

ESSENTIALS OF CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

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Westminster John Knox Press
LOUISVILLE • LONDON

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Acknowledgments

Both the basic idea and the title for this book came from Donald McKim, and I am more grateful than I can say to him both for his encouragement and for entrusting his own “baby” to me as its editor. Some of my editorial work was done with the support of a grant from the Louisville Institute, and I am thankful to Jim Lewis both for the grant and for permission to turn to this task from what I was really supposed to be doing. I did my work in the pleasant surroundings of the Martin Marty Center of the University of Chicago Divinity School, and I owe thanks to Richard Rosengarten, dean of the Divinity School, and Clark Gilpin, director of the Center, for their hospitality. Matt Miller fixed nearly endless last-minute computer problems. Above all, I am grateful to the authors of the essays included in this book, who took time from very busy schedules to undertake this work because of their belief in the importance of introducing students to theology. Some of them even finished on schedule.

W.C.P.

Why Bother with Theology?

An Introduction

WILLIAM C. PLACHER

Several times, introducing me to a church group, a well-meaning person has said, “Bill Placher is a theologian, but I think you’ll find what he has to say very interesting.” That *but* always worries me, yet it captures something honest about contemporary attitudes to Christian theology. It is not surprising that many religious skeptics dismiss theology as meaningless superstition, but many Christians also think of theology as technical, complicated, irrelevant.

What is puzzling about this attitude is that all Christians do theology all the time, for *theology* just means thinking about our faith.¹ When a child dies and we say, “God didn’t want that to happen,” or, “Now she’s in heaven,” or even, “I don’t know how to make sense of this”—

All Christians do theology all the time, for *theology* just means thinking about our faith.

whatever we say, we are doing theology. In less dramatic moments, if we pray, “If it be your will, help my mother to get well,” or explain, “No, your friend can’t take Communion; she hasn’t been baptized,” or sing, “Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so,” all of that too is, or at least presupposes, theology.

The responsibility to think about our faith and how its elements fit together falls particularly on those who preach and teach. The twentieth-century Swiss theologian Karl Barth used to call theology “the conscience of preaching.” A preacher can carefully research the biblical texts, reflect on the situation of the congregation, and preach on one scriptural passage this week, and then another one next week, and give thoughtful sermons. But if someone in the congregation says, “Those two sermons seemed contradictory,” or, “I don’t see any connection between those ideas,” then, in order to explain, one has to start doing theology—and maybe should have done it before preaching!

Similarly, a pastor can help plan the church budget, provide helpful pastoral counseling, and get involved with organizing the community against a local polluter. But how do the way we allocate church funds, the advice we give, or the stands we take connect to our Christian faith? When we think about such questions, we are doing theology. Theology thus orders and connects our faith and our practice. If Christians pretend not to think about theology, we end up with unexamined theology, sometimes in forms that are silly or even dangerous.

It is possible, of course, to build a church around friendly community, helpful counseling, social outreach, and good music on Sunday morning without worrying much about how we articulate our faith. But social clubs, psychiatrists, political action groups, and choral societies can do all that as well or better. What sets churches apart is that we claim to have challenging but joyous news (after all, *gospel* just means “good news”) about God, ourselves, and the world in which we live. In order to do well what only the church can do, we need to get clear on that news in our own minds and figure out how to teach it to our children and explain it to our neighbors. There again, we are doing theology.

Theology, then, serves a variety of purposes, but it is also just fun. Many “professional” theologians, truth to tell, may have started out with varied interests in philosophy, history, anthropology, cosmology, and any number of other fields. Then we found this subject called theology for which *all* our interests were relevant. Once you start thinking about God, after all, it can lead anywhere. Some of the greatest minds of history have devoted their lives to Christian theology, and it is rewarding to think in their company, even as we try to connect what we are thinking with concrete problems down the street or around the world. As the contemporary theologian Thomas Oden puts it, watching good theologians “play theology is like watching Willie Mays play center field or Duke Ellington play ‘Sophisticated Lady.’”² Theology can bring people hope and help transform the world, but the seriousness of the task should not detract from the joy of observing the grace of the performers.

CONTEXTS FOR THEOLOGY TODAY

The authors of the book share a passion for theology. They are good writers who can effectively communicate their excitement. All are Christians, but they are

other things as well—women and men, white and black, of different sexual orientations, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Methodists, Roman Catholics, Disciples of Christ, Episcopalians, Baptists. Those characteristics, and many others, shape the way they think about their faith. All come from North America, and all of them live at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Those contexts too, of course, contribute to the theological issues that seem important to them, and the ways they approach those issues.

At the risk of drastic oversimplification, let me just mention five factors that shape the doing of Christian theology in North America at the beginning of the twenty-first century:

At least five factors shape the doing of Christian theology in North America today: modernity, the Barthian challenge, ecumenism, pluralisms, and post-modernity.

1. *Modernity.* What historians mean by *modern* is a complex and contentious matter. For our purposes, suffice it to say that, beginning sometime in the seventeenth century, most Christians acknowledged: (a) that the discoveries of modern science shape at least some important aspects of the way we understand the world (at minimum—this was the first big controversy—that the earth revolves around the sun, not the opposite), and (b) that people of different religious beliefs can find ways of living more or less peacefully together under the same government. As many of us have recently learned, in some (not all) Islamic societies *all* education is based on the Koran and none but Muslims are allowed to teach their religious beliefs in public. Most predominantly Christian societies are very different from that, and that difference illustrates the fact that Christians have pretty much accepted modernity, while Islam is still debating whether or not to do so.

2. *The Barthian challenge.* Karl Barth (1886–1968) is the one twentieth-century theologian who simply cannot be ignored. His liberal German teachers had taught him that theology has to adapt to its culture. Barth (who was Swiss) grew alarmed when those teachers supported the German war effort in World War I. Under the Nazis, he denounced church officials and theologians who compromised Christian faith in order to get along with the government. Barth drew a much different conclusion: Christianity, he said, should *never* compromise its principles to fit the culture around it. Even theologians who disagree with him have to face his challenge. If we are willing to adjust to a relatively nice society in order to fit in, do we have strong enough principles to resist and preserve our own values and beliefs if Nazis take over some day?

3. *Ecumenism.* Fifty years ago, denominational loyalties meant a lot to most Christians and to most Christian theologians. Preachers and theologians regularly denounced other denominations passionately. Things have changed. The Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) opened Roman Catholicism to all sorts of new influences—to freer conversations with non-Catholics and even non-Christians, to critical biblical scholarship, to trends in modern science and philosophy.

Catholics continue to debate whether Vatican II went too far, just the right distance, or not far enough, but all would agree that it changed their church in fundamental ways. The second half of the twentieth century saw all sorts of ecumenical conversations between Catholics and Protestants and among different Protestant denominations (and to a lesser extent Eastern Orthodox groups). Certainly among Protestants, and even among Catholics, labels such as *liberal*, *conservative*, or *evangelical* have now come to be more important than *Lutheran* or *Baptist*. Conservative or liberal Presbyterians, for instance, will often feel they have more in common with conservative or liberal Methodists or even Catholics than with the opposing party in their own denomination.³

4. *Pluralisms*. Fifty years ago nearly all those with academic training in theology were white and male. Women, African Americans, and Hispanics are now beginning to be well represented among theologians in North America. Moreover, in 1900, two-thirds of all Christians lived in North America and Europe; in 2000, the figure was only one-third. Europeans and North Americans can no longer take ourselves for granted as the mainstream of Christian theology when we represent only a minority of Christians. Even in Europe and North America, furthermore, Christians live with far more non-Christian neighbors. Muslims or Hindus are not just distant objects of curiosity or missionary activity; they live down the street. All these forms of pluralism make a difference in how we think about theology.

5. *Postmodernity*. If it is hard to define what *modern* means, it should be no surprise that what supposedly comes after it—the *postmodern*—is even trickier. *Postmodern* has become a faddish word among many writers, but they often mean very different things by it. For example, modern architecture aimed for simplicity and functionalism. The boxlike skyscraper seeks to be “rational” by providing office space and elevators as efficiently as possible. Postmodern architecture, by contrast, calls attention to itself as architecture: the top cut off at an odd angle, the arch perched on the top of the building. Similarly, postmodern novelists do not consistently help readers lose ourselves in the story; they keep interrupting to call attention to the fact that we are reading a piece of fiction. Even TV shows where characters turn to address the audience directly, as if to remind us that we are watching a program, can claim to be postmodern.

In philosophy and other fields, *postmodern* often refers to the idea that, after the carnage of World Wars I and II and the horrors of the Holocaust, it is hard to be as optimistic about human progress and the power of reason. The stories we tell about humanity must therefore be more ironic and fragmentary (and more conscious of their own character as stories) than the big stories (*metanarratives*) that intellectuals used to tell concerning how history as a whole is really about intellectual progress, or the growth of Western culture, or the eventual triumph of the working class. The “modern” idea that science and civilization have or soon will overcome barbarism looks doubtful. Some even wonder if “modernity” was such a good idea. At any rate, looking at a simple, Stone Age tribe in

the Amazon jungle, postmoderns hesitate to say with confidence that we are better than they are.

If one had to summarize a very complicated idea in one word, one might say that postmodernism teaches theology to be *suspicious*—suspicious of optimism about human nature, suspicious of easy answers (whether from the left or the right), more comfortable with ambiguity, irony, and fragments. (It follows of course that postmodernism teaches us to be suspicious of short definitions!)

ORGANIZATION, LANGUAGE, AND SOME FINAL WORDS

Nine chapters follow this introduction. They represent a fairly standard list of some of the big topics of Christian theology (though others certainly might have been included; I am particularly conscious of the lack of a separate chapter on the Holy Spirit). The structure represents a combination of three of the most common ways of organizing Christian theology:

1. Following the outline of history as the Bible presents it: First there is God, then God creates the world, then human beings fall into sin, then God works to save them in the history of Israel, the coming of Christ, and the activity of the Holy Spirit, shaping the life of the church and the lives of individual Christians as well as other elements of the world until all history comes to an end.

2. Organizing according to the Trinitarian pattern of the creeds: first the “Father” and the work of creation, then Christ and salvation, then the Spirit, the church, and the last things.

3. The *exitus-reditus* (“going out and returning”) pattern particularly common in medieval theology: Creation flows out from God and in sin people turn away from God, but then Christ begins the process of returning us to God, which will be completed only at the end of history.

These three organizing schemes overlap enough to make compromises among them fairly easy. Thus, the following chapters discuss: (1) revelation and authority, by way of introduction; (2) God; (3) creation and providence; (4) human nature and human sin; (5) the person and work of Jesus Christ; (6) the church and its worship; (7) Christian life; (8) Christian understanding of non-Christians; and (9) eschatology—the study of the last things).

Two theologians will address each topic from different points of view. Sometimes they will disagree strongly; in other cases, they will illuminate different aspects of their topic from similar perspectives. In inviting these particular writers, I sought to avoid lining them up in two clear “teams.” Theological debate is more complicated than that, and the points of view here represented reflect that situation. You may well love some and hate others; perhaps it is worth remembering that some other readers will probably like best the essays you most dislike. Strong disagreement may well generate your own best theological thinking. The philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre has defined a *tradition* as

an ongoing argument. The authors of this book share in the Christian tradition; that will not stop them from arguing. You are invited to join the tradition by joining the argument.

Doing theology does involve operating in a tradition. It is significant that a textbook in chemistry, for instance, might have a few pages at the start about the history of the field but would move quickly to the current state of the discipline. Introductions to theology, by contrast, always contain great chunks of history all the way through, and every chapter in this book will begin with some form of historical survey. In his essay for chapter 1 of this book, Stanley Grenz offers two reasons for studying history as part of studying theology. First, it offers us both good models and warnings of pitfalls. Second, Christians are necessarily part of a community (more on that in chapters 6 and 7), and attending to theology's history affirms our membership in a community of thinkers that extends through the centuries. If we ignored that history completely, we would be placing ourselves outside the body of Christian believers.

Paying attention to a tradition, however, does not always mean agreeing with it. Nor does "the Christian tradition" always speak with one voice. A tradition, remember, is an ongoing *argument*. Even the language we use in writing theology is a matter of ongoing debate. Like all of those writing theology these days, the authors of this book have to think about the proper language to use, particularly as regards gender.

Like all of those writing theology these days, the authors of this book have to think about the proper language to use, particularly as regards gender.

English, theologians used to say "men" in a way that, more or less, meant "men and women" but also in a way left women out. It is usually easy enough, and certainly better, to say "people" or "men and women" or "women and men."

Other changes raise harder questions. Jesus spoke to and of one he called his "Father." Was he just reflecting the patriarchal patterns of his society? Or was he using God's true name, which we should not change? Theologians disagree. Christians generally agree that God is beyond gender—neither male nor female. Some conclude that we should not use male pronouns of God. Others find the use of female pronouns an unacceptable break with the tradition, and argue that avoiding personal pronouns at all makes God an impersonal "it" who could not love us and to whom we could not pray.

Passions run high on these topics. Some women who have suffered discrimination or, even worse, abuse, find that using male language to refer to God reinforces the cultural patterns of which they are victims. Some men agree. Other women and men are convinced that changing language changes content and breaks with the faith that the Christian tradition has taught. Different authors in this book follow different practices in these matters. It seemed inappropriate to edit them into a common usage (even if they would have let me!), since the appropriate usage is itself an important issue in theological debates.

I have written a brief introduction to each chapter, laying out some of the history and some of the key terms that concern that issue, so that the other authors can plunge immediately into stating their own theological ideas. I have also added some summary statements at key points in the text and provided questions for reflection and lists of books for further reading at the end of each chapter. These aids may be particularly helpful to those reading this book on their own, rather than as a member of a class.

Throughout, I have tried to function as much as I could simply as a historian and summarizer, but smart readers will recognize that I too have my perspective and my prejudices. I am nevertheless pleased that my role as “introducer” has generally freed the other authors from needing to summarize and review so that they can get on with the excitement of doing theology. Samuel Johnson, the eighteenth-century English writer, was once asked if he believed in infant baptism. “Believe in it?” he replied. “Why I’ve seen it done!” An introduction to theology, it seems to me, should not just describe for readers what it would be like to do theology; it ought to give them a chance to see it done.

I earlier mentioned a number of reasons for doing theology; I have saved one for last. The Westminster Shorter Catechism, a famous seventeenth-century summary of Reformed faith, opens by declaring that the chief end of human beings is to glorify God and to enjoy God forever. Theology can sometimes be a rather ponderous way of glorifying God. Still, just as God gave the cheetah its speed, the elephant its strength, and the otter its playfulness, so God has given us humans intellect and imagination. When we use those gifts to think about God, we give God glory. So—to the glory of God.

FOR FURTHER READING

The works cited here (and at the end of subsequent chapters) are all from the last hundred years and mostly from the last twenty-five. The footnotes and bibliographies of these recent books should lead you to older ones. Books listed here generally survey the whole range of theological topics. Many theologians who are just as important but whose most significant books address only one or two topics in theology will appear in the lists following later chapters.

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