

Karen Meyers

I found Dr. Steve Simmons’ article fascinating and thought provoking, in the same way that I am fascinated and blessed by sermons or lively Sunday School discussions or books that provoke and stimulate new ways of thinking. In other words, the notion of worshipping God “with our minds as well as our spirits” has always appealed to me. As a result, I was somewhat surprised by the claim that “theology [is] so often perceived as an impediment, if not an actual threat, to the life of the church.”

If, indeed, there is a “widespread aversion” to theology in the church, I suspect it is part and parcel of a more generalized anti-intellectualism in the land. But I also suspect it is because whatever exposure many of us have had to theological discourse has, indeed, involved “the clever interlocking of abstract propositions divorced from the vital relationship with God exemplified in Jesus” that both Simmons and Schleiermacher eschew. I have not read Schleiermacher, but this article certainly makes a compelling argument for examining his work and that of other theologians whose thinking is central, rather than extraneous, to our pursuit of a right relationship with God.

So my interest in Schleiermacher has been piqued. And yet, I’m not likely to go out and buy one of his books. Why? Because, to be quite honest, the thought of reading a nineteenth century German theologian makes me break out in hives. As a lay person, I don’t feel I have the knowledge or training to decode theological discourse on my own; I’m not adverse to theology, but I am certainly intimidated by it.

Like most lay people, I need someone to mediate, interpret, explicate, and, most of all, help me apply that scholarship and wisdom to my own faith journey. I believe many lay people crave such nourishment (I love that Simmons calls it “soul food”) or at least could develop a taste for it. That’s why, as a parishioner, I *do* want my pastor to be thoroughly grounded and educated in theology that will inform, deepen, challenge, and stimulate his or her thinking, so that the message he or she delivers to me — whether through preaching, teaching, individual spiritual counseling, or just by the way he or she lives — reflects that knowledge and in turn nourishes my mind as well as my spirit.

But as a church member, I also need to recognize that such study on the part of a pastor, such “serious theological reflection, like good digestion, takes time and energy,” as Dr. Simmons puts it. In addition to the foundation laid in seminary studies, it takes ongoing individual effort, continuing education, and opportunities for discussion and renewal with other students of theology. It needs to be recognized by church boards and members as part of the pastor’s job.

I was saddened to read that many pastors wish they had been taught how to balance the congregation’s budget instead of how to read Karl Barth, because that speaks to the unreasonable demands we place on them. If we as parishioners expect our ministers to spend their time visiting inactive members, mediating disputes about Sunday School curriculum, camping out with the youth, and cleaning up the kitchen to boot, we can’t very well expect them to also find the time and psychic energy for serious theological exploration. That means we shouldn’t be

surprised if both they and we are malnourished in the faith. I am grateful to Steve Simmons for helping me to think seriously about what our priorities should be.

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Truman Dunn

My thanks to *The Hinge* for inviting me to be a respondent to the very thoughtful article by Dr. Simmons concerning the plight and promise of theology in the Church today. I want to begin by commending Steve for bringing the work of Friedrich Schleiermacher to a forum for Moravian theological discourse. The Moravian connection to Schleiermacher's life is, perhaps, our most significant contribution to theology, even if it is somewhat indirect.

While some might disagree, I have found that the "aversion to theology" of which Simmons speaks at the beginning of his article is something we Moravians possess in spades. We Moravians seem to take great pride in saying that ours is a simple faith, unencumbered with the "wrangling of words," (to cite another phrase Simmons uses) which plague other denominations. We often use our long-standing motto about being united only in the few essentials to illustrate what we mean, implying that Christian faith is much simpler than many seek to make it.

It is not surprising, then, that there have been few books of theology written by Moravians in

our more than 550-year history. That, in itself, is quite telling as to how unimportant theology has been to Moravians over the centuries. Instead, we say, you can find our theology in our Easter Morning Liturgy. Never mind that the work of theology would be to understand and discern the meaning of the Easter Morning Liturgy.

Because this is to be a brief response, let me cut to the chase. As I understand what Simmons is trying to say, there have been a number of reasons for the aversion to theology in most of Christianity. Simmons seeks to identify the reasons why, suggesting that many of them are self-inflicted by theologians themselves. Using the voices of Schleiermacher and African-American Christians in particular, Simmons then seeks to demonstrate why he believes "theology matters."

I think Simmons is right when he says that serious theological reflection takes time and energy, and we live in a fast food, instant gratification world. This, in turn, has led to what Simmons describes as a "marketable Jesus," along with health and wealth interpretations of the gospel. The implication, of course, is that few Christians are really interested in serious theological reflection, including most pastors. In my experience, most pastors do not seem to be interested in serious theological reflection, nor do they see the need to do so. Like Simmons, I have also listened to many pastors bemoan having been required to read Karl Barth when they could have been learning something useful such as how to balance a congregation's budget or settle church fights.