

THE ASSUMPTIONS OF THEOLOGY

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The purpose of this session is to give 'non-theologians', a misleading term if it implies that people who are not paid to engage in theology are also not actively engaged in theological thinking, an opportunity to get a handle on the common assumptions of those engaged in the discipline of theology. That is to give them a handle on what its practitioners share in common and take for granted, to give an insight into the issues they address and how they operate in addressing them. Unfortunately I will have to disappoint you, for while there may be shared intellectual values amongst those engaged in theology, values common to any intellectual endeavour such as commitments to comprehensiveness, consistency, non-contradiction, and a rigour in reasoning, you will not necessarily find in those who operate under the umbrella of 'theology' today shared starting points, shared preoccupations or shared outcomes. This is not just because "theologians are like musicians and writers in that each one has his or her own distinctive emphases, style and preoccupations"¹. It is because theology, particularly as practised in the West, shares in the same crisis of authority and knowing as the rest of the culture. That being the case to know the assumptions of any theology one must first ask 'Whose theology?' This will not prevent me from differentiating below the starting point of Christian theology from other starting points, and attempting some brief justification of that, but you should know that not all who practice 'theology' would share or even reckon as legitimate such an approach. Having expressed my starting point I will list the givens of such a Christian theology and summarise the character of the theology that arises from dealing with those givens. First, however, to prevent more confusion than is necessary, I will clarify what I am talking about when I am using the word 'theology'.

What is Theology?

At its simplest, theology is thinking about and talking about God. 'Theology' as it is practised in theological colleges and universities [generally not in Australia] is engaging in that reflection and discourse with the same disciplined and rigorous thought and training which is given to other fields of study at tertiary level. It is, however, distinguished only by degree from the activity of a Bible Study group talking about why God tells us to pray when He knows all things, or someone reading J. I. Packer, or Rowan Williams, on their holidays from the Lab. At a tertiary level, while it can be used about a course of study that embraces languages, biblical studies, history, it is used primarily of disciplined thinking about God. As such it is to be distinguished from religious studies, which gives itself to description of the religious practices of humanity and reflection on their origin and role, and can be expressed in a number of overlapping sub-disciplines - Biblical, Historical, Philosophical, Moral, Dogmatic and Systematic Theology.

With such an understanding of theology it is clear that theology can be engaged in by anyone with a concept of God and some claimed source of knowledge of God which can be the subject of rational reflection. Thus there can be and are Jewish, Islamic and Hindu theologies, each with a distinctive starting point in their own claimed revelations. Some, observing this, will attempt a generic theology, trying to isolate what is common to all. Others, partly in response to the observation of conflicting theologies not just between faiths but within faiths, will want to focus on starting with the knowing subject of theological discussion, claiming that theology is human exploration of the question of God and what is being examined are human claims about knowledge

¹ Gunton, The Christian Faith, p. ix.

of God, and what is of interest is how those claims operate in human society [e.g., in endorsing inequalities in relationship] or how particular human contexts shape claims about God. Still others, observing the role faith commitments have in particular communities, want to start with particular collectives and what they have always believed about God, with the goal of elaborating and clarifying for that community its understanding of God.

Christian Theology

Yet none of these are an adequate starting point for a Christian theology for they are not true to the reality of the God Christians know. Christian theology is thinking about and speaking about God in response to His revelation, His address to us is in the gospel of Jesus Christ, Son of God. The gospel is its starting point, and it takes its purpose and character both from the fact and content of that gospel address. This understanding of the starting point is consistent with the gospel's self understanding - it comes to us on its own terms as a message from God [Mk. 1: 1, 1: 14-15; Acts 10: 42, 13: 46-47, 17: 31-32; 1 Cor. 15:1-3; 1 Thess. 2: 13], one that personally addresses its hearers and seeks a change, a beginning; it is consistent with Christian history where the foundational documents and congregations arise out of and maintain the preaching of the gospel [i.e., they are the consequence of the apostolic preaching, itself the outcome of Jesus' equipping and commissioning, and embody and preserve that teaching]; and it is consistent with the experience of the individual Christian whose relationship with God is initiated and mediated through faith in the gospel. Reception of the gospel as a word from God is the obligatory starting point for Christian life and thought, and one cannot step outside of or move beyond what is 'given' in the gospel, e.g., to claim another source of knowing God independent of the gospel, without losing what is distinctly Christian. Thus Christian theology has, in common with Christian profession, just one assumption, the truthfulness of the gospel as the word from God.

The Gospel

I have assumed what is meant by 'gospel' but must now make that sense explicit. The 'gospel' can have shorter or longer summaries [e.g., Mk. 1: 15, 1 Cor. 15: 1-3; Acts 2: 15-36, 13:16-41, 17: 22-31. "The simple statement that 'Jesus Christ is Lord' summarizes the gospel."²] but is fundamentally the message about Jesus crucified and risen as the fulfilment of what God has promised His people, of Jesus as God's Son who reigns over all, and who can save all who turn to Him [Rom. 1: 1-4, Acts 10: 42-43]. As this is the content of the gospels they should be acknowledged, as they were in the early church, as expressions of the one Gospel, and reception of this 'gospel' will ultimately embrace as revelation the other apostolic writings that explain and apply that message, and the Old Testament writings that Jesus' coming fulfils.

What does accepting the gospel as an address from God mean for Christian theology, and what does its content tell us are givens in a Christian theology. The fact that there is a message from God that addresses individuals means that we take as given that God is, and in being is not a projection of the human imagination, that He is not passive but active, that He can communicate in intelligible words and is not condemned to inarticulate silence and that we, humans, are made to receive such words for the goal of the gospel is relationship with God. The initiative in our knowing God is now with God, and this is a gracious initiative for the word of address is a saving word. The ultimate test of the truth of claims about God - who He is, what He has done - will now be what God has said about Himself, and the theologian's primary task will be to know and understand that self revelation.

² P. Jensen (2002), *The Revelation of God*, IVP Press, p. 34.

The Gospel and a Personal Relationship with God

But the gospel does not just present us with the bare fact of revelation. The gospel has content even in its simplest Scriptural summary "Jesus is Lord" or that found in 1 Cor. 15:3-4 "that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures." It is this content in the message, which is the foundation of not only Christian theology but also the Christian life, which provides Christian theology with its 'givens', the core elements of Christian thinking about God, people and the world. The gospel, with its demand of repentance or talk of sin or fulfilment of Scripture, assumes God, the God of the Old Testament, in assuming responsibility to God and relationship to God. The gospel thus assumes the fact of Creation and humanity's creation as the foundation for the expectation that all people should repent and believe, an assumption made explicit in the preaching of Acts 14: 15-17 and Acts 17: 22-31 which also indicates a testimony of creation to God. The gospel also assumes and endorses the Old Testament revelation of God's character as loving, holy, righteous, faithful, a just judge. The Gospel in addressing humans regards them as significant yet sinful and mortal. The reality of our rebellion against God and our ignorance of God as a consequence is the gospel's starting point, a position that has implications for human knowing, for our capacity [or, better, incapacity] to arrive at, recognise and respond to truth. This is reinforced by the gospel story itself, which is the story of God coming amongst us as the enfleshed Word and, rather than being acknowledged and welcomed, is violently rejected. In addressing sin as the issue the gospel makes clear that spiritual and moral realities are at least as 'real' as physical reality and vital for human well being. Further, the gospel as an address from God will **focus** our knowledge of God on Jesus, for Jesus is the content of the gospel. The test for claims about knowledge of God will then be the understanding and place of Jesus in those claims. In particular it will be the place given to Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection, the pivotal events, and Jesus' claim, vindicated by the resurrection, to be Son of God. As the gospel comes with a purpose, the reconciliation of women and men to God in the creation of the people of God [implicit in both the notion of the kingdom of God and the fulfilment of Scripture], it commits Christian thinkers to reflect on the content of the changed relationship with God brought about by believing the gospel, both in its individual and communal aspects. Finally the gospel, with its commitment to bodily resurrection, embraces the Old Testament view of the end of the age as a given with its understanding of the outpouring of the Spirit, judgement, resurrection and the new creation as the goal of God's dealings and thus of human history.

All these are not conclusions arrived at by a process of lengthy reasoning from distant premises. They are immediate in the gospel, embraced at the beginning of Christian commitment, the givens of thinking that sees the gospel as God's address to His world. Each could be, and in other contexts have been, elaborated at great length. It can also be seen that the gospel makes claims about events [the "real" world] at three key points - the creation, the resurrection, and the end, never permitting Christian thinkers to accept a position where God is somehow prohibited from acting in the 'real' world, or theology cannot subsequently make statements about the real world. It is also interesting to note that the early summary of belief known as the Apostles' Creed, which represented for generations the givens of Christian faith, approximates very closely to this brief survey of the gospel's contents. But, for our purposes, what do these givens mean for the character and practice of Christian theology? They are listed here to help you see both how like, and unlike, it may be to your practice of science.

Characteristics of Christian Theology

Christian theology that has as its starting point the gospel will know itself to be firstly *responsive*. It is not a self directed activity but takes its direction and preoccupations from God's revelation of Himself, and in seeking to know God the theologian knows that she or he does this because he or she is first known by God. It will be secondly *relational*, for God is known as a

person who initiates relationship, not as an object. It will thus be characterised by faith in the word of God, the starting point of relationship with God, and humility [Is. 66: 1-2]. Because it is responsive and relational it will thirdly be constrained, knowing that it can know of God only what God reveals of Himself. It will not, however, be *constrained* only within the limits of revelation but also by the shape or structure of revelation. For example, a theology that does not have the central and abiding place taken up with Christ and His work is a deficient Christian theology and may be moving towards becoming an idolatrous theology. While being constrained it will also know itself to be *free*. This freedom is two-fold. There is (1) the freedom from the opinions of the world that comes from a sense of accountability to God for what is believed about God, and (2) the freedom that comes from knowing truth, while acknowledging that it does not know all truth (the freedom to acknowledge limitation, to not have all the answers). Christian theology, conscious of dependence on God and of the sinfulness of its practitioners will also be *prayerful*, for knowledge of God is not just dependent on revelation once made but revelation in the mind of the individual, traditionally called illumination. It will thus also be *patient*, free from the illusion that such knowledge can be acquired on demand. It will be *passionate*. This is not fundamentally an intellectual passion, a curiosity, because the relationship that undergirds Christian theology is all embracing of a human life, demanding and eliciting love. Theology is not a disinterested pursuit, but one that comes from love and has a goal, the loving of the beloved in truth, a love expressed in practical obedience that includes words and thoughts but is not confined to them. To operate in any part of life on the 'as if principle [i.e., 'as if God did not exist'] is an offence to Christian theology. Conscious of the particularities of its practitioners, Christian theology is also *self consciously communal*. The gospel is not a private insight but the birthright of all God's people, and the theologian is both in dialogue with other members of the family of faith [present and past] and responsible to them [present and future]. It is this communal reality that allows theology to be *self-critical* [seeing the successes and failures of others in other contexts] and *progressive*, developing the thought of others. As the gospel, transmitted over the centuries, is preserved in texts which are themselves the gospel, Christian theology is also *text dependent* and *text driven*, requiring the skills to access ancient texts in ancient languages. While the interpretation of texts also allows for new insights and requires a consciousness on the part of the interpreter of their own time bound presuppositions the historical consensus of the sense of a text cannot be departed from lightly, for we observe in biblical hermeneutics not only that we occasionally have differences but that so much has been understood by so many over such a lengthy time, an observation that speaks of the shared starting point of Christian interpreters across the ages in faith in the gospel and the gift of the Spirit. Finally, like the rest of the Christian life, Christian theology in its shape and practice must be *cruciform*. Luther commented that it is prayer and suffering that made a theologian. The apostolic lifestyle evidenced this [e.g., 2 Cor. 4 & 5, Phil. 3] and faithfulness to the truth of God in Christ even in opposition and suffering is a requirement of theology, and such a theology will not be surprised by such opposition. Just as a theology that has its starting point in the gospel is faith seeking understanding [Anselm] so it is also the exploration in life and thought of the folly of the cross to gain wisdom, not the attempt to impose wisdom on that foolishness of God.

The Gospel and Science

I have said that Christian theology has as its starting point, like the Christian life, the gospel of God. The truthfulness of the gospel is its one 'assumption'. The fact and content of this gospel provide the givens, the core beliefs of Christian theology that inform all its activity, and also determine the character and practice of Christian theology. You are in a better position than I to say how it relates to your practice of the scientific enterprise but I offer these thoughts as starters to your own reflection. They are plainly alike in that both represent human activity within a human community and both present as the fruit of their labours a body of knowledge. But theology is not

self directed by human curiosity, being responsive to the initiative of God, and its practitioner starts off and continues being more known than knowing. It is not reductionist in methodology, seeking a kind of comprehensiveness both in its understanding of what God has said about Himself, ourselves, and our world, knowing that such an understanding will yield normative conclusions for all three spheres of our relating, which in turn embrace the totality of a human life. It has a deep suspicion of pride in human reason, being strongly convicted of our capacity in any endeavour, but especially in relation to God, to be deceived or self deceiving. It cannot forget that the crucifixion of Jesus was a rational response [in the sense that it could be rationally justified John 11: 49-50, Mt. 27: 24] by rational people. It is therefore shy, or should be, of embracing anything not clearly taught in Scripture. While scripture, and the theology that stems from it, does not teach science it does provide a 'theology of nature' that can provide a context for the operation of the scientific endeavour³ and it does claim to teach scientists, like all other people, about their duty to God and to others and to provide the 'metanarrative' that gives meaning to their life and work and hope when both are over.

³ P. Jensen (2002), The Revelation of God, IVP Press, p. 116-117

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