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Toward a Post-Liberal/Conservative Definition of the Theological Enterprise.

Proposing a definition for christian theology is not merely a exercise in pedantry, but is, in fact, determinative of the appropriate subject matter and methodology of a discipline. That is, the actions of theologians are determined by their definition of theology. Any acceptable definition of theology must then determine the subject matter of the discipline as well as suggest certain methodological limitations. We may use the classic, and oft repeated, definition for theology, as an example: "theology is the science of god." This definition delineates a subject matter, "god;" as well as a means of inquiry, "science," which has been understood at different times as anything from "rational inquiry" to "scientific method." In either case, the above definition suggests that the subject of the discipline, "god," is accessible by means of the suggested method "science." There are two central problems with this suggestion; the first having to do with the subject "god," the second having to do with the method "science."

To suggest that the subject of theological inquiry is "god" requires several things to be true of this god, or at least true of this being. The first assumption is that this god can be thought about apart from any particular religious tradition, that it makes sense to speak of a generalised "god," a being apart from particular naming of this being (Yahweh, Allah, Odin, etc.) The problem with this assumption is, of course, that such a depicularlised god will not satisfy any of those traditions, the god that a given religion

names is particular and is exclusive of all other gods. The notion of a meta discipline, theology, must be resisted in favor of “theologies;” christian theology, islamic theology, hindu theology, etc.

Additionally, to suggest “science” as the method for the theological reflection is to implicate theology in the tradition of rational inquiry wherein knowledge about the world is sought to be objectively known by means of shared (that is, universally acknowledged), value neutral, methodologies. It is to make theology operate the same way chemistry does; just having a different subject matter. Quite simply, such an enterprise is futile: methodologies are not value neutral, in fact they are always ideologically determined, and as such, they are always particular to a given community. Further, for humans, objective knowledge is not attainable, our knowledge is always socially determined and from a certain perspective; that is, human knowledge is always contextualised, and as such, subjective.

Further, such a definition suggests that what is known can be spoken of without reference to the knower. This is problematic in the first instance both because it is not the case that knowledge can have any existence apart from knowers; knowledge is always a socially determined phenomena, it originates out of a particular social situation and it is always directed toward social ends, which is to say it is always ideologically directed. Also the activity of knowing is an activity subject to ethics; that is, since knowers are determinative of the quality of what is known, the quality of what is known depends upon the character if the knower. Ethics as a set of moral expectations is the product of a communities controlling narrative; and as such is also socially determined.

Theology as a discipline cannot be built on the expectations inherent in the definition, “theology is the science of god,” for such a discipline could only falter under the weight of those impossible expectations.

It is necessary, then, re-conceive the discipline of theology in such a way is not susceptible to the critiques leveled at the traditional definition. I therefore propose the following:

- Theology is a communal exercise: it is done by the church, for the church.
- Theology is a response to Scripture; for Christians it is response to the Bible.
- Theology is always contextualised; it is done by the church in the world.

Firstly, theology is a communal exercise; that is, the appropriate arena for theology is not the halls of academia, or the pastor’s study, but rather the church congregation. Further, theology is not a task for individuals, though we are accustomed to thinking of it as such. Rather, christian theology is necessarily dialogical. There are several reasons why this must be; foremost among them is that we are human, and as humans the horizons of our experience is limited. Those horizons can only be extended in the company of others, our suppositions cannot be fully tested by the gaze of self-reflection; our theological reflection must be pursued within the community of the church. Additionally, christian theology is done for the sake of the church; that is, needs of the community serve as the catalyst for theological reflection.

Secondly, christian theology is a response to christian scripture; that is, the bible. To say that the bible is scripture is to say that it is normative for christian life and prac-

tice. To say that the bible is normative for christians is to say that it is the starting point for any theological reflection that has the characteristic of being a theology that is christian. It must also be said that since the god that the christians name is mediated in the pages of scriptures, this principle limits the authoritative source for christian theological reflection to the christian scriptures.

Thirdly, theology is always contextualised; theology is done for the church so that it can be the church in the world. For the church to faithfully fulfill its vocation it must constantly re-evaluate its own position in and relationship to the constantly shifting plethora of cultural, political, social, economic, and ecological states of affairs that make up human experience. Given the constantly changing context, theological reflection cannot pretend to be a-historical.

This proposed definition for christian theology, clearly, is particular to christians; other religious traditions would have to self-determine what sources are deemed normative. This proposed definition also severely limits the usefulness of christian theology; specifically, its usefulness is limited to the christian church, however broadly defined. clearly the classical epithet, “the queen of the sciences” can no longer be attributed to the discipline; but then theology has long since lost this attribute in academia. Rather than trying to replace theology to her former position in academia, this proposed definition seeks to recover theology for the church, for whom also theology has been displaced. This hope, if not as grandiose, is at least honest.