

Teaching Theology in the Local Congregation

(This article was prepared as a lecture in which a significant amount of material had to be compressed in a slot of time, and is printed here in that form.)

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The teaching of theology in the local congregation happens best when it is not planned or programmed, when it flows spontaneously and naturally out of the theologically *informed* activities of church leaders, especially ministers. In a fundamental sense the teaching of theology cannot be programmed, contrived, and arranged. Certainly it never takes place by committee or bureaucratic decree. It happens when theologians are present in a congregation that is concerned with the basic issues of life, with the questions and issues which are the responsibility of theology.

I

The teaching of theology begins with the theologian and with the work of theology itself. Hence the question with which we have to begin is What is theology?

Theology is first of all sustained, critical reflection. It is never simply enthusiasm. It is not prayer, though some theologians, such as Anselm in the *Proslogion* and Augustine in the *Confessions*, have attempted to write theology as prayer. But this is the exception and a proper method only for genius. Theology is not the language of awe, of reverence, or of adoration. It is not the language of immediate religious experience, but critical rational reflection on that experience.

Theology in a very broad sense may be conceived as critical reflection upon the meaning of life. Nevertheless it is difficult to arrive at any satisfactory definition of theology that does not have to do with God. Yet just as theology has to do with God, it also has to do with human life. As Calvin said, we cannot speak of God without speaking of man, and we cannot speak of man without speaking of God. Hence serious concern with the meaning of human existence is an indispensable dimension of the theological task.

For our purposes theology may be defined in this way. Theology is (1) critical reflection (2) about God, about the created order, about human existence, and about the faith itself, (3) in the light of what is perceived to be the decisive revelation of God in Jesus Christ as attested in Scripture (4) in dialogue with the church's understanding of that message, and (5) in dialogue with the experience of the human community, *especially* with human experience in the Christian community today.

The task of theology is best understood as a dialogue. The dialogue is open-ended. There is no final theology. As Barth put it, theology is written for time not eternity. The dialogue is also a human work and therefore fallible. The dialogue takes place in community. The immediate community is the church. The theologian learns from the whole Christian community, and the work of the theologian is subject to the critical review of other theologians. Theology is also written in the context of the whole human community. It is a *public* task. It must commend itself as a responsible intellectual enterprise that can maintain its intellectual integrity even among those who do not share its presuppositions. Good theology is never written in private.

Theologians can be grouped or typed by the way in which they participate in this dialogue. Karl Barth wrestled with the Biblical message and with the church's understanding of that message until he understood what he had to say in his time on the basis of what the prophets and Apostles said in their time. Reinhold Niebuhr also wrestled with Scripture, though less systematically than Barth, and with the church's understanding of that message, but he also heard what social scientists were saying, the question they raised for the faith and how the faith was to be related to the social facts of human existence. Other theologians have given special attention to psychotherapy (Tillich), philosophy (Schubert Ogden), physical sciences (Karl Heim), and world religions that justify any assertion and to the demands of language usage, so that the statement of theology will be clear and intelligible.

The nature of the theological task means that the theologian has a mastery of scripture and the history of doctrine, but it also means that he or she reads widely. In principle, all truth, as Justin Martyr understood long ago, can be incorporated into the statement of Christian faith to its enrichment. The nature of the theological task means that the theologian must be alive intellectually to the best thought of the time and sensitive to the full ranges of human experience and emotion.

What now are the tests of theology? How can good theology be distinguished from poor theology or false theology? There are two basic tests for any theology that claims to be Christian. (Cf. writings of Outler, Ogden, Tracy.) The first is the *appropriateness* of a theology as a statement of the Christian message. Theology is the self test that the church makes of its proclamation. The word of God in preaching is examined in the light of the Word of God in Scripture insofar as the written word attests the Word of God in Jesus Christ. For Barth the primary problem before the church is heresy. If the church can get the message right, the message itself under the power of the Holy Spirit will create its own response. There is something very compelling about the message when it is clearly articulated. No one who has witnessed the work of some of the mass evangelists can doubt the power of simple indicative statements in the contexts of mass audiences, even of indicative statements that cannot stand up to critical scrutiny. The first task of theology is the articulation of an appropriate statement of the content of the Christian revelation. Theology must demonstrate its right to be called Christian. The first test is the *appropriateness* of the message.

The second test of any theology is its *adequacy* in accounting for and in making sense out of human experience, *especially* human experience in the church. The kind of orthodoxy that once dominated our church obscured this characteristic of all good theology. Doctrine was conceived as truth that could

be memorized and accepted as true. Believing became a form of work righteousness, of merit before God. Paul Tillich wisely related justification by grace through faith to doctrine or beliefs as well as to works. The Christian is saved not by right beliefs but by the mercy of God. The role of doctrine in the Christian life is to illuminate, to clarify, and to correct the experience of the believer. Any faith that endures has to illuminate the human experience of meaning amid the absurdities of existence. It must explicate common human joys and common human sorrows. It must deal in a meaningful way with the great human facts of birth and death, the sense of being obligated, the reality of evil, and the depth and transcendence of the human self. The Christian claim is that Christian faith does more justice to the facts, makes more sense out of life, illuminates human experience as does no other faith.

Augustine said long ago, "We believe in order to understand." He was convinced that there is a faith factor in all understanding. A faith commitment, either explicit or implicit, always enables us to put together the diverse facts of experience in some meaningful way. Every one lives in the light of some faith. To be human is to live by faith. The conviction that life is worth living, for example, is the expression of some faith. The necessity of deciding, of acting, forces us to live in the light of some faith about the meaning of the universe and of human life. The fundamental human difference is not between believers and unbelievers but between believers with different faith commitments, not between faith and facts but between faiths.

The teaching of theology involves the negative task of uncovering the faiths by which people live and of subjecting those faiths to critical scrutiny as to their adequacy in accounting for and illuminating the decisive experiences of life. The positive task of teaching Christian theology is to indicate how Christian faith illuminates, organizes, and gives meaning to the facts of experience better than any other categories of understanding. Faith, as Anselm said, seeks understanding or intelligibility. (*Fides quaerens intellectum.*) Faith does not seek demonstration or proof. It is validated as it illuminates our experience. Augustine once said that faith is like friendship. Hence the nature and function of faith can best be explicated by analogies from human relations. There is no way for example to prove friendship. Every possible evidence is always subject to another interpretation. My faith that my friend is true is confirmed or undercut by the way my faith in my friend illuminates and makes sense out of my experience with my friend.

Thus far three fundamental points should be clear about the teaching of theology. *First*, the teaching of theology requires the explication of the relation of Christian faith to what is perceived by the Christian community to be the decisive revelation of God in Jesus Christ as attested in Scripture. *Secondly*, the teaching of theology demands the explication of the ways in which Christian faith illuminates and makes sense out of the personal, social, political, and economic experiences of life. *Thirdly*, the teaching of theology requires the uncovering of the diverse faiths by which modern people live, even people within the church.

II

How then shall theology be taught in the local church? What is required for the teaching of theology?

The first and fundamental requirement for the teaching of theology is a minister who is a *theologian*. The decisive significance for the minister of competence in theology should be clear. Ministers admittedly have to have many competencies. They are promoters, administrators, counsellors, fund raisers. Yet all of these competencies will be duplicated in the community, and usually exceeded. The one competence that ministers have that is essential to their work as ministers and that is not likely to be duplicated in the community is competence as theologians. In any case, it is critical for the teaching of theology. *No one can teach what he or she does not know*. Furthermore, theology cannot be taught well in a church until the teacher has not only mastered theology with mind but has assimilated it in life. Good theology requires not simply the mastery of books but the maturing of time, the passages of life and a broad and deep range of experience. It is not likely that a young person can be a good theologian. Even much academic theology is poor because its practitioners have not lived long enough to have experienced it, or have personally appropriated it in a restricted range of experiences.

Now it must be admitted that many ministers are not competent theologians. Some believe more with their hearts than they know with their minds, and this knowledge of the heart is communicated in human relationships. Some ministers are community good will people who go about doing good things. Unquestionably this is a useful function, and it pleases many people in and out of the church. But it ought not to be confused with the function of a minister of the Word. Some ministers are court jesters, who relieve the tensions of life with their wit and small talk. They make life bearable. Some ministers are public relation experts, some promoters, some management experts. But people in the secular community usually excel in these gifts. The minister, if he or she fulfills the role historically given in the Reformed tradition, must be a theologian who interprets, explicates, and communicates the Word of God as attested in Scripture. Certainly this is the *sine qua non* of teaching theology.

What are the tests of theological competence? One possible test is the traditional Reformed insistence on the approbation of the people of God. In the long run this is a very good test. Do the members of the congregation have confidence in the theology of the ministers? What happens to the level of sermon taste in a congregation during a pastorate? What improvements occur in the theological literacy of the congregation? But the approbation of the people is not an adequate test in the short run. If medical doctors were allowed to practice simply on the basis of the judgment of their patients, it is likely that many quacks of the worst order with good bedside manners but with little or no medical education or knowledge would have the biggest practices. And so it is with ministers, as any good observer of American church life knows.

There are other tests which we can put to ourselves, and these tests I think should be standard.

1. How many serious theological books have I read in the past year?
2. Do I know in a thorough way the theology of one of the great theologians of the church, an Augustine, Luther, or Calvin?

3. Do I know in a thorough way the theology of one twentieth-century theologian, a Barth, a Brunner, or a Niebuhr?

4. Have I recapitulated in my own theological development the development of Christian theology, as it has occurred in the church? (One can wait until fifty to complete this task.)

5. Can I talk intelligibly about basic Christian doctrines?

6. Do I feel as comfortable talking about theology as about politics? Recently I was at the Presbyterian Center when it was closed in recognition of Martin Luther King's birthday. This observance has a good foundation, but I do not recall hearing of any effort at the Center to observe the birthday of a Calvin or an Augustine without whom it is doubtful if Martin Luther King would have been an historical possibility, without whom certainly the Presbyterian Center would never have existed.

7. Do I know enough about contemporary human experience to relate theology to it? The answer to this question involves the experience of life on a wide and deep range as well as reading such contemporary best sellers as Jastrow: *When the Sun Dies*; Carl Sagan: *Dragons of Eden*; Richard E. Leakey: *Origins*; Carl Degler: *Place Over Time*.

The teaching of theology presupposes a competent theologian. Competence in theology demands the mastery, even the memorization, of a vast amount of data as well as the acquisition of the ability to comprehend ideas and to relate them and to express them in a clear and forceful way. Without this competence there is no need to talk about teaching theology.

The teaching of theology also demands enthusiasm for theology, and sensitivity to theological nuances and issues. Good theology is never simply enthusiasm, but it is never without enthusiasm. Enthusiasm for theology is never a matter of will power alone. Many factors contribute to it such as personal idiosyncrasy and even physical well being. But no fact is more important than the community in which one participates. The experience of the Bible as the Word of God or the experience of an event in history or nature as an act of God depends more upon the community in which one participates than it does upon the reading of a book on providence or the study of the Bible. So it is with enthusiasm for theology. It is not likely to exist apart from a supporting community, from fellowship with others who find the discussion of theology a deep and abiding joy. (Enthusiasm is a human work as indicated here, but from another perspective it is the work of the Holy Spirit for which we pray and hope.)

Sensitivity to theological issues and nuances cannot be taught nor can it be acquired by a sheer act of will. But it may be developed as one lives with great theology, reads and studies the great theological works, and engages in discussion with competent theologians.

The simple but inescapable fact is that competence in theology is not easily acquired. It demands patience, persistence, time, and discipline. But the rewards are worth the effort.

III

What shall we teach?

First of all we must teach the Bible. The church could at one time in our

culture take Biblical knowledge for granted, certainly among active church people. The Bible was a part of culture. It was taught in the public schools and read in the homes. This is no longer the case. Moreover, education theory has in the recent past minimized the importance of factual knowledge of the Bible. Church colleges have moved away from the standard courses in the Old and New Testaments usually requiring two years. The result is a radical decline in the knowledge of the content of the Bible. Yet it is difficult to know how Protestant faith can be transmitted without a factual knowledge of the Bible, including such prosaic information as the books of the Bible in order, a basic knowledge of the history of Israel, the life of Jesus, and the missionary journeys of Paul. The traditional piety of the church also included a knowledge of portions of the Bible by memory. And again it is difficult to know how the faith can be traditioned without knowledge of Scripture by memory.

Secondly, we must teach the theology of the *church*. In recent years a great emphasis has been placed on having one's own faith. This is essential, provided one's own theology is appropriate and adequate. Yet the teaching of one's own faith is hazardous because of the limitation, in some cases severe, of one's own life. The theology of the church has been tested, corrected, and validated by the long term common sense wisdom of the church.

The church, that is the people, must be protected from the personal eccentricities, from the emotional fluctuation in the beliefs of its ministers and teachers. For example, the minister at the occasion of a death is not called upon to bear witness to his or her own personal beliefs about what happens when one dies, but to the faith of the church. There must of course be a congruity and an acceptance between one's own personal stance and the beliefs of the church, but this need not and cannot always be identical or firm.

Furthermore, the theology of the church protects us from the fads of culture. Karl Marx rightly understood that theology and faith can become ideologies. Indeed there is an ideological factor in all faith, in all theology. We can and do use faith and theology to serve our own interests. This is especially true when theology is tied to special movements and causes or when it focuses upon particular themes. The danger is all the more apparent in thematic theologies that are related to particular theological and social concerns. Albert Outler once said that few diseases are more fatal to the theologian than lust for novelty and narcissistic delight in being different. The church is best served by those who are content with humbler tasks of interpreting the church's theology.

The Bible and the church's theology have a logical, if not a chronological, priority in the teaching of the Church.

Thirdly, we must teach how to think theologically and how to make ethical decisions in the context of Christian theology. In professional and academic circles there has probably been too much concern about method. In any case, all good and productive methods are determined by the content, by the substance, and by the spirit and personal commitment of the theologian. Furthermore there is no one way of doing theology or of making ethical decisions. Yet with these qualifications we need to teach what it is to think theologically and to engage in ethical reflection. Theology is more than intuition or personal conviction. It is rational critical argument that is publicly accountable to critical judgment for its assertions. The learning of theological method can best be accomplished as those who are less adept in theology live, work and converse

with those who responsibly analyse issues in the context of Christian theology, and who work through complicated moral issues in the light of the faith.

Fourthly, we need to teach theology by explicating how theology illuminates the common experiences of life. A religious experience is not a unique, discrete experience, but a dimension of ordinary experience. The presence of God, particularly in the experience of wonder and grace, as well as judgment, is mediated through everyday experiences. The task of preaching and teaching is to help people become alive to the divine presence. There is a fundamental difference between Pelagius and Augustine. Pelagius wanted people to become alive to God by first obeying his will. Augustine believed that a life in conformity with God's purpose follows the experience of the grace and wonder as well as the judgment of the divine presence. The task of preaching and teaching is to help people become alive to the divine presence in the ordinary affairs of life as wonder and grace, as well as judgment. This must be done specifically and concretely.

The foundation for teaching theology in the church is a minister who is a theologian, who can comprehend and relate ideas, who can express theological ideas in a clear, cogent, and forceful way, who is knowledgeable in the great theology of the church and who is able to relate theology to human experience in our time, who has an enthusiasm and sensitivity to theological nuances and issues. This a great and humbling task, but it is the task to which we have put our hands, and over a period of years it is not impossible.