



A MINISTRY SCHOOL OF THE ANGLICAN DIOCESE OF THE UPPER MIDWEST

# The Service of Theology to the Church's Life and Mission *Or*

## The Place of Theology in a Revival of Word and Sacrament

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*Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching [doctrine]. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers (1 Timothy 4:16).*

*Contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints (Jude 3).*

### **I. Theology: An Oft-Maligned Inevitability**

"What has theology ever said that is of the smallest use to anybody? When has theology ever said anything that is demonstrably true and is not obvious? I have listened to theologians, read them, debated against them. I have never heard any of them ever say anything of the smallest use, anything that was not either platitudinously obvious or downright false. If all the achievements of scientists were wiped out tomorrow, there would be no doctors but witch doctors, no transport faster than horses, no computers, no printed books, no agriculture beyond subsistence peasant farming. If all the achievements of theologians were wiped out tomorrow, would anyone notice the smallest difference? Even the bad achievements of scientists, the bombs, and sonar-guided whaling vessels work! The achievements of theologians don't do anything, don't affect anything, don't mean anything. What makes anyone think that 'theology' is a subject at all?" ~Richard Dawkins, *The Emptiness of Theology*.

Aside from peddling the denatured science of scientism, and prizing utilitarian pragmatism in such a way as to eclipse nearly all other considerations, the renowned evolutionary biologist from Oxford University is unartful, self-congratulatory, and wildly overblown [it seems to escape him that overstatement does not strengthen his claims, but cheapens them]. But even



more to the point, Dawkins is self-contradictory and self-refuting. Why? **Because his diatribe against theology is theological to the core! That is to say, Dawkins denounces theology for theological reasons; and in so doing, he makes a profound—though profoundly misguided— theological statement!**

Ironically, then, Dawkins illustrates a point of great significance for our present purposes at Gregory House: **Theology is an inevitable, inescapable human exercise. Everyone—yes, even atheist fundamentalists like Dawkins—are theologians.** Why is this the case?

~Because we bear God's image in God's world, human existence is theological existence (behind all life's big questions is the question of God).

~Because we are created by God for communion with God, we are *homo adorans*, worshipping beings (we are made to know God, and therefore, hard-wired for worship).

So the question for us, as for all Christians, is not whether we will be theologians. Rather, the question is whether we will be good theologians.

## II. **How Theology Lost Its Way, and Its True Home in the Church**

### i. **Romancing the Enlightenment**

"Enlightenment is the human being's emancipation from its self-incurred immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to make use of one's intellect without the direction of another. This immaturity is self-incurred when its cause does not lie in a lack of intellect, but rather in a lack of resolve and courage to make use of one's intellect without the direction of another. '*Sapere aude!* Have the courage to make use of your own intellect!' is hence the motto of enlightenment." ~Immanuel Kant, *An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?*

"I think, therefore I am." ~René Descartes, *Discourse on the Method*.

### ii. **Rejecting Holy Mystery**

To the extent that the church has capitulated and conformed to the spirit of secularism, she has reduced the robust biblical notion of knowledge—namely, knowledge of God—to mere rational and discursive knowledge. This amounts to the separation of knowledge from mystery, an affirmation of the world's autonomy, of its self-sufficiency in terms of reason, knowledge, and action. ~Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World*.



### iii. Relinquishing a Birthright

Our Christian forebears knew well that the native and natural habitat for theology is the church, because theological formation is conformity to Christ, the ultimate theologian and head of the church. But modernity is marked by efforts to move theology to the margins of the church and beyond, away from the convictions and practices of the Christian life. As a result, the church has become more and more suspicious and estranged from one of God's most precious gifts to her: the office of theology that is rightfully hers to cherish and steward.

### iv. Undermining Identity, Authority, and Relevance

"In relating Christianity to some other way of constructing reality, the other way too often demonstrates the greater power of absorption. The result, from the Christian viewpoint, is apostasy. To be sure, that is not the intension, but here as elsewhere intensions may have little to do with consequences. Thus we must view with robust skepticism the proposition that good sociology, or psychology, is good theology, and vice versa. One suspects that those who say such things have a stronger idea of what good sociology (or psychology) is than they do of what good theology is. The reason for this is not to be found in a moral fault but in the very structure of intellectual discourse in our world." ~Richard John Neuhaus, *Freedom for Ministry*.

## III. The Purpose and Vision of Gregory House

### i. Our Aim

The aim of Gregory House is simple and uncluttered by novelty. It is to resource a revival of word and sacrament with theological formation done in the church, by the church, for the church and her mission to the world.

This aim is motivated by the conviction that theology is meant to sing to the glory of God in the presence of God and amidst the worshipping community. ~J. B. Torrance, *Worship, Community, and the Triune God of Grace*.

### ii. Our Book

The premise of *A Call to Christian Formation* is that theology is about devoted attention in heart, soul, mind, and body to knowing and loving God—because knowing and loving God is the supreme end of human existence, the very reason for which we were made.



In other words, our call to Christian formation is the call of Christ to be formed in Christ, and while this call surely involves more than theological formation, it just as surely involves nothing less.

For the rightful aim of theological formation is the renewal of our mind and transformation of our whole person into the image of our incarnate God and Savior. This is the only antidote against being conformed and deformed by the world, the only alternative to being catechized and liturgized by the spirit of the age and its dominant ways of thinking, speaking, and acting (Rom. 12:1-2; 2 Cor. 3:18).

#### **IV. Some First Words About Christian Theology**

“Theology” is a compound of two Greek nouns. The first noun is θεος, or God; and the second is λόγος, which can mean both word/speech and reason/logic.

The adjective “Christian” qualifies a theology that relates specifically and unremittingly to Jesus Christ. Authentically *Christ-ian* theology relates to Jesus Christ in a way that is expressly ordered by the “theo-logic” of the gospel, that refuses to undermine and obscure his identity by laying alongside or in place of him any foundation alien to his unique and singular lordship (1 Cor. 3:11).

At root, then, *Christ-ian* theology is the church’s call to offer a competent, compelling confession of her faith in the God who is truly, finally revealed in the Lord Jesus Christ.

“The centre, the cornerstone, the jewel in the crown of Christianity is not an idea, a system, or a thing; it is not even ‘the gospel’ as such. It is Jesus Christ.” ~Michael Reeves, *Rejoicing in Christ*.

#### **V. Some Preliminary Points to Ponder**

- i. The apostle John joins θεος and λόγος by referring to Jesus Christ as the “Word of God,” indeed, the “God-Word” (John 1:1; Rev. 19:13). John is telling us that Jesus Christ *is himself* our theology, and our ultimate theologian—the definitive Word of God, by God, from God, about God.
- ii. Theology is our participation in Jesus Christ’s knowledge of the Father in the fellowship of the Spirit, the redemption and renewal of our minds in the mind of Christ. Theology is the gift of participating by the Spirit in the Son’s communion with the Father (Rom. 12:2; 1 Cor. 2:6-16).
- iii. Theology is thus the obedience of our minds to the mystery of Christ, “the founder and perfecter of our faith” (Heb. 12:2). As such, our theological formation is faith seeking



understanding, and shares in the baptismal pattern that characterizes all aspects of our Christian existence. "Caught up by the Holy Spirit into the reconciling work of God in Christ, [our] reason is condemned and redeemed, torn away from its evil attachment to falsehood, vanity and dissipation, and so cleansed and sanctified for service in the knowledge of the truth of the gospel." ~John Webster, *Confessing God*.

- iv. The church is a creature of the triune God of the gospel, who creates *by* dialogue *for* dialogue. Thus *Christ-ian* theology is an answer to an address, the church's awed response to the self-revelation of God in Christ. Theology is the words of faith and worship uttered by the church *in response to* being sought and found by God in the incarnate Word.
- v. **Christian theology is necessarily both propositional and personal.** It must never seek to be merely one or the other, and at the same time, the two must never be confused or conflated. **The key here is *distinction without division*.** For the personal apart from the propositional is hopelessly abstract. Conversely, factually true propositions apart from the personal is dry, doctrinaire, and dead. The point is this: Christian theology is propositional in that it attempts to articulate biblical truths regarding the Christian faith. Yet Christian theology is not simply about saying the right things in the right ways! Rather, Christian theology is about employing truths to confess the Truth, employing words to commend the Word, and thus, employing propositions to describe and enshrine Jesus Christ, who is always and ever both living person and living Word. Biblical propositions that constitute the stuff of Christian theology are the God-given, Spirit-vivified vehicle in and through which Jesus Christ gives himself to us and forges himself within us. Indeed, the living Truth claims and masters us ***precisely*** as we continue to immerse ourselves in the prophetic/apostolic witness by which he enhances our knowledge of him, intensifies our affections for him, quickens our trust in him, and enlivens our obedience to him!