THEOLOGY IN THE LIFE OF FAITH

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From its beginnings, the Christian Church has understood theology to be indispensable to its life. And yet, the subsequent history of the enterprise betrays a striking proliferation of diverse theological creeds, systems, and irreconcilable methodologies. In spite of the lack of consensus in the churches about *how* theology shall serve their own particular causes, however, most believing communities continue to affirm the importance of theology for deepening in the knowledge and love of God. This essay offers a conceptualization of the role of theology in the life of faith which seeks to transcend many of the conflicts manifest in the present practice of theological reflection. Its central focus is on the ways in which theology guides faith toward integrity, against twin threats of idolatry and heresy, and in so doing, assumes a form in modern life which itself is an eloquent witness to the very faith it serves.

1. THEOLOGY AND FAITH

The thesis with which I want to begin the discussion is one which has a venerable history in the life of the church: *Theology is a process of seeking understanding which fulfills an inner drive of the faithful.* The faith which in believers seeks such understanding includes both a wholehearted trust in God as revealed in Christ (*fiducia*), and a holding to certain beliefs about God's self-revelation in Christ (*assensus*). Theology's premise is that when we reflect upon such faith, we better understand the origins, meaning, truth, and scope of a Christian perspective on, and way of, life.

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Further, by means of such understanding, the church is better enabled to bring others to faith, to assess the forms in which its faith is at various times expressed, both by individuals and communities, and to facilitate deepening in faith, both personally and corporately. Indeed, whenever the church has actively sought an understanding of what its faith most authentically is, how that faith arises, how it may be nourished, and how it can become distorted, the church has been engaged in theology. However variegated are all the churches' creeds and theological systems and however conflicting the methods by which they have been developed, the theological enterprise as a whole expresses an underlying unity of concern *of* the faithful to understand, enrich, and witness. Every theology is, finally, a venture of faith in search of that kind of understanding which further enlivens the faith from which it proceeds.

In my judgment, what especially motivates communities of faith to reflect upon their faith expressions, in light of both their own traditions and of new insights into the transcendent realities to which those traditions witness, is the threat of *distortion* of that to which their faith testifies. That is, faith's drive toward understanding arises from perceived threats to its inner integrity, and from faith's perceived vulnerability to temptation when the demands of that faithful life become, as they must become, difficult to fulfill. The dual question which this kind of experience generates is whether the faith of an individual or of the community is rightly placed in that which is *truly* ultimate (many *call* Him "Lord," ...) and whether the expressions of that faith are congruent with a more encompassing tradition of witnessing. I believe that, underlying every serious theological effort, are these questions/faith concerns, and that the results of every sort of theological reflection will be experienced as mere abstraction unless their connection with such questions and concerns is evident. Any given act or expression of faith can fail in reference to either or both

criteria, with, in the first instance, *idolatry* the result, and in the second, *heresy*. A closer look at these two dangers is now called for.

2. IDOLATRY AND THE MISPLACEMENT OF TRUST

The possibility of idolatry comes into view especially with the reminder that "faith" is a pledge of loyalty with another in a cause mutually shared. Such trust is evidenced especially in the relationships between parent and child, between subjects and their sovereign, and, in the modern era with its (relatively) novel institution of romantic love, between lovers. Traditionally, theology has had as one of its primary tasks that of applying such experiences, by analogies, to understanding our relationship with God.

In the form of trust, faith has both a receiving side and a giving side. We receive abundantly in and by means of a trusting relationship; indeed, it is *only* in trusting that we can experience satisfaction of some of our most basic needs, e.g., for safety, nourishment, approval and fellowship. But there is also a giving side to trust. For in trusting others, and remaining loyal to them, even when it appears that we might be betrayed, we willingly risk our own well-being. The risk is taken *for the sake of* the relationship; without such risk, there can *be* no relationship. In the early stages of our development, of course, we have no choice in the matter; dependent for our very survival upon the favor of others, we must look to others for our care, no-matter-what. With maturity comes, increasingly, the power of choice; as we become better able to seek out the various sources of need and drive satisfaction which are available to us, the risk to well-being which our trust entails becomes increasingly a matter of our conscious decisions rather than of necessity. With the attainment of even modest self-sufficiency, we become less vulnerable to loss of particular relationships. However, self sufficiency can never reduce totally the risk element in a

trusting relationship. In fact, from a Christian point of view, the most significant kinds of trusting relationships are those within which risk is and must remain maximal: "Greater love hath no one than to lay down one's life for one's friends." The giving side of trust, at its highest level, requires even *sacrificial* love.

Today, it is widely claimed by philosophers, psychologists, and theologians alike, that trust is the vital center of wholeness in persons, both as individuals and in communities; that misplaced trust corrupts the human spirit; and that the absence of trust is catastrophic to human development. While utter incapacity for any trust, fortunately, is rare, distorted and even destructive forms of trust are legion. One such form, common in present-day "narcissistic culture," is egoistic or paranoid (and sometimes both) trusting *only* in oneself: "looking out for number one." Its opposite, however, is equally destructive to human development: absolute trust in someone or something *instead* of oneself, self-immolation which cancels out rather than supports genuine, mutual upbuilding relationships. Many religious cults today seem to converge upon such bizarre and destructive forms of faith. In both kinds of trust, which really are "un-faith," the trust is in someone or something *unworthy*. Such misplaced trust is what faith has meant by idolatry.

For the Judaeo-Christian tradition as a whole, it is crucial to maintain clear distinctions between what is believed worthy of *unconditional* trust, and all other realities and possibilities; "God" is understood as the only appropriate recipient of *unqualified* faith. God *alone* is to be trusted wholly, for only God is *worthy* of such trust. Whenever faith is placed without conditions in any person or in anything other than God, that faith has assumed idolatrous form. But all of this is easier said than lived; we know all too well how difficult it is to maintain true faith in God and to avoid idolatry. Idols tempt us constantly. I believe that one of the most important purposes of theology in the life of faith is to make plain *why* this is the case.

One answer to this question can be discovered by looking more closely than we usually do at the ways in which we both experience and conceptualize God. Christian theology has emphasized strongly that God is a transcendent reality "above" or "beyond" the experienced world. Though related to human beings as a personal presence, God is, essentially, so far beyond personhood that predication of personhood itself becomes dubious. Certainly, the *via negativa* has not been the only theological approach to the conceptualization of God, but negative predication about Her has so pervaded theological discourse as to create almost insuperable difficulties for understanding our relationship to Him. Simply put, faith of any sort is trust, and trust requires for its sustenance a *recognizable* Some-One in whom to trust. Merely verbal reassurance that God is, somehow, a personal presence, is insufficient empowerment for unconditional trust reaffirmed across a lifetime. It is not enough, if our faith is to be a *living* faith, to trust only what we have been told *about* God and to trust those who have done the telling. Nevertheless, God's messengers *are* concrete, personal subjects in whom to trust. Needing to trust unconditionally, but confronted by a reality conceptualized in ways which preclude easy recognizability in experience, we sometimes put most, if not all, of our trust in the *witnesses to* such Reality. A book becomes the "Holy Bible"; or a man becomes the "Holy Father." Still other persons become cult figures, demanding and sometimes receiving total allegiance. Numinous, though finite, vehicles for divine presence *can* nourish trust in a transcendent God, but every finite vehicle, however numinous, also can become an idol.

A second answer to the question of how idolatry can persist in our lives proceeds from taking seriously that God *is* experienced as precisely that Personal Presence which, sometimes, at least, theology affirms cannot be so described. And when God *is* so experienced, we frequently feel overwhelmed. Terror fosters evasion: "Adam, where are you?" - and Adam looked frantically

for still thicker brush in which to hide. Given, however, the way in which God comes to us, and given even a modicum of self-understanding, there is a predictability about such reaction. The most immediate analogy which suggests itself is the experience of very young children with their powerful parents, whose awesomeness sometimes proves too much to bear. As with parents, so also with God: Her creatures may seek escape; they may adopt an obsequiousness to mask hostility; they may rebel; or they may erect elaborate defenses which screen out altogether the apprehension of His hovering presence. Whichever course is followed, however, the inevitable result is that someone or something else, less threatening than God, becomes, in place of God, our object(s) of trust. A holy man is trusted, perhaps because his smile comforts, or perhaps because his suffering assures that God has channeled both His interest and Her wrath to him, as a substitute for everyone else. Or, trust comes to be placed in a book, perhaps because books admit of mastery in ways that a divine author might not. Unqualified trust in *God*, however, can be sustained only when His otherwise overwhelming presence is also experienced as supportive. We begin to risk opening ourselves to such a God when we begin to experience Him as kindly disposed toward Her creatures and toward their condition. At its deepest level, our faith seems to "come to us," like a gift, enabling us to accept God as merciful as well as condemning.

A basic question for theology, therefore, has always been that of the grounds for trusting, not that there is a God, but in a God who is "for us" rather than "against us." Reflecting upon the conditions for experiencing such a God is one of the most important ways in which theology enables a truly faith-filled response to Her. Though the quality of much of our theological writing on the subject reflects the obfuscating tendencies to which our sin-filled intellects are prone, behind at least some of the writing are the deep struggles with faith itself: we are called upon to pledge our unconditioned loyalty to a Reality

quite unlike any of those realities to which conditional loyalties are due. Exhibiting the possibility of true faith, while at the same time confronting one another with the persistence of our idolatries, is one indispensable task of theology.

3. HERESY AND THE CONFUSION OF BELIEFS

Faith as unconditional trust in God becomes distorted by idolatrous relationships; faith as holding to certain ideas and convictions about God becomes distorted through clinging to beliefs which prove to be incongruent with those of the particular community of faith to which we espouse loyalty. Idolatry is distortion of the vertical dimension of our faith, a dissipating of the love due God; heresy is a distortion of faith's horizontal dimension, a breaking of the mutual trust presupposed by members of a faith community who risk their well-being for a common cause. To be sure, merely holding to beliefs does not constitute the binding force of most faith communities; as I will discuss more fully later, shared actions and feelings are at least as important, if not more so. However, conflicts over beliefs can be peculiarly divisive, in ways which acting in common, and sharing our feelings, often transcend. Thus it is especially strengthening of the church that reconciling constantly be experienced between belief at a personal, individual level and belief at a corporate level, between how "I" reconcile "my" beliefs with the beliefs that "we" and "they" are expected to hold. Beliefs are held and upheld not only by individuals, but by communities, and the integrity of our personal beliefs is in no small part a function of an attentiveness to the ways in which our brother and sister believers bear witness to their own faith by means of a set of beliefs which we can share.

Believing what upon only the most careful consideration seems true to a wider community is a way of honoring God. Holding to what others equally genuinely believe to be true about God, that is, being "orthodox" in our beliefs, and committing

ourselves to a process of mutually testing them, is a way of maintaining mutual caring within our own communities of faith. When we pledge our allegiance to the beliefs accepted by a community, then that community is better enabled to consolidate its unique identity in the midst of alternative forms of witness and life which claim its attention incessantly. In the third and fourth centuries, insistence upon newly emerging Christological formulae represented an attempt to unify Christianity in a secular order invaded constantly by the claims of many other religious traditions, most of them quite prepared to accommodate Christian teaching within the larger syncretistic whole which embraced them. "*Homoousion to patri*" and "*homoousion hemin*" anchored distinctively Christian moorings in a religiously pluriform culture. In the 16th and 17th centuries, "Protestant orthodoxy" sought a Christian identity over against medieval and Counter-Reformation Catholicism. Today, Christianity once again has become acutely aware of itself as one of many forms of existence, now seeking to make its way among other religious traditions, and in the face of a pervasive secularism. In the attempt to maintain dialogue with proponents of these alternative ways of life, the distinctiveness of Christian witness can become threatened. Commitment to orthodoxy helps to preserve identity in the midst of the very dialogue needed on a world-wide scale.

But in the presentation of identity, there may arise such a fanatical clinging to orthodoxy that the all-important testing of belief is shunted aside. At the extreme, critical inquirers are excluded from the very communities they intend to serve. How can these dangers of a too-scrupulous orthodoxy be avoided? Primarily, I believe, by reminding ourselves repeatedly that the so-called "heresies" in the development of Christian doctrine are not egregiously false statements about God and the world, but rather, incomplete expressions of revealed truth. A heretical statement is a paradox with the incongruities removed. By "paradox" here I mean a juxtaposing of beliefs in a way which is

contrary to expectations: e.g., that Jesus Christ is fully God and fully man; that the complete essence of God dwells in each of several different and concrete divine self-embodiments; that trust in God is both a divine gift and a demand upon the fulfillment of which rests our salvation. All such beliefs bring together assertions which normally would not be combined in these ways; it is in this sense that they are all paradoxes. Whether what is paradoxical is also contradictory in a logical sense, and if so, what the consequences may be for corporate assent, is a question which all theological inquiry, in whatever form, sooner or later must address. While I do not myself now believe that any of the central paradoxes of the faith fall into contradiction, I cannot discuss this matter further here. What I do want to insist upon is that the essential doctrines of Christian belief require enunciation in paradoxical form.

The conceptual untidiness of such formulations leads many Christian thinkers to seek dissolution of the paradoxical elements, usually at the expense of one or the other incongruous element; the result is a truncated form of Christian belief. By contrast, striving to avoid heresy in the name of orthodoxy, an orthodoxy tested and re-tested, to be sure, is a striving for completeness and adequacy in the articulation of our beliefs. It is unfortunate that the anathemas pronounced against heresies so often have fostered persecution of those who hold to the heresies, with the heretic destroyed rather than the heresy clarified. That theology can be so misused, however, does not constitute a valid reason for refusing to put it in the service of a truly orthodox witness of faith. Searching inquiry into the formation of normative beliefs can heighten our sensitivity to the difficulties which attend maintaining a wholistic understanding of Christian revelation, and can help us to avoid the oversimplifications to which persons in all epochs of Christian history have been heir.

Fundamentalisms aside, a call to Christian orthodoxy has a jarring ring about it, to modern-day believers. Everywhere

nowadays, it would seem, there is renewed interest in personal religion and in forming new communities of faith, but this interest is frequently accompanied by declining interest in the "established" churches. While religion is definitely "in," "church," in many traditional senses of the term, is "out." Typical manifestations of this cultural phenomenon are expressed in statements such as: "My religion is very important to me, and I have some strong beliefs, but I really don't believe in dogmas or creeds or anything like that," or "The churches have gotten away from what Christianity is really all about, so we are forming a fellowship to get back to the basics of Christian living." A common theme running through both kinds of statement is that beliefs are important, but true beliefs are not to be found very easily any longer in the mainstream of the Christian churches. It is interesting, however, to note the frequency with which persons of such persuasions form communities of the like-minded, and, in reformulating the basics of Christian living, quickly put into place a set of normative doctrines, and make allegiance to them a necessary condition for participation in the fellowship at all.

None of this is meant to suggest that the sole basis for shared, corporate faith is merely a set of beliefs or a theology held in common. The outward, social, shared dimension of faith, that faith which is "ours" as well as merely "mine," and the inward, personally centering expressions of faith, include but are not definable merely by assenting to doctrines, by believing propositional truths. Together, Christians also *do* things: we worship, nurture one another, learn, teach, witness, serve. And we *feel* things in common: our affective lives are shaped by a sense of support and being cared for, of being challenged, of having to deal with interpersonal conflict, of love received and love given, of anger put to constructive uses. From the beginning, the Christian "life together" has been formed by integrating "doing," "feeling," and "believing." How to maintain all three in a unity has remained a constant challenge.

For the purposes of this present essay, however, I have been giving particular attention to the place of believing in the Christian life, for I believe that it is as a resource to believing, more than to doing or to feeling, that theology is of *primary* service to faith. From the beginning, the church has been given a message to transmit (*kerygma*), and Christians are called to transmit that message without distortion. Theology which both shapes and is shaped by doctrines and shared confessions facilitates Christian witnessing, by helping to determine whether a particular witness of faith is indeed representative of God's message, entrusted to the church, and whether it is consistent with a community of believers' own corporate self-understanding. If Christians are to go into all the world and preach the gospel, theology is necessary, for churches must be sure that their members are witnessing to that gospel and not just to "some new thing," and that, when they are absent from each other, each nevertheless is loyally sharing the community's own believing appropriation of that gospel. Serious regard for "right beliefs," then, is of profound importance both to faith and to disciplined reflection upon faith; indeed, faith is not only holding to beliefs, but also the beliefs or set of beliefs held. Fully to understand faith in this latter dimension requires attentiveness to the ways in which beliefs configure and are organized into more comprehensive wholes. To this matter, the next paragraphs turn.

4. THEOLOGY AS A FORM OF CHRISTIAN WITNESS

By way of preparation for this concluding discussion, it may be helpful to summarize the argument of the essay thus far. Theology's resourcefulness to the life of faith, I have been maintaining, lies in its capacity for disciplined reflection. "Faith," the subject matter reflected upon, is both highly inward, individual, and personal trust in and loyalty to God, and a holding to, an investing of oneself in, beliefs which witness to God and God's ways in the world, and which are corporately

shared. The personally centering power of faith is shared in community; trust (*fiducia*) and belief (*assensus*) are not only of individuals, but of the whole people of God, the body of Christ called to be by God Himself. Theology's fundamental task is to make plain and convincing the character of this faith, the faith of God's church, held both personally and corporately, by God's faithful in that church. Properly to accomplish this task, theology must reflect upon faith's origins, individually and collectively, the process of its development, and the possibilities of its distortion into the destructive modes of idolatry and heresy. As theology turns its reflections upon the beliefs which the faithful hold in common, more than upon the holding itself, its subject matter for investigation becomes the basic doctrines upheld by the Christian Church. Now, the questions begin to revolve around what are those beliefs which distinguish Christian believers from other sorts of believers and non-believers in the world; what these distinguishing beliefs themselves mean; why they are important to Christians; and why they should matter to anyone else? In working out answers to these questions, Christian theology assists in determining the Christian witness, both past and present. Its outcome is a witness of faith which is both demonstrably Christian and believable to men and women in the situations in which it is shared.

By means of theology, then, we clarify to ourselves *what* is to be shared at all, and *how* the sharing is to take place. The church's traditional guidelines for disciplined reflection upon faith, and upon it idolatrous and heretical distortions, namely scripture, tradition, experience, and reason, in their interplay, determine the content of our theology, and our theology in turn guides personal witness, sermons, catechetical instruction, and the formation of dogmas, creeds and systems alike. In this sense, theology is a dynamic working of the mind, both individually and collectively, a reflective process shaped by faith commitments.

But theology also can be viewed from the standpoint of the *results* of our reflecting, and more especially still, of the *forms* in which the reflecting comes to expression. Theology is not only an investigat*ing* of faith in a disciplined manner, for the sake of enhancing faith; theology is also investiga*tion* which yields assessable results. Theology is also reflection completed, even if subject to later revision, and in this form, too, bears a witness of faith.

To be sure, as a witness of faith, theology has an appearance about it which is quite different from other more readily recognizable forms of witness, such as sermons, prayers, Bible stories, personal testimonies and the like. Indeed, when we look at a "piece of theology," we are struck at once by several features, perhaps the most noticeable the relatively highly abstract character of its words, images and concepts. Further, there is a stress on preciseness of expression, often of an almost obsessive quality. And then also, there is concern for the orderly progression of thought: theology often is arranged in logical arguments, complete with definitions, premises, conclusions, and rules for inference. Finally there is intense preoccupation with discovering, and if necessary, eliminating, conceptual confusions and logical contradictions. Throughout, therefore, theology seems designed deliberately to arouse a response of the mind more than a response of the heart. Its witness to the truth which faith believes looks remarkably like a system of philosophy; and indeed, both *are* bodies of "wisdom" striving for expression in the clearest and most comprehensive terms possible. It is no accident that the different theological systems represented in church history parallel the different philosophies represented in world history.

From the beginning, many have asked, and still ask today: *is* such a form of witness in any sense necessary? Are not sermons, prayers, readings from the Bible, the sharing of personal experience, the liturgy sufficient? Is it necessary to plunge into the kinds of intellectualizing and word-play which

the discipline of theology seems to demand? How much does it matter, really, how men and women of faith verbalize and conceptualize their beliefs? For instance, what difference does it make, finally, to insist upon *homoousion* rather than *homoiousion to patri*? Trust in Christ does not depend on any particular concept of Christ. Further, does not the reality of Christ remain the same, whether a believing community's concept of that reality is "right" or not. And even if some particular dogmatic formulations have come to be regarded as essential to Christian witness, must those formulations themselves be ordered, as has been the penchant in Christian theology since at least the time of Schleiermacher, into a conceptual *system*? At the very least, the dogmas could be affirmed individually, and arranged merely *ad seriatum*, as a confession of faith is arranged.

As frequently as such doubts may be expressed, the *fact* of the matter is that the church has found theology an important witness of faith from at least the second century to the present, and has not hesitated to adopt different forms for presenting its witness, as circumstances warrant. Why? Because idolatry and heresy have been perceived, and rightly, to be perennial threats to the integrity of Christian witness, threats requiring the rigor of disciplined reflection for successful defense. In modern times, the particular form within which theology has come most naturally to expression has indeed been that of a conceptual system, a framework of thought in which both the major concepts, and the propositions which assert by means of them, derive from some master concept as their ground. It seems to me that there are two good reasons why this particular form of expression has in fact become the most frequently utilized form of theological witness in the present. The first is that a conceptual system is exquisitely suitable for expressing what most needs to be expressed about faith, in a world increasingly conscious of the pluriformity of many cultures: faith's coherence with *all* experience. That its beliefs do in fact admit of integration into a comprehensive perspective upon the meaning of things in

general is implied by the Christian doctrine of creation: belief in God as the ground of all things entails a belief in the unity of *all* knowledge and faith. The specific connections between Christian and all other beliefs can be elucidated especially clearly by means of a conceptual system. For instance, as Anselm and Calvin anticipated, a system of thought can exhibit the strict entailment of all true beliefs about the finite order from truths of faith which themselves can be shown to be comprehensible rationally as well as mediated by divine revelation. Or, as in Thomism and in 17th and 18th century "natural theology," the truths of faith can be shown to be strictly entailed by the most evident beliefs about the natural order. In both models, theology becomes more than merely the arranging of Christian beliefs; it is a bearing witness to the connectedness of all things under and in God.

A second reason for reflecting by means of conceptual systems is suggested by contemporary "constructionist" epistemology, with its view that "reality" is a composition we fashion by acting upon what appears to us under the conditions of finite knowing. Upon this view, there is no such thing as a "bare" given, which presents itself simply as it is, without the mediation of some prior interpretive framework. The very principles by which reality-construction proceeds, though affected by appearances, also and more importantly are brought to appearances and constitute them *as* appearances. If such an epistemology is appropriate to propositions about the properties of light, the curvature of space, or psychic determinism, it surely holds as well with respect to the belief-statements of the world's religions. Sometimes, to answer a question previously posed, iotas *do* matter; some prior affirmation of the relationship between the divine substance and the incarnate being of Jesus Christ, e.g., *homoousion* or *homoiousion*, will shape what *anyone*, believer or non-believer, subsequently may "see" and "hear" about Christ. For the very meaning of Jesus *as* divine emerges in the constructions placed upon what many generations

of Christians found that they heard in the earlier *kerygma* of the Church. And in turn that very *kerygma* is also a construction placed upon what Jesus' earliest followers, themselves, remembered his saying and doing. At all times and everywhere, Jesus *becomes* "Lord" for human beings in his being *construed* as such.

6. CONCLUSION

Theology, then, is disciplined reflection upon faith, whose results are exhibited most frequently today in the form of a conceptual system. It functions to safeguard the Christian community against heresy by unifying the belief structure of the Church beliefs, and to deepen awareness of the One in whom we are called to place our consummate trust and loyalty, as a check against idolatry. As an understanding of Christian faith, it is, also, and especially, integral to the shaping and sharing Christian forms of life, which sharing it is the task of Christian ministry to guide.