



Between Confessions

by William C. Placher

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Preface

The General Assembly's Ministry Unit on Theology and Worship is pleased to present to the church at large, and especially to those concerned for its theological renewal and confessional integrity, this third in a series of occasional papers. This is an edited version of an address delivered by William C. Placher to the Conference of Systematic Theologians from Presbyterian seminaries in September, 1990.

As William Placher notes in this paper, we live in a time when most theologians seem less interested in the church and most church people less interested in theology than once was the case in the Reformed tradition. Yet, it is still the case that some theologians remain "church theologians," offering up the gifts of their minds, as well as the passion of their hearts, for the renewal, faithfulness and integrity of the church, in what many are calling a "post-modern" world. They are undertaking new constructive theology in important conversation with new developments in critical thinking.

It is also the case that there yet remain church members who yearn for adequate resources and opportunities for theological discussion, and who hope that their ministers will become, once again, theologians-in-residence among the people of God.

William Placher is a church theologian who takes seriously both the theological vocation of the whole people of God, and the challenge that presents now to those who have been called to teach, both in theological institutions, and in the congregations of God's people. This paper, reflecting on twenty-five years of theology between two confessions of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), The Confession of 1967 and the recently adopted Brief Statement of Faith, describes some of the ways theologians in the intervening years have come to realize the challenge before us all now.

This is, quite simply, a suggestive essay. It represents an address given to a gathering not long ago of some of the teachers in our church's theological seminaries. We are privileged to overhear the beginning of what will be an ongoing conversation among them. We are grateful to Bill Placher for allowing us to listen in.

The Theology and Worship Ministry Unit is now at work on a whole series of initiatives in partnership with many of our church's

ministers and members, theological institutions and governing bodies, to help renew our church's theological vocation. We trust that this address will serve as the occasion for constructive conversation among us. We invite you to share with us any reflections you may have on this analysis, as well as any proposals you may have for ways in which this Unit may make its appropriate contribution with others.

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Twenty Five Years of Theology

William C. Placher

In the mid-1960's the United Presbyterian Church in the USA debated and then adopted a new confession of faith, The Confession of 1967. Nearly twenty five years later the reunited Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) adopted the Brief Statement of Faith. While the division of history into distinct periods is always arbitrary, the juxtaposition of these two events provides an occasion for reflection on what has been happening in theology in this country in the intervening years, and some implications of those developments for theological education.

My thesis is we live and work within a crucial moment for theology in this country - a moment with exciting potential, but also with the very real possibility that the potential will not be realized. Theology never takes place in a vacuum; it is shaped in part by forces from the life of the church, from the wider society, and from the academic world.

Rather than rehearsing a list of books and authors, I want to begin by locating some theological work in its social context. I will start with the good news, the exciting potentials for contemporary theology, which I will discuss under three major headings: first, the ways in which theologies of liberation have opened the theological conversation to new voices; second, the intellectual disestablishment of mainline Protestantism, and the opportunities that poses for our theology; and third, some developments in other academic disciplines which open up new possibilities for theological conversation. Fourth, however, I will look at an increasing split between theology and the church and suggest that this split could undercut all of these rich potentials. I will conclude by drawing some unfashionable consequences for contemporary theological education.

Liberation Theologies

First, then, theologies of liberation, and the new voices they have introduced into theology. Let me recall some dates: Mary Daly's *The Church and the Second Sex* appeared in 1968, James Cone's *Black Theology and Black Power* in 1969, and Gustavo Gutierrez's *Theology of Liberation* in 1971. Certainly all these books had precursors, but they were still pioneering works. That reminds us that theologies of liberation have emerged as an important force in the years since 1967.

At first glance, the powerful social witness of parts of C-67 might seem to suggest otherwise. It advocated the abolition of all racial discrimination (9.44), urged Christians to search for world peace "even at risk of national security" (9.45), and denounced "enslaving poverty in a world of abundance" as "an intolerable violation of God's good creation" (9.46). The confession was recognizably a product of the ferment of the 1960's, recognizably the work of the socially progressive wing of the church. The debate about it in most presbyteries and congregations, after all, concerned whether or not it was "too radical."

Yet liberationist thought since 1967 has changed the theological agenda in at least two broad ways. First, the social agenda of C-67 consisted of matters the church needed to tell society or theology needed to tell the church. The document did not engage in much critical self-reflection about how theology itself gets done. Here liberationist work has made a big difference, reminding us that it is not enough for privileged voices to advocate causes that will benefit the less privileged. The voices of the oppressed themselves also need to be heard and to participate in the definition of our common theological and confessional tasks.

Second, the absence of gender issues in C-67 is striking. Its list of "progressive issues" includes racial justice, peace, and economic equality. Its only substantial discussion of gender is an affirmation of the importance of marriage. Even this, I have been told, was a late addition. Women's ordination still aroused wide controversy in our denomination in 1967, but the confession did not mention it. Indeed, by creating a Book of Confessions which included the Second Helvetic Confession, the process which produced C-67 actually introduced an explicit condemnation of women's ordination for the first time into the confessional standards of American

Presbyterianism.¹ Not only the language about God but the language about human persons remained unreflectively male. A sentence like, "The church is called to bring all men to receive and uphold one another as persons in all relationships of life" (9.44), seemed unproblematically progressive! My point is not to criticize or ridicule C-67 (whose prophetic words on many topics the church has not yet heard) but to remind us all, in the face of much that has not changed, of how much *has* changed, at least at the rhetorical level, in a relatively short period of time.

Both those factors - increased reflection about the implications of social context for the doing of theology itself, and increased attention to issues about gender - have raised us to a new level of hermeneutical reflection. Take the issues of gender as an example. We don't need a fancy hermeneutic to read Amos or the Sermon on the Mount and draw some forceful conclusions about the importance of economic justice. I am tempted to say that all one needs to do is read the text aloud, slowly and with emphasis. "There is no knowledge of Yahweh," James Cone has written, "except through his political activity on behalf of the weak and the helpless of the land. . . .If theology does not side with the poor, then it cannot speak for Yahweh who is the God of the poor."² Some might argue that Cone picks one theme out of a complicated web of biblical concerns and thereby oversimplifies, but it does not ring obviously false.

In contrast, Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza insists, "All early Christian texts are formulated in an androcentric language and conditioned by their patriarchal milieux and histories." Thus, Christian feminists who do not want simply to jettison these texts and this history as their own must, "Rather than *abandon* the memory of our foresters' sufferings and hopes in our common patriarchal past. . . *reclaim* their sufferings in and through the subversive power of the remembered past."³ Therefore, the appropriation of these texts in a feminist context must involve a more complex hermeneutic, and we are all familiar with a variety of ways of doing that. Phyllis Trible finds that a careful literary analysis of crucial texts discovers silences and juxtapositions which evoke the repressed voices of the women at the margins of the story as it has usually been told. Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza argues that historical analysis of the New Testament reveals a Jesus and a very early community more committed to equality between the genders than is the text as we have it. Sallie McFague uses Ricoeur's categories to develop a

metaphorical theology that opens up possibilities for new images of God.

I have chosen a few examples among many, examples that attempt to appropriate the tradition critically rather than more radically breaking with it. But I think they illustrate my point: that reflection on the issue of gender in particular drives us to a new kind of hermeneutical reflection. The same is true with regard to other issues when we begin to think about the implications for theology itself and of the need to hear voices too long silenced. We cannot simply add another social issue or two to the agenda of theological ethics; we have to think in fundamental ways about how we do theology. Theology has only begun that task, but it has begun.

Intellectual Disestablishment

My second point concerns the intellectual disestablishment of mainline Protestantism. We can begin with that problematic term itself: 'mainline.' In the late 60's there may have been various branch lines and alternative means of transportation, but *we* were still recognizably the 'mainline.' Now we are just one track among others, and that makes a difference to the doing of theology.

The immigration act of 1965 abolished the quotas which had long favored northern European immigration to this country. In particular, the act opened the doors to a new generation of Asian immigrants; usually, by the way, well educated professionals. We had long talked about American religious pluralism, but generally it had been a pluralism confined within the limits of Judaism, Christianity, and Enlightenment Deism. Now American Christians no longer need to get plugged into the global village to learn about Hindus or Muslims - such folk may live next door, work as surgeons in the community hospital, or own the local motel.⁴

It is partly as a result of changed demographics that inter-religious dialogue and the "theology of religions" has become the growth industry in contemporary theology. Even in the late 60's, the 1930's debate between William Ernest Hocking and Hendrik Kraemer about Christian attitudes to other religions still set the agenda, and that agenda focused on the nature of appropriate Christian missionary activity. Non-Christians still seemed people 'over there;' we would either try to convert them or not. Today,

non-Christians are 'here' and seem to be genuine conversation partners. That position that would have seemed radical in the 60's. Karl Rahner's discussion of anonymous Christians, for instance, is now dismissed by scholars like John Hick and Paul Knitter as far too ethnocentric and conservative.

My own feeling is that too much of this discussion still fails to respect sufficiently the *particularity* of other religious traditions, continuing to seek dialogue with "other religions" generically understood. Theologies which engage in serious conversation with one other religious tradition in all its uniqueness may prove (at least in the short run) the most fruitful. Paul van Buren's reinterpretation of Christian theology in dialogue with Judaism, Langdon Gilkey's interest in Buddhism and David Burrell's in Islam come to mind as examples. But however such matters develop, it is at least clear that inter-religious dialogue will remain an important theological theme.

Closer to home, the 1960's were also the time of Vatican II, and the end of the isolation of Catholic scholarship. I think it was not entirely Protestant prejudice that led, even in the 50's, to talk of "Catholic biblical scholarship" versus just plain biblical scholarship. Even Protestant theologians reading their Catholic counterparts were usually self-consciously engaged in ecumenical dialogue. Now, however, if I refer to Paul Knitter or Karl Rahner on attitudes to other religions, or to Raymond Brown or Elizabeth Schüssler's Fiorenza's biblical analysis, or to Schillebeeckx or Leonardo Boff on theological method, the fact of their Catholicism might not even enter my mind. We have gone beyond dialogue between two distinct groups, merging into a single conversation.

If many walls between Protestants and Catholics have come down, that is less true for some barriers within Protestantism. While it is not clear that fundamentalists or evangelicals represent a larger percentage of the population today than they did in 1967, they are more successful in retaining members than 'liberal' brands of Protestantism, and they do have a far clearer voice in our public discourse than they did twenty-five years ago. Jerry Falwell began radio broadcasting in 1956 but did not found the Moral Majority until 1979; Pat Robertson founded the Christian Broadcasting Service in 1960 but did not start the "700 Club" until 1968. In 1967, a self-described fundamentalist was less likely to vote than the average American, and certainly less likely to engage in direct political

activity. In the years since, the religious right has become a political force.

Such factors change public perceptions. *Time* magazine covered the debate over C-67 in some depth, as did many newspapers. Today the Southern Baptist Convention gets far more press than a Presbyterian General Assembly - partly because the issues are for the moment more dramatic, but also due to the media's sense of relative cultural importance.

'Mainline' theology, however, rarely reflects these changes. But a new generation of progressive evangelicals - Richard Mouw, Clark Pinnock, Donald Bloesch, Jack Rogers - is doing interesting theological work. Yet the attitude toward them among more liberal theologians tends to mirror the attitude to non-Christian religions in the days of Hendrik Kraemer. We study evangelicals sociologically to try to figure out how to convert them, but we don't really engage them in intellectual dialogue.

That is even more true with another contemporary phenomenon. In 1967 the religion section of the local bookstore contained a range of Bibles, perhaps some sermons by Paul Tillich or Peter Marshall, popular books on the history of Christianity by Roland Bainton, some books on Judaism; although I am making up this list, I am prepared to bet on its approximate accuracy. Today the shelf space allotted to all such categories is dwarfed by the space given to works of New Age spirituality. Most of us do not read the stuff, but many people do. Seminaries are offering more courses in Christian spirituality, a development that recovers part of our tradition that has been too often neglected (thereby, perhaps, driving people elsewhere). But we cannot simply hire someone 'in spirituality' to solve the problem, for basic theological issues are at stake across the board. To take just one example, whether Christians can believe in reincarnation is a significant issue in many congregations, yet most theologians have not even been thinking about the context out of which such a question emerges.

In sum, in the years since 1967, non-Christian religions, an intellectually revitalized Catholicism, various evangelical parties, and the New Age movement have become significant players on the United States religious stage. Mainline Protestant theologians have responded with genuine dialogue with other religions, and Protestant and Catholic theology have virtually merged into a single conversation. The impact on theology of evangelical growth and

the New Age movement remains much less clear. In any event, 'mainline' Protestant theologians now can enter into a range of conversations that can be genuine conversations among equals.

Developments in Other Disciplines

My third point concerns developments in other academic disciplines that make possible important conversations for theologians. Examples include literary approaches to the Bible, new interest in cosmology among physicists, and a variety of changes in philosophy.

First, the Bible. In the late 60's 'Biblical scholarship' generally meant the application of various techniques of critical history: research into historical context, form criticism, redaction criticism, and so on. Now we live in the midst of many other approaches to the Bible from scholarly disciplines outside of theology. In my own work I have highlighted the literary approach, benefitting from the work of Northrup Frye, Robert Alter, and Frank Kermode. But one could also mention reader response theory, deconstructionism, and many others. If our theological work is to be intellectually respectable, we need to continue to learn from historical scholarship on the Bible, but I suspect many of us find conversations with the other approaches to the Scriptural texts more interesting - perhaps because they are newer conversations.⁵

A second new conversation comes from physics. A generation or two ago, cosmology was hardly a respectable field among physicists. The origin of the universe seemed a singularly speculative question. Now a range of technical articles and popular books alike - Stephen Hawking's *Short History of Time* the most famous among them - tackles such issues. At the same time developments in quantum mechanics, particularly the implications of Bell's inequality, raise fundamental questions about the very nature of reality. In the face of various strong and weak anthropic principles, the one thing that seems clearest is that old fashioned materialism is in trouble.⁶

My own instinct is to avoid using the latest scientific theories too directly as grist for any particular theological mill. Historians sometimes tell the story of Galileo's condemnation before the Inquisition as if the moral were that theology ought to listen more to science. I draw nearly the opposite conclusion. In fact, theology had listened

all too well to Aristotelian science (and very good science it was) in the generations just before Galileo. But when theologians baptized that one cosmology as the official Christian science, they ended up having to condemn new and better scientific theories as un-Christian. So let us be cautious about choosing sides among theories of quantum mechanics. With such caution in place, however, we can find a number of scientists who are thinking these days about what it means to explore the origins of all things, or the relation of subject and object, and who are open to the possibility that metaphor and even myth may be the appropriate language for such discussions. Theologians have some experience with questions analogous to those they are considering. We might find that they are open to conversation and that we could learn from the exchange.

More generally, we live in a much more open philosophical context than did theologians in 1967. I am struck by how often older (and even some recent) discussions of philosophical resources for theology begin with the regretful dismissal of 'analytic philosophy' as sadly unsympathetic to theology. Even in the late 60's, the dominant philosophical approach in universities in the United States was the analytic tradition, which usually meant either a form of logical positivism or the kind of ordinary language philosophy developed in its purest form by J. L. Austin. Either way, theology came off badly; it appeared to be obvious nonsense to positivists, and it generated among Austinians a devastating sense of puzzlement. As a result, theologians who wanted to make contact with philosophers turned to existentialism or to Whitehead, thereby awkwardly finding themselves 'in dialogue' with philosophy in a form hardly represented in their own universities.

These days, the old boundary lines between 'analytic' and 'continental' philosophy have begun to blur. Habermas cites J. L. Austin, and Hilary Putnam talks about Husserl. Who can classify Richard Rorty or Alasdair MacIntyre? Both sides of the old dichotomy are more diverse, and in some of their forms more open to theology. Whether through Wittgenstein or Gadamer, our philosophical colleagues may have grown interested in religious traditions; they may well be reading Ricoeur - or Thomas Aquinas - as much as we are. This strikes me as healthy in two ways. First, it enables us to sharpen our arguments in dialogue with philosophers who actually are interested in talking with us. Second, it keeps us cognizant of a wide range of philosophical positions rather than tempting us

to baptize one somewhat congenial position - whether Heidegger or Whitehead or Ernst Bloch - as the official authorized philosophical conversation partner for theology.

The Split Between Theology and Church

It is, then, an exciting time to be a Christian theologian. Theologies of liberation have introduced new voices into the conversation, the intellectual disestablishment of mainline Protestantism provides us with new theological conversation partners in a position of genuine equality, and developments in other disciplines open up new possibilities for conversation. But a fourth development could put all that in jeopardy - a split between theology and the church.⁷

In the early 1960's, when the drafting committee was preparing C-67, everyone knew that the two most famous Protestant theologians in the United States were Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich. Tillich, who died in 1965, and Niebuhr, who died in 1971, embodied some significant characteristics of the theology of their generation. Niebuhr had been the successful pastor of a local church who never got a Ph.D. (I treasure his possibly apocryphal remark to a student who asked him about his dissertation topic: "Young man, there are people who write dissertations, and then there are people about whom dissertations are written.") Richard Fox's controversial biography of Niebuhr undoubtedly overstates its thesis in portraying him as so busy dashing from one lecture to another that he almost never had time for serious scholarship, but it does indicate how deeply he was involved in the life of the church and in practical politics. Tillich had been active in Christian socialism and the early anti-Nazi struggle in Germany. Although he addressed a wide audience outside the church that was interested in philosophy, psychology, and the arts, he first became widely known in this country through the publication of a volume of his sermons, and he became a widely sought after preacher.

In the 1950's and early 60's persons pursuing a Ph.D. in theology might have wished to study with Tillich or Niebuhr themselves. But, in any event, they probably would have entered a doctoral program that mirrored their close relationship with the churches. Although particular institutional arrangements varied, nearly all major graduate programs in religion had some relation to a seminary, and nearly all faculty members and students had seminary

degrees. Even institutions offering programs quite independent of church affiliation usually hired ordained Christian ministers as faculty. Theology and Bible were the dominant disciplines.

In this respect too, we now live in a very different world, with an academic discipline called "religious studies" seeking self-definition. Newer Ph.D. programs like those at Indiana University and the University of California at Santa Barbara polemically define themselves as religious studies programs that totally reject 'the seminary model.'⁸ Even in more old-fashioned places like Yale, Chicago, Vanderbilt, and Emory, many entering students come straight from undergraduate work or from an M.A. program rather than from a seminary, and may be concentrating in sociology of religion or Asian religions rather than in Christian theology. Ordination is now a handicap in securing a religious studies position in many colleges and universities.

In reading Fox's biography of Niebuhr it is striking not only that Niebuhr devoted so much time to preaching but that so many churches wanted him to preach. In that time, church-related campus groups and youth organizations running major conferences featured, as a matter of course, major theologians. Churches sponsor far fewer such events these days, and when they do, it rarely occurs to anyone to invite a theologian as the main speaker. (Some theologians of liberation are the exception to that rule, an exception to which I will return.)

David Tracy sets out three distinct 'publics' of theology: society, academy, and church.⁹ Twenty-five years ago theologians viewed academy and church as being more closely related. Even those who taught in universities rather than denominational seminaries worked in a context much nearer to the orbit of church and seminary. Moreover, the life of the churches was far more engaged with theology. One consequence of this connection was that theologians could hope to influence society through their influence on the church. Today, academic theology and the church seem worlds apart. Thus, if theologians aren't speaking to the church and the church isn't listening to theologians anyway, it is hard to imagine why anyone else should pay attention.

That bleak conclusion can be qualified in three ways. First, theologies of liberation - particularly women's theologies - are a clear exception to the rule. Books like Elaine Pagels' on the Gnostics or Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's *In Memory of Her* bring technical

scholarship to bear on issues that matter to many people in the church (especially, though not exclusively, women). Such writings have found a wide audience, deeply touching many lives.

Second, even academic discussions about theological method have the potential to touch the life of the church. For instance, the current debates between postliberal and revisionist theologies may seem (and in many forms are) the sort of technical discussion that captures the interest of theologians in universities while remaining thoroughly irrelevant to the lives of ordinary congregations. And yet, Stanley Hauerwas makes an extreme form of the postliberal approach directly relevant to congregational life. The primary task of the people of God, says Hauerwas, is to nurture a language and a form of community unknown to the rest of the world. Taking that task seriously would make an enormous difference to the life of a congregation in South Bend, Savannah, or San Francisco. Furthermore, if more of us were to take that task seriously, being out of the 'mainline' might become a kind of liberation. As my teacher Hans Frei once put it, if Christianity could get out of its secondary role of providing a justification for Western culture, it might be able to recover more effectively its primary role of being a religion. Whether or not one agrees with Hauerwas' answers (I do so myself only part of the time) he captures the imagination of pastors in a way that clearly indicates he is asking some of the right questions, questions that flow out of debates about theological method.¹⁰

Third, I have tried to argue that very practical considerations often drive us to theoretical questions. It is easy to be sarcastic about engaging in debates on hermeneutical method while people are in pain. However, to take just one example, when pain comes from the conflict between some Christians' commitment to the language of "Father" and "Son" and other Christians' sense that such language reinforces the patriarchal structures that oppress them, it may be that we need reflection on hermeneutics and the function of symbols as a starting point for conversation that does not quickly turn into irresolvable conflict.

Even with these qualifications, the central problem remains. We live in a time when most theologians seem less interested in the church and most church people less interested in theology. This is especially the case in what we still tend to call 'mainline' Protestantism. This is a major problem for both theology and the church. Theology ought to help us reflect on our faith, and our faith ought

to make a practical difference, but that is unlikely to happen if theologians are cut off from the one institution - the church - they stand the best chance of influencing. It is not clear how they can expect theologians from other traditions or scholars from other disciplines to pay much attention to them if theologians lack an audience within their own community.

I am not sure that I have the solution to the problem, but I can suggest three places we could begin a search for a solution. The first has been proposed by Edward Farley in his exploration of theological education, *Theologia*. If theology is only the business of trained professionals, he argues, then it is hard to see why it should even be *their* business. If no one else in the church cares about theology, then ministers in training will see little point in learning it themselves. Theology can matter, Farley claims, only if it becomes part of the life of the whole Christian community. But before that can happen, ordinary laypeople need to learn a bit more about theology. And why not? Farley notes that since teenage church members move easily and quickly into the complex world of computers, foreign languages, DNA, and calculus, it is not unreasonable to think that they and their elders might manage over a lifetime in the church to learn the kinds of things seminary students pick up in the first weeks of their studies.¹¹

It is not my task to defend the content of the Brief Statement of Faith, but I will say a word on behalf of its form. We on the Special Committee were convinced that we needed to write a creed that could be used in the liturgical and educational life of the church. We developed something that people can read through in five minutes and then talk about together. Having led discussions of the Brief Statement in a variety of congregations around the country, I continue to be amazed at how eagerly people discuss it. Churches are full of people with interesting ideas and strong opinions about how to express Christian faith. I think we have too often failed to give church members adequate resources and opportunities for theological discussion; clearly, they do not lack the interest. Churches in which such discussions take place will soon demand books that address them and pastors who can teach them.

Second, if we are to have a theology that seriously engages issues of concern to the churches, it will be primarily the product of denominational seminaries. It might be tempting to think that the real cutting edge of theology happens in major universities, and

that the task of denominational seminaries is popularization and application. But, for the foreseeable future, for a variety of institutional reasons, I think the direction of universities will be in the opposite direction - away from theology that has any real connection to the life of the church. If the work the church needs is to get done, denominational seminaries will have to function as research centers, with all that implies for teaching loads, summer sessions, and the definition of faculty appointments.

Finally, I come to the question of the place of theology in the seminary curriculum. Consider Joseph Hough and John Cobb's book, *Christian Identity and Theological Education*, published in 1985 with the double imprimatur of the American Academy of Religion and the Association of Theological Schools, with funding from the Lilly Endowment. It generated a volume of responses, *The Education of the Practical Theologian*. Taken together, these books seem to be as close as one can get to the official party line on theological education. To their credit, both books go beyond abstract discussions to propose specific requirements for seminary education. However, in both cases, the word "theology" (or the adjective "theological") appears only once in the list of suggested course requirements - in both cases in a passing reference to "liberation theology." That is not, I think, a casual omission; it reflects a marginalization of theology from the proposed theological education.

The Hough/Cobb proposal includes a curriculum consisting of four basic parts. Part I covers "the heritage that shapes our identity" in seven courses, beginning with "the origin" of our faith through the Babylonian exile and ending with "North American religious history from the colonial period to the present."¹² The authors explain that our common history makes us a community, and therefore, "The church needs to know its story, its whole story, in order to know what it is."¹³

Part II covers "the global context of our lives" in one course analyzing "world hunger and oppression showing the interconnection of economic and political forces with ecological decay, population growth, racism, and sexism." Part III consists of seven courses addressed to "issues for practical Christian thinking" - required courses in "how can we make sense of our doctrinal heritage in our post-Enlightenment age," the study of some non-Christian religious tradition, as well as elective courses in topics such as what

liberation theology has to say to North American churches, sexuality and gender differences, and Christian spirituality. Part IV involves nine courses and a summer internship in "professional preparation for pastoral ministry."¹⁴

As I noted, the word "theology" appears only once in the curriculum, in reference to liberation theology (which is rather explicitly defined as something other people do - people who live outside of North America). The course on making sense of our doctrinal heritage in a post-Enlightenment age might seem the most promising locus for constructive theology, but I am not sure quite what Hough and Cobb mean at this point. They concede that their approach "does not prohibit the formulation of systematic theologies [how generous of them!]. . . . But these efforts, like those that have gone into creeds and confessions, simply become additional parts of that memory by which we live and think. The effort to capture the meaning of that history and exhaust it in a formulation of the beliefs to which it gives rise at any time and place is misdirected."¹⁵

I think we need more theology than that. Heinrich Ott once wrote that "theology is the conscience of preaching."¹⁶ He meant, among other things, that preachers are always tempted to address selected issues with force and interpret particular Scriptural passages in isolation. When we find ourselves addressing a wealthy and complacent congregation on issues of economic justice, the temptation for many of us is to quote one of the prophets or Jesus' parables and say, "Hear the Word of God." But if someone quotes Paul on homosexuality or the place of women in the church, we say, "Well, it's a bit more complicated." Theology begins when we ask how and whether we can say both things without becoming absurdly inconsistent. Again, we want to express the power and excitement that we find in a community of Christians, to develop a basis for dialogue with those who experience glossolalia, and to acknowledge the freedom of the Spirit of God, which, like the wind, blows into the most unexpected places and stirs things up. When we think about how to do all those things together, we are developing a doctrine of the Holy Spirit.

My argument is that theological education which slights the work of constructive theology risks losing us our consciences. After all, our common story as Christians is a very ambiguous story; it is full of grace and truth, but it is also full of racism and sexism and

bloody crusades. We cannot simply tell the story uncritically, nor can we honestly tell it while leaving out the parts we don't like. We need a hermeneutic of critical appropriation. Similarly, we can learn a great deal about the social and intellectual forces of our contemporary world, and the managerial and rhetorical skills that lead to growth and success. But there are some managerial and rhetorical techniques that Christians should not use, and some social and intellectual forces in our world that Christians ought to condemn. We need criteria for making those decisions, and that means we need to do theology.

In short, we need constructive theology that tackles head on and in a systematic way the question of how to make sense of Christian faith in the contemporary world. If the church as church is to have anything distinctive to contribute, it needs leaders who can address just that question. Much of the education of such leaders has to take place in seminaries. Knowing our history on the one hand and a lot of practical techniques on the other, without ever working out how that history guides us and how we apply those techniques, seems to me like building an arch without a capstone. Such arches tend to fall down.

I do not propose this to the greater glory of theology or of theologians. Theology matters only to the extent that it serves the church, and the church matters only to the extent that it serves the glory of God, the flourishing of humankind, and the stewardship of creation. Rebecca Chopp makes the point eloquently: "It is only by looking away from our center, our preservation, and our own identity that we have any hope of offering the world what it so desperately needs: new discourses of humanity, of history, of freedom, of God, and of life itself....The point it seems to me, is not whether the church will have a strong identity, but whether or not it has anything at all to say to the world."¹⁷ By the grace of God, the church does have something to say to the world, and theology does have something to say to the church that can help it carry out its tasks. There is theological work to be done if we can seize the moment and get on with it.

1. "We teach that baptism should not be administered in the church by women or midwives. For Paul deprived women of ecclesiastical duties, and baptism has to do with these." (5.191).

2. James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (Seabury Press, 1975), pp. 65, 71.

3. Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her* (Crossroad, 1984), p. 31.

4. I owe much of my awareness of these issues to continuing conversations with my colleague Raymond B. Williams. See his *Religions of Immigrants from India and Pakistan* (Cambridge University Press, 1988).

5. The politics of these discussions get complicated. John Barton, as one representative of historical scholarship on the Bible, sees in the application of literary analysis for theological purposes a refusal to face historical questions and a lapse into crypto-fundamentalism. See his *People of the Book* (Westminster/John Knox Press, 1988). Theologians may have to fight for the right to engage in these new conversations.

6. For an introduction to the remarkable implications surrounding Bell's inequality, see Bernard d'Espagnat, "The Quantum Theory and Reality," *Scientific American* 241 (1979), pp. 158-181. On the anthropic principle, see John D. Barrow and Frank J. Tipler, *The Anthropic Cosmological Principle* (Oxford University Press, 1986).

7. For an analogous argument about black theology and African American churches, see James H. Harris, "Practicing Liberation in the Black Church," *Christian Century* 107 (June 13-20, 1990), pp. 599-602.

8. "Polemical" is not an exaggeration: "The major Ph.D. programs found at places like Yale, Harvard, Union, Chicago and Graduate Theological Union have failed to provide a 'product' that fits the new 'market.' ... Now is the time for a new approach to religious studies." (Religious Studies newsletter, vol. 8, no. 1, Indiana University Alumni Association, Fall 1987).

9. David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination* (Crossroad, 1986), pp. 3ff.

10. For Hauerwas' most explicit statement of his relation to Lindbeck's postliberalism, see the introduction to Stanley Hauerwas, *Against the Nations* (Winston Press, 1985). For the most straightforward application to parish life, see Stanley Hauerwas and William

H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens* (Abingdon Press, 1989). For Lindbeck's own thoughts about the practical implications of his proposal, see George a. Lindbeck, "The Church's Mission to a Postmodern Culture," in Frederic B. Burnham, *Postmodern Theology* (Harper and Row, 1989), pp. 37- 55.

11. Edward Farley, *The Fragility of Knowledge* (Fortress Press, 1988), p. 92.

12. Joseph C. Hough, Jr , and John B. Cobb, Jr , *Christian Identity and Theological Education* (Scholars Press, 1985), p. 129.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 97.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 130.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 105.

16. Heinrich Ott, *Theology and Preaching*, trans. Harold Knight (Westminster Press, 1965), p. 22. I am sure he is quoting Barth, but I chickened out on trying to find the reference somewhere in the *Dogmatics*.

17. Rebecca Chopp, "When the Center Cannot Contain the Margins," in Don S. Browning et al., *The Education of the Practical Theologian* (Scholars Press, 1989), p. 76.



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