

“To Us and the Holy Spirit”:
The Voice of the Spirit in Theological Community

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Introduction

Presumably for good and sincere reasons, St. Augustine identified *eleven* prerequisite abilities which one must possess before doing theological interpretation.¹ Among them were: intimate familiarity with the entire Bible, knowledge of Greek and Hebrew languages, expertise in textual criticism, acquaintance with the secular sciences (esp. history and logic) and awareness of differences between current and past social conventions!²

Without placing undue and unfair blame on Augustine, this nonetheless serves as an example of the way of thinking in which theology is a scholar-only activity, as opposed to an 'all-saints' activity. This mindset takes various forms – varying degrees of both elitism in academia and anti-intellectualism in the local church fellowship. This essay will seek to befriend academia and the local church, showing why theology and ecclesiology are related, and how the Spirit speaks through the study of God (theology) by the people of God (ecclesiology), especially when the church is in unity as a Theological Community.

Theology: Task, Source and Method

There is much discussion about the nature/task of theology,³ as well as its sources and method. As we begin our brief review of these issues, firstly what theology *is*, we shall see clearly the significance of the believing community in the theological enterprise.

Hall wonderfully defines 'theology' as the "ongoing activity of ... clarifying what 'gospel' must mean here and now," occurring when the Christian community 'lives' between text and context; revelatory answer and human question (Tillich); Bible and newspaper (Barth); and tradition past and time present and future.⁴ The title of Grenz's systematic theology⁵ well indicates orientation of the theological task; 'Theology' is done '*for the community of God*'.⁶ Owen and Rees

¹ Cited in Francis Watson, 'Authors, Readers, Hermeneutics' *Reading Scripture with the Church: Toward a Hermeneutic for Theological Interpretation*, Ed. Adam, et al, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2006) 119-123.

² These requirements were specifically for theological *interpretation*, so in fairness to Augustine, he likely would have agreed that all should participate in theological reflection.

³ 'Theology' in the wider sense, rather than 'theology *proper*' (the specific doctrine of God).

⁴ J.D. Hall, 'What is Theology?' *Crosscurrents* (Summer, 2003), 177.

⁵ Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Grand Rapids, Michigan / Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994).

⁶ *ibid.*, 8.

add helpful additions; theology renders account for statements of faith in God,⁷ knowing and naming Him, and discovering who He is “with and for us”.⁸

Standard *sources* for theology are Scripture, Tradition, Reason and Experience, but Culture and Revelation are added often. Interestingly, these sources are inextricably *interwoven* together. For example, Tradition consists of the Experience of the past communities of faith, Reasoning over the Revelation of God in Scripture, within their Cultures. Theology, then, can be seen as *the Christian community Reasoning over the Revelation of God in Scripture* (reaching its ‘telos’ in Jesus Christ), *in continuity with Tradition, forming and informing its Experience, and enriching its relationship to Culture.*

Finally, questions of theological *method* are widely discussed and debated. *Biblical* theologians have emphasised the need to attend to the detail of Scripture, while *Systematic* theologians have stressed the need for integrated and coherent presentation. Clearly, both are vitally essential to the theological enterprise.

Over the centuries, standard theological categories (Theology [‘proper’], Anthropology, Christology, Pneumatology, Ecclesiology and Eschatology) have emerged, providing a basic structure around which theological elements can be developed and refined while remaining inter-related. Development in one category necessitates subsequent ‘developmental ripples’ in the others. For example, Christology is intimately related to the other categories (Theology sees the *revelation of God* in Christ, Anthropology sees its *superlative example* in Christ, Pneumatology has its *character* in Christ, Ecclesiology has its *head* in Christ, and Eschatology anticipates all things *consummating* in Christ).

Church: The Community of God

The foundational doctrine behind Ecclesiology is the doctrine of Election, which (though it cannot be fully expounded here) describes God’s action of ‘calling out’ His people for His purposes in the world. Scripture describes God continually acting in and through His People in many ways. He enters into covenant with them, He saves them from their enemies, He speaks to them in various ways (judgment, instruction, affection, etc.) both personally and through

⁷ John Michael Owen, 'Theology' *The Encyclopedia of Christianity: Volume 5 Si-Z, Ed. Fahlbusch, et al.* (Grand Rapids, Michigan / Cambridge, U.K. / Brill, Leiden / Boston: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008) 363.

⁸ Frank Rees, 'Enabling Congregations to Become Theological Communities', *Evangelical Review of Theology* 30(1): (2006), 6.

spokespersons, and He empowers them for their tasks. These are revelatory acts in which God invites His People to know Him and share this knowledge with the world. A central task for God's people, therefore, is theological reflection and expression.

Theological Community

Therefore, the Church is necessarily a Theological Community. Hütter wisely points out that "To experience Christian existence... means to be a theologian; to be [a] theologian means to experience Christian existence..."⁹ Fowl suggests "Theology should happen in the seminary and congregations"¹⁰ This will be seen as we now survey three points where 'theology' and 'Church' intersect.

Residing in Tradition

Theological traditions sooner or later tend to give rise to church traditions. It has always been that way. Avis notes that over history theology has been done not only within community, but within communities that stand within a particular interpretive or theological tradition.¹¹ Whatever kind of tradition it might be ('academic' tradition across continents or 'denominational' tradition across the Sunday-school room), if you're doing theology in a particular community, then you're being influenced (for theological good or ill) by the tradition of that community. Adam affirms the benefit of doing theology in community, listing three things that make for better biblical theologians: 'our friends', 'our congregational worship' and 'the wisdom of the saints'.¹² This affirmation stands true, but especially when we don't allow ourselves to be limited to only those traditions we are most comfortable with.

⁹ Reinhard Hütter, *Suffering Divine Things: Theology as Church Practice* (Grand Rapids, Michigan / Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 75.

¹⁰ Stephen E. Fowl, 'The Importance of a Multivoiced Literal Sense of Scripture: The Example of Thomas Aquinas' *Reading Scripture with the Church: Toward a Hermeneutic for Theological Interpretation*, Ed. Adam, et al, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2006) 35-50.

¹¹ Paul Avis, 'Church' *Encyclopedia of Christianity*, Ed. John Bowden, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005) 227.

¹² A.K.M. Adam, 'Poaching on Zion: Biblical Theology as Signifying Practice' *Reading Scripture with the Church: Toward a Hermeneutic for Theological Interpretation*, Ed. Adam, et al, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2006) 34.

Wrestling with Scripture

Theology and Church also have to share the Bible. Battles over its nature and use have divided the Church, so patient wisdom is called for. Sometimes, the academic approach (with its natural focus on historical criticism) can be out of touch with (or ambivalent towards) ministry taking place through local churches. Here, Braaten is wise to warn that historical criticism (if separated from the faith and life of the church) serves “a different master than the Word of God incarnate.”¹³

On the other hand, churches often are less than interested in what historical scholarship has to say. Donfried sharply (and rightly) rebukes this, warning that it risks “succumbing to an uninformed literalist reading of Scripture”, and caters to a modern individualistic “self-referential reading”, which the “Trinitarian church has always rejected.”¹⁴

In and To Culture

Another dimension of the task of theology is helping the Church understand its relationship *in and to culture*. In order to be a witness to the world, the Church must continually appreciate the influence which Culture has on it. As Hall says, Theology equips the Church to live “between its worldly [cultural] situation and its own particular sources of wisdom and hope”.¹⁵ David and Cynthia Strong also remind us that doing theology across language and cultural barriers is necessary for unity *within* the Church as well.¹⁶

The Voice of the Spirit in Community

As we have seen, those things which have too often been strangers (theology and church; academia and local congregations) are meant to be friends. The remainder of this essay will demonstrate that the Spirit speaks when the church finds this kind of ‘friendship’.

¹³ Carl E. Braaten, 'Scripture, church, and dogma: An essay on theological method' *Interpretation* 50(2): (April 1996), 154.

¹⁴ Karl Paul Donfried, *Who Owns The Bible? Toward the Recovery of a Christian Hermeneutic* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2006), 16.

¹⁵ Hall, 'What is Theology?' *Crosscurrents*, 182.

¹⁶ David K. Strong and Cynthia A. Strong, 'The Globalizing Hermeneutic of the Jerusalem Council' *Globalizing Theology: Belief and Practice in an Era of World Christianity*, Ed. Craig Ott and Harold A. Netland, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2006) 132.

Vanhoozer reflects this unity, calling himself 'evangelical' and 'catholic'. In reflecting on the importance of Scripture, Tradition, Culture, Pneumatology, Christology and Ecclesiology, he wonderfully integrates the language of theological *sources* and systematic *categories*;

“I am evangelical [tradition] because I am committed to the authority of the gospel in its canonical [scripture] context; I am catholic [tradition] because I recognize the Spirit's work [pneumatology] in the church's [ecclesiology] reception of the gospel [revelation] over the centuries [tradition] and across cultures [culture]. It is the Spirit's [pneumatology] speaking [revelation] in and through the Scripture [scripture] that employs the authorial discourse [revelation], ministers the christological subject matter [christology], and enables the ecclesial community's [ecclesiology] right reception [revelation].”¹⁷

Indeed, the Spirit 'searches all things' (1 Corinthians 2:10), for even in our theological reflection on the Revelation of God in Scripture, God Himself indwells the process; and all the more so *when that theological reflection is within the communion of Saints!* It is the use of “Scripture *in the church*, not Scripture-in-itself,” says Vanhoozer, “that is the primary theological datum. (Emphasis mine)”¹⁸

Therefore, both theology and the church are Pneumatologically driven. Hütter again says it well, “The mission of the church must thus be identified with the mission of the Holy Spirit.”¹⁹ The Spirit, as the Spirit of Christ, gives expression to Christ to the world through the church; or as Hütter puts it, “Through the Holy Spirit (Pentecost!), Christ becomes 'public' in the world.”²⁰

Case Study: Acts 15 – The Jerusalem Council

As a case study, the Jerusalem Council provides a wonderful example of the Spirit speaking in the midst of the theological community. In the chapters leading up to Acts 15, the Spirit had confirmed the inclusion of the Gentiles into

¹⁷ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, 'Imprisoned or Free? Text, Status, and Theological Interpretation in the Master/Slave Discourse of Philemon' *Reading Scripture with the Church: Toward a Hermeneutic for Theological Interpretation*, Ed. Adam, et al, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2006) 77.

¹⁸ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, 'On the Very Idea of a Theological System: An Essay in Aid of Triangulating Scripture, Church and World' *Always Reforming: Explorations in Systematic Theology*, Ed. A.T.B. McGowan, (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2006) 142-143.

¹⁹ Hütter, *Suffering Divine Things: Theology as Church Practice*, 144.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 145.

the People of God. Then Paul and Barnabas had ‘no small dissention’ with ‘certain men from Judea’ who wished to impose the Law of Moses on would-be Gentile converts (Acts 15:1-2). On the heels of this, they went up to Jerusalem and had ‘Theological Community’ with ‘the apostles and the elders’ (Acts 15:6).

After ‘much dispute’ (Acts 15:7) and testimony, listening, declarations and reflection on Scripture (if anything is clear, it was not a tidy, organised meeting!), they agreed that the Gentiles were not to be ‘troubled’ (Acts 15:19) by the Law of Moses. David and Cynthia Strong correctly observe that the Council of Jerusalem “bowed to the authority of Scripture and the unmistakable evidence of the Spirit’s will, but it also acted as a *hermeneutical community* (Emphasis mine).”²¹

Conclusion

In considering the nature of both ‘theology’ and ‘church’, in noting the various ways in which they are related to and mutually dependent on one another, and finally in the example of the Jerusalem Council, we have seen that God continues to reveal Himself through the Spirit’s voice in Theological Community. For the Church to truly be the Church, the People of God, she must engage in Theological Community and by doing so, be formed and informed for her mission in the world.

²¹ Strong, ‘The Globalizing Hermeneutic of the Jerusalem Council’ *Globalizing Theology: Belief and Practice in an Era of World Christianity*, 136.

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