Theology Matters

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Six Observations about Presbyterian Theological Education: The View from My Window

by Jeffrey F. Bullock

I would like to thank Richard Burnett, as well as the other organizers of this Theology Matters conference, for the invitation to share a little time with you today. Sharing time is truly a gift and not a throw away phrase imbedded in a speaker's introduction. Time matters to all of us and, most certainly, the older I get the more I have come to realize that time is one of my most precious of possessions if, in fact, we can possess time. How I use it. Why I use it. How I choose to invest it is a matter of theological stewardship in ways that I clearly didn't comprehend when I began my ordained ministry in 1985. So, I choose to spend my time with you today, as you choose to spend time with each other, because the matters of which we are thinking and discussing are worth our stewardship of time.

The second point I would like to make in my introduction is this: I am no John Leith. I am no Tom Gillespie. I am not an accomplished theologian or biblical scholar. In fact, I am not a child of the church; that is, I was not raised in a Christian family. I stumbled into church one day as a kind of last resort for my mother who wanted me out of the house and enrolled me in a neighborhood Vacation Bible School (VBS), in Omaha, Nebraska. And much to my surprise and, I suspect, even more of a surprise to my mother was that I actually enjoyed it—immensely so. I wanted to go back the next day, and the next. And when the next year rolled around, I was one of the first to sign up to attend. Something about that experience grabbed me—and never really let me go—at that early age.

Several years later, we moved to a different community in a different state where middle school students were released from public school one hour a week to attend confirmation classes. When given the choice between attending algebra or leaving school for an hour to go to confirmation, I chose confirmation. The only problem was that I hadn't attended a church in that community.

So when it came time to fill out the attendance form I scribbled in "Presbyterian" for my denomination, as that was the church in which I was first enrolled in VBS. And a funny thing happened on that three-block walk to confirmation. Indeed, I missed a lot of algebra and never acquired an aptitude to work any of the equations, but I loved confirmation. I loved the class. I loved the homework. I loved the study. And I loved learning. Once again, that experience grabbed me—and never let me go. Both are moments in my life in which I now see the activity of the Holy Spirit alive and at work.

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So, you see, it's important to me that you understand that I'm not a John Leith or a Tom Gillespie; a Donald Bloesch or a Timothy Keller. My point-of-view is that of the grown-up kid whose DNA never really belonged to the Presbyterian Church (USA) in the way that a lot of you have experienced belonging. There was no Montreat in my ecclesial experience, no Ghost Ranch or Synod Schools. Very few of my kin were Christians and those that were, were Methodists, I later discovered. My experience and intellectual assent were neither familial nor generational. In fact, I'm a bit of a loner; an ecclesial orphan who to this day still loves and gives thanks for the church people that nurtured me in the faith. But, importantly and distinctively, that love and thanksgiving found its expression through congregations and not General Assemblies; men like Reuben Lewis and women like Anna Mae Handevidt, not the Moderator or the Stated Clerk. And, of course, that formation is who I am and, I suspect in some important ways, has greatly informed how I have tried to lead the College and Theological Seminary known as the University of Dubuque for the last twenty-five years.

The View from My Window

On a December day twenty years ago, I received a call from one of our trustees; a high school dropout by the name of Charlie Myers. Charlie and his spouse, Romona, had just completed funding an $8 million library which, at the time, was the largest single commitment to the University of Dubuque. Charlie was calling to tell me that my office didn't much look like a president's office, and he wanted to do something about that. He told me that he wanted to build an administration building to which I politely declined. "Charlie," I said, "we don't need an administration building. What we need is a classroom building. So, if you're willing to build a classroom building with some of the administration in it, I think we can talk." "Well," he said, "let's do that."

And, if you were to come to visit UDTS, you would see that, because of Charlie and Romona, the view from the Office of the President is really quite spectacular. And, given that I spend a good portion of each day looking out that window and wondering how we're going to make our way through this, that, or the other mess, it's a good thing that the view is expansive—rather than, say, a view of a brick wall. That would be a rather unfortunate metaphor for what I do!

Near the end of his career, Hasidic existentialist, Martin Buber, was encouraged to publish his philosophy in the way that Heidegger published *Being and Time* or Gadamer eventually wrote *Truth and Method*. Of course, Buber was best known for *I and Thou* and, to a lesser extent, *The Way of Man*. But instead of his own systematic, as was expected of him, Buber pulled together a collection of short stories written at very different periods of his life. Today, we know those collections as a book titled *Meetings*. On the celebration of his eightieth birthday, Buber, in trying to explain his intent in *Meetings,* said something like this: "I'm not a philosopher, prophet, or theologian, but a man who has seen something and who goes to a window and points to what he has seen." *Meetings* is Buber's way of pointing to that which he has seen. It's an observation out of the window; a pointing; a glance.

And that's how I invite you to understand my remarks today. I'm not a philosopher, prophet, or theologian but a person who has seen something over these last twenty-five years, and now I simply want to point to what I have seen, what I have glanced or observed. Rather than a systematic, I'm offering seven observations about mainline theological education from my third floor window.

Observation One: *Congregations are needlessly closing*

The congregation in which I was confirmed forty-nine years ago closed on April 25, 2021. After concluding a meeting with our Trustees, I stepped into my car and drove the five hours to that final service of worship. And it was a surreal experience.

Had any one of you walked into that sanctuary or church building prior to that final service of worship, you would have immediately thought to yourself, "Something good is happening here." It's a beautiful setting, having been located in that little town for over 150 years. The building and grounds are well maintained. The community is rural but is certainly healthy. There are plenty of children and many families still to be reached.

In fact, this congregation had an endowment of nearly $1 million, the legacy of people like Maylon Muir, Dr. Maitland, and Dorothy Fittus. Some earnings from that endowment were used to support the five or six of us from that congregation who were called into the ministry, as well as to support mission work around the world and within the community. And on April 25, 2021, an interim Lutheran pastor read from some pre-printed Presbytery manual and closed the doors to that sanctuary for the final time. There wasn't even a coffee hour afterwards. In fact, I was the last person out of the door.

Here's what I observed from my metaphorical window:
1. The elders were tired of propping up worn out structures but by then knew of no other way to be church. Ironically, a Methodist Bell Choir played music, and a Lutheran Choir helped to lead worship, but all the Presbyterians did in the service was introduce the Presbytery's Commission and record official minutes of the service.

2. Sunday School, Vacation Bible School, and Bible Studies had long ago ceased to operate within that church building. But minutes were taken at every session meeting, shrinking rolls were well-documented, and a point of order was declared during the worship service to make sure that, you guessed it, minutes were being taken to document the end.

3. And, of course, you can't help but think of Proverbs 29:18 here: "Without a vision, the people perish." And perish, it did.

Observation Two: *Leaders of congregations must be theologically and emotionally—steady*

From the best of my recollection, the last time that congregation had a pastor that was ably equipped to lead, build a vibrant worshipping community, and reach out into the community was about 1978. Yes, yes, I know: within our Presbyterian system, ministers and laypeople—together—lead congregations. But let's not deceive ourselves: within our system, ministers are set aside, by virtue of our ordination, to preach, teach, exercise care, and administer the sacraments. Over time—in this case, over 40 years—and without consistently strong ministerial leadership, congregations will wither on the vine and eventually die.

And what was unique about that ministerial epoch that lasted from 1967 to 1978? Together, the pastor and elders invested in youth. In fact, that investment was written into that pastor's terms of call. They led mission trips, held members accountable when they were absent from the church's life, and they were distinctively engaged in the community. And they consistently reached out to those within the community that didn't have a church home by making home visits, engagement through the education system, and by being active within the community.

Interestingly, every pastor that served that congregation from 1978 on, attended one of our PC(USA) seminaries for their formal theological preparation. However, the person who led that congregation from 1967 to 1978 never acquired a formal theological education from a seminary accredited by the Association of Theological Schools. After years of serving congregations in a lay capacity, he was examined by his presbytery and deemed worthy and qualified for Ordination into a Ministry of Word and Sacrament. We need to pay attention to that fact. Leaders would do well to read and understand Donald Bloesch's *Essentials of Evangelical Theology* here and to be well-aware of the emotional "why?" as it relates to their calling.

Observation Three: *The Academy is not the Church*

The Academy is not the Church, and the true Church does not belong within the formal Academy; at least the Academy as is understood within the context of most of our PC(USA) seminaries or the Association of Theological Schools. In the time of Leith and Gillespie, the American Academy of Religion or the Society of Biblical Literature were still somewhat grounded in the Christian faith, particularly the Reformed Christian faith. There are today, perhaps a few remnant faith communities within the larger Academy, but they are few and far between. And the fact of the matter is that it is sometimes the case that the loyalty of many seminary professors is to the Academy more so than to a vibrant worshipping community. Though there are exceptions, healthy pastors are not formed by theological faculties or the Presbytery's Committee on Vocation. Healthy pastors are formed and nurtured best within healthy worshipping communities. In this way, ministry is more "caught" than "taught," and it is in this way that the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary was founded.

In response to the westward migration of German speaking immigrants, Adrian Van Vliet, pastor of what is now the First Presbyterian Church in Dubuque, consistently gathered together cadres of young men and, in the basement of that congregation, began a process of theological education and formation that included worship, Bible study, and the reading of classical theology that was available to him at the time, but primarily Calvin's *Institutes*. These young men were discipled into the Christian faith and mentored into the artful ways of pastoral leadership. There were no accrediting bodies. There was no ATS and I'm still unclear what, if any, role was played by the national church in their ordination. But, over a period of decades, these young men went on to found congregations in out-of-the-way places throughout the upper Midwest in Iowa, Nebraska, Minnesota, North and South Dakota, Wisconsin, Illinois, and Missouri. They invested in those places. Made disciples in those places. And they exercised spiritual nurture and care in those places—that is, to a population of dispossessed, lonely, and sometimes bewildered new immigrant communities.

Observation Four: *The project of the Mainline has ended, and its Progressive Christianity replacement is not a faithful or sustainable substitute*

In the words of Timothy Keller in the first of his four-part series titled, "The Decline and Renewal of the American Church," the overall project of mainline Protestantism has failed or, perhaps less critically, that mission has ended. Keller's work is not new here; rather,

he integrates into his thesis the work of scholars like George Marsden and our Bradley Longfield. In effect, his point and the conclusion of their research is that mainline Protestantism, once the unofficial religion of America, achieved what it set out to accomplish; that is, it became the culture. And in the process of becoming the culture, mainline Protestantism lost any sense of distinctive identity or prophetic voice which could instruct that culture—our society—about the basics of human nature, or what genuine human flourishing looks like. Paraphrasing Donald Bloesch, progressive Christianity may use the vocabulary of a grounded evangelical faith, but it does not use its dictionary.

The truth is, I like Keller a lot. Though I've never met him, he offers a lot of insight, and his congregation happens to have been founded in the living room of one of our alums, a person by the name of B.J. Weber. B.J. was an avowed Communist and came to Christ because of the Trappist monk who discipled him and the Trappistine nun that mentored him. He wanted to become a Presbyterian minister, but the Presbyterians wouldn't have him, like we Presbyterians, forty years later, wouldn't have one of our more recent graduates who, like B.J. in New York city, went on to plant a ministry in Louisiana. You see, neither one of our alums fit the accepted Presbyterian mold. Yes—both of them are theologically and biblically sound; frankly, too orthodox or conservative for our present denomination. Their ministries are a distinctive outreach to the cultures in which they are embedded; in B.J.'s case, a counterpoint to the dominant progressive Protestant Christianity that many experience in New York city today. His is a ministry of friendship for the friendless. Whether that friendless one be a Wall Street banker through ministries known as the New York Fellowship or the New Canaan Society, the homeless couple down the street, or the addict son of the Hollywood icon, B.J. unapologetically announces the love, forgiveness, and opportunity to fellowship with the Lord Jesus Christ day in and day out. His ministry, along with that of our most recent alumnus in Louisiana, is not supported by the Presbyterian Mission Agency, but by the $100 monthly investments of people from all over the country—congregations and individuals. And that was just a bridge too far for our Presbyterian ecclesial structure.

Observation Five: *Theologically grounded non-conformist ministries of discipling are the future*

So, what do the ministries of B.J. Weber, and Brian and Amanda Beverly have to teach the tired elders of the former First Presbyterian Church of Jackson, Minnesota, that is, my home congregation that closed? The fact is: those elders were just plain old tired of propping up rusting church structures. Over the years, as John reminds us in Revelation, "… they had forgotten the love they had at first" and, instead, replaced that love, that passion, that zeal of engagement and service with a safer, far less risky kind of church; a kind of church where, in the process of closing down a 150+ year-old congregation an elder interrupted that last service of worship—not to offer a rebuttal or an emphatic "No, there is a better way!" to the action that was about to be taken, but to inquire about whether minutes were being taken to accurately account for that sad act. Observers of the faith rather than participants in the faith is what they had become. They had forgotten the love that they had at first and replaced that love with a safer, less engaging commitment to upholding the establishment, the denominational bureaucracy.

Our alums B.J., Brian, Amanda, and others like them remind us that the true joy and purpose of ministry is not serving on a church committee, being moderator of a General Assembly, or being president of one of our theological seminaries. The true joy and purpose of ministry exists only insomuch as we are living into the Great Commission; that is, making disciples, and baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit (not the Creator, Sustainer, and Redeemer), and teaching them to both know and observe what human flourishing really looks like. And, finally;

Observation Six: *Commissioning—that is Great—is a verb*

Forming disciples to exercise leadership within a Great Commissioning movement requires a different kind of theological education than that which has been in existence in our mainline and PC(USA) seminaries for the last 100+ years. It must be an education that is grounded in a distinctive evangelical vocabulary and theological structure. So long as there are denominations, there will be formalized structures and policies for preparation and ordination. In fact, it could be argued that it's our most important ecclesial responsibility and deserves more attention and oversight than it currently gets. And it is true that there are students in preparation who will do just fine within our current denominational structures of preparation.

But it is also true that a new day has dawned, and that the mainline has been moved to the sideline, and it is unequipped to exercise leadership in this epoch of Great Commissioning. Instead, in this time, theological preparation must be both/and. That is, utilizing *both* the elements of formality and tradition, such that exists in faithful pockets within our PC(USA) seminaries, *and* beyond the conventional reach of those institutions into vibrant and healthy congregations and non-conformist ministries of commissioning. In this new day of Great Commissioning, Christian leaders must primarily be

formed in the unconventional places where discipling can actually happen; where it can be learned, and modeled; where it can be "caught" using a language and a practice that is distinctive and consistent.

On our campus, that kind of discipleship most often takes place in undergraduate campus ministry within an undergraduate student demographic where there are more Muslims than there are Presbyterians; and this is at a faith-based university of teaching and learning. That is the complexity of our mission field today and, candidly, that type of student is an unfamiliar audience within the teaching experience of many of our more conventional theological faculty.

Pastors and church leaders today must be formed, primarily, within healthy congregations and non-conformist ministries that are what? That are practicing the Great Commissioning; that is, are identifying youth within their communities that are unattached, drifting, or unchurched. That are getting their hands dirty with addicts of all stripes. That are introducing people into the ways of human flourishing, which means that they actually have a sense of what human flourishing looks like, feels like, and is. The days of *de facto* discipling are done; that is, when people come to our congregations because that's where the movers and shakers of the community reside. It is done.

In retrospect, that was its own kind of lazy discipleship; a way of doing church that was certainly faithful in its intent and purposes, but bureaucratically resistant to the now more difficult and much dirtier work of Great Commissioning. And if truth be told, I was prepared—well prepared for the former and woefully unprepared to do the work that I believe needs to be accomplished now. With the exception of one professor who, amongst his peers was considered an intellectual lightweight, nobody in my formalized theological education talked about making disciples—as a verb.

Conclusion

So where do we go from here? I believe that faithful Christian leaders today must be formed in a focused collaboration between seminaries with an evangelical spirit (doctrine and experience) and specialized congregations and non-conformist ministries. The way we attempt to do that at Dubuque—and we are far from perfect—is through our online hybrid model of content delivery where we have students from three countries and twenty-seven states. Students are on campus, sometimes multiple times throughout the year but, importantly, they are often embedded in congregations and non-conformist ministry sites, applying in real time what they have learned in their physical and virtual classrooms. In this way, ecclesial leaders are formed within the real context of ministry—every day; not as a nine-month required internship. In healthy congregations and non-conformist sites, and with healthy mentors, students learn the spiritual art that is required to practice ministry and discipleship in a landscape where worshipping communities must be nurtured and built, often from scratch.

I am reluctantly convinced that most of my predecessors could hardly envision such an ecclesial landscape as that which we live in today. And, yet, it is a landscape, to me at least, that seems strangely familiar; likely because it is from that place of human brokenness that I was first introduced so many years ago to an elementary vocabulary of human flourishing in a tiny little congregation in Omaha, Nebraska. It was there, as a child, and later in two other congregations, where a new language was inculcated into my life and life-story where I actually came to believe that the Great Commission was both a mandate and an invitation; a verb or active participle.

Were I to pastor a congregation today, we would regularly talk about Jesus; the Jesus who lived and died, and who lives again. We would try to live, together, in the way that Jesus modeled, and in the way that Scripture invites and at times commands us to live. Nearly all of my energy and enthusiasm would be invested in discipling youth and teens, and reaching out to young adults to inculcate within them a different kind of vocabulary for living, and tending to the poor and broken within the community I serve. That very simple and focused approach to pastoring will eventually lead to a renewal of that congregation—that worshipping community. Paraphrasing John Leith, with clarity it is a way of Christian formation of identity, in contrast to the smorgasbord of competing identities that so many pastors are trying to represent in today's environment. Indeed, there is a way that reinforces an identity grounded in human flourishing, and it has been with us all along. And the practicing of that kind of ministry does not require the taking of minutes, or the closing of missional outposts known as congregations. But it does require leaders that have been formed within an alternative educational culture that is seldom available through most mainline theological seminaries today, but is possible with innovative strategic partnerships that authentically recognize that the way to human flourishing remains an ever-present need and our calling as participants in a Great Commissioning.

This address was delivered on Oct. 6, 2021, at the second theology conference sponsored by Theology Matters *at Providence Presbyterian Church, Hilton Head Island, South Carolina.*

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Why and How Theology Matters

by Joseph D. Small

This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy.

1 Corinthians 4:1-2

I have a secret shame. I always feel better—cleaner, revitalized—after reading theology, even poor theology, as it caresses and probes every crevice of the unknowable.

John Updike, *Roger's Version*

We are all together at a "Theology Matters" conference, so I think it's safe for me to assume that everyone here agrees … theology really does matter. Because we all agree that theology matters, I can assume that we meet regularly with colleagues to probe the depths of the gospel and do our own theological work in preparation for teaching the faith in session meetings, confirmation groups, adult education classes, and, of course, worship. Perhaps most importantly, I can assume that each of us feels better, revitalized by our theological work because it is vital to our stewardship of the mysteries of God, central to our trustworthiness as ministers of Word and Sacrament—ruling as well as teaching elders.

Because I don't have to convince you *that* theology matters, I'd like us to talk a bit about *why* and *how* theology matters in the life of the church. I will begin by telling you something about myself, not because I am all that interesting, but because it shaped my earliest understanding of how and why theology matters.

I did not grow up in the church. My parents were not church-goers; my Sunday mornings were spent on my bike riding dirt roads to deliver the *New York Times*, *Herald-Tribune*, *Boston Globe*, and *Springfield Union* to widely separated farms and houses. If you'd asked little Joey Small if he believed in God, he would have said, "Sure, doesn't everyone?" How, then, did I get from there to here? It took a religious studies course in college (because I thought it would be easy), which led to what I thought would be a "gap year" of studying patristics before heading to law school, wonderful professors, including Markus Barth, Dietrich Ritschl, and Ford Battles, and an assigned year at the Wesley Center African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church in the Hill district of Pittsburgh. Then, on an early Spring morning of that first year I realized that I believed it all.

Providence of God or dumb luck? Part of me would like to think that God's hand was in all of this, but then what do I do about the things in my life that didn't turn out well? Was God's hand in that unpleasantness, or does God direct the good things in my life while setting me loose to take wrong turns on my own? I've been "called" to three pastorates, and to positions at Pittsburgh Seminary and the General Assembly Office of Theology and Worship. Were my calls and the calls of other ministers always God's doing?

Church life is full of loose talk about "what God is doing in the world" and "God's leading in my life"—talk that frequently results in God conveniently doing what we want to do and leading where we want to go. How do we know what God is doing in the world, and what God is doing in each of our lives? Can we be certain that our prayers for guidance are answered by the Lord's whisper rather than by the echo of our wishes? Is the decline of mainline churches in North America part of God's providential purpose? God's judgment? God's abandonment? The precursor to God's reforming grace?

These are not questions asked only by ministers and elders. Church members and those outside the church ask them as well. And this is only one aspect of broader questions about the real presence of Christ and the blowing wind of the Holy Spirit. I've spent decades thinking and praying about the providence of God without quite getting to a neat answer. Even so, it is a question that merits my theological seriousness so that I can respond honestly and helpfully to others who also ponder the presence of God in the world, in the church, and in their lives.

Is It True?

Before Karl Barth became the Karl Barth of the *Church Dogmatics* he was the pastor of a small congregation in a small Swiss town for ten years. Toward the end of his pastorate he published a commentary on Romans that made him something of a celebrity. He became a professor and frequent speaker at pastors' conferences. In one address, "The Need and Promise of Christian Proclamation," Barth drew on his pastoral experience to talk about what happens on Sunday mornings.

> On Sunday morning as the bells start to ring, calling the community and the pastor to church the moment heaves with *anticipation* of a great, meaningful, even decisive *event*. The anticipation has nothing to do with

how strongly the people feel it … The anticipation is real; it permeates the entire scene. …

Here are *people*, perhaps only two or three as is the case in this country, but perhaps a few hundred, who stream into this building driven by an odd instinct or will—where they seek *what*? The satisfaction of an old habit? Perhaps, but from where does this habit come? Do they seek entertainment and instruction? A very strange entertainment and instruction indeed! Edification? … In any case they are here and their presence already points to an event which they anticipate . . . Above all, here is a [pastor] upon whom the anticipation of that imminent event rest in a very special way. …

But what is the meaning of this situation? To what kind of event does this anticipation point? … No, we cannot suppress it any longer: the question burns, *is it true*? Is it true, the vision of unity for those who are scattered, the anticipation of a steadfast pole amid the flight of [events], a righteousness that does not lie somewhere beyond the stars but within the events that make up our present life. … Is it true, the speaking of the love and goodness of God who is more than some friendly deity of transparent origin and short-lived dominion? *Is it true*? This is what people want to hear, to know, to understand. *Therefore* they grasp, not knowing what they do, at the unheard of possibility to pray, to open the Bible, to speak of God, to listen, and to sing. *Therefore* they come to us, placing themselves into the grotesque situation of Sunday morning. …

This is not something that people cry out, least of all into the ears of pastors. But let us not be deceived by their silence—blood and tears, the deepest despair and highest hope, their passionate desire to grab hold of *that* which, no, rather *him*, the one who has overcome the world because he is its Creator and its Redeemer, the Beginning and the End, the Lord of the world. They passionately desire to have the Word spoken to them, the *Word*, which promises grace in *judgment*, life in *death*, the beyond in the *here and now*.

This is what stands behind our churchgoers, no matter how spiritless, bourgeois, or commonplace their desire seems to be in so-called reality. … They expect us to understand them better than they understand themselves.[1]

I was a pastor to three congregations, in Towson, Maryland, Westerville Ohio, and Rochester, New York. In my experience, Barth was on to something. People in those churches brought the question—"Is it true?"—to worship, study groups, session meetings, and mission trips. They expected more from me than religious bromides and friendly evasions. It was also my experience that theology—the wisdom of Christian centuries—is the expression of the desperate situation Barth described and the question of any pastor who dares to take up the task.

Serious, sustained reading and thinking and talking about the faith is essential work for ministers of the Word and Sacrament—not just for our own sake, but for the sake of people who come to us in the expectation that we will help them discover if it's true, and *why* it's true, and *how* it's true. Because you and I know that, I assume we all engage in regular reading, thinking, praying, and talking the Faith because, along with Karl Barth, we know that theology really does matter for the life of the church and each of its members

But we also know that many of our colleagues in ministry do not know that and do not do that. Why is that? There are a host of reasons, ranging from the way theology is taught in seminaries to the constant pressure on pastors to stem the ebb tide of membership loss. But today is not the time for critique, but for talking more specifically about why and how theology matters, beginning with the question Karl Barth and Joe Small say that is on the outer edge of consciousness for the people who decide Sunday after Sunday whether to go to church or stay home, read the New York Times and drink mimosas: "Is it true?"

Thinking the Faith

My youngest daughter and her husband are both physicians—she a neo-natal pediatrician and he an emergency room doctor. Both read medical journals, attend seminars on developments in their fields, go to conferences, and must be examined periodically to maintain their licenses. The requirement for continuous education is also true of lawyers, social workers, and many other professionals. This is necessary for them to keep abreast of developments in their fields. But that is not why Christian ministers need to engage in serious, sustained study. We are not keeping up to date on advances in diagnostics and pharmaceuticals, or changes in tax law, or benefit adjustments. Theology's task is not to not to keep abreast of changes in the gospel, but to probe more deeply into the mysteries of God.

We all know that when Scripture and tradition talk about the "mysteries" of God, they are not speaking about puzzles to be solved. When Eucharistic prayers announce, "Great is the Mystery of faith" and the congregation sings or says, "Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again" this does not mean we are praying about an enigma. No, the mystery of faith means that the more we understand the meaning of Christ's death on the cross, the reality of Christ's risen presence among us, the hope of Christ's consummation of all things, the more we know that there is more to

understand. The deeper we go, the more we realize there are still depths of understanding that will lead us to fuller adoration and praise, more faithful preaching, intensified prayer, and expanded participation in God's mission to a church and a world in desperate need.

Christ *has* died, Christ *is* risen, Christ *will* come again. The mystery of faith embraces past, present, and future … and then points to an even wider horizon, from Creation to the new Jerusalem. Let me read an excerpt from the sadly neglected Confession of 1967 that opens us to some of the depths of the mystery:

> God's reconciling act in Jesus Christ is a mystery which the Scriptures describe in various ways. It is called the sacrifice of a lamb, a shepherd's life given for his sheep, atonement by a priest; again, it is ransom of a slave, payment of debt, vicarious satisfaction of a legal penalty, and victory over the powers of evil. These are expressions of a truth which remains beyond the reach of all theory in the depths of God's love for humankind.

The Confession of 1967 overcomes silly talk about "theories of the atonement" that encourage us to choose between two or more mutually exclusive options. But C67 also calls the church, especially its ministers and elders, to avoid easy formulas. Instead, we are called to put ourselves in the company of those who have lived and died the faith before us as well as contemporaries who have thought long and hard about the mysteries of faith … in order to help *us* think about the mysteries of faith … so that we can help congregations understand what Jesus' suffering and execution have to do with their lives and deaths, how Christ is really present now in Word and Sacrament, how hope in Christ's return has anything to do with their hopes and disappointments.

People come to us wanting to know if it is true, and, if it is true how it is true for them. That is why theology matters. Pastors who fail to engage in serious, sustained theological reading and thinking and teaching must assume either that Christian convictions do not much matter to their ministry and their congregations, or that the smattering of theology they received in seminary is enough to sustain them for four or five decades. It is curiously arrogant.

Douglas John Hall, a Canadian theologian, was one of the earliest to analyze the significance of the end of Christendom in North America. Beginning with *Lighten Our Darkness* in the mid-1970s, Hall probed the reality of the church's loss of cultural prominence and the implications for the church's witness. His major work is a three-volume exploration of "Christian Theology in a North American Context"—*Thinking the Faith, Professing the Faith,* and *Confessing the Faith*. In his preface to the first volume, *Thinking the Faith*, he gets to the core of the church's current situation.

Everyone here is now aware of the church's cultural disestablishment, its loss not only of members and prestige, but its loss of interest by more and more people. It is not that people are hostile to Christian faith and its churches, but that they are indifferent. Denominations respond by devising slogans for their latest recycling of standard programs, and congregations struggle to be more attractive. Hall says that our reliance on pollsters and consultants and popular sociologists to provide the key to ecclesial rebound "is symptomatic of the churches' incapacity to confront the deeper malaise," for "the crisis behind the crises cannot be submitted to computer programming. For that rudimentary crisis," says Hall, "is *a crisis of thinking*." He goes on to say that "only a thinking faith can survive."[2]

To be sure, "thinking the faith" is inseparable from "praying the faith" and "living the faith," but it is likely that without thinking the faith, praying the faith will be reduced to occasional requests that God solve problems, and living the faith will devolve into conformity to the conventions of social and political sub-groups. Theology is thinking the faith in company with others, living and dead, who are participants in a deep tradition that spans time and space. Theology is not only asking, "Is it True?" but probing deeply into what the "It" is.

Four or Five Questions

Theology is thinking, speaking the faith. *Theos*, God … *logos*, word. Theology is using words to talk about God. In one sense, that makes all Christians theologians, because we all think and talk about God in the prayers we pray and the hymns we sing as well as the words we read and speak. But many Christians—ministers and members and those we call "theologians"—are very bad theologians, insufficiently aware of or attentive to the word of God that bears witness to the Word of God.

But in another sense the church has surrendered the word "theologian" to people who have earned graduate degrees, who write books, and teach in universities and seminaries. Most ministers would think it presumptuous to call themselves "theologians" even though they get paid to talk about God in sermons and hospital rooms, in public prayers and private counseling, at weddings and funerals, at the Baptismal Font and the Lord's Table. Do the words we speak express the Truth that helps to answer the implicit question that surrounds these events? In all the pastoral tasks we perform regularly we ministers are stewards of the mysteries of God, and in all of these we are either helping people answer the question implicit in their very presence or we are abandoning them to the imagination of their hearts.

I've come to the conclusion that there are only four basic theological questions. There are countless theological questions, of course, but all are refinements of the four. It doesn't matter if you are Thomas Aquinas, Karl Barth, Joe Small, or the average church member; all of us must ask and strive to answer the same four questions.

Who is God? … Really!

The first question: *"Who is God? … really!"* Not, who do we hope God is, or fear that God is, or wish God would be. Not God who is just like us, only bigger and better. Who is God and how do we know who or what God is? The Westminster Confession tells us that God is "infinite in being and perfection, a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts, or passions, immutable, immense, eternal, incomprehensible, almighty, most wise, most holy, most free, most absolute," and on and on.[3] Robert Jenson, in what Stanley Hauerwas calls the most nearly perfect theological sentence, says "God is whoever raised Jesus from the dead, having before raised Israel from Egypt."[4]

The Torah tells us that God himself says, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob" (Ex 3:6). Moses presses further, asking for God's name, that is for God's identity, receiving the enigmatic "I am who I am [or I will be who I will be]" (Ex. 3:14). John the Evangelist tells us that the "Word was God" and that "the Word became flesh" (Jn 1:1, 14), and later says briefly, "God is love" (1 Jn 4:8). The Nicene Creed affirms that the One God is Father Son Holy Spirit. Are all these truthful answers to the question "Who Is God?" Are some truer than others? If they are all part of the truth, how do they fit together?

We use the word "God" over and over, all the while imagining that we know what we mean, that persons to whom we are speaking know what they mean, and all of us thinking that we mean the same thing. But, of course we don't all mean the same thing and most of us have constricted comprehension of the Lord of all that is. When pastors speak of God in sermons, what "gods" do we think are conjured up in the minds of our listeners?

As a young priest, New Testament scholar N.T. Wright served as chaplain at Worcester College, Oxford. His welcoming visits to first year students were often punctuated by their remark, "You won't be seeing much of me; you see, I don't believe in God." Wright developed a standard response: "Oh, that's interesting; which god is it you don't believe in?" The students were surprised because they regarded the word *god* as having self-evident meaning. Often, after students stumbled through a few characteristics of the god they didn't believe in, Wright would comment, "Well, I'm not surprised you don't believe in that god. I don't believe in that god either."[5] I think Wright's story might be repeated if we asked church members—as well as elders and ministers—to tell us about the god they believe in. We might find their responses a bit chaotic.

Apart from theological clarity about who God is—really—people who come to us on Sunday morning are likely to have their understanding of God shaped at least as much by culture as by Scripture. Social historian Robert Lippy characterizes popular religion as "akin to shopping for God in a divine supermarket, for it involves individuals looking to many sources, picking and choosing beliefs and practices that make sense to them, and ultimately constructing a worldview that enables them to make sense of their own lives out of their own experience."[6] Baylor University's survey of American religion summarized the four gods Americans do believe in—the Authoritative God, the Benevolent God, the Critical God, and the Distant God.[7] The National Study of Youth and Religion characterizes the beliefs of American Youth (and the churches that teach them) as "therapeutic moralistic deism."[8] None of this is new or unusual. Calvin described human nature as "a perpetual factory of idols,"[9] for the constant human temptation is the effortless creation of a god in our image. The blueprint for the factory of idols and its product output is provided by the culture in which we live and move and have our being. This is what people bring to us Sunday after Sunday. Yes, they are asking "Is It True?" without knowing what the "It" is that they are uncertain about. This is what people bring to worship, and to session meetings, study groups, mission trips, potluck suppers, and all the other events their congregations make available. Even the most mundane of church activities "heaves with anticipation" of a great event, accompanied by the burning question, "Is It True?"

This includes ministers, of course, so the need for serious, sustained theological engagement is acute. Before pastors can deal honestly and faithfully with the question that is implicit every time the church door opens, the self-interrogation that is at the heart of all theological work must dwell in the depths of the pastoral heart and mind. "Who is God? … really!"

I mentioned earlier the name of a theologian who might not be familiar to you: Katherine Sonderegger. She has published two of a planned three-volume *Systematic Theology*. Before reading *Volume 1, The Doctrine of God*, I had not spent time with her beyond one essay and a couple of conference addresses. I decided to read her first volume because I'd been told that she approaches the doctrine of God from God's Oneness rather than from the current preference for beginning with God's Triunity, from what God *is* rather than what God *does*. I was curious. Very early in the book she writes:

> To attempt to speak of the One God whose nature is without form or similitude is to strive to name, approach, and worship the God who is unapproachable Light, Holy Fire, and Goodness; around this One is thick darkness. We pray that God's entire Goodness may shield us and, in that shielding, pass by so that we may know the mystery of this God. … We hunger to know the Oneness of God, to rest in it, and that hunger is the Spirit's gift to us, quickening our appetite for divine things, our search into the mystery of God, the pilgrimage of the Christian life.[10]

These sentences not only capture Sonderegger's commitments and style, but also stand as a lovely indication of what faithful theology is and why it is a central calling of the church. I am now reading the second volume, *The Doctrine of the Holy Trinity*. Like the first, it draws heavily on the Old Testament, probing the reality that YHWH ELOHIM is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Calvin knew this, and I know this, but I think most church members and not a few ministers imagine that "the God of the Old Testament" was singular, that the Son showed up in Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit blew in at Pentecost.

I've been around for a long time and I've read a lot, but Sonderegger took me deeper into the mystery, intensifying my understanding, enriching my prayer, and expanding my recognition that Old and New Testaments together bear witness to the One God, Father Son and Holy Spirit. We are stewards of the mysteries of God, and if we are to be trustworthy stewards, we must give ourselves to the work of theological seriousness.

The Other Three Questions

I know you are all dying to know the other basic theological questions. I'll tell you, but there is not enough time to say much more than name them.

The second basic theological question is, *Who Are We/Who Am I … Honestly*. Not who do I wish I were, or pretend to be, or regret that I am. What does it mean to be human, and what does it mean to be the human I am? Where is my identity found? in my work, my family, my abilities? Am I characterized by my sinfulness or by my accomplishments? Saint or sinner or some amalgam of the two? Are zygotes human? Fetuses? And what is God's will for human life? To borrow from Wendell Berry, *What Are People For?*

Third question: *What Does God Have to Do with Us/With Me?* What does it mean to say that the One God—Father Son and Holy Spirit—is my Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer. … and the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer of other people and of the cosmos? What does it mean to be saved? Exodus, election, covenant, incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, ascension … what does all this mean for me, for us, for the world?

Fourth question: *What Do We Have to Do with Each Other?* Who is my neighbor, and who are my enemies, and who are my sisters and brothers, who are strangers to me, and what do I owe to all of them and receive from them? What communities am I part of? How are we free for, not from one other, and how are we obligated to one other? Ecclesiology, ecumenism, Judaism, Christians throughout the world, other faith communities, mission, evangelism. What does my congregation have to do with other congregations, not in some organizational or invisible sense, but as Presbyterian churches together, and together with Catholic, Orthodox, other Protestant, and Pentecostal churches, and as Christian churches with Jewish synagogues?

These are the questions people bring to us Sunday after Sunday. Yes, they are asking "Is It True?" without knowing what the "It" is that they are uncertain about. Nevertheless, this is what people bring to worship, as well as to session meetings, study groups, mission trips, potluck suppers, youth groups, concerts, and all the other events their congregations make available. Even the most mundane of church activities "heaves with anticipation" of a great event, accompanied by the burning question, "Is It True?"

So What?

There is another question that hovers around all four: *What will I do?* The four questions lead to a question about what pastors might do to probe the questions because they are the questions asked by the people who continue to come to us, as well as the people who have stopped coming because they find no answer to the question *Is It True?* and perhaps no help in knowing what the *It* is. Their questions may not be formed precisely, their sense of the *It* they ask about may be fuzzy. But as Barth said they expect (hope?) that we understand them better than they understand themselves. Why does theology matter? It matters for the sake of the men and women, girls and boys, who entrust themselves to us.

So, for all the ministers who don't know this, as well as for us all at this Theology Matters conference, I suggest a simple discipline:

Read: Commit to read one significant theological, biblical, ethical, or ecclesial history book a month for twelve months. Reading should be done at a slow pace, dividing the book into daily reading, done at the same time each day, allowing time to think carefully about what is read. I can even suggest Small's book-of-the-month club, setting out twelve books to start with.

With Another/Others: Find one or two others to join you in the discipline, so that reading is not done in isolation, but in the company of others. Reading with others not only expands the circle of conversation but also makes us accountable to one another.

Meet: Come together with your reading companions toward the end of each month, away from church buildings, for at least an hour of discussing what you have read. Theology is not a solitary avocation but a communal endeavor in which people of faith enrich one another through their questioning, discovering, confirming, expanding understanding of the mysteries of God.

Ask: In the monthly gathering, ask each other what further questions have been raised by the reading, and where to go to pursue the matters that intrigue you.

Be Aware: Throughout, be aware that you are not doing this just for yourselves, but for the sake of the congregations you serve, for the sake of each person. Serious, sustained study is essential to the pastoral vocation as trustworthy stewards of the mysteries of God.

In conclusion, a few words from Karl Barth to a group of pastors to whom he refers, perhaps hopefully, as "theologians." Barth says to us as well as to them:

> Regardless of whether you feel this way or that, it should be possible for me to talk with you about our *situation* which I would like to characterize by the following three sentences: *As theologians, we ought to speak of God. But we are humans and as such cannot speak of God. We ought to do both, to know the "ought" and the "not able to," and precisely in this way give God the glory.* This is our plight. Everything else is child's play in comparison.[11]

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[1] Karl Barth, "The Need and Promise of Christian Proclamation," in *The Word of God and Theology*, trans. Amy Marga (London: T&T Clark International, 2011), 108–111.
[2] Douglas John Hall, *Thinking the Faith: Christian Theology in a North American Context* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989), 12–13.
[3] Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), "Westminster Confession of Faith," III.1 in *Book of Confessions* 6.011. (Louisville: Office of the General Assembly, 2016).
[4] Robert W, Jenson, *The Triune God*, vol. 1 of *Systematic Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 63.
[5] N.T. Wright, The Biblical Formulation of a Doctrine of God," in *Who Do You Say That I Am? Christology and the Church,* ed. Donald Armstrong (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 50.
[6] Charles H. Lippy, *Being Religious, American Style* (Westport: Praeger, 1994), 233.
[7] Rodney Stark, *What Americans Really Believe: New Findings from the Baylor Surveys of Religion* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2008).
[8] Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers Is Telling the American Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).
[9] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960) 1.11.8, 108.
[10] Katherine Sonderegger, *Systematic Theology: Volume 1, The Doctrine of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), 23.
[11] Barth, "The Word of God as the Task of Theology," *The Word of God and the Theology,* 177.

Lord God, Lord Jesus

by James Edwards

It is well known that the primary and most important name for God in the Old Testament is YHWH, which means "Lord." The four Hebrew letters of this word, known to scholars as the Tetragrammaton, were (and still are today) regarded by Jews as too holy to pronounce. In combination with the Hebrew word for "God" (Elohim), "Lord God" characterizes the sovereignty, majesty, and supremacy of Israel's God. We also know that the earliest and most succinct title of Jesus in the Greek New Testament is *kyrios Iesous*, "Lord Jesus" (1 Cor. 12:3), and that the earliest Aramaic prayer of the church is marana tha, "Come, Lord Jesus" (1 Cor. 16:22). These two titles—"Lord God," "Lord Jesus"—are the special subject of this article. I wish to consider two supremely important questions in relation to them: First, *why* did the early church, which was Jewish and hence as monotheistic as its Old Testament forebears, choose to bestow its most sacred name for God on Jesus of Nazareth? Second, *what* precedent did the early church find in the testimony to YHWH in the Old Testament for ascribing this title to Jesus of Nazareth?

I. Why did the early church ascribe the name YHWH to Jesus? There are two major characteristics of YHWH in the Old Testament, the first of which is God's *majesty*

and *might*. "The heavens are telling the glory of God (Ps. 19:1), says the Psalmist. The number of ways the Old Testament recounts God's glory and might are manifold and manifest. God is enthroned above the cherubim (2 Kgs. 19:15), enthroned in heaven itself (Ps. 123:1), with "light as a garment" (Ps. 104:2). The prophet Micaiah saw "the Lord sitting on his throne, and all the armies of heaven standing beside him on his right hand and on his left" (1 Kgs. 22:19).

The prophet Ezekiel commences his prophecy with plethora of images—wind, fire and burning coals, winged beasts, flashes of lightening, brilliant and precious stones, and the vastness of space—all of which convey God's glory (Ezek. 1).

The concluding Psalms forsake human laments, prayers for vindication, and prayers for the king in order to focus supremely on God's majesty and might: "On the glorious splendor of your majesty, and on your wondrous works I will meditate. They shall speak of the might of your awesome deeds, and I will declare your greatness" (Ps. 145:5–6). The shortest Psalm in the Bible depicts God's glory and faithfulness thus: "Praise the Lord, all nations! Extol him, all peoples! For great is his steadfast love toward us, and the faithfulness of the Lord endures forever. Praise the Lord!" (Ps. 117).

God's majesty and might are not his only essential properties, however. The second major characteristic of YHWH in the Old Testament is his self-revelation. God is not remote, unknowable, and capricious, but *imminent* and *knowable*. God is partially knowable because he is the creator of heaven and earth, and *creation* itself—the sun, moon, stars, and the abundance of the earth—bears his fingerprints. "How majestic is your name in all the earth" (Ps. 8:1); heavens and earth "proclaim his handiwork" (Ps. 19:1); "the earth is the Lord's, and the fulness thereof" (Ps. 24:1).

God's knowability in creation is not a final or sufficient witness in itself, however. Creation reflects its Creator, and as such leaves a *sense* of God, but this sense is not personal or complete. God's revelation in history is more complete and personal than his revelation in nature, for God's *historical revelation* reveals God's *person*. The most important means by which YHWH reveals himself in human history is through his *word*. God creates the world itself by the word (Gen. 1). God delivers the moral law through the "Ten Words," as Jews refers to the Ten Commandments (Exod. 20:1–17; Deut. 5:1–20). The compilation of God's teaching in the Old Testament is known in Hebrew as "Torah," the root for which is the verb "to teach." Torah instructs God's people who he is, how they may know and love him, how they should treat others and the world in which they live, and how to experience wellbeing in human community and work. So massive is the quantum of God's teaching in the Old Testament that it has occupied Judaism to the present day in further elaboration in the Mishnah, Gemara, the two Talmuds, and rabbinic commentary. "The law of the Lord is perfect, … reviving the soul, … making wise the simple, … rejoicing the heart, … enlightening the eyes," declares the Psalmist (Ps. 19:7–8). If the shortest Psalm (Ps. 117) speaks of God's glory and majesty, the longest Psalm (Ps. 119), like the Jewish rabbinic tradition itself, extols the commandments of God. Psalm 119 is divided into twenty-two sections, one for each successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Each section is comprised of eight verses, each verse beginning with the corresponding letter of the section. The most frequent reference in Psalm 119 is to God's teachings, his "precepts," which God "commands to be kept diligently" (Ps. 119:4).

The historical revelation of YHWH is not limited to legal precepts, however. God's self-disclosure is also, and perhaps more importantly, manifested in *prophecy*. At the zenith of the Israelite monarchies, both the northern monarchy of Israel and the southern monarchy of Judah, the Hebrew prophets fused the *truths* of God with the *imminence* of God. The God who is radically present in human prophecy calls for obedience to the word and will of God in the present *Kairos*—the decisive moment of God's redemptive activity.

The "Lord God's" defining characteristics—his majesty and might, and his self-revelation in Torah and prophecy—were personified in the three great offices of Israel: kingship, priesthood, and prophecy. Each of the modes of revelation we have noted above was exemplified and represented in one of these offices: God's majesty and might in kingship, God's precepts in the priesthood, and God's particular will in prophecy. The early church appropriated these three offices for its understanding and proclamation of Jesus as prophet, priest, and king. The offices were a theological viaduct that spanned from Israel to the church, from "Lord God" to "Lord Jesus." Each of these offices is referenced to God in the Old Testament and each is referenced to Jesus Christ in the New Testament. The Transfiguration of Jesus—an event, incidentally, for which there is no precedent or counterpart in either Israel or in other religious traditions—depicts this transferal from "Lord God" to "Lord Jesus." Jesus had already revealed his fulfillment of Torah, for in saying, "Take my yoke upon yourselves and learn from me" (Matt. 11:29), he employs "yoke"—a common metaphor for "Torah" in Judaism—to signify that he fulfills Torah. Jesus had also donned the prophetic mantel in speaking of himself as "a prophet without honor" (Mark 6:4), and of Jerusalem as a place "that kills the prophets" (Matt. 23:37). When, therefore, Moses the lawgiver and Elijah the prophet present themselves to Jesus at the Transfiguration (Luke

9:31), their announcement of Jesus' "exodus"—his Passion—is a declaration of the consummation of salvation history.

It is remarkable how purposefully and completely the nature and mission of "Lord God" is ascribed to "Lord Jesus" in the New Testament—and in all levels of its transmission.

Synoptic Gospels. Jesus declares, "All things were delivered to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, nor does anyone know the Father except the Son and to whom the Son desires to make him known" (Matt. 11:27; Luke 10:22).

Fourth Gospel. Jesus declares: "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30). "One" here recalls the uncompromising emphasis of monotheism from the Shema, "Hear Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one" (Deut. 6:4). Perhaps the fullest and most revealing transferal of "Lord God" to "Lord Jesus" occurs in John 5, where Jesus's opponents charge that "he not only breaks the sabbath, but says that God is his Father, making himself equal with God" (John 5:18). Jesus responds by citing God's unique works in the Old Testament, including authority to raise the dead and execute judgment, which he—Jesus—executes (John 5:19–29).

The Apostle Paul. The Pauline Epistles contain the two most outstanding hymns in all Scripture equating Jesus with God.

> Think among yourselves as Jesus himself thought. For he existed in the form of God, but he did not count equality with God something to be seized greedily; rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, assuming human likeness. And, being found in human form, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death by crucifixion. Therefore, God exalted him and freely gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father (Phil. 2:5–11).

And again:

> Jesus is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation, for in him were created all things in heaven and on earth, things seen and things unseen, whether thrones or lordships or rulers or authorities. All things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things and all things hold together in him, for he himself is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn of the dead, so that he may become preeminent in all things, for in him all fullness was pleased to dwell and through him to reconcile all things to himself, having made peace through the blood of his cross, whether for things on earth or in heaven (Col. 1:15–20).

Pastoral Letters. Five terse and bold Christological hymns of similar nature appear in 1 Tim. 2:5–6; 3:16; 6:15–16; 2 Tim. 1:9-10; 2:11–13. 1 Tim. 6:1–16 describes Jesus Christ as the manifestation of God, "he who is King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone has immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no human has seen or is able to see, to whom be honor and eternal dominion."

The Revelation of John. The fourth chapter of Revelation acclaims the celestial glory and majesty of God, which in the following chapter is ascribed equally to both God and Jesus Christ: "To the One who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and dominion, for ever and ever" (Rev. 5:13). We may summarize this peerless witness to the Lordship of Jesus Christ by recalling that the *kerygma,* the earliest known summary of the gospel proclamation of early Christianity, is a brief, memorable, and public announcement of Jesus Christ as the fulfillment of salvation history.

I. The Messiah promised in the Old Testament has come.

II. He is Jesus of Nazareth, who
- A. Did good and executed mighty works by the power of God.
- B. Was crucified according to the purpose of God.
- C. Was raised from the dead by the power of God,
- D. Is now exalted as "Lord" to the right hand of God,
- E. Will come again in judgment to restore all things.

III. Let all who hear believe this message, repent, and be baptized.

It is worth adding that the fulfillment of the prophetic promises of the Old Testament in the kerygmatic proclamation of the New Testament is carried forth without diminishment by the Apostolic Fathers. The First Epistle of Clement (ch. 16), for instance, walks readers through each strophe of Isaiah 53, showing how each ascription of the Servant of the Lord is likewise an ascription of Jesus as Lord. Again, Ignatius of Antioch emphasizes the *reality* of Jesus as the incarnate God through a dramatic repetition of the Greek word *alethos* ("really" or "truly"):

> Be deaf, therefore, whenever anyone speaks to you apart from Jesus Christ, who was of the family of David, who was the son of Mary; who *really* was born, who both ate and drank; who *really* was persecuted under Pontius Pilate, who *really* was crucified and died while those in heaven and on earth and under the earth looked on; who, moreover, *really* was raised

> from the dead when his Father raised him up. In the same way his Father will likewise also raise up in Christ Jesus us who believe in him. Apart from him we have no *real* life (*Trall*. 9).

The foregoing summary brings us to the point where we can answer our first question, namely, *why* the early church, which was Jewish and hence as monotheistic as its Old Testament forbears, chose to bestow its most sacred name for God, YHWH, on Jesus of Nazareth? The panoply of evidence we have surveyed in the New Testament and Apostolic Fathers provides the unequivocal answer to this question: Jesus Christ, in his life, teaching, death, and resurrection, exhibited himself to be the *incarnation* of Israel's "Lord God." For this reason, from the earliest days of the church, Jesus Christ was understood and proclaimed as "Lord Jesus." "Lord Jesus" is understandable only as a human manifestation of "Lord God." Since the nature and revelation of "Lord God" is essential for understanding "Lord Jesus," the early church fundamentally interpreted the Christ-event in light of its manifestation of YHWH, and in so doing interpreted the New Covenant in light of the Old.

Statistical evidence within the New Testament makes this claim irrefutably evident, for the New Testament preserves more than 3,500 references or allusions to the Old Testament and other Jewish scriptural traditions such as the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha. This signifies in the strongest possible way that the New Covenant of Jesus Christ cannot be properly understood without reference to the Old Covenant of Israel. Two comparisons with other bodies of relevant literature underscore the significance of the above statistic. First, the early church came of age in the Greco-Roman world as much as in the Jewish world, yet there are only *four* references or allusions to (non-Jewish Greek) classical Greek literature in the New Testament! This remarkable statistic indicates how insignificant prototypes of the Greco-Roman world were for understanding and transmitting the Christian gospel in comparison with prototypes from the Israelite world. A second comparative statistic comes from the Qur'an, which, because it too stands in a tradition related to the Old Covenant, and particularly to Abraham, is also relevant for our inquiry. The Qur'an preserves roughly one hundred allusions to the Old Testament. This statistic also throws the organic relation of the New Covenant with the Old Covenant into stark relief, for every reference to the Old Testament in the Qur'an is matched by thirty-five references in the New Testament. These statistics reveal, first, that the early church understood its saving proclamation, and hence is own nature, as essentially related to the story of Israel in the Old Testament rather than to classical antiquity; and second, they reveal that the bond of early Christianity with the Old Testament is far stronger than the bond of the Qur'an with the Old Testament.

One important clarification is necessary on the relationship of the New Testament to the Old Testament before we leave our first question. Among the plethora of references in the New Testament to the Old Testament, references to the Psalms and especially the prophets are cited more often and with greater emphasis than are references to the Torah and legal tradition. The early church thus understood itself and the gospel to be more essentially determined by the prophetic tradition than by Torah. Salvation history was, above all, the fulfillment of the prophetic promises in Israel rather than an elucidation of its legal tradition.

II. I wish to turn now to the second question I posed at the outset of this article, namely, *what* precedent did the early Christians find in the Old Testament for interpretating "Lord God" in terms of "Lord Jesus"?

Servant of the Lord

One of the most important—and for Christians inescapable—linkages between the New Testament and Old Testament is the similarity between the depiction of the ministry and mission of Jesus and that of the Servant of the Lord in Isaiah 40–55. We have noted how 1 Clement exegetes Isaiah 53 from first to last with reference to Jesus Christ. Isaiah does not name the Servant of the Lord, nor does the Servant reappear elsewhere in the Old Testament except in Isaiah 40–55. Jewish scholars have historically given only cursory attention to the Servant of the Lord, other than regarding the Servant as a symbol of Israel. Consider the difficulties of that interpretation, however, in light of what Isaiah says of the Servant: "It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and bring back the preserved of Israel; I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth" (Isa. 49:6). The Servant here is not equated with Israel, but declared a *redeemer* of Israel. In the long Old Testament story, when does "Israel" ever save Israel? When does "Israel" take the light of salvation to the nations? The early church rightly saw no fulfillment of the enigmatic Servant of the Lord in the Old Testament. Only in the life, ministry, passion, and death of Jesus of Nazareth did Isaiah's visions of the Servant became a historical reality. The same Jesus of Nazareth fulfilled Isaiah's prophecy of the "young woman who shall conceive and bear a son, Immanuel" (Isa 7:14). Jesus was, as Isaiah further foresaw, "Mighty God," "Prince of Peace," who established and upheld the throne of David "with justice and righteousness from this time forth and forever more" (Isa. 9:6–7).

Melchizedek

The Messianic expectation is older than the eighth-century Israelite prophets, however. Genesis 14 records a Middle East war in which Mesopotamian superpowers invade Israel. After the war, a recondite figure named Melchizedek appears to bless Abram. Melchizedek is given no prescript and no postscript. Other than three brief verses (Gen. 14:18–20), he is never again mentioned in the Old Testament except in Psalm 110:4, where he appears as the model of Israel's quintessential king, "a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek." Melchizedek, whose name means "Righteous King," is "King of Salem (= peace)" who meets Abram with "bread and wine" and blesses him in the name of "God Most High," the God whom Abram worships. We are not told how it is that Melchizedek worships the same God that Abram worships. Not until the New Testament is there a canonical interpretation of this preternatural walk-on at the dawn of salvation history. The Book of Hebrews exegetes the gospel story in light of the Old Testament and sees in Melchizedek an incarnational prototype, a foreshadowing in the Old Covenant of the Son of God who is the true "King of Peace" and "King of Righteousness," whose Last Supper of "bread and wine" represents his body and blood offered for the salvation of the world.

Two-Natures Christology

The correlation of "Lord God" and "Lord Jesus" is further adumbrated in less recognized ways. No Christian doctrine is more essential to a proper understanding of the gospel than the doctrine of the two natures of Jesus Christ. The Vienna Christological Formula of 1976 has succeeded in drafting a Christological formulation that for *the first time in Christian history* has been affirmed as orthodox by all major sects of Christianity, including the Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant, Syriac, Church of the East, and Coptic traditions. It states simply that Jesus Christ is "perfect in his divinity, perfect in his humanity."[1] The two natures doctrine—one divine and one human—is usually considered the least Hebraic and most Hellenized of Christian doctrines, indebted primarily or even wholly to Greek philosophical influence. But is it? Is there not a mysterious, undefined, yet virtual two-natured figure that visits random Israelites unexpectedly? Prior to Israel's conquest of Canaan, Joshua is confronted by a "man" (Heb. *ish*) with a drawn sword, before whom Joshua falls on his face and worships as Lord (Josh. 5:13–14). A half-millennium earlier, Jacob wrestles with a "man" (Heb. *ish*) at the ford of the Jabbok River, after which he confesses, "I have seen God face-to-face" (Gen. 32:22–30). In both instances, a human appearance conveys a divine revelation. Earlier still, a "*malak* of the Lord" meets Hagar in the wilderness after she has fled from Sarai. In Hebrew, *malak* can mean either a human or divine messenger. This *malak* has all the properties of a human being, yet Hagar responds, "You are a God of seeing" (Gen. 16:7–13).

The capital instance of this preternatural phenomenon occurs in Genesis 18 with reference to "three men" (v. 3; Heb. *anashim* [plu. of *ish*]) who come upon Abraham unforeseen as he sits in the door of his tent at Mamre. Abraham and Sarah extend unsparing hospitality to the visitors, who, after the meal, announce the birth of a son to them. This announcement repeats earlier announcements of the same to Abraham and Sarah by YHWH; indeed, the "three men" are shortly identified as "YHWH" (v. 13). Remarkably, this same narrative evolution repeats itself in the second half of Genesis 18, where once again the three "men" (v. 16, Heb. *anashim*) set out for Sodom along with Abraham, and in their conversation with him they are once again identified as "YHWH" (vv. 17-20). Genesis 18 repeats with greater explicitness the same phenomenon we see regarding Melchizedek, Joshua, Jacob, and Hagar. The Creator not only instructs his creatures and makes promises to them and covenants with them, but at critical junctures of their history he becomes *one of them*. The Playwright scripts himself into the drama and appears momentarily on stage. The appearance necessarily entails *two* natures, for in entering the creation the Creator does not cease being God, but in order authentically to enter creation the Creator must also become human. Leaks of Christianity's two-natures doctrine are already evident in the Old Testament.

Trinity

The Christian doctrine of a Trinitarian deity—one God in three Persons—is also typically regarded as a Greek philosophical concept rather than a concept evidenced within the Old Testament. Is this the only—or best—explanation, however? Like the embryonic "two-natures" doctrine that we detect in the Old Testament, a "threeness" of God is proleptically present as well. Genesis 18, as we have just seen, twice records the appearance of the three men who presently are identified as YHWH. In neither instance is this remarkable transposition explained. It is simply presupposed: three persons, one God. Nor is this the only intimation of such in the Old Testament, for on more than one instance, God speaks self-referentially in first-person plural. "Let *us* make man in *our* image and likeness" (Gen. 1:26). "Come, let *us* go down and confuse their language" (Gen. 11:7). "And I heard the word of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for *us*?" (Isa. 6:8). Nor is the Old Testament alone in this phenomenon. Islam understands itself as dogmatically monotheistic as Judaism does, and yet the Qur'an, which consists entirely of first-person narrative of God, frequently casts the first person in the *plural*—"We."

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In light of this, is Jesus's declaration, "I and the Father are One" (John 10:30), really best understood as a late Hellenistic worldview transposed onto the words of the Galilean rabbi? Or is it, rather, like all the titles ascribe to Jesus, both by himself and by others—teacher, prophet, high priest, servant of God, Messiah, Son of Man, Word, Son of God—more properly understood with reference God's revelation in the history of *Israel*. It is, after all, God's unique self-reference as YHWH ("I Am") that Jesus claims for himself fully twenty-five times in the Gospel of John. As we noted in the Introduction, the *earliest* title for Jesus is also the most exalted of Old Testament titles for God—"Jesus is Lord (YHWH)."

It might be asked at this point why Christians saw a "high Christology" prefigured in the Old Testament, but that Jews did not? The answer—surprisingly perhaps—appears to be that many Jews did see such a prefigurement. In the second and third centuries of the Christian era, Jewish rabbis (often in debate with Christian apologists) made claims for a slate of Old Testament figures that rivaled the claims that Christians made for Jesus of Nazareth. The least surprising of these was David, who was increasingly identified as a *divine* king. More important was Enoch, who is reported not to have died (Gen. 5:24). Enoch was ascribed several divine epithets, the most remarkable of which was YHWH! Other epithets also indicate Judaism's ability to entertain something approximating a "two-natures" doctrine. In this respect, Enoch was identified as Metatron, a divine figure who guided the Israelites through the wilderness (Exod. 23:20–22). Furthermore, the enigmatic Servant of the Lord of Isaiah 40–55 was identified as Ephraim, who was acknowledged as a suffering Messiah.[2] Jewish rabbis, obviously, did not want to acknowledge Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah and Son of God, but I note the foregoing as evidence that they too found within the Old Testament prefigurements for the kinds of claims that the early church made for Jesus.

Conclusion

The Apostle Paul admonished the elders of the church in Ephesus to "declare the whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:27). "Lord God, Lord Jesus" is the sum and essence of the whole counsel of God. Both Testaments—the Old and New—are required to declare the whole counsel of God, the *one* story of salvation, for both Testaments bear witness to the one essential and saving truth, that "in the fulness of time, God sent his son, both of a woman, born under the law, so that he might redeem those who were under the law, so that *we* might inherit sonship with God" (Gal. 4:4–5).

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[1] The full Vienna Christological Formula reads thus: "We believe that our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, is God the Son incarnate; perfect in his divinity and perfect in his humanity. His humanity is one with his divinity, without commixtion, without confusion, without division, without separation."

[2] For an informative discussion of this little-known development in second- and third-century Judaism, see Peter Schäfer, *The Jewish Jesus. How Judaism and Christianity Shaped Each Other* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).