

TEACHING THEOLOGY TO MINISTERS

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In June 1970 I began teaching theology at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary. Teaching theology to ministers is an incomparable privilege for which I am grateful to God. It also is a serious responsibility, both because I must answer to God for my stewardship and because I have exercised an influence, sometimes small and sometimes not so small, in the lives and ministries of the men and women in my classes.

Naturally this responsibility has led me to reflect upon what ought to be achieved in a theology class. To use a word still somewhat in vogue though perhaps not destined to endure, what “outcomes” should a class in Christian theology have? What do I hope for in my students?

My answer is simple. What I hope is that my theology classes will help students to become more trustworthy theologians.

We Are All Theologians

All Christians are theologians. We all have ideas about God and the world and the ways that God relates to the world. We all think about God.

Of course, all Christians are not academic theologians. There is a difference between folk theology and academic theology. Folk theology is the understanding of God that is held by people who have not received a formal theological education. It is not always articulated carefully, but it is almost always highly internalized. Many faithful Christians find it difficult to put their convictions about God into words, but they live daily lives that are true to those convictions.

Academic theology, on the other hand, is highly articulated but not necessarily internalized. That is, those who receive a formal theological education are familiar with the technical vocabulary of theology, they know the history of Christian theology, they read journals and books of theology, and they write papers, articles, and books about theology. They have learned to articulate theological ideas. However, they do not always internalize everything they know. For example, a theologian who is a Calvinist may become an expert on the theology of John Wesley; although he does not agree with Wesley’s Arminian ideas, he may know more about them than most Arminians do.

Trustworthiness

We are all theologians, some academic and some folk. What we want is to become more trustworthy theologians.

Trustworthiness is an alternative to other possible objectives. Theologians cannot be omniscient or inerrant, but they can be trustworthy. They can be persons who deserve to be taken seriously and

to be trusted when they speak about theological matters to those to whom they minister. Trustworthiness is a virtue that falls between the extremes of being infallible and being dismissed as undependable.

In order to be trustworthy, ministers need to be both formed and informed.

Formed to Be Trustworthy

Ministers need to be formed into certain kinds of people. P. T. Forsyth once wrote that the truth we see depends upon the kinds of persons we are. The reason that we do not understand God better is not that we are not clever enough or intelligent enough; it is that we are not good enough.

In *Discerning the Mystery*, Andrew Louth made the same point in different terms. He wrote, “We are not concerned with a technique for solving problems but with an art for discerning mystery.”

What art must we learn if we are to discern the mystery of the Triune God? What kinds of persons must we be in order to understand God well?

We must be people who have confidence in the Christian message but who also are humble about our own powers. It is difficult to explain how a person can be both confident and humble. Aren't confident people by definition lacking in humility? And aren't humble people by definition lacking in confidence?

Yet God calls us to have both confidence and humility. And we sometimes meet people who are both confident and humble, so we know it is possible to combine these two virtues. But it isn't easy.

Moreover, ministers need to be people who, as Paul said, speak the truth in love (Eph. 4:15). Once again, it is difficult to see how to combine the two virtues. We have all seen examples of unloving truth, some of them in the church, and examples of untruthful love, some of them in the world. It isn't easy to be both truthful and loving.

Virtues such as humility, confidence, truthfulness, and love are what make trustworthy theologians. They transform our thinking about God from merely intellectual concepts into authentically knowing God.

In theology class, we occasionally talk about virtues such as these, but the contribution of a theology class to the formation of students into confident, humble, truthful, loving persons is mostly indirect. As a class affirms with conviction the wonderful gospel of Jesus Christ; as we allow Scripture to teach us which questions matter as well as answers to the questions; as we learn to be careful and thoughtful when we speak about God; as we intentionally seek to avoid the legalism that understands human beings to be less important than the Sabbath (see Mark 2:27); as we attempt to do these things in a theology class, that class can become a means used by the Spirit of God to form in us virtues such as confidence, humility, truthfulness, and love.

Informed and Conversant

In order to be trustworthy theologians, we must be informed as well as formed.

Unlike the statement that we need to be formed into trustworthy theologians, the statement that we need to be informed in order to be trustworthy theologians is uncontroversial. But it does not remain uncontroversial long. The controversy begins as soon as we begin to describe what it is about which we need to be informed if we are to be trustworthy theologians. Across the centuries, many theological conversations have been going on, and many are going on today. In order to join in these conversations, we must be conversant. But conversant with what? I will mention just three conversations.

First, ministers in the church today need to be conversant with the theological conversation found in the Bible, because the Bible is the church's holy book and because theology is central to the Bible's message. Second, ministers need to be conversant with the theological conversation that resulted in the consensus of the undivided church reflected in the Nicene Creed. Third and finally, ministers need to be conversant with the current conversation among academic theologians.

In a moment, I will return to these three conversations. But first let me note two things: the church has had and continues to have other theological conversations, and a case can be made that ministers today need to be conversant in them. There is some justification for claims that the conversation of the medieval western church, the conversation of the magisterial reformers of the sixteenth century, the conversation of the small b-baptists, the conversation with contemporary political philosophy, and the conversation with other world religions deserve the attention of a minister of the church today who intends to be a trustworthy theologian. I agree that all these are important, but they do not, I believe, impinge upon the lives of the ministers in my classes in the way that the three that I have named do.

Now I will review the three conversations that seem most important to me.

The Bible

What is involved in helping ministers to become conversant with the theological conversation going on in the Bible?

Three things, I believe. First, students need simply to know what is in the Bible. Most of my students arrive in my classes with that knowledge. They have read and studied the Bible, perhaps for years. They know its stories, and they believe that it is relevant for their lives and for the life of the church and of the world today.

Second, students need to develop enough historical awareness to recognize in the Bible a world that is different from our own. My sense is that many students come to theology classes without having been asked to acknowledge the fact that the world of the Bible is in many ways unlike the

modern world. They need to experience what Karl Barth called “the strange new world within the Bible.”

In his wisdom, God has seen fit to display himself to people in the thus-and-so-ness of their world rather than in a-historical abstractions. One way to increase our understanding of the message of the Bible is to acknowledge the differences between its world and ours and then to become aware enough of its world to understand the Bible as its first readers understood it.

What shall we call this awareness? The conventional name is “the historical-critical understanding” of the Bible. However, because so many people understand the word “critical” to mean “destructive,” we probably ought to follow the advice of the late Dr. Penrose St. Amant, who proposed in the spring 1982 issue of *The Theological Educator* that we substitute the word “analysis” for the word “criticism.” To “historical analysis” of the Bible I would add “historical imagination,” for the grasp of Scripture that we need comes to us in part as we attempt to put ourselves in the place of the earliest Christians.

Once we accept the historical character of Scripture, a caution is in order. We need to be reminded from time to time that we do not have the information that we need to answer all of the historical questions that we are capable of framing. That is, I believe, a major concern of Professor Morna Hooker in her much-discussed article entitled “On Using the Wrong Tool” (*Theology*, November 1972). If failing to acknowledge the fact that the world of the Bible is in many ways unlike the modern world can limit our understanding of the Bible, failing to acknowledge that we are unable to answer all historical questions can seduce us into thinking that we are the masters of Scripture rather than its disciples. The problems are equally pernicious.

Third and finally, students who know the Bible fragmentarily rather than as a whole need to learn its story line. It is important, as Elizabeth Achtemeier says, to work toward “recovering the one story” of the Bible, the story of the Creator whose love for his fallen world leads him to act repeatedly in human history, and supremely in Jesus Christ, to redeem the world from its fallenness and to restore it to the *Shalom* for which it was created.

Christian Orthodoxy

Second, trustworthy theologians need to be conversant with the theological conversation that was carried on in the undivided church of the first four centuries and whose conclusions are displayed in the ecumenical Nicene Creed. Those conclusions are known by various names, including “mere Christianity” (C. S. Lewis), “plain Christianity” (J. B. Phillips), “basic Christianity” (John Stott), and “consensual theology” (Thomas Oden). The most familiar name for them is “Christian orthodoxy.” This is the heritage of all Christians since the fourth century, and all Christians have been influenced by that theology, even (perhaps especially) the heretics who have chosen to reject some aspect of it. Lack of familiarity with this theology is a severe liability for a minister today, even in churches which intend to have no creed but the Bible. More serious than lack of familiarity with Christian orthodoxy is the domestication of it and the use of political pressure to support it. The best champions of

orthodoxy are those such as G. K. Chesterton and Dorothy Sayers who have pointed out the romance and even the adventure of it.

What are the component parts of Christian orthodoxy? It is a challenge to attempt to summarize that rich heritage. My own summary is as follows.

There is one and only one true and living God. That God is the creator of all things visible and invisible. The world that God made has fallen into sin and is alienated from God. In some wonderful and mysterious way, the one God is eternally Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Father sent his Son into the fallen world to redeem the world. Jesus was born of a virgin named Mary, lived a life of perfect obedience to his Father, gave us matchless teachings, called together the nucleus of a new community, died upon the cross to take away the sins of the world, was buried, rose again the third day in power and glory, and ascended to his Father. The Father and the Son poured out their Spirit upon the followers of Jesus. The Spirit now guides and empowers the church to carry out its world mission. The church proclaims the word of the gospel and observes baptism and the Lord's Supper in obedience to Christ. In the future God will complete the work that he began in Jesus Christ. The Bible is the Word of God that tells us this marvelous story.

Whether in these words or some others, trustworthy theologians need to be fully aware of this theology, and they should ignore the advice of those who dismiss this theology as irrelevant or misguided. Jaroslav Pelikan has proposed a useful distinction between tradition and traditionalism; traditionalism is the dead faith of living people, and tradition is the living faith of dead people. In taking this tradition seriously, we honor our fathers and mothers in the faith and respect the contribution they have made to our theological conversation.

Without an appreciation for Christian orthodoxy, ministers will be unable to discriminate between issues that have always been regarded by the church as non-negotiable and issues that are secondary. Moreover, they will be unable to recognize the common ground that they share with Christians of other churches and denominations. They need to appreciate this heritage so that they will understand the wisdom of the Lutheran Peter Meiderlin, who wrote in 1626: "*In necessariis unitas, in non necessariis libertas, in omnibus caritas.*" In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, freedom; in all things, love.

Contemporary Theology

Finally, we turn to the conversation of twentieth century academic theology. Many Christians assume that the study of theology is in fact the study of the ideas of certain theologians, and in many cases those theologians are twentieth century academic theologians. So Roman Catholics study Karl Rahner, mainline Protestants study Karl Barth, and evangelical Protestants study Carl Henry.

The theological conversation of the twentieth century is fascinating. Ministers who aspire to be trustworthy theologians need to be aware of it, because its proximity to them entails that it exercises great influence on them. Sometimes we have benefitted from its influence, and sometimes we have

been hurt by it, but we have all been affected by it.

What help can we expect from the study of contemporary theology? Unlike the theology of the undivided church, twentieth century theology does not offer us a consensus. However, it has responded with various strategies to the acids of modernity, and we all need to know how to defend ourselves against the corrosive power of those acids. Moreover, we need to be able to communicate to people who, like ourselves, have been influenced by the Enlightenment.

At this point it is worth considering how much theological teachers ought to transmit their personal theological vision to their students. For it is not only the case that the Bible gives us the authoritative vision of Christianity, and the undivided church gives us the orthodox vision, and various contemporary theologians give us their visions. Each of us has his or her own particular spin on all this theological heritage. Should we share our own visions with our students?

My experience has been that most students welcome the vision of their professors. So, I attempt to share my own vision, while carefully distinguishing between the heritage described above and the way in which I myself understand it. Here is how I would position my theological vision.

To the right is fundamentalism. There is an irony in the name, for fundamentalism is not always very fundamental. In *The Fundamentals*, the booklets from which the name was taken, there are several essays insisting that there was one Isaiah, not two or three, but there is no essay insisting that the Christian understanding is that God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; *The Fundamentals* are not fundamental enough. Just as war is too important to be left to the generals, so the fundamentals of the Christian faith are too important to be left to the fundamentalists.

To the left is liberalism, which sometimes helps us to be attuned to the times in which we live but which sometimes lacks parts of the tradition that our times need. Ironically, liberalism's quest for relevance can lead to irrelevance, on the principle offered by W. R. Inge, "He who marries the spirit of the age is destined soon to be a widower."

In front of us chronologically are the Eastern Orthodox and the Catholics, our older cousins. I remember that they have been faithful to the Bible and to Christian orthodoxy, often while experiencing persecution. But I am concerned about accretions to Christian orthodoxy in those churches, accretions such as the attitude toward emperors of the eastern churches and the attitude toward Mary and the saints in the Roman Catholic Church.

Finally, behind us chronologically are the Pentecostals and the charismatics. I sense that God has used them to bring renewal to the faith and lives of many millions of Christians, and for that I am grateful. But I worry about their subscription to the idea that what is distinctively Christian in the church is its experiences with God rather than its proclamation of the history of the crucified and risen Jesus, and I am troubled.

My own vision is centered on three spring days in the history of the world, on two parcels of

ground near Jerusalem. On one of those parcels the Son of God died for sins, and on the other he was buried and rose again the third day. Then and there God reconciled the world to himself (2 Cor. 5:18). Then and there he displayed the infinite love that he has for his world and for everyone in that world (Rom. 5:8). This message is the Christian gospel, and I try to avoid domesticating it. I try to understand it for what I think it is, a radical truth-claim.

That is the vision that I have tried to share with my students.

Conclusion

In conclusion, my hope for the students who attend my theology classes and who are or soon will become ministers of the church of Jesus Christ is that they will be trustworthy theologians. I hope they will be formed in such a way as to be both confident and humble, both truthful and loving. I hope they will be informed about the Bible, about Christian orthodoxy, and about the theological work of modern academic theologians. And I hope that they will center their thinking—and their faith and their lives and their ministries—upon the crucified and risen Jesus, the friend of sinners, the Son of God. For the law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ (John 1:17). It is this grace and this truth that all human beings need in the deepest part of their souls.