

THEOLOGY: A QUESTION OF DISCIPLESHIP¹

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Holy Sonnet XIV: Batter My Heart, Three-Person'd God

Batter my heart, three-person'd God, for you
As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;
That I may rise, and stand, o'erthrow me, and bend
Your force to break, blow, burn, and make me new.
I, like an usurped town, to another due,
Labour to admit you, but Oh, to no end.
Reason, your viceroy in me, me should defend,
But is captived, and proves weak or untrue.
Yet dearly I love you, and would be loved fain,
But am betrothed unto your enemy:
Divorce me, untie or break that knot again,
Take me to you, imprison me, for I,
Except you enthrall me, never shall be free,
Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me.

John Donne (1572–1631)

Introduction

I realize that pairing the words “theology” and “discipleship” may seem odd and even laughable to some. As most theology professors know, few students sit before them willingly. Usually they come because the curriculum requires them to do so. In the churches, the perception of theology is often worse. Christians not only see it as a bore, but often as a roadblock,

1. This paper is the address given by Dr. Steven Studebaker at his installation as Assistant Professor in Systematic and Historical Theology of McMaster Divinity College on March 28, 2007.

or at best a detour, rather than as an avenue to discipleship. But why is this the case?

For many Christians, particularly in the Pentecostal tradition from which I come, theology is an impediment to discipleship. They see theology as antithetical to a relationship with God. I remember that when I announced my plan to attend seminary to the church in which I was serving as associate pastor, a skeptical woman chided me after the service, saying that I was going to “cemetery.” The implication is that seminary education, and theology in particular, will subvert one’s vital relationship with Jesus.

For many Christians, theology is tedious talk about ethereal irrelevancies. Invariably, people recall the great theological conundrum that asks, “How many angels can dance on the head of a pin?” Although it is doubtful that students in a medieval lecture hall ever entertained this question, it represents a common perception that theology is irrelevant. It symbolizes the notion that theology invests its energy in discussions that have little to do with anything, or at least anything with which most people are concerned.

For many Christians, “theology” is threatening and unsettling. Its subject matter and terminology are foreign to the uninitiated. Students often find theology uncomfortable because it bombards them with words and ideas they do not immediately grasp and have never heard before. Consider some of the terms used in theology—perichoresis, circumincession, supralapsarianism, infralapsarianism, homoousios, homoiousios, hypostatic union, immanent and economic Trinity, aseity, patripassianism, and so they go *ad infinitum*, *ad absurdum*, and *ad nauseam*. Although academic theology, like other disciplines, needs its technical jargon, for all intents and purposes, an introductory course in systematic theology is an introduction to a foreign language.

Not only does theology present a formidable vocabulary challenge, it requires students to think in unaccustomed ways. Theology challenges preconceived ideas and, therefore, can distress students. Often, students simply want their cherished ideas re-affirmed in the classroom. They tend to dislike what makes them uncomfortable. Being forced to think through what they believe, and why they believe it, is difficult; it is hard work; who wants that? Exposure to new theological ideas often leads to a modification and/or rejection of previous notions. The experience of intellectual

upheaval can create a sense of spiritual tumult. Students wander through a sort of theological “no man’s land” as they seek to integrate the new and modify the old. Thus, the upset that theology can cause can be interpreted as damaging to a person’s relationship with Christ.

Despite popular misgivings about theology, theological reflection is inevitable for human beings. In this respect, the words of Karl Barth are worth remembering. Barth declared, “There is no [person] who does not have his own god or gods as the object of his highest desire and trust, or as the basis of his deepest loyalty and commitment. There is no one who is not to this extent also a theologian.”² But why are all people theologians? The Early-Church Bishop of Carthage and renowned theologian, St. Augustine, gives the answer with his famous lines: “Man, being a part of Thy creation, desires to praise Thee... Thou movest us to delight in praising Thee; for Thou hast formed us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless till they find rest in Thee.”³ Augustine recognized that something drives the human toward God and religious expression, and he identified that something as God’s very own presence. We inevitably ask theological questions because God created us to do so, and ever calls us to relationship. Thus, the foundation and possibility of theology derive from the reality that God created us for relationship. Being engaged in theology, therefore, is essential to being human. In order to develop the inevitable theological quest of the human, I first describe the biblical drama of creation and redemption that makes Christian theology possible. Secondly, I outline the contextual and personal implications of theology as a question of discipleship.

Creation, Fall, and the Possibility of Theology Forestalled

The Genesis creation accounts tell the story of cosmic and human origins. Gen. 1:1-25 says that in the beginning, God created the heavens and earth. The earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the

2. Karl Barth, *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction* (trans. Grover Foley; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), p. 3.

3. St. Augustine, “Confessions,” in Philip Schaff (ed.), *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church* (first series; 14 vols.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), I, pp. 45-207 (45) (1.1.1).

deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. God made two great lights—the greater light to govern the day and the lesser light to govern the night. He also made the stars. And God said, “Let there be an expanse between the waters to separate water from water,” and God said, “Let the water teem with living creatures and let birds fly above the earth across the expanse of the sky.” And God said, “Let the land produce vegetation” and “Let the land produce living creatures.” And it was so.

But Genesis not only says that God created the heavens and the earth, it also says: “Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, in our likeness...’ So God created man in his own image; in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them” (Gen 1:27).⁴ Genesis 2 provides a more detailed account of human creation. It states: “God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being” (2:7).

Genesis 2 proceeds to describe the paradise of Eden in which Adam and Eve lived in wonderful harmony with each other, creation, and their God. It paints a picture of Adam and Eve enjoying unmediated intimacy with one another and their God. For instance, although the chapter narrates a decisive turn of events, Gen. 3:8 states that “the man and his wife heard the sound of the Lord God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden.” The fact that they tried to hide implies that, prior to their sin, Adam and Eve went out to meet God when God came “walking to them in the cool of the day.” Thus, the creation narratives affirm that God created human beings for relationship with their Creator. God created human beings to run to meet the God who comes walking to them in the garden. Consequently, theology, which is reflecting on the Creator and what it means to live in relationship with God, is essential to being human. Human persons were created to know, love and enjoy the delights of intimacy with God. Theology is that mode of thinking that explores the dimensions and content of that relationship.

Unfortunately, we no longer live in Genesis 2 or Eden. Since everything today is “post” this or that (postmodern, post-Christendom, etc.), we might say that we are “post-Genesis 2” or “post-Eden” people; we live in

4. Scripture quotations are from the NIV.

Genesis 3, a world marked by sin, betrayal, alienation, and death. Our context is east of Eden. We live in the barren and desolate spaces outside the garden. We are more familiar with the thorns and thistles and the sweat of the brow described in Genesis 3 than the serenity of Eden portrayed in Genesis 2. Estrangement and desperation, rather than intimacy and unbounded joy, often mark our relationships with God, each other, and even the world in which we live.

Yet, nestled within this bleak pronouncement of the fallen human condition is a promise of redemption, a message of hope. Sometimes called the proto-evangelium, or first gospel, is the passage in Gen. 3:15 where God curses the serpent and vows to “put enmity between you [the serpent] and the woman, and between your [the serpent’s] offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.” God promises to vanquish evil and restore humans to the Eden for which they were created. Thus, the ensuing drama of biblical redemption is a story in which God strives to restore the relationships lost in Genesis 3 and fulfill the promise of Gen. 3:15 to crush the head of the serpent. The saga of redemption is God’s effort to enable humans to live again without shame before God and each other.

The Old Testament chronicles God’s actions toward redeeming human beings. For example, God calls Abraham into a unique relationship and promises him that his descendants will become a great people who will live and flourish in right relationship with their God. God continues to work through the patriarchs and seems on the verge of achieving the Abrahamic promise with Moses and the deliverance of the Hebrews from Egyptian servitude. However, as in Eden, human beings persist in unfaithfulness and violate their relationship with God and each other. The Old Testament describes the on-going work of God to bring back human persons into relationship with each other and their God, and the persistent failure of humans to fully actualize that restoration.

The Gospel and the Renewal of the Possibility of Christian Theology

The New Testament presents the decisive turn in the redemption story. The New Testament gospel is the good news that God has not abandoned us to Genesis 3, but that God came “walking” to the daughters and sons of

Adam and Eve in the humanity of Jesus Christ. The gospel is the promise of life, for “the light shined in the darkness and ...”—life emerged under the veil of death.

Jesus Christ offers a restoration of human relationships with God and other people. The gospel of Jesus Christ or the drama of redemption is the presupposition of Christian theology. In other words, the foundation of Christian theology is the gospel, the good news that God acted in Christ to restore us to fellowship with our Creator and to heal our sinful and broken condition.

In order to articulate the nature of the gospel that is the foundation and possibility of theology, I turn to the two Christian traditions that are formative for my Christian identity—Evangelicalism and Pentecostalism. Each tradition has a particular emphasis. Evangelicalism accentuates Christ and provides the christological content of the gospel. Pentecostalism emphasizes the Holy Spirit and supplies the pneumatological content of the gospel. Although these traditions can be interpreted as giving priority to their respective emphases over and against each other, the gospel is irreducibly *both* christological and pneumatological. That is, the gospel is the work of Christ and the Spirit, both in its provision and participation.

Traditional evangelical theology speaks of Christ accomplishing redemption. The opening verses of the Gospel of John tell us:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God (1:1).

The Word became flesh and lived for a while among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth (1:14).

No one has ever seen God, but God the only Son...has made him known (1:18).

These texts provide the conceptual idiom for traditional Logos Christology. Logos Christology affirms that Jesus Christ is the eternal divine Son who descended from the Father, or came down from heaven, and united himself to humanity in Jesus.

The Synoptic Gospels of Luke and Matthew show us that the Spirit is also at work in the incarnation. In Luke 1, the angel Gabriel comforts the distressed Mary with the words:

“Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus”...“How will this be,” Mary asked the angel, “since I am a virgin?” The angel answered, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God” (Lk. 1:30-35).

The Gospel of Matthew makes the same point in its story of the angelic appearance to Joseph. It states:

This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about. His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. But after he had considered this an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit” (Mt. 1:18-20).

Thus, Matthew and Luke inform us that the incarnation of the eternal Son of God in Jesus Christ was also a work of the Holy Spirit. Jesus Christ is the union of humanity with the eternal Son through the unifying power of the Spirit. Jesus’ ability to live in utter love and faithfulness to the Father and humanity derives from the datum of the incarnation. He embodies full devotion and love to God and neighbor. He is the superlative actualization of humanity living in union with God, and by that union, in love with God *and* other human persons. Jesus was what we could never be without grace. Because of this he provides the definitive means and possibility for the restoration of our relationship with God and other human persons.

Evangelicals often pride themselves on teaching that Christianity is not a religion, but a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. But the truth of the matter is that we sometimes fixate on issues that betray our relational rhetoric. We portray salvation as essentially receiving pardon before a wrathful deity enthroned in a heavenly tribunal. Once our sins are forgiven, we spend the rest of our time pining for heaven and minding our P’s and Q’s. Thus, salvation is escaping hell, gaining heaven, and being uptight and stiff until we are beamed up to heaven. Is it any wonder that people are often allergic to Christianity?

Without discounting the above concerns of guilt, heaven, and morality, we must realize that Christianity is not primarily about receiving an acquittal before the judge of heaven, being stuffy religious folk, and finally, as a pastor I once served with put it, “leaving this bag of bones and going to heaven.” Christianity is about a renewal of our love relationship with God and other human persons; hence the greatest commandments are: “Love the Lord your God...and your neighbor as yourself” (Deut. 6:5; Lev. 19:18; Mt. 22:37-40). Yes, it also includes forgiveness, obedience and participation in the everlasting kingdom, but these are relative to the more fundamental restoration of our relationships with God and each other.

Jesus showcased the relational nature of his redemption in his farewell prayer in Jn 17:20-26, when he prayed:

My prayer is not for them alone; I also pray for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me... I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them.

Jesus’ prayer reflects the relational and personal nature of redemption. He prays that believers will experience the relational unity he enjoys with the Father and at the same time that this unity will characterize their relationships with each other. It is important that he does not pray for unity with “God,” but for unity with *him* and the *Father*. Believers come into union with the trinitarian persons. Moreover, in the context of the prayer, unity with Christ and the Father is indivisible from unity with other believers. His redemption that is expressed in this prayer is a reunification of personal relations in two respects. On the one hand, human persons participate in restored relationships with the “three-personed God” and, on the other hand, with other human persons. Placed in the context of the broader narrative of redemption, his prayer is a request for the reconstitution of the relationships lost in Genesis 3.

The final canonical book, Revelation, vividly describes the conclusion of the redemptive saga and reflects the fulfillment of Jesus’ prayer in John 17 and the “first gospel” of Gen. 3:15. It describes a scene of the full renewal of humanity’s relationships with God and each other. It proclaims:

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away” (Rev. 21:3-4).

In short, the order of Genesis 3 will pass away and the more ancient order of Genesis 2 will return. It is a vision of a “people” who no longer know the shame of nakedness—tears, betrayal, abuse and death—because the conditions of alienation from God and each other no longer exist. It is a promise that once again humans will live in the presence of God and each other without the shame of nakedness.

The gospel is the promise that we can participate in the everlasting kingdom in which life and love prevail over death, sin, and hate *and* not only in some eschatological future, but in the present. Jesus said, “Whoever hears my words and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life” (Jn 5:24). Paul affirms that “if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation, the old has gone, the new has come” (2 Cor. 5:17). Again, Jesus announced to the Pharisees, “if I drive out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you” (Mt. 12:28). Although we have not experienced the fullness of the everlasting life, the new creation, and the coming of the Kingdom, we nonetheless have tasted it.

Although the gospel is the promise that we can participate in the redemption of Christ, Christ left the earth long ago. So how do we participate in his redemption? Jesus anticipates and answers these concerns in the Gospel of John. Shortly after announcing his return to the Father, Jesus assures the disciples:

I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever—the Spirit of truth... I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. Before long, the world will not see me anymore, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. On that day you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you... If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him (Jn 14:15-20, 23).

In his farewell words to his disciples (and ultimately to all who would become his followers), he promised to send the Holy Spirit because he

knew that he would not be with them much longer, at least in the way they had grown accustomed to his presence. He anticipated his passion, resurrection, and ascension to the Father. Nonetheless, he would not leave them alone, he (and the Father) would send the Holy Spirit, and through the Spirit his disciples would come to participate in the loving fellowship of the Son and the Father.

Acts 2 describes the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the disciples in the upper room. This is a favorite passage for Pentecostals. It accents the importance of the Spirit for Christian ministry and service. But more importantly, the event reflects a fulfillment of Jesus' promise to send the Spirit to the disciples. Pentecost is not only the reception of the Spirit, but the induction of the believers into fellowship with the Son and the Father. Acts 2 narrates the dramatic fulfillment of Jesus' promise to send the Holy Spirit and thereby consummate the trinitarian fellowship that is the essence of the gospel. By virtue of the indwelling Spirit, believers are children of God and heirs with Christ (Jn 1:12-13; 3:1-8; Rom. 8:15-17). The Spirit unites believers to Christ whereby they become, along with the Son, children of God who love the Father.

The coming of the Spirit that brings us into union with Christ (and thereby makes us children of God) is the foundation and possibility of Christian theology. Without renewed relationship with God, Christian theology is impossible. This is the case because Christian theology is the attempt to understand the implications and ramifications of participation in the fellowship of the trinitarian God and the grace that makes us God's children. Christian theology seeks to answer the question, "What does it mean for us to embody the grace of Christ that has laid hold of us?" Thus, theology is a question of discipleship. Several implications follow from understanding theology as a question of discipleship and to these we now turn.

The Contextual and Dynamic Nature of Theology

The contextual and dynamic nature of theology derives from the reality that the call of Christ to fellowship with God comes to us in the particular circumstances of our lives, and that we seek to respond to that call within those circumstances. Indeed, the dynamism of theology derives from its

contextual nature. When I say that theology is dynamic, I mean that the way we actualize our relationship with God is in flux both for our personal lives and our communal or church lives. It will not do for us to ape the practices of the past unreflectively; this is traditionalism that fails to see that Christ calls us to follow him in this world and this culture and not the world of a romanticized past.

Recognizing and accepting the dynamic nature of theology is difficult. I am reminded of a conversation I had with a professor at one of the most prominent evangelical seminaries in the United States. He informed me that the sixteenth-century Reformers and the seventeenth-century codifiers of Protestant Reformation theology basically said everything that needs to be said. The task of contemporary theology is to put their expressions in a contemporary idiom. While I share his admiration of the Reformers and the Herculean intellectual efforts of the Protestant scholastic theologians, we do not live in sixteenth-century Wittenberg or Geneva. The social world of the Reformers has long since passed. We live in the North American cultural context. Many people refer to our world as post-Christian, post-Christendom, or at least post-churched. Although we may grow weary of the trendy clichés, we nonetheless must take account of our cultural situation and discern what it means for us to embody the grace of Jesus Christ in the world in which we live.

Please do not misunderstand me; I am not dismissing the achievements of the past. Remember that my title is Professor of Systematic *and* Historical Theology; one of my primary areas of research is on Jonathan Edwards, an eighteenth-century Puritan theologian. However, we misunderstand and ultimately do not honor these past heroes of the faith by unblinkingly repeating their theologies. We honor them and emulate them when we *do what they did*. They brought the gospel to bear on their world and proclaimed what it meant to be a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ in their day. Thus, the contemporary and contextual focus of theology does not mean that we ignore the insight of our traditions. On the contrary, the tradition shows us how those who have gone before us sought to give credible witness to Christ and to the central ideas that give shape to the narrative of Christian redemption in the contemporary context.

An example is the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformer Martin Luther. Luther countered the guilt-and-merit religious system produced by certain

late-medieval theologies and spiritualities. He did this by drawing on an emphasis in the doctrine of justification that the gospel promises peace with God through sheer grace. However, the problems Luther faced no longer exist, at least in the form he experienced them. Does this mean that justification by faith has nothing to say to contemporary Christians? No. But it does mean that the way we articulate it and bring it to bear on our world may be different. Perhaps the contemporary message of justification speaks to the oppressing and sycophantic worldview of North American consumerism. Consumerism functions as a civil religion that defines a person's value and quality of life by his or her ability to participate in the capitalist and consumer economy, which means the ability to produce, acquire, and consume more things. Linking the value of human life to its ability to produce and consume is perhaps why euthanasia is so attractive to our culture. The elderly commit the unpardonable sin of consuming expensive medical resources, but do not produce anything. Thus, we should dispense with them.

In contrast, the gospel is the promise that human dignity and value is not relative to income and the accumulation of the artifacts of the consumer culture, but to the reality that God loves each human person, demonstrated this love in Christ, and offers all possibility to participate in Christ's redemption. Scripture's teaching on justification has not changed, but contemporary Christianity and culture is different than what faced Luther, or even the apostle Paul. Theology does not serve the church and society by simply parroting the past expressions of theology. But rather, theology fulfills its purpose when it finds and proclaims the redemptive message of the gospel in a way that speaks to the present church and world.

Theology is a question of discipleship because it asks and seeks to answer questions such as:

1. What does it mean to follow Jesus Christ in the cultural circumstances in which we/I live?
2. What is the Spirit of God saying to the Church of Jesus Christ today?
3. How do we bring the redemption revealed in Jesus Christ to authentic and credible expression?

Theology is a discipline of thought that seeks to discern appropriate answers to such questions and concerns.

Theology Is Personal

A second implication of theology as a question of discipleship is that theology is personal. Theological reflection is not a pursuit of some vague, de-contextualized and essentialized notion of discipleship. A single definition and form of discipleship does not exist; there are at least twelve in the Gospels; each disciple followed Christ in a unique way. Theology is personal because it deals with relationships between persons. Christianity is not just about a relationship with God *per se*, but with the trinitarian God. The Christian is in relationship with the Son and the Father through the Holy Spirit and with all other believers who participate in that trinitarian fellowship.

Although we follow Christ in the context of the Christian community or church and the broader world, we also follow him as individuals and need to think about what it means for us personally to follow Christ. Christ calls us as individuals. The question of discipleship is intensely personal. Jesus ultimately asked the twelve, “Who do *you* say that I am?” (Mk 8:29; emphasis added). The call of Christ comes to us in the specific conditions of our lives. For example, the call of Christ came to Peter while he was living out his life as a fisherman on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. It came to Saul/Paul while he was carrying out his program of persecuting the new Christian sect. We are not called by or to a church creed or system of doctrine, but by and to Christ. For me, theology is part of my broader vocation to be a disciple of Christ and, more specifically, it is the way I embody the call to follow Christ. Being a professor of theology is one of the ways that I engage in theology and answer the question of discipleship—what does it mean for me to follow Christ? Theology is personal because it seeks to explore the unbounded horizon of our relationship with the trinitarian God.

Conclusion

In closing, let me recall Donne’s sonnet, “Batter my Heart Three-Person’d God.”

Theology is that modality of inquiry where we seek to discern:

- Where the three-personed God batters and knocks at our hearts

- Where this God seeks to breathe and shine and thereby to mend our hearts
- The domains of our lives that God desires to overthrow, break, blow, burn and thereby make new.

Theology spotlights those areas of our lives that are weak, captive to our foe, and untrue to our God. Theology perceives the ways that God seeks to ravish us with the holy love that makes us chaste.