentors them in discipleship. It is likely they will need more than one mentor over the course of their life. In the seminary class I taught last fall, students shared key moments in their spiritual autobiographies in small precept groups at the beginning of the course. Time after time, I heard stories in which mentors played key roles in their spiritual journeys. I heard Adam's story. Just as he turned 13, Adam's doctor discovered that he had a small hole in his heart and that he had to stop all strenuous sports, which had been such an important part of his childhood. It was his youth

group leader who stepped in at this pivotal moment and formed a supportive, mentoring relationship with Adam. He helped Adam deepen his relationship with God and discover new activities besides sports that were challenging. I heard the story of Courtney. Courtney is the second child of a deeply religious family. She describes herself as the family “pleaser” while she was growing up. But then she left home for college and transitioned from “good child” to “wild child.” When she finally was sick of the person she had become, she turned to Christians her age for help. All she received from one person after another was judgment. She finally met an older student who wasn’t afraid of her questions and reputation and mentored her back into a relationship with Christ. Congregations that build a strong sense of community are places where people can be mentored in discipleship.

Paul, however, not only had a mentor, Barnabas, but become a mentor. The fullest example of this is his relationship to Timothy. Timothy’s grandmother (Lois) and mother (Eunice) were both converts from Judaism and are described as devout women who knew Paul personally. When Paul and Barnabas were on their first missionary trip, they visited Lystra, where Timothy’s family lived. It was in Lystra that Paul was dragged out of the city, stoned, and left for dead. It is pretty likely that Timothy heard about this as a child. On Paul’s secondary missionary journey, he stopped in Lystra and asked Timothy to become a companion in his work, a role Timothy played to the end of Paul’s life. They travelled to Philippi, Thessalonica, and many other places. They worked together in Ephesus for two years. Paul, often, left Timothy in a new church community for a while after he had moved on. He was

Paul's personal envoy, delivering Paul's letters and dealing with problems in congregations they established.

In Paul's relationship with Timothy, we see a very important dynamic in building community in congregations. The mentee becomes a mentor; the one mentored becomes a mentor of others. This a key part of building a community that is missional. We don't come to church just to receive. But receiving from others, we are prepared to give. We all need a Barnabas, but we also need a Timothy.

I want to quickly mention two other types of relationships that are an important part of building community in congregations, continuing to draw on Paul. We all need an Antioch, a home base where we are known and accepted. Antioch, of course, was Paul's home base. He worked there for many years and returned there after his missionary journeys. Moreover, within this community, Paul had a small group of peers, a kind of leadership team that worked, prayed, and discerned God's will with one another. Acts 13:1-3 tells us that it was in the context of this group that God directed the community to set aside Barnabas and Paul for their missionary work. We all need an Antioch, a home base, and within that a small group of peers who know us in depth.

Like Paul, finally, we also need a Macedonia, a mission field that is just beyond our comfort zone. You might not remember the story in which Macedonia figures prominently in Paul's missionary journey. He wanted to go to Ephesus but was kept doing so by the Holy Spirit, so he veered to the seas ports of Bithynia. There he had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him: "Come over to Macedonia and help us." (Acts 16:9, 10) When Paul sailed for Macedonia, he was

leaving familiar territory. We all need a Macedonia, the place that we suspect God wants us to go—further than any place we’ve have been before. Odds are good that your Macedonia will not turn out to be an actual place far away but relationships and opportunities close at hand where God wants you to serve outside the walls of your church.

This is the first thing mainline churches need to do if they are going to become missional churches: build a stronger sense of community among their members. And this is all about relationships. This leads me to a second thing I have learned from Chris Smith about our context. We need to place far more emphasis on Christian Education. In *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, Chris reports the findings of one of the largest and most important research projects on the spiritual lives of adolescents undertaken in the last three decades. It is required reading in many courses at Princeton Theological Seminary. There is a lot we can learn from this book but I want to focus on just one finding. The “creed” that most adolescents believe in American society today is what Chris calls *Moralistic Therapeutic Deism*. They believe in a God who created the world and watches over human life on earth. But they don’t believe God is particularly involved in people’s lives unless He is needed to help them deal with a crisis or problem. They believe that God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other and that good people go to heaven when they die. But they also believe the most important goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about yourself.

It is somewhat misleading to describe Moralistic Therapeutic Deism as a “creed” because most teens are pretty vague about what they really believe, even if

they are regular participants in religious communities. American teens know very little about the sacred writings and beliefs of their own religious tradition. This is true whether their home community is conservative, middle of the road, or liberal.

This finding should give those of us in the Reformed tradition reason to pause. Historically, the Reformed tradition has been deeply committed to forms of education promoting biblical and theological literacy in our congregations. For many centuries, it required study of a catechism before children were admitted to the Lord's Supper. It championed biblical preaching and teaching.ⁱⁱⁱ But there is no reason to believe that Presbyterian young people are less characterized by Moralistic Therapeutic Deism than others. It is pretty clear that we must take Christian education far more seriously than we have in recent past.

I do not know of any one program or set of practices that will provide a magical solution to the problem of biblical and theological illiteracy. It seems to me that answer lies in the commitment of congregations to two goals. How congregations accomplish these goals will vary from one congregation to another, depending on their size, resources, and membership demographics.

First, every congregation ought to commit to helping every child, youth, and adult learn the basic story of the Bible. Some scholars call this the metanarrative of Scripture. It is the larger story the bible tells. The smaller stories and genres are a part of this larger story. Biblical scholars, like N.T. Wright, Richard Bauckham, Craig Bartholomew, Michael Goheen, and others make a defense of metanarrative in biblical scholarly. Wright argues that it is helpful to think of this larger story or drama as having six parts: Part 1 tells the story of Creation; Part 2, the story of the

Fall; Part 3, the story of God's election of Israel; Part 4, the story of God's redemption in Jesus Christ; Part 5, the story of God's calling of the church; and Part 6, the story of the return of Christ and consummation. The church today is located in Part 5, God's calling of the church and looks ahead to God's promised future.

This is where I would put my energy in Christian education: learning the basic story of Scripture. It is really not possible for a congregation to be a missional church unless its members learn how to interpret their own stories as part of the larger biblical story, which tells of God's mission to the world. There are all kinds of methods and programs that can assist you in this. But in the end, it is not a matter of methods but of motivation. People are only motivated to learn Scripture if they come to experience it as a source of spiritual guidance in their lives. This depends on excellent biblical preaching. It depends on leaders who continually turn to Scripture for guidance. It depends on parents who read and pray Scripture in front of and along with their children. In the end, it is not just about information but *formation*. Eugene Peterson puts it like this: "The biblical way is to tell a story and in the telling invite: Live *into* this—this is what it looks like to be human in this God-made and God-ruled world; this is what is involved in becoming and maturing as a human being."^{iv}

I hesitate to offer a second goal because I believe the first is so important. But I do believe that every congregation should commit itself to cultivating a basic level of theological literacy. My great grandfather was a baker in St. Louis. He also was a Lutheran, who learned Luther's Small Catechism as a child. He was determined that his daughter—my grandmother—was going to learn it as well.

Every week, he gave her one answer to learn. After school, when she went to the bakery for a treat, he was there waiting to ask her the question and see if she could give the answer. She got a treat whether she got it right or not. But when she did get it right, he would take her in his arms, give her a hug, and say, “Well done, my daughter.” If we could cultivate the equivalent of a basic catechetical level of knowledge among our children, it would represent a step forward.

Think of it like this. When you are learning a sport like baseball as a child, one of the first things you do is learn the vocabulary of the game. First base, outfield, pitcher, catcher, home run. You really can’t even play the game if you don’t know what these words mean. As you become a better and more sophisticated player, your vocabulary expands: sacrifice bunt, hit-and-run, infield fly rule, suicide squeeze. The same is true in learning the Christian life. You need to a basic vocabulary to participate meaningfully: God, worship, preaching, Scripture, disciple, Kingdom of God. As you grow as a Christian, your vocabulary expands: providence, reconciliation, sacrament, atonement, Trinity, and mission. Again, it is not just a matter of learning information. This language is a way of helping people understand the biblical story and the ways their own stories are a part of this story.

I think these two goals—learning the larger story of the Bible and a basic level of theological literacy—are so important that every congregation should consider setting up clear target goals. By the end of elementary age, we will expect children to understanding these Bible stories and theological ideas, by the end of confirmation those; before they become members, these stories and theological ideas, or an officer those. I think you get the idea.

This leads me to the final topic I want to address. Here, I am not in dialogue with Chris Smith's work but Lilly-funded research called the Mainline Evangelism Project. It has been written up by Martha Grace Reese in a book called, *Unleashing the Gospel*. It is a book I'd strongly recommend. For mainline congregations to become missional churches that give witness to the gospel they need to learn how engage in evangelism. Historically, this has not always been one of the strong points of the Reformed tradition. But if our own American context truly is a mission field today, then this is a ministry that we need to learn how to carry out.

The Mainline Evangelism Project found that it is not just Presbyterians who are doing a poor job of evangelism but *all* of mainline Protestantism. Here are some of the findings of the Project. The vast majority of people who are becoming members of mainline Protestant Church are the children or new spouses of people who are already members. This is evangelism by natural growth. It also found that around 75% of the fastest-growing congregations in the mainline are either located in the South or are racial\ethnic churches. The Project leaders decided to look more closely at mainline congregations that are Caucasian and located outside the South. To get a true test of how they were doing at evangelism, they identified churches that were baptizing an average of five or more adults a year (over age 18) for a three year period. They had to be first-time adult baptisms. They found that fewer than one half of 1% of the eligible congregations were baptizing this many adults. Let me put this more simply. Of the 30,000 mainline congregations involved in this part of their study, only 150 were baptizing an average of five adults per year over a three year period.

Why are mainline churches doing such a poor job at evangelism? There are many reasons. Seminaries aren't doing a good job of teaching their students about evangelism. Reese reports that only 10 out of 60 mainline denominational seminaries require even half a course on evangelism for graduation. The Project also discovered that many laypeople in the mainline think of evangelism in highly negative ways. Here are representative responses that were given when people in mainline churches were asked the question: What do you think about when you hear the word *evangelism*?

Scaring people into faith.

No! I don't want to knock on strangers' doors and give them some pamphlet.

A televangelist is asking for money for a theme park.

I know we're supposed to talk with people about faith and invite them to church, but I don't want to lose friends. I feel guilty.

I don't think we should do evangelism. It implies other religions are wrong.

When this Project looked closely at mainline congregations that are doing evangelism well, they discovered three qualities.

First, these congregations nurture a vital, growing, personal relationship with God among their members. The Project discovered a deep connection between evangelism and spiritual formation. People who share their faith with others love God and believe that other people's lives would be better if they were in a relationship with God too. They don't think of evangelism as a sales job but as sharing what Christ has meant to them on their own spiritual journeys and inviting their children, friends, neighbors, and co-workers to join them on that journey in a community of faith.

Second, the Project found that congregations doing evangelism well have a strong sense of community. Since I spoke about this in the first part of my lecture,

I'll only share why this is important for evangelism at this point. People are only willing to invite others to come to their church if they feel good about it, if they feel it offers them authentic, supportive, and challenging relationships. When people feel good about their congregation as a community, it feels natural for them to invite others to join them in this community.

Third, mainline congregations doing evangelism well are places where people learn to feel comfortable sharing their faith story with others. This is one of the biggest barriers to evangelism among the members of mainline churches. They just don't feel comfortable sharing their faith with others. They don't want to come across as intrusive or manipulative. Often, they grew up in the church and don't have much perspective on what a life without faith would feel like and what it would add to people's lives. Congregations that are doing evangelism well give people the chance to hear leaders share their own faith stories and to share their own stories with other's in the church. This prepares them to share their faith stories with others beyond the church in ways that feel comfortable and authentic to them.

While I don't have the time to explore it in any depth, Martha Grace Reese offers a helpful image of evangelism that makes a great of sense to me. She says that we might think of different "s of evangelism." A is the frequency on a radio. In evangelism we turn into to different frequencies of the people around us.

- a. Bandwith 101.1 – Children and Youth of the Congregation
- b. Bandwith 101.2 – Children's and Youth's Friends
- c. Bandwith 101.3 – People Attached to Your Church who never joined
- d. Bandwith 101.4 – Committed Christians from *Similar* Church Backgrounds
- e. Bandwith 101.5 – Committed Christians from *Different* Church Backgrounds
- f. Bandwith 101.6 – People Raised in the Church who Drifted

- g. Bandwith 101.7 – People Raised in the Church Who Were
- h. Bandwith 101.8 – Unchurched People Like Current Church
- i. Bandwith 101.9 – Unchurched People Different from Current Church Members in terms of job, education, ethnicity, etc

Think of these as a frequencies that are easy to tune in and frequencies that are much harder to tune in. Bandwith 101.9—evangelism with unchurched people who are different than current church members—is the most difficult to tune in.

Sharing the gospel with the children and youth of our own members, 101.1, is the easiest to tune in. Drawing on this image, Reese rightly believes that congregations that want to work at evangelism might ask three simple questions:

1. Which of these is your church most turned into? How might you do them a little better?
2. Which are easily within reach of your church but currently not being done?
3. Which represent the biggest stretch for your church? How might you move toward turning into this frequency over time?

In this lecture, I have argued that mainline congregations must take seriously that our context today is a mission field and that we must become missional churches. I have emphasized three important steps that need to be taken for this to occur: (1) building a stronger sense of community in our congregations; (2) taking Christian education far more seriously; and (3) equipping our members to engage in evangelism as a part of their witness to the gospel.

ⁱ Smith, *American Evangelicalism*, pp. 21-22.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid*, p. 118.

ⁱⁱⁱ Calvin and his followers believed that people should not be illiterate, so schools were established that were free and open to all—boys and girls alike. They believed that society is better off if it has doctors, lawyers, and well-educated people in business and the trades. They believed ministers

should be well educated. So established universities across Europe. They believed that everyone should have access to the Bible in their own language. So they took advantage of the invention of the printing press and helped make inexpensive Bibles available. They preached biblical sermons and encouraged Bible study in the church and home. They believed that every member of the church should understand the basic beliefs of Christianity, so they wrote catechisms and published inexpensive catechisms; they offered classes that instructed young people in the catechism before they were admitted to the Lord's Supper.

^{iv} Eugene Peterson, *Eat This Book: A Conversation on the Art of Spiritual Reading* (Grand Rapids: William Eerdmans, 2006), pp. 43-4.