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# The Place of Theology in the Life of the Church

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Once I was asked to give a presentation on the birth narratives in Luke and Matthew to an adult Sunday School class in a local congregation. As might be expected, the topic of the virgin birth was discussed. At the time I tried to explain that the historicity of the virgin birth was a little ambiguous in these narratives because the Greek work we translate as virgin can also mean young woman. I tap danced around the topic until a man stood up and asked, "Do you believe in the virgin birth?" I responded in a way that was evidently much too ambiguous for him so he asked me again, "Do you believe in the virgin birth?" Again I equivocated. Finally he said, "Just tell me, yes or no, do you believe in the virgin birth?" I sighed, sat down and said, "Yes".

This true story illustrates the place of theology in the gathering of believers called the church. Its place is such that a faithful man or woman—perhaps even a faithful girl or boy—can challenge the words of a person with a Ph.D. in theology if those words appear to be in violation of what the community believes is essential to the life of the church. My questioner was asking about a belief he thought essential to the life of the church. Moreover, he was not alone in this assessment. Much of the church confesses that Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary in our creeds. If I, a pastor and teacher of the church, said that I did not believe in the virgin birth, there would be some question of my suitability as a Christian theologian, for it is the task of a theologian to defend intellectually what is considered by the communion of saints to be essential to the life of the church. While it may be true that my questioner and I might disagree concerning what the virgin birth is, means or

signifies, I, as a theologian, must either affirm my belief in the virgin birth or demonstrate to the community of faith that the virgin birth is not essential to the life of the church.<sup>1</sup>

The idea that theology is a discipline that is derived from the life of the church is an idea that is being explored in modern theology. In discussing justification by faith, for example, Robert Jenson and Eric Gritsch conclude that this “doctrine on which the church stands or falls” is metalinguistic.<sup>2</sup> That is to say, the doctrine of justification by faith tells us how we speak about our relationship to God that is established in baptism and through the spoken Word. Indeed, they go on to argue that this is indeed the case with all dogma. The Council of Nicea, for example, informs us that we are to speak of God as one would speak of an entity with three *hypostases* in one *ousia*. Christological dogma informs us that we are to speak of Jesus as fully human and fully divine. George Lindbeck expands this understanding with his cultural linguistic approach to doctrine. Essentially this says that doctrine is to the life of the church as grammar is to language.<sup>3</sup> Just as grammar is dependent on language, so is theology dependent on the life of the church.

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Theology’s dependence on that which is deemed essential to the life of the church was evident as early as the Arian controversies of the fourth century. It is well known that St. Athanasius and the Cappadocians—Basil the Great, Gregory of Nazianzen and Gregory of Nyssa—challenged the Arian idea that Jesus was a creature and not divine. What is not so well known is that the Arians had both impeccable logic and fourth century common sense on their side. Common sense told them that God was ungenerated. Everyone, including those whom we would later call orthodox, believed that Jesus was generated, and a simple, concise and cogent Aristotelian syllogism informed them that Jesus was not God. The syllogism went like this: God is ungenerated. Jesus is generated. Jesus is not God. The conclusion seemed inescapable.

The orthodox response eventually led to a rather sophisticated understanding of Trinity, but initially those who opposed the Arian claim that Jesus was not God did not do so because they had a sophisticated theological system out of which they

could make their case against the Arians. They opposed the Arians because they recognized that if Jesus is not God, then the preaching of the church as well as the church's baptismal practices would be false. In other words, they based their theological constructs on what they considered essential to the life of the church, namely, preaching and baptism. For them, theology was a secondary discipline that develops its intellectual constructs from the question, "What must something be (in their case the question was, What must God be?) if that which is considered essential to the life of the church is true?" What later happened in the name of orthodoxy, namely the imposition of doctrine on the church, was not what the orthodox theologians were doing during the Arian controversy. They were deriving their theology from the life of the church.

Time and time again, St. Athanasius said things to the effect that only by sharing the Father's divinity could the Son offer the salvation that the church's preaching proclaimed,<sup>4</sup> and when it came to the divinity of the Holy Spirit, the reasoning was similar. In his "Oration on Holy Baptism," Gregory of Nazianzen argued that if the Son and the Holy Spirit are not divine, Christians would be baptizing into creatures and therefore the baptismal promises of salvation could not be fulfilled because creatures do not save.<sup>5</sup> In a similar vein, Basil the Great argued for the divinity of the Holy Spirit in this way: "For if our Lord when enjoining the baptism of salvation charged his disciples to baptize all nations in the name 'of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost,' not disdaining fellowship with Him [i.e., the Holy Spirit], and these men allege that we must not rank Him with the Father and the Son, is it not clear that they openly withstand the commandment of God?"<sup>6</sup>

Note the way these people reason. They begin with that which is deemed essential to the life of the church, and they reason using what is deemed essential as their first principle. It is one of the ironies of church history that those who are deemed orthodox were fighting the rigid dogmatism of the Arians. It was not the so-called orthodox who said, "We, believing the holy and blessed men, say that the pious mysteries (of salvation) are accomplished neither by solemnity of names, nor by specific customs and mystical symbols, but by correctness of doctrines."<sup>7</sup> It was Eunomius of Cyzicus who was the greatest and most formidable of all Arian theologians.<sup>8</sup> He was so

formidable in fact that both Basil the Great and Gregory of Nyssa thought it necessary to write against him. The ones we later designated as orthodox challenged Eunomius and other Arians because they were convinced that there was something far more important and fundamental than correctness of doctrines. It was the preaching and baptismal practices of the church, practices they deemed essential to the very life of the church.

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If theology is an intellectual defense of what the faithful consider essential to the life of the church then theology's place in the church is other than what we normally expect. Normally we think that theology is learned and then applied to a given situation. Accordingly, we develop our doctrine, teach it to future pastors, and, armed with these teachings, our pastors are sent off to teach Christians the truths they learned in seminary. When there is resistance to these teachings, neophyte pastors generally assume either that the people with whom they are called to minister have never been Christian or that theology is of no value and ought to be avoided at all cost. The latter are often the more "successful" pastors, but their success often happens at the expense of the Gospel. The former are often the more frustrated and, perhaps, angry.

If theology is an intellectual defense of what the faithful consider essential to the life of the church, however, theology is not a preconceived truth that is applied to a given situation. It is something that is found or discovered in a given situation. The previous section hinted that fourth century orthodox theologians did not apply a preconceived doctrine of God in their controversy with the Arians. Instead they discovered the doctrine of the Trinity by reflecting upon what they deemed essential to the life of the church, namely, preaching and baptism. If theology is discovered rather than applied, congregational life will be different. The congregation finds itself engaged in the task of discerning that which is fundamental to the life of the church, reflecting on these implications and acting on the basis of these reflections. This will be a more communal process than if one person is responsible for applying theology because it will be discovered that discernment is a communal task that requires that all the gifts of the Spirit be focused on the task

of discernment, and no one person has all of these gifts. These gifts do, however, reside in the body of Christ.

This understanding of the place of theology in the life of the church may appear to undermine the importance of the church's traditional teachings on the Trinity, anthropology, sin, eschatology, and other traditional theological loci. This is not true, but it does alter the function of these traditions. Rather than being eternal truths that must be accepted for all time, the traditional loci become a gift from the communion of saints which assists us in the task of discernment. They show us where to look as we attempt to discern what is essential to the life of the church. They tell us what other faithful people deemed essential to the life of the church, and they inform us that the task of theology is not simply our own personal enterprise. These teachings have stood the test of time, and if they are believed to be irrelevant, the church is in peril. The following is an effort to demonstrate the relevance of some of these traditional categories following a theological method that begins with what is arguably essential to the life of the church.

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There are many systematic consequences to the contention that theology is a secondary discipline that is derived from what the faithful consider essential to the life of the church. Gregory of Nyssa himself explored many of these consequences in his Hellenistic context, and this is something worthy of historical and theological analysis.<sup>9</sup> We are, however, in a different context, and this may demand that we explore other starting points that the faithful might consider essential to the life of the church and speculate concerning their systematic significance. In our age of pluralism, I think it is particularly fruitful to examine some of the systematic implications of what the Gospel of Matthew may take to be essential to the life of the church. I take as my starting point Matthew 18:15–18. This text has been chosen because it is about an excommunication, and therefore discloses what Matthew seems to think is essential to the life of the church, for, what is thought essential to any organization is often revealed when a person must be dismissed from that organization.

The text reads, "If your brother sins against you, go and take the matter up with him, strictly between yourselves, and

if he listens to you, you have won your brother over. If he will not listen, take one or two others with you, so that all the facts may be duly established on the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, report the matter to the congregation, and if he will not listen even to the congregation, you must then treat him as you would a pagan or tax collector.”<sup>10</sup>

This text indicates that the reason for the excommunication is not because of the first sin. It is not because of false doctrine. It is not because the brother refuses to repent. Surprisingly, it is because the person has failed to listen. At first he did not listen to the one against whom he had sinned. Second, he did not listen to the witnesses, and finally he did not listen to the whole congregation.<sup>11</sup> In other words, Matthew contends that listening is essential to the life of the church.<sup>12</sup>

There are many systematic consequences to this contention, but to discuss them it must first be stated that holding listening as essential to the life of the church implies an understanding of power that is different from our normal understanding of power. A good way to expose this difference is to distinguish between a conversation and communication. Contrary to popular misconceptions, not all communication involves conversation. An advertisement communicates, but it is not a conversation. Likewise, an inter-office memo communicates, but it may not be related to a conversation. The difference between sheer communication and conversation is fundamentally the difference between two types of power and authority. Sheer communication—like advertising, orders, war and many forms of violence—presupposes the sort of power that Bernard Loomer and Peter Paris describe as unilateral power.<sup>13</sup> Unilateral power is the capacity to “influence, guide, adjust, manipulate, shape, control or transform the human or natural environment in order to advance one’s own purposes.”<sup>14</sup> It is one dimensional because it involves moving and influencing others without being subject to the influence of others. For example, it is the wish of the advertiser that many people do exactly what the advertiser desires without the advertiser or the product having to change in the process (this does not always work, but it is the goal). Unilateral power operates from a center and moves out to manipulate its environment. It seeks to objectify its environment and thereby control it. This objective implies

that unilateral power receives its authority from death since the implementation of unilateral power depends on the ability to make one's environment an environment of objects. The close association between this objective and death can be noted by observing that when a living being dies it becomes an object.

Conversation employs a different kind of power. This power involves being moved by others and, at the same time, moving others. This is the type of power Peter Paris calls communal power in his book *The Social Teaching of the Black Churches*, and it is his contention that this was the kind of power that was employed by African Americans in the Civil Rights movement.<sup>15</sup> They indeed moved others and were themselves moved. In contrast to unilateral power which derives its force from its association with death, communal power is derived from the fact that it receives its power from the authority of life. The power of life can create motion, movement and what psychologists call growth.

It is now appropriate to visit briefly some traditional theological loci. We do so by reflecting on some of the implications of Matthew's belief that listening is fundamental to the life of the church. If listening is fundamental, one way to interpret the life of Jesus is to note that Jesus did not come into the world to be served, but to serve, and to serve one must listen to the one being served. It is truly the case, is it not, that Jesus refused to employ the unilateral power. He was present among us. He made adjustments to us. He was moved or influenced by us, and he never sought to move us without himself being moved. All these things are consistent with Matthew's contention that listening is fundamental to the life of the church.

Listening being fundamental to the life of the church also gives us a way to understand ecclesiology and the Christian life. The church is an alternative community in the world. It is in the world, but not of the world because it is a listening community. This means that it employs communal power, and it can do so because it has received this power of life from its risen Lord. Believers are challenged to employ this power of life in the world so that they can be salt of the earth or the leaven for the loaf. What this power is, and how it is employed, are the subject matter of the locus we call Christian life and the disciplines we call ethics and spirituality.



Understanding listening as fundamental to the life of the church also enables us to address anthropology anew. Human beings are created for a conversation with God. We are created to listen to God, and God listens to us. That is to say, we are primarily praying beings. The first chapter of Genesis implies this when it states that God speaks about all of creation, but when it comes to human beings, God speaks both about us and to us.<sup>16</sup> "He blessed them and *said to them...*" In my opinion this is a fruitful way to interpret the meaning of "*imago dei*". Being created in the image of God means that God somehow finds Godself in us, but God may not actually see Godself in us. Instead, God may hear Godself in us. God discovers some of God's own identity in conversation with human beings. This notion is reinforced by a textual change that Walter Brueggemann notes in Abraham's conversation with God over the proposed destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 18:16 ff.). According to most translations, this conversation begins with Abraham standing before the Lord. This clearly indicates that Abraham is assuming a subordinate relationship like that of a student to a teacher. However, in a very early text in which the authenticity cannot be denied, the reading is the Lord stood before Abraham.<sup>17</sup> It is the Lord who is the student, and Abraham is giving the Lord a theology lesson when he says, "Wilt thou indeed destroy the righteous with the wicked?...Far be it from thee..Shall not the Judge of the earth do right?" In this conversation, the Lord discovers something about Godself, namely, that in order to covenant with Abraham, the just cannot be destroyed with the unjust. God finds God's image in Abraham's speech.

Understanding listening as essential to the life of the church also has some fruitful implications regarding our understanding of the nature of sin and salvation. Sin can be understood as our effort to make objects of everything with which we speak. Religion, for example, always tries to make God manageable. We try to make God conform to our own objectives and desires. The same is true with respect to our fellow human beings. Ironically, it is especially true with respect to those we love for it is the ones we love that, in spite of ourselves, we seek to control. Violence happens when others resist our efforts to make them objects. Oppression happens when there is no such resistance. In contrast, salvation is losing oneself in an actual

conversation, and we experience a foretaste of the kingdom when we lose ourselves in conversations that happen in the world. Since we are not involved in conversations every time we speak, we are not yet in the kingdom of God; however, when we engage in conversation we do experience the kingdom even in this world. It is important to note here that a conversation is no minor happening! People get married because they have had one conversation. Conversations change lives. This may be why Jesus compares the kingdom of God to banquets or parties. For a party to be successful, one has to lose oneself in the conversation and fellowship that occurs, but in losing oneself, one finds oneself. For example, if when attending a party you have to ask yourself if you are having a good time, you are not. Having a good time requires the loss of the self awareness necessary to ask such a question. In conversations that occur at parties, such self awareness is lost, and, in the process, we find ourselves.

Finally, God is Triune because God is a conversation. God is three persons because a conversation takes time. It has a past, present, and a future that roughly correspond to Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This threefold tense structure implies three and only three persons, and the conversation itself is the unity of these persons. We can thank God that as brothers and sisters in Christ we are invited into this divine conversation in which we will more fully experience the power of life.

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This paper has argued that theology is an intellectual defense of what the faithful believe is essential to the life of the church. This understanding has its roots in the Trinitarian controversies of the fourth century and is particularly evident in the writings of Athanasius, Basil the Great, Gregory of Nazianzen and Gregory of Nyssa. It also has consequences for the way our congregations should be organized and how power should be shared. Moreover, this way of doing theology has intellectual implications that reinforce the wisdom of some traditional doctrine. This is the case because much of our theology was developed by reflecting on the implications of what the faithful deemed essential to the life of the church.

## Notes

- 1 It must be recognized that the task of a Christian theologian is often to challenge that which a particular generation or generations of Christians take to be essential to the life of the church. We can be wrong about what we take to be essential. Insofar as the virgin birth is concerned, some theologians have challenged the truth of the doctrine on the basis of the belief that it is not essential to the life of the church. Probably of more importance than this challenge, however, are the arguments of liberation theologians who correctly argue that what we have taken to be essential to the life of the church has often been essential to patriarchy, white oppression or capitalism instead. These challenges have even extended to the use of the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit in our baptismal formula. It follows from this that what is deemed essential to the life of the church is often unclear and can be debated by faithful Christians. It does not, however, follow that nothing is essential to the life of the church. Thus, the implications of the contention that theology must begin with that which the faithful deem essential to the life of the church are worth pursuing.
- 2 Eric W. Gritsch and Robert W. Jenson, *Lutheranism: The Theological Movement and Its Confessional Writings* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976) 4, 5.
- 3 George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984) 32 ff.
- 4 See for example, Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, Bk. 7, in *The Early Christian Fathers*, ed. and trans. Henry Bettenson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956) 291.
- 5 Gregory of Nazianzen, "Oration on Holy Baptism," in *The Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, Vol. VII, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980) 326. *The Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers* will hereafter be abbreviated *N.P.N.F.*
- 6 Basil the Great, "On the Holy Spirit," 10.24, *N.P.N.F.*, Second Series, Vol. VIII, 16.
- 7 Eunomius of Cyzicus, "An Apology of an Apology," as quoted Gregory of Nyssa, *Against Eunomius*, Bk. II, *Gregorii Nysseni Opera*, 2, ed. W. Jaeger and H. Langerbeck (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1960) 284. The accuracy of this quotation is somewhat suspect because the only access we have to the writings of Eunomius of Cyzicus is through those who opposed him. Nonetheless, this quotation clearly demonstrates that Gregory of Nyssa was against making salvation dependent on correctness of doctrine.
- 8 See Thomas A. Kopecek, *A History of Neo-Arianism*, Vols. I and II (Cambridge, MA: The Philadelphia Patristic Foundation, Ltd., 1979) for an unparalleled account of the development of Arian theology in the fourth century and for a treatment of the power and importance of Eunomius of Cyzicus.
- 9 See my *Gregory of Nyssa's Reformulation of Christian Thought: Some Paradigmatic Implications of His Doctrine of Divine Infinity* (Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms International, 1985).

- 10 Matthew 18:15–17 (*The New English Bible*).
- 11 A couple of remarks are necessary about this text. One of them is in my defense. I have maintained the gender specific references in this text because I think that this refers to a man and not a woman. My reasons reside in my interpretation of the text and will be discussed in the note below. Second, please note that the church's character is revealed in the punishment the dismissed brother receives. Treating him as a Gentile or a tax collector is an ironic thing to do in Matthew, the tax collector's Gospel. Not only does the tradition maintain that Matthew himself was a tax collector, but Matthew may well understand the purpose of the church to be embodied in the Apostolic Commission that tells us to go to all nations, teaching all that Jesus has commanded and baptizing in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In other words, whereas other social organizations tend to shun those they dismiss, this one is called to make those who are dismissed the purpose and focus of the organization. Lines are indeed drawn that distinguish the church from what is not the church—a phenomenon that is sociologically essential to any group's survival and something to remember at a time when there is a tendency to say that anything goes—but the fact remains that those who find themselves outside the line drawn to distinguish the church from what it is not are, in fact, the church's reason for being.
- 12 This is why I think the language of this text is male specific. In Matthew's context the non-listening ones were even more likely to be men than they are in our context. In any case, when one asks the question, "Who are the ones least likely to listen?" the answer appears to be that the ones least likely to listen are the ones who either think they know everything or think they do not need others. People like theologians, pastors, the rich or the educated are quite likely to be found in this category and in the Matthean context are more likely to be subject to excommunication.
- 13 Bernard Loomer, "Two Kinds of Power," *Criterion* 15/1, Winter 1976, 14, and Peter Paris, *The Social Teaching of the Black Churches* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985) 113, 114.
- 14 Loomer, "Two Kinds of Power," 14.
- 15 Paris, *Social Teaching*, 113.
- 16 Robert W. Jenson, *A Large Catechism* (New Delhi, NY: Lutheran Publicity Bureau, 1990) 34.
- 17 Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox, 1982) 168.