

**Theology as Evangelism:  
Transformation by the Renewing of Minds**

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Among the five branches of theological studies, the least appreciated and most slighted is systematic theology. People are interested in biblical, historical, practical, and contextual theology; but the sheer mention of systematic theology makes people want to puke. If at all possible, doctrinal subjects are avoided by students and ministers alike, not just because it causes people to nosebleed, but primarily because of their widely-perceived irrelevance.\*\* In a pragmatic world such as ours, coupled with our evangelical activism, Christians consider it a waste of time to sit down and let the mind do some work. To think, for many Christians, is not a useful Christian verb. Our Christian calling is to evangelize, the argument continues, and doing theology is simply a digression.

Contrary to popular misconceptions, I would like to argue that theology is actually evangelism. Theology is essentially the proclamation of the gospel that calls for both decision and action. It is all about conversion, repentance, and transformation. In contrast to evangelical conversion, however, the target audience of theology to call to repentance are Christians. Although we agree that Christian conversion includes a holistic transformation of the human life, heart, and mind, and although *metanoia* or repentance primarily means “change of mind” instead of “change of life,” the actual transformation of the mind is usually neglected in Christian spirituality. Especially among evangelicals, the tendency is to emphasize changed allegiance and lifestyle at the expense of what Paul called as having “the mind of Christ” (1 Cor 2:16). Even within the Wesleyan-holiness tradition, preachers tend to emphasize only the call to consecration of Romans 12:1 without following things up with the call to be “transformed by the renewing of [the] mind” found in the next verse.

Nevertheless, before theology is able to do its evangelistic function, it must itself be evangelized. It must be admitted, quite embarrassingly, that theology

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\* This paper was presented by Dr. Eugenio on the occasion of his installation as Assistant (now Associate) Professor of Theology at Asia-Pacific Nazarene Theological Seminary.

\*\* Editor’s Note: “Nosebleed” is a Filipino expression to describe a cognitively challenging discussion.

as a field in the academia, has been severely corrupted over the last several centuries. The animosity and suspicion that theology and theologians receive today is not entirely without foundation. Since the rise of modernity in the sixteenth century, particularly within Protestantism, there was the tendency to make theological discussion too technical and complex that the uneducated simply cannot relate and follow. Because of the categories theologians employed in their theologizing, theology had become elitist, accessible only to those who underwent formal education. As a result, even the capability of theologians today to communicate the gospel is highly suspected.

### The Rise of Systematic Theology

How did theology come to where it is now, at the bottom of a sink? What follows is a historical account of what happened to theology as a field of inquiry, and how the terrible decisions of its major representatives since the modern era contributed to its inevitable demise.

The “modern era” reached its apex in the eighteenth century, during the Enlightenment, but its beginning reaches back to the Renaissance, when European art and thinking were flourishing. The births of “modern science” in the work of Francis Bacon (1561–1625) and “modern philosophy” in the work of René Descartes (1595–1650) were also major contributors. Overall, the main tenor of the modern era was suspicion and rejection of the authority of the church in relation to truth, and thus the invalidity of Christian doctrines. The newly minted canons of truth provided by modern science and philosophy found Christian doctrines to be superfluous and irrational. Modernity does not reject the possibility of knowing truth as such, but argues that such truth is no longer found in the authoritative declaration of the church, and can only be discovered and verified through the instruments it provides. Truth claims must be judged by rational consistency and empirical verifiability. Facing such pressure from the intelligentsia, the church accepted these judgments and impositions. As a consequence, many modern theologians attempted to deconstruct doctrinal contents in order to take up the challenge of radical reformulation. Christian theology became philosophical theology.

Among the several competing canons of truth in the modern era, rationalism which asserts that truth is true if it is explained in a logical and coherent manner, had one of the loudest claims. Logicity and coherency were the canons of authenticity. This set the way for the birth of *systematic theology*. To be systematic in something is to engage a subject according to a prescribed

and recognizable rational order. The clearest example is Friedrich Schleiermacher's (1768–1834) theological agenda. For him, Christian doctrine (*Lehre*) is only satisfactorily articulated when “the system of doctrine has become a complete system (*Lehregebäude*), in which every moment of the religious and Christian consciousness is given its developed dogmatic expression, and all the dogmatic propositions are brought into relation with each other.”<sup>1</sup> In a sense, theology has always been “systematic.” Even the early fathers were doing “systematic” theology.<sup>2</sup> The problem of the modern version of systematic theology, however is this: the rational order is not provided by theology itself, but by philosophy. For theological claims to be truthful, according to modernity, it must employ the logic and canons of science and philosophy; otherwise, it does not provide genuine knowledge. The systematic theology of the early fathers, where the logic it employed is *intrinsic* to it, is in stark contrast to the *extrinsicist* foundationalism developed and advocated by René Descartes and John Locke.

The modern approach to theology brought problems and challenges. The Church was no longer free to claim doctrinal truths unless such claims are verifiable by external measuring instruments. Modernity effectively caged theology and placed boundaries to both the process of investigation and the product of cogitation. Theology as a field lost its right to speak for itself. It always stood in the tribunals of modernity. Theologians spent their efforts studying the canons and rules of modernity and used whatever they scavenged to reformulate the doctrines of the church. The changes in theological formulation were drastic. First, theology operated on the basis of doubt. Anselm's dictum *fides quaerens intellectum* was swept away as theologians avoided being branded as fideists. The theology schools of the universities became the very sphere where doubting doctrinal statements is not only applauded, but encouraged. Secondly, theology only communicated and became understandable to the elite few who understood and knew philosophy. Theology became a purely academic enterprise, and it never successfully left the confines of the university or the seminary. Quite naturally, many uneducated church people (which comprised the majority of Christians), owing to the complexity and

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<sup>1</sup> Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 87. The fact that Schleiermacher uses the word *Gebäude* echoes Descartes's program of beginning the structure again on new foundations.

<sup>2</sup> See the examples of Gunton, “Historical and Systematic Theology,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine*, chap 1.

incomprehensibility of theological statements, avowed theology to be a useless enterprise. Thirdly, theologians made sure that their reconstructed theology is as far different as can be from the original faith statements of the Christian tradition. Quite ironically, by trying to appeal to the tribunals of modernity, instead of being spokespersons of the church, theologians became the sources of confusions and unbelief. In this sense, it was the theologians themselves who caused the marginalization of theology in life of the Church. Peter Berger was right to claim that,

A secularized Christianity has to go to considerable exertion to demonstrate that the religious label, as modified in conformity with the spirit of the age, has anything special to offer. Why should one buy psychotherapy or racial liberalism in a “Christian” package, when the same commodities are available under purely secular and for that very reason even more modernistic labels? The preference for the former will probably be limited to people with sentimental nostalgia for traditional symbols, a group that, under the influence of the secularizing theologian, is steadily dwindling... In other words, the theological surrender... represents the self-liquidation of theology and of the institutions in which the theological tradition is embodied.<sup>3</sup>

Because of modern biases, the terms “dogmatic,” “dogmatics,” “dogmatism,” and the like have fallen from usage. To be dogmatic is equated with being a fundamentalist, or someone whose mind is closed to new reflections and whose views are already securely entrenched. The origin of this bifurcation was the Enlightenment, when the *dogmatics* and the *sceptics* were contrasted. Those who were willing to examine their beliefs using the tools provided by rationalism were called “sceptics,” and those who were unwilling to use external sources as valid instruments in judging the truthfulness of their beliefs were called “dogmatics.” Of course, in an age where skepticism was the order of the day, to be non-skeptical about one’s own belief was a terrible position. To be a sceptic is a sign of a thinking being.

In its original usage, *dogmatics* refers to the kind of knowledge that is forced upon us when we are true to the facts we are up against, and in which we let our thinking follow the witness of those facts to their own nature and reality. Thomas F. Torrance (1913–2007) argued that this dogmatic science was already employed by the early fathers. For instance, Cyril of Alexandria spoke of Christian theology as *ἐπιστήμη δογματική* (*epistēmē dogmatikē*). In

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<sup>3</sup> Berger, *A Rumor of Angels: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1969), 25–26.

particular, Cyril argued that the nature of God, as He has revealed Himself to humanity through the reality of the incarnate Word should govern how theologians were to think out and give rigorous expression to its truth by conformity to it. Dogmatics thus rejects any categories or “systems” imposed to theology. Theology is not guided by a system or by ideals, but is guided through and through by its transcendent Subject/Object, the Lord. This is why, when Karl Barth produced his *magnum opus Kirche Dogmatike*, the first volume argued that,

As a theological discipline dogmatics is the scientific self-examination of the Christian Church with respect to the content of its *distinctive* talk about God... Dogmatics is a theological discipline... But theology is a function of the Church... The Church confesses God as it talks about God (CD I/1: 3).

For Barth, the approach modern theologians rejected was precisely the approach that theology should implement. Proper theology should not be concerned with fashioning an understanding of God that fits a logical system imposed from without. Theology is more directly intertwined with biblical theology than dependent on ideas that come from cultural, philosophical, and sociological sources.

### Scientific Theology

It is as dogmatics that theology is a science. Here, we use “science” in terms of the German *Wissenschaft*, “a rigorous and disciplined inquiry of the object according to its unique nature.” A rational person, no matter how free he or she is, should think as he or she is compelled to think by the external world. For instance, if a flower reveals itself as yellow, the rational mind, like a true scientist, should concede that the flower is yellow. It cannot argue against the nature of the flower as it reveals itself, no matter how culturally or philosophically questionable or disagreeable such acceptance could be. The theologian, like a true scientist, thinks in strict accordance with the reality under investigation. Theology, thus, is not “free thinking,”<sup>4</sup> or purely speculative. Rather, it is a thinking bound to its object.

Owing to the resigned acceptance of the Church of the separation between faith and science, it is mistakenly assumed that the scientific methodology has nothing to do with theology. The opposite is actually the case. In fact, when we say theology should employ the scientific methodology, we are not saying that

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<sup>4</sup> Marianne H. Micks argues that theology is a “discipline thinking,” in *Introduction to Theology* (New York: Seabury, 1983), xiii.

we should *borrow* something from the sciences. In his book *Theological Science*, Torrance argues that the scientific methodology was actually employed in the early Alexandrian theological tradition, in which Clement, Origen, and Athanasius stood. According to Torrance, Alexandria, influenced by the developing Greek science, espoused an investigative procedure in strict accordance with the nature of the reality under scrutiny, or *kata physin*, which is also “to know things... in accordance with their truth or reality (*kat’ aletheian*) and thus to think and speak truly (*alethos*) of them.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, *kata physin* requires that theologians begin a discussion of the knowledge of God by looking at God himself. “If we are to have any true and precise scientific knowledge of God,” Torrance argues, “we must allow his own nature, as he comes revealed to us, to determine how we are to know him, how we are to think of him, and what we are to say of him.”<sup>6</sup>

Theology should employ investigative techniques proper to its Object of inquiry. We reject Descartes’s notion of a *scientia universalis* with its apparatuses applicable to all sciences. Rather, we should follow the distinction Torrance made between *formal* scientific procedure and *material* scientific procedure. In short, there is a *formal* procedure common to all sciences, i.e., thinking *kata physin*. But in each particular field, science requires a modification of its formal procedure in a way appropriate to the distinct nature of its object. For instance, it is illogical and unscientific for a microbiologist to use a telescope in his/her field, because the nature of his/her object of investigation requires her to employ other relevant apparatuses such as the microscope. Therefore, theology is scientific and rational only if theologians study the Object of theological investigation in light of the Object’s nature as God. This employment of scientific procedure also guarantees the ethical dimension of theologizing. We approach God as God, not as something else. To approach God as if He is a rock by using tools of geography or as a concept by using the tools of philosophy does not make sense. We do not need to use the apparatuses of natural sciences or philosophical inquiry to measure God.

Like all branches of knowledge, theology (1) has a definite subject matter to investigate; (2) deals with objective matters (not merely subjective feelings); (3) has a definite methodology for investigating its subject matter; (4) has a method of verifying its propositions; (5) has a logic that establishes the coher-

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<sup>5</sup> Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith: The Evangelical Theology of the Ancient Catholic Church* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), 51.

<sup>6</sup> Torrance, *Trinitarian Faith*, 52.

ence of propositions; (6) is NOT subject to principles or axioms, and answerable to the same canons or logic of other disciplines; and (7) does NOT employ methodologies from other disciplines. Theology is not an irrational or illogical endeavor. Because coherency is important, it employs logic in its formulations, which it does not borrow from external sources. It also does not allow logic derived from culture, philosophy, or sociology to dictate how theology should be done. Theology has its own internal logic.

### Evangelizing Theology

It is only as dogmatics that theology becomes an evangelizing endeavor. So long as theological formulation is guided by extrinsic mechanisms, theology can never communicate the unadulterated truth of the gospel. But as soon as theology speaks in accordance with its own logic and proclaims the gospel without being filtered by philosophical and cultural biases, theology becomes an instrument of gospel proclamation. Theology should not care whether philosophy finds its statements incoherent or unattractive. In the same way, it should not care whether its truth claims are offensive to cultures and worldviews. The task of theology is to call people to subject their minds to the truth of the gospel, and not to please secular tribunals. Theology is not an enterprise where we try to fit the gospel in Procrustean beds established by culture and philosophy. Theology actually serves the world by calling into question culture and philosophy, and challenging them to be transformed in the light of the gospel. Assimilation runs the risk of diluting theology and turning theology into a worldly venture. It *might* gain the approval of the world, but it becomes irrelevant to the Church it serves. The philosopher of science Michael Polanyi reminds us that we cannot convince others by formal argument, for so long as we argue within their framework, we can never persuade them to abandon it.<sup>7</sup> And yet this is the erroneous approach usually taken by apologists and missiologists. Whenever we take that line we are simply reducing ourselves to be servants of the ideas of the dominant culture, and in being so, we have nothing at all to offer to people which they do not already know or cannot tell to themselves much better than we do. This also deprives theological knowledge of its proper meaning. We must remember all the time that theological instruction is not descriptive, compelling assent; it is persuasive, challenging conversion.

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<sup>7</sup> Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, 1974), 151.

Secondly, in theology we are face-to-face with God Himself. Like all encounters, we cannot genuinely encounter the Truth (John 14:6) without personal relation to the Truth. While it can be true that natural sciences can study micro-organisms in a detached manner, such an approach is improper in theology. In theology we are face-to-face with an eloquent Being, someone who speaks and communicates, and wants the recipients of His Self-speech to respond in a relationship of intimacy, humility, and submission. “To know the Truth is to become a participant to it.”<sup>8</sup> Alan Torrance actually argues that “to be absolutely neutral before God is to be absolutely hostile to God,” because knowledge of God entails intellectual obedience and submission.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, knowing God involves “participation and coordination with its communicated pattern and inner organization.”<sup>10</sup> Christians cannot know God, a personal Being, in detachment, and in a way that measures or calculates Him with the tools provided by the human sciences. Doing this to God is not theology, but atheism. Moreover, in theology we encounter God as Lord. We meet a Person who is wholly given; a Person who fully gives Himself to us. Because we encounter Him as Creator, Savior, and Sanctifier, we meet Him in gratitude, praise, and worship. Because God is *Kyrios*, we encounter Him in utter humility, and our rational faculties could not but respond in worshipful “Yes” to His Self-objectification. We do not respond to His Self-revelation in unbelief or doubt; rather, we respond in submission to His Self-manifestation, no matter how illogical the method and content of revelation might be to our human minds. This is where the absurdity of systematic theology is most evident. Systematic theology treats God not as Lord but an object that can forcefully be fitted, measured, deconstructed, and reconstructed according to borrowed rules. Its initial response to God’s Word is rebellious doubt, not a worshipful Amen.

Finally, to know always involves the transformation of the learner. Theology requires that we adapt our rationalities to the logic of God’s revelation, not

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<sup>8</sup> Torrance, *Theological Science* (New York: Oxford U. Press, 1969), 87; *Conflict and Agreement in the Church*, vol. 2: *The Ministry and the Sacraments of the Gospel* (London: Lutterworth, 1960), 62.

<sup>9</sup> Alan Torrance, *Persons in Communion: Trinitarian Descriptions and Human Participation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 12–15; T. F. Torrance, *God and Rationality* (London: Oxford U. Press, 1971), 166.

<sup>10</sup> Torrance, *Transformation and Convergence in the Frame of Knowledge: Explorations in the Interrelations of Scientific and Theological Enterprise* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 92.



the other way around. As we know God, we are transformed in how and what we think about Him. In theology, we do not set out to meet humanity's question; rather, we are met by the Questioner. We do not subject God to torture and inquisition, or to impious re-shaping so that He fits in our previously acknowledged truths. God comes to us not in accordance with our own prejudices; rather, He comes to us in an unexpected way. He comes to us *kata phusin*, in strict accordance with His nature as God. He comes into our experience and into the midst of our knowledge as a *novum*, a new reality which we cannot incorporate into a series of other objects, or simply assimilate to what we already know. His Personal nature disallows him to be pigeonholed using human-created categories.

Thus, the presupposition that we have to do theology or explain the mysteries of the gospel in the light of the existing dominant or popular ways of thought needs to be challenged. Even the supposed "dialogue" between the dominant culture and Christianity is evidently one-sided, because one dictates the criteria of formulation to the other. An *aggiornamento*, which Peter Berger notes as the *via media* between assimilation and defiance, involves a bargaining process where there is a sort of "mutual cognitive contamination."<sup>11</sup> But the critical question is: "Who is the stronger party?" As Berger concludes, "the theologian who trades ideas with the modern world... is likely to come out with a poor bargain, that is, he will probably have to give far more than he will get."<sup>12</sup> The problem, thus, is that in the dialogue between culture and the gospel, it is Christianity that is mostly contaminated. It is Christianity which seems to have given up a lot of its previous commitments in order to gain very little (or nothing!). The devilry of the situation is this: "The theologian who sups with [the world] will find his spoon getting shorter and shorter—until that last supper in which he is left alone at the table, with no spoon at all and with an empty plate. The devil, one may guess, will by then have gone away to more interesting company."<sup>13</sup> The goal of theology is not to dialogue with the world but to transform it.

### Conclusion: The Mind of Christ

Admittedly, there are Christians whose ways of thinking are still more influ-

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<sup>11</sup> Berger, *A Rumor of Angels*, 26–27.

<sup>12</sup> Berger, *A Rumor of Angels*, 27.

<sup>13</sup> Berger, *A Rumor of Angels*, 28.

enced by the world and its standards than by the Scripture. Even in the way Christians view God, there are those who are not yet entirely emancipated from their old ways of thinking and allegiances. The goal of theology is to call these previous ways of thinking into question and challenge Christians to no longer conform to the “patterns of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of our minds” (Rom 12:2). There is a distinct Christian way of thinking. Ephesians 4:17–24 is clear about this. It asserts that we are called to think “in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus” (4:20), and admonishes that we “must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking” (4:17). Gentiles here refer to those who have not heard the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which is why “they are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of their ignorance” (4:18). The message is clear: Christians have already heard and believed in the Gospel of salvation, and as such are no longer darkened in understanding and ignorant. Hence, the expectation is that they now should think differently, not futile in their thinking, but always productive for the Lord (One will notice that the discussion of the redeemed mind was immediately after the discussion of the unity and maturity in the Church). Christians are asked to abandon their former way of thinking in favor of the “way of life you learned when you heard about Christ and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus” (4:20). The truth that in Jesus (cf. John 14:6, Jesus is the Truth) must transform us until we are “made new in the attitude of your minds” (4:23). This is *metanoia*.

The goal is to have the mind of Christ (1 Cor 2:16), which Paul contrasts with “the wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age” (2:6). God’s wisdom, for Paul, is not achieved through common sense, because it is “a mystery that has been hidden” (2:7) and “none of the leaders of this age understood it” (2:8). It is only through the Spirit that we are able to know these things (2:10, 11) and understand what God has given us (2:12). “Spiritual realities” are learned only through “Spirit-taught words” (2:13). It is because the Spirit is working in us, revealing God’s will to us, that we possess “the mind of Christ” (2:16). In the power of the Spirit, we are able to think like Christ thought and to have “the same mindset as Christ Jesus” (Phil 2:5).

It is true that the world will never understand how Christians think and behave. The Christian life and mentality runs “against the flow.” We should not expect to be understood. Paul himself already said that even the message of salvation through the death of Jesus Christ on the cross is “stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles” (1 Cor 1:23). What the world considers as

foolishness, we consider as “the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Cor 1:24). People may laugh at us and mock us with our distinct way of thinking about God, the world, and ourselves, because they do not understand. Paul explains that this is something we should not be surprised about, because “the person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness, and cannot understand them because they are discerned only through the Spirit” (1 Cor 2:14). They may call us foolish, but let us continue not to be ashamed of the gospel (Rom 1:16), because “the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom” (1 Cor 1:25).

The problem is deep, because we are accustomed to live in our accustomed and inherited frames of reference. We do not learn how to think; we just think the way we think. Thus to experience a paradigm shift from one to another involves radical self-denial on the one hand and reconciliation to the new frame of reference on the other hand. Our untruth must be challenged and changed by the truth of the gospel. Only when our minds are reconciled to God’s truth are we able to think in the light of His revelation. Therefore, the last thing we must ever attempt to do is to eliminate the real difficulties that confront us in the nature of the God’s Truth, even if it is for the noble intention to make it easy for people to believe and understand. This is because in doing so, we actually make it next to impossible for them to receive the true gospel and be transformed by it. Torrance’s warning is important: “If there were no offence, we would find nothing new in the Scriptures, hear nothing we could not and have not already been able to tell ourselves. That which challenges us, which calls us in question, is the radically new, the element we are unable to assimilate into what we already know without a logical reconstruction of all our preconceptions and a repentant rethinking of what we already claim to know.”<sup>14</sup> The Gospel is not cheap. It demands a radical and complete reconciliation to God’s ways and logic. The role of the theologian is to call Christians to have a mind-surgery until our minds that transformed by God’s own Self-revelation.

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<sup>14</sup> Torrance, *Theology of Reconstruction* (London: SCM, 1965), 29.