

Fall Convocation 2015:
“Why Theology Matters?”

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“Why theology matters” is a strange convocation theme in a Divinity School concentrating on the Master of Divinity program, because theology includes every subject in the MDiv curriculum. Accordingly, the three contextual theologies embracing multiple disciplines that have dominated the American theological landscape for half a century accentuate the importance of theology throughout the Divinity School: Liberation theology in Latin and South America insists on freedom from economic and political oppression. Black liberation theology demands equal justice, police accountability, and real opportunity for African Americans in the United States. Feminist and womanist theologies challenge patriarchal structures of subordination that deny the dignity and flourishing of women.

Each of these contextual theologies happens in broad historical and cultural movements that advocate freedom: the liberation of oppressed people. Their specific demands for fundamental change constitute sharp critiques of the traditional theology of the church. Thus the larger question of “why theology matters” moves beyond contextual theologies to the limitations, deficiencies, and flaws in traditional church theology.

“WHY THEOLOGY MATTERS” IN DIVINITY SCHOOL IS NOT A QUESTION BUT AN AFFIRMATION.

Old Testament, New Testament, Church History, and Systematic Theology are the four classical disciplines that have shaped the church’s understanding of Christian faith in every major epoch of its history—from the patristic period to the present. Much of the health of the church historically has depended upon the positive, dynamic relationship of these four classical disciplines. Of the four, systematic theology is the most troublesome, for some unexpectedly difficult and therefore sometimes valued least. If theology really matters, why does constructive theology frustrate so many? Why do some discount the importance of theology?

Two problems: First, systematic theology is unquestionably the most abstract discipline in the theological curriculum. Theology lacks the concreteness of biblical studies, historical analyses, and ministry practice. Though theological styles vary, the primary mode for doing theology is “conceptualization”: Theology pursues abstract thinking about major questions that take theoretical form in concepts. Through abstract conceptualization theology articulates the content and meaning of Christian faith.

A second problem: Systematic theology does not have a canon. Old Testament and New Testament have canons. Church history has a canon of historical epochs. Rather than a canon, constructive theology consists almost entirely of “questions and answers.” The questions originate existentially in human existence, but the answers emerge through the constructive task of theological reflection on Christian faith. Thus Paul Tillich aptly characterized systematic theology as “answering theology.” Of course, all disciplines in the Divinity School ask the question of the content, meaning, and significance of Christian faith for today—directly and indirectly. Nevertheless, the peculiar task of systematic theology is to concentrate on key questions and to offer specific proposals to explain the essentials of Christian faith.

Nine “core questions” drive systematic theology.

One: How do we know “God”? Indeed, if God even “exists”?

Two: Who is God? What is God?

Three: Who is Jesus Christ?

Four: Who—indeed, what—is the Holy Spirit?

Five: Is God the Creator of the universe? Is God relationally invested in the wellbeing of life on planet Earth?

Six: What is Homo sapiens? What does it mean to be a human person?

Seven: What is human sin, and what does “salvation” mean? Do sin and salvation encompass Radical Evil and Incomprehensible Suffering?

Eight: What is the church and its mission with God in the world?

Nine: What is the future in which we hope as well as the future for for which we dream?

And each question contains more questions, for they are not simple but complex.

The Jewish New Testament scholar Amy Jill Levine lectured in the Divinity School more than a decade ago. She talked about her arrival at Vanderbilt Divinity School, and she recounted a conversation she had with Edward Farley, a brilliant systematic theologian.

She told him: “I have tried to read your books, but I do not understand what you do and how you do it.”

Farley’s answer is unforgettable: “I shut my eyes, and I make it up!”

His humor notwithstanding, what else could he say? Unlike her, he did not have a canon to anchor him. Furthermore, he did not focus on the concrete study of the biblical traditions and church epochs. Rather, he creatively engaged in abstract conceptualization around core theological questions, and he produced theological answers—always in dialogue with biblical studies, church history, and contemporary culture.

A CRUCIAL POINT: WHY THEOLOGY MATTERS ISSUES ULTIMATELY FROM ITS SUBJECT—GOD.

All questions finally turn on one question, because theology has only one problem: God. And the problem of God is the most urgent and critical problem in modern theology. First century biblical history, the patristic period, the Protestant Reformation—Christian tradition church theology essentially took form in these great historical periods. But they were all prescientific, precritical, and premodern. None of these epochs wrestled with the stubborn, complex problem of God that we face today: In the critical, scientific perspectives of modernity the category “God” is not necessary to explain anything that happens in our world. Therefore, religious scholars readily admit that “God” is inevitably a human projection. However, the enduring question remains: Is there is a mysterious Reality that evokes these projections, theses human images of the Divine?

A brief summary is appropriate.

Who Is God? God discloses herself in the Old Testament as YHWH: the God who created Israel as well as the Earth wherein humanity lives; the God of the covenant whose Ten Words demands faithfulness; the God who uniquely loves Israel. YHWH is the sovereign Lord of the universe.

This God reveals herself in the New Testament in the surprising “story of Jesus” as Abba, Father, “the Fatherly Mother.” This crucial image shifts the model of the Holy from the dominant monarchical model of God in the Old Testament to the dynamic parental model for God in the New Testament. Similar to parents, God chooses to limit herself—her power, knowledge, and presence—to give freedom, opportunity, and responsibility to her children, This choice of self-limitation enables us to respond to her in the freedom of love, for a personal relationship is always voluntary and without coercion. This Abba God is not controlling but exercises power in the restraints of love to accomplish her purposes in the world.

Jesus proclaimed the dawning kingdom of God and offered the gift of salvation to anyone who would receive it. He did not fast but celebrated life. Jesus invited everyone to his table: He did not exclude anyone. Thus a legitimate charge: “A glutton and drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.” Eating and drinking in festive celebration—Jesus related everyone around the table as friends.

Jesus condemned the wealthy for oppressing the poor. He denounced corrupt alignment of the Jerusalem establishment with the occupying power of Rome. He cast out demons. He healed the sick. Everywhere he went Jesus offered hope to the hopeless. On the basis of his lifelong experience of God as Abba, he taught his disciples to pray daily: “Abba, our Motherly Father, give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sinned against us.”

However, Jesus did not simply call people to a new way of life. This “unauthorized rabbi” taught them new ways to think about God and trust in God: He taught them to think carefully and to feel deeply transformation and community responsibility. He not only taught them about the love and mercy of God, but he demonstrated the same love and mercy in his ministry of compassion—always “doing mercy”

Two unforgettable parables: The parable of the Prodigal Sons and the parable of the Compassionate Samaritan. In the parable of the prodigal sons, one left his father and home; the other stayed home but still left his father. In the parable of the compassionate Samaritan, a hated half-breed Samaritan, despicable to Jewish touch, found an almost dead Jewish merchant in the ditch by the road—a man who ordinarily would repudiate him—and rescued him, “doing mercy.” Through the parable Jesus redefined the way to eternal life, scandalous to his listeners.

Alas, the corrupt Jewish leaders in Jerusalem rejected Jesus’ message about his Abba God and the integrity of his ministry from God. They collaborated with the Roman occupying powers to kill him—a public execution that repudiated Jesus and his message in the name of YHWH and for the security of the tyrannical rule of Rome.

Then a radical reversal: The Godforsaken death of Jesus did not end his life and terminate his identity, for God raised the crucified Jesus from the dead. The resurrection of the crucified proclaimer of the gospel of God vindicated his disclosure of YHWH as Abba, “Abba the interiority of YHWH.” Finally the Johannine tradition declared that the whole story of Jesus reveals the very essence of Holy Mystery: Beyond “God loves Israel,” a verb; to Abba YHWH: This God is love, a noun.

What else? The Spirit of God is internal to all creation and present in every person’s life, but the Holy Spirit arrives with new, powerful vitality in the community gathered in Jesus’ name for its mission in the world. The Spirit is the presence of God in creation, but the Spirit is distinct from creation—that is super-natural. Therefore, for the sake of the presentation of the awesome, magnificent activity of God, the biblical writers portray God’s action in the world through supernatural intervention—always descriptively more than the possibilities in nature and the contingency of history.

However, we live in a new day, an unprecedented day for which we are not prepared! Modern science requires us to rethink the activity of the Holy Spirit in the biblical world—not through Divine Intervention but “Spirit-filled Intensification.” Sadly the literal interpretation of God’s action in the biblical traditions has blinded us to the genuine action of God in the biblical world and our world. We must learn to see the activity of the Spirit in the ministry of Jesus parallel to—quite similar to—the action of the Spirit among us in today’s scientific world. Contrary to the paradigm of Supernatural Intervention, the action of the Spirit in the goodness of creation happens through Spirit-filled Intensification in the realities of the world. “The Spirit of Life” works in the depths of creation and creaturely human existence, the work of the Spirit “hidden” to unbelievers.

"WHY THEOLOGY MATTERS" FOR EACH OF YOU IN THE DIVINITY SCHOOL MAY NOT BE TRANSPARENT: YOU ALREADY ARE A THEOLOGIAN

You come to Divinity School with "an embedded theology," usually a variation of the traditional theology of the church and perhaps conscious dissatisfaction with certain features of it. Some of you have already begun to deconstruct and reconstruct your theology—a never ending task for the rest of your life. In addition to reconstruction, a distinct goal of systematic theology is integration. Throughout your experience in Divinity School you must integrate biblical studies, historical analyses, and ministry practice into YOUR PERSONAL THEOLOGY. A viable constructive theology aims at coherence, dialogue, inclusiveness, and hospitality for understanding faith in God through Jesus Christ, continually nurtured in the openness of the Spirit.

Yet you will actually integrate your studies through the discipline where your "mind is at home." Old Testament, New Testament, Church History, Christian Ethics, Preaching, Worship, Pastoral Care—your mind will be "at home" mostly in one general area. This area—this discipline—will become the distinctive reference point for pulling your theology together, making it your own theology.

Regardless—nevertheless—the contribution of systematic theology to your interdisciplinary integration remains crucial—especially your understanding of God. IF the driving questions about God, about the continuing disclosure of God in Jesus Christ, about the constant working of the Spirit in whole domain of creation—IF these concerns do not constantly inform your work in the various disciplines of study, you will lose the cutting edge of your theological vocation in ministry and severely limit your contribution to the mission of God in the world.

Correspondingly, IF the content and insights of other disciplines do not inform systematic theology, your theological construction will prove shortsighted and embarrassingly shallow.

Ultimately all theological disciplines mutually inform and impact each other, but the driving questions of theology within the larger theological curriculum is crucial in the formation of your theology—nothing less than Your Personal Theological Worldview that will enable you to address and resolve unforeseen problems beyond your Divinity School experience.

Sometimes constructive theology has been characterized as "theory" that requires other disciplines to turn its theorizing into practice. This popular conception of systematic theology—sometimes nurtured in theology lectures and books—is tragically inadequate, indeed, radically reductionist, frankly dead wrong. Genuine theology contains enormous existential energy for personal actualization in your life and for bold implementation in the church. Theorizing—even theological theorizing—makes little or no difference in the world in which we live. Genuine Christian theology is always internalized into life: It must be Your Personal Theology—from your head through your

heart down into your bones, then out of your bones back up through your heart and into your head, always sifting, always discerning. Authentic theology aims to be for actualized in your life and demonstrated in your ministry. You must embody your theology into your whole person, for Your Personal Theology Is Your Christian Worldview.

NOW FOR THE BAD NEWS:

For over half a century surveys have reported the continuing decline of churches in the United States, but the Pew Report this May specifies a sharp decline of precipitous, indeed, crisis proportions:

In the last seven years the number of adults identifying as Christians dropped from 78 per cent to 71 per cent of the American population—a stunning decline.

The Nones—nonbelievers unaffiliated with any religion—have jumped from 16 per cent to 23 per cent—practically 1 in 4 Americans.

Similarly, 25 per cent of Millennials—those 18-29—are unaffiliated with any faith, and they describe themselves as atheist, agnostic, or “nothing in particular”

The decline at least means fewer members and fewer resources, because the indications are that the decline of the last several decades will continue unchecked.

Multiple explanations help us understand the reasons for the decline. But the world-famous theologian and devout Methodist John B. Cobb puts it bluntly: The deepest reason for the malaise is: “the church has abandoned its theological vocation.” Consequently: “What we say and do does not seem to be terribly important.”

WHY DOES THEOLOGY HARDLY MATTER IN PROGRESSIVECHURCHES TODAY?

One problem is the rise of professionals in countless areas of American life—including church ministers. The professionalization of theological studies begins with highly educated professors who teach in divinity schools, and they diligently educate future clergy for ordination to ministry to lead the church. Since ordinary Christians know that they are not among the experts, they have stopped thinking seriously about what they believe: They have abandoned their theological vocation to the experts—the church professionals, the clergy. Before professionalization of the clergy, everyday Christians did think seriously about what they really believed. Over the last century nonetheless such theological thinking has mostly ended.

Nevertheless, all Christians trust God in Jesus Christ, and they are already theologians! Every Christian has an embedded theology based on experiences inside and outside the church. However, they know that their vague awareness of theological ideas will not stand up to critical inquiry. In fact, they know that serious thinking about “my

Christian beliefs” leads inevitably to the struggle of faith. So they avoid the most basic questions of faith—of Christian life.

NOW EVERYTHING MUST CHANGE—THE CHURCH, ITS MINISTERS, AND DIVINITY SCHOOLS.

You who lead the church must teach ordinary Christians in the church to think seriously their faith—to ponder what they believe and their reasons for believing it.

What questions frustrate Christians about their faith and trouble them from time to time? “God Questions.”

What is God really like?

What does God actually do in the world?

Do the teachings of Jesus work in the pressures of everyday life?

Is the cross of Jesus anything more than a martyr’s death?

Did God suffer on the cross with him?

Is the presence of “the Spirit of Christ” in the difficulties and tragedies of life the real meaning of Jesus’ resurrection?

Does God really answer prayer? If so, why did he not answer my prayers?

How can we speak of the reality of the God of love amid devastating natural disasters? In the face of radical human evil producing overwhelming, indescribable suffering?

These are theological questions that demand responses from every Christian believer who “trusts in God through following Jesus.” They are not incidental but central questions to Christian faith.

The Divinity School must take responsibility to teach the entire theological curriculum in the Master of Divinity program that can be translated into the everyday language of the local church—everyday Christians whom we love. Divinity school is not church: But we professors and students must become comfortable talking about God in our lives in a fashion consistent we have taught and learned about God in our classes. Where do we start? “My Story of Faith” is where serious theology can begin, for “God” is central to the story of each of us. In fact, My Story of Faith contains numerous implications of our understanding of God.

I conclude with the words of Jürgen Moltmann, a commitment, a confession of faith, and a breathtaking vision of theology:

It is simple but true to say that theology has only one, single problem: God. We are theologians for the sake of God. God is our dignity. God is our agony. God is our hope... To me theology springs from a divine passion: that is the open wound of God in one's own life and the

tormented men, women, and children of this world. But for me theology also springs from God's love for life, the love for life which we experience in the presence of the life-giving Spirit, and which enables us to move beyond our resignation, and begin to love here and now. These are also Christ's two experiences of God, and because of that they are the foundation of theology: God's delight and God's pain.

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