

THEOLOGY AND LIFE: ATTENDING TO THE GAP

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Theology happens when the church seeks to know God and his truth. When reading the Bible, exegeting the text, learning about the time and history of the biblical narrative, formulating doctrines and elaborating them into a system, theologians nurture the church's identity and safeguard the deposit of truth given to her in trust (1 Tim 6:20). As part of their religious community, theologians confront new questions with appropriate answers, new lies with eternal truth, and new challenges with up-to-date and relevant responses.

But there must be more to theology. While I was lecturing at McGill University, a master's student inquired of me: "Why do you do theology? What difference does it really make? Does the doctrine of the Sabbath make one a better citizen, wife, or mother?" This is a relevant question about the relevance of theology. Why *do* we do theology? Is it for the sake of truth alone, for the sake of tradition, or is it also for the sake of enriching and ennobling human character and life? What difference *do* we theologians make in growth in grace, in struggle against sin, and in the life and ministry of the church? How indispensable *is* the work of a theologian in making the Word of God relevant and transforming? Such questions point to a gap that emerges between theology and human life, between beliefs and practices. Scholars are concerned about the relevance of Scripture¹ because the path from text and doctrine to lifestyle is not easily found.²

This essay has a threefold task: to try to find the possible causes of the disconnectedness between beliefs and practices, to examine the role of theology in God's act of salvation, and to look for ways of making the Word of God more relevant and theology more user-friendly for everyday living.

The obvious cause of disconnection between beliefs and practices is human sin and finiteness. Vices, habits, fears, heredity, and constant temptations from within and without compound the problem. In addition, human limitations in time, space, knowledge, and power create gaps that cannot be bridged. It is true that if humans could clearly foresee the consequences of our actions or decisions, we would be much wiser and happier, but these are not our concerns here. We are searching to find if there are things that theologians can do, or refrain from doing, so as to enhance and facilitate the application of the truth we know and teach. A closer look at this divide yields three layers: the distance between *ignorance and knowledge*, *knowledge and action*, and *action and character*.

¹W. Klein, C. Blomberg, and R. Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Waco: Word, 1993), 403.

²I. H. Marshall, "The Use of the New Testament in Christian Ethics," *ExpTim* 105/5 (1994): 136.

The Gap between Ignorance and Knowledge

The first danger to a seamless connection between theology and praxis of life is a tendency to make the search for truth an end in itself, rather than a bridge between ignorance in sin and knowledge of a better alternative. Theology is then absorbed by its own issues, debates, and controversies, often leading to a self-serving parachurch or a disconnected "independent ministry." Yet this contradicts the very nature of the science of theology as seen by most eminent Christian theologians. "Theology is the function of the church," says Emil Brunner.³ Karl Barth concurs, insisting that "Whoever wishes to engage in the science of dogmatics . . . must accept the responsibility of remaining within the parameters of the Christian church, engaged in the task of the church. This is a condition *sine qua non*." Theology must respond to the concrete and actual questions and needs of the church, speaking the language of the pew, and feeding biblical insights into the minds and hearts of the faithful.⁴

The search for truth and a knowledge of truth are of pivotal importance. Scripture presents knowledge as one of the essential elements of the redemptive process. Isaiah's messianic prophecy declares that "by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous" (Isa 53:11), while, through Hosea, God laments saying: "My people are destroyed for the lack of knowledge" (Hos 4:6). The people of God, therefore, are not a group of ignorant lunatics. The OT priests, prophets, and Levites were charged to instruct and educate (Exod 18:20, Mic 4:2, Mal 2:7), and the ministry of Jesus and his disciples consisted primarily of teaching and preaching (Matt 7:29, 1 Tim 4:11).

But the human predicament is not simply a result of misinformation and ignorance. Education alone cannot change human behavior nor transform the character, as Plato taught. Knowledge alone "puffs up" (1 Cor 8:1) and pride is at the core of sinful human tendencies.⁵ The highly educated terrorists, criminals, and miserable, lost, homeless intellectuals are the evidence of that truth. "Go and teach," says the Master, inform all, from the squatter towns to the palaces, that there is but one way back to abundant life, to meaningful existence, to communion with self and others, by trusting God as one trusts a father.

Theological jargon and preaching clichés can also prove a hindrance to bridging the gap between ignorance and knowledge of truth. Highly sophisticated vocabulary may impress hearers and yield respect from peers, but it can also hamper communication, even between the theological sciences themselves and, worse, between theologians and the church. Frequently used terms, such as salvation, love, forgiveness, repentance, and grace, need

³Emil Brunner, *La Doctrine Chrétienne de Dieu* (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 1964); my translation.

⁴K. Barth, *Esquisse d'une Dogmatique* (Neuchatel: Delachaux & Nestle, 1968), 7; my translation.

⁵Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (New York: Scribner's, 1964), 3.

clarification and fresh articulation in order to be relevant for everyday living.

Some methods of interpretation can work against bridging the gap between ignorance and knowledge of biblical truth. John Frame, for example, claims that "The meaning of Scripture is application."⁶ Since theology does not seek to discover abstract truth in itself, it is "the application of the Word of God by persons to all areas of life."⁷ This method is safe only if and when we have heard the biblical message in its completeness and clarity. A hasty jump into the application of the text may, in fact, perpetuate ignorance.

The Gap between Knowledge and Action

What happened to the thousands who had the privilege of hearing Jesus? No doubt they were impressed (John 7:46), but we have no reports or statistics of conversions or baptisms, as found in the book of Acts. It seems significant that even Jesus' audiences experienced the gap between *knowing* and *doing*. Could it be that, prompted by such concerns, Jesus once said that just *hearing* his words profits little? "Every one who *bears* these words of mine and does not *do* them will be like a foolish man who built his house upon the sand" (Matt 7:24-27; emphasis added). Head knowledge needs realization, incarnation, historicization. Theory must receive legs, arms, pulse, and breath. However, there are many obstacles to such a realization.

The claims of the traditional method of interpretation, that exegesis (description) comes first and application last, may be problematic as well. Krister Stendahl makes this cogent statement: "When the biblical theologian becomes primarily concerned with the present meaning, he implicitly or explicitly loses his enthusiasm . . . for the descriptive task."⁸ The theologian is tempted to jump too quickly to action. Consequently, the two phases of exegesis and application must not be comingled or "the Bible will not exert maximum influence."⁹

There is much to say about the importance of letting Scripture speak fully before an application is made. Too often subjective concerns interfere and we put our own meaning into the text, the very thing that the last words of the book of Revelation forbid under the penalty of a curse (Rev 22:18-19). However, Stendahl's approach may unintentionally separate the text too far from the application in the mind of a theologian. Is it possible or even advisable to become so thoroughly detached from the present context as to preempt the possibility of personal confrontation with the message as the grasping of its strangeness happens? Is such a spontaneous impact always an evil thing? It seems that striving for objectivity must not handicap the

⁶John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1987), 67, 97.

⁷Ibid., 80-84.

⁸Krister Stendahl, "Biblical Theology, Contemporary," *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. George A Buttrick, et al. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), 1:419-422.

⁹Ibid.

interpretation by producing a brilliant “left brain” exactness that would impair absorption of the message into daily life. Some of those experiences of encounter with the text can never be recovered later, and such interpretations may prove less user-friendly and widen the gap between knowledge and action, rather than bridging it.

The gap between the knowledge of doctrines and the actions informed by them can ensue from theology itself. Concern for the actual conduct of a Christian is lessened by the sacramental view of sanctification or formalism. If sins are atoned for by a mere eating and drinking of the emblems, and if the sacramental bread and wine work *ex opere operato*, the Christian believer and his or her actions are distanced from the responsibility of acting in harmony with God’s will. One may feel less concerned about lifestyle issues. However, sins happen on the level of actions, which need cleansing and forgiveness.

Similar dynamics may be operating in tradition, where justification overshadows sanctification. If salvation comes to humans by Jesus alone, if we can do nothing to attain righteousness, if the death of Christ has paid our debt and completed our right to adoption as sons and daughters of God, and if all one needs to do is to believe and live this new status that is freely offered, that is good news indeed! But that also opens the way for the corrupted, sinful soul to see the grace of God as expensive to him, but cheap to the sinner.

Cheap grace means grace as a doctrine, a principle, a system. It means forgiveness of sins proclaimed as a general truth, the love of God taught as the Christian “conception” of God. An intellectual assent to the idea is held to be of itself sufficient to secure remission of sins. The Church which holds the correct doctrine of grace has, it is supposed, *ipso facto* a part in that grace. In such a Church the world finds a cheap covering for its sins; no contrition is required, still less any real desire to be delivered from sin.¹⁰

Fear of legalism can also contribute to the distance between truth and life. When Christian standards of behavior and obedience to God and his will are set aside, unpopular theology gives way to antinomianism. It is claimed that God is not concerned with specifics. He gave humanity broad principles and freedom to navigate within them. But as Daniel M. Doriani states: “Fear of legalism should not foster a nebulous idealism that never actually says ‘Do this, not that.’”¹¹ Wolfgang Schrage reminds that

Beyond all doubt Jesus demanded not just a new attitude, a rethinking and an inward conversion, but concrete and specific obedience—not in the form of a universal moral appeal to the human conscience, but in concrete injunctions. What Jesus requires is not the relationship of the soul to its God, not inward renewal, but totality of the person, including concrete actions.¹²

Disjunction between God’s law and love has similar effects on practicing

¹⁰Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (London: SCM Press, 1959), 35.

¹¹Daniel M Doriani, *Putting the Truth to Work* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2001), 125.

¹²Wolfgang Schrage, *The Ethics of the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), 44.

biblical teachings. Ellen G. White describes this tendency:

Satan deceives many with the plausible theory that God's love for His people is so great that He will excuse sin in them; he represents that while the threatenings of God's word are to serve a certain purpose in His moral government, they are never to be literally fulfilled. But in all His dealings with His creatures God has maintained the principles of righteousness by revealing sin in its true character—by demonstrating that its sure result is misery and death. The unconditional pardon of sin never has been, and never will be . . . that so-called benevolence which would set aside justice is not benevolence but weakness.¹³

Dichotomy between God's law and his love is unbiblical. Doriani insists that "Generalized beneficence towards others ('Everybody, I love you') is not love. The law of God indicates which acts are loving, and which are not. Love fulfills the law" (Rom 13:10; Matt 22:37-40).¹⁴

Bridging the Gap between Knowing, Doing, and Being

Both *thinking* and *acting* impact the human *being*. Proverbs 23:7 states that "as he thinketh in his heart, so is he" (KJV). Thinking is not a secondary function of the mind. My thinking determines my inner mood and my self-concept. Norman Vincent Peale demonstrated the power of positive thinking on the quality of human life, but more recent counseling literature emphasizes the impact that "self-talk" can have on human character and quality of life.

Moreover, actions impact character because repeated actions form habits, and repeated habits create virtues or vices. Paul, in Rom 7:17-24, notes how engagement in sinful behavior materializes another entity in the human psyche that makes war against its host. The presence of sin confronts Paul in a pseudoontological fashion, dehumanizing and highjacking him. Thus Aristotle could say that "We become just by doing just acts; temperate by doing temperate acts; brave by doing brave acts."¹⁵

The first step toward a theological contribution to bridging the chasm between doctrine and the quality of being is to recognize that the biblical text is unlike any other piece of literature. The impact of nineteenth-century Post-Enlightenment theology must be dealt with first.

Contemporary theologians would do well to eavesdrop on Christ's conversation with his disciples. Speaking about the nature of his words, Jesus says: "It is the spirit that gives life, the flesh is of no avail; the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life" (John 6:63). Exegeting and interpreting the biblical text requires us to keep in mind the creative power of the inspired Word. It is not outside of the human being, and thus not an intrusion. If it feels

¹³Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1970), 522.

¹⁴Doriani, 124.

¹⁵Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1103, trans. Martin Ostwald (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1962), 34.

strange, as Stendahl claims, it is not because of the Word's inadequacy. The reason is that to the extent we are deformed by sin, to that same extent the Word will seem alien to us. It is not foreign to life, *it is life* (Deut 30:11-14).

This implies that a theologian cannot assume a superior posture vis-à-vis the text. Understanding implies standing under the Word. The message must be communicated in spite of its unpleasantness, just as a physician's diagnosis and/or therapy must be faithfully indicated and applied. Paul directs Timothy to divide the word of truth "rightly" (2 Tim 2:15), whether it is pleasant, "in season," or not (2 Tim 3:2-5).

Gabriel Marcel has drawn a distinction between *fidelity* and *constancy* in religious life.¹⁶ When lifestyle illustrates fidelity, the entire being is involved, including beliefs. A person becomes willing to go as far as necessary in his or her service to God. Constancy, on the other hand, refers to a mere conformity, in which a person is not involved in the deepest sense. Jonah, for example, mentally accepted God's will to go to Nineveh, yet he was not willing to accept God's indiscriminate mercy toward the Ninevites following their repentance. Outwardly his actions showed conformity to God's plan, but he diverged as soon as deeper fidelity and trust were required of him. The gap between actions and being is then determined by the quality of commitment. By the same token, a theologian's deep commitment in his or her religious experience will express theory as practicable, and practice as faithful to biblical truth.

The author of the book of Hebrews wrote to the Christians in Rome, asking them to measure the standard and the extent of their commitment. He notes that believers have seen how far some of the heroes, such as Abraham, Daniel, Jeremiah, and even Rahab, were willing to go in their practice of faith. They were not always the picture of fidelity. They often struggled at the level of constancy (e.g., Gen 20:1-18); but then there were moments of triumph, such as Abraham's encounter with God on Mount Moriah (Gen 22). A theologian who has not experienced Heb 11 on his or her own might be prone to set himself or herself apart as a standard and thus perpetuate the gap between the teachings of God's Word and Christian life.

As theologians focus on their work by asking, "What did these words mean?" followed by "What does this mean for us today?" they cannot limit the definition of the word "means" to a theoretical, cognitive, or epistemological sense. Rather, theologians must discipline themselves and ask, "What should I do now, given this information? What shall my readers do now, given this truth?" Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass concur:

Today rapid social change and intense spiritual restlessness evoke fierce yearning in many people, in our neighborhoods and around the world. Some observers see this yearning as a quest for meaning, others as longing for spiritual consciousness or experience. Important as these quests are, we think that they arise from a deeper longing, longing for a life that adds up to

¹⁶Gabriel Marcel, *Creative Fidelity*, trans. Robert Rosenthal (New York: Noonday Press, 1964).

something that is in a deep sense good for oneself, for other people, and for all creation. As Christians, the two of us affirm that such a way of life—right down to the specific words, gestures, and situations of which it is woven—finds its fullest integrity, coherence and fittingness insofar as it embodies a grateful human response to God's presence and promises.¹⁷

Conclusion

The work of a theologian can use occasional examination. The search for truth is the essential *first* step in the task of theology. If occasional attempts to devote sustained thought to the meaning, application, and significance of a particular Christian belief and the practices that embody that belief are not undertaken, such practices can become hollow, insignificant, and ultimately unpersuasive—even to those who undertake such practices with diligence and love.¹⁸ The gap that ensues can become scandalous.¹⁹

This occasional self-searching effort made by theologians is indispensable. It is significant and troublesome to hear from our pulpits and read in some publications that doctrines are not important. What matters the most is to have a close and deep relationship with God. Such comments should be taken as a clarion call to the church's theologians. It is a call to us to present biblical doctrines to our hearers and readers as a way of living, not only as a way of understanding. Without theology and doctrine, what does "relationship" mean? What sort of God do we speak about? If our theologizing is not clear as to what we shall do about the well-articulated truth, our work is far from finished. For when God sends his Word to his people, it must not return to him empty because it is too hard to understand, too esoteric, or too theoretical. It must not return to him without accomplishing the task for which he is sending it.

¹⁷Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass, eds, *Practicing Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 16.

¹⁸David S. Cunningham, *The Practice of Trinitarian Theology* (Malden: Blackwell, 1998), 8.

¹⁹A glaring example can be found in the theology of apartheid. Consider Abraham Kuyper's claim that racial diversity is God-given and that each race has a right to maintain its identity. In addition, he insisted that Christ did not die for every human being. Such claims opened the doors for apartheid policies of hierarchical ordering of economics, politics, and social standing, and justified negative discrimination against the "non-whites" (*Particular Grace: A Defense of God's Sovereignty in Salvation* [Granville: Reformed Free Publishing, 2001], 22-56).