

## An Outline of Christian Theology

### Introduction: The contemporary theological task

A. In a secular culture, religious language appears to have lost the kind of meaning which relates it to experience. In such a culture as ours, many and significant areas of life -- government, business, industry, education, communication, social planning, psychology, technology, space exploration, medicine, entertainment -- all function without any apparent necessity for religious actions, religious language, religious categories. Religious institutions may survive, even thrive, but they are optional, marginal, leisure-time "interests" that may be called upon for what Peter Berger describes as "public rhetoric and private consolation." Religious language may still have meaning for many people within its own context, but it does not appear to relate necessarily and essentially to anything else.

B. The church is called to function theologically in this kind of world not for its own sake (in order to survive) but for the sake of the very world of which it is a part. There seem to be three strategic options open to the Christian community:

1. Accept or even cultivate the schism between the religious dimension and other areas of experience. In this strategy the religious community seeks to function as a ghetto or to compartmentalize the religious experience. This would be a more or less extreme form of "private consolation." Besides its virtual impossibility, such a strategy is a betrayal of Christianity's necessary universality.
2. Utilize cultural themes and forces to shape the form and content of the religious enterprise: e.g., competition, success, evolutionary development, psychological health. This would be a more or less extreme form of "public rhetoric." Though tempting in its appearance of viability, such a strategy is a betrayal of Christianity's necessary particularity.
3. Engage our culture in what Langdon Gilkey has termed "intelligible disjunction." This means that "faith" in the Christian sense occurs not in the absence of understanding, but rather when the alternatives are clearly understood. This means that Christianity is intelligible in terms of universally acknowledgable experience, that what happened in the history of Jesus of Nazareth is within the "ballpark" of our experience. But what happened in the history of Jesus is "disjunctive;" that is, it is a redemptive alternative to what else is going on in that "ballpark."

C. Hence the task of Christian theology is to make evident the experiential basis of Christian language and action in a coherent form. To disclose the "plausible" character of the Christian perspective dare not mean to surrender Christian substance, and it cannot mean to "ease" people into Christianity. To have faith in the Christian sense means today, as it always has, to repent and be saved, to die and be made alive, to renounce and be born anew. But we can and must do our theological work so that we and all people are confronted by the alternatives, so that we are called, engaged, arrested, encountered by the claim and offer which happened in Jesus.

There will be three major parts and two "post scripts" to this presentation. Part I asks how we, how all men, experience God. How does the world we live in, how do we ourselves, bear witness to the "God-dimension"? For "He did not leave himself without witness" (Acts 14:17). That witness is not the "good news." That witness has some painful elements. But that witness inheres necessarily in every aspect of our common and universal experience. And it is the context within



which "good news" is intelligible. Part II asks what grounds we have for asserting that there is any other news at all besides the news in our common and universal experience. What grounds, if any, are there for specifically Christian proclamation? The answer must be sought in the historical event of Jesus. What that event says and how it is an alternative is the content of Part II. Part III asks how we share in the "good news" centuries after the event. What does such sharing mean? Here we are concerned with much that is familiar in the Christian vocabulary: grace, faith, repentance and new life, church and eucharist, Holy Spirit and ministry, creation and prayer, hope and eternal life.

In good Lutheran fashion these three parts will have dealt not with the "being" of God, but with God's dealing with us. Now as a first "post-script" to God's dealing with us in the history of Jesus, faith in the Gospel can draw some conclusions about the Being of God. We call our conclusions the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. The Holy Trinity has been "there" all the time as the premise for God's own action. But we do not experience it as premise. We experience it as conclusion.

Similarly, the authorities which God has given us, Holy Scripture and Christian Dogma, have been "there" throughout this theological exercise. Indeed, we could not have done our theological task without them. So, in a second "post-script," we are able to reflect about their nature and function.

### Part I

#### The experience of God apart from the Christian Gospel

In order to describe the context within which the Christian Gospel is intelligible, we need to do two things: First, suspend the perspective of Christian faith. (This shouldn't be hard. The "old self" does it all the time.) Second, recover those definitions of "religion" and "faith" and the "God-experience" which will break through the "modern schism" between the sacred and the secular, which will breakdown our attempted compartmentalization.

#### A. Values and evaluation

1. Values and value choices are the location of the religious dimension in human existence. "What does it mean to have a god?" asks Luther. "A god is that to which we look for all good and in which we find refuge in every time of need." In this sense there is no "secularity." Worship is about that to which we ascribe highest worth. We all have values. Some values are more important than others. These higher values become evident as we make and act out our choices. The participants in Watergate valued law and valued winning the election. In the end winning the election won out over law. The highest value is my god. That is how I am religious. No matter what church I join, what creed I profess, my real religion is revealed by my value choices.

2. The values in our world are good in themselves: friendship, health, loyalty, wife, children, food, drink, house, government, peace, sex, happiness, pure doctrine. When one or another of them is elevated to the position of highest value, when it becomes that value which controls our choices, it is deflected from the purpose for which it was intended. Health, when elevated to the position of highest value, makes a man a fadist or a hypochondriac. We know this as fanaticism. It can also be called "idolatry." This means that there is some Value to which all other values are properly subordinate, which alone gives all other values their appropriate place. Thus the proper use as well as the misuse of values points beyond itself. (46)



3. We cannot be valuing beings without also being evaluated. We must necessarily make value choices. We have no choice about that. But this means that we are also responsible for the nature of our choices. Indeed the testing of our choices is built into the very nature of the things among which we choose. No finite value in itself can bear the weight of being an ultimate value. The making of value choices from among finite values betrays us into destructive fanaticism or empty despair. But to want to avoid making choices at all is to want not to be what we are. We are enmeshed by the very structure of things, and our necessary movement among the alternatives enmeshes us even more.

#### B. Freedom and Fate (Necessity, Control)

1. As human beings we exercise a significant amount of control over our existence and direction. We are all aware as we do many things that we could have done alternative things. We might not have married, for example, or fathered children, or become clergymen, or accepted one or another call, etc. In this sense we experience freedom.

2. But our freedom is paradoxically limited, controlled. We experience our freedom within a framework of "law."

- a. This "law" is first expressed in the conditions of existence. We cannot choose the fact or the framework of existence. Our birth, our death and the limitations in between provide boundaries for our choices. We cannot, for example, choose to fly off the top of Luther Tower unaided.
- b. This "law" is also expressed in "legislation." We must choose among possibilities. "Not to decide is to decide." The freedom to legislate is also the necessity to legislate. Good legislation is appropriate response to the conditions of existence. This is what morality and society are about.  
*good order in*
- c. This "law" is ultimately expressed as evaluation. The fact that we must legislate does not excuse us from responsibility. Thus we are vulnerable to judgment, to inexorable consequences, to retribution.

3. Hence, freedom points beyond itself to that which transcends freedom. We are not free not to be free. If we were not free, we would not be accountable. We would be merely victims; pathetic, but not tragic. If we were only free, we would be accountable only to ourselves, not to any structure or framework beyond ourselves. But the paradoxical fact of our existence is that we are simultaneously fated and accountable. Indeed it is our fate to be accountable. We are accountable to and by virtue of our fate. (Note the interplay of these themes in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead.)

#### C. Guilt and God

1. Our foundational experience is one of threat. Not only is our existence threatened by death, but our enforced value choices make us vulnerable to being evaluated, our enforced freedom is threatening in its dimension of accountability.

2. Finally, it is this threat that we trust, that we take with ultimate seriousness. We show that we trust threat by those individual and collective



quests for power and prestige by which we seek to defend ourselves (R. Niebuhr). Defense against threat is always at the expense of one another. We become one another's accusers and exploiters. We thus give another grounds to accuse us.

3. The last secret that results from taking threat with ultimate seriousness is that we have a need to vindicate ourselves not only before others and before ourselves, but through the voice of others and ourselves we have need to vindicate ourselves before the Accuser in the structures of existence. This is how we experience God: as the Accuser in the structures of existence.

4. That our self-vindications are illusory may or may not become evident. But awareness that we are not vindicated is not, in itself, redemptive. It is despair. Both the illusion of self-vindication and the truth of despair bear witness to our trust in threat. Despair only indicates that our Accuser is justified, that we have become vulnerable to accusation, that we are accountable and culpable.

## Part II

### Jesus of Nazareth as the event of the Christian Gospel

Suppose we trust being vindicated instead of attempting self-vindication. This dimension, too, is present in our experience. But our diagnosis was that an Accuser transcended all accusation. Is there a Vindicator transcending all vindications? We know on what grounds we are accused. Is there anyone or any event that provides a grounding for our vindication? The Christian good news is that Jesus of Nazareth is that Someone, that event in our world's history and therefore in our history.

A. The History of Jesus is the content of the Christian Gospel. The four gospels in the New Testament come chronologically within the 2nd and 3rd generation of the Christian community. This observation is not a judgment upon their authorship (which may be first generation), but on the generally recognized period of <sup>the</sup> final composition. If a "generation" is about twenty five years, then St. Paul's earliest letters are first generation, but provide only bare-bones biographical information about Jesus. The earliest gospels are certainly after 55 A.D., the latest after 80 A.D. Hence their character as 2nd and 3rd generation witness. Their literary form is unique: a biographical format as proclamation, as good news! History is not accidental to the good news. It is essential. We need to know whether an event has grounded the good news. We must begin with history, not only with what Jesus' disciples claimed about him, but with what Jesus himself did and taught.

1. Jesus came "acting out" the presence of God's reign in table fellowship with "sinners" and affirmation of "gentiles." "Gentiles" were regarded as outside (not yet) of God's reign; but "sinners" were regarded as rejected from and obstacles to God's reign. Jesus' action thus embodies the most improbable extension of the surprise of grace. The quality of Jesus' surprise was that he offered affirmation which neither exploited nor indulged men. Rather, it gave them an alternative to trusting threat, so that they would have the courage to break with self-vindication, to be free for repentance and servanthood. The Zacchaeus incident (Luke 19:1ff.) is the paradigm.

2. Jesus' teaching was about his "acting out" the surprise of God's grace. This is the point of the parables, the "Kingdom" sayings and the Lord's Prayer tradition.



3. To the question of his authorization Jesus responds with reference to his baptism (Mark 11:27 ff.), that is, to his crucifixion (Mark 10:38). He is authorized to forgive sinners because he bears the ultimate consequence of sin. That is what a forgiver does, as opposed to a retributor: He bears the fate of sin instead of inflicting it. Jesus' death is thus the climax and foundation of his commitment to sinners.

4. His appearances as the Risen and Transformed One are the first proclamation that his life and death were the event of ultimate forgiving love. The Ascension is the re-location of Jesus' table fellowship with sinners in the words and actions of the Gospel.

B. The history of Jesus of Nazareth as friend of sinners is the content of the church's confession that Jesus is God.

1. It is inadequate and misleading to construct a Christology "from above." Christology from above begins with a concept of "divine being and activity" which is then applied to the historical Jesus. Such an approach assumes a direct experience of "divine nature" which does not correspond with the God-experience in nature and history. It substitutes an ontological paradox (that Jesus is the bearer of two mutually exclusive "natures") for the surprise of grace. The gospel then becomes an ideology, and faith becomes an intellectual "virtue" because one sacrifices the intellect.

2. Nevertheless, it is valid to confess Jesus as God. Jesus is God the Affirmer, in contrast to the experience of God as threat. Thus Jesus calls for a shift in trust (Mark 2:1-12, the healing of the paralytic). That is what it means to believe in Jesus. To trust him as forgiver is to have him and acknowledge him as God.

3. Jesus did not become God in the history of his activity, teaching, death and resurrection. What he was in those events he has always been. That is why he is validly confessed as having become incarnate by the Holy Spirit in the womb of Mary, the Virgin.

### PART III

#### Participation in Jesus as the Gospel

A. Individual participation in Jesus as the Gospel.

1. The Lutheran Church confesses the Gospel as the justification of sinners by grace for Christ's sake through faith. We are affirmed in the midst of our being accused. We have no claim on that affirmation. It is thus grace, freely given. Jesus is the event of that grace. Faith trusts grace rather than threat.

2. Holy Baptism is the sacrament of justification.

a. In Luther's catechisms the theological focus in Baptism shifts. "Salvation" means a shift in one's trust, and thus a new life-style (Romans 6). In Baptism we are confronted with God's grace towards us. We are thenceforward determined by that confrontation. Hence the initial confrontation occurs but once. God's commitment to the baptized person is grounded in the event of Jesus ("baptized into his death"). That commitment reaches us through the Christian community: the



affirming community that gives courage to the sinner to confess his sins and thus die to them.

- b. The candidate responds by committing himself to wanting the baptismal life-style, that is, a life of faith in the Gospel effected from the church's side through admonition and absolution by which the sinner is freed for repentance and servanthood. In the case of infants, the parents and "god-parents" respond for the candidate, committing themselves to provide a context for the baptismal life-style.

3. Baptism includes the "Sacrament of Repentance," that is, the freedom for confession. Confession is death to sin, the giving up of self-vindication or despair, the shift in trust from threat to grace. It is taking responsibility for one's past without despair. It is the "cost" of forgiveness to the sinner. It is "taking up the cross," painful and necessary because we are daily rebels. God's prior grace is the freeing courage to die with Christ to sin rather than to die apart from Christ in sin. Death to sin means simultaneously the freedom to "walk in newness of life," that is, to become servants of one another and of our world.

#### B. Corporate participation in Jesus as the Gospel.

1. Faith in Jesus as the Gospel has a necessary corporate dimension. Community is both the agent and the result of God's forgiveness. The community of the Gospel is the redemptive alternative to anti-Gospel community. Man is communal. The question is whether his will be community in truth or community in deceit, community in servanthood or community in competition, community in admonition and repentance, or community in accusation and self-vindication.

2. The church is the event of the Gospel, the giving and receiving of the forgiveness of sins. The marks of the church are dimensions of the Gospel. The church is one because there is but one Gospel. The church is holy because it is the people re-consecrated to God's purpose for community. The church is catholic (orthodox) because dogma has its basis in the Gospel. The church is apostolic because it is sent by and with the Gospel.

3. The Lord's Supper is the celebration of faith in the Gospel as a communal experience. The foundational event of the Gospel, the death of Jesus, is present as His Body and Blood. To share in that Body and Blood through faithful eating and drinking is to be the Holy Communion.

4. The Holy Spirit is present as the ministry of the Gospel within and through the Christian community. (Augsburg Confession, Article V) We use the term "spirit" today to describe that which is operative only through the members of a group and yet transcends them: team spirit, mob spirit, school spirit. The question to be asked of the dynamic of any group is whether it expresses Holy Spirit or unholy spirit. To test for the Holy Spirit is to test for the presence of the Gospel through the witness of the community in word and deed.

#### C. The confession of God as Creator and Preserver of the world.

1. That the world is creation, that God is creator, is the way faith in the Gospel receives the world and its values as gift. (This is in contrast to Part I, A.) Thus Genesis 1 and other confessions of creation are the result of trust in the redemption of God. Apart from faith in the Gospel we view and experience our world in idolatry or despair (Ricoeur, Symbolism of Evil).



2. That God orders the world providentially is also the perspective of faith in the Gospel. It is not a conclusion drawn from events, but rather a way of experiencing events.

3. Prayer in the name of Jesus is the way the Christian community participates faithfully in God's ordering of the course of the world. We are, willy-nilly, part of God's ordering of the course of the world, whether as tools or as sons (C.S. Lewis), whether for judgment or redemption. To pray in the name of Jesus is to want to be a son, to want to be God's servant as was Jesus, to share in his suffering and death for the world. Christian prayer is therefore intercession for and action in the world that is shaped by faith in the Gospel. Intercession, therefore, results from hearing and trusting the Gospel, and issues in action. Thus Luther explains the petitions in the Lord's Prayer.

#### D. The Confession of God as Lord of History.

1. Time and history are as capable of being used in idolatry or despair as are space and things. To receive time and history as good gifts is a fruit of faith in the Gospel. Faith in the Gospel also leads to recognition that God will put an end to "this aeon," since the "new aeon" has already begun in Jesus' death and resurrection.

2. Faith in the Gospel is the origin and content of Christian hope. The God who surprises us with grace in the Gospel will surprise us with a new beginning beyond death and grave in the resurrection to life eternal. Christian faith therefore takes death seriously, but not as God's final word about us. Hell is the final rejection of grace; heaven the final experience of grace.

#### Part IV The Holy Trinity

Our experience is limited to God's dealing with us. We can experience the being of God only as this is expressed in God's dealing with us. On the basis of the event of Jesus as the Gospel we can draw some conclusions about the being of God. When I shift my trust to Jesus as God, the Affirmer, his affirmation confers upon me a new relationship to myself, new possibilities for myself, indeed a new self. When I trust Jesus, I can experience the world as good but not god; I confess that for the world to be its true self it must have God as its Greater transcending itself. In the confession of the Creator I am given a new relationship to the world. When I trust Jesus, I also experience people as the agents, but not the originators, of the forgiveness of sins. The Spirit who transcends forgiving people, and thus frees them to become truly persons, is the Holy Spirit. In the confession of the Holy Spirit I am given a new relationship to my fellow men, to human community. God is thus singular, unique, only (and in that sense one), and yet the transcendence experienced in and beyond my threefold relationship to myself, my world and my fellows. That transcendence must be confessed as personal because Jesus is a historical person, because the Gospel is personal address, because the world is experienced as purposive. Apart from its grounding in the Gospel the most orthodox formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity can be heretical. Because the doctrine of the Trinity is the confession of the being of God, it is a final statement, the last word, a word of praise. It is not the basis for further theological speculation. It is always and only conclusion. To shift it from conclusion to premise is to invite distortion and/or mis-interpretation.



Part V  
Holy Scripture and Church Dogma

A. Holy Scripture

1. It is now clear that the church needs Holy Scripture because of the Gospel. My experience of threat and accusation takes place apart from the witness of the Bible, although the Bible also witnesses to both threat and accusation. My subjection to the "law" takes place whether I recognize it or not, whether I acknowledge it as God's law or not. There is no escape from the paradoxical experience of fate and guilt.
2. Holy Scripture is indispensable for the Gospel. It is our only access to the event of the Gospel. It is the only norm, although not the only form, for the proclamation of the Gospel. As such it is the prophetic and apostolic foundation of the church, unique and without parallel or substitute in the life of the church. When we trust the Gospel we recognize its witness as that of the Holy Spirit. If we reject the Gospel, then we also resist the testimony of the Holy Spirit. To trust the Gospel is to acknowledge the trustworthiness and authority of Holy Scripture.

B. Church Dogma

Church Dogma is the mandatory content of the church's proclamation of the Gospel. One does not believe Dogma; one believes the Gospel. Dogma is necessary so that the Gospel is present in its verbal and sacramental forms in order that faith can be evoked. It is lex docendi, the law of teaching in the church.