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Formation and Reflection: The Dynamics of Theology in Christian Life

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There is a broad sense of malaise currently in The United Methodist Church, at least in its North American setting. And there is a range of diagnoses of the underlying problem. When one looks for points of consensus in these assessments it is striking how often—across the spectrum of the denomination—the focus turns to bemoaning a paucity of theological concern and theological reflection in our corporate life. More specifically, our lack of theological clarity and consensus at Annual and General Conference levels is attributed to a dearth of theological engagement among members in our local congregations.¹ The implied mandate is for Methodists to devote resources (like the present issue of *Quarterly Review*) to the task of revitalizing theological concern and reflection in the local church.

Those like me who teach theology professionally will likely resonate with this agenda. But they will also know that this agenda must confront at the outset this question: “Why should United Methodist congregations invest in the theological competence of their laity?” We encounter this basic question continually in the various contexts in which we teach. When offering required general education courses in theology at Christian liberal-arts colleges it comes in this form: “Why do we have to study theology, we are not going to be pastors?” And when teaching current or prospective pastors we all too often hear the question, “Why do we have to study theology, we are not going to be professors?”

Behind the differing forms of this question are some common assumptions about the nature of theology as a human enterprise. At the least, theology is cast as abstract reflection that has little contact with or relevance for daily Christian life. Often there is the further suggestion that theology necessarily involves a style of reflection and discourse that is accessible only to those with professional training. Sometimes even more pejorative insinuations are evident, as in C. S. Lewis’s caricature of a

theologian in *The Great Divorce*. The premise of this delightful little story is that a group of persons in hell are allowed to visit the portals of heaven, in order to determine whether they wish to transfer residence to the heavenly realm. The “catch” is that they must finally surrender the vices that currently consign them to the lower realm. Most of the visitors prove unwilling to change (illustrating Lewis’s point that “hell is self-imposed”), including a certain theologian. He chooses instead to return to the nether-world to deliver a promised paper to a Theology Society there. The subject of this paper is how Jesus might have developed more moderate views if he had lived longer instead of being crucified while still at an idealistic age! Here we see the not-so-subtle insinuation that theological reflection is not just in danger of losing contact with ordinary life, but also of becoming a sophisticated way of obscuring or discounting the clear demands of the gospel.

There are undeniably examples of “theology,” both at present and in earlier times, that can be marshaled to illustrate these common assumptions. But there is also a more authentic sense and practice of theology running through the history of the church that stands in judgement on these examples. It is this classic expression of theology that we need to revitalize in our churches. An important step toward this goal would be to gain a clearer sense of its nature and dimensions.

Classic Dimensions of the Theological Enterprise

The common assumptions about theology just sketched are connected in that they take the activity of professional academic theologians as standard for defining the nature of theology. But this standard is unduly narrow and anachronistic. Only with the emergence of universities in the Middle Ages did we begin to get persons whose primary vocation was academic instruction in theology. The vocation of noted theologians in prior centuries was more commonly that of pastor, bishop, abbot, or spiritual director—roles devoted to shepherding Christian communities in their engagement with daily life. Broadening the consideration to include these earlier examples results in a more robust view of theology, a conception that identifies at least five dimensions within the overall enterprise.

The foundational dimension of this robust expression of theology is the *basic worldview* that Christians assume should orient believers’ lives in the world. As Paul put it, Christians will perceive things rightly and act appropriately only when they have the “mind of Christ.” That this involves

holistic dispositions, not merely intellectual convictions, is evident from Paul's parallel emphasis on Christians nurturing the "fruit of the Spirit." The mind of Christ fosters—and is reciprocally strengthened by—loving service of others (Philippians 2). The "orienting" nature of this foundational dimension deserves special emphasis. A person's worldview is not simply one set of beliefs/dispositions alongside others which he or she embraces; these specific beliefs/dispositions frame the perspective within which the person makes sense of, evaluates, and incorporates all other beliefs and dispositions. That is why the term *theology* should not be restricted to designating only knowledge of God (as the Greek roots of the word might imply). It is inadequate even to confine it to knowledge of general religious truths. It names instead the Christian practice of approaching all of life from, and placing all knowledge within, the perspective of God's revelation in Christ Jesus.

Paul's passionate appeal for Christians to emulate the "mind of Christ" reflects the reality that this orienting worldview is not unilaterally infused by God at one's conversion. Neither does it emerge effortlessly over time, or manifest itself spontaneously whenever it is needed. It must be cultivated, as part of the intentional process of growing in Christlikeness. This need defines the second dimension of the theological enterprise evident through the history of the church—the *pastoral² task of forming/reforming a Christian worldview in believers*. Since the worldview in question is holistic, this task has proven to involve a variety of activities aimed at invoking and shaping beliefs, affections, and character dispositions. The case of the early church is particularly revealing in this regard. Their theological energies were necessarily dominated by the task of forming a Christian worldview in new believers, and they pursued this task with a clear sense that the cultures within which they lived were bent on instilling quite different worldviews. In this context they prized most highly as "theologians" those who crafted such formative practical-theological materials as hymns, liturgies, catechetical orations, and spiritual discipline manuals.

The case of the early church also makes clear that the production of such "first-order" theological materials will inevitably spawn "second-order" *normative theological reflection* (a third dimension of the overall theological enterprise). That is, it will spark debates not only over the adequacy of particular practices for forming a Christian worldview but also over alternative conceptions of this basic worldview and alternative proposed implica-

tions of the worldview for concrete action in the world. Thus, for example, a proposed liturgy addressing prayers directly to the Holy Spirit provoked a debate in the early church that led naturally into the range of issues concerning God's triune nature.³ Challenges to the longstanding use of predominantly male imagery for God in Christian discourse and symbols provide a current example of the same dynamic interaction between these dimensions of the theological enterprise.

The concern of the three dimensions of theology considered so far focuses primarily on those who have embraced (to some degree) the Christian worldview. A fourth dimension that can be discerned throughout the span of the church is more apologetic and evangelistic in aim, *engaging self-consciously those who question or reject Christian beliefs and practices*. While this aim has its own integrity, once again we should not overlook the connections between this dimension and those already identified. Dialogue with critics has often helped to clarify aspects and implications of the Christian worldview. Likewise, the questions that outsiders articulate are typically gnawing at insiders as well, and their resolution serves to enable a deeper appropriation and integration of the Christian worldview by believers. Coming full circle, Christians living more authentically in the world are the most effective apologetic or evangel that could be desired.

One further perennial dimension of the overall theological enterprise is the concern to *train new generations within the community of believers to carry out the formative, normative, and apologetic dimensions* of this enterprise. Through the first millennium this training took place largely by mentoring. As such, it generated few distinctive forms of theological expression. One learned how to engage in first-order, second-order, and apologetic activities under the guidance of a practicing pastor, abbot, catechist, and so on. By contrast, as specialized academic institutions increasingly subsumed this training task in the second millennium it became common to privilege the curricular forms developed within this new setting (compendiums, *summae*, systematic theologies, and the like) as "serious" theology, and to consider the instructors in these institutions the "real" theologians.

The Shift to Privileging "Theoretical" Theology

The emergence of these academic institutions and the development of corresponding forms of theological activity are, in themselves, surely not to be lamented. They were natural processes that had actually been unduly

delayed by historical circumstances. And they provided greater time, focus, and scholarly resources for some in the church to pursue specialized aspects of the broad theological enterprise—such as careful linguistic and cultural exegesis of biblical and historical texts. But the specific model that came to dominate academic theology is problematic. The longstanding assumption had been that theology was overall a “practical” discipline (*scientia practica*); that is, theology focused primarily on addressing humans and the things humans do—in light of God. For a variety of reasons, it became increasingly standard within the university to defend theology as instead a “theoretical” discipline—focused first and foremost on understanding God *per se*.⁴

The crucial problem with this shifted focus is not that it champions theoretical reflection, but that it easily severs the dynamic interaction between the normative dimension of theology and the foundational and formative dimensions. Theoretical considerations about the nature of God, drawing on biblical exegesis and philosophy, have been integral to normative judgment in the church from its earliest days. But the “practical” consequences of alternative conceptions of God and God’s relationship to humanity have been equally central in classic Christian normative reflection.⁵ Moreover, just as it was instructed by spirituality/practice in reaching its decisions, second-order normative reflection was ultimately geared to readdressing spirituality/practice by means of first-order theological activities. It could take very formal expression in conciliar creeds, for example; but its fruitful outcomes were never intended to be restricted to such expression. They were meant to guide how Christians prayed, worked, played, procreated, and the rest.

As the heightened theoretical emphasis supplanted practical considerations in normative reflection, it became natural to identify full-time academic theologians as the ideal—because they were “freed” from the burden of shepherding (even participating in?) the daily life of a Christian community in order to devote full time to theoretical reflection. And it was predictable that their sense of this reflection being *second-order* activity would fade. On the one side, there was less exposure to the ways in which the daily experience and practice of ordinary believers could inform theological judgment. On the other side, a professional disdain tended to emerge toward concerns that theological insights be expressed in forms that communicate to and effectively shape the worldview of ordinary

believers: “real” theologians wrote systematic theologies or philosophical apologetic treatises, not liturgies and hymns.

The inverse impact of these developments remains readily apparent outside the academy. Few pastors view their main role as shepherding the theological formation of those in their care; or see decisions about worship materials, building programs, and the like as first-order theological activity. They may be more willing to talk about their role in spiritual formation, but usually assume that this is quite different from theological formation. And the typical layperson finds any suggestion that he or she has a crucial role in theological formation and reflection within the church quite foreign.

Amplifying Effect of Enlightenment Assumptions

The privileging of theoretical theology was well underway when Methodism came on the scene. Despite glimpses of an alternative in Wesley’s “practical” theological activity, influential American Methodists soon appropriated the reigning academic model.⁶ This served to intensify the disparity sensed between the populist nature of most early American Methodist worship and preaching, on the one hand, and the scholastic or philosophical nature of what was broadly held to be “theology,” on the other. This helps explain why many ordinary early Methodists (clergy and lay alike) were proud to declare that theirs was not a “theological” church!

In terms of the classic conception sketched above, this was actually far from true! The point is not just that early American Methodists inherited via their Anglican roots the historic doctrinal outlines of the Christian worldview. It is also that they took the catechetical task seriously, producing and actively using manuals for this purpose. Methodist laity were generally as ready and willing as their traveling preachers to expound upon the exegetical problems and detrimental implications of theological views like unconditional predestination and deism. And the distinctive practical-theological structures of class meeting, quarterly meeting, and accountability to the General Rules were effective for a while in nurturing in the Methodist ranks a “Christian mind” that resisted surrounding cultural practices like slavery.

But over time things changed in the ancestor branches that flow into contemporary United Methodism. The distinctive structures were either abandoned or reduced to mere bureaucratic functions. The typical values of Methodists became ever more like those of the cultures in which they

lived. The concern for formative catechetical instruction, particularly the continuing instruction of adults, faded. And the percentage of laity who felt competent to participate in normative theological debate steadily decreased.⁷ In other words, Methodists increasingly became a less “theological” church—in the classic sense of that term—particularly at the lay level.

What promoted this move? Deepening impact of reigning academic assumptions about theology likely played a role, but does not seem a sufficient explanation. Echoing a point in the previous essay by Ann Taves, I believe that a major amplifying factor has been the way which North American Methodists have embraced in an insufficiently discerning manner certain Enlightenment assumptions flourishing in our culture over the last two centuries. I am not suggesting that Methodists are unique in this regard; rather, this is one of the places where we have served as the “most representative” North American denomination. Nor am I suggesting that Methodists should have summarily rejected all Enlightenment assumptions; quite the contrary, the rejection of such assumptions as human equality and individual rights by reactionary elements must be judged at least as problematic as the uncritical appropriation of certain others by “mainline” Methodists. But it is this appropriation that is most relevant to our present topic.

The Enlightenment period in Western culture is characterized by vigorous advocacy of modern empirical inquiry as a guide to truth. This advocacy emerged as a justified reaction to the dominant focus on exposition of traditional texts as the model for learning in the preceding centuries. But the specific ways in which it has been framed have served to obscure—both in the general public and in the church—the classic conception of theology as the discipline devoted to bringing all knowledge into dynamic interrelationship with the truth of God revealed in Jesus Christ.

To begin with, a broadly influential model for inserting new empirical inquiry into the medieval curriculum appealed to the notion that God has provided two “books” of revelation: the Book of Scripture and the Book of Nature. The implication drawn was that while scripture can be studied by traditional methods, the book of nature is more appropriately studied by present empirical investigation. In clearing space for the emerging independent sciences, this model left the suggestion that theology is concerned simply with studying traditional texts. This more restricted conception of theology was reinforced by the growing specialization of the modern

academy. At the outset of the Enlightenment it was still possible to pursue the ideal of individually comprehending all fields of knowledge. But we have long since conceded that individuals can master only specialized areas. The clear popular assumption (evident widely in Methodist circles) became that *the theologian's characteristic area is study of past religious texts, while the natural and human sciences are "lay" specializations*. This leaves the unfortunate following dual connotation: 1) one can be a "theologian" in some adequate sense without engaging the lay disciplines; 2) study of theology is a peripheral, and optional, matter for lay intellectual inquiry.

These connotations would be mitigated somewhat if theology and the other specialized fields were considered of equal value, and specialists in each field were encouraged to engage the others frequently in mutually-informing dialogue. But the dominant stream of the Enlightenment pushed in precisely the opposite direction. The recommendation of key figures was not just to introduce present inquiry as a parallel consideration alongside traditional methods and materials; it was to discount all reliance on tradition. For many this ultimately meant displacing theology from the modern scientific university. And in culture more broadly it has fostered a "privatization" of theological convictions. These convictions are reduced to matters of "opinion" that individuals are free to hold but that, they are exhorted, should make no difference in their intellectual inquiry, professional activities, or political judgments.

While the Enlightenment assumptions considered so far were undercutting the sense of theology as normative *reflection* on all knowledge and all of life, other assumptions were eroding appreciation for the dimension of theology as worldview *formation*. The general Enlightenment optimism about humanity was most central in this regard. One form this optimism could take was Wesley's insistence that God's grace is universally available and holistically transformative in human lives. More often, though, it was expressed in terms of the *inherent goodness of human nature*. The difference between Wesley's conviction and this more common expression is subtle, and his American descendants increasingly blurred the distinction. The crucial point is that when moral goodness is assumed to be inherent, there is little emphasis on cultivating dispositions toward desirable actions. Many will assume that the ideal dispositions emerge naturally, if we do not foolishly thwart them by attempting instead to impose our distorted cultural expectations. Others will suppose that cultivating predispositions is irrele-

vant (if not antithetical) to moral concern, because the essence of true morality is rising above all biological and cultural inclinations in exercising our innate power of rational choice. As a growing number of Methodists embraced such assumptions, they inevitably lost touch with Wesley's stress on the importance of cultivating within believers an enduring holistic disposition toward Christ-like life in the world, and his appreciation for the role of first-order forms of theological activity in this venture.

The Need for Investing in the Theological Competence of Laity

The dynamics just traced help explain why many in our churches honestly question the value of devoting major resources to cultivating the competency of laity in theology. When theology is understood as a narrowly specialized discipline of highly abstract reflections on a purely private area of life, what vital contribution could its mastery make to laity? And what possible benefit might they bring to theology? But these dynamics also provide the backdrop for appreciating the growing sense of need to reclaim the classic conception of theology, with its emphasis on both the importance of lay theological formation and the value of lay participation in theological reflection.

Consider first the foundational dimension of holistic orienting dispositions. There is broad lament in North American culture over a perceived decline of "character" in our citizens. This is helping to call into question the diffuse Enlightenment assumption that dispositions toward honest, humane, and charitable behavior are native to humans and emerge naturally in normal maturation. We are beginning to appreciate again the degree to which character is a product of the formative (or *de*-formative) impact of our various communities-of-influence. And we are learning that the communities which are most pervasive and intentional in their influence have the most impact. Hence the sad reality that so many of us raised in a community named for the one who "emptied himself for the sake of others" are pursuing life in a way that reflects instead the consumerist motto that "the one who dies with the most toys wins"! Lack of appreciation for the malleable nature of character has left us susceptible to cultural captivity. If we want our members to have greater clarity about and greater consistency in embodying truly Christ-like life in our culture, we must own the need to cultivate competent Christ-like dispositions.

Moving to the next dimension, it is vital to recognize that laity are

not just beneficiaries of formative attention, they are also major players in the practical-theological activities that shape the worldview/character of those in our churches. At the heart of character is a “life narrative” that frames our sense of self in relation to others, lending coherence to our dispositions and actions. While this narrative has unique elements, its plot self-consciously emulates a prototype—imbibed from those who surround us and/or chosen out of adoration. For Christians, this prototype is the “Christ story.” Sermons and scattered scripture reading are insufficient for transcribing this story deeply into our soul. It is impressed more fully through regular patterns of worship, times of intentional study of scripture, the example of mentors who emulate Christ, and a variety of other activities in which laity are forefront. The effectiveness of these activities is dependent upon a sufficient core of laity recognizing their theological dimension and engaging them competently.

The authenticity of the Christ story being impressed through these activities is also of concern, reflecting the interplay of the formative and normative dimensions of the theological enterprise. The ability to discern this authenticity is grounded in a knowledge of the whole of scripture. It is strengthened by exposure to the long and broad tradition of Christian interpretation and application of scripture. This exposure makes one sensitive to the reality that God’s revelation in Christ—while universal in scope—took specific historical-cultural expression; and it provides the chance to benefit from the wisdom gained through the attempts in other ages and cultures to give appropriately translated expression to that revelation. By contrast, a lack of grounding in scripture or exposure to the tradition of Christian life and witness makes it more likely that we will fail to recognize cultural captivity in our life and witness. Any investment that increases the competence of our laity in scripture and tradition increases the likelihood of authentic Christian formation in our churches.

Such investment is also vital for formalized normative reflection. United Methodist polity provides laity a prominent voice in our decision-making bodies. As John Cobb has reminded us, when we fail to also provide laity with support in (and expectation of) developing appropriate theological competence, it increases the likelihood that theological issues will be decided by cultural and political dynamics.⁸ The solution to this danger is surely not to exclude laity from normative reflection! In the first place, clergy and academic theologians are also susceptible to cultural and

political influences. More importantly, such exclusion would represent a surrender to the unfortunate fracturing of normative reflection fostered by the Enlightenment. Normative debates in theology are now commonly framed as forced choices between past authorities (scripture and tradition) and present authorities (reason and experience). Given the specialization of knowledge described above, this approaches a choice between relying on clergy/theology for guidance and relying on laity/science. John Wesley rightly resisted this framing of theological debates, evidencing some awareness that interpretation of experience and reason is as human—and thus fallible—as is that of scripture and tradition. He modeled a desire for normative reflection to sustain dialogue between competing interpretations of the various sources of theological insight until a way was found to “do justice” to *all* the sources (and thus to the contributions of all the church).⁹ We need laity from all areas of specialization who are grounded enough in the classic dimensions of theology to be confident and discerning in offering their unique contributions to normative reflection in the church.

We also need laity to own their crucial role in the apologetic dimension of the theological enterprise. In this age of specialization and rapid change, new challenges to Christian claims and values emerge most often in research labs, boardrooms, clinics, and the like. It is laity who first confront these challenges, and often laity who are best placed to offer an influential Christian response. This makes it vital that they resist the privatized model of the relation of their Christian convictions to their vocation, and that they are theologically competent to participate in forming this response. It is equally vital that the church support them in developing this competence.

Prospects for Enhancing the Theological Competence of Laity

What are the prospects for strengthening this support? The good news is that some excellent resources are being made available to United Methodist congregations and are being used to a significant degree. Programs like the *DISCIPLE* bible study, *Christian Believer*, and Covenant Discipleship are proving their value both for promoting *formation* of authentic Christian conviction and dispositions, and for grounding and strengthening participants’ capacity to participate in normative *reflection*.

The prospects are bleaker in the academy. I have formal theological education only partly in mind in this assessment. A variety of voices here

are calling for the recovery of something more like the classic conception of theology.¹⁰ The broader problem is the general isolation of formal theological education from the rest of the university. While some divinity schools stand on university campuses, they rarely require students to engage any field outside the divinity curriculum. More importantly, United Methodist-related colleges and universities have largely dropped any expectation that nondivinity majors will develop basic competency for bringing theological perspective to their area of specialization. We will have to look elsewhere at present for academic models that prepare laity for serious participation in the theological enterprise.

Endnotes

1. To cite just two examples, see William J. Abraham, “The Revitalization of United Methodist Doctrine and the Renewal of Evangelism,” in James Logan, ed., *Theology and Evangelism in the Wesleyan Heritage* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1994), 35–50; and John B. Cobb Jr., *Becoming a Thinking Christian* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993).

2. I am using this term to describe the nature of the task, not to delimit who might engage in it. The tendency (particularly in the Western church) to restrict such formative work to clergy is regrettable and unjustified.

3. Cf. Basil’s *On the Holy Spirit*.

4. For details on this development see Randy L. Maddox, “Recovering Theology as a Practical Discipline: A Contemporary Agenda,” *Theological Studies* 51 (1990): 650–72.

5. This point has been emphasized by Ellen Charry, in “The Moral Function of Doctrine,” *Theology Today* 49 (1992):31–45; and *By the Renewing of Your Minds: The Pastoral Function of Christian Doctrines* (New York: Oxford, 1997).

6. Cf. Randy L. Maddox, “An Untapped Inheritance: American Methodism and Wesley’s Practical Theology,” in *Doctrines and Disciplines: Methodist Theology and*

Practice, edited by Dennis Campbell (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1999), 19–52.

7. On the points in this and the preceding paragraph, see James Kirby, *et al.*, *The Methodists* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1998); Cynthia Lynn Lyrly, *Methodism and the Southern Mind, 1770–1810* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); and A. Gregory Schneider, *The Way of the Cross Leads Home: The Domestication of American Methodism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993).

8. See this worry in John B. Cobb Jr., *Lay Theology* (St. Louis: Chalice, 1994), 3–4.

9. For more on this, see W. Stephen Gunter, *et al.*, *Wesley and the Quadrilateral: Renewing the Conversation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997); and Randy L. Maddox, “Honoring the Dialogue,” *Circuit Rider* 22.6 (Nov/Dec 1999): 24–27.

10. See Maddox, “Recovering Theology.”