

Engaging in the task of theological reflection

[Religion](#), [Christianity](#)



Methodologically speaking, how should one set about engaging in the task of theological reflection? INDEX

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Whatever is truth must be consistent with all other truth" 1 . There cannot be a variety of truths. All aspects of truth must be one, consistent with the one God. There is an aspect of faith that needs to judge claims of truth even though this seems opposite to the notion of faith itself. Reflection for a Christian begins with the notion that God is truth. The journey of faith requires reflection before ideas can be transferred from thoughts to belief systems. This paper looks at the need for methodology in theological reflection and how methodology is always the production of man and therefore needs to be constantly revised and developed. Pannenberg, Wolfhart An Introduction to Systematic Theology. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1991), 6 ESSAY REFLECTION Theological reflection needs to removed as far as possible initially from experience otherwise our reflection places us in the position of God, where we reflect on our experience and

anthropomorphize God, rather than coming from the premise that we are finite beings seeking an eternal God whose thoughts and ways are higher than our thoughts and ways. Everyone reflects but this initial approach to reflection will determine the outcome of that reflection. Without reflection on truth, Christians will become insecure about the message they are sharing and move away from the gospel to other peripheral issues or causes.

Reflection can be a haphazard exercise, but when we move from reflection to systematic reflection we then move into the discipline we call 'theology'.

THE NEED FOR THEOLOGY Theology is a science. A science seeks to understand an object on its own terms and then consider how it relates to existence. According to Barth, theology is a science "whose task is to apprehend, understand and speak of 'God'." ² There is no worldview, philosophy or religion that is not in some way also a theology. Christians have seen many changes in approach to theology over the course of history. The word 'theology' is derived from two Greek words, *theos* (God) and *logos* (word, teaching, study). Theology therefore is the teaching concerning God or the study of God. Early Christian study of theology was highly influenced by the Greeks but by the medieval period it had become 'the rational explication of divine revelation'. ³ By the 18th century in Germany theology had become a more inclusive word referring to a variety of theological disciplines. Today Christians view theology either as an inclusive term or slightly narrower but regardless of this and the development of the forms of theology it is "the intellectual reflection on faith". ⁴ Theological reflection combines the intellectual reflection of theology with the reflection of how that faith and understanding of God works in the community of believers and

the world. The Christian theologian combines the areas of theology, anthropology, Christology, pneumatology, ecclesiology and eschatology. But over and above all of this, it is based totally on the Word of God. It relates man to God, rather than God to man, it is interested in God before being interested in man and can only be a human production of God. ' In short, theology is not a creative act but only a praise of the Creator and His act of creation-praise that to the greatest extent truly responds to the creative act of God'.⁵ 2 Barth, Karl *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction*. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1963), 23 3 Yves , M. J. Congar, *A History of Theology* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1968), 33 4 Stanley Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Grand Rapids: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 4 5 Barth, 1

METHODOLOGY AND ITS NECESSITY Once we come to an understanding of reflection and theological reflection, the question to consider is why methodology is necessary. Once again it is a question of truth, the need to define truth, teach truth and appropriate that truth into our lives. Truth remains constant yet language and thought change through eras and geographical regions. Therefore truth needs to be constantly reformulated in order to present it clearly through the changes of time, language and culture. This is where a system is needed. A comprehensive interpretation of basic doctrines about God is how systematic theology began. " Systematic theology is necessary in order to substantiate the truth claims of Christian language about God. "6 Thomas Aquinas practiced this type of theology and was the first to make the statement that ' everything in theology is concerned with God'. 7 However, there have been many challenges over time which have called for the development of theological method.

Pannenberg discusses two of these in order to illustrate why these challenges have been necessary and indeed helpful. The first challenge has been the role that science has taken particularly since the Industrial Revolution. Science has been a major factor in the shaping of modern culture. Some scientists would believe that science has filled the place that once was filled by religion and that science is able to answer the existential questions posed by human beings. The second challenge is one which is crucial to an approach to theological reflection. This is the challenge of the recourse to authority. Prior to the 17th century, authority was regarded as necessary to gaining understanding of biblical, or other texts. The reliability of the authority was all that needed to be determined. In modern times " authority and reason were no longer seen in harmony but in opposition, and it became the battle cry of modern culture to follow the light of reason, not the prejudices of authority. " 8 This led to the use of experience as proof of authority which caused damage to the discussion of Christianity being taken seriously as a rational discourse. Authority itself is not an argument but a motivating factor in searching for and understanding truth in the scriptures. According to Gordon Fee " the evangelical stance on the question of religious authority is that our basic authority is external. This is predicated on the prior theological grounds (which we find eminently reasonable) on the nature of God and the reality of the Fall. " 9 We believe that God has revealed Himself, that God wants to reveal Himself and he has chosen the ways to reveal Himself - through what He has done, through the person of Jesus Christ and through the Bible. These three work together but ultimately the Bible reveals and explains God through history and reveals and explains the

person and work of Jesus Christ. Because of this, we take the Bible as our ultimate authority and use other forms of authority, (tradition, reason and experience), to verify this authority. 6 Pannenberg, 13 7 Ibid, 13 8 Ibid, 14 9Fee, Gordon Gospel and Spirit: Issues in New Testament Hermeneutics. (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1991) 29 As one moves into the task of theological reflection, various factors need to be considered to ensure that the methodology used is satisfactory in ensuring a balanced, objective view of the text in order to ensure that the subsequent application of the text is reliable for life. FACTORS TO CONSIDER Consider firstly the role of history. In Christianity, the claims of the gospel are dependent on an historical persona and an historical event. Other people, prophecies and proclamations are historical. Theological reflection seeks to understand how these factors of history can be relevant to people today. An understanding of history is important for one to ascertain what is written as an historical account, what God was revealing through an historical event or how historical proclamations are relevant today. Creation is an historical event and the world around us reveals that it was created. Creation is described in the beginning of Genesis. But is this description an historical account? Without a solid understanding of history, the process of theological reflection can be potentially misleading. A biblical view of history, according to James Montgomery Boice, is one in which God, rather than people, is in control. The desire of believer is that His will be done. This is made evident when we pray, " Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in Heaven. " 10 Several components of a Christian view of history are revealed in this passage. Firstly, there is a goal of history which is the Kingdom of God.

Secondly it reveals there is a struggle or a battle. It does not come naturally but is something that must be prayed for and sought after and thirdly there is human responsibility. By understanding this, we begin to gain greater insight to the purpose of the historical counts. The Bible has been written in a variety of genres each with its own puprose. Secular writers insist that the Bible is purely human writing, but on the other hand, some Christians tend towards religious simplicism. " Theology lives with and from the Bible, not as a pupil of primary school mathematics lives with a set of correct answers but as a storyteller lives with what seems the original and most authentic version of the story she or she is trying to tell, now, under different circumstances. "

11 We must be careful not to see the scriptures and the role of theology as simply to acquire information. The purpose is also inspirational and revelational. 10 Matthew 6: 9-10 (KJV) 11 Hall, Douglas Thinking the Faith, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 262 THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION AND THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY Theological reflection is not an isolated exercise. " The truth is that theology is a component of the life of the church, not vice versa. "

12 This does not mean all agreeing but all pursing truth together. As John Macarthur states, " when it comes to biblical issues, moral principles, theological truth divine revelation and other spiritual absolutes, compromise is never appropriate. "

13 Martyn Lloyd-Jones refers to the distrust of polemics in modern society. He says, " Disapproval of polemics in the Christian Church is a very serious matter. But that is the attitude of the age in which we live. The prevailing idea today in many circles is not to bother about these things. As long as we are all Christians, anyhow, somehow all is well. "

14 He contends that the scriptures are full of arguments, full of

polemics and it is the role of the community of disciples to systematically engage in reflection and discussion with the goal of discerning truth. " This is not an argument for the sake of argument... We must earnestly ' contend for the truth' and we are called upon to do that by the New Testament. " 15

METHODOLOGY AND ITS DEVELOPMENT Due to the numerous factors involved in theological reflection, methodology has taken various forms through the centuries. Martin Luther's approach, sola scriptura, or scripture alone, which viewed scripture as the only source rather than the inclusion of the church's teaching through the eras, was refined by later theologians such as Calvin and the writers of the Westminster Confession of Faith. By the 20th century, Paul Tillich, had developed a system of theology which drew on existentialist questions posed by man combined with divine revelation from scripture to provide answers. " The answers theology presents must be derived from revelation, but they must be expressed in a form which will speak to the existential concerns of human beings. " 16The Wesleyan quadrilateral is a popular alternative to this approach. It suggests four sources for theological reflection - Scripture, Reason, Experience and Tradition. Although all four sources are regarded as equal one is often elevated above the others. Karl Barth, in his writing on evangelical theology, describes it as " modest theology because it is determined to be so by its object, that is by him who is its subject. " 17 He goes on to say that there are three subordinate presuppositions which need to be understood to approach theology using this method. They are firstly, the general event of human existence, secondly, that there are people of faith who are ' ready and willing to acknowledge God's self-proclamation' and thirdly, there is reason which is

common not only to believers but to all people. 12 Ibid, 289 13 MacArthur, John The Truth War, (Nashville: Nelson, 2007) 192 14 D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, Romans: An Exposition of Chapters 3: 20-4: 25: Atonement and Justification (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970) 113 15 Ibid, 114 16 Grenz, 19 17 Barth, 7

A further development in theological method is that of pentecostal theology. The development of pentecostalism has had an impact on other theological methods in the last century. " Someone once remarked that Pentecostalism is an experience looking for a theology" 18 was how Pentecostal theology was initially viewed by other theologians. In 1918, Benjamin B. Warfield wrote in his book, ' Counterfeit Miracles " The objective, written authority of scripture as inspired by the Holy Spirit would inevitable be undermined by those who taught a subjective concept of the Spirit. "19 This notion has largely diminished today in evangelical circles as people felt ,“ When men had the Word without the Spirit they were often dead and dull and dry; and when men had the Spirit without the Word there is always a tendency towards fanaticism. " 20 CONCLUSION " The freedom of theology..... has its foundation precisely in the fact that we must ever ask anew for the message, for its authentic content and meaning and consequently can come into conflict about it ourselves, and in the fact that we have nothing under our control from the beginning" 21 Helmut Gollwitzer, An Introduction to Protestant Theology, trans, David Cairns (Philadelphia Westminster, Therefore, as one approaches theological reflection one must determine methodology firstly by the way they " proceed in criticism and construction" and secondly " by the way they justify their procedure' 22 18 McGee, Gary " Historical Background of Assemblies of God Theology", in Systematic

Theology, a Pentecostal Perspective. (Stanley Horton (ed), Springfield: Gospel Publishing House, 1998), 1 19 Ibid, 8 20 Ibid, 8 21 Helmut Gollwitzer, An Introduction to Protestant Theology, trans, David Cairns (Philadelphia Westminster,) 5 22 Packer, James " Method, Theological", in The New Dictionary of Theology. (Ferguson & Wright (eds.). Leicester, England: IVP, 1988), 425 BIBLIOGRAPHY Barth, Karl Evangelical Theology: An Introduction. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1963 Boice, James Montgomery Foundations of the Christian Faith: A Comprehensible and Readable Theology, Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP, 1986 Bloesch, Donald A Theology of Word & Spirit: Authority & Method in Theology, Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP, 1992 Fee, Gordon Gospel and Spirit: Issues in New Testament Hermeneutics. Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1991 Gollwitzer, Helmut An Introduction to Protestant Theology, trans, David Cairns Philadelphia Westminster, Grenz, Stanley Revisioning Evangelical Theology, Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP, 1993 Grenz, S. J. Theology for the Community of God. Carlisle: Paternoster, 1994. — Ch6 ' Our Nature as Persons Destined for Community' pages 196-233. Hall, Douglas Thinking the Faith, Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991 Macchia, Frank " Pentecostal Theology", The New International Dictionary of Pentecostal Movements. Stanley Burgess (ed.). Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2003 McGee, Gary " Historical Background of Assemblies of God Theology", in Systematic Theology, a Pentecostal Perspective. Stanley Horton (ed), Springfield: Gospel Publishing House, 1998 MacArthur, John The Truth War, Nashville: Nelson, 2007 Macquarrie, John Principles of Christian Theology. London: SCM, 1966 Martyn Lloyd-Jones, D. Romans: An Exposition of Chapters 3: 20-4: 25: Atonement and Justification Grand Rapids: Zondervan,

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