

Reformed University Fellowship

Theology as a Presupposition

I. Theology in life.

A. Postmodern attacks against systematic theology.

1. Preference for narrative.
 - a. Everyone loves a story.
 - b. “Narrative preaching”.

Everyone is talking about the need for incorporating narrative and story in order to communicate with increasingly postmodern listeners. One undergrad (the son of Christian parents, thoroughly familiar with Reformed teaching, and an English major at Vanderbilt) once told me, “If you stand up and say that you’re going to speak about God’s omnipotence, I feel myself checked out. But if I’m reading my Bible and it says ‘God remembered His people,’ then I get fired up.” (Brian Habig)

2. Hermeneutic of suspicion.
 - a. There is no absolute truth.
 - b. Propositions are control mechanisms used by people who would use you for their own benefit.
 - c. Find your own truth for yourself.

B. Everyone has a theology.

1. Theology is your beliefs about God, life, and the universe.
2. Christian theology is beliefs based on the Bible.
3. Whenever you talk about life or the Bible you are doing theology.
4. The idea that ministry can be based on the Bible without theology is foolish and/or dishonest.

C. Systematizing is human nature.

1. Adam named the animals and noticed the system of sexual pairing.
2. Language and writing are systems of communication.
3. Things are not useful unless organized systematically.
4. Every field of study, every activity, and every facet of human endeavor requires systematic organization of the ideas, objects, and procedures which are necessary to that area.
5. Being made in God’s image, we get all this from God who names, organizes, and categorizes His creation.

D. The New Testament demands systematic theology.

1. Paul’s insistence on “sound” words, doctrine, life. (1 Timothy 1:10; 6:3; 2 Timothy 1:13; 4:3; Titus 1:9; 2:1-2.)

Think about this: it wasn’t enough for Paul for individuals to be able to regurgitate passages from the Law and the Prophets, or even from Jesus’ teachings. They had to buy into a particular “take” on these passages in order to be considered *sound* in their thinking as followers of Christ. It wasn’t enough to believe in God, sin, Christ, salvation, the church, heaven, and hell. You had to believe in these realities *in a sound way*. (Brian Habig)

2. We are required to pass on the traditions (*paradosis, paradidōmi*). (1 Corinthians 11:2; Romans 6:17; 2 Thessalonians 2:15; 3:6; 2 Timothy 1:13)
- E. Church history demonstrates the need for systematic theology.
 1. Instruct converts in the fundamentals of the faith.
 2. Refute heretics.
 3. Guide our thinking and protect us from false reading of scripture.
 4. New Testament evidences of creedal formulas.
 5. Apostles Creed.
 6. Nicene Creed has been the touchstone of sound doctrine in all branches of the church for 1500 years.
 7. Reformed confessions were essential for teaching, protecting, and propagating the true understanding of scripture.
- F. Biblical terms can be used with different meanings.
 1. Neo-orthodoxy in the mid-twentieth century.
 2. New Perspective on Paul, the Federal Vision in the twenty-first century.
 3. We cannot afford to neglect striving for clarity and accuracy in understanding the doctrine taught in scripture.
- G. Our theology is best expressed by the Westminster Standards.

II. Doing Systematic Theology.

A. Supremacy of Scripture.

Mt. 22:29 Jesus answered them, “You are wrong, because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God.”

Systematics becomes lifeless and fails in its mandate just to the extent to which has become detached from exegesis. And the guarantee against *a stereotyped dogmatics* is that systematic theology be constantly enriched, deepened, and expanded by the treasures increasingly drawn from the Word of God. Exegesis keeps systematics not only in direct contact with the Word but it ever imparts to systematics the power which is derived from that Word. The Word is living and powerful. (John Murray, “Systematic Theology,” in his *Collected Writings*; emph. added)

B. Hermeneutical Circle.

1. Seeing a truth in scripture.
2. Seeing its place in the overall system of truth.
3. Understanding the scripture more deeply.
4. Understanding doctrine more fully.
5. Repeat.

C. Interaction with Tradition.

1. “The clean sea breeze of the centuries blowing through our minds.” C. S. Lewis

From its very beginnings, the Reformation assumed its catholicity over against the abuses and dogmatic accretions of late-medieval Roman Christianity. In other words, the Reformers and their successors understood their theology to stand in continuity with the great

tradition of the church, particularly with the theology of the ecumenical councils, the church fathers, and the “sounder” of the medieval doctors. ***Scripture was certainly the prior norm for theology*** on the basis of which all other norms were to be judged, including the ecumenical creeds and the fathers. Nonetheless, the orthodox theologies of the Reformation and post-Reformation eras accepted the larger part of the Christian exegetical and dogmatic tradition - and rather than reinvent a theological system, ***they reshaped it in terms of the Reformation insights***. (Richard A. Muller, “Sources of Reformed Orthodoxy: The Symmetrical Unity of Exegesis and Synthesis,” in *A Confessing Theology for Postmodern Times*; emphasis added)

III. Theology in RUF.

- A. We are part of the Presbyterian Church in America. The PCA understands the scripture to teach the doctrines found in the Westminster Standards.

The staff member must have a basic understanding of doctrine, as set forth in the Westminster Standards. This does not mean that he must have received formal theological training in a seminary. He must, however, possess sufficient knowledge and understanding to have a “theological perspective” or frame of operation that will enable him to offer a balanced teaching ministry and to deal correctly and effectively with the philosophies set forth in the university world. (From “Overview – Staff in *Operations and Procedures Manual*)

We carry out our teaching and ministry from a specific theological perspective, sometimes referred to as the Reformed faith, a helpful summary of which is to be found in the documents known as [the Westminster Standards]. We hold to these not because we wish to follow a tradition for its own sake, but because we believe that they express in a systematic form the teachings of Scripture, which alone is infallible and ultimately authoritative. (from “Overview – Presuppositions of the RUF Ministry”)

- B. Our goal is to be Christ-centered in our teaching of scripture.

On the one hand (as is often noted), systematic theology depends on exegetical and biblical theology. To develop applications, the systematic theologian must know what each passage says and the mighty historical acts of God that are described therein.... On the other hand (and this point is often less noted), the reverse is also true: exegetical and biblical theology also depend on systematics. One can surely exegete the parts of Scripture better if he is sensitive to the overall teaching of Scripture as discovered by systematics. And one can understand better the history of redemption if he has a systematic perspective. (John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*)

- C. We are making disciples, including future leaders in the church, home, and community.
1. Discipleship begins with hearing and obeying the gospel.
 2. Discipleship continues with understanding the “pattern of sound words” found in the scripture.
 3. We cannot claim to be making disciples if we neglect doctrinal instruction.

... systematic theology must dare to be itself again, and to be active as such. It must encourage and itself exercise the ministry of teaching in the church. It must reactivate its catechetical function in order to confirm both churches and individual believers so that they are not being driven around by alien doctrines and finally destroyed. Making disciples (Matt 28:19) is not a

matter of a one-time proclamation. It requires the intensive stage of teaching to follow up the extensive work of evangelism. This is the proper NT order. "If you want to go wide, you have got to go deep".... Failing to provide teaching as the continuation of mass evangelism today, means - As John Wesley put it - begetting children of the devil. This after-work is a consistent problem for our generation. What we need is theological substance instead of preoccupation with gimmicks and technique. (Klause Bockmuehl, "The Task of Systematic Theology," in *Perspectives on Evangelical Theology*)

Scripture does not exist to serve our systems. Just the reverse. Theological reflection takes place for one reason: to help us think through the biblical faith in our moment in history. As such, theology is the servant of the Word of God and faith. Systematics is not the goal of Scripture, but a means for our application of the biblical world to our own. (Michael Williams, "Systematic Theology as a Biblical Discipline," in *All for Jesus: a Celebration of the 50th Anniversary of Covenant Theological Seminary*)

* Note C.S. Lewis' comments on this point: Appendix A.

[I]t is for want of this laying the foundation well at first, that professors themselves are so ignorant as most are, and that so many, especially of the younger sort, do swallow down almost any error that is offered them, and follow any sect of dividers that will entice them, so it be but done with earnestness and plausibility. For, alas! Though by the grace of God their hearts may be changed in an hour, (whenever they understand but the essentials of the faith,) yet their understandings must have time and diligence to furnish them with such knowledge as must stablish them, and fortify them against deceits....

I do there fore desire, that all masters of families would first study well [The Confession and Catechisms] themselves, and then teach it their children and servants, according to be able to read other books more understandingly, and hear sermons more profitably, and confer more judiciously, and hold fast the doctrine of Christ more firmly, then ever you are like to do by any other course. (From "Mr. Thomas Manton's Epistle to the Reader," bound with some editions of the Westminster Standards)

IV. Theology in Ministry.

A. Structure of Ministry.

1. Methods, built upon...
2. Goals, built upon...
3. Philosophy of Ministry, built upon...
 - a. Principles.
 - b. Presuppositions.
4. Theology, derived from...
5. Bible.
6. (Jesus is the foundation; the Bible is His word.)
7. (Bible/theology is one of our presuppositions, but they also undergird all other presuppositions.)

B. Three Mistakes in Ministry Structure.

1. Building on a weak foundation.
 - a. Bad theology: poor grasp of what scripture actually teaches.
 - b. Defective ministry of Arminian, Charismatic churches springs from defective theology.
 - c. Results in motivation by guilt, pursuit of secondary priorities, etc.

2. Building the ministry on something other than the foundation.
 - a. Making principles, goals, methods, programs, issues, etc. the foundation.
 - b. Making the principles the foundation.
 - i. Assuming the Bible, justification, sanctification.
 - ii. Results in spiritually weak people.
 - c. Making the goals the foundation.
 - i. Assuming evangelism, discipleship, worship, holiness.
 - ii. Results in people who are inactive and ineffective.
 - d. Making methods the foundation.
 - i. Assuming contact evangelism, personal evangelism, small groups, home schooling, worship style, etc.
 - ii. Results in people who are active and involved, but shallow.
 - e. Making programs the foundation.
 - i. Assuming Evangelism Explosion, Four Spiritual Laws, Liturgy, Sunday School, Sunday evening service, VBS, choir, etc.
 - ii. Results in people who are active but very shallow.
 - f. Making issues the foundation.
 - i. Assuming conservative/liberal politics, view of Genesis 1, alcohol use, worship style, etc.;
 - ii. Results in failure to reach anyone with different views.
3. Showing off the foundation instead of doing ministry.
 - a. Making theology a principle instead of a presupposition.
 - b. Good theology by itself does not promote spiritual growth.
 - c. Dwelling on baptism, TULIP, covenant, law, etc.

V. Theology as a Presupposition in Relation to Other Presuppositions.

A. God is at work.

1. It is not up to us to cram all the right theology into people immediately.
2. God will bring them around to a right understanding eventually.
3. We need not fear losing people because of our theology.
4. God will bring to us all the people He wants us to have, even if we are true to our beliefs.
5. It is worth our effort to teach theology as people are able to hear it.

B. The Church.

1. As part of the Presbyterian Church in America, RUF holds the theological position of the PCA.
 - a. We recognize Reformed Theology as the most faithful statement of the doctrines taught in scripture.
 - b. All ministers, staff, and interns in RUF must subscribe to the Westminster Standards.
 - c. It is illegitimate to expect that the ministry of the gospel on campus should be done by something other than the church.
 - d. It is illegitimate to think that campus ministry can be successful only by concealing our theology.
 - e. It is foolish to think that campus ministry can be successful by rejecting theology.
2. Since the church of Christ is larger than the PCA, we minister to all people, regardless of their theological positions or denominational affiliation.
 - a. Students are not required to become Presbyterian or Reformed to participate in our ministry.
 - b. Students may be involved in churches from a variety of denominations.
 - c. We do not hide our theology, but we treat the views of others with respect.

C. Learning process.

1. People will absorb much theology if we minister out of it.
 - a. Is your ministry theologically driven?
 - b. Or theologically exhibitionist?
2. People learn by seeing and doing.
 - a. Does your ministry demonstrate theology?
 - b. Or do you just talk about it?
3. People learn when they have a need.
 - a. Are you equipping people to thrive in their current situations?
 - b. Or are you giving people information they don't need now?

D. Individual and demographics.

1. Are you taking into account how the image of God is uniquely expressed in these people in this place?
2. Does your ministry reflect that theological conviction?

VI. Using Theology in Ministry.

- A. Theology is not the content of ministry.
- B. Jesus, the gospel, the Bible are the content of ministry.
- C. Theology provides the framework in which we preach Jesus from the Bible.
- D. Theology guides us as we seek to interpret and explain the Bible to people.
- E. Everyone does use theology in ministry, regardless of protests to the contrary.
 1. Anytime you say anything about God, life, or the Bible, you are making a theological statement.
 2. The truth about God, life, and the Bible is sound theology.
 3. Thus we want our ministry to conform to the theology that is faithful to the scriptures.

Appendix A: Knowing God vs. Experiencing God.

In a way I quite understand why some people are put off by *Theology*. I remember once when I had been giving a talk... an old, hard-bitten officer got up and said, 'I've no use for all that stuff. But mind you, I'm a religious man too, I *know* there's a God, I've *felt* Him: out alone in the desert at night; the tremendous *mystery*. And that's just why I don't believe all your neat little dogmas and formulas about Him. To anyone who's met the real thing they all seem so petty and pedantic and unreal!'

Now in a sense I quite agree with that man. I think he probably had a real experience of God in the desert. And when he turned from that experience to the Christian creeds, I think he really was turning from something real to something less real. In the same way, if a man has once looked at the Atlantic from the beach, and then goes and looks at a map of the Atlantic, he will also be turning from something real to something less real: turning from real waves to a bit of colored paper.

But here comes the point. The map is admittedly only colored paper, but there are two things you have to remember about it. In the first place, it is based on what hundreds and thousands of people have found out by sailing the real Atlantic. In that way it has behind it masses of experience just as real as the one you could have from the beach; only, while yours would only be a single isolated glimpse, the map fits all those different experiences together. In the second place, *if you want to go anywhere*, the map is absolutely necessary. As long as you are content with walks on the beach, your own glimpses are far more fun than looking at a map. But the map is going to be more use than walks on the beach if you want to get to America.

Now, *Theology* is like that map. Merely learning and thinking about Christian doctrines, if you stop there, is less real and exciting than the sort of thing my friend got in the desert. Doctrines are not God: they are only a kind of map. But that map is based on the experiences of hundreds of people who really were in touch with God— experiences compared with which any thrills or pious feelings you and I are likely to get on our own are very elementary and very confused.

And secondly, if you want to get any further, you have to use the map. You see, what happened to that man in the desert may have been real, and was certainly exciting, *but nothing comes of it*. It leads nowhere. There is nothing to do about it. IN fact, that is just why a vague religion— all about feeling God in nature, and so on—is so attractive. It is all thrills and no work; like watching waves from the beach. But you will not get to Newfoundland by studying the Atlantic that way, and you will not get eternal life by simply feeling the presence of God in flowers or music. Neither will you get anywhere by looking at maps without going to sea. Nor will you be very safe if you go to sea without a map.

~ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*

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