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Why Engage in the Discipline of Theology?

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This lecture is intended as something of an introduction to the idea of theology, attempting to make a case for why theology is a discipline in which Christians have good reason to be engaged. Now, if this attempt is to have any chance of being successful, we need first of all to have some sense of what theology is. If we look at the word "theology", we see that it literally means "God-talk"—but that's not all there is to it, because there are a lot of ways of talking about God that are not theology. Many philosophers, for example, talk about God non-theologically; indeed, they often go to some lengths to make just this point. And, of course, adherents to other faiths—Jews, Hindus, Muslims—talk about God without asking exactly the same kinds of questions, or asking them in just the same way that we do. And this is so, I would argue, because theology, at least as the term has come to be used in Western culture, is not talk about God in general, but talk about God that is occasioned by a prior commitment to that complex of beliefs and practices which constitute the Christian church.

Having said this, it is important to face the fact that this way of talking about God rarely makes anybody's top ten list of the most productive ways to spend time. Even in the church—to say nothing of the culture at large—theology tends to be viewed as a somewhat questionable enterprise. Nor is this surprising when you consider that after nearly two thousand years Christians have yet to come up with a way of talking about God that they can agree on among themselves, let alone one convincing to the world at large. This history of failure inspired the great Swiss theologian Karl Barth to characterize theology

as the description of an embarrassment, in which Christians struggle to explain how it is that their own very human words can also be the Word of God.¹ After all, the gospel Christians proclaim is supposed to be “good news” for all people everywhere, yet Christians seem chronically incapable of convincing the world that what they have to say is either news or especially good.

This embarrassment has grown particularly acute in the modern period. In the medieval world the value of the Christian message was pretty much taken for granted; but beginning with the fragmentation of Western Christianity occasioned by the Reformation, the prestige of the church has fallen off considerably. Given this situation, the question naturally arise, “Why bother?” Perhaps it would be better to be silent on matters like God, about which we evidently lack the capacity to speak clearly or convincingly. Why not simply get on with the work of doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God (Micah 6:8) and leave theology aside? Yet although Christians may be tempted from time to time by this line of argument, in the final analysis they have found themselves unable to dispense with the work of theology, embarrassing though it may be. They have found it necessary, in other words, to reflect on why they should talk about God in one way rather than another. That does not mean we as Christians have to wait until we get our theology straight before we can go out and do works of love and justice in the world. Theology is not a matter of developing a theory about God that we then go out and apply. On the contrary, theology is necessary precisely because Christians are *already* engaged in the business of preaching the gospel and doing the works that follow from it. But the act of preaching the gospel is anything but self-justifying, because the gospel isn’t simply a friendly bit of advice on how to get along in the world, but a message that demands the complete attention of its listeners and a life of total commitment and action that, if it is taken seriously, accords very ill with established perceptions of what people ought to be about in the world. And if we as Christians persist in speaking this message to others as the final truth about what it means to be a human being, it is hard to see how we can avoid reflecting on what we are saying and why we say it. And if there were any doubt on this score, the need to be able to justify our faith has clear

biblical support in 1 Peter 3:15: “Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an account of the hope that is in you.”

Now, in many respects this need to be able to give an account of the Christian hope is very ordinary. A lot of communities—from hunter-gatherer societies to multinational corporations to bowling leagues—have occasion to reflect on the hope or the rationale that sustains them as communities. When we think about what giving an account of the Christian hope might mean, it seems natural that would include telling the story of the community in which that hope takes shape: talking about where we came from, about what drew us together into community in the first place; and then going on to think about what lies ahead, about where we are going, and whether the things we do together as a community are consistent with that goal. It is natural for every human community to take time for this kind of self-evaluation, and Christians are no different.

What sets the church apart from other communities (and also causes its embarrassment), is the fact that Christians can only tell their own particular story by doing theology. It is not enough for us to talk about our community and its members; we must also talk about God. Why? Because the story that Christians tell about themselves, the story which serves as the central reference point for the beliefs and practices that shape their life together, is a story about God, about the One who is the origin and goal of all that is. It is a long story which begins in the Hebrew Scriptures. It tells how God made a covenant with the people of Israel, leading them out of slavery and into the Promised Land; it goes on to relate their faithlessness to that covenant, their exile, and their restoration. And for Christians this story continues and finds its culmination in the New Testament account of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, through whom the covenant God made with Israel was extended to include every nation.

Because *this* is their story, Christians cannot talk about themselves without talking about God. Christians claim that at bottom (and contrary to all appearances) their story is also God’s story. And because Christians believe that the call of this God in Jesus Christ is gospel, or good news, for all people everywhere, they cannot regard the task of giving an account of

their hope as a matter that concerns only themselves. Because the Christian story includes all people, Christians are under an obligation to tell their story in a way that allows non-Christians as well to hear it as good news.

If this obligation is to be met, Christians need to be able to explain their story in a way that makes sense even to those who do not belong to the community. This is not the same as evangelism: the point of theology is not to persuade others to believe; that is the job of preaching. A good sermon—thank God!—is not the same thing as a lecture in theology. In a sermon the pastor proclaims the Word of God; when we do theology we ask whether what the pastor preaches is in fact God's Word. Theology's job is secondary; it is the job of keeping the church honest by forcing it to reflect systematically on the content and implications of its preaching. The theologian asks whether the church's proclamation has any logic to it, whether what is being proclaimed from the pulpit is indeed good news, or simply a bizarre collection of ancient Hebrew, Persian, and Greek superstitions. If this kind of reflection is to be productive, those who do it need to be perceptive and flexible. Only so will the church be able to continue to communicate the gospel effectively when faced with new situations, new persons, and new ideas. Whenever Christians take the time to engage in this kind of reflection, they are doing theology in the way that Peter describes: giving an account of their hope in God.

We can call this particular dimension of theology *apologetic*. The Greek word from which this term derives comes originally from the courtroom, and refers to giving a defense. And it is this word that Peter uses when he urges Christians always to be ready to make their defense—their *apologia*—to anyone who demands from them an account of the hope that is in them. The apologetic side to theology is therefore a matter of making the Christian story understandable, of using words and concepts that illuminate what it means to say that God was in Christ calling the church into being, and of showing that the doctrines and practices that have resulted from this call hang together as a coherent whole.

But that is not all there is to theology because, unfortunately, it is a matter of Christian experience as well as Christian belief that the task of giving an account of the faith does

not take place against a neutral background. Theological reflection is a contentious process in which many competing accounts are presented for the community's consideration. And traditionally, Christians have not judged all accounts of God to be of equal value or mutually compatible; quite the contrary, they have insisted that some accounts are destructive of a genuine understanding of the story of God in Jesus Christ. Consequently, at the same time that Christians attempt to give a common account of their beliefs, they have felt themselves obliged to reject other accounts as unfaithful to the Christian story.

Now the history of Christian condemnation of competing accounts of the faith has been a major factor in producing the embarrassment of theology that I mentioned earlier. The very words associated with the condemnations of particular theological positions—words like dogma, orthodoxy, heresy, anathema—immediately conjure up pictures of the Inquisition, witch trials, and book burning. Add to these images the victims of religious wars and the slaughter and enslavement of indigenous peoples in the name of Christian civilization, and it is easy to understand how a philosopher like Voltaire could describe the history of Christianity as a catalogue of crimes against humanity—sentiments which have been echoed in one form or another by Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, Sartre, and many other critics of Christianity over the last two centuries.

The struggle to answer these critics lies at the heart of much modern Christian thought. In fact, it would probably not be unfair to characterize the modern period in theology as an attempt to come to terms with the suspicion that Christianity in general and theology in particular are far more trouble than they are worth. Even in the (at least nominally) Christian cultures of western Europe and North America, memory of the battles fought in the name of theology has led to a profound distrust of theological argument in the church as well as in the public sphere. And elsewhere in the world, memory of the oppression of non-Christian peoples carried out in the name of Christianity has led many to conclude that the promotion of genuine freedom and justice are simply incompatible with professing the Christian faith. From either point of view, the problem with theology is not merely that it is unconvincing, but that it is positively dangerous and destructive to genuine human community.

This legacy forces us to ask whether it is really necessary to condemn certain ways of telling the Christian story. A broad toleration of all the different ways Christians talk about God story might seem more reasonable. And yet Christians have found that at the same time they seek to proclaim the gospel as *good news*, they must also emphasize the fact that it is *news*, that it is not just any story, but the particular story of God in Jesus Christ, and that it is necessary to speak a decisive “no” when someone has failed to get the story straight. This need to judge and (sometimes) reject some accounts of the Christian hope constitutes the second, or *polemic*, side to theology. If apologetic theology is a matter of building up an account of God, the polemic side is a matter of tearing down such accounts. But it is not a process of destruction for its own sake; rather, the critical work of polemics is necessary for the sake of building up, because solid construction, in theology as elsewhere requires prior excavation, and the sorting out of good materials from bad.² This second side of theology has its biblical foundation in 1 John 4:1, which reads: “Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God.”

John takes it for granted that there are many spirits or, if you prefer, many ideas and attitudes, abroad in the world, and that not all of them are consistent with the story Christians seek to tell. It is therefore necessary for the community to test the spirits in order to make sure that the accounts it gives of God in new situations remain faithful to the foundational story of Jesus. In the process of testing such accounts, the church has to ask questions of itself and to make concrete decisions based on how it answers them. Will it be a community that attempts to influence the course of worldly events? Or will it seek to separate from a world it believes to be abandoned by God? Does it accept the established order of things as a manifestation of divine will? Or does it see God as one who might oppose the status quo?

These kinds of questions are the stuff of Christian theology, and they do not come from ivory tower speculation. They come in response to real life challenges in which the Christian community is forced to ask what it will do in response to particular situations it faces in the world. In this way, the constructive, apologetic and critical, polemic forms of theology go

together and complement each other as Christians seek to tell their story faithfully in moments of crisis, where clear speaking and decisive judgments are called for. And, as a matter of historical fact, the dogmas of the church, like the Trinity or the Reformation doctrine of justification by faith alone, were formulated in just such moments, as the church found it necessary to take a stand against positions it believed to be unfaithful to the Christian story.

This process of defining dogma should not be confused with dogmatism. Dogma is, literally, an opinion. In the ancient world the word was applied to the public teachings of the various philosophical schools, so that one spoke of the “dogmas” of the Stoics or the Cynics or the Epicureans. Dogmatism, on the other hand, suggests a refusal to accept any criticism of one’s dogmas and the attempt to impose them on others by force. Now, there is no denying that the word dogma has acquired a specifically negative connotation in present-day English largely because the Christian churches have used dogma in order to promote dogmatism. But it is important to recognize that this move from dogma to dogmatism is not inevitable. And I would argue that Christians have resisted dogmatism most impressively when they have had the courage to engage in the theological task of questioning prevailing dogmas and opposing them with other dogmas more faithful to the Christian story.³

For example, it was by appealing to the dogma that defines Jesus Christ as the sole Word of God that the leaders of the Confessing Church condemned the dogmatism of the pro-Nazi “German Christian” movement, which argued that Hitler and the politics of “blood and soil” were part of the good news back in the 1930s. And, more recently, it was by insisting on the equality of all persons before God as a point of dogma that Christians in South Africa opposed the dogmatism of the Dutch Reformed Church and its dogma that apartheid was part of the story of Jesus Christ.

There is, of course, always the risk that a dogma that may have proved crucial in defining the Christian message in the past may become petrified, and be used as an instrument of oppression in the present. But this abuse is not the result of theology; it is rather what happens when the church neglects to do theology. In other words, it is when the church, whether out of complacency or fear, fails to test the spirits that it runs

the greatest risk of distorting its telling of God's story so that it is no longer the good news of Jesus Christ.

The modern world does not make it easy for Christians to remain faithful to this story. It is a world characterized by an enormous degree of pluralism, of different ways of looking at things, some religious and some non-religious, and Christians must seek to come to terms with them if they are to be responsible in their preaching of the good news.

In this context, the demand that Christians be ready both to "give an account" of God and to "test" that account can help us to rule out two extremes in doing theology that confront the church. On one side we can define what we might call (for lack of a better term) the absolutist position. In its most extreme form, an absolutist position regards one particular account of God as exhaustive and is unable to say "yes" to any new theological ideas: any deviation from established teaching is viewed a betrayal of the Christian faith. And while it may not sound very attractive, it is important to recognize that there is something compelling about this position: it reflects a valid concern that Christianity could lose its distinctive voice and become watered down under the influence of ideas and opinions coming from other belief systems. Thus someone with absolutist sympathies might argue that Christianity is best thought of as a closed system of thought like mathematics or chess: based on a fixed set of premises and procedural rules which one is not free to alter. If a chess player were suddenly to move a rook diagonally instead of straight up and down, it would be entirely proper to cry foul and disqualify him or her from the game. In the same way, one could argue that there is nothing unreasonable about a church expecting its members to adhere strictly to its official account of God, because only so is it possible for the church to retain its own distinctive identity and message in a pluralistic culture.

At the other extreme we have what might be called a relativist position. In contrast to the absolutist (who is unable to say "yes" to any new ways of talking about God), the extreme relativist is unable to say "no" to them. Arguments for relativism can also seem persuasive. They tend to begin with the observation that the beliefs and practices of any community—including the church—are formed in reaction to particular social and historical contexts, and therefore must be updated

as those contexts change. Because there is no version of the Christian story that is uncontaminated by its context, the argument goes, no one account of God can be regarded as universally binding on Christians. For the strict relativist the condemnation of different positions can only be interpreted as a sign of bigotry and narrow-mindedness, in which the church has become so concerned with maintaining its own distinctive traditions that it ignores the continuing work of God in the world and ends up being irrelevant. It follows that someone with a more relativistic outlook might view Christianity less like chess and more like improvisation, in which it is necessary to be ready to change the rules in order to adapt to new situations and make the gospel understandable to others beyond the established boundaries of the church.

It would probably be hard to find anyone who would defend either of these positions in their most extreme forms. Within the history of Christian theology, absolutism and relativism appear not so much viable options in themselves as points that define the ends of the theological spectrum. Therefore, while circumstances will lead individual theologians to position themselves closer to one end or the other of this spectrum, both extremes tend to be avoided. Nor is this surprising, because absolutism and relativism alike, each in its own way, ignore the command to test the spirits.

The command to test the spirits is issued in the first instance as a warning to the community: it is necessary to "test the spirits" because "not every spirit is from God". Such a command presupposes that at least some accounts of God are heretical, that is, unfaithful to the Christian story. Yet a radical relativism refuses to concede this possibility; in its eagerness to adapt to new circumstances, it fails to recognize that the Christian story has at its core a particular shape that cannot be adapted indefinitely without making it into a different story with a different message.

At the other extreme, absolutism does guard the integrity and distinctiveness of the Christian message, but it disregards the fact that this message must be open to reformulation so that it can be heard as good news for people inside and outside the church under new or unusual conditions. In this way, the absolutist, too, fails to heed the demand to "test the spirits," because the warning that "not every spirit is from God"

presupposes that at least some spirits *are* from God, and that the church needs to listen to them if it is to continue to tell God's story faithfully in the world.

We might summarize the situation as follows: radical absolutism disregards the *apologetic* task of giving an understandable account of God in new situations. It thereby turns Christianity into a monologue, in which the official leaders of the church are the only speakers. At the other end of the spectrum, radical relativism sidesteps the *polemic* task of rejecting certain accounts of God as incompatible with the Christian story. When this happens, Christian proclamation dissolves into mere chatter, and the good news of God's Word is lost amid a confusion of voices that are all judged equally true or equally false. An alternative to these positions which takes seriously both the apologetic and polemic sides of the question understands the church's speech as neither monologue nor babble, but as a conversation.

Conversation implies genuine give and take between speakers, a willingness to speak an honest "yes" or "no" to each other. If we conceive of the life of the church as a conversation, it is necessary for its members, including the leadership, to be willing to have their opinions called into question, recognizing that because God's Word is "living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword" (Hebrews 4:12), the shape it will assume at any given time cannot be decided in advance; it needs to be waited on. But because God addresses us in human words, this waiting does not imply passivity; it demands the kind of probing of words and their meanings that is the substance of genuine conversation.

And conversation does not take place in a vacuum. We can only pick out God's Words from among all the other words that surround us, if we have some fixed markers against which to evaluate particular theological proposals. In other words, we need to recognize that genuine conversation is possible only when there is a common speech, with clearly defined rules of grammar and syntax, and a basic, core vocabulary shared by the speakers. And that means that if you or I expect to be productive participants in the Christian conversation, we need to be trained in its grammar, sensitive to its idioms, its peculiarities of expression. Only so can we expect to gain a sense of why Christians have decided in times past to express their

faith in one way rather than another, and, in the process, gain some appreciation for the kinds of issues are at stake in the debates that have caused and continue to sustain so much division among those who call themselves Christians.

If the life of faith takes the form of a conversation, we can think of theology as its grammar.⁴ The dogmas that make up the content of Christian theology can be conceived, in turn, as grammatical rules that guide Christians in their reflection as they strive to discern the will of God for the church at any given time. And, like grammar, the point of theology is not in the first instance to limit conversation, but to facilitate it by providing a shared framework within which ideas may be expressed and evaluated. And by dedicating ourselves as theologians to learn this grammar, we certainly do not commit ourselves to agree with everything that Christians have said; on the contrary, the value of learning the church's theological grammar is that it allows us to be clear about where and why we disagree, and thus to be sure that we aren't simply misunderstanding each other. Only then can we decide whether such disagreement is important, and what strategies may be necessary to overcome it.

The situation is complicated considerably by the fact that there have arisen among Christians over the centuries many different theological grammars, each with its own peculiarities. There is no reason why diversity in itself should be a bad thing. We can all take delight in the regional peculiarities of English, for example, while still recognizing that the man from Edinburgh and the woman from Bombay still speak the same language. In the same way, there is no reason why local differences in the way Christians express themselves should not enrich the church. Nevertheless, there are some points where such differences have been perceived by their respective adherents to be unacceptable, where the rules of speech have diverged so greatly that groups are no longer able to recognize each other as speaking the same Christian language and telling the same story.

It is impossible for us to avoid these divisions when we undertake the task of theology. Everyone speaks the language of Christianity with a distinctive accent. And there is no need to be embarrassed by this. For one thing, there is no way to avoid it: as much as we might wish it were otherwise, there simply

is not any neutral language of Christian theology, some objective standpoint from which we can dispassionately evaluate the merits of different Christian grammars. Because theology is an ongoing conversation, we all enter it in the middle. Consciously or not, we all speak from within a particular tradition, with its own distinctive sensibilities and turns of phrase.

In a Lutheran seminary it is to be expected that we should proclaim the gospel with a recognizably Lutheran accent. But because we are a Lutheran seminary in particular, we should not simply accept that fact as natural or self-justifying. We as Lutherans define ourselves traditionally as a reforming movement within the church catholic. We claim that something about the way we speak the gospel is not simply an interesting local variant, but absolutely essential if Christian talk about God is to maintain its integrity as the good news of Jesus of Nazareth. So essential do Lutherans feel their way of speaking to be that they have found themselves compelled to break with the church of Rome, the church which traces its line in unbroken succession back to the apostles. And no one was more aware than Luther of the seriousness of this break, and of the tremendous weight it placed on those who adhere to the Augsburg Confession. And so as Lutherans who are about the business of trying to improve our command of the grammar of our faith, we have a double burden. We not only need to familiarize ourselves with the broad outlines of the Christian conversation as it has developed over the last two thousand years. We also need to reflect on how we relate to it, on whether speaking with a Lutheran accent helps us to communicate the gospel, or whether it just makes it harder to understand.

But if we are to assess ourselves accurately, we cannot just look at what Lutherans have to say. Lutheranism grew out of the Christian theological conversation, and it has developed as a confessional movement only in continued interaction with the theological positions of others. If we are to understand what Lutherans have to contribute to the conversation, why they persist in demanding the attention of the wider community of Christians, we need to get to know the lay of the land—not simply those particular controversies which occasioned Luther's protests, but the whole complex of theological ideas that formed the background both to his own thinking and that of his opponents. And this is possible because the

fact that there are real differences between the ways in which Christians talk about God and the world does not mean that there is no possibility of communication between these various dialects. In fact, the whole aim of reform only makes sense if there is trust that at some level Christians, for all the diversity in the ways they worship, for all the variety of ways in which they talk about God, and for all the differences in their backgrounds, are still able to enter into conversation with one another.

Whether this presupposition is justified, whether it is possible to understand and work toward agreement with people who speak from different theological perspectives, will only be seen as we actually go about the business of examining the major doctrines or teachings of the Christian tradition. Only by improving our familiarity with the issues that have agitated Christians in the past can we expect to gain the skill and the confidence to speak our own "yes" or "no" to particular ways of telling the Christian story. And in the same way that one can only learn how to ride a bike by getting on it, one's skills will only be honed as one actually tries to form theological arguments by responding to issues that one finds pressing in the church's life.

Entering into any conversation, including the church's, is as much a responsibility as a right. We need to work in order to understand the position of our conversation partner if the conversation is not to regress into a monologue or degenerate into idle chatter. And for the theologian, one's conversation partners aren't limited to this room, or even to this time, but extend back across the centuries to all those who have struggled in the past to tell the Christian story faithfully. And in the same way that our telling of that story is affected by those who came before us, so we must always keep in mind that what we say will affect the way that story is told in times to come.

Because our perspectives remain partial and our motives mixed, we can expect that theology will continue to be an embarrassment. The process of conversing is by its very nature unpredictable, depending always on the (often unexpected) turns taken by one's conversation partner. But insofar as it helps us to participate in conversation, theology also carries the possibility of helping us to understand and respond to

other Christians across time and space. And because we cannot respond without first having heard, the first requirement for joining the conversation is a willingness to listen.

This need to listen certainly doesn't mean that we are obliged to give our attention equally to every voice that calls to us. Real listening requires the capacity for discernment. The good listener, like the good observer, is not the one who takes in everything, but who knows what to ignore. Consider that what distinguishes an experienced chess player from the beginner is not that he or she sees more, but less. While the novice is simply overwhelmed by all the possible moves that can be made, the master's eyes automatically filter out the poor moves, so that the player is able to concentrate on and choose from among a comparatively small number of possible options.

Good listening is a similar skill. The good listener does not take in everything indiscriminately, but has the ability to screen out the background noise in order to focus on what is important. Part of being a good theologian includes acquiring this ability, which requires first a sense of where to listen. For a theologian—especially one in the Lutheran tradition—the first place to listen is Scripture. As the definitive rendering of the Christian story, Scripture provides the basic framework that shapes all our other listening, the basic patterns of speech and thought that serve as the measure, the final court of appeal for all Christian statements about God. But listening to Scripture is not just a matter of citing chapter and verse. Simply lining up “Bible bullets” does not constitute an argument because, as the temptation stories remind us, the devil can quote Scripture most impressively; and it is the same Jesus who says, “The one who is not with me is against me” and “The one who is not against us is for us.” A theologian needs to have some way of orienting him- or herself to the totality of the scriptural witness, of having a sense of what passage is decisive in the particular situation for which he or she is called to make a decision.

All of which is just to say that reading Scripture does not take place in a vacuum. It, too, is part of the wider Christian conversation that extends back in time and into which we enter. Our appropriation of Scripture is therefore bound up with the context of our tradition. Tradition refers to the

practice of handing on, and when we speak of the tradition we mean those voices that have claimed Christian identity in the past and thereby shaped our Christian understanding in the present. Nor is the question of the context of our faith limited to the past. Because there continue to be many spirits at large in the world, it is also important to listen to the demands of the present situation and recognize the role of experience in shaping our perceptions of and reactions to the scriptural narrative. And, finally, because those factors that influence our reading of Scripture are so varied, the church has generally recognized the importance of reason as that faculty which allows us to reflect specifically on whether all the various strands of our faith fit together into a coherent whole.

Even bringing all these factors to bear, there is certainly no guarantee that Christians will come to agreement. The claim that theology is best conceived as an ongoing evaluation of the Christian conversation does not mean that at the end of the day it will turn out that all Christians basically say the same thing. I do not believe that they do. But it is to suggest that Christians are, at least, all talking about the same thing; specifically, that they are all responding to the story of Jesus of Nazareth as *news* that is *good* news for all people. The questions that divide the churches should therefore be understood as disagreements over what is necessary to preserve the integrity of the story Christians tell about Jesus as good news.

News is something that jars us, that informs us of something we did not expect. Real news turns our world around, and causes us to see things in ways we could not even have anticipated before. For Christians, the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth, as the culmination of God's encounter with Israel, is such news; but it is not enough to proclaim it as news. It is also necessary to make clear that this news is *good* news, news that sustains, enriches, and fulfills human life, not news which breaks it down, trivializes it, or deprives it of hope. And, by way of anticipation, I would suggest to you that every important theological debate centers on two questions: first, whether what the church is saying about Jesus of Nazareth is really *news*, and, second, whether that news is *good*. Because there is a lot of news about in the world, and some of it may even include Jesus, but even the story of Jesus can be told in a way that is not good news. In fact, it was precisely Luther's contention that the church of his day had ceased to proclaim Jesus

Christ as good news, that it was proclaiming law in place of the gospel. But it is not enough simply for the church's message to be good either. In this century Dietrich Bonhoeffer attacked the Lutheran church precisely on the ground that it had become so preoccupied with making its message appealing to people that it had covered up what was truly newsworthy about it—namely, that God had come as a crucified Jew.

And it is the very fact that God came in this way that justifies the interpretation of Christian speech as conversation. For the good news of the gospel is precisely that God relates to us in and as a fellow human being, as a God who seeks a response from us, and, even more, as a God who wills to be God only in a fellowship with human beings that includes the hearing of the human yes and no. God could have chosen to be God differently, as a God who remained above the contingencies of human existence. In that case it might well be that theology would take the form of an absolutist monologue, because God's own speaking would not be one that needed or could tolerate any human response. Alternatively, if God chose not to speak at all, a theology of pure relativism would be entirely appropriate: since God had claimed no voice, no place in history, nothing that anyone said or did could make any special claim on our attention.

But God did not remain aloof. God came to us in the person of Jesus of Nazareth and, Christians claim, remains with us as that person until the end of time. And because God came and spoke to us in this way, the Christian God is one whose identity is ever after inseparable not only from Jesus, but from those people with whom God has entered into relationship through Jesus. To listen for this God therefore means listening to other people. It means first of all listening to the apostles, whose witness is enshrined in Scripture; it means also listening to their successors throughout the history of the church, who have continued to reflect on the apostolic witness and make it alive for subsequent generations. And it means, most directly, listening to the people in this institution and in this room, who are your most immediate conversation partners as you seek to understand the will of God for the church in this time and place. And it means listening to all these voices, past or present, in the hope and the confidence that as you enter into the conversation, whether in the work of Irenaeus of Lyons

or Martin Luther, of Julian of Norwich or Karl Barth, or of the person sitting next to you, you will find yourself able to discern amid all their very human words the very Word of God.

Notes

- 1 See Karl Barth, "The Need and Promise of Christian Preaching" and "The Word of God and the Task of the Ministry," in *The Word of God and the Word of Man* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1957) 101–102, 185–186.
- 2 The difference between the apologetic and polemic dimensions of theology derives from Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Brief Outline on the Study of Theology* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1970) pars. 39–40.
- 3 For an excellent discussion of the relationship between dogma and dogmatism, see Christopher L. Morse, *Not Every Spirit: A Dogmatics of Christian Disbelief* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1994) 17–20.
- 4 The idea that theology may be understood as grammar was first suggested (in passing) by Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations: The English Text of the Third Edition* (New York: Macmillan, 1958) par. 373. For a more detailed examination of this idea, see George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984) especially 32–41, 79–84.