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# The Renewal of Theology

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Theology must not be confused with any rival discipline that bases its credibility on religious or human experience, even if that experience is confirmed by scientific verification. Theology is neither philosophy—a description of ultimate reality—nor psychology—an exploration into the inner states of the human mind. Nor should theology be confused with mysticism, which focuses on the *image* of reality contrived by human imagination rather than on the spoken *word* that overturns human imagination. Theology cannot be subsumed under other disciplines of knowledge just as revelation cannot be subordinated to human reason. Theology leads us out of the morass of subjectivity and relativity into knowledge of ultimate being that we could not attain on our own. It witnesses not to an altered state of consciousness but to a personal being beyond us, who condescends to our level, who meets us on our plane of being and understanding. Theology employs language drawn from metaphysics, but it is not itself metaphysics, for its overriding concern is not a comprehensive understanding of reality but the transformation of reality by the Spirit of the living God.

## THEOLOGY DEFINED

From this perspective, theology is the systematic reflection within a particular culture on the self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ as attested in Holy Scripture and witnessed to in the tradition of the catholic church. Theology in this sense is both biblical and contextual. Its norm is Scripture, but its field or arena of action is the cultural context in which we find ourselves. It is engaged in reflection not on abstract divinity or on concrete humanity but on the Word made flesh, the divine in the human.

This position stands in fundamental conflict with both the old and the new liberalism. Albrecht Ritschl saw the task of theology as ‘the articulation of a disciplined theoretical defense of the practical certainty of faith in the divine governance of the world’.<sup>1</sup> Here the fulcrum of theology is not the Incarnation of the Word of God in history but faith’s venture in obedience to the providential reordering of the world.<sup>2</sup> For the liberation theologian Gustavo Gutierrez theology is ‘a critical reflection on historical praxis’.<sup>3</sup> Praxis in this context means involvement in the class struggle to build a new society. Thus the emphasis is not on what God has done for us in biblical history but what we can do to spearhead the coming of the kingdom.

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<sup>1</sup> 1. George Rupp, *Culture-Protestantism: German Liberal Theology at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1977), p. 33.

<sup>2</sup> 2. ‘The immediate object of theological cognition is the community’s faith that it stands to God in a relation essentially conditioned by the forgiveness of sins.’ Albrecht Ritschl, *The Christian Doctrine of Justification and Reconciliation*, trans. H.R. Mackintosh and A.B. Macaulay, 3d ed. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1900), p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> 3. Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation*, trans. and ed. Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1973), p. 6.

It is commonly said in neoliberal circles that the task of theology is to construct a new view of the world or forge a new synthesis of meaning in the light of the tremendous changes in human culture since the Enlightenment. Instead of the grandiose design of creating a meaningful world (the thrust of Gordon Kaufman's constructive theology),<sup>4</sup> I uphold the more modest agenda of an evangelical dogmatic theology: to expound the significance of the new creation that has broken into this world from the beyond. Theology is not an analysis of the vagaries of universal religious experience nor an exploration of the possibility of meaning in a meaningless world but an exposition of the particularities of Scripture that bring meaning to the otherwise desolate landscape of human existence.

Theology is the diligent and systematic explication of the Word of God for every age, involving not only painstaking study of the Word of God but also an earnest attempt to relate this Word to a particular age or cultural milieu. Theology in the evangelical sense is the faithful interpretation of the biblical message to the time in which we live. It must struggle to elucidate the relevance of the cross and resurrection victory of Jesus Christ for our time and place in history, not simply reaffirm past interpretations or repeat creedal formulas of another era.

Theology is a science not in the sense of natural science but in the sense of wisdom: it is certain and true. I here side with Duns Scotus, who followed Aristotle in contrasting science with opinion and conjecture because of its certainty and truth. Yet Scotus denied that theology is a science in the strict sense, his ideal being mathematical science. Here he differed from Thomas Aquinas, who saw theology as a speculative science. This does not mean, however, that its doctrines are only moral postulates. Theology endeavours to present a true picture of the activity of divinity that serves to illumine the pilgrimage of faith. Its purpose is not to give abstract knowledge of God but to direct humanity to its spiritual home for the glory of God. God has provided a revelation of himself sufficient for us to think deeply and rightly concerning his will and purpose so that we may implement his plan for the world in faithful service. Yet God has not given us an exhaustive knowledge of the inner workings of his Spirit or a direct perception of the essence of his being. As Scripture says, 'The secret things belong to the LORD our God; but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children for ever, that we may do all the words of this law' ([Deut. 29:29](#)).

Even though we cannot claim a comprehensive knowledge of God as he is in himself, we must not suppose that God in himself is other than God as he relates himself to us in Jesus Christ. To know God in Christ is to know God in himself, that is, God as he exists in the paradoxical unity of majestic holiness and unbounded love—though this is always a partial and broken knowledge waiting for completion on the day of redemption.

The method of theology is not reason preparing the way for faith (Abelard) but faith seeking understanding (Anselm). This is not the method of correlation (Tillich) but that of faithful explication. Theology is not existential-ontological, proceeding from existents to Being-itself (Macquarrie), but revelational-situational, proceeding from God's self-revelation in Christ to the human existential situation.

The sources of theology are Scripture and tradition, but the first has priority. Scripture is the primary, tradition the secondary, witness to divine revelation. Culture or human experience is the medium of revelation but not its source or norm. I take issue with Schillebeeckx, who sees the sources for faith as the traditional experience of the Judeo-Christian movement and the contemporary human experiences of Christians and non-

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<sup>4</sup> 4. See Gordon D. Kaufman, *The Theological Imagination* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981), pp. 21–57, 263–79.

Christians.<sup>5</sup> I prefer to speak of contemporary human experience as the field of theology but not its source or norm.

Karl Barth has wisely advised Christians to have the Bible in one hand and the daily newspaper in the other—the Bible to give us the criteria for faith and action, the newspaper to give us sufficient knowledge of the current situation to enable us to apply the directives of our faith in a meaningful fashion. We neglect either of these at our peril.

Yet the concern for relevance can be carried too far. Thomas Finger speaks not only of a ‘kerygmatic norm’ for theology but also of a ‘contextual norm’.<sup>6</sup> ‘The extent to which theology is intelligible within the experience and thought-world of its context is also a standard by which its adequacy may be measured’.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, he cautions against judging the truth of theology by the norms of any context. The contextual norm sets the stage for the way we formulate and convey our message. In my opinion this view still gives too much weight to the context in determining the credibility of the Christian message. The gospel gains its credibility only by the power of the Spirit, and though we must employ the language of our day in expressing the truth-content of faith, this truth must never be brought into even partial accord with the criteria for truth entertained by the culture.<sup>8</sup>

In the last analysis liberal theology is fundamentally anthropology. Its focus is on human existence or self-understanding. Here Reinhold Niebuhr reflects his liberal heritage, declaring theology to be not a science of God but ‘a rational explication of man’s faith’.<sup>9</sup> Herrmann views faith as confidence in one’s own experience as a Christian. Bultmann defines theology as ‘the conceptual presentation of man’s existence as an existence determined by God’.<sup>10</sup> Schillebeeckx bases his theology on a phenomenological analysis of human existence or the universal experience of suffering humanity. According to Troeltsch the role of dogmatic propositions is to unfold the contemporary consciousness of the church.

In the evangelical theology I propose, the focus is neither on divine essence nor on human existence but on divine existence in humanity, as we see this in Jesus Christ.

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<sup>5</sup> 5. Schillebeeckx, *Jesus*, p. 13.

<sup>6</sup> 6. Thomas N. Finger, *Christian Theology: An Eschatological Approach* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1985), 1:54.

<sup>7</sup> 7. *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> 8. Finger’s eschatological contextual theology leads him to bring the faith into a partial harmonization with the ideological movement of modern feminism, to the extent that he can advocate calling God ‘She’ as well as ‘He’. Theology, he says, must let itself be challenged by ‘reality’s openness to change, growth and the partially unknown’. See Thomas Finger, ‘Donald Bloesch on the Trinity: Right Battle, Wrong Battle Lines’. *TSF Bulletin* 9, no. 3 (Jan.–Feb. 1986):21.

<sup>9</sup> 9. Patrick Granfield, ‘“Christian Realism”: An Interview with Reinhold Niebuhr’, *Commonweal* 85, no. 11 (Dec. 16, 1966):320.

<sup>10</sup> 10. Rudolf Bultmann, ‘The Problem of a Theological Exegesis of the New Testament’, in *The Beginnings of Dialectic Theology*, ed., James M. Robinson (Richmond, Va.: John Knox Press, 1968), p. 252. Along these same lines Gabriel Fackre, who was deeply influenced by Reinhold Niebuhr, defines theology as the ‘ordered reflection that seeks to elaborate and render intelligible the faith of the Christian community’. *The Christian Story* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1984), 1:16. Both Niebuhr and Fackre stand closer to Schleiermacher than Barth in their theological method. Barth would say that the object of theology is neither human faith nor Christian faith but divine revelation that stands over and against the community of faith, that continually calls the faith-perspective of the community into question, that provides the absolute standard by which the community must reform and purify its faith. Fackre’s divergence from Barth is conspicuous in vol. 2 of his *Christian Story*, where he includes ‘the world’ as a criterion for faith (see pp. 51–54).

Theology is not the verbalization of religious experience (Schleiermacher), even less of common human experience (David Tracy). Instead, it is the articulation of a divine revelation that breaks into our experience from the beyond and transforms it.

The Catholic philosophical theologian Bernard Lonergan has defined theology as ‘reflection upon conversion in a culture’.<sup>11</sup> If this were taken as an exhaustive definition (which Lonergan does not intend) it would end in rank subjectivism, since human conversion takes many forms. The focus should be not on the experience of faith but on its object—its ground and its goal. The basis of our theology can be none other than God’s incomparable act of reconciling the world to himself in Jesus Christ.

In the theological method I advocate, we do not adduce true insights from Scripture (Finger), nor do we deduce true propositions from Scripture (Carl Henry). Neither do we infer general truths from Scripture by an investigation of particulars—the way of induction (Charles Hodge). Instead, we discover the truth within Scripture after being confronted by the One who is the Truth—Jesus Christ. We begin not with Scripture as a historical text but with the living Word of God—Jesus Christ—and then try to ascertain how Scripture bears witness to him.<sup>12</sup>

Theology is neither ‘experiential-expressive’—expressing the universal aspect of human experience (as in Tracy)—nor ‘cultural-linguistic’—purporting to describe the cultural-linguistic reality of Christian word and life (as in Lindbeck).<sup>13</sup> Instead, it is creative-transforming—seeking to critique the life and symbols of the church as well as the experience of the culture in the light of the new reality of Jesus Christ. It brings a new horizon to both the church and the world that alters, sometimes dramatically, the church’s faith-understanding as well as overturning the culture’s self-understanding.

I agree with Tillich that theology is neither an ‘empirical inductive’ nor a ‘metaphysical deductive’ science.<sup>14</sup> Nor can we say (and Tillich concurs) that it is simply a combination of both. Yet I take issue with him when he says theological understanding is grounded in the mystical a priori, which transcends the cleavage between subject and object. Theology is a faith-responsive science. God makes himself an object to our understanding in the event of revelation, but this can be perceived only in faith.

## DOGMA AND DOCTRINE

Ever since the Enlightenment, dogma has been viewed with suspicion, especially by Protestants. Harnack regarded dogma as the unwelcome intrusion of the Greek spirit into the world of biblical faith.<sup>15</sup> According to Ritschl, our focus should be not on dogmas about God and Christ, which tend to remove faith from history, but on value judgments that are rooted in the experience of the redemptive work of Christ in history.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> 11. Stephen Happel and James J. Walther, *Conversion and Discipleship* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), p. 145. See Bernard J.F. Loergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1972), p. xi.

<sup>12</sup> 12. Once we see Scripture in the light of its divine centre and goal, we are then free to use both induction and deduction in the task of understanding the full import of the scriptural message.

<sup>13</sup> 13. See George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Post-liberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), pp. 30–45.

<sup>14</sup> 14. Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 1:8–9.

<sup>15</sup> 15. Harnack, *History of Dogma*, 1:17.

<sup>16</sup> 16. Ritschl, *The Christian Doctrine of Justification and Reconciliation*, pp. 203–12, 398–99.

*Dogma* has undergone variations of meaning through the centuries. In the New Testament, *dogma* referred to a decree, ordinance, decision or command ([Lk. 2:1](#); [Acts 16:4](#); [17:7](#); [Eph. 2:15](#); [Col. 2:14](#); [Heb. 11:23](#)). In Greek philosophy it came to mean doctrinal propositions expressing the cardinal beliefs of a particular school of philosophy. In Roman Catholicism it assumed the form of authoritative declarations of the faith by the teaching magisterium of the church on the basis of special illumination granted to it. Because dogma was said to have its source in Scripture and church tradition, the church came to speak of revealed dogmas, bearing the stamp of infallibility. The Protestant Reformers challenged the infallibility of church dogmas, appealing to Scripture alone as the source of authority and revelation. In place of dogmas they drew up confessions of faith that were to be always under the authority of Scripture. In the development of Reformed theology dogma has come to mean an expression of the truth of faith that has achieved official status in the church but is not itself infallible.<sup>17</sup>

For Karl Barth dogma is ‘the agreement of Church proclamation with the revelation attested in Holy Scripture’.<sup>18</sup> It is therefore an eschatological concept, since there will never be perfect agreement between church proclamation and the eschaton until the parousia, when Christ comes again. Unlike Harnack, Barth did not dissolve dogma in the relativities of history, but he saw dogma as the transcendent goal and model of dogmas.

With Barth I see the need to hold on to the concept of dogma but not to confuse dogma with church formulations that always bear the mark of historical and cultural relativity. Dogma is the divinely given content of the faith apprehended and proclaimed by the believer in the act of obedience. It is the revelational meaning of the biblical message given to us in the act of bearing witness to the faith. Dogma is to be associated with God’s self-understanding; dogmatics signifies an expression of the believer’s reflection about God.

It is important to distinguish between dogma and doctrine. Dogma is the divinely inspired apostolic interpretation of the events of redemption. Doctrine is the systematic affirmation of this divinely inspired interpretation by the theologians of the church. Dogma is what God declares; doctrine is what the person of faith articulates. Doctrine is dogma condensed in a propositional statement accessible to human understanding and *eo ipso* distortion. Dogma is irreversible and irreformable. Doctrine is open to reformation and correction, but its dogmatic content is irrevocable and unalterable. Dogma in the plural is equivalent to doctrines, but in the singular it ordinarily indicates the content of revelation.

When dogma is translated into dogmas or doctrines, it enters the stream of historical relativity and loses its absolute status. In the process of translation, revelational truth—the truth of personal address—is transmuted into a purely propositional truth—the truth of cognitive mastery.<sup>19</sup> Receiving reason is now superseded by controlling reason.

In its fundamental meaning dogma is always alive and dynamic because it is God speaking and the believing subject hearing. Barth rightly asks, ‘Is the truth of revelation

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<sup>17</sup> 17. McKim reminds us that for the Reformers and their followers ‘faith is personal trust and relationship with God through Jesus Christ, not primarily assent to what the church says must be believed’. Donald McKim, ‘Dogma’, in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1984), p. 328.

<sup>18</sup> 18. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, trans. G.T. Thomson (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1936), 1(1):304.

<sup>19</sup> 19. There is, to be sure, a propositional element in revelational truth in that this truth is a claim that calls for our acceptance and obedience. But this is a claim that presses itself upon our understanding rather than a claim that has been reduced to an object of our understanding. It is an announcement of unfathomable grace that can only be received in gratefulness, not a general truth that is there to be assimilated into a conceptual system. It is a command that calls us into action, not a principle that is ever at our disposal.

... like other truths in the sense that it may be established ... as the manifestation of something hidden, in human ideas, concepts and judgments, that it may be, as it were, conserved in this restricted and specialized form, that it can be had as truth apart from the event of its being manifested?'<sup>20</sup>

Doctrine represents the crystallization of dogma, the articulation of the truth of revelation in the form of a guiding standard or normative witness. Doctrines can be trustworthy when they are controlled by the dogmatic norm of the law and the gospel. I concur with Avery Dulles that with qualifications, 'one may hold that right doctrine, insofar as it accurately mirrors the meaning of the original message, is, in its content, revealed. God's revelation achieves itself through human concepts and words'.<sup>21</sup> Doctrine is nonetheless always open to reformulation as more light breaks through from God's Holy Word. Dogma by its very nature cannot be revised, but doctrine is open to revision as we are led into a deeper or fresher understanding of dogma.

I agree with Barth that dogma has an eschatological thrust. Because our apprehension and formulation will never be in total harmony with the divine revelation until Christ comes again, we need to struggle for a fuller understanding of dogma. Our dogmatic formulas are necessarily incomplete, for God is hidden even in his revelation. This does not mean, however, that they are necessarily untrue. Nor can they be regarded as nonbinding so long as they have their source and inspiration in Scripture.

A dogma represents a claim to absolute truth, but it is also a claim to obedience (Brunner). We can have absolute truth, yet only in the act of obedience. Because disobedience always accompanies our obedience, truth becomes mixed with untruth. By the grace of God we can nevertheless make true statements about what God has revealed to us, but our formulations will invariably show the signs of special interests, historical conditioning and cultural limitations. We must therefore constantly return to the source, Holy Scripture, in order to reformulate the content of the truth of revelation for new situations. No doctrinal formulation is ever in and of itself infallible or irreformable. But it can nonetheless bear and communicate infallible truth.

Dogmas and doctrines are necessary because the church must distinguish sound doctrine from unsound doctrine, whatever the cultural pressures to divert it from this task. The church is compelled to articulate the faith more precisely when it is threatened by heterodoxy and heresy. At the same time, the dogmas of the church must never be identified with the Word of God itself. As Barth poignantly says, 'The Word of God is above dogma as the heavens are above the earth'.<sup>22</sup>

Church dogmas are not revealed propositional truths but human affirmations born out of fidelity to divine revelation. While not an identity, there is a continuity between the dogma of revelation and church dogma. The dogma of revelation is the story of salvation—but as interpreted by the Spirit of God to the church. We can grasp it only as we are grasped by it. We can have it only by returning to it again and again. 'Even in the Scriptures', Brunner observed, 'the divine dogma is not simply "given", but it is given in such a way that at the same time and continually it must be *sought*'.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> 20. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, trans. and ed. G.W. Bromiley, rev. ed. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975), 1(1):269–70.

<sup>21</sup> 21. Avery Dulles, *Models of Revelation* (New York: Doubleday, 1983), p. 223.

<sup>22</sup> 22. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, trans. Thomson, 1(1):306.

<sup>23</sup> 23. Emil Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, trans. Olive Wyon (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974), p. 106.

The dogmatic norm in the Bible is the law and the gospel: the law illumined by the gospel and the gospel fulfilled in the law. But as soon as we define what the gospel is, we have the kerygma, not the gospel. The gospel transcends human formulations even while it is reflected in these formulations.

Dogma is not the last word but the beginning word. When our eyes are opened to the revelatory meaning of what God has done for us in Christ, we embark on a pilgrimage of faith that involves a lifetime of striving to understand what the Spirit is teaching us to see. Dogma is therefore not only the ground of our faith-understanding but its goal and culmination.

We can cherish the dogma of the two natures of Christ, as defined by the Council of Chalcedon (AD. 451), while recognizing it to be an imperfect reflection of the divine mystery of God in Christ. It is binding on the church but not absolutely infallible in the sense of being faultless or undeceiving. It is not in and of itself infallible, but by the illumination of the Spirit it communicates infallible truth, that is, dogmatic truth. It is binding in the sense that it must be taken seriously as a normative statement of the church's faith. Its truthfulness is based on its continuity with the mind of Christ as this is reflected in the church.

The truth of every church dogma and doctrine is ultimately grounded in the revelation that God has given to us in Jesus Christ and that he gives again through the work of his Spirit in the church. Thomas Torrance is indubitably correct when he declares, 'The truthfulness of theological statements ... depends not on the truthfulness of their intention but on a participation in the Truth which God alone can give.'<sup>24</sup> They must certainly be guided by 'the truth content of the Scriptures, but what must determine theological formulation is the objective truth forced upon the interpreter of the Scriptures by God himself'.<sup>25</sup>

In recent years there have been new interpretations of dogma in Roman Catholic circles. Hans Urs von Balthasar regards the propositions of dogma as true 'insofar as they are a function and an expression of the Church's understanding of the Christ-mystery, as given to it by the Holy Spirit. They cannot be taken out of this setting; therefore, they do not have any *purely* theoretical (i.e., non-experiential, non-existential) truth'.<sup>26</sup> Gerald O'Collins cautions that no 'dogmatic statement can ever exhaustively express the mystery of God's self-communication in Christ. Here as elsewhere faith must continue to "seek understanding" and appropriate new formulations'.<sup>27</sup> O'Collins is insistent that dogmas cannot and should not be treated as ultimate norms. 'The supreme rule of faith' is found in 'the Scriptures, taken together with sacred Tradition'.<sup>28</sup>

Karl Rahner here resonates with much of what is being said in this chapter: 'The clearest formulations, the most sanctified formulas, the classic condensations of the centuries- long work of the Church in prayer, reflection and struggle concerning God's

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<sup>24</sup> 24. Thomas F. Torrance, *Reality and Evangelical Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982), p. 147.

<sup>25</sup> 25. Ibid., p. 135.

<sup>26</sup> 26. Hans Urs von Balthasar, 'Truth and Life', in *Concilium* 21 (New York: Paulist Press, 1967), p. 90.

<sup>27</sup> 27. Gerald O'Collins, 'Dogma', in *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology*, ed. Alan Richardson and John Bowden (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983), p. 163. According to O'Collins, 'All dogmas are doctrines, albeit of a particularly solemn kind, but obviously not all doctrines have reached or ever will reach dogmatic status.'

<sup>28</sup> 28. Ibid., pp. 162–63. O'Collins here cites the Vatican II statement *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation* 6.21.



mysteries: all these derive their life from the fact that they are not end but beginning, not goal but means, truths which open the way to the—ever greater—Truth.’<sup>29</sup>

As Catholic theologians come to recognize the relativity of dogmatic formulation and as Protestant theologians begin to sense the need for a confessional or dogmatic norm in theological work, there may be reason to hope for an emerging consensus on this important issue in the whole church. Yet there is also the sombre possibility that theology in its eagerness to come to terms with the new historical understanding spawned by the Enlightenment will lose sight of the irrevocable fact that there is an infallible standard transcending and governing history, that God’s Word in the form of the gospel and the law is irreformable and irreversible, and that theological study and teaching therefore have an anchor in the transcendent, which cannot be ignored without irreparable harm to the thought and life of the church.

## DIMENSIONS OF A RENEWED THEOLOGY

The kind of theology I advocate is a self-transcending theology, pointing beyond itself to Jesus Christ, to what God has done for us in Christ. It sees itself in the service of the church proclamation of the gospel.

Theologizing, I firmly believe, entails a personal relationship and acquaintance with Jesus Christ, involving a renewal of the mind and heart of the theologian. Theology presupposes regenerate theologians. It is to be done by those who have experienced the Holy Spirit as the interpreter of Scripture. As Luther discovered, ‘theological knowledge is won by experiencing it’.<sup>30</sup>

I assert this against Schubert Ogden’s extraordinary contention that ‘even though faith without theology is not really faith at all, theology without faith is still theology, and quite possibly good theology at that’.<sup>31</sup> The crux of the matter is not whether the theologian accepts the answer of the witness of faith but whether he or she reflects on the question to which the answer is addressed. From my perspective, the pivotal question does not arise out of human experience but is itself a gift of revelation and therefore presupposes that the subject has already been grasped by revelation.

It is well to note that Calvin called his *Institutes* not a *summa theologiae* but a *summa pietatis* (a summary of piety). Indeed, according to John McNeill, the secret of Calvin’s mental energy ‘lies in his piety; its product is his theology, which is his piety described at length. His task is to expound ... “the whole sum of piety and whatever it is necessary to know in the doctrine of salvation”’.<sup>32</sup>

A renewed theology will be evangelical, that is, centred in the gospel of reconciliation and redemption as attested in Holy Scripture. It will serve the evangelical proclamation and will therefore have a pronounced missionary dimension.

It will also be catholic in the sense that it will be universal in its outreach and stand in continuity with the tradition of the whole church. It will draw on the theological commentary on Scripture in the church through the ages. The Reformers appealed not only to Scripture but also to the church fathers in support of their theses.

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<sup>29</sup> 29. Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, trans. Cornelius Ernst (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1961), 1:149.

<sup>30</sup> 30. Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, trans. Robert C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966), p. 8. Note that these are the words of Althaus.

<sup>31</sup> 31. Ogden, *On Theology*, p. 19.

<sup>32</sup> 32. Calvin: *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), [1:li](#).

In addition, a renewed theology will be Reformed. First, it will be anchored in the Protestant Reformation. It will see the Reformation as the rediscovery of the New Testament gospel of salvation by free grace. Second, it will see itself as always being reformed in the light of the Word of God. Theology in this sense will be a *theologia viatorum* (a wayfarers' theology) or a *theologia in via* (a theology on the way). It will not be a *theologia beatorum* (a theology of the blessed) or a *theologia in visione* (a theology in vision). The theologian will humbly acknowledge that he or she has not yet arrived, that the absolute system, the final synthesis of all theses and antitheses, is the property only of God the Almighty.

This same attitude of dependence on the Lord will lead a renewed theology to be pentecostal, in the sense of being open to the new wind of the Spirit. But this is the Spirit never separated from the Word. Theology acknowledges that God has yet more light to break forth from his Holy Word (John Robinson, d. 1625). This new light, however, is not a new revelation—and certainly not a contradiction of what has gone before— but its amplification and clarification.

Finally, theology will earnestly strive to be orthodox. It will not be slavishly bound to the creedal formulations of the past, but it will respect them. It will make use of creeds in order to go beyond them to a new articulation of the faith that nevertheless stands in continuity with the old.

Theology at its best will be integrally related to practice. 'Knowledge of God', Barth pointed out, 'is not an escape into the safe heights of pure ideas, but an entry into the need of the present world, sharing in its suffering, its activity and its hope'.<sup>33</sup> The goal of theology is holiness in life and thought. The motto of liberation theology has much to commend it: 'No one can understand the gospel without the performance of the gospel'.<sup>34</sup> This is in accord with the words of the psalmist: 'A good understanding have all those who do His commandments' ([Ps. 111:10](#) NKJ; cf. [1 Jn. 2:3-4](#); [4:7-8](#) JB). But we should not overlook the other side of the paradox—that knowledge of God has priority over action in the name of God (cf. [Col. 1:9-10](#); [2 Jn. 9](#)). It is not until we are awakened to the love of God poured out for us in Jesus Christ that we will be moved to do acts of love out of gratefulness for what God has done for us. It is only when we ourselves practise love that we are enabled to understand the full implications of the gift of faith.

A catholic evangelical theology will be characterized by a high view of Scripture, unabashedly holding to *sola Scriptura*, the watchword of the Reformation. This means not that Scripture is the only source of revelation but that it is the original and primary witness to revelation. Scripture therefore has primacy—over the church, religious experience and reason. Evangelical theology will take strong exception to Ogden's contention that 'the locus of the canon ... cannot be the writings of the New Testament as such but can only be the earliest traditions of Christian witness accessible to us today by historical-critical analysis of these writings'.<sup>35</sup> It will firmly resist the call of Rosemary Ruether for a new canon that would widen the Scriptures of the church to include Gnostic

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<sup>33</sup> 33. Quoted in Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts*, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), p. 100.

<sup>34</sup> 34. From a lecture by M. Douglas Meeks of Wesley Seminary, Washington, D.C., given at St. Paul's United Church of Christ, Chicago, May 4, 1980.

<sup>35</sup> 35. Ogden, *On Theology*, p. 64.

writings and literature of goddess spirituality.<sup>36</sup> It will affirm with the church father Jerome that 'the bulwark of the Church is that man who is well grounded in Scripture'.<sup>37</sup>

Another hallmark of a catholic evangelical theology is its high view of God. The God of theology will *eo ipso* be the God of Scripture, the sovereign Creator and Redeemer of the world. It will not be the finite God of process philosophy (Whitehead) and philosophical personalism (Brightman) but the personal-infinite God attested in the Bible (Francis Schaeffer). This God is not only Saviour of humankind but Lord of everything that exists.

With full confidence in the power and mercy of God, evangelical theology will uphold the Reformation principle of the sovereignty of grace. Grace not only saves but also rules. We are not only justified by grace but also kept by grace. Yet grace works not apart from human action but in and through human action. Grace realizes its goal in human life through the cooperation that it itself makes possible. A religion of grace will always be arrayed against a religion of works-righteousness. Christianity is not legalism or moralism but the story of the triumph of grace in the lives of sinful human beings.

Paradoxically, the evangelical theologian will have a high view of humanity, agreeing with Irenaeus that 'the glory of God is man fully alive'. Humanity is not reduced to nothingness by grace but instead elevated into fellowship with divinity. God's grace does not denigrate the human but sanctifies and restores it to its true purpose.

A catholic evangelical theology will have in addition a high view of the church, not hesitating to call the church 'our holy mother' (as Calvin did). The church represents the feminine side of the sacred, the bride of Christ, who cleaves to the One who lays down his life for her ([Eph. 5:21-33](#)). We are conceived in the womb of the church and nurtured by the tender love of this holy mother. The church is a sacrament of the grace of God in Christ, a visible sign of the invisible grace that is sealed in our hearts by the Spirit of God.

Finally, evangelical theology will be grounded in a personal commitment to Jesus Christ. Theologizing is valid only when done by those who trust in the grace of Christ for their wisdom and who are motivated by the desire to give glory to God in Christ.

Theology in the sense intended here is more than descriptive. It is also prescriptive, for it presents the truth of faith as normative for all human endeavour. Its task is to clarify and interpret the divine dogma communicated to the church by the Spirit. Its purpose is to serve the church proclamation, the heralding of the good news that we are saved only by grace through the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ for the sins of the world.

## THE TWO SIDES OF THEOLOGY

Theology has two sides: the dogmatic and the apologetic. Its mandate is to combat misunderstandings of the faith (polemics and apologetics) and to articulate the true understanding (dogmatics). Apologetics is the conscious endeavour to answer criticisms from the world outside the church. Polemics is the systematic effort to counter misunderstandings within the family of faith.

Apologetics is not the preamble to dogmatics but an activity within dogmatics. The best defence of the faith consists in expounding the message of faith in love. The self-attesting Scripture, not the new world consciousness, is the point of departure for evangelical theology. In other words, the substance of the faith takes priority over the evidence of faith.

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<sup>36</sup> 36. Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Womanguides: Readings Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon, 1985), pp. ix–xi. Also see Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk* (Boston: Beacon, 1983), pp. 38–41.

<sup>37</sup> 37. Cited in *Presbyterian Journal* 31, no. 50 (Apr. 11, 1973):13.

The evangelical theologian does not blithely proceed to correlate the creative questions of the culture and the answer of faith (as in Tillichian apologetics). Instead, we are challenged to lead people to ask the right questions, questions that are hidden from sinful humanity until the moment of revelation. We seek neither a correlation of the gospel with secular thought nor a synthesis of the gospel with secular thought but a confrontation of secular claims by the truth of the gospel.

Theology exists to serve the proclamation of the church. It will therefore be a kerygmatic theology, focusing on the message of faith. But it will also have a prophetic dimension, endeavouring to bring the law of God to bear upon both personal and social sin. Finally, it will have an apologetic dimension, for it will make a determined effort to unmask the powers of the world that challenge and attack the church. Yet in fulfilling its apologetic mandate it will not presume that arguments for the faith can ever induce faith in unbelievers, for faith comes only by the hearing of the Word of God ([Rom. 10:17](#)). At the same time, it nurtures the hope that as it defends the claims of faith before both church and world it might in the process kindle within unbelievers a curiosity regarding these claims that could be used by the Spirit to lead them into a situation where they might be ready to hear the gospel message.

The method of a theology of revelation is faith seeking understanding (Augustine, Anselm). Reason is not the springboard to revelation nor its foundation but its servant in making the truth of revelation clear both to the church and the world. Our task as theologians of the church is to preach not a bifurcated or private gospel but the whole gospel. We are enjoined to proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord of all of life (Francis Schaeffer). This means we will proclaim not simply the message of salvation but the divine commandment that calls for a dramatic reordering of the life of society and of personal life.

Theology as an agency in the renewal of the church strives for a balance of doctrine, life, experience and worship. Doctrine is important, but it becomes lifeless apart from the experience of the Spirit, the life of obedience and the adoration of the true God in prayer and thanksgiving. Philip Spener rightly depicted theology as not a mere science but a *habitus practicus* (a way of life).<sup>38</sup> Theology is integrally related to the trials and pitfalls of life as well as to its joys and hopes. As Luther observed with characteristic forthrightness, 'One becomes a theologian by experiencing death and damnation, not by understanding, reading, and speculating'.<sup>39</sup>

The emphasis today is on *praxis* over *logos* and *doxa* (worship) over dogma. This is a sorely needed corrective to the lifeless orthodoxy that has been more constricting than liberating. Yet the corrective itself is liable to create a new imbalance. We must not overlook the perennial need for sound doctrine in the church. Here we see the relevance of the Pastoral Epistles, which urge us to remain true to the faith once delivered to the saints (cf. [1 Tim. 4:6](#); [2 Tim. 3:16](#); [Tit. 1:9](#); [2:7](#), [10](#)). In the current pluralistic climate we should take to heart this Johannine admonition: 'Any one who goes ahead and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God; he who abides in the doctrine has both the Father and the Son' ([2 Jn. 9](#)).

The more we emphasize *praxis*, the more we run the risk of losing sight of both the propositional and historical dimensions of revelation. Theology has to do with both the

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<sup>38</sup> 38. Philip Jacob Spener, *Pia Desideria*, trans. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1964), pp. 103–15.

<sup>39</sup> 39. See Jared Wicks, *Luther and His Spiritual Legacy* (Wilmington, Del.: Michael Glazier, 1983), p. 89. Cf.: 'The true contemplation is that in which the heart is crushed and the conscience smitten.' *Luther's Meditations on the Gospels*, ed. and trans. Roland H. Bainton (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962), p. 135.

living of the Christian life and the knowledge of the true God, of his plan and purpose for the world. Neglect of the latter can only leave us vulnerable to the allurements of the New Age mentality that encourages a counterfeit spirituality.

Theology is an intelligible and articulate explication of the message of Scripture on the basis of an experience of the Lord of Scripture for the purpose of greater obedience to him. This explication entails not only affirming the truth of the gospel but also exposing the untruth that subverts or ignores the gospel. To say yes to Jesus Christ is to say no to the spirit of the antichrist. The ability to say yes has its basis in the illumination and empowering of the Holy Spirit ([1 Cor. 12:3](#)). The resolve to say no has this same source, for the discernment and power to resist untruth come from divine grace, not from natural human sagacity.

## THE CHALLENGE TODAY

In order to reaffirm orthodoxy we need first to rediscover heresy. Orthodoxy indeed emerges when the church struggles to reclaim the faith in the face of its distortions and misinterpretations. This is not an undertaking for the fainthearted. With his usual perspicacity Luther realized, 'If I profess with the loudest voice and clearest exposition every portion of the truth of God except precisely that little point which the world and the devil are at that moment attacking, I am not professing Christ, however boldly I may be professing Christ!'<sup>40</sup>

Heresy signifies a palpable imbalance in the interpretation of the faith so that certain truths are ignored or downplayed. It may also indicate an aberration that strikes at the vitals of the faith. In the first sense it is probably more accurately described as heterodoxy.

Schleiermacher was one of the first modern theologians who tried to take heresy seriously (which did not prevent him from fostering it himself). He saw basically four types of heresy: the docetic and ebionitic, which refer to misunderstandings of the person of Christ; and the Manichaeism and Pelagian, which represent misapprehensions in the realm of soteriology.<sup>41</sup> While his analysis has much to commend it, it is woefully inadequate in confronting such perversions of the faith as 'German Christianity' and apartheid. Schleiermacher could justly be accused of promoting the heresy of unionism—seeking Christian unity at the price of letting go of doctrinal particularity.<sup>42</sup> The problem arises from a false irenicism in which love is elevated over truth.

Subjectivism is another theological aberration that wreaks havoc in the church, and Schleiermacher's influence is discernible here also. In this misunderstanding, autonomous human reason or experience becomes the determinant for Christian thinking and practice. Thus Gregory Baum denies that the Christian message gives us information about the divine to be rationally assimilated. Instead, it is salvational truth that raises human consciousness and enables one to see the world in a new light.<sup>43</sup> According to Langdon Gilkey, 'authority for all of us has no locus except here in this world, in present

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<sup>40</sup> 40. Cited by Marshall Shelley, review of *Bring Forth Justice* by Waldron Scott, *Christianity Today* 25, no. 11 (June 12, 1981):62.

<sup>41</sup> 41. See Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, trans. H.R. Mackintosh and J.S. Stewart, 2 vols. (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1963), 1:97–101.

<sup>42</sup> 42. Schleiermacher fervently supported the creation of the Prussian Union Church by Frederick William III in which Lutheran and Reformed distinctives were sacrificed for the purpose of a pan-Protestant church.

<sup>43</sup> 43. Gregory Baum, foreword to Andre M. Greeley, *The New Agenda* (New York: Doubleday, 1973), p. 16.

experience; and consequently the authorities we recognize must be generated out of experience itself'.<sup>44</sup>

The opposite error is objectivism, in which the human mind is called to submit to a purely external authority. Kant aptly referred to this as the peril of heteronomy. We find objectivism in sacramentalism, creedalism and ecclesiasticism, in which the confession of faith or the church is made the final criterion for life and thought. The shadow of heteronomy clouds the vision of Max Thurian, erstwhile theologian of the Taizé community: 'We have no better access to the truth contained in Sacred Scriptures and believed in by the whole Church than the trinitarian and Christological dogmas of the first councils. ... *Theological science is composed of exegesis and of submission to the faith of the councils*'.<sup>45</sup>

Another seedbed of heresy is eclecticism, which draws from various traditions, often conflicting and disparate. The search for a global religion that would in effect supplant institutional Christianity was already noticeable in Schleiermacher, and it has reappeared in Paul Tillich, John Hick and Rosemary Ruether, among others. Ruether is unabashedly eclectic when she says, 'The search for usable tradition may widen to pre-Christian, non-Christian, and post-Christian traditions, not simply over against the biblical and Christian traditions, but as a way of placing it in a larger context, which complements and corrects its biases'.<sup>46</sup>

Closely related to eclecticism are latitudinarianism and pluralism: here any exclusive or particular claim to truth is frowned upon as a sign of provincialism and fanaticism. Schleiermacher prepared the way for the new mentality: 'Let none offer the seekers a system making exclusive claim to truth, but let each man offer his characteristic, individual presentation'.<sup>47</sup> He and those who followed in his steps failed to perceive the fanaticism inherent in such a position.

Christians, of course, should acknowledge the pluralism of the modern age in which various religions and ideologies coexist in mutual and sometimes creative tension, but we cannot under any circumstances surrender our claim to a definitive revelation. There can be a relative pluralism in theology, which seeks to interpret the faith for every age, but not in dogma, which is the doctrinal foundation of faith. We are free to elaborate the doctrinal or dogmatic substance of the faith, but we are not free to discard or ignore its core meaning. Dogma is irreformable, but theology must be constantly reformed in the light from almighty God given in Holy Scripture.

The opposite error of eclecticism and latitudinarianism is sectarianism —unduly narrowing the range of Christian experience and elevating marginal doctrines into dogmas. When belief in the premillennial reign of Christ or the pretribulation rapture of the saints becomes part of the message of the gospel, we are trapped in a dangerously sectarian mindset. Sectarianism is the identification of a particular church with the holy catholic church or a particular theology with the wisdom of God. Just as liberals gravitate to eclecticism and latitudinarianism, so conservatives veer in a sectarian direction. Evangelicals and fundamentalists are notorious for majoring in minors.

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<sup>44</sup> 44. Gilkey, *Catholicism Confronts Modernity*, pp. 65–66

<sup>45</sup> 45. Max Thurian, *Visible Unity and Tradition*, trans. W.J. Kerrigan (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1964), pp. 30, 32. Thurian has since converted to the Roman Catholic church and has left the Taizé community.

<sup>46</sup> 46. Rosemary Ruether, 'Theology as Critique of and Emancipation from Sexism', in *The Vocation of the Theologian*, ed. Theodore Jennings, Jr. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985), p. 30.

<sup>47</sup> 47. Schleiermacher, *On Religion*, trans. Oman, p. 175.



The primary task of the theologian today is not, as Langdon Gilkey says, 'the revision of the Christian message in contemporary terms'<sup>48</sup> in accord with the prevailing philosophies of the culture, but the reaffirmation of a catholic evangelical theology, which celebrates biblical faith kept alive in the universal tradition of the whole church. To this end we must have a faithful rendition of the Christian message both in the language of Canaan and in the language of our day. Nor can we accept with Schubert Ogden that 'the ultimate criteria for the truth of any claim can only be our common human experience and reason, however hard their verdict may be to determine'.<sup>49</sup> Our ultimate standard must be the gospel of God that brings all human experience and cultural values into radical question.

In some circles today it is fashionable to speak of theology as describing a particular tradition rather than presenting a normative claim to truth competing with other claims. Doctrines, George Lindbeck suggests, specify rules for Christian speech and action rather than norms that have a basis in ultimate reality. But theology is not simply descriptive but also combative. It must expose error in thinking and must call for a decision for the truth. It seeks to persuade as well as to expound, yet basing its appeal not on its own logic but on the metalogic of the cross of Christ, which drives reason beyond itself. Theology does not merely explicate the doctrines of faith for the sake of coherence and meaningfulness but also presents its doctrines as truth claims calling for decision.

With the rise of narrative theology, the emphasis has shifted from exploring the metaphysical implications of the faith to investigating the story of a people on pilgrimage. While reflecting certain biblical concerns, this development is nonetheless fraught with peril. Theology can ill afford to ignore the issue of truth, for it is truth that gives narrative its significance. Revelation brings us not only insight into the human condition but also foresight into the divine plan for the world. The divine incursion into history sets the stage for an excursus in ontology. Theology is certainly more than a generalized description of the faith of the community: it entails a metaphysical probing of how this community is grounded in reality.<sup>50</sup> Christianity is not a religion in search of a metaphysic (as Whitehead erroneously believed);<sup>51</sup> it is a faith that has its own metaphysic, but one that needs to be developed over against the illusory speculations of a humanity that has declared its independence from God.

The overall aim in this kind of exploration is not conceptual mastery or comprehensive understanding but a faithful rendition of the truth-content of divine revelation as this pertains to the whole of reality. Theology is not to seek a place in the sun at the expense of philosophy but to aspire to give all praise to God's glory, humbly recognizing that the perfect or fulfilled system of thought lies only in the mind of God. Our little systems are at the most imperfect reflections and approximations of the absolute system that God alone possesses. Theology's task is to set up signs and parables that point to the perfect wisdom of God, which for the church is an eschatological hope rather than a realized possibility.

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<sup>48</sup> 48. Langdon Gilkey, 'Theology as the Interpretation of Faith for Church and World', in *The Vocation of the Theologian*, ed. Jennings, p. 97.

<sup>49</sup> 49. Ogden, *On Theology*, p. 140.

<sup>50</sup> 50. I affirm this against Thiemann, whose doctrine of revelation is 'not a foundational epistemological theory but an account which traces the internal logic of a set of Christian convictions concerning God's identity and reality'. Ronald F. Thiemann, *Revelation and Theology: The Gospel as Narrated Promise* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985), p. 70. Unlike some other narrative theologians, Thiemann contrasts 'descriptive' with 'explanatory' rather than with 'normative'.

<sup>51</sup> 51. See Alfred North Whitehead, *Religion in the Making* (New York: Macmillan, 1957), p. 50.

## A VENTURE IN OBEDIENCE

Theology is a venture in obedience before it is a search for deeper understanding—either of divinity or of humanity. We seek to understand in order to be fit instruments for service in God's kingdom. In our obedience we will try to build bridges of understanding but also tear down bridges that can only lead to greater misunderstanding. We will be messengers of hope but also prophets of gloom, for our task is to announce the divine judgment on human sin as well as the gospel of God's grace.

In our theological endeavour we have models from the past to guide us. For Luther theology was essentially a battle (*Kampf*), whereas for Thomas Aquinas it was primarily wisdom (*sapientia*). This accounts for the often erratic character of Luther's writings and the well-balanced but somewhat boring character of Thomas's works. Yet we need both: rational coherence and the sharpness of polemical combat. Both Luther and Aquinas employed rational analysis and polemical argument, though not to the same degree. Both sought to maintain the mystery and paradox in revelation. This is more evident in the former, but Aquinas too maintained that the truth of faith, though intelligible, is incomprehensible. Both would concur with the apostle Paul: 'Now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face' ([1 Cor. 13:12](#)).

Theology is not a *game* in which we share insights or discoveries about ultimate reality in order to gain intellectual stimulation or deeper self-understanding, for this would make it into a sophisticated kind of psychology. Nor is it essentially a *quest* for wisdom, for then it would become just another philosophy. Nor is it basically a *battle* against false belief, for this would reduce it to polemics.<sup>52</sup>

Instead, theology is essentially a *witness* that takes the form of faithful reflection on the truth revealed by God in a particular time and place in history for the purpose of equipping the church in its apostolic task of preaching and teaching. As a witness to the truth revealed by God it will involve exposing falsifications of this truth as well as striving to understand the ramifications of this truth for every aspect of experience.

Theology will include the dimensions of battle and wisdom, but it will exclude any attempt to construe it as simply an intellectual exercise. When theology becomes a game it is bereft of serious commitment and even of serious content. The bona fide theologian will recognize that we have to say an irrevocable no to some beliefs and an equally irrevocable yes to others. We must be charitable but at the same time resolute in our fidelity to the gospel.

Likewise, theology must not be reduced to a phenomenological description of religious experience or of human existence. It is on the contrary an announcement of the good news that a Saviour has come into the world who not only promises deliverance to a people enslaved by the powers of darkness but also who aspires to be Lord of all creation. Theology is *reflection* on the meaning and impact of God's intervention in human history but for the purpose of *obedience* to this God as Lord of the universe.

Evangelical theology of the kind I am proposing will be characterized by humility. The theologian will be fully cognizant of the fact that human thoughts are not the same as the thoughts and ways of God and may be a very inadequate way of expressing the truth revealed by God. Thomas Aquinas sardonically commented on his own theology shortly before his death: 'It reminds me of straw.' Karl Barth wryly followed suit: 'The angels will laugh when they read my theology.'

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<sup>52</sup> 52. Brunner errs in this direction when he says: 'This fight with modern thinking is the task, supremely, of theology; and since it is a fight more critical than any other the Church has to wage, the responsibilities of theology are now perhaps greater than ever before.' Emil Brunner, *The Word and the World* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1931), p. 6.



A theology rooted in the gospel will also be imbued with the spirit of love. We are obliged always to speak the truth in love. As Thomas Aquinas wisely admonished, 'We must love them both, those whose opinions we share and those whose opinions we reject. For both have labored in the search for truth, and both have helped us in finding it.'<sup>53</sup>

Finally, evangelical theology will be noted for its daring. It will seek to witness to the truth of God with boldness and resolution, undeterred by pressures from the world. Indeed, holy boldness can be said to be the salient mark of great theology. Yet this boldness must be informed by wisdom, love and humility.

Theology at its best will be a venture of daring love born out of fidelity to the Great Commission to share the gospel with all peoples. It will not try to impose its claims or impress the world with its superior wisdom. It will seek only to serve the incarnate Word of God, its Lord and Master, by announcing the coming of his kingdom with its promise of liberation and transformation for the world.

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# Revisioning the Theological Task

Stanley J. Grenz

**Keywords:** Theology, proposition, revelation, faith community, contextualization, epistemology

Every Christian is a theologian. Whether consciously or unconsciously, each person of faith embraces a belief system. And each believer, whether deliberately or merely implicitly, reflects on the content of these beliefs and their significance for Christian life. The close connection between being a Christian and theological reflection arises from the New Testament itself. The biblical documents invite the faith community to think through their beliefs in order to understand why these are a part of personal and corporate commitment (e.g., [Mt. 22:37](#); [2 Cor. 10:5](#); [1 Pet. 3:15](#)). Theology seeks to facilitate this conscious reflection on faith. Therefore, the enterprise is to be neither feared nor despised, but rather welcomed, because of its important function within the life of discipleship.

We have asserted that the ethos of evangelicalism is a shared experience understood in terms of shared categories, a piety cradled in a theology. But what theology can assist us as evangelicals in our attempt to reflect on the faith we share?

Despite the orientation toward spirituality characteristic of the movement as a whole, contemporary evangelical thinkers generally engage in the theological task with eyes

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<sup>53</sup> 53. Cited in *The Catholic Worker* 46, no. 6 (July–Aug. 1980):8.