

WHAT IS THEOLOGY?

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Some years ago when I was making a rather long trip by air, I found myself seated besides an important-looking gentleman. I am not usually seated by really important-looking people, because I make it a practice of traveling in the cheapest possible way. But for some reason, that day, I had been “bumped up” into first class, no extra cost.

The gentleman gave every indication of wishing to be undisturbed; and since that was exactly my own mood, I was happy to oblige. Presently, however, my fellow-traveler began to fidget, and it was inevitable that conversation of some sort would ensue. I suppose it began, innocently enough, with the weather or some equally non-emotional chit-chat. But in a short time I had learned quite a lot about the man. He was, he told me, an executive officer in a large communications firm. We spoke about that for some time, and then he turned to me (I could see it coming!) and asked, “And what do *you* do?”

Now, I shall have to confess that usually, when this question is asked of me on airplanes, I—well, to be honest, I lie. I do so, not out of sheer human perversity, but because I have found out by bitter experience that if you say straight out that you are a theologian, you can expect one of two possible responses, neither of them desirable: Either it ends the conversation immediately, or else the other party puts on that special face and demeanor reserved for clergy and other religious types; and then you never do find out who the person is! In that way, you

forfeit the only real value of conversation *en route*, which is the value of a rare kind of truth-telling.

On this particular occasion, however, I decided that I *would* own up to the fact that I teach Christian theology, whatever the consequences. And this time my confession brought a different response from the usual. “And what is *that*?”, asked my interlocutor eagerly; “Tell me about that!”

Well, as I said, it was a long trip; so I thought, “Why not?” Gathering my thoughts together as coherently as I could, I produced a kind of mini-lecture on the subject for my class of one. I probably went on for about twenty minutes.

When I had finished, my “student,” whose attention had not flagged at all during my oration, looked at me with something like awe, and said: “It must be wonderful,” he commented after a pause, “*to think about everything all the time*.”¹

Now this remark, uttered under most circumstances, would certainly have to be heard as a piece of sarcasm—a veritable put-down! But the man’s face did not convey anything of the sort, and almost at once he went on in some such fashion as this: “I, too, used to think about everything. I even. . .prayed! But now all that I seem to do is to concentrate on this [expletive deleted] job of mine!” After that, we had, as I recall, a very good—a very real!—conversation.

I don’t think that I have ever heard a more perceptive response to any attempt of mine to define “theology” than the one given, years ago now, by that businessman: Theology is “thinking about everything all the time.” Everything! For there is no subject under the sun that is unimportant to someone who tries to understand a little about God and God’s world; and if you have that as your object, you have to be at it—simply at it—*all the time*. Because you know very well that you will never understand it even if you were given, literally, all the time in the world. In the end, as I said in my little book, *Why Christian?: For Those on the Edge of Faith*² you can only “stand under” this immensity, this eternity; you cannot (in our usual sense of the term) *understand* it, and you certainly cannot master it. If theology is a science (and in a certain respect it is, since it refers in part to a body of knowledge and a way of knowing, it is “the most modest science” (Karl Barth); for, unlike all other sciences, its object is no object but a living Subject—an Eternal Thou (Buber), whose being and ways are wrapped in mystery, and Who must never be reduced to an It.

I have always fervently wished that I could recall exactly what it was that I *said* to that businessman—I should have had a tape recorder, because the Divine Spirit must have been putting more words into my mouth that day than is usually the case; I would love to be able to produce that kind of response every time

I had the occasion to define theology. But, like Sir Arthur Sullivan's "Lost Chord," those words, spoken spontaneously and under unique circumstances, are lost forever. So now you will have to put up with a much more plodding, calculated and careful answer to this question that constitutes the first of my two lectures. I hope, however, that, for all their ordinariness, you will be able to hear in these words something of my own wonder—indeed, my gratitude!—for having had the privilege, all these years, of thinking about. . . "everything, all the time."

What Theology is *Not*

One way of defining anything (technically, it's called the *via negativa*—the way of negation) is to say what it is not. This is a particularly important method of definition where complicated things—especially living things—are concerned. For instance, it's easier to say that your wife is not tall, not a brunette, not unattractive (that's a nice *double negative*!), and so forth, than to try to convey to someone else who your wife *is* (Personally, I am still trying to find that out after more than forty years!).

The way of negation is important, too, when something is too often, and wrongly, identified with some of its aspects and associations. For instance, love, these days, is for many people almost a synonym for sex—as in the terribly strange modern phrase, "making love" (a phrase that nobody in the nineteenth century would have understood as having sexual congress). Anyone who has experienced real love knows that love is *not just sex*. So if, in our kind of world, you want to define what love means, christianly understood, you will certainly have to have recourse to the *via negativa*.

For both of these reasons (both because theology is about the mystery of a living Creator and living creatures; and because there are many false opinions around about what theology is), it is useful to get at the meaning of this discipline "by way of negation." *So what is theology not?*

I will suggest four responses to this question:

First, *theology is not doctrine*. I am somewhat reluctant to say this kind of thing publicly today, because in so many of our once-mainline churches when you affirm that theology is not doctrine people hear this as a falsely liberating pronouncement! Someone announces that theology is not to be equated with Christian doctrine or dogma (it happens fairly often today), and there is a sigh of relief in the audience—not a heavy sigh, because few people in twenty-first-century audiences of moderate Protestants seriously entertain that idea to begin with. So such a public pronouncement only serves to confirm our middle-class

Christian anti-intellectualism or smug “spirituality.” Doctrine—any kind of doctrine, religious, political, ethical—has a bad name among us. We feel it is an affront to our inherent right to believe whatever we want, individually, to believe. Doctrine of any sort seems to curtail our vaunted “freedom,” and to spoil the immediacy of our personal access to truth—our PIN number for accessing universal Verity. The whole idea of “indoctrination” is distasteful to us—indeed, I suppose the word “indoctrination” is only used pejoratively today.

Against this kind of childish bias, serious Christians have to insist that doctrine is definitely *part* of the discipline called Christian theology. Theology is not something that we make up as we go along, simply spinning it out of our own entelechy. We are the inheritors of a very long and complex history of doctrine. Generations of thoughtful people have labored to express the meaning of faith in ways that try to do justice to the gospel. And the saying is as true of the history of doctrine as of every other historical phenomenon, namely, that those who do not remember this history are doomed to repeat it—to repeat, in particular, the false and misleading turnings, the mistakes, the heresies and idiocies that were experienced along the way.

This having been said, however, it remains true that theology is *not* a synonym for “doctrine.” One could know the history of Christian doctrine exceptionally well and still not be *theologically* alive. Generations of catechumens have had to memorize digests (in former times, exhaustive summaries!) of Christian dogma and doctrines but that guaranteed little with respect to the ability of the majority of those so “indoctrinated” to think theologically. Something vital is missing. And when theology is *equated* with doctrine—*correct* doctrine—as has happened and still happens in large segments of the church universal, this missing element is not only conspicuous but its absence profoundly affects the whole community of faith. For in such a community, assent to allegedly true doctrines is substituted for trust in God towards whom the doctrines are intended to point. And anyone who has familiarity with such religious communities knows that there are few forms of human association more oppressive, more unforgiving, more conducive to power-seeking and, eventually, schism than are communities based on correct doctrinal belief.

Second, *theology is not biblical study and knowledge*. And once again I am hesitant to say this kind of thing today, because in our liberal and moderate churches it is highly unlikely that anyone will equate Bible and theology in the first place, and it is very probable, in fact, that, apart from a few isolated sentences and vague allusions, most people will have precious little real knowledge of the

Bible. One does not want to appear to sanction this kind of ignorance by remarking that biblical awareness as such is not theology.

Yet one has to say something like that, in our particular context, for the reason that a very important segment of the Christian church in North America (indeed, by far the most vociferous segment today!) *has* virtually equated the Bible and theology, or at least it would like to believe this about itself. The truth is, of course, that most of what is identified as Bible-Christianity in our society does not represent *genuine* faithfulness to Scripture, but the imposition upon Scripture of fondly held religious (indeed, doctrinal) assumptions which are then “found” in the Bible. This is clearly the case with Fundamentalism, whose five so-called “fundamentals” are, all of them, the results of historical doctrines reduced to formulae, slogan and code-language like “the divinity of Christ,” and then backed up with de-contextualized biblical quotations. The disciples of Jesus would not have understood language like “the divinity of Christ” any more than they would have understood the language of the doctrine of the Trinity, both of which are post-biblical and even non-biblical languages.

I often feel that the so-called “mainline” churches have been far too generous (and naive) in allowing biblical literalists to claim the Bible for themselves. Biblicism is not the greatest enemy concerned Christians have to counter today: there are worse forms of darkness! But Biblicism is an “ism,” an ideology like any other “ism”; and what John Kenneth Galbraith said of neo-conservative economic ideology is equally applicable to the ideology of biblicism: “Conservatives,” said Galbraith in a speech given in Toronto in 1997, “need to be warned that ideology can be a heavy blanket over thought. Our commitment must always be to thought.”³ (I wish there were time to engage in a long excursus on the question, “What is *thought*?”; for thinking, reason, rationality, and everything that has to do with human cognition is as badly understood today as is theology).

Third, *theology is not the articulation or sharing of “religious experience.”* Here, we who belong to the liberal and moderate denominations are made just a little uncomfortable. For there is an abiding tendency in all of our churches to assume that personal religious experience is the basis of everything worthy of the name theology. This is partly a leftover from the pietism and liberalism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which was rooted in an understandable rejection of the rationalistic forms of Christian orthodoxy that developed in the seventeenth century and beyond. And it is partly the result of that rampant individualism that has been so strong in North American history and experience.

It is also bolstered today by the new and trendy interest in “spirituality,” which cloaks a good deal of what is plain anti-intellectualism in our churches and society. I like what I heard the Benedictine theologian, Joan Chittister, say on the subject of “spirituality”: “If it’s the real thing (and *sometimes* it is), it does not turn the mind off; it turns it on.” The question that always has to be asked about experiential, spiritualistic religion is: What does it lead to in terms of both thinking and acting? *What* “spirit,” precisely, is being invoked here? The world is full of spirits, and as the first Epistle of St. John reminds us, “not every spirit is of God.” Probably the most “spiritualistic” events of our epoch—if we discount “Woodstock” and the rock-concerts for a moment—were the famous Nuremberg rallies of Adolf Hitler and Company. “Test the spirits!” [I John].

Of course experience—being grasped by the divine Spirit—is the condition without which theology, real theology, cannot be undertaken. The trouble with so much doctrine, in fact, when it is put forward as if it were theology, is that it lacks precisely the dimension of participation, involvement, “being grasped” (as Tillich used always to put it). But remember: when the disciples at Pentecost were grasped by the Holy Spirit, they did not immediately start talking about their being so grasped! They did not begin to babble about their wonderful religious experience. They pointed to that which transcended themselves: they pointed to the Christ, whom the Spirit made present to them in a new and deeply meaningful way.

Fourth and finally, *theology is not to be equated with ethical reflection and moral sensibility and action*. Some of the more liberal Christian bodies of this Continent (I belong to one of them) are prone to downplay the importance of theological reflection and struggle, or to leave it up to individuals, in favor of involvement in the moral issues of the times. In these churches we are constantly congratulating ourselves that we are “on the right side of the issues” (meaning, usually, the left side). And, for the most part, I agree: I think we are.

But I am not sure we know *why* we are there—and there *as Christians*; and I am not confident that we have such a marvellous grasp of what we believe that we shall know in the future what “the right side of the issues” would be. For the most part, in fact, we are nearly as *reflective* of our society as conservative Christians are; it’s only that we reflect a different segment of our society. And the purpose of Christian ethics, as I shall say more fully in a moment, is not to *reflect* but to *engage* from a perspective that belongs centrally to our confession of faith.

Personally, I am very glad to be part of a province of the Christian church (the anglosaxon world in general, and perhaps North America in particular) that

has always placed a high premium on Christian pragmatism. A Christianity that is theologically sophisticated but ethically passive, as so much European orthodoxy has been, will not pass Jesus' test: "By their fruits you shall know them." All the same, Dietrich Bonhoeffer's early criticism of American Protestantism is still valid. He wrote:

American theology and the American church as a whole have never been able to understand the meaning of "criticism" by the Word of God and all that signifies. Right to the last, they do not understand that God's "criticism" touches even religion, the Christianity of the churches and the sanctification of Christians, and that God has founded his church beyond religion and beyond *ethics*.⁴

Theology that does not move constantly and inevitably towards ethical thought and act is questionable theology; but it is equally true that ethical activity that is not grounded in profound theological engagement both begs the question of its ground and becomes, very often, part of the problem rather than of its solution.

What Then *is* Theology?

If by saying what I think theology is *not* I have cleared away some misconceptions; it will be a little easier now to undertake the more difficult task and try to say positively what Christian theology *is*—according to my understanding of the matter. Let me attempt a brief, positive definition in this way: *Theology is what occurs when the Christian community knows itself to be living between text and context, between the revelatory answer and the human question (that is Tillich's formulation), between the Bible and the newspaper (that is Barth's formulation), between the tradition bequeathed to it from those who have gone before and the unfinished book of time present and future. Or perhaps we could put it even more simply: Theology is that ongoing activity of the whole church that aims at clarifying what "gospel" must mean here and now.*

No doubt you will have noticed that I used the term "gospel" in that sentence in a way that is not usual. Usually—indeed, almost without exception—the word "gospel" is employed by Christians with the definite article: *the Gospel*.

There are of course times when it is meaningful to speak about *the* gospel; but when we do so *all* the time (as we do), we convey the impression that "the gospel" is some fixed, prescribed, once-for-all codification of truth, already well-known by the church, which if is our Christian duty to preserve and proclaim.

But such an assumption both misconstrues the nature of the church and betrays the true meaning of the term *evangelion*—the Greek word we translate as “gospel” or “good news.”

If for a moment one thinks about the combination of the words “good news”—just as a term, a metaphor—one is bound to realize two things about it: it refers to “news,” i.e., something not yet known or realized; and it refers to news that (unlike most of what the media give us daily) is good! That is to say, when this news is heard and appropriated it has the effect of cancelling out of profoundly altering the situation as it was perceived or feared to be before *this* news was heard. There is a necessary element of surprise—even (as C. S. Lewis would say) of *joyful* surprise—in the hearing of this news. It is not what we expected or anticipated—or deserved! And it is certainly not “old hat,” warmed-over claims and observations. It produces in those who hear it a sense of wonder or astonishment, combined with relief, and above all with gratitude.

If you understand this about the metaphor, “good news,” and you apply it to what we call the Christian message or *kerygma*, you will realize why it is that what people think of *usually* when they hear Christians employing the term “the gospel” just won’t do. Why? Because what even more or less informed people regularly assume when they hear that combination of words with the definite article (very definite indeed!), is something like this: “Oh yes, here come the Christian enthusiasts again with their announcement about Jesus as God’s only begotten Son, and the cross and resurrection, and the Holy Spirit, and the Trinity and all that. Nothing *new* there! We’ve heard that hundreds of times before. Not much good about it either, unless you think that sheer repetition is beneficial to the mind.”

And what is worse still, the Christians themselves are likely thinking the same thing.

Surely part of the reason why Christianity has become so boring to many in our time is that people have been hearing from us the same old things in the same old words accompanied by the same old hymns and following the same old liturgical patterns and so forth. *And I am not saying this in order to encourage, or to approve, all the supposedly “new” things that churches have tried to get going over the past decades, because a lot of that is pretty boring and mediocre too.* I say this only to discourage turning “gospel” into something altogether predictable and routine.

There is really only one reason why the authors of the newer Testament, or anyone else for that matter, would want to employ such a term as *evangelion*; and that is because they have understood the events to which the gospels and

epistles testify as introducing a new situation, a situation that is both discontinuous with the past and beneficial or liberating in relation to the present and future. To put it into a formula: The good news is *good* because it challenges and displaces *bad* news. Gospel addresses us at the place where we are overwhelmed by an awareness (as the liberationist, Juan Luis Segundo, has put it) of what is wrong with the world and with ourselves in it. It is good news because it engages, takes on and does battle with the bad news, offering another alternative, another vision of what could be, another way into the future.

And the bad news is always changing! It is never quite the same from time to time, or from place to place. Christians do not embrace a cyclical view of history but a linear view. So while human experience may indeed involve recurring themes and problems and possibilities, each given context presents the creaturely condition in a somewhat different light. If it is going to articulate gospel, and not just doctrine, or Bible, or stylized religious experience, or moral imperatives, the Christian community must so expose itself to the specifics of its socio-historical context that it will find itself driven back to its sources with new and urgent questions. And if it persists in asking these questions of its biblical and doctrinal sources, it will (not automatically, but now and then, here and there) be permitted to hear a responsive Word that really addresses and engages its context. That Word will be gospel. It will always have to be heard anew. What was gospel yesterday will not necessarily be gospel today, and what is gospel in that place (Latin America, for example) will not necessarily be gospel for this place (North America, for example).

Now what we call “theology” is nothing more nor less than the intellectual-spiritual activity that helps the church to live creatively and faithfully between its worldly situation and its own particular sources of wisdom and hope—metaphorically speaking, between context and text. That is to say, theology helps the church discover “gospel.”

So, for example, in a social context where people are victims of poverty and political oppression, “gospel” would certainly have something to do with economic, political and other forms of liberation. That is why various theologies of liberation have developed throughout the world—and precisely in places where economic, racial, gender and other types of injustice are prominent. But if the social context is one of comfortable middle-class life, rampant consumerism, three-car garages, and all that sort of thing, a gospel of liberation would be quite *inappropriate*—as one sees wherever people try to apply the typical themes of liberation theology in our so-called “developed,” First World societies.

I have not found a more dramatic illustration of this relation between text and context in the discernment of gospel than one that is drawn from that so provocative period of recent history, the Second World War. In the 1930s and '40s, Hitler's henchmen were rounding up Jews and sending them to hard labor and extermination camps, as everyone now knows. In despair over what was happening in and to his society, the then-Dean of the Protestant Cathedral in Berlin, Heinrich Grueber, asked himself: "How can I proclaim the gospel in this situation? What would gospel *mean* under these circumstances?" And he found himself answering, "Gospel today is this: *Jesus Christ was a Jew!*"

In those circumstances, such a rendition of "gospel" rang true as good news—not for everybody, of course, but for those who were in greatest peril, or who hungered and thirsted for authenticity as Christians. For such an articulation of gospel took on, head first, the bad news that the world and the devil had between them concocted. Over against the Nazi theories of race, in which so-called Aryans were considered superior humans and Slavs, Blacks, homosexuals, Gypsies, the handicapped and—especially—Jews were regarded as decadent peoples deserving only annihilation, the Christian message had to become an unconditional affirmation of the full and equal humanity of all people. If what is really true is that Jesus was "a Jew," then Hitler's racial policy, Grueber realized, flies in the face not only of humanitarian justice but of God's own sovereignty. It must be resisted.

Now, this illustration of the meaning of "gospel" will not be fully grasped unless it is put side by side with another attitude that was strongly present in that same historical context. And this will illustrate what happens when Christians, for one reason or another, do *not* engage in the kind of "critical thinking" (Bonhoeffer) about their context that Heinrich Grueber undertook—when, perhaps innocently, or perhaps with ulterior purposes in mind, they assume that they already know what is going on in this context, or that nothing has changed, and that, consequently, Christians are not obligated to engage in any very original thinking about their message, but just to say and do what they have always said and done.

This is the other attitude I am talking about: Hitler, as you know, did not wish to alienate the churches altogether. He needed them and, sadly, on the whole he got their support without much difficulty. Among other tactics he employed in that connection, Chancellor Hitler appointed one of his clerical supporters to the office, so-called, of *Reichsbischof* (Bishop of the Realm). The first to occupy this dubious office was one, Ludwig Mueller. You can imagine that

Reichsbischof Mueller was not about to say that his credo for today was that “Jesus Christ was a Jew.” What he did say, however, is very instructive. “As for me,” he announced, “I believe *all the creeds*.”

Whenever you hear about people who believe “everything,” watch them carefully. Very often, they use their broad platform of comprehensive “belief”—true-belief, “full gospel,” or whatever else they may call it—to keep clear of any *specific* confession of faith in word and deed, or simply to support the status quo. Their broad religious credulity functions for them as a very effective type of neutrality—a neutrality, as with Ludwig Mueller, that in fact covertly justifies and blesses the political status quo. Theology is thinking about everything, but it does not boil down to *believing* everything! A decision has to be made. Having thought about “everything,” how am I now enabled to speak, to bear witness, to preach gospel? Having “professed” the faith, how shall I now “confess” it?

Two things are learned from this comparison of Grueber and Mueller: *first* “gospel” is not a permanently true body of doctrine in the possession of the church. Gospel must be *discovered*. Each day, each historical epoch, each generation, the faithful are required to enter with sufficient depth into the trials and temptations of the present and impending future to be in a position to hear—“gospel.” Gospel is discovered, not possessed. And it is discovered precisely in our struggle, as communities and persons of faith, to comprehend what is going on in our world—especially (as Segundo says) “what is wrong with the world”: the bad news. We may comprehend and rejoice in the *good* news only as we subject ourselves over and over again to the world’s bad news. And theology is nothing more nor less than the most concerted intellectual and spiritual effort of the church to do just this. Heinrich Grueber, and not Ludwig Mueller, was the real *theologian* in that 1930s context, because he did not rest on past professions of faith, but rather pondered those past professions well enough and deeply enough to conclude that, in *that* context, they had to produce the very explicit confession: “Jesus Christ was a Jew!”

In this, Grueber showed himself to be a real student of the great theologian, Martin Luther, who had the following to say about all this (it is my favorite quotation; I use it wherever I can):

If I profess with the loudest voice and clearest exposition every portion of the truth of God [“all the creeds”] except precisely that little point which the world and the devil are at that moment attacking, I am not *confessing* Christ, however boldly I may be *professing* Christ. Where the battle rages,

there the loyalty of the soldier is proved. To be steady on all battle fronts besides is mere flight and disgrace if he flinches at that point.⁵

Gospel—that which Christians are required to *confess*—is not the church's possession. We may be said to possess what we *profess* (the creeds, the long and varied doctrinal traditions of the evolving church, the liturgies and prayers and hymns and the rest); but we are not in possession of what we are to confess; for under the conditions of history faith's true *confession* will be dependent upon what is actually occurring in our context. Gospel is always a matter of discovery. Only if we hear it ourselves, always anew, will we be enabled to proclaim it meaningfully to others. And if indeed we do hear it, our telling of it will never be boring or predictable.

And this is the *second* lesson we learn from that 1930s comparison: discovering gospel is never easy, never painless. For gospel can never just be “heard.” It is always the sort of message that, when it is really heard, grasps the hearers and plunges them into the very thick of things. That is why Heinrich Grueber, who was caused to hear this gospel of Jesus Christ's Jewishness in the midst of a society that was killing Jesus' Jewish brothers and sisters, felt compelled by his hearing of this gospel to set up in Berlin a “bureau,” through which hunted Jews and other persecuted persons could be protected and, hopefully, helped to escape. A very dangerous activity! The Reichsbischof Ludwig Mueller, for whom “the gospel” meant believing “all the creeds,” was able to use his religion to find a safe and prestigious place for himself and, as he imagined, avoid all suffering. Those who discover—and are discovered by!—gospel, who hear good news because they have exposed themselves to the bad news of their here and now: they are usually made to suffer for their discovery. Gospel, when it is real, is never just a sweet and lovely message—“Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine!” Grueber might well have said, on the contrary, what the great preacher of New York, Paul Scherer, used to say: “Blessed disturbance, I am His!” It is not accidental that there is more in the New Testament about the *suffering* of the church than about any other single ecclesiastical theme.

Conclusion

What a difference it would make in the practice of Christian theology (in seminary education, for instance) if it were to be taken quite seriously from the beginning that the whole purpose of this discipline is to equip the Christian community for real participation in the world that God loves—and therefore for

suffering. Not for masochism! Not for the supposed glories of martyrdom! Not for pious cross-bearing! But for participating, voluntarily, intentionally and intelligently in the suffering that is really there in the world, with a view to its engagement and, so far as possible, its resolution. Whenever I feel discouraged about the business-as-usual approach to so much theological education, as if it were just a routine, professional affair, I remember Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the illegal, clandestine seminary that he headed in Finkenwalde, Pomerania: a seminary for pastors who, like their professor, Bonhoeffer, were being equipped to submit *themselves*, mind and body, to their world's bad news. What if all seminaries were conscious of being such places? What if all Christian congregations were?

What we should then find, I think, is not only that theology—at whatever level one engages in it—is a preparation for the deepest and therefore most vulnerable kind of involvement in the realities of our world, depths of participation that most of us, likely, had not bargained for. But simultaneously we should find that this study introduces us to a kind of *freedom* rare in human experience: freedom *from* the boring constraints of predictable ideas and practices, including predictable religiosity; freedom *from* the rote repetition of mostly meaningless dogmatic formulae and pious slogans; freedom *for* an originality of thought that does not have to despise what others have thought in order to be original; freedom *for* the full deployment of our grace-given imagination; freedom to struggle to understand what we can understand of the wise foolishness, the foolish wisdom, of the crucified God, and to be blest by it.

The freedom of theology is very different, of course, from the bourgeois freedom that we in these more affluent countries are conditioned to covet for ourselves. For it is a freedom that can be enjoyed only by persons who are ready to admit their own utter incapacity to achieve it on their own. As Helmut Gollwitzer wrote—

[T]he freedom of theology—which it, like all thinking, requires—has its foundation precisely in the fact that *we must ever anew ask for the message, for its authentic content and meaning*, and consequently can come into conflict about it with ourselves, and in the fact that we have nothing under our control from the beginning.⁶

In short, the freedom of theology is not the freedom that people imagine they have when they lack for nothing, when they possess everything, or when

they “believe everything.” It is the freedom, rather, of those who are conscious enough of their emptiness and lack to realize that they must “ever ask anew” for intimations of a truth that, in its fullness, forever eludes and transcends them; a truth, however, that is willing and more than willing to impart itself in its sufficiency for the here and now, and to those who ask for it humbly and in solidarity with all who hunger and thirst.

Notes

1. I have reproduced this story in more or less the same words in an article entitled, “Bound and Free: On Being a Christian Theologian,” in *Theology Today*, Vol. 59, No. 3, October 2002; pp. 421–427.
2. *Why Christian?: For Those on the Edge of Faith*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998.
3. Delivered at the University of Toronto before the Liberal Party of Canada, and quoted in *Macleans*, Vol. 110, No.3, January 20, 1997; p. 15.
4. Quoted by John de Gruchy, ed., Dietrich Bonhoeffer: *Witness to Jesus Christ: The Making of Modern Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991; p. 216).
5. WA, Bk, 3, p.81f (Letters).
6. *An Introduction to Protestant Theology*, trans. by David Cairns; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982; p. 32.

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