

Diakonia Program – Northern Illinois Synod ELCA

Christian Doctrine

Session 1, Segment A

Introduction of Course, Context, and Method

- I. Opening Devotions
- II. Course Introduction – Christian Doctrine & the Study of Systematic Theology
 - a. The Purpose
 - b. The Sources and Resources
 - c. The Instructor – Perspectives, Commitments, and Person
 - d. The Movement - Method & Context to Doctrines to Ethics

III. The Task and Method of Theology

- a. Why Bother with Doctrine & Theology?

Theology is a “continuing search for the fullness of the truth of God made known in Jesus Christ.” Theological understanding is not simply memorizing doctrines, but a “persistent search for the truth to which they point and which they only partially and brokenly express.” (Daniel Migliore, Faith Seeking Understanding, 1)

“I offer this book to those students of the Christian mysteries who seek a better understanding of the symbols of our faith and who wish to pursue the loving life as a response to God’s gracious love for us.” (Peters, xiv)

- b. An Unsettling Warning for a Journey of Faith

Theology can be scary – it can unravel our worldview, can knock the foundations from the house of cards that we live within, can ask questions we wish were never asked and require answers we desire to avoid. Faithful theology can also offer the keys to the prison cell of our own making, opening a new way for God’s grace to encounter us.

The journey of faith often leads us from our simple beginning through a period of deconstruction, where we learn that things are not as they seem, or that others think differently, or that we have been holding on to ideas that cannot co-exist. This gives way to reconstruction as we return to the sources – Scripture, tradition, the community of Christ.

“Faith in God revealed in Jesus Christ sets an inquiry in motion, fights the inclination to accept things as they are, and continually calls in question unexamined assumptions about God, our world, and ourselves.” (Migliore 3)

Naïve Realism – *“We assume that the ideas of our mind and words of our mouths correspond with the world the way it really is... thinking at the level of the first naïveté has its own integrity. It is not necessarily anti-intellectual, dishonest, or spiritually shallow. It is natural, an inevitable stage of consciousness from which some people never emerge but which all of us must go through. Nevertheless, once a person undergoes the purging fires of modern critical consciousness there is no going back.” (Peters 23)*

c. The Necessity of Theology

*“..if by theology one means the continuous process of disciplined and prayerful thought through which a community of faith seeks to understand what it believes and thus to be guided in its living out of that belief (and that is what I mean), then to deny that theology matters, and matters very concretely, is tantamount to opening up the ever-ready floodgates of irrationality and mindless, boundless spiritualism.” (Douglas John Hall, *the Cross in Our Context*, 3)*

“When faith no longer frees people to ask hard questions, it becomes inhuman and dangerous. Unquestioning faith soon slips into ideology, superstition, fanaticism, self-indulgence, and idolatry. Faith seeks understanding passionately and relentlessly, or it languishes and eventually dies.” (Migliore 6)

“For what ‘kills’ in religion is not only, or primarily, the exclusionary deed, the aggressive and proselytizing stance, the crusading attitude and act, but the underlying doctrine that functions both as inspiration and justification for all such actions. A religious community that believes itself to be in possession of ‘The Truth’ is a community equipped with the most lethal weapon of any warfare: the sense of its own superiority and mandate to mastery.” (Hall, 5)

d. The Method of Theology

“The method of correlation is especially the method of apologetic theology. Question and answer must be correlated in such a way that the religious symbol is interpreted as the adequate answer to a question, implied in man’s existence, and asked in primitive, pre-philosophical, or elaborated philosophical terms. For instance, the question implied in human finitude is answered in the symbols which constitute the idea of God...” (Tillich 139)

“How can the Christian faith, first experienced and symbolically articulated in an ancient culture now long out-of-date, speak meaningfully to human existence today as we experience it amid (an emerging post-modern consciousness that, although driven by a thirst for both individual and cosmic wholeness, still affirms and extends) a world-view dominated by natural science, secular self-understanding, and a worldwide cry for freedom?” (Peters, 7-8)

IV. The Theological Landscape and Times - Worldview and Meta-Narrative

- a. The Ancient Worldview - How did humans know things? What role did faith play? How did humans define what it meant to be?
 1. Knowledge through story, myth, superstition, mystery
 2. Faith as the glue of life
 3. Being rooted in community; family; social status
- b. The Pre-Modern Worldview - Driven by chaos to order
 1. Knowledge through authority
 2. Faith as center of life and power
 3. Being defined by relationship to authority
- c. Modern Worldview - Driven by oppression to freedom
 1. Knowledge through objective analysis - subject-object split - creation of scientific

2. Faith as personal choice - creation of secular; distances us from our symbols that make sense of the world. Doubt trumps faith -- we all believe something - anything!
 3. Being as freedom to think and observe - individualized world
- d. Post-modern Consciousness
1. Knowledge as subjective, relative - mistrust of objectivity; battle between objective and relative views of the world.
 2. Faith as a longing for integration and rejection of institution
 3. Being in flux - relational
- e. Viewing the Whole Picture
1. No age completely displaces the prior -- vestiges remain
 2. We live in an age far removed from the original worldview of the faith we have received.
 3. Post-modern situation seeks wholeness in a world fragmented by modern relativism and objectivism
 4. Post-modern situation seeks integration of scientific, secular, and spiritual divisions; feeling and thinking are held together; creation is unfolding, not a static "done deal."
 5. Making Theological Sense of the Whole - What in the world does "proleptic"? The integration sought and the approach to theology that can address this complex situation we face will be rooted in **anticipation** - by which we mean, it will see things in light of the future whole. Jesus Christ is the revelation of not just God in a past reality, but embodies a promise and fulfillment of what God has been and will be up to until all the universe is consummated, finding its end in God. God - The World's Future.

"Only in light of the God-determined whole can we apprehend the purpose according to which all the world processes and human enterprises will be integrated, according to which separated and fragmented parts will be transformed into an integrated unity. Of course, that God-determined whole is not yet actual. It does not yet exist. But it has been revealed - it has been incarnated - ahead of time in the life, death, and resurrection of the Nazarene. Hence, it is to Jesus Christ that one must look to find human destiny, to gain a vision of the whole, and according to which people can integrate the disparate elements of their lives. A life so integrated around Christ is a proleptic life. It is the future actualized ahead of time." (Peters, 22)

Think of a mystery novel and reading the end first. Think of how a puzzle not complete -- no part we have included is thrown out -- all fit into the future whole. The modern project said the pre-modern was wrong and sought to replace it -- can they be integrated? Science seeks to replace faith with reason -- can both have a place?

V. The Journey of Theological Inquiry

- a. *Naïve World Construction* - NOT pejorative; faith is meaningful at all "stages." This is the place where we assume everyone thinks life we do; the challenges are moral -- good vs. evil; spirit vs. flesh; heaven vs. hell. The big issue is personal commitment -- how much faith do I have; can I believe all the time?

The symbols of faith - creeds, confessions, stories, sacraments -- are world constructing and give us language to understand our world. All people experience this stage; some never have to move forward.

- b. *Critical Deconstruction* - The advent of modern thinking; a scientific worldview; critical, objective reflection on matters of faith all take their toll on our naïve world construction.

"The Bible describes the intervention of supernatural powers into the course of human events; we today describe events in terms of laws of nature. The Bible assumes heaven is above, somewhere near the clouds; we today fly above the clouds in jet airplanes. We can no longer live naively in the world of the Bible. We live twenty centuries distant from it." (Peters, 25)

- c. Response to Deconstruction - Some refuse to be subjected to the process -- "naïve literalism;" Some militantly reject the process - fundamentalism; Some theological constructions ceded the natural world to science and claimed faith as pertinent only to personal faith -- furthering the secular-spiritual split; Some found traction in the way that we thought about faith as ultimate trust (Luther, Kierkegaard, Tillich et.al).
- d. *Post critical Reconstruction* - If we stop at deconstruction we are alone with our individual thoughts and questions. We bet our lives on the Christian symbols as a source for new ways of thinking and being. God is in the questions not just the answers. God is where the future overlaps the present. We begin to reconstruct the pieces of our world asking how we can see ourselves and the whole world in relation to the God revealed in the symbols of faith.

Session 1, Segment B The Christian Symbols

I. What do symbols mean?

- a. Loss of Meaning -- One of the difficulties of our age is that language has even lost its meaning. Words have become pregnant with excess baggage that obscures meaning. "Symbol," for instance, when applied to things Christian, some might feel diminishes the faith -- "Only a symbol."
- b. Life is highly symbolic - Language itself is a system of symbols -- a word is a sound in itself, but it points to meaning beyond itself. Get in a discussion about the flag and you will uncover the power of symbols.

"A symbol is what it is, but at the same time it points beyond itself to a greater reality. In fact, this greater reality is somehow present to the symbol and efficacious through it. Symbols live because they bear us gently from this world to the next without ever leaving this world behind." (Peters 37)

c. Christian Symbols

- i. Physical - Cross, bread & wine; water; Jesus himself
- ii. Metaphorical - Words - kingdom of God; Lamb of God; Jesus Christ. These bring two often contrasting things together to flesh out a larger meaning; the creator something new.
- iii. Theological Concepts - Trinity, sin, grace, justification, etc. - they are not the object of worship, but express interpretation that leads to concepts. Any concept will fall short of the reality it expresses. Theology both helps shape these symbols and understands their short comings.

- iv. Confessional symbols - Creeds, doctrines, confessions, dogmas. Some say these divide - and they may - they are faith seeking understanding and proclamation.
- d. Interpretation of Symbols
- i. Suspicion - We need to recognize that symbols can be used in ways that are counter to the gospel -- to oppress; to gain power etc.
 - ii. Trust - *"Our wager is that if these symbols be of God, they will lead us finally to an understanding of ourselves, of our world, and of the divine that will bring wholeness."* (Peters, 46)
 - iii. Dialectic Tension -- Living in between Black and White.
- e. The Gospel Standard
- i. The Good News of Jesus Christ is the heart of how we evaluate our interpretive and theological work. Is it the gospel?
 - ii. Thesis - *"The gospel is the act of telling the story of Jesus with its significance."* (Peters, 48) We always tell the story AND interpret it at the same time - see Acts, I Peter etc.
 - iii. Significance of the Ancient Witness - Jesus story announces salvation:
 - a. Jesus is the fulfillment of prior Hebrew expectations
 - b. Jesus death is the unwarranted death of the righteous one
 - c. Jesus was raised from the dead
 - d. Jesus life, death and resurrection were about the forgiveness of sins.
 - iv. The Gospel as New Creation - *"The end of the age and the resurrection of the dead envisioned by apocalyptic seers have already occurred in Jesus Christ, and those who are united with Christ through faith are already participants in the new creation that is yet to come for the whole cosmos. The gospel communicates that on account of Christ, God's future is spiritually present now, imbuing us with newness of life and inspiring hope while granting peace of mind."* (Peters 50)
 - v. The Gospel as Justification - At the foot of the cross all people are rendered equal by God. *"We are still sinners, still participants in injustice of the old order. Yet in Christ, we participate in the justice of the expected new order... Through faith in Christ we are citizens of two aeons, the future and the present."* (Peters, 53) -- Saint and Sinner - Luther.
 - vi. The Gospel is Proclaimed - *"The whole life and destiny of Jesus are in their unique way God's Word spoken to the world. This makes telling the story of Jesus a divine address. So, for the church to present the gospel through teaching and preaching is to participate in the very activity whereby God addresses the world."* (Peters, 54)

Session 1, Segment C
Sources & Scripture

I. There are four traditional sources from which we draw our interpretive work:

- a. Scripture - The primary and foundational norm
- b. Tradition - The wisdom and collective thought of the communion of saints
- c. Experience - Will this dog hunt?
- d. Reason - Does it make sense?

II. What we say about the Word of God

- a. Constitution 2.01a. Jesus Christ is the Word of God incarnate, through whom everything was made and through whose life, death, and resurrection God fashions a new creation.
- b. Constitution 2.01b. The proclamation of God's message to us as both Law and Gospel is the Word of God, revealing judgment and mercy through word and deed, beginning with the Word in creation, continuing in the history of Israel, and centering in all its fullness in the person and work of Jesus Christ.
- c. Constitution 2.01c. The canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the written Word of God. Inspired by God's Spirit speaking through their authors, they record and announce God's revelation centering in Jesus Christ. Through them God's Spirit speaks to us to create and sustain Christian faith and fellowship for service in the world.
- d. Constitution 2.03. This congregation accepts the canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the inspired Word of God and the authoritative source and norm of its proclamation, faith, and life.

III. What is the Word of God?

God's Word is a Living Word, not a dead word. Dead Word is: "Truth packaged in propositions with which we can argue or disagree." Living Word is: "Truth manifest in an event, a story, or an encounter through which God addresses us." (Erlander 10)

Some might say that the Bible was in some way dictated by God to the writers and is therefore "inerrant." By human reason therefore, we can then deduce fundamental propositions that we must accept." These often take the form of

- i. Doctrines we must "believe."
- ii. Moral Laws we must obey.
- iii. Steps of "salvation" we must experience.

Other Christians say that the Bible is a fallible human book. Through reason however, we can get behind the material to find eternal truths, such as

- iv. God is the Creator of all humanity
- v. All humans are brothers and sisters.
- vi. The Golden Rule is beneficial.

Both these approaches depend on human reason and reduce the Word to "dead" propositions. The Living Word is an address to us from a loving God. It cannot be contained in a book, though The Book is a witness to God's active, living Word in history.

The Word of God is:

Persistent — it addresses us continually

Pervasive — it is incarnate, speaking in and through creation

Powerful — it bears the power to change lives and bring new life.

As we have discussed, the Bible is not THE Word of God, it is a witness to the word of God. This distinction regarding biblical authority—between what it does and what it is — helps us understand the variety of ways that folks claim that the Bible has authority for their life. Back to the Constitution: Is it authoritative because it is the Constitution? Or does its authority come from its ability to bring about the values of justice and equality? I would suggest that when it ceases to do the latter, it ceases to be authoritative.

The Lutheran tradition is of great value in this discussion. It is clear that, for us, the authority of scripture rests in what scripture does, not what it is. What does it do? It testifies and makes manifest the promises of God, the gospel, as shown in Christ. The Bible has authority because it makes Christ known. When it doesn't, it loses its authority.

“The heart of scripture is the promise of the gospel that is brought to expression in the Christ event. Its authority is not a juridical kind; it is not a book of legal doctrines, inerrant reports, or devotional material. The Scriptures convey the life-giving word of salvation in Christ to those who accept it through faith alone. Authority in matters of faith rests on the gospel of Scripture,” (Carl Braaten, Principles of Lutheran Theology, 4)

The law tells the truth about us and drives us to God's grace. The ultimate truth that the law in any age tells is that we will die. Only in the gospel is there life.

“‘Law’ is our encounter with mortality. It is ‘law’ because it is both inescapable and mandatory. ‘We owe God a death,’ (Shakespeare, *Henry IV, Part II*). ‘The death rate is one death per person’ (John Strietelmeier). ‘Men must endure their going hence’ (the Shakespearean epitaph from *King Lear* on the tomb of C. S. Lewis). The grounding of law here is death itself, not the Bible. Death does not require the Scriptures for either experience or analysis.

The Christian gospel is not an idea (e.g., God loves the world) however true it may be. The Christian good news is the historical event of Jesus. For only the risen Jesus can justify the dead, since he is beyond the power of death forever. (Romans 6:9) We require both access to and normative proclamation of this historical event. That is provided only by the New Testament. Hence two axioms characterize the Lutheran approach to the authority of the Bible.

(A) Only the gospel gives the Bible its true authority.

(B) Only the Bible gives the gospel its normative content.

The authority of the Bible is the authority of the Gospel.” (Lecture by Walter Bouman)

IV. How do we interpret scripture?

Contextually – Paying attention to the literary and historical context. What was the writer trying to communicate to the original readers?

Use of analogy – Correlation of contextual insight with modern situation

Scripture in light of scripture – recognition of tensions, try to be faithful to the whole rather than parts.

Some scripture is valued above other parts – (Mat 7:12; 22:37-40; 1 Cor 15:3-4; Mic/ 6:8; Heb 6:1-2)

Church (community where Word is preached and sacraments shared) has responsibility to apply scripture to present day, as it has in matters of slavery, divorce, hats in church.

(Adapted from *How Do Lutherans Interpret Scripture?* by Mark Alan Powell)

The Principles of Evangelical Explication

- I. Creedal Ordering Principle - We will follow the Trinitarian form of the Creeds
- II. Systematic Principle - A coherent relationship of the parts to the whole
- III. The Ecumenical Principle - Attention to Christians across space and time
- IV. Contextualization Principle - Take account of the reality in which we find ourselves
- V. Engagement Principle - Theology will attend to the matters at hand, not ignore them
- VI. Self-Criticism - Is this true? How so?
- VII. Explanatory Adequacy -- Is the construction comprehensive, is there important matters left out?

Session I Bibliography

Why Study Theology? Donald G. Luck, Chalice Press, 1999. ISBN 0-8272-4242-5

Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology – Second Edition, Daniel L. Migliore, Eerdmans Publishing, 2004. ISBN 8-8028-2787-X

The Cross in Our Context, Douglas John Hall, Fortress Press, 2003. ISBN 0-8006-3581-7

God- The World's Future, Ted Peters, Fortress Press, 1992. ISBN 0-8006-2542-0

Principles of Lutheran Theology, Carl Braaten, Fortress Press, 1983. ISBN 0-8006-1689-8

Christian Dogmatics, Vol. I, Carl Braaten & Robert Jenson, eds., "The Knowledge of God" Paul Sponheim, Fortress Press, 1984. ISBN 0-8006-0703-1

Paul Tillich: Theologian of the Boundaries, Mark Kline Taylor, ed. Fortress Press, 1991. ISBN 0-8006-3403-9

Christian Theology: An Introduction to its Traditions and Tasks, Peter Hodgson & Robert King, eds., Fortress Press, 1982. ISBN 0-8006-1848-3

Baptized We Live, Daniel Erlander, 1981.