

ST2B Lecture 2

Introduction and Link from Lecture 1

The lecture from last week did several things, but most particularly explained that faith and reason, belief and practice, theory and praxis are mutually informing and thus cannot be separated. But within that the main point was to indicate that thinking is integral to the Christian life. We might sum this up by saying that:

- If we do not think then someone else will think for us – and the history of the acquiescence of Christians in ideologies of racism, classism, sexism, imperialism, and other forms of violent oppression should never be forgotten.

But that is a rather negative way of putting what theology does, presenting it merely as a watchful act of testing or reflective interrogation and linking it particularly with the doctrine of sin.¹ A more positive theological way of putting it, and without having to resort to essentialising and abstract claims such as humanity is a rational animal (Aristotle), is to link it to a properly theologically ordered doctrine of creation and to say that

- We think because we have been thought – and our thinking depends upon having been *absolutely thought*, i.e., thought by God. This is the way I take Barth's reading of Anselm – our *ratio* participates in, and follows as a consequence of, God's *Ratio*.² For Barth, our *ratio* only functions well when it is following this movement of divine thought, when it is *Nachdenken* (a thinking after). Good, i.e., well-ordered, thought then is grounded in theology and made necessary by virtue of our being creatures of the *Ratio*.

¹ Carl E. Braaten: "Christian theology is a function of the church. ... Dogmatics exists for the sake of the identity and mission of the church. Of course, it has its own special way of serving, not by repeating the doctrines of the past, but by a critical interpretation of the received doctrines in the light of our biblical knowledge and our present engagement with the modern world. This means that dogmatics is done not so much to defend the church as it is, but to criticize it. This criticism occurs in the interest of discriminating between true and false preaching, as well as between church-centered activism for its own sake and kingdom-oriented praxis for the good of the world." ["Prologomena to Christian Dogmatics", in Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (eds.), *Christian Dogmatics Volume 1*, 1-78 (6f.)]

² The Prologue to the *Gospel of John* speaks of Jesus as the incarnate Word (Greek – *Logos*) of God, drawing conceptually most particularly on Hebrew traditions of the divine Wisdom and linguistically possibly on the Stoic notion of *Logos* – for the Stoics, the *Logos* is the reason that grounds, fills and animates life in this world, and human beings possess a spark of that *Logos* within them, thus uniting them with the *Logos spermatikos*.

In other words, the modern antagonism of faith and reason, belief and practice, is not merely a *practical* problem, or at least not primarily a practical problem – it is essentially a *theological* problem, a mistake in the understanding of theology and the life it witnesses to. Likewise, Christians separating faith and understanding are making a *theological mistake*. It is for this reason that Karl Barth opposed Nazism on *theological grounds*, understanding it to be making political claims on the human person that can only be made by Jesus Christ, the one true Lord.

I finished last Tuesday’s lecture by describing theology as a self-involving performance of doctrinal therapy or critical testing of church proclamation. Understanding theology in this way has prompted Karl Barth, for example, to change the title of the dogmatics he commenced in the late 1920s from *Christian Dogmatics* to *Church Dogmatics*. Theology, according to Barth, exists within and for the sake of the church in service to her life and witness. As Robert Jenson claims, theology is the church’s thinking, and “is the thinking internal to the task of speaking the gospel.”³ Consequently, theology arises out of a particular context and serves it as best as it can – and Barth was under no illusions about the fragility and provisionality of the theological discipline.

Several metaphors other than the medicinal one frequently used by theologians to describe what they are doing may serve to unpack something of what is meant here by self-involving performance.⁴

- Theology as craft or skill (McCabe) – participative, learned, continual learning

³ Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology Volume 1: The Triune God* (New York and Oxford: OUP, 1997), 5. “The church has a mission: to see the speaking of the gospel, whether to the world as message of salvation or to God as appeal and praise. Theology is the reflection internal to the church’s labor on this assignment.” [11]

⁴ Thomas F. Torrance speaks of theology as ‘science’, and thus draws it into conversation with the natural sciences as a way of understanding reality. The scientific nature of theology is particularly indicated by its: (1) commitment to its subject matter (God), (2) methods being shaped by its subject matter (and because God is not a ‘thing’ God cannot be known or studied like other things), (3) being a human discipline. Torrance’s metaphor does good work, but it is limited and even misleading if pressed too hard. As Karl Barth points out in *CD I.1* theology is *Wissenschaft* (ordered or disciplined knowledge) but it differs in great measure from, while nonetheless possessing some significant overlaps with, *scientia* (the sciences) precisely because of the irreducible particularity and uncategorisable nature of its subject matter. Andrew Louth complains that “at the heart of the matter theology is *not* like the exact sciences. ... Torrance goes far too quickly. ... Torrance is mistaken in the fundamental thrust of his enterprise.” [*Discerning the Mystery: An Essay on the Nature of Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 53]

- Theology as learning grammar or rules of Christian speech (Lindbeck)⁵ – doctrines are rules for group identity and practice, analogous to the grammatical rules of spoken language, the linguistic norms of a subculture that create group identity.⁶

That implies, then, that theology “is *prescriptive* grammar. ... Every theologoumenon lays down a prescription: speak in this way and *not* in that other way to which we may be inclined.”⁷

A dogmatic choice is one by which the church so decisively determines her own future that if the choice is wrongly made, the community determined by that choice is no longer in fact the community of the gospel...⁸

⁵ Linbeck’s *Nature of Doctrine* distinguishes 3 broad approaches to understanding doctrine – the propositional, the experiential-expressive, and the cultural-linguistic. Preference for the theoretical over the practical meaning of doctrine is both a consequence of identifying salvation with possession of the truth (as opposed to error) and a result of historical factors. Jaroslav Pelikan has noted that theology was done by bishops in the patristic period, by monks in the medieval period, and by university professors in the modern period [*The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 5]. As the universities developed in the medieval period, learning and intellectual reflection became located in the educated classes. Academic study was defined as theoretical in opposition to practical, as the pejorative use of the term ‘academic’ suggests. Knowledge as objective truth, uninfluenced by practical or utilitarian considerations, now dominated the academy, where theology was done. Today, academic theology focuses primarily on the history of, or grounds for making theological claims. Consideration of the effects of beliefs on the believer has been relegated to the province of practical, ascetical, moral, or pastoral theology as distinct disciplines in the modern theological curriculum. Modern theological curricula separate systematic from practical theology, and the latter is in turn subdivided into pastoral, moral, and ascetical theology. These divisions are wholly artificial from the perspective of pre-critical thought. This essay proposes a reading that reunites the dogmatic, moral, and spiritual dimensions of Christian doctrine so that Christian piety may again reflect this holistic understanding.

In some circles popular is the view that doctrine does not say anything about actual things or facts (a theological non-cognitivism/non-realism). Theological language, then, says something about ourselves – whether that be about the way we misconstrue the nature of things and project our values onto the world, or about our ways of constructing symbols and myths as ways of giving meaning to chaos.

In contrast, Lindbeck’s approach adapts theories of cultural anthropology to religious communities.

⁶ Jenson, 18: “The church, we may say, is the community that speaks Christianese, and theology formulates the syntax and semantics of this language. Doctrinal statements function as accepted rules of proper usage; theological opinions of individual theologians or schools are attempts to point out such rules.” In this view, one becomes religious by the way one comes to speak a language: through practice and habit (to ‘inhabit’ a language and be instinctively native to it). Religiousness is learned behaviour rather than a confession of propositional truth claims or the expression of an inner emotional state or feeling.

⁷ Jenson, 20.

⁸ Jenson, 17.

Theology, then, has less to do with a series of facts about things to be believed than with an atmosphere for the proper shaping of the Christian life, a series of rules governing what it means to speak Christianly (that is not to say that theology does not have a place for facts, merely that these facts are not ends in themselves but belong to a larger context).⁹ Theology, and the set of rules called doctrine that are its communal fruit, is not a witness to some thing but to the infinite richness of God who, as Thomas Aquinas says, is not a Thing among things but no-thing.

There is another popular image that describes theology as having to do with what Anselm in his *Proslogion*, drawing largely on Augustine, calls “faith seeking understanding” (*fides quaerens intellectum*). This assertion does important work:

- It too suggests that it is not possible for the Christian to follow the modern dualism of faith and reason, reason and faith –
 - No reason without faith – faith (or belief of some description) is what enables reason to operate (hence *faith* seeking understanding)
 - No faith without reason – to imagine that it is so is to misunderstand the nature of faith
 - Faith is faith or trust in someone or something –
 - things and persons provide *content* to faith that can be reflected upon and spoken of
 - to fail to reflect on, or to understand, the content of faith is to be open all sorts of distorting influences
- A notion of faith seeking understanding possesses an ethos of exploration and not assertion, recognising that it is perennially seeking understanding, and thus understanding is never fully available or achieved. Aidan Nichols puts it like this,

⁹ An example of a form of knowing that is not oriented to facts but nonetheless is not unfactual is that involved in personal relations – I do not know certain facts about my wife and on that basis claim meaningfully that I ‘know’ her, and I certainly do not need to know a whole host of facts about her before I begin the process of getting to know her. Instead, the *things* I know about her are oriented toward deepening our relation to one another. Yet, even though my relation is not dependent upon, or aiming for, knowing certain facts about her (a ‘knowing that’) it would be odd for me to meaningfully claim that I ‘know’ her (i.e., have a certain type of personal relation to her) without knowing certain things about her (what she looks like, so that I am not having a relation with someone else and thinking that it is my wife; her likes and dislikes, and so on). Thus while theological knowing is always more than coming to know certain things it is problematic to imagine it is ever something *less* than that.

because of the intrinsic richness of revelation, no one theology can hope simply to reproduce revelation in some kind of complete and unconditional way.¹⁰

To imagine that we can do so is to fundamentally misunderstand the nature of revelation and the partial nature of our thinking.

- Crucially because it is *faith* seeking understanding reason has a specific shape. Reason is not abstract but rooted under the authority in Christian faith, reflecting on faith, and for the sake of faith. As Nichols claims, albeit with too little sense of the critical relation of the theologian as committed to particular traditions,

To be a theologian, one must share the common *fides quae*, the faith of the people of God. A theologian is not an ecclesiastical *Übermensch*, but is equally bound, with all Christians, by the Church, not necessarily financially or even sociologically, but always epistemologically. ... The historical nature of the Christian religion means that we cannot reinvent the Christian religion in our own age to suit our own tastes and using our own speculation. We are always in dependence on the people from the past.¹¹

Today and tomorrow we will reflect a little more on the nature of that self-involving performance, arising out of the claims to the advent of God in Jesus Christ – that it is particular, mediated, communal and provisional.¹²

We will explore that through the authoritative place of tradition and the scriptures for the formation of Christian identity.

¹⁰ Aidan Nichols, *The Shape of Catholic Theology: An Introduction to its Sources, Principles, and History* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 36.

¹¹ Nichols, 16, 21.

¹² These are the kinds of theological themes that can provide a subversive mood, resisting ideology and committing the traditioned community into self-disposition before transcendence [see James Hanvey, 'Tradition as Subversion', *IJST* 6.1 (2004), 50-68]. Theology, then, is a very human science, but nonetheless a committed one. According to Stanley Hauerwas, "Theology should be a form of discourse that is meant to help us to live more faithfully as Christians who are part of that community called Church." [Stanley Hauerwas, *Unleashing the Scripture: Freeing the Bible from Captivity to America* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 8] Therefore, it is committed not to securing or absolutising any of its own insights, expressions and claims, but rather committed to learning carefully and appropriately how to discern God's Word and the shape of the world it creatively and recreatively speaks.

The discussion will run somewhat parallel to what we covered last week – worries over the notion of ‘simple faith’ or of ‘practice’ without a theoretical context will surface again in accounts of doctrine as expressions of pure factual truths delivered once and for all to the ‘saints’, or as expressions of pre-conceptual religious experience.

These spill over into approaches that can ignore the notion of the authority of the scriptures by virtue of their ‘back-to-basics’ experience of the religious life, or can ignore the place of the tradition or the Christian communities in the ‘simple’ ‘back-to-basics’ reading of the scriptures.¹³

On the former we could take Immanuel Kant as an example, particularly his *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*. On the latter there are plenty of examples in so-called ‘biblical theology’ movements: notice the plethora of ‘the biblical doctrine of...’ or ‘what the bible says about...’ type books.¹⁴ Post-Reformation axioms of *sola scriptura*, the sufficiency of scripture, the perspicuity of scripture, that revelation is self-authenticating, and so on, in reaction to the strong ecclesiasticism of the Roman Catholic Church, all add up frequently to provide an impression that the glass of scripture through which God is seen is very clean indeed.

I want to suggest that approaches such as these that bypass the Christian traditions would not make sense to most within the history of the Christian communities, and for good theological reason too, arising largely as they do from problematic post-Enlightenment distortions of human identity and performance flowing from the dubious understanding of the individual alone in her experience before God. And I intend to do so for 2 main reasons:

- That they are illusory or unrealistic – i.e., not the way we actually learn Christian identity. So in the first place, there is the *social formation of personhood or*

¹³ Books abound with titles beginning *The Biblical View of...*, or *The Biblical Doctrine of...* as if the scriptural writers all spoke unanimously and clearly and that all we have to do is put their words into our own to interpret the scriptures properly. A book I recently came across on Amazon would seem to suggest that this perspective continues unchecked: *What the Bible Says About A to Z*. Or I have been approached by numerous people who have told me that I shouldn’t read theology but just read my bible; or the more inquisitive of whom have asked what the point of reading what people say when we have God’s Word. These perspectives, of course, raise the spectre of a particular understanding of the bible and how it works – in fact, and this is what this suggests the naïveté of these perspectives, the approach makes significant theological assumptions and these need to be probed in order to see how legitimate they are.

¹⁴ A book I discovered a few years ago on Amazon would seem to suggest that this perspective continues unchecked: *What the Bible Says About A to Z*.

identity – we are never alone but are and remain socially formed in our understandings of ourselves and the world around us (there is a good reason why Roman Catholics can claim experiences of Mary and the saints, while Protestants claim experiences of Jesus, Islamic mystics of the impenetrable depths of Allah, and so on)¹⁵

- That they are theologically reductive, and therefore bad theology. So in the second place, tradition (at least in theory) is a boon and not a bane to be escaped from in the pursuit of Christian identity – in other words, much of the momentum of ‘back-to-basics’ type ‘primitivisms’ can be denied at this point, seeking to escape contingency and risk as they tend to do (in something like the theological equivalent of disembodied and person-universalising cyberspace [theospace]).¹⁶ Tradition, or the formation of persons within contexts of historically extended communities (the Church universal), is the embodied context within which God’s claim upon us is spoken, heard, and responded to.¹⁷
- That they are theologically dangerous – they individuate believers and churches, insulating them from the communal practices learning and listening attentively to God’s speaking God’s Word, and learning through others how to identify and resist their sins; this means that the rejection of tradition actually impedes our ability to faithfully hear and responsively embody God’s creative speaking.

This is a particularly long-winded way of saying that we need to listen critically to the Christian past (the tradition) in order to interpret the scriptures – and I will make a particular theological plea for anti-traditional Protestants to remember the importance of

¹⁵ On this one could consult William Alston’s reflections on doxastic practices.

¹⁶ Createdness and dependence on others are often considered to be bane rather than blessing, and Christianity has not been immune from this depreciation of the body and the body’s dependence on others for its existence and wellbeing (the strict separation of soul and body, with the latter being both what is theologically important and made eternal is an instance of this). But the blessing of God on that which he had created is a stinging theological indictment of this disdain of createdness. And one of the things that makes us human is our *dependence* upon others, and this not merely for our physical needs but also for our cognition (our knowledge).

¹⁷ So it is not that I am here deliberately trying to obfuscate something that is essentially simple, but rather am encouraging a far more sensible and theologically suitable understanding and appreciation of some of what is involved in Christian believing.

the creeds. To forget to do so, or worse to deliberately bypass tradition, is to make several theological assumptions: that

- revelation comes immediately;
- there are no pressures (cultural, for instance) that distort the reception of revelation (and thus revelation can be ‘possessed’ and ‘wielded’ in the power of its recipients);
- revelation can be frozen in an eschatological presence (‘already’) without any sense of the provisionality (‘not yet’).