Theology Matters

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Learning to Speak Thoughtfully of Jesus: Calvin's Way With Heretics

by Karen Petersen Finch

Most Christians have a basic understanding of the issues that led to the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century. Yet we all tend to downplay the degree of theological uncertainty in which the reformers were working. Challenges to the Roman Church's theology and practice created a vacuum in which ancient heresies[1] came out of their hiding places (so to speak) and clamored for reconsideration. Much earlier, in the fourth and fifth centuries, Christians had affirmed that Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit were fully God along with the Father (the doctrine of the Trinity); they had also clarified that Jesus was fully human as well as fully divine (the doctrine of the two natures of Christ). Yet not everyone in the 16th century was willing to follow their lead. A flourishing of heretical teaching partly explains why Luther and Calvin gave authority to the Nicene Creed (325) and the Definition of Chalcedon (451) respectively as clarifications of biblical thought, even while they were committed to the principle of "Scripture alone" (*sola scriptura*).

This article explores how John Calvin held to the Nicene/Chalcedonian understanding of Jesus Christ in the face of a particular challenge. It is good to know that Calvin did this, and how he did it, for a number of reasons. First, if we think of Calvin as writing only in response to Roman Catholic theology, we miss out on much of the creative and constructive flavor of his work. Calvin was writing for all Christians, explaining and defending not only Reformation convictions but also the ancient faith. Moreover, the particular way in which Calvin adhered to creedal teaching on the person and work of Jesus is instructive to us today. What should be our response to misunderstandings of Jesus Christ that reappear, in slightly different form, from generation to generation? It helps to begin—as Calvin did—with the early church.

Trinity, Person and Nature

How and why the church developed a doctrine of the Trinity and fully accepted it by the late fourth century would be an article in itself. To summarize: in 318, a priest named Arius from the city of Alexandria provoked a firestorm by arguing that Jesus was a creature, made by God: a special creature who could do special things, yet not of the same divine Being as God. After all, how could Jesus be divine if there was a time when he had not yet existed? God-ness is eternal, Arius argued, and Jesus was not; ergo, Jesus was a creature and not the Creator. From a common sense perspective, this view makes a great deal of sense even today. Yet others in the early church knew that it did not make biblical sense: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (Jn. 1:1). Biblically, Jesus Christ has always existed. To call Jesus the "only-begotten" is to identify him as a unique, unrepeatable communication of the very substance of the Father (Jn. 3:16). Therefore

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"begotten" does not mean "created" as Arius believed. Rather it describes an eternal relationship of the Father "speaking" his substance in the Word from before time began. Jesus' birth in Bethlehem was not his beginning but merely the entrance of the Word into human time. These insights led to the writing of the Nicene Creed in 325 and its full ratification in Constantinople in 381. They also led to a useful distinction between Substance (what there is one of in God) and Person (what there are three of in God). Yet it often happens that the solution of one conundrum leads to the creation of another, and this was the case theologically between 381 and 451. If Jesus fully shares in the divine substance (as the Holy Spirit also does), then what of his humanity? Was it merely an illusion? The apostles testify that Jesus ate, slept, cried, became tired, felt love and anger, and even experienced a genuinely human fear of death. Paradoxically, this humanity is what allowed Jesus to fulfill his divine mission of dying for sin and rising to life. And so the church made yet another theological distinction: between Person (what there is one of in Jesus) and Nature (what there is two of in Jesus). The Definition of Chalcedon (451) states that Jesus is one Person in whom there is both a complete divine nature and a complete human nature. And how did this happen? In the womb of Mary, the pre-existent Word—who was God and was with God—assumed a totally human nature. That human nature had to be complete in every way, so that every aspect of our humanity could be healed by the Word's gracious choice to assume it.

The Chalcedonian Definition was not a "definition" in the sense that it ruled out any discussion of the mystery of Jesus Christ. For example, there was still the perplexing question of how the divine and human natures related to one another. Some theologians put the focus on Jesus' human nature; others used the categories of Greek philosophy to put the focus on His divinity. Everyone struggled to articulate a relationship between the humanity and the divinity that did not violate the essential properties of either one. The writers of the Definition sought to put boundaries around this ongoing discussion in order to keep it healthy. They included four phrases, each of which is a preemptive strike against a possible heresy: "*without confusion, without change, without division, without separation.*" In the one Person of Jesus, the two natures do not get mixed up with one another to become a third thing; they do not change their properties; neither of them are missing any parts; and they are never separate from one another. Any of these alternatives would threaten the full reconciliation of humanity and divinity in the person and work of Jesus Christ, who is our salvation.

As for Calvin, in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* he carefully adhered to what we now call the "four fences" of Chalcedon. Calvin also recommended another ancient technique for safeguarding healthy speech about Jesus. When "the Scriptures speak of Christ," he explained, "they sometimes attribute to him what must be referred solely to his humanity, sometimes what belongs uniquely to his divinity. And they so earnestly express this union of the two natures that is in Christ as sometimes to interchange them. This figure of speech is called by the ancient writers 'the communication of properties.'"[2]

An example of the communication of properties occurs in Acts 20:28 when Paul says, "God purchased the church with his blood." Strictly speaking, it is the blood of Christ that Paul has in view, but in the mystery of their union, God can meaningfully be said to have shed blood. Calvin was very fond of such expressions because they honor the *mystery* of Jesus as a unique and unrepeatable Person who alone can mediate between a holy God and a sinful people. In other words, Calvin did not want his readers to be pondering how generic divine nature (is there such a thing?) interacted with generic human nature in Jesus. There is only one Savior and there is nothing generic about Him. We know him truly through his work as revealed in Scripture, and Calvin's favorite umbrella term for that work was *mediation*. As we will see, Calvin did not limit the mediation of Christ to the cross. He insisted that the eternal Son was mediating on our behalf before the world began.

The Challenge of Francesco Stancaro

We are now ready to eavesdrop on the debate between John Calvin and Francesco Stancaro, an Italian teacher of Hebrew who made his way to Poland in 1559. At this time, Calvin was nearing the end of his leadership in Geneva and was only six years away from his death. One of Calvin's strengths was the value he placed on friendship and collaboration, which caused him to maintain a constant and lively correspondence with other reformers throughout Europe. In this way he came to know that Poland was a hot-bed of anti-Trinitarian and anti-Chalcedonian teaching, and that the Polish Reformed church had expelled Stancaro for his teaching about the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Stancaro, however, was eager to correspond with Calvin and his fellow reformers directly. In his letter to them, the Italian scholar adopted a bizarre strategy: Stancaro claimed that the teachings of Arius from the fourth century were alive and well in Poland and were being falsely attributed to Calvin! To paraphrase: "I know, Calvin, that you are not a follower of Arius. You do not believe that Christ is inferior to the Father. If you want to refute this heresy effectively, and protect your reputation, you will join with me in teaching exactly what I teach."

Stancaro's attempt to ingratiate himself with Calvin had two easily discernible weaknesses. First, it was known that Stancaro had publicly insulted Calvin and the other reformers, famously commenting that a particular theologian of the past had been "worth more than a hundred Luthers, two hundred Melanchthons, three hundred Bullingers, four hundred Peter Martyrs and five hundred Calvins, and all of them ground in a mortar with a pestle would not amount to an ounce of true theology." Obviously, Stancaro would not be making common cause with someone he despised, and must have another motive for reaching out to Calvin. Second, Stancaro's own view of Jesus Christ was *neither* an effective refutation of Arius *nor* a view that Calvin could share, given Calvin's appreciation for the "four fences" of Chalcedon.

What did Stancaro teach? First of all, he did not object to the ancient conception of two complete natures in the one Person of Jesus Christ. Stancaro believed that Jesus *did* possess a complete divine nature; on this point he truly *was* an opponent of Arius. Stancaro also shared Calvin's interest in the biblical image of Christ as Mediator. For his part, Calvin strongly believed that human beings would still need a Mediator even if we had never fallen into sin—because we are finite, and God is infinite. But Stancaro questioned how Jesus could be *a mediator on the basis of his divine nature.* In his mind's eye, Stancaro could easily imagine the human nature of Jesus mediating between us and the Father. After all, he argued, a mediator is usually inferior in status than the one to whom he addresses mediation. Stancaro's difficulty was imagining the divine nature of Jesus as involved in mediation to the Father. If mediators are always of lower status, wouldn't that make Jesus' divinity less than the divinity of the Father? And is not that dangerously akin to what Arius taught?

How much better it would be, Stancaro urged, to describe Christ as mediator with the Father *only on the basis of his human nature*! Then we would run no risk of implying that Jesus' divinity was less than that of the Father. Stancaro also wanted to avoid what he believed to be a puzzling image of Christ as God mediating with Himself. So he suggested that the best way to understand the mediation of Christ is to imagine the human nature of Jesus (and never his divine nature) as representing our interests before the entire Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Knowing that he needed biblical evidence in order to be persuasive, Stancaro cited I Corinthians 15:24-28 in which "the Son himself," having secured the world against evil, hands it over to God the Father and "is subjected" to God. In Stancaro's interpretation, this act of subjection perfectly symbolizes the mediation of Jesus' human nature *only* before the Father (and, by extension, the Holy Spirit).

At this point I invite the reader to imagine: what if a 21st-century version of Francesco Stancaro were to teach in your adult education program on a Sunday morning? How would you respond to his teaching? You might be impressed that Stancaro was so eager to refute the ancient heresy of Arius, and be afraid yourself of slipping into that error. If you knew your Nicene Creed, you might join Stancaro in wondering why a fully divine Christ would address mediation to the Father when Christ, the Spirit and the Father are supposed to be "equally worshipped and glorified." Hopefully, in addition to this surface agreement, you would have an uneasy feeling at the thought of *separating* the human and divine natures of Christ into a division of labor in which one nature has the ability of mediation and the other does not. And with that, you would have arrived at the moment in your thinking when the four fences of Chalcedon—"*without confusion, without change, without division, without separation*"—really display their value.

John Calvin's Response

We are fortunate to have two letters that Calvin wrote back to Stancaro, so we know exactly what he said to the erstwhile reformer. Calvin took a clear stand *against* the separation of the natures and *for* the communication of properties as we defined it above. His favorite designation for Jesus Christ—"the one Person of the Mediator"—occurs frequently in these two letters. Jesus Christ is one unified Person, in that His divine and human natures are never separable in anything he does. Even if we were to decide that mediation to the Father is most logically related to the human nature of Jesus, because of the communication of properties, his divine nature would be a full participant in the act of mediation because He is never divided against himself. The One who heals the division between God and humanity is never thus divided, in his person or in his work. "What truly and suitably belongs to the totality," Calvin wrote, "ought not to be divided and assigned to the natures."[3]

Moreover, there are sound biblical and theological reasons why mediation in particular "truly and suitably belongs to the totality," that is, to the two natures of Christ in their unity. First, consider the priestly type of mediation that Jesus displayed. The Letter to the Hebrews speaks of Jesus as our great high priest, who by sacrificing himself reconciled us to God. Calvin reminded Stancaro that this priestly work of Jesus was an act of mediation in both natures, human and divine. "When expiation cannot be accomplished without dying and the shedding of blood, then the mediator must die. This is something proper to humanity, "he explained. Divinity cannot die; but a human nature can. However, "since dying is one thing and the effect of dying another, the reconciliation effected by death is falsely

attributed to the human nature alone."[4] Our sin is an offense against God, and only God can receive its expiation and choose to be reconciled. One could say, then, that the divine nature of Christ was equally involved in the sacrifice that won our salvation—and this is true. It is even better to say that from before all time, the unity of the human and divine natures in the eternal Son of the Father made him the perfect expression of priestly mediation when the time came for him to die on our behalf.

This was Calvin's trump card in his resistance to Stancaro: the eternal nature of Christ's mediation *in two natures.* "Certainly," he insisted, "the eternal [Word] was already mediator from the beginning, before Adam's fall and the alienation and separation of the human race from God."[5] As Head over humanity and the angels, the only-begotten Son has always been for us; he has always interceded on our behalf. Many Christians have trouble with this concept because they think of salvation history as a timeline, in the way that we experience it as human beings. How could Jesus be the eternal Son of the Father if the incarnation came "after" the creation? It helps to remember, as Calvin did, that God is outside of time and does not experience sequence as we do. From the vantage point of the Eternal Son, creation and incarnation and expiation are one, simultaneous "now." And in that "now," Jesus Christ is always our mediator, and always in two natures: "*without confusion, without change, without division, without separation*." His acts of mediation in time are fitting expressions of the unity that He is outside of time.

What of Stancaro's concern about the divine nature of Christ addressing mediation to the Father and the Spirit? Does that mediation suggest that Jesus' divinity is less "divine" than theirs? (As if divinity could be a matter of "more" and "less"!) Only if we accept Stancaro's assumption that a mediator is always of lesser status. Calvin exposed this as a human, not a biblical, understanding of mediation. For the biblical understanding of mediation, he turns to Augustine, his favorite among the early theologians. Augustine argued that "to be mediator [Christ] must have something in common with God and something in common with men, lest being like men in both points, he would be far from God, or if in both of them like God, he would be far from men, and so he would not be mediator."[6] Biblically speaking, the mediation of Christ is not addressed from less to more, but from same to same, and in two dimensions at once: human and divine.

Finally, Calvin also tackled Stancaro's interpretation of I Corinthians 15:24-28, a passage that still troubles Christians today. It describes the last moments of history, when Jesus has carried out his mandate from the Father to "reign until he has put everything under his feet," including death itself. At the very end, the Son of God will also be "made subject" to God that God might be "all in all." Calvin flatly denied that this picture of Jesus as subject to God, and to God's purposes, confirms him as mediator in his human nature only. The Father has "sent" the Son to do what only the One human-divine Mediator can do. "What does it mean to overcome death?" Calvin inquired. "To rise in the power of the Spirit and to receive life from oneself? To unite us to God and to be one with God? Without doubt, these will not be found in Christ's human nature apart from the divinity…"[7] Calvin believed that this interpretation of I Corinthians fits much better with Jesus' own request that God would honor him "with the glory which I had with you from the beginning" (Jn. 17:5). If Jesus were a mediator in the human nature only, this request would be presumptuous; from the One Person of the Mediator, however, it is "only proper."[8]

Conclusion: Speaking Well of Jesus

What can we learn from Calvin's approach to the theology of Francesco Stancaro? It is important to note that—in an age known for brutal language between intellectual opponents—Calvin could be surprisingly mild when he spoke to and about Stancaro. He did not respond "out of hatred for Stancaro or to weigh him down with ill will."[9] This restraint is all the more significant considering that Stancaro was generally known for his arrogance and malice, and that Calvin was not generally known for meekness! With respect to Stancaro's ideas, Calvin was unstintingly negative; with respect to the man himself, Calvin even "hoped that natural endowment, which was raised too much on high by boasting, may incline [Stancaro] to gentleness and moderation."[10] In other words, Calvin could praise his opponent's gifts even while disagreeing with the employment of them.

I believe there is much for us to learn from Calvin's self-control in this matter. We live in an age in which public discourse wobbles between relativism ("everything is true") and dismissal ("you and your views are ridiculous"). In the presence of a fellow believer whose theological standpoint is troubling to us, neither of these extremes is appropriate. Who knows what personal struggles have led to their current convictions? This is a brother or sister for whom Christ died. We always have the right to disagree—and sometimes, we have the responsibility to present a view that is more biblical and that has stood the test of time. We can only discern on a case-by-case basis whether it is best to speak or to keep silence. But Calvin knew that in all cases, truth is best served by humility and mercy, and not by "bitterness, nor contentiousness, nor quarrelsomeness."[11]

Believers today can also learn a great deal from the content of Calvin's rebuttal to Stancaro. In my experience, church people have far better theological judgment than they believe themselves to have. Of course, you and I are not theologians on the same order as Calvin; but we do have access to the same resources. Calvin depended on Scripture, the Nicene Creed, the Definition of Chalcedon, and the testimony of the early church to determine what was "off" in Stancaro's thinking and how best to respond to it. Even if we do not have the minute knowledge that Calvin had, we can still learn from the way he used these tools. First, in controversy, Calvin referred to the whole Bible and its over-arching story of salvation, rather than slinging around a few verses as proof-texts. Long before the encounter with Stancaro, he had built an understanding of the One Person of the Mediator that depended on both the Old and New Testaments. That "big picture" view prepared him for the confrontation with Stancaro, and enabled him to recognize the separation of the natures as a biblical problem, as well as a creedal one. Today we can emulate Calvin's approach by seeking those resources that strengthen our "big picture" understanding of the Bible.

Second, instead of getting distracted by a human conception of mediation, such as the "lesser to greater" image in Stancaro's mind, Calvin stuck to a biblical conception of mediation which the creeds and early theologians had helped him to identify. The reader might not have the opportunity for a detailed study of Augustine, but the creeds are brief and lend themselves to memorization. Finally, part of the lure of heresy is that it can be easier to understand and explain than (for example) the "two natures in one person" language of the Definition of Chalcedon. Stancaro's view of mediation according to the human nature alone is an example of this easier way. But the creeds are complicated for good reason: they are protecting the mysteries that lie at the heart of our salvation.

In other words, the mediation of Jesus Christ on our behalf in two complete natures may be harder to articulate, but it is essential to the salvation story. Here is why: because he is human, Jesus' mediatory work can reach us and apply to us; because he is divine, we can trust that his mediation is effective and enduring. Like Paul, Calvin was convinced that "neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 8:38-39). Calvin well knew that the assurance we gain from a better understanding of Jesus Christ is the definitive reason why theology should exist at all.

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[1] A heresy is a theological perspective, held by a person within the Christian community, which pertains to the heart of the Gospel and is crippling to the way Christians understand and/or practice the Gospel.

[2] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Library of Christian Classics 20 (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1960), II.14.1.

[3] Joseph N. Tylenda, "Controversy on Christ the Mediator: Calvin's Second Reply to Stancaro." Calvin Theological Journal 8, no. 2 (1973), 153.

[4] Ibid, 149.

[5] Ibid, 147.

[6] Ibid, 155.

[7] Ibid, 153.

[8] Ibid, 155.

[9] Ibid, 146.

[10] Joseph N. Tylenda, "Christ the Mediator: Calvin versus Stancaro," Calvin Theological Journal 8, no.1 (1973), 16.

[11] Tylenda, "Controversy on Christ the Mediator: Calvin's Second Reply to Stancaro." 157.

Why Church Leaders Should Study Theology

by Mark Patterson

In order to lead any organization one must clearly, accurately, and firmly perceive two realities. The first is what the organization exists to accomplish. The second is how well the organization is fulfilling this purpose. Where either (or worse, both) of these ceases to provide guidance and influence, the organization will inevitably become directionless, purposeless, and irrelevant.

This axiom is no less true for the church and those called to lead it.[1] When the church—regardless of whether this refers to an entire denomination or specific congregation—loses sight of its purpose it will inevitably become aimless, distracted, and inconsequential. And where its leaders fail to accurately and honestly assess or, worse, deny its true condition, this drift toward irrelevancy will only hasten. The health and vitality of the church then is dependent upon its faithfulness to the purpose for which it was birthed and its courageous rejection of anything that might distract or turn it from seeing this fulfilled. It is vital[2] then that those in leadership understand God's intention and purpose for the church and have the ability to assess its true faithfulness in fulfilling this mandate.

I found it intriguing then—and as a Presbyterian, providential!—that while writing this article Barna Research Group released *The State of the Church in 2016*.[3] Brilliant I thought! What could be more useful to this current labor than statistical insights on the state of American Christianity? What could be more helpful to this cause than an accurate assessment of the church in our day?

Barna's report provides many reasons for viewing the scene positively: currently 75 percent of Americans self-identify as Christian. America remains the "most religious" country in the industrial world, as concretely measured by prayer, church attendance, Bible reading, and giving. While the numbers are, in many ways, problematic, there is no doubt (statistically) that there are more churched Americans than unchurched and that our culture, as a whole, continues to drink deep from the Christian well.

How interesting then—and not a little mystifying—to juxtapose this effervescent assessment with those from a book lying open beside my computer: "This is the real story of religion in America. For all its piety and fervor, today's United States needs to be recognized for what it really is: not a Christian country, but a nation of heretics."[4]

Clearly this is a more Stygian assessment.[5] Such vastly different perspectives compel us to ask, "Which of these is true? Which is more accurate?" But it takes little reflection to see that each provides factual descriptions of American Christianity. America has a deep Christian lineage that continues to influence and shape its character and culture in spite of seismic changes to the contrary. And, at the same time it must be acknowledged that statistics, while presenting various facts, tell little of the larger story. That 75 percent of Americans self-identify as Christian does necessarily mean that 75 percent of Americans understand what it actually means to be Christian.[6] Indeed, Barna's own research affirms this: a majority of these believe, in sharp contrast to the Bible's teaching, that they have no responsibility or mandate to share their faith with others. Of this 75 percent of Americans less than half actually attend church and even fewer read the Bible. And it gets even more troubling: according to Barna's research 55 percent of these self-identified Christians believe one attains heaven through good works. And this perspective, regardless of all self-affirmations and claims, is nothing less than heretical. It is not a viable, alternative interpretation of vague and difficult verses but the twisting of the clear and repeated message of Scripture. As such, it is anti-Christian, a false teaching that, where allowed to exist and fill the church, would transform the Gospel of grace into another message focused upon human merit, ability, and achievement.[7]

Of course such an assessment is unsettling and problematic. In a culture that values self-discovery, personal expression, and undifferentiated tolerance above all others this is a terrible thing to say. The very term *heresy* (and its antonym, *orthodoxy*) is seen by our indulgent culture as boorish and outworn. Our culture balks at pronouncing anything or anyone wrong. This means the church that adheres to biblical and historic faith will inevitably find itself in conflict with the perspectives and values of the surrounding culture. And it means that the church, in hope of avoiding or mitigating such conflict, exists under relentless pressure from without and temptation from within to accept and integrate these perspectives into its life and message. The more unsure the church becomes of its own theology and ethic and the more it yearns for the respect and amity of the surrounding culture, the more likely it is to enfold the

culture's values and ethic into its life and message, sanctifying them as part of the gospel. Both Barna and Douthat provide evidence that this is exactly what has been occurring in American Christianity for decades.

Arguably, there has never been a time in church history when these forces and temptations have been absent. Indeed, the history of the church is in many ways a story of its never-ending struggle to be in the world and speak to the world without becoming transformed by the world. The labor of maintaining the eternal truth of the gospel while translating and incarnating it in different cultures and times is profoundly challenging. The values and perspectives of the culture relentlessly work to forge the church's message into something more palatable to its cultured despisers. At times the church resists this pressure holding fast to its doctrine and ethic. At other times the church capitulates, dropping elements of faith and life viewed by the culture as antiquated, restrictive, or onerous in order to present itself more positively to the culture. Ironically, when the church becomes confused about its own message and abandons essential elements of faith and life to make itself palatable to the culture it loses the only unique word it has to give and actually moves into ever deeper disdain and irrelevancy.

It is incontrovertible to say the western church is deeply confused about its own faith and life, its doctrine and its ethic. This fact is evidenced again and again, from the pages of Barna's report to the pages of countless newspapers, internet screens, and denominational statistics. It is evidenced in declining numbers, scandals of sex and money, and cataclysmic discord. When measured against the repeated and clear teaching of Scripture, when held before the historic standards of the church across the breadth of its existence, we are forced to acknowledge that there has never been a time in American history when people had a fuzzier understanding of what it means to follow Jesus and live as his disciple. Never in American history has the church been more uncertain of its purpose and mission or more flawed in the assessments of its vitality or what is needed to restore it.

The western—North American/European—church is facing a crisis of knowledge. Quite simply, it has been so overwhelmed by decades of struggles, controversies, failures, and decline that these have come to give primary shape to its life and message. And it has been overrun by contrary ideas that challenge, corrupt, and confuse its created purpose and mission. What it means to follow Jesus is today proclaimed in terms that are not only latitudinous but antithetically diverse and mutually contradictory. The result is not so much that people believe *less* as they believe *what they wish*. The godly life has come to be viewed as a spiritual buffet from which each person may pick and chose only those elements believed to be personally true, tasteful, essential, and useful. And of these, the last receives greatest interest. For we as a culture are extremely skeptical of truth claims, profoundly reluctant to name essentials, and profoundly convinced that all that really matters is the practical and pragmatic. It is inevitable the larger culture will esteem and pursue such a course. But when the leaders of the church also take this course the church becomes increasingly directionless, divided, and nugatory.[8]

Exacerbating this damage is the fact that we have lost the theological skills needed to discern these realities or accurately assess the health and faithfulness of the church. Too little is known of God's will and purpose for the church, too little of his saving work that brought the church into existence and thus too little of what it was created to do and be. In the absence of such knowledge substitutes are allowed to rise—pragmatic programming, therapeutic spirituality, and indiscriminate inclusivity—all in the naïve and ultimately idolatrous belief that new methods or fresh messages will restore to the church a vibrancy known in other times and seasons. While all such approaches and methods bear a certain spiritual and ethical appearance they will always prove to be impuissant and vacuous and thus incapable of bringing the renewal of faith by which alone the church lives and thrives.

The problem, more than any other, is a lack of theological understanding. And it is not surprising. For many, *theology* is a less than positive concept, being perceived as esoteric and irrelevant to the real needs and life of the church. The work of theologians is popularly characterized as time wasted on such abstruse speculations as determining how many angels can fit on the head of a pin.[9] Theology is viewed, at best, as providing little that is essential or relevant for the Christian life. At worst it is seen as divisive, frivolous, and distracting. Thus many believers today doubt theology is either necessary or helpful. Why, they wonder, do we need all this complex analysis and speculation? Why the big words, the interest in arcane concepts, and the continual looking backward instead of forward? Should not the faith be kept simple, vibrant, and relevant?

The answer to at least the last question is obvious: Yes! The faith should indeed be kept clear, living, and transformative. But one must ask, how is this excellent goal to be achieved? What must the church and its leaders know, practice, and proclaim to keep the faith relevant to people who come each week in hope of hearing something that would improve their lives? What *have* we to say and what *must* we say to bring God's transforming power into their lives? How do we teach to ensure our message conveys the vibrancy of life and hope

characterized in the life and teaching of Jesus? And how do we keep the gospel simple, understandable, articulable without diluting it into meaningless platitudes fit only for trifling memes and cheesy inspirational posters?

Right Knowing

The first step in accomplishing this is to ensure that churches—and thus first, their leaders—have a genuine understanding of the Gospel. The vibrancy and health of the church is entirely dependent upon how well it adheres to, lives out, and proclaims the Gospel message it has been given. The church and its leaders must understand how and why it exists, what it was made to do and proclaim. And it must be able to courageously evaluate its own faithfulness in upholding and living these standards as well as apply the proper correctives when they have been missed. The only other alternative is to dissolve, tepidly and blandly, into the cultural stew. If the church is to be faithful and relevant it must again become biblically literate and theologically adept.

For this to be done right we must properly understand the place and practice of theology. Clearly, the focus of our faith is always on the dynamic and living relationship with the Triune God through Jesus. We were created—and then recreated through Jesus' saving work—for intimacy with God. Theology, as a science, must not, and indeed, cannot replace this. The essence and center of the Christian faith is a relationship not an axiom, a divine person not a philosophical paradigm. The purpose of theology then is not to quench this living relationship with complex principles but to describe it, accurately and fully. Theology, at its heart, is the reverent, loving, grateful description of God's nature and work, expressed only to make the relational center increasingly vibrant and meaningful.

This essential work has two interrelated perspectives, two intertwined responsibilities. The first is descriptive: theology exists to proclaim, interpret, and apply what God has given of himself in his self-revelation. The second aspect is protective. Here theology endeavors to correct errors in understanding and application to protect the unique divine-human relationship from destructive understandings and practices. Both aspects are vital to the health and life of the church and thus its relevance and mission. For without theology's explanatory witness and protective guidance the faith will only burst into endless speculations, subjective opinions, and arbitrary values, all tragically lacking any legitimate reality or authority.

Theology is rightly described as "a complex science that keeps the Gospel from becoming complex."[10] Complex, not because the gospel is complex, but because the world it enters and addresses is complex. Complex, not because its message is complicated but because the questions raised before it and the criticisms raised against it can be. And it is complex because, as the science of God, the object of its study is indescribably vast, mysterious, and veiled.[11] Describing the wonders of the Triune God, the far-reaching power of his saving work, and the vast implications of his lordship and reign over all creation often requires complex expressions, intricate descriptions, and intimate detail. But these are not voiced to confuse the message or render the faith's relational center opaque. Theology rises to describe, interpret, and protect the good news of God's saving, merciful work accomplished for us in Christ Jesus, ever striving to deepen our relationship with God by expanding our understanding of his nature and work thus increasing our sense of wonder, hope, joy, and awe.

It is the responsibility of the church to remain faithful to the truth revealed to us. Its leaders must never allow preconceived notions and theories or cultural expectations and values to cut away at the truth given us. The truths given in God's saving act and its accompanying revelation must not be dismissed or diluted because they are perceived as untenable or unpalatable. It is the purpose and responsibility of all who believe to make known what it has been given.

Knowing God and Making Him Known

> *The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, the gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.*
> *And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.*
> John 1:9–14

This passage radiantly describes the revelatory center of the Bible. With many other verses it describes God's dual act of reconciliation and revelation, of making us right while making himself known. And all this occurs in a decidedly remarkable way. Not waiting for us to discover him (an impossible endeavor[12]) or even seek him (an unlikely endeavor[13]) God enters our world in the person of the Son simultaneously setting us right and making himself known. He comes to us, a people that should have known him and might have known him had we not chosen instead to reject and shun him. But in his reckless grace he pursued us. With brash mercy he wooed us. And with a relentless love he won us! In Jesus God has not

only reconciled us to himself (his saving act) he has also, in this and through this, unveiled his will and the intentions of his saving work (his revealing act). And in our experience of Jesus we have both genuine knowledge of God and a genuine experience of God. The reality of this encounter creates faith and reciprocal love by which we are reborn as children of God. In this new relationship with our eternal Father both his saving work and revealing continue to unfold giving ever greater insights into his nature and work and the implications these have for our lives.

The good news of the gospel is not only that we can know God, it is also how we know him. To recognize that in the objective reality of Jesus Christ God has given himself to be known and revealed that he desires to be known. He has loved us, concretely and powerfully, creating in us a new life and between us a new relationship. The knowledge of God, unveiled by God through gracious, relational encounter, opens an entirely different vista and provides an entirely different reality. The church exists to know and reflect this reality, to shine its light and wonders into this dark world. The church exists to know God and make him known. It has no other purpose. Every constituent detail of its life and work is right only insofar as it participates in this and expands it.

It is the life of the church to live this reality and through its living witness and testimony, make this reality known to the world. It is for this and this alone that we exist. And our health and faithfulness is measured only by how well this is done. Thus the primary work of church leadership is to grow ever deeper in our understanding of all that God has given and revealed and ever more skilled at sharing, declaring, and living these realities. And it must relentlessly, courageously, and skillfully assess how well this is being done and what needs to change to ensure it does.

Christian theology exists to help the church in this work. The work and purpose of the church's theology is to study, interpret, and protect all it has been given in Christ Jesus. Theology is the scientific study and description of God's work of reconciliation and revelation. It is the task of theology to take up Scripture's authoritative witness faithfully interpreting and explaining it that the full obedience of mind and life might be submitted to God and conformed to the relationship and revelation we have been given. Where theology fulfills this purpose it will prove to be vitally relevant and helpful in advancing the church's mission.

Whose Story?

In my church we are blessed with leaders who see theology as doxology, who see descriptions of God's nature and work as grounds for praise, adoration, and hope, who see theological discourse as a means to correct error and provide insights for the godly life. We are blessed with a businessman who in his free time reads N. T. Wright's brilliant descriptions of New Testament theology, who calls me to discuss Barth's commentary on Romans, and has read Calvin's *Institutes* cover to cover. We have a man who spent his career as a police detective and who spends his free time reading through the whole of Barth's *Dogmatics* and every theological work he can get his hands on. We have a young mom—a seminary grad hoping one day to be ordained but now raising two pre-school children—in love with Hebrew cosmology and the Old Testament Scriptures. We have a retired parole officer who has spent his entire adult life striving to better understand the Bible and all it describes. And each of these individuals regularly stand before the people of our church family to provide them with ever deeper insight into the infinite wonders of God's nature and work. And in so doing, they build the church by deepening the people's knowledge of God and his work. They strengthen the church by addressing with insight and wisdom the deep problems, questions, and needs of our fallen race. They inspire the church by describing, in ever greater and varied detail the wonders of God's goodness, mercy, and love.

In my church we are blessed with leaders who strive to shape our lives and work around the person of Jesus and the salvation he has accomplished. They courageously and creatively strive to shape the mission, ministry, and worship of our church, not around the ephemeral expectations of pop culture but the eternal realities of what God has given us in Jesus. Their work as leaders is to help the church be a community of growing disciples who are growing disciples. In doing this they equip the saints for ministry, build up the body of Christ, deepen the unity of the Spirit, and grow ever towards full maturity of faith in the image of Jesus.

We live in an age obsessed with telling our own stories, celebrating our diverse perspectives, and treating all insights as equally valid. But the church does not exist for the telling of our story but the telling of God's story. It exists to display to the world and proclaim to the world the wonders of another world and reality. And it strives (or should strive!) to be ever more faithful, ever more skilled, ever more efficient in this wondrous task. And it strives to be ever more courageous in assessing its faithfulness in achieving this. Through all the centuries of its existence, theology has proven again and again to be a vital and most relevant help in fulfilling this holy call.

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[1] In our Presbyterian tradition I am thinking primarily (but not exclusively) of the session and its constituent pastors and elders. But it must not be lost that this axiom and expectation extends to all who lead others within the body of Christ.

[2] From the Latin *vītālis* (*a life*), derivative of *vīvere* meaning *to live*. *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines vital as "something indispensable to the continuance of life." It can also mean "full of energy; lively." Firmly grasping and passionately guarding the church's divine reason to exist is indispensible for its life and required if its life is to be vibrant and full of energy.

[3] Barna Report, *The State of the Church in 2016*, Research Releases in Faith and Christianity, September 15, 2016. https://www.barna.com/research/state-church-2016/#.V-BdszuXviY.

[4] Ross Douthat, *Bad Religion: How We Became a Nation of Heretics* (New York: Free Press, 2012), 6. In my opinion, this book is must reading for every pastor and elder. Douthat raises essential issues, which, if true, will profoundly shape the future life and mission of the church.

[5] Wordsworth may best combine into a single voice the glow of Barna with the murk of Douthat: "upon whose roseate lips a Stygian hue." Certainly Wordsworth describes the sanguine pronouncements from those church leaders who declare each new deviance from Scripture and tradition to be a work of the Spirit.

[6] Or, if we are completely honest, we must wonder how many of these even *are* Christian in any biblical or historical sense. In the end we must acknowledge that *self-identification* provides more perceived "self" than accurate "identification."

[7] Gal. 1:6ff, 3:1–5; Eph. 2:8–9; Rom. 3:20–26, 11:6; Jn. 1:12–13.

[8] A delightfully useful word, from Latin words *nugatorius* "worthless, trifling, futile;" *nugator* "jester, trifler, braggart;" and *nugatus*, "to trifle, jest, play the fool."

[9] This well-known phrase has been used for centuries as an example of frivolous theological speculation. While medieval theologians did raise esoteric questions in effort to merge theological and philosophical perspectives there is no evidence that they ever endeavored to answer this question. Rather it was posited specifically as criticism of theological deliberations that were perceived largely irrelevant and unhelpful to the life of the church. On a humorous note, the Christian satirical webpage *The Babylon Bee* recently reported: "Majority Of Nation's Christians Believe 'Theology' Deadly Disease, Study Finds." http://babylonbee.com/news/majority-nations-christians-believe-theology-deadly-disease-study-finds/

[10] The oft repeated words of my first theology teacher and mentor, Prof. F. Dale Bruner of Whitworth University.

[11] "Your knowledge is beyond my comprehension; it is so far beyond me, I am unable to fathom it" (Ps. 139:6). See also: Ps. 145:3; 147:5; Isa. 45:15; Rom. 11:33.

[12] Jer. 13:23; 5:3; 17:9.

[13] "As it is written: 'None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one'" (Rom. 3:10–12). Cf. Ps. 14:1–3 and 53:1–3; Ps. 36:1–4; Rom. 1:21ff.

The Vertical: "Be Reconciled To God"

A Sermon to the 222nd General Assembly

by Jerry Andrews

From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. As we work together with him we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. For, he says, "At an acceptable time I have listened to you, and on a day of salvation I have helped you." See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!

II Cor. 5:16–6:3, NRSV

In the second chapter of his Second Letter to the Corinthians, Paul speaks of first coming to them by travelling from Troas to Macedonia and, though troubled, "God has led a triumphal procession." They had been saved by his preaching, comparing it all to "the fragrance" or "the aroma," he says, "of the knowledge of Christ." By this, Paul is recommending

himself to them. He needs to. Some disconnect had divided them from him.

Was it their jaw-dropping defiance of common decency—a man sleeping with his father's wife and the church elders bragging on it as evidence of the new freedom in Christ? Even the pagans haven't thought of that one yet, Paul scolds. Was it their sharing communion by doing everything but sharing or communing? Are the rich actually humiliating the poor at the common table, Paul asks out aloud. I can't believe it, he says. Was it the total disregard of the promise of the resurrection or the believing and teaching of it to be anything but the resurrection? Or was it the acknowledged harshness with which the Apostle had addressed them in the Letter?

From that second chapter passing through our chapter to the seventh, Paul defends his ministry among them. That is a tough assignment. How do you tell folks God has sent you to them and that you are, flaws included, really good for them? In what could be the unofficial GA motto, when the Apostle finishes this argument, he reminds them that when they were together he "had no rest" was "harassed at every turn"—"conflicts on the outside, fears within."

But the apostle has hope. In the midst of this alienation, Titus showed up and spoke of affection—genuine affection. Titus, here the messenger, like Paul the messenger, is so identified with the message, that to receive one with gladness is to receive the other. This is not merely listening earnestly to one another and speaking humbly to each other, though it is not ever less than that. (Frankly, you should do that in every meeting of any kind—meetings of NPR or the NRA, probably not both). No, what Titus brought, Paul recalls with a smile, is news of genuine comfort, sustained concern, sincere longing, profound joy.

When he finishes all his arguments, Paul will, in the next chapters, with great skill, immediately put it all into the employ of … of all things … a fundraising appeal. Really. Brilliant. I plan to do the same this fall with a capital campaign. You can send your checks to First Presbyterian Church of San Diego.

But now I get to the point: at the very heart of these matters of the heart—the hope of Paul to again persuade them to continue with him in Gospel ministry—a hope not uncommon at this or any General Assembly—is the passage just now read from the fifth chapter—the passage that forms the theological core of this letter.

Calvin says of this passage and only of this passage: "*est hic insignis locus, si quis alius est in toto Paulo,*" which translates, "Here is a significant passage, if ever there is one in the whole of Paul."[1]

Let's cease the old way of thinking about one another and Christ, says the Apostle. Perhaps the old way sounds something like this—me an old Jew, you a bunch of barely baptized barbarians; Christ, a good teacher, fabulous miracle worker, very inspiring religious leader … only. Instead, think anew of each other and of Christ. The two are bound together.

The old way of thinking? Predictable thus prejudicial. The new way of thinking? As different as the new creation is from the old—the old gone, the new come. This is probably less a reference to the individual becoming a new thing—though it is also that—and more an acknowledgement of the new creation of all things.

The Creator of which is God. "God," and God alone, is the subject of the long run-on sentence that now follows. Bad, remarkably bad, theology comes from rearranging this sentence so that God is the indirect, or, worse yet, the direct object of the verb.

God reconciles. Not the Church, not us, not ever. Reconciliation is the work of God—the work of God in Christ. In Christ, God reconciled us to God. In Christ, God is reconciling the world to God.

Note: no one, yet, is being reconciled to each other. We have been reconciled by God to God, that is, we have been reconciled to God "in Christ." It is important to notice that it says "in Christ," not merely "by" Christ.

It is the difference between a Moderator and a Mediator. The Moderator, rightly our highest office(s) in the church, brings together for reconciliation two parties, neither of which is he or she a member. This was beautifully done by the American and Christian Jimmy Carter, bringing together the Israeli-Jew Menachem Begin and the Egyptian-Muslim Anwar Sadat. I confess to still being proud of being both American and Christian because of the events that day in the Rose Garden.

But Carter was a Moderator, not Mediator, as we retell the story. Begin and Sadat will make the sacrifices that day, and later with their political careers and, in the case of Sadat, with his life, and they, not Carter, will rightly share the Nobel Peace Prize.

The biblical presentation of the Mediator—very differently—is not of one disconnected from both parties, but one who, in his person, is both parties. God and humanity—each fully in Christ—each reconciled fully in Christ.

In Christ, we have been reconciled to God. Our trespasses no longer counting against us, we are righted with God. Remember: we are not free people; we are a freed people. The people of God who desire to be always a grateful people remember this.

The passage leading us to this one proclaims the saving action of Christ's death and the resurrection. That's the deed: reconciliation. And this is the word about the deed. We have been entrusted with the announcement of this reconciliation. That's grace. All grace.

Paul will never get over this amazing grace. To the young Timothy he writes that he, Paul, the untrustworthy one, once thought God to be so untrustworthy that he, Paul, had to do God's work for God—namely persecuting Christians. But now! Isn't this amazing? The Only Trustworthy One, God, has entrusted the Gospel to me, Paul, the untrustworthy one. Paul will never get over this.

We now have this trust—the Gospel—which proclaims the reconciliation of God in Christ. Thus, we (in this passage, Paul and his team) are ambassadors for Christ. The Greek word for "ambassadors" is "*presbeuomen,"* which is a root word for Presbyterian—another proof Paul was a Presbyterian. This is a verb—"ambassadoring." We "ambassador" for Christ. God is making God's appeal through us.

Remember: Paul is recommending himself to them, now by connecting his message, not only with himself the messenger, but with God the Author of the message who, like an Emperor, has sent out his Imperial Legate to proclaim imperial tidings—Paul with the Divine message of reconciliation. An angelic herald singing peace on earth, good will towards all.

Please note: Neither Paul, nor we, are announcing a reconciled world, nor, of course, are we announcing our reconciliation to the world (actually, I think, we should work to keep Christianity strange), and tempting as it may be in this violent world, neither Paul nor we are reconciling the world to itself. The world reconciled to itself, but unreconciled to God, is not a new creation, it is merely the old Babel, on its way to becoming another monstrous Babylon.

And here, surprisingly, is where the apostle, like an evangelical preacher at a GA, slips it in—"Be reconciled to God."

Note the Vertical: "… to God." The command is not to "get along with each other," though that is good advice. The command is not to "work for peace," found easily enough elsewhere in Scripture.

The command here is to be righted to God, like one reconciles accounts, or like one brings into harmony that which is discordant. A command it is. Perhaps surprisingly.

After convincing us that this whole project is an act of God, which act we announce, not enact, the Apostle, in the imperative (and only here, mind you), tells us to do it. Be assured Paul has read his Calvin.

This is the language of evangelism. It is more suitable to the preaching of the Gospel outside the church, one would think. But here the Apostle invites us, us! "Be reconciled to God." The language of evangelism is also the internal language of the church—a church that wants to be reminded of God's grace and thus remain a grateful church.

Clearly this is all about Jesus. God made righteous Jesus to be sin that we, sinful as we are, might become the righteousness of God. A transaction has taken place. Deal with it. And, yes, this is the language of justification and of exchange, and the language of the Suffering Servant of Isaiah.

This is high rhetoric. This is the language that Calvin calls the most profound in all of Paul. All this is the Gospel Paul preaches and teaches.

The previous passage explicating the cross and resurrection now has its ending frame: "*he who died for all, died that we might live; in his dying we all died, in his rising we all rise."*

Once a sinner and nothing but a sinner. But now become the righteousness of God. God in Christ reconciled us to God. God with us announces that reconciliation.

We are co-workers, Paul says. Co-workers with God, Paul dares to say. That's how Calvin reads it and Hodge too, who can out Calvin Calvin.

We are being told in the most certain of terms that reconciliation is God's work—alone. So … do it. And we are being told that announcing that reconciliation is our work—which God is doing.

This is not confusion. This is grace. It is a great grace in itself. The one that will haunt Paul all his ministry, namely, that God entrusts me with God's own work.

So Paul pleads: Do not accept this grace in vain—rejecting me, my message, and my Savior who gave me this message.

Just as Paul a moment ago entreated the church to "Be reconciled to God," he urges them now to do it now—Now!

Did not God say that there is an acceptable time for this? That time is now. That day has come. Can't you see it? *"See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!"*

Again, this is probably less about the conversion of the individual, though it must also include that. It is more about entering that new creation spoken of at the beginning of the passage.

Salvation is very personal, but never private. The Gospel is profoundly intimate, and always public. What goes deepest to the human heart goes widest to the world.

Corinthians—Now! Presbyterians—Now! How about Friday, June 24, 2016, before noon? How about while we sing "Just as I Am"? Jesus may come back before lunch—for which many of you are now hoping—I mean, Jesus coming back, not lunch.

Remember where we started: alienation and affection. It is in all of Paul's letters. To the Galatians, of whom he is more critical than the Corinthians, Paul writes: *"My little children,"* as he also whispers, *"with whom I am again in travail."* To the Thessalonians, he writes: *"Like a nurse who cherishes her little charges, we yearn for you, and we wanted to give you not only the Gospel but even our lives."*

In the verses that will soon follow the theological burst of our passage, the Apostle will take a breath and lower his tone: *"I have let my tongue get away with me, Corinthians, and opened wide my heart to you. We are not withholding our affection from you, but you are withholding yours from us. As a fair exchange—I speak as to my children—open wide your hearts also."*

The heart opened wide by the wide open heart of our reconciling God, who in Christ now reconciles not only us but the world to God—that heart is invited, indeed commanded, now in response, to open wide to God and, as a fair exchange, to each other.

Well, what have I done here? I have argued that the Church has a Faith without which she cannot live faithfully. That Faith declares that a loving God sent a crucified and risen Savior, in whom God reconciled us to God and is now reconciling the world.

That truth is announcement before it is agenda. The vertical orients the horizontal. This truth, I have attempted to persuade you, is the truth on which the reconciliation of, and within, the Church is founded.

This is the Faith that we are invited to reaffirm: God reconciled us through Christ. In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself. Past tense, notably—the best tense for the announcement of the Gospel. God "has" provided for our salvation. See what God "has" done in Christ.

And this is the faithfulness which it invites: Entreating each other to be reconciled to God. Urging each other to do so now.

We are the first generation of Presbyterian officers not to have in our ordination questions a sentence with both words, truth and unity, such as, "Will you maintain the truth for the sake of the unity of the Church?"

The Faith tends toward faithfulness, Truth toward unity. This is Paul's message.

Allow me a further word. It belongs to Augustine who, commenting on being drawn to God, with a heart wide open to God, and once having been alienated from God, yet desiring God with great affection, knowingly writes: "Give me a man who has been in love, he will feel what I now say. Give me someone who yearns. Give me one who is travelling in this wilderness, thirsting and panting after the springs of the eternal home. Give me such, I say, and they will know what I am saying."[2]

Be reconciled to God. Now.

Let us pray. *Lord, remind me of the grace of being reconciled to you, in Christ, by his death and resurrection. Haunt me with the grace of being your co-worker in the announcement of You reconciling the world to Yourself. Now. Just as I am, I come. Amen.*

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[1] Calvin, *Calvini Opera* 50. My translation. Compare *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries,* eds. David Torrance and Thomas Torrance (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd: 1959–72), II Cor. 5:18, trans. T.A. Smail, 77.

[2] Augustine, *Tractatus in Joannis evangelium*, 26.4 in *Patrologiae Cursus Completus Latina*, 35, column 1379. Translation mine. Commenting on Jn. 6:44, "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him," Augustine responds to the Pelagians who declare that Augustine teaches we are drawn against our will. The quote calls them the "cold men" for never having known a passion for God, or for anything else.

A Reformation Day Sermon

by David McKechnie

"*For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one should boast."* Eph. 2:8–9

If you have ever worked waiting tables, you know how tough that job really is. Your memory has to be intact. You have fussy people. You have to observe etiquette. You have heavy trays to carry. It is a tough job. Most people in the service industry are dependent on tips.

What kind of a tipper are you? The IRS guessed that tips last year in America amounted to $42 billion. So how do you tip? And to whom do you give tips? The valet who drives your car, the babysitter, the person who waits on you in a restaurant? Or how about the people who do housekeeping in a hotel? Do you tip your ski instructor? Who do you tip and how much do you tip? I go into Starbucks and there is that jar sitting there. I am always thinking, "What am I supposed to do with that? I only got a cup of coffee. Do I have to tip for that?" Tipping is an obligation and an opportunity. It is an obligation to say thank you to someone, but it is also an opportunity to affirm someone and do it tangibly with money.

On October 31, 1517 Martin Luther nailed 95 theses to the door of All Saints Church in Wittenberg, Germany. Luther was fulfilling an obligation, but he was also taking advantage of an opportunity. He believed he had an obligation to challenge some of the teachings of the medieval Roman Catholic Church. Make no mistake: there is a difference between the Roman Catholic Church of the 16th century and the 21st century. Luther and his company were concerned that the Church of his day no longer capable of speaking to the basic crisis of human existence. It had lost the ability to speak meaningfully into the lives of people burdened by guilt and threatened by death. It had lost the ability to say something about what it is to live a Christ-like life.

The people did not have the Bible in the vernacular, so Luther translated the Bible into German. The people were dependent upon priests, many of whom were very poorly trained, to teach them the Bible. At the same time, the church accumulated huge amounts of wealth, power, and prestige. Today, if you sail the Danube, on either side of the river, you see huge vineyards for miles and miles. The Roman Catholic Church owned many of these lands in the 16th century. Yet when the people came to the Church for spiritual nourishment, they were encouraged to go on pilgrimages. When they came for spiritual healing, they were encouraged to purchase indulgences, that is, to pay money to get Aunt Susie out of purgatory and into Heaven. More pervasively, the Church taught that if you really want approval from God, you have to earn it by doing a lot of good works.

This, Luther and others noticed, was contrary to what Scripture teaches. The reformers, by contrast, taught that we are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, according to scripture alone, on the basis of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ alone. It wasn't about what *we* have to do, but about what *God* has done for us in Christ, which is our justification. It was not about *us* completing God's work in ourselves, but about *God* completing his work in us through Christ, which is our sanctification. The Reformation was born of a rediscovery of this text: "*For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus, for good works…"*

Josh got his report card the other day. He is in fifth grade. Today they don't send report cards home. They do it electronically. Everybody can see it! Josh wasn't proud. His grades were bad and the comments were worse. So he had a little conference with his father and said, "Dad, what do you think it is: heredity or environment?"

The environment of the 16th century was confused about grace. The hearts of Luther, Zwingli, Calvin, Knox, and many others ached to convey the message of God's grace in Jesus Christ: "*For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one should boast."* The Protestant reformers' hearts ached to convey to people that Christianity is not just a good story. Christianity is not extraneous to our psyches. Christianity is really a life! Jesus said, "*I have come that you might have life and that more abundantly*" (John 10:10). The Protestant reformers translated values, ventures. and visions into life.

Isaiah 49, under the providence of God, gives us some insight. In verse 2 it says, "*He made my mouth like a sharp sword … he made me a polished arrow*." The

prophet goes on to say to the people of God, "*You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified*." Could it be that we are part of the spiritual heritage of Israel? Could it be that we have received some semblance of truth? Could it be that we are supposed to be sharp swords and polished arrows in our culture? I think it says we are called to holy boldness. Where we stand tall for Christian principles, no matter the context, we do it under the inspiration of the Spirit and under the tutelage of the Word of God.

We know this about arrowheads: they were never mass-produced. They were always shaped, sharpened, and polished by hand. You, my friends, are being shaped, sharpened and polished by the Word of God, by the community of faith, by the history in which you find yourself, by the sense of mission you share, by the use of your resources. We are shaped, sharpened and polished. We are here on purpose, for a redemptive purpose. So we sharpen and polish our values, our ventures and our visions.

So what are your values? What values are really important to you? The problem with us is that our vices are often more visible than our values. What do we really value? We value people more than things. We value the priesthood of all believers, which means we are all responsible to live the Christian life, not just priests or preachers. We value the community of faith. We value prayer. We value the opportunity to use our resources for redemptive ends. We believe God accepts us as we are, but he does not expect us to stay that way.

We have a marvelous history of 226 years here at Sardis. The mission and values of this community of faith have permeated our surrounding culture and made a difference in the world. We're on an important venture. We ought to be praying for the body of Christ, for our witness in Charlotte and around the world. Another venture is how we use our possessions. What a privilege to make a difference in the world as a result of how those things are used.

In the next couple of weeks we are going to focus on the operating budget for 2017. Again, another venture. Are you willing to take a step of faith or are you only going to do what you think is easy? God calls us to step out in faith. Jesus is not against possessions but he is against possessiveness.

The old proverb goes: "We carry from the ashes of the past the fire, not the ashes." Where is the fire in this congregation, or in your life? Peter Drucker, the guru of management consulting, says: "Focus only on those things that will make a big difference if successful." He was speaking to the fact that we are so easily focused on petty, little things when God has called us to such a greater vision.

When it comes to a vision for you and for this part of the body of Christ, we don't tip God. Tipping God is not in our vocabulary. It is 'all in' or not at all. It says in Proverbs 29, "*Where there is no vision, the people perish*." Friends, sight is a faculty, but seeing is a gift of God. If we can catch a vision of what God wants for us we will be participants in his redemptive parade.

Do we dare pray, "Lord, pour out your spirit on us? Let us be conduits of your grace. Let us be vessels of your love. Work through us, do something, even in spite of us, that will be redemptive in the context in which we find ourselves." We are in for a terrific ride into the future. I dare to believe God has wonderful things planned for this congregation and its next pastor.

Luther loved the Bible and his beer. This is not a recommendation for your Bible study! But Luther once said: "While I was drinking beer, God reformed the church." Luther, in other words, did not take himself or his abilities too seriously. But he did take God and his abilities seriously and he knew that God could use him. As a result we have the Protestant Reformation.

In 1935, the brilliant architect, Frank Lloyd Wright, was invited by the Kaufmann family to build a home for them in southwestern Pennsylvania. It was a beautiful setting, next to a waterfall. Wright came up with a design that involved using cantilevered steel to extend part of the house over the waterfall. Thus, the structure looked as if it was suspended in air. So it was very unique. He called the place Fallingwater. This home came to life. He saw his dream become a reality.

He believed in it, but the construction people doubted. So under the main cantilevered steel beam, the construction crew built a stone support column. When Frank Lloyd Wright saw it he was furious. In anger, he had the top layer of stone discretely removed so there was nothing between the top of the stone column and the steel beam. Just air. You know what? The beam stood, and stands to this day.

Friends, I do not know what hangs over you. I have no idea what threatens you or what burdens you are under. But I want you to know this, on the authority of the Word of God. II Corinthians 12:9 says: "*My grace is sufficient for you, and my strength is made perfect in weakness*." That you can trust. Amen.

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Dr. Randal Working is President of *Theology Matters*. Dr. Richard Burnett is Executive Director and Managing Editor. The Board of Directors consists of ruling and teaching elders in various Presbyterian denominations. *Theology Matters* exists to inform and encourage, instruct and inspire, members of the Presbyterian family and wider Christian community through the clear and coherent articulation of theology that is reformed according to God's Word. It is sent free to anyone who requests it. You can reach us at 864-378-5416 or admin@theologymatters.com or at our website: www.theologymatters.com.

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Learning How to Help Each Other

Probably more powerfully and perceptively than any churchman in modern times, Karl Barth taught that a culturally accommodated church, a church that compromises not only the content of its message, but permits itself "to abandon the form of its message and order to its own pleasure or to changes in prevailing ideological and political convictions," is a false church.

Barth understood that churches seeking to be useful and relevant, first and foremost, always end up being the most useless and irrelevant. "All honor to relevance," he wrote, "but pastors should be good marksmen who aim their guns beyond the hill of relevance." He taught that the church that marries the culture of her day will find herself a widow tomorrow. Preoccupation with being relevant is a symptom of the heresy of modern, Neo-Protestantism.

Near the end of his life, he wrote with reference to the church of modern, Neo-Protestantism: "Supposedly to reach people where they are, this church is forever paying regard to them, adjusting itself to them, trying to win their attention and sympathy, attempting to be—or to appear to be—as pleasant as possible to them. It is the distracted and therefore the chattering church, the squinting and therefore the stuttering church."

Yet does such a view imply we can simply ignore where people are? Barth rejected efforts that put more emphasis on methods and techniques of sharing the gospel than knowing and living the gospel. He taught that Christians are to be clear, first and last, about what the gospel is, which is often easier said than done. Preachers who think they must first exegete their congregations before they exegete the text know little about either, Barth taught. Preachers who think they are ever smart enough or good enough to know where people really are or what their deeper, more specific needs and problems are—except that we all are sinners in need of grace—are fooling themselves.

Because sin always confuses us about who we are, whose we are, where we are, and what our real needs and problems are, we cannot rely on knowledge of ourselves alone to understand ourselves truly. We need the grace of God in Jesus Christ. This is also why psychological or sociological points of contact we may have with others, as helpful as they may be, are of limited value when it comes to hearing the gospel. Here, the Holy Spirit creates the only point of contact that is decisive. All others become unhelpful if they compete or serve as a substitute for this one.

Of course, this does not mean that being kind, considerate, cordial, cheerful, helpful, polite, patient, or pleasant, etc., does not matter! Nor does it mean we can ignore the concrete needs, situation, and language of the people we meet, as if the Word of God fell out of heaven like a stone! Barth said that if we aim to preach the gospel in China, we must learn not only the language of Zion. We must learn Chinese. And if we want to help others, even in a provisional, penultimate way, we should ask them how we can help.

This is true not only for those outside the household of faith, but especially for those within it. Therefore, the Board of *Theology Matters* wants to know how we can help you. We want to aim beyond the hill of relevance and be, first and foremost, faithful. We do not want to adjust the content or form of the gospel message to accommodate "changes in prevailing ideological and political convictions." Nor is it our mission to address issues everyone else is talking about. Nevertheless, we do want to help.

In order to help us understand how we can help you, please take our survey. Type the web address below into your web browser. It will take you to our survey on the Survey Monkey website: www.tmsurvey.org

Richard Burnett, Managing Editor