

Twenty-six Theses Regarding Theological Integration

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Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of the prophets, but test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil.
I Thessalonians 5: 19-22

1. I am delighted and honored to speak on this important matter before us, namely, how to integrate theological reflection into the Seminary's curriculum more effectively so that our graduates can serve the church and the wider community more faithfully. It is easy to think of theology as an academic discipline, appropriate for the seminary but something not directly related to the daily life and work of a congregation, an institution of the church or the wider unity of the church.

2. Today let me argue that the model of "pastor as theologian" is a means by which theological reflection can be integrated with the ministry and mission of the congregation and the church at large.

3. I rejected this when it was first presented to me in seminary more than thirty years ago because it seemed to me to present an elitist model of what a leader of the church should be. I was more interested in the model of pastor as healer of souls, involved in the life struggles of his or her parishioners. I could imagine myself being a new Henri Nouwen. I was more interested in the model of pastor as agent of

change, bringing new life to the congregation. I imagined myself being a new Robert Raines. I was more interested in the model of pastor as community servant, the one who spoke truth to power in the neighborhood and so brought justice to the community. I imagined myself being a new Dorothy Day. I was more interested in the model of pastor as priest, the one who presided over the liturgy in an elegant way and thereby brought a bit of heaven into the daily humdrum existence of so many weary parishioners. I imagined myself being a new Cyril or Methodius. But pastor as theologian? No! Maybe Karl Barth had preached to the prisoners in Basel but for the vast reaches of Christendom his systematic theology was, and continues to be, a great and lofty height to be climbed by only the bravest and brightest.

4. Now, thirty years after ordination, with experience in a variety of the church's expressions, I find myself persuaded that the seminary should find ways to integrate theological reflection into its curriculum for the purpose of raising up more "pastors as theologians" and that pastors so trained and formed should understand a significant portion of their ministry to be involved with training and shaping their parishioners to be active theologians as well.

5. By “theologian” I mean a person of faith who can reflect critically upon the ebb and flow of life, one’s own life as well as the great forces, events, and personalities of the larger communities of which one may be a part, through the lens of the Gospel. I am aware, of course, that there are different schools or types of theologians, for example, systematic, biblical, philosophical, or historical. Regardless of the particular method used by the theologian, theologians in general are passionate about critical reflection upon life through the lens of the Gospel.

6. One goal of such critical reflection is to bring clarity about a particular controversial matter. The theologian should be able to help the church, in its various expressions, large and small, to be clear headed about the issues at hand. At a time when the church is beset by a host of controversial issues, being clear about just what the salient features of an issue are so that the church can know what it is confronting is a gift to the church.

7. Another goal of such critical reflection is discernment. Critical reflection upon life through the lens of the Gospel can help the church answer the all important question, “Where is God at work?” And the related question, “Given God’s activity now in this place among these people in this way, what is expected of us as a faithful response to God’s activity?”

8. Critical theological reflection moves along a continuum from wonder to analysis to communication to action. In this understanding,

I have been deeply influenced by the writings of Abraham Joshua Heschel, especially *God in Search of Man, a Philosophy of Judaism*.

9. One begins with wonder. Wonder has to do with standing in the face of mystery. The vastness as well as the intimacy of creation, the breadth of the human story, the pathos of individual experience, the dynamics of love and anger, resentment and forgiveness, jealousy and kindness as people seek to live out their lives in community — these are examples of mystery. Wonder captures our attention and will not let us go easily.

10. In particular, a Christian theologian wonders about the proposition that God is alive and at work in the world, creating, saving, and sanctifying. The appropriate response to the mystery of God’s living and active presence in the world is wonder.

11. Having become a captive of mystery in wonder, the theologian moves on to analysis. The tool which the theologian uses at this point is reason. Reason allows the theologian to dissect the object of wonder apart, to consider its various aspects, their individuality and their interrelatedness, and to discover the dynamic forces at work in a particular wonderful occurrence. As mystery moves to wonder, for the theologian, so too critical reason moves to the understanding of power and its workings.

12. Communication now comes into play for the theologian. How can I share what I have discovered about mystery through analysis with the community in a way that is coherent and constructive for the community? Here

the theologian can make use of the tools of language, of shape and color and form in art, of the posture and motion in dance, and of sound in music.

13. Finally, the theologian's insights call for faithful action on the part of the community. This action is a response to God and what God is doing in the world, as discerned by the work of the theologian. The alignment of one's own passions and gifts, or those of the community, with God's passion for the world is the faithful response, the right action. At this point, I am influenced by H. Richard Niebuhr and his book *The Responsible Self*.

14. What I have described so far is the work of critical or analytical thinking. What makes this theology as opposed to critical reflection upon life in general is the lens of the Gospel. The Gospel, says Paul, is "the power of God unto salvation" (Romans 1). John's Gospel reminds us that "No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known" (John 1). This lens focuses critical thinking upon God and God's saving work so that the theologian may have words to speak about God and what it is that God is doing in the world.

15. The kind of critical theological reflection I am seeking to describe is always done on behalf of the community of faith and within the community of faith. The pastor as theologian is never an agent apart from the community of faith. While the history of the church is replete with significant moments when pastors as theologians had to stand over

against the community of the faithful in their communication of what they had discovered and speak in a prophetic mode, they did so on behalf of the community and for the community's good. They did not speak on their own behalf and for their own benefit.

16. The mystery is that God is alive and at work in the world. Reason asks how and where and to what end, even why. The lens of the Gospel focuses the attention of analysis on God. As the answers to these questions are communicated, a response is required of the individual and/or the community. This response is their act of faith active in love for the sake of justice.

17. For example, Moses was confronted by the mystery of the burning bush and the voice which came forth from it. He turned aside to see. This is what I am calling wonder. He entered into a dialog, an argument, a reasonable critique with the Voice, and discovered the voice of God. This is what I am calling analysis. Moses communicated, through Aaron at first, what he has discerned of God's presence in the world, through speeches and through physical signs, to Pharaoh and the people of Israel. This is what I am calling communication. Pharaoh and the people of Israel responded in various ways, both faithfully and unfaithfully, and acted accordingly. This is what I am calling action. These are the movements, in broad strokes, of the theologian.

18. By "pastor" I mean a person called by God to sustain men and women in their vocation. This sense of call is recognized and

affirmed by the community of the faithful. This sense of call may or may not be ordered by the community. This understanding of “pastor” is directly influenced by the writings of Seward Hiltner.

19. The pastor can perform this sustaining ministry in a variety of roles. As priest, the pastor makes use of the sacraments and the rites of the church to care for brothers and sisters. As a teacher, the pastor makes use of the teachings of the church and the culture at large to care for others. As a preacher, the pastor makes use of God’s word in proclamation. As counselor, the pastor makes use of God’s word and the therapeutic method to listen and to speak to the heart of others. As prophet, the pastor makes use of God’s passion for justice and the techniques of community organizing. These are some of the various ways in which a pastor may sustain others as they live out their vocations.

20. These various forms of pastoral ministry will be most faithful and effective if they are informed and shaped by critical, theological reflection. The work of the critical theologian separated from the pastoral ministry will lack agency. The work of pastoral ministry separated by critical theological reflection will lack clarity and runs the great risk of becoming idolatry, that is, man’s presumption of working on God’s behalf but without God’s command.

21. The pastor as theologian, therefore, is one who can think critically about life through the lens of the Gospel. The work of the seminary, if it seeks to integrate theology with the daily life of the church, is to train and

shape such pastoral theologians. In so doing, the seminary will seek to train its students to think theologically rather than view theology as a discreet subject matter to be acquired through study. One would study the works of the theologians of the past and present in order to be shaped by their turn of mind not simply to become familiar with this or that set of insights and propositions or arguments.

22. The role of the pastor as theologian in the local community of faith is, in part, to train and shape others to be able to think theologically, to reflect analytically upon the issues of their own individual and communal lives through the lens of the Gospel.

23. It would be a compliment of the highest order, therefore, for someone to say, “Those Moravian Theological Seminary graduates! They are always wondering, questioning, and sharing their startling insights. They are always calling for direct action! They are too clear headed! They are too tough minded! Can you believe it, they actually imagine that God is at work in the world, creating, saving, sanctifying! They are always on the alert to discover where and how! And to make matters worse, the members of the congregations they serve are just as bad! Always wondering and questioning! Always speaking up and acting out!”

24. Historical examples of what I am seeking to describe can be seen in the life of Luther and Zinzendorf, Rosemary Radford Reuther and Phyllis Tribble, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, especially the first several pages of his *Letters and Papers from Prison, What We Have Learned Thus*

Far, and Martin Luther King, Jr. All were able to integrate rigorous theological inquiry with the life of church and the life of the individual Christian. Certainly, these men and women of faith served the church and the wider culture in a rich variety of ways, but they were crucial to the life of the church then and now because of their ability to wonder, to analyze, to communicate, and to call the community to faithful action.

25. While eminent men and women of yesterday and today have fulfilled this calling of pastor as theologian and thereby integrated the life of theology with the life of the church, so too have so-called everyday Christians like Ralph Kurtz. Ralph Kurtz was a member of the congregation I served, St. Paul's Lutheran in Dansville, NY. He was a welder, working for Foster-Wheeler Energy. He was married and had three children. He was no stranger to heartbreak. One of his sons was estranged from their family and one of his daughters was hit and killed by irresponsible driver. Ralph was active in our congregation's life and loved to talk and argue at various retreats and study groups. He also came with me on various occasions to visit inmates at Attica Prison. Members of the congregation and I regularly visited inmates on Fridays for many years while I was serving at St. Paul's and cared for inmates' families while they were visiting inmates. Occasionally, inmates would be released and our congregation would help to find housing and work and provide regular guidance for men during the first 100 days of their release. On one visit, when Ralph and I were talking with a group of about one dozen inmates, the discussion turned toward

the topic of work. One inmate, in particular, was quite outspoken in rejection of daily work. He had "earned" hundreds of thousands of dollars by selling drugs in New York City. Why work in a factory? He could earn in one weekend more than Ralph could earn in a year. Ralph entered the discussion with passion. He set forth a clear exposition about the meaning of work as a means of supporting his family, of providing a product of valuable use for others, in fact for many others whom he would never meet. Ralph spoke of the community of fellow workers and the expression of his gifts and abilities through work. Ralph was not an educated man. I am not sure he graduated from high school. Nevertheless, he set forth a clear and articulate presentation of Luther's concept of vocation. The inmate was forced to look at work in a new light because of Ralph's work that day as pastoral theologian in Attica Prison. Ralph, through his engagement in worship life and various study groups, had been shaped to wonder, to think critically, to share his insights with genuine force, and to call other person to more responsible action. The theological training which the pastors of St. Paul's Lutheran Church had received at a variety of seminaries was integrated in the life of a small, rural congregation for the good of a group of inmates in Attica Prison, through Ralph Kurtz.

26. How can we integrate the theological studies of seminarians at Moravian Theological Seminary with the life of the congregations of the Church? By means of training, shaping students to be "pastors as theologians," who in

turn can shape the lives of the men and women and children of the communities they serve to become theologians as well — men and women with a critical turn of mind, in the grip of mystery, setting forth what they perceive,

calling brothers and sister to align their lives with the great rhythms of God's life for us. The church needs, I believe, men and women who are clear headed and not just sincere.

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Pastor As Translator

Amy Gohdes-Luhman

I am grateful to be invited to speak on the topic of “Theology and the Seminary” at Moravian Theological Seminary, my alma mater. I am also thankful to be paired with President Thomforde, who was my president first! That is, he was President of St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minnesota, where I teach in conjunction with the pastoral work I do at Main Street Moravian Church. So, many thanks!

I remember typing papers at Hamilton Hall and thinking of all the men (and they were all men then) who had lived in that hall. I have heard some of the names of my dad's contemporaries: George Lloyd, Bob Rierson, Jim Saldwedel, Bob Smith, Jimmy Newsom (the old Jimmy), Henning Schlim, Will Harstine. I called my dad, Bob Gohdes, to get some dirt, something stupid one or more of these young seminarians may have done, but he gave me nothing. He insists they were all straight-laced

and proper — nothing but the Lord's work all the time. Right.

I remember being in Theology class or Old Testament class and for some reason, at that time of my life, I was shy to speak. I would send telepathic messages to Paul Couch, willing him to raise his hand and say what was on my mind. And it worked almost every time. But sometimes if he wasn't in class or was not receiving telepathy that day, I would be cringing and writhing with something to say in response to some discussion point, knowing I had the right answer. Professor Hargis or Professor Bechtel could see it on my face and would say politely, “Amy do you have something to say?” Blah Blah Blah! It would all come pouring out, usually not so gracefully.

When I was asked to share in this celebration of 200 years of seminary instruction here at