

“That’ll Preach!” The Plight and Promise of Theology Now

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There is room in a rich person’s enclosure for all kinds of animals. — African proverb

There is a great mystery at the heart of the world just waiting to be expressed. — Fred Rogers

Some months ago, Conan O’Brien’s late night talk show featured Chicago-based rock band Wilco, who, of all the songs they might have sung in that prestigious venue, chose one called “Theologians,” which begins, “Theologians... they don’t know nothing about my soul.”¹ That’s pretty interesting in itself (notwithstanding the slur against members of my particular guild). What’s even more interesting is that the song goes on:

I’m going away
Where you will look for me
Where I’m going you cannot come
No one’s ever gonna take my life from me
I lay it down.

“Where I’m going you cannot come?” “I lay it down?” Uh-oh. Although the fact may be lost on a general audience that doesn’t know the Bible, and John’s gospel in particular, it is clear just who is doing the speaking here.

Inlitterati lumen fidei
God is with us everyday
That illiterate light
Is with us every night

Not your average rock song.
They thin my heart with little things
And my life with change
Oh in so many ways
I find more missing every day.

This was Wilco’s chance to make a big splash on late night TV, and they chose to do a song called... “Theologians”? Not only that, but they encoded it with biblical references, almost literally in the name, and certainly in the voice, of Jesus.

Who is the audience here? An intriguing question in itself, and all the more intriguing because the answer might be “folks like us”! I have heard these kinds of complaints about theologians and their works echoed in the church, among both Christians whose pastors are seminary trained and Christians whose pastors are raised up from within congregations and learn the craft of ministry from seasoned practitioners in the field.

To illustrate, just try scheduling an adult education course in your church entitled, “The Theology of...” or “Theology and...” and see

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what happens. The question I want to address in this essay is, to put it broadly, this: Why is theology so often perceived as an impediment, if not an actual threat, to the life of the church, and what can be done about it?

This is a frankly exploratory piece. It grows out of my experience with several faith communities who haven’t always been in deep conversation with each other but whom I esteem highly and regard with deep affection, although I can’t claim extensive experience with all of them, and am eager for (gentle) correction from those who can. I am a white male Presbyterian pastor with a PhD in Christian Theology from the University of Chicago who is privileged to work at Moravian Theological Seminary and, over the past three years, with a number of African-American pastors in northeastern Pennsylvania. I hope here to map out some of the territory we have been exploring together in recent days.

Theology, in the form of controversy over doctrine, surely is the arena where Christianity has historically been a contact sport and, too often, a blood sport. It has been the playground for elitism and obscurantism (and those are the nice words), and has occasioned countless bitter divisions in the church from the first centuries of its existence to the present. In the training of pastors, theology has often been thought of as a kind of hazing ritual inflicted upon seminarians who might otherwise have studied something worthwhile. I have lost track of the number of pastors I have heard bemoan the fact that they were required to read Karl Barth when they could have been learning something useful like how to balance the congregation’s budget for the coming year or how to settle church fights.

And yet, “theology matters,” as the current saying has it. We are commanded, in fact, to love God with all our mind, as well as heart, soul, and strength. Coupled with his insistence that the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom is Paul’s injunction to worship God with our minds as well as our spirits, and his exhortation in Romans 12 to make our bodies a living sacrifice to God as our “reasonable” worship (NRSV) or “your proper worship as rational beings” (TNIV).

Aside from such lofty considerations, there are more practical ones. Like most of us, when the church catches its nourishment on the run, it tends to load up on junk food (from the health and wealth gospel in its various guises to the creepy Hollywood apocalypticism that trades in the Prince of Peace for the more marketable Jesus as action figure), much to the detriment of the body. Serious theological reflection, like good digestion, takes time and energy.

We can only run our race badly if we don’t pay attention to proper nutrition. Surely the Logos, the very Word by whom, in whom, and for whom all things were made, deserves nothing less than our best and most careful thinking. Further, in the absence of some kind of epitomization of the essentials of Christian faith, we risk unconsciously adopting an informal canon within the canon that reflects only our own preferences and biases and makes God an accessory to our own “devices and desires,” in the words of the old Book of Common Prayer.

It seems to me that the widespread aversion to theology in the church stems from a number of related impulses:

- The fear of the faith's being hijacked by an intellectual elite, and the substitution of dry abstractions for living encounter (this, of course, goes all the way back to the arguments about whether non-scriptural words like *homoousion* could legitimately be used to explicate biblical concepts). There is also a fear, I think, of subjecting the Gospel to an alien and predetermined political or ideological agenda, and this fear exists on both the left and the right. For example, in the Black church, as Dale Andrews points out, there is considerable resistance toward the militant and exclusionary nature of much Black theology in contrast to the inclusionary and pastoral character of Black folk religion.²

- The fear of theology has to do, not only with the endless “wrangling over words” against which Timothy 2:14 cautions us, but with the concern that the more we tidy up our thinking about God, the more our theology will become only a distant echo of our first love (think of the lover who begins to ask himself, concerning everything his beloved says, “I wonder what she meant by that.”). Analysis having effectively stifled the Good News, there will be nothing left to preach that isn't subject to the death by a thousand equivocations that Princeton sociologist of religion Richard Fenn calls “seminar talk.”

- The current craving for experience over explanation, as evidenced, for example, by the near-incantatory nature of much contemporary praise music; I often hear the complaint from

more traditional folk that praise music contains “bad theology” — in some ways, I think the complaint is beside the point. Lots of folks don't particularly care what the music says, as long as it invokes the name of Jesus and you can dance to it — or, put less facetiously, they are hungry for a direct encounter with the Lord, and often find it lacking in traditional worship.

- The sense that the “second order” language of theology cannot be constitutive and sustaining of community in the way that first-order language is (hence the feeling that more recent translations are less “scriptural” than the KJV — the point is not only the language, but what is “said” by the tremendously powerful role the Authorized Version has played in the formation of the church in the English-speaking world, notably in the Black community, where its cadences have validated the role of the preacher; as Henry Mitchell puts it, “the Bible filled the void once occupied by an awesomely authoritative oral tradition.”³

On the other hand, it can be argued that failure to reflect carefully upon Christian tradition results in unformed and immature faith, at best, and, at worst, in covert and disingenuous “theologies” that actually undermine the message of the Gospel. In this connection, we might note the church's frequent captivity to the surrounding culture; for example, highly sophisticated “biblical” arguments have historically been marshaled in support of slavery, the suppression of women in the church, and other practices now seen to be profoundly sub-Christian.⁴ The point is not, after all, whether one “does theology,” but how and to what ends one does it.

Having said all this, I wonder if much of our trouble comes from a misconstrual of what the proper business of theology really is. Perhaps the task of theology is not so much to build an unassailable wall against the intellectual “stumpers” posed by skeptics or the existential questions raised by the hazards of life, as it is to express and articulate a prior experience of faith, to recover a sense of the wholeness that was there all the time.

A number of years ago, *The Whole Earth Catalog* had on its back cover a picture of the world with the caption, “We can’t put it together. It is together.” The challenge is to maintain a healthy cross-fertilization between the first-order language of primary experience and the second-order language of theological discourse, and so to do our theologizing, as it were, from the inside out as well as the outside in. Perhaps we can take this as our point of departure in mapping our theological terrain, and, in this, I would suggest that we take some cues from the eighteenth-century German theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher.

When I first began this article, I thought would be intriguing to discuss a theologian who was “shared” by Moravian and Reformed (in my case Presbyterian) Christians, and in developing it my original intuition has been confirmed. The reasons for this choice may not be immediately self-evident. Schleiermacher? On the one hand, this “Father of modern theology” is often depicted as the one, above all, who gave away the store of Christian faith to the secular Enlightenment, one who believed, as Karl Barth said, that we could get to God by “speaking of man in a loud voice.”⁵ Worse yet, he is the author of *The Christian*

Faith, a formidably intellectual book that stands alongside Calvin’s *Institutes*, Barth’s *Church Dogmatics*, and Tillich’s *Systematic Theology* as one of the fullest and most systematically developed expressions of Protestant theology. If theology is the crime under investigation, Schleiermacher is surely a prime suspect.

And yet Schleiermacher himself took theology to be nothing less than the explication of the continuous and intimate awareness of God that was perfected in Jesus Christ and is presently manifested in the proclamation and life of the church. In the proper conduct of theology, the church embraces Paul’s amazing claim that “We have the mind of Christ” (I Cor. 2:16). Schleiermacher himself had nothing but scorn for the kind of theology that consisted in the clever interlocking of abstract propositions divorced from the vital relationship with God exemplified in Jesus, and that he saw as all too prevalent among the Protestant scholastics of his own time: “And what else do you take this deduction and weaving together of ideas to be, which neither live nor correspond to any living thing?... Hence the dominion of the mere notion; hence the mechanical erections of your systems instead of an organic structure; hence the vain juggling with analytical formulas, in which, whether categorical or hypothetical, life will not be fettered.”⁶ “Wrangling over words,” indeed!

We should note from the start that Schleiermacher does not pose, as the alternative to this arid speculation, the kind of individual introspection that these days is vaguely described as “spiritual”; the “God consciousness” he has in mind is always mediated through life

in the community of faith and in the world. He is clear that God comes to us through the events and phenomena of everyday life. His view is not “supernaturalist,” and he, like most Protestant theologians, was leery of using the term “mystical” to describe religious experience, because of what he considered its individualistic and otherworldly connotations. It is the church as body of Christ that has the mind of Christ.

The point here is not merely to psychologize the experience of Christ (contrary to Barth’s criticism), but, so to speak, to “operationalize” it so that it demonstrates a patterning of life. Borrowing a term from Richard R. Niebuhr, we might say that Schleiermacher’s theology is not “Christocentric” so much as “Christomorphic”—it is a modeling of Christ.⁷ In this, Schleiermacher reflects his formative experience with the Moravian communities at Herrnhut, Niesky, and Barby, where, as James David Nelson puts it: “To be in the fullest sense possible a representation of the Savior both among themselves and before the world was deemed the sole consideration in the life and structure of such a settlement.”⁸

Theology, for Schleiermacher, is first and foremost incarnational, both in Christ’s epitomizing God and in the church’s epitomizing Christ. Above all, it is the act of preaching that constitutes the locus of the re-presentation of Christ in the church, for the Lord himself was most effectively present in his preaching and teaching. “The entire effectiveness of the Redeemer himself was conditioned by the communicability of his self-consciousness by means of speech, and Christianity has, in the same way, always and everywhere spread through proclamation alone.” (*Glaubenslehre*, 15.2)⁹ Let

there be any confusion about academic theology’s secondary and derivative status, he goes on to say, “The dogmatic procedure has reference entirely to preaching, and only exists in the interest of preaching.”¹⁰

This is not to demean the role of theology, since, while preaching is to be done in everyday language, it is also to be informed by a carefully articulated system of doctrine.

Indeed, eloquence alone can be pernicious in the service of false teaching. The point is that while preaching presumes such a system, it does not display it directly. The emphasis in preaching is to be upon lived coherence, and not merely upon logical consistency. Drawing upon his life with the Moravians, Schleiermacher argues that the life of a religious community and, indeed, the life of every individual within it, embodies the witness of Christ in a particular way (this is, in fact, one reason why different versions of Christian truth can amiably coexist).

Consequently, as Terence Tice has put it: “This general understanding of human beings and of their diverse relationships with God helped make Schleiermacher a truly ecumenical theologian. For him, ‘speaking the truth in love,’ a motto for the full array of ministry in his eyes, did not entail rejecting all but one expression of the truth.”¹¹

In current parlance, Schleiermacher understood all Christian truth (and, in fact, all truth) to be contextual; and it is especially here, I believe, that we can take some worthwhile cues from several African-American theologians and pastoral counselors in describing “God consciousness.” For Schleiermacher, it was at this

juncture that Christianity could press its claims against, variously, Enlightenment rationalism, an anti-intellectual Pietism, and Romanticism. Briefly stated, for Schleiermacher theology was properly grounded, not in the rational mind detached from its life in the body and in community, nor in a solitary emotionalism, but rather in the consciousness of God as manifested both in the human heart and in the concrete life of a particular community of faith.

In this connection, to frame the issue in more contemporary terms, James Cone reminds us that the fundamental theological question for the Black church has always been, not so much, “Does God exist?” as “Does God care?” This, I would suggest, is actually very close to Schleiermacher’s sense of the core question. Especially in his later and more systematic writings, Schleiermacher based his theology on what he called the human feeling of “absolute dependence” upon something other than itself — in short, upon God. I would argue that it is the way in which this question of absolute dependence is framed that is determinative of whether theology “matters” in the life of the church, and that academic theologians can rightly stake a claim to be taken seriously if, and only if, they attend seriously to the real existential questions posed by the community in its life together.

In a sense, what is at stake here is whether the existentialist European theologies of the twentieth century continue to dominate the theological discourse of the twenty-first, or whether a new theological idiom is called for. I apologize if this may seem, to some readers, to be covering well-trodden territory (aren’t we over

Bultmann and Tillich yet?); but I think that these theologies both have permanent lessons to teach us, on the one hand, and that we need to reframe them if we are to make theology accessible and relevant to the church of the present moment.

Insofar as they have convinced us, once and for all, that all theology is “located,” situational, embedded in a particular place and time, they have performed an inestimable service to the theological enterprise. But to the extent that they have oriented themselves around such categories as “anxiety” and “the quest for meaning” (at least in a kind of middle class suburban sense), they have failed to address the core concerns of enormous numbers of Christians who need to know, most fundamentally, that God loves them and has saved them from oppression, sin and death.

I would suggest that most Christians do, indeed, face serious existential questions, but that for many of them the operative categories are much more those of self-worth and shame than they are of “anxiety.” Put somewhat differently, the fundamental question is not so much that of existence, either ours or God’s (*ex-sistere*, of course, meaning “to stand outside”), but of making one’s way in a world that largely denies one’s value and selfhood; the operative categories here become, not so much finitude and guilt, as oppression and shame (one may also think here of such terms as *han* in Korean Minjung theology). The motto of a theology responding to this question would be less Descartes’ “I think, therefore I am” than Jesse Jackson’s “I am somebody!”

Pastoral counselor Edward Wimberly has outlined this kind of theology in his description of Jesus' God-consciousness as, most fundamentally, an assertion of his worth as a child of God in the face of society's persistent attempt to shame him.¹² Similarly, Bruce Chilton has argued that Jesus' status in his community as a *mamzer* — a child of uncertain parentage — was fundamentally determinative of what he understood himself to be as God's beloved Son.¹³ I would argue that for the many Christians who sense their place in the "new world order" to be precarious and provisional — not in a cosmic sense, but in the very particular sense that they may find a pink slip on their desk when they come in next Monday morning — this could be the basis of a theology that really matters (and, we might note with New Testament scholars like Bruce Malina, that likely brings us much closer to New Testament ways of thinking than a theology that bases its assertions upon the "Cartesian self"). Such a self-understanding is inextricably bound up with culture, since one not only feels shame but is "shamed." I also suggest that African-American pastors and theologians, whose work has been forged in the crucible of discrimination and oppression, have much to teach the broader church in this regard.

Everybody asks existential questions, but, as the saying goes, "Where you stand depends on where you sit." The real question is not whether one "does theology," but from where one does theology. As the Rev. Cecil Williams of Glide Memorial Methodist Church in San Francisco puts it, "When I was a child I learned that church was the place where you went to work on your stuff." Can anyone doubt that

the problem with both church and theology, for many people in our "spiritual but not religious" age, is their disappointment at not having found a sympathetic and trustworthy community in which, in Christ, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, they could work on their stuff? On the other hand, how many pastors have burned out because they were constantly expected to be dispensers of answers and defenders of God, rather than trusted friends who could in the breach with a brother or sister when there simply was no answer — or better, when in the words of the old graffito, "Christ is the answer," not to this or that specific question, but to the question posed by life itself?

At this point, Schleiermacher provides some useful cues, arguing that the preacher is properly less the expositor of doctrine than the embodiment of Christ-consciousness in and on behalf of the community. In his understanding,

The human Word that so renders Christ is both supernatural and natural, both divine and human. The Word arises from the being of God in Christ, but it only expresses itself in the concrete particularity of human life. Preaching then, itself, is analogous to the person of Christ: it is human and divine, historical and ideal. Hearers of the preached Word, under the appropriate conditions, encounter not a feeble human speaker but the Redeemer himself. In this sense, preaching is a re-presentation of the self-presentation of Christ.¹⁴

And yet, at this point, we may reasonably ask, why should this responsibility rest solely upon the shoulders of the pastor? If, in fact, the church is itself the body of Christ (a proposition with which Schleiermacher himself would

surely agree), then why should it not be the congregation’s responsibility to model Christ in proclamation as well as in action? In this model, the preacher would be freed from playing all the positions to assume the role of coach (thus, in many instances, nudging the members of the church to talk as good a game as they play). Actually, Schleiermacher himself opens a door for us here. In his view,

religious language is mutual or reciprocal in that no one finite being can fully represent the Infinite. And since the purpose of religious language is to mediate between finitude and the Infinite, that mediation will be complete only when every finite being has reflected Infinity in its own mode.¹⁵

Indeed, these “modalities” of religious language will involve revelation, invitation, celebration, and conviction/confession (in both senses of the terms) as contrasted with the language of argument/persuasion/demonstration, leading the hearer to respond in faith to the lived experience of Jesus Christ rather than being forced to a conclusion. We are in the realm of evocation and invocation, of presentation and expression and performance, not of analysis, here. This is theology as “God talk” in the most direct and resonant way of which human beings, in the image and likeness of God, are capable.

There will certainly be a time for the second-order work of theological reflection, and this will constantly have as its norm the scriptural witness to Jesus Christ as explicated in the light of the best scholarship available. There will always be a need to “test the spirits,” and to balance the sense of the community with the legitimate claims of the

individual conscience. But these moments will be organically rooted in the primary experience of the community in ways that have yet to be fully explored (the base community experiments of the church in Latin America being an early instance of this kind of approach).

This leads me to the phrase that heads this article, and which I have gratefully absorbed from my Black colleagues. It comes when, in a moment of intense engagement with a text, the group shares a flash of insight and somebody declares, “That’ll preach!” No one could have engineered it, and no one person “owns” it. It is not a logical conclusion. One doesn’t say, “QED,” but “Eureka!” (in the call and response mode of preaching, this is, of course, an indispensable part of the preaching event itself). No one needs to make a case; everybody just knows. I believe this is nothing less than a moment when we experience Christ’s presence in our midst. And, for Schleiermacher, it was the very essence of preaching (and theology, for that matter). It is the product, not so much of a single mind, as of a Mind reflected and refracted through the life experience of the members of the Body.

A final word on the place of theology. It should be clear that none of the preceding could have been said without some pretty intense theological training. But theology, as reflection upon embodied and enacted truth, is at its best when it is done in service, not so much to the classroom or the professional seminar, as to the body of Christ. From Augustine, Anselm, Aquinas, Luther, Barth, and the great Orthodox theologians, to contemporaries like Gustavo Gutierrez and Letty Russell, theological giants have seen theology itself as irreducibly

confessional and saturated with prayer. In the end, it is the church itself that does the work of theology. The task of the theologian is to bring us into conversation with both contemporary culture and the “tradition” (and, incidentally, it is amazing how one’s reading of the great theologians deepens and becomes real soul food when we see them as people who, like us, struggled to represent Christ to their worlds in times of turmoil and transition – and what time hasn’t been such a time?).

Where does this leave us? It leaves the theologian (and, by extension, the preacher) in, perhaps, a less exalted but more authentic and useful place. He or she will no longer be the referee, or even the quarterback, but the coach who (informed by a deep knowledge of the theory and history of the game) encourages and guides each member of the team in playing his or her best, as God gives each particular gifts for ministry.

As for the act of preaching, it will become more collaborative, less the fruit of one person’s solitary study and reflection and more a core sample of the ongoing life of the community brought to conscious awareness and expression, and will undoubtedly require new forms and methods.¹⁶ Like the parables of Jesus himself, to go back to a root meaning of the Greek word *parabole*, it will be less a definitive statement than a “venture,” a risk, a conscious and faithful approximation to a truth which, finally, is the fullness of Christ in our midst. And in the process, to borrow once more from Wilco, rather than thinning his heart with “little things,” we may find ourselves dwelling in him in ways that remind us, again and again, that he is with us every day.

(Endnotes)

¹ Wilco. Theologians. *A Ghost is Born* (Nonesuch Records, 2004). <<http://wilcoworld.net/records/ghost.php>>

² Dale Andrews, *Practical Theology for Black Churches: Bridging Black Theology and African American Folk Religion* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002).

³ Henry Mitchell, *Black Preaching: The Recovery of a Powerful Art* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990), quoted in Andrews, 18.

⁴ Jack Rogers, *Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality: Explode the Myths, Heal the Church* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), esp. ch. 2.

⁵ Quoted in Brian Gerrish, *A Prince of the Church: Schleiermacher and the Beginnings of Modern Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 13.

⁶ Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*, tr. John Oman (New York: Harper & Row, 1958).

⁷ *Schleiermacher on Christ and Religion: A New Introduction* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1964), 212.

⁸ James Nelson, *Herrnhut: Schleiermacher’s Spiritual Homeland* (Univ. of Chicago: Ph.D. diss., 1963), 56.

⁹ Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, ed. by H. R. MacKintosh and J. S. Steward (London & New York: T & T Clark, 1999), 77-78.

¹⁰ *Glaubenslehre*, 88, quoted in Dawn DeVries, *Jesus Christ in the Preaching of Calvin and Schleiermacher* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 103.

¹¹ Terence Tice, *Schleiermacher* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2006), 22.

¹² Edward Wimberly, *From Shame to Self-Worth: Preaching and Pastoral Care* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999).

¹³ Bruce Chilton, *Rabbi Jesus: An Intimate Biography* (New York: Doubleday, 2002).

¹⁴ DeVries, 63.

¹⁵ DeVries, 50.

¹⁶ Such an approach has recently been suggested by O. Wesley Allen, *The Homiletic of All Believers: A Conversational Approach to Proclamation and Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005).