

A Theology for the Church
Convocation Address
Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary
August 20, 2002

David S. Dockery
President, Union University
Jackson, TN 38305

Ephesians 4:11-16

And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ. As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves, and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming; but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all *aspects* into Him, who is the head, even Christ, from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by that which every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love (NASB).

At the heart of a theological seminary is the study of theology.¹ The term “theology” scares people. It sounds formidable, esoteric, abstract, and

¹ This essay borrows ideas significantly from and is dependent on the following sources: Paul Basden and David S. Dockery, eds. *People of God: Essays on the Believers' Church* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1991); Robert Bellah, et al. *Habits of the Heart* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985); Donald G. Bloesch, *Essentials of Evangelical Theology* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1979); David S. Dockery, ed. *New Dimensions in Evangelical Thought* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1998); Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985); James Leo Garrett, Jr. *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995); Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970); Stanley G. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994); John Hannah, *Our Legacy* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2001); Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, reprint 1977); George R. Hunsberger and Craig Van Gelder, *The Church Between Gospel and Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996); Abraham Kuyper, *Principles of Sacred Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, reprint 1963); C.S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (New York: Collier Books, MacMillan, 1946); Paul S. Minear, *Images of the Church in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960); Leon Morris,

technical. Many people are suspicious of the word theology—thinking it is irrelevant to our life with God, or even worse, a sort of human presumption. People ask, “Are we taking the living word of God and stuffing it into an arid intellectual system?” In my years of involvement with Christian ministry, going back to my university student days almost 30 years ago, I have been warned about theology. I don’t think my experience has been atypical for I have continued to find the suspicion of theology to be problematic among many church people. The suspicions are right at least partly because theology often has been studied in the wrong way which has led to mis-thinking or even hurtful thinking at many places.

Theology is not just an attempt to articulate our feelings about our dependence on God, as the influential German theologian Friederich Schleiermacher said. On the other hand, it is not merely an attempt to state the objective truth, or to put the truth in proper order, as the great orthodox theologian Charles Hodge suggested when he attempted to articulate theology in 19th century scientific terms. It seems best to me to think of theology in a twofold way: (1) as developing a mind for truth so that we can indeed “articulate the faith once for all delivered to the saints,” and (2) as developing a heart for God so that our lives are built up in the faith. Ultimately, a theology that has the church as its focus is to build up the believers so that the body may grow up into the Head, which is Christ himself, in order to bring about maturity in thought and in life (Eph 4:13-16).

For too many people, however, the province of theology is not the church, but is limited to the realm of specialists in the academic world. Let me say that I believe that Christian theology should engage the academic world, society at-large. I do believe there is a rightful place for a public theology. Ultimately, however, I believe theology is for the church. While this does not mean that all Christians are to be theologians in the sense of being uniquely summoned to the task of leading in theological thought, nevertheless all believers have a responsibility before God to be theologians, that is, to think lofty thoughts about God

Expository Reflections on the Letter to the Ephesians (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994); E. Y. Mullins, *The Christian Religion in its Doctrinal Expression* (Philadelphia: Judson, 1917); Robert Saucy, “Doing Theology for the Church,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 16 (1973); *The Church in God’s Program* (Chicago: Moody, 1972); Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers* ([1799] San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1958); David Smith, *All God’s People: A Theology of the Church* (Wheaton: Bridgepoint, 1996); John R. W. Stott, *God’s New Society: The Message of Ephesians* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1979); Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988); *Practicing Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001); Robert E. Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999).

and to live accordingly, that is to live according to God's word in Holy Scripture. To abdicate the theological domain to specialists alone either because of a lack of interest or because of the technicalities involved is not only harmful to the church, but I believe also that it is unpleasing to God. The truth is that every believer is in some sense a theologian, for all believers who know God have the responsibility to see and understand the revelation of God for their foundational beliefs, while integrating these beliefs into their life and practice.

Theology and the Church

Theology is certainly *not* the whole of church life, but there must be a place for the true intellectual love of God, for Jesus has told us to love God with our heart, soul, strength, *and mind* and love our neighbor as well. This should not lead to some cold, intellectual approach to the faith unaccompanied by affection. For too many, theology is a kind of intellectual aloofness or uncommitted intellectual curiosity. But before we can discuss the role of the church in doing theology, I would suggest that we think about the relationship of theology *to* the church.

I believe theology renders service to the church in many ways. It satisfies the mind so that we can know God, so that we can know the living Christ. Theology is necessary for the church's teaching and apologetic tasks (1 Pet 3:15). Theology is important as a touchstone for understanding what the church believes and for recognizing the principles by which the allegiance of its members will be judged. Such beliefs and practices come from serious theological reflection. Theology also points to ethics. Certainly it is possible to act one way and think another, but it is not logically possible for one to do so for long, for even the biblical writer has admonished us "as a person thinks in his heart, so he is." If the church is to live in the world with a lifestyle that issues in glory to God, it must think—and think deeply—not only of personal ethics but of the implications of the biblical faith for social, economic, and political ethics as well. Such necessities touch the heart of the church's life and mission; they are not just matters on the periphery or options from which we can pick and choose.

One of the main problems the church faces in this new century is a failure to recognize one of the primary purposes of the church, which is stated clearly for us in Ephesians 3:10. God's intent is that through the church the manifold wisdom of God is to be made known. The term "manifold" means multicolored or multifaceted like a beautiful jewel. The history of the Christian church and the unfolding drama of redemption is a graduate school for the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realm.

The church is central to God's working in history. John Stott says that the church is not only central to history, but to the gospel and Christian living as well.

Thus theology is more than God's words for me as an individual—theology is God's words for us—the church—the community of faith. It is important that we understand theology not merely in individualistic terms. We need to move toward a corporate and community understanding. If the church is central to God's plan then we cannot push to the edge what is central for God. This implies that we need a framework for understanding a theology *of* the church before we can talk about doing theology *for* the church.

A Theology of the Church

In Ephesians Paul seems to advance the understanding of the church beyond that of a local body of believers to include the people of God on earth at any one time, plus all believers in heaven and on earth. This is the true, invisible, universal church.

At Pentecost God inaugurated the church as his new society (Acts 2). He founded it on Christ's finished work (Acts 2:22-24) and the baptizing work of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12:13). The church is a mystery (Eph 3:1-6) that Christ prophesied (Matt 16:18) and was revealed at the Spirit's coming at Pentecost. The church has apostles and prophets as its foundation and Christ as the cornerstone (Eph 2:20-21).

Thus in origin and in purpose the church is God's church. We do not create the church by our efforts, but receive it as God's gift. It is constituted by him and for him. Membership is by divine initiative. God creates a fellowship of people indwelt by the Holy Spirit. The New Testament presents the church as the household of faith (Gal 6:10), the fellowship of the Spirit (Phil 2:1), the family of God, the pillar of truth (1 Tim 3:15), the bride of Christ (Rev 19:7), the body of Christ (Eph 1:22-23), the new creation (Eph 2:15), and the temple of the Holy Spirit (Eph 2:21). The church is thus more than a human organization; it is a visible and tangible expression of the people who are reconciled to Christ and to one another.

Joining with the church's confession throughout the ages we can maintain that the church is one, holy, universal, and apostolic. The church then must seek to remain in continuity with the past, primarily the apostolic doctrine and practice made known to us in Holy Scripture (see Eph 2:20; 3:2-13). It is for this reason that theology is important for the church. The church must take seriously the work of doing theology as part of its purpose and mission.

Doing Theology for the Church

Carrying out the image of the pillar of the truth, theologians must see their first calling as the equipping or building up of the church (Eph 4:13-16). Equipping involves moving believers toward: (1) the unity of faith and (2) a maturity of the faith that involves the full knowledge of God's Son.

When the church is equipped, the people of God will evidence stability in precept and practice. The church will demonstrate and model transparent relationships where people can "speak the truth in love" to one another—or as the text literally says—can model "truthing in love" where the church will grow up in every way into Christ, with each member supporting the other, fitted together in harmony and built up in love.

The people of God are to have a childlike faith, demonstrating honesty and humility in all things. However, we are not to be childish, which implies a lack of discernment. The church is not to be characterized as unstable, always caught up in the latest movement, trend, or fads, always seeking that which is novel based on the newest teaching at the most recent conference.

The kind of maturity described in Ephesians 4 needs a carefully articulated theological foundation that will lead the church away from instability and gullibility. Believers are to be trusting, but also discerning. We must not presume that everything bearing or using God's name is true. The church must always beware of deceptions and counterfeits to the truth.

Theology vs. Practice: A False Dichotomy

Likewise the building up of the people of God results in the advancement of the gospel mission. In actualizing that mission, the church is called to be faithful, to discern, to interpret, and to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ as the transforming power for the world. Granted, the church also needs to be effective; i.e. to structure and manage its work in such a way that efficient stewardship of all available resources is practical.

Faithfulness and effectiveness, however, do not have equal status. The way in which the church manages itself, that makes and implements decisions regarding planning, organizing, staffing, coordinating, and evaluating, is determined by faith commitments concerning the nature and calling of the church. The theological understanding of the church and its calling then must serve as the primary criteria by which the discoveries of the human or social sciences are critically analyzed. Thus effectiveness must be in service to faithfulness and indeed, when effectiveness is considered in isolation, may lead to unfaithfulness. The

inter-relationship with faithfulness and effectiveness can be adequately carried out only within a comprehensive ecclesiology that includes both theological foundations and practical manifestations in a mutually constructive relationship.

Unfortunately, the contemporary separation in which we find ourselves often results in mutual suspicion and hostility of the theological enterprise. The church does not encourage, and in fact at times seemingly discourages, the needed creative and collaborative expertise of theologians. The flip side of the coin is no better. Within the academy the practical issues of church are often considered too soft—sometimes mere fluff—to be intellectually stimulating and worthy of disciplined attention. And not surprisingly those practitioners of the life and work of the church often consider academic theologians to be overly abstract and too theoretical, thus irrelevant for the real life of the church. Even professional associations and journals have emerged that cater to the various special interest groups within both the academy and the church. Unfortunately there is seldom if ever any cross-fertilization. These groups read different books, listen to different experts, identify different problems, consider different issues, contribute to different journals, and congregate in different groupings as they pursue diverse and sometimes competing agendas.

My concerns today are not to be another sour voice on the contemporary scene. There are too many people today looking at the church and seeing the glass half empty. What we need is a renewed eschatological vision for the people of God with a recognition of the importance of the church in God's overall plan and a fresh appreciation of the significance of a theological foundation for the church. Granted that the lack of theological acumen on the part of many church members is due to many factors beyond the control of professional theologians; today it is important that we recognize the relationship between being a faithful theologian and a faithful churchman. In fact, Michael Green has shown that early theologians not only were faithful churchmen, but also evangelists, which points out that it was the vital intrinsic connection between theology and the church in its earliest days that contributed to its strength.

Despite the fact that academic theology has produced vast amounts of materials requiring technical specialization as in other areas of knowledge, theology cannot afford to become some sort of esoteric endeavor done only for the initiated few. It is germane and important to have theological societies and serious theological debate, but unless theology operates consciously as the servant of the church little long-term value is forthcoming. One is reminded somewhat facetiously of the fat ghost of the cultured voice as C. S. Lewis describes him in his work,

The Great Divorce. Upon refusing to repent of his snobbish spirit of open-ended intellectual inquiry in order to enter the heavenly city, the ghost cuts off conversation with his hosts to return to the gray city by saying, "Bless my soul; I'd nearly forgotten; of course I can't come with you; I have to be back next Friday to read a paper. We have a little theological society down here."

The responsibility of making theology applicable to the church rests both with the theologian and the church. Theology must be understandable to the church. Too often what theologians write is unintelligible for many church members. As someone has observed, our best minds are siphoned off to seminaries and graduate schools where they are expected to write indigestible monographs for the dozen other people in the world who can understand what they are talking about. Lest anyone misunderstand, I think that should continue but that can't be the end of the theological enterprise. In the past, theologians of the church wrote so that literate people could understand and it must be acknowledged that Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, and Wesley are much easier to read than many contemporary theologians. Today we need theologians who can write in ways that are sharp, powerful and right on target. John Calvin himself frequently commended the biblical writers for their clarity, simplicity, and brevity, and sought to emulate them in his own writings.

If theology is to impact the church, theologians must learn to communicate in understandable ways. As someone has humorously said, "It may be scientific to say: 'Scintillate, scintillate, globule divific, fain would I fathom thy nature specific, loftily poised in the ether capacious, strongly resembling a gem carbonaceous.' But it is much more understandable to say, 'Twinkle, twinkle, little star, how I wonder what you are, up above the world so high, like a diamond in the sky.'"

Theology and Practice in Concert

Likewise, theology must be relevant and applicable to the church. Yale theologian, Miroslav Wolf, in his new work, *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in the Christian Life*, has encouraged us to think of theology as "a way" in the manner that the early church thought of the Christian faith as the way of life. This is not in any way to downplay or denigrate the importance of serious Christian scholarship. We certainly recognize that the various disciplines of theology are indeed indispensable to an accurate understanding of truth. Without the scholarship of experts in philology, philosophy, archaeology, history, languages, and other related fields—theological study would be seriously impoverished. Yet, if these specializations are pursued in of themselves as an end in themselves and not molded into a unified view of truth they

can get lost in the satisfaction of scholarly achievement alone. I hope that no one would ever suggest that my track record has been to subvert the validity and importance of these scholarly disciplines. But as Abraham Kuyper correctly pointed out a century ago, these studies do not finally touch the higher function of theology unless they set before the church and the world a system of truth that depends upon the regenerated mind and exposes the radical difference between Christianity and the philosophies of the world.

Certainly what engineers, surgeons, and other specialists think and do has significant consequence in this life. But our beliefs about God have significant consequences not only for this life but also for all eternity. Christian theology then forms the foundation of the church's beliefs, proclamation and ministry. It not only involves believing revealed truth but articulating it in such a way that calls the church to purity and ethical holiness. If Christian theology is the study of God and all his works, then it cannot be merely an exercise done in the ivory tower by specialists. Theology is the responsibility of the church seeking to communicate what the church believes, practices, and proclaims primarily for the good of believers, but also for a watching world.

We often hear voices suggest that theology is too divisive and therefore we should de-emphasize its importance. But theology is the backbone of the church. Without good theology the church cannot and will not mature in the faith and will be prone to be tossed back and forth by waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching (Eph 4:14). Healthy theology that matures the heart and head not only enables believers to move toward maturity, but also results in the praise and exaltation of God. Good theology should always lead to doxology. The Apostle Paul, after expounding the doctrines of sin, justification, sanctification, and the future of Israel in the first 11 chapters of the book of Romans, concludes that section by saying, "Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor? Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him? For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever! Amen." (Rom 11:33-36).

We must admit that some theologians unduly complicate the Christian faith or distract us from aspects of Christian living. We should not, however, conclude that theology in itself is distracting or divisive. Theology must be as much a part of the life of the church as evangelism and worship. Evangelism based on unsound theology will itself be unsound and even dangerous. Worship that does not see God as he is and as he has revealed himself will not rightly glorify God. Theology can help us better understand the faith we desire to share in our evangelistic

efforts and moreover can help us lead to an awareness of the grandeur, the greatness, and goodness of the one, true, and wise God that we worship.

Theology can also enable God's people to recover a true understanding of human life. In this sense God's people can once again gain a sense of the greatness of the soul. Theology can help us recover the awareness that God is more important than we are, that the future life is more important than this one, and that a right view of God gives genuine significance and security to our lives. We will understand that happiness is the promise of heaven and that holiness is the priority here in this world.

The church then can better understand what we believe and why we believe it. We can appreciate our heritage and enliven our future hope. When the church carries out this theological task and when theologians do theology for the church, the truth content of the faith can be preserved. For it is the express task of theology to expound the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:7).

When this takes place, the church can be strengthened. The gospel and its fullness can be proclaimed. Without the foundation of solid theology there can be no effective long term preaching, evangelism, or missionary outreach. Those who would suggest that what you don't know can't hurt you could find themselves in great difficulty if this approach is taken toward ultimate matters like heaven and hell. On the other hand, sound, reliable theology, based squarely on God's word, offers reassurance and hope.

As you begin this new academic year, as many of you even for the first time begin your pilgrimage as theological students, let me encourage you to do so with the commitment to inspired Scripture as the primary source of all theology. Thus our fundamental assumption is that there is truth available to us and it is found in the Bible and in the church's study of the Bible. The Bible is the word of God written. Christ is the Word of God revealed in it and the Holy Spirit is the voice of God in it revealing Christ to the church.

While we unhesitatingly affirm these truths, a warning needs to be voiced. No single church or denomination, however orthodox or evangelical, strictly follows the Bible. While the church has sought to be always faithful to Scripture, the depth of meaning in the biblical texts is rarely fully understood at any one moment in history. Theology in any tradition is often the art of establishing central and classic texts, which may mean that other texts unfortunately are ignored or not given sufficient weight. No single theologian, church, or denomination has escaped nor can escape human frailty, though there is certainly

continuity throughout the centuries, particularly in the teachings concerning the person and work of Christ.

Thus understanding theology in the context of the history of the church provides insight for today and guidance for the future. In this way theology helps preserve the church from wrong-headed fads. Knowledge of the past keeps the church from confusing what is merely a contemporary expression from that which is enduringly relevant. Theology helps present to the church a valuable accumulation of enduring insights along with numerous lessons and warnings—both positive and negative. Thus theology done for the church will always have one eye on the church's historical paths.

Such an awareness of the church's history provides a bulwark against the pride and arrogance that would suggest that "we" are the only group or tradition that carries on the orthodoxy of the apostles. Knowledge of such continuities and discontinuities in the past will help us focus on those areas of truth that are truly timeless and enduring, while encouraging authenticity and humility, as well as a dependency on God's Spirit. Hopefully this awareness will cause us not just to accept things in accordance with our tradition or do things in accordance with our own "comfort zones" but will again and again drive us back to the New Testament with fresh eyes and receptive hearts—and then rest our case there.

Finally, we believe that a theologically informed and equipped church will be better prepared for times of duress and trial—whether through means of persecution, in the face of faithless scholarship, or in the midst of the church's internal bickering and divisions. With hope the church can focus on the triumphal work of God in Jesus Christ, living in expectation of the glorious reign of the King of kings and Lord of lords. Indeed Samuel Stone has said it so well in his great hymn about the church:

The Church's one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord;
 She is His new creation, By Spirit and the Word:
 From heaven He came and sought her to be His holy bride,
 With His own blood He bought her, And for her life He died.

Elect from every nation, Yet one o'er all the earth,
 Her charter of salvation, One Lord, one faith, one birth;
 One holy name she blesses, Partakes one holy food,
 And to one hope she presses with every grace endued.

Mid toil and tribulation, And tumult of her war,
 She waits the consummation of peace for evermore;
 Till with the vision glorious Her longing eyes are blest,
 And the great Church victorious Shall be the Church at rest.

And then with the Apostle Paul we shall all gladly proclaim, “Now to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations for ever and ever! Amen.”