

Introduction

When I first applied to Asbury Theological Seminary, I did not yet know what I was getting myself into. For the most part, I thought I basically had my course of action planned; or rather that I would go as I felt led, and figure out the rest as I went. I applied online and flew across the country from Washington to start classes, having never even visited Wilmore campus. I figured I would be here for a few years, then graduate and possibly go back to WA to reform the Pacific Northwest Conference of the UMC. I also speculated that a career as a military chaplain might be the way to go. If either of those scenarios fell through, I reasoned that I could always become a theologian and just write speculative books to put food on the table. Such was my attitude towards theology, that it was a stuffy academic discipline better reserved for people of great intellect. I did not yet realize its potential to actually make a difference in people's lives. I simply felt God wanted me to serve him, and I needed to figure out what exactly this entailed.

I probably would have agreed wholeheartedly with the statement, "Happy is the Christian who has never met a theologian!"¹ This would have been due to the fact that I had not yet actually met anybody who was identified as a theologian. However, after two years in seminary, I have finally begun to realize that theology is of vital importance in walking out the Christian faith. Since what we believe shapes how we live, knowing *why* we believe cannot be overlooked. Far too often, churchgoers affirm the beliefs that have been handed to them by their parents, local church, or denomination, without really knowing how they came to be. I say this not to invalidate the significance of tradition, but to say that people should be responsible in and for their own understanding of Christianity.

¹ Stanley J. Grenz & Roger E. Olson, *Who Needs Theology?* page 12.

In that regard, I would rephrase the original statement to read, “Happy is the Christian who *is* a theologian!” Since “at its most basic level *theology* is any thinking, reflecting, or contemplating on the reality of God,”² we should not cringe at the notion of being labeled theologians, but rather embrace the opportunity to expand our conceptualization of the Infinite. This semester, I have learned to further refine my theological method by categorizing beliefs and presuppositions that I hold to be true. Though I would not yet describe myself as having arrived at the pinnacle of my theological methodology, in this paper I will attempt to explain my existing sources and norms in relation to my purpose in ministry.

Sources of Theology

Expressions of theology can range anywhere from reading scripture to the music heard on the radio. To put it more scholarly, the sources of theology “consist of the biblical message, the theological heritage of the church, and the thought-forms of contemporary culture.”³ The aforementioned sources are of course listed in order of descending priority. I hold the Bible to be my primary theological source, looking secondarily to the rich tradition of the early church for supplementation. Additionally, I try to stay informed about current events and cultural trends, to monitor the pulse of society, so to speak. Billy Graham has said that he reads two things regularly, the Bible and the newspaper. I believe this to be an excellent way to approach ministry. We must be aware of what is going on in the world around us if we are to effectively minister to people’s needs. If we adhere only to the first two sources of theology, we live a monastic experience and do little to impact the lives of non-believers.

² Ibid, 14.

³ Ibid, 92.

It should also be mentioned that holding to the mantra of *sola scriptura* while neglecting the importance of church tradition is a contradiction. The problem lies not in the original assertion of Biblical truth as made by Protestant reformers, but in the typical post-modern misunderstanding of the meaning behind *sola scriptura*. To say that one believes scripture but rejects church authority is to overlook the fact that it was by the authority of the early church that the Bible was canonized. One must realize that to people such as Martin Luther, the utterance of *sola scriptura* meant a call to return to the tradition of the church fathers, and to renounce the corruption that was occurring in the papacy.⁴ In fact, many people today could benefit from setting time aside to familiarize themselves with the history of the early church fathers. By doing so, one would have a better appreciation of the past and a more solid foundation for how to handle similar problems in the future.

One parallel might be Gnosticism then and Mormonism today. “The name ‘gnosticism’ derives from the Greek word *gnosis*, which means ‘knowledge.’ According to the Gnostics, they possessed a special, mystical knowledge, reserved for those with true understanding. That knowledge was the secret key to salvation.”⁵ This certainly seems to be the case with Mormonism, because though they include Christ in their religion, they mix in other doctrines and teachings that are neither scriptural nor archeologically verifiable. True Christianity should leave no room for worldly mixture.

It is only when the first two sources are in line that the third must be allowed to come into play. If scripture and/or tradition are being denied, one must question the validity of the truth claims behind any new doctrine. Such is the case with the current

⁴ Hugh T. Kerr, *Readings in Christian Thought*, page 138.

⁵ Justo L. González, *The Story of Christianity*, Volume 1, pages 58-9.

dissent in the United Methodist Church. Those who advocate homosexuality in the clergy proof-text Biblical passages, and call the conservatives in the UMC outmoded in their way of thinking. They show a lack of respect and disregard for the authority of scripture and tradition, relying solely on the thought-forms of our contemporary and quite secular culture. This is a good reason for sincere Christians to be trained in theological discourse. “We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people’s trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming.”⁶

Norms of Theology

This brings us to the discussion on theological norms. If sources can be thought of as contained in a wheat field, then norms might be considered a threshing-floor. This is where theological presuppositions are put to the test and proven to be either valid or not. I would classify my norms as being: scripture, tradition/creeds, and my own experience insofar as it aligns with the previous norms. I hold scripture to be my “norming norm.”⁷ I affirm that though I may have experiences that seem logically acceptable, if they run contrary to the teachings of the Bible, I must necessarily invalidate them as possible theological norms. I also believe that though something may seem unintelligible, as long as it is in accordance with the teachings of scripture and church tradition, I must hold it to be true. An instance of this will be addressed later in this paper.

I agree with Wolfhart Pannenberg’s assessment of theological norms, in that they can and should be open to outside critique.⁸ This means that though I hold scripture as being my primary theological norm, I do not lord it over nonbelievers as something that is untouchable. Truth cannot be kept locked safely inside a glass case, but must be

⁶ Ephesians 4:14 NRSV

⁷ Stanley J. Grenz & John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, page 63.

⁸ Charles Gutenson, *The Being and Nature of God in the Theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg*, page 35.

allowed to be examined up close. To deny that one can engage Biblical truth claims on an intellectual level both alienates the nonbeliever, and makes faith seem fragile, as if to question its suppositions would possibly damage Christianity. This makes the Bible seem flimsy and in need of protection, rather than something of real substance. We do not need to shield God.⁹ Ultimately, it is not the job of believers to be soul-winners, only witnesses to the message of Jesus Christ.¹⁰ It is up to the Holy Spirit to work on their hearts, even long before we encounter them. This comports with Wesley's concept of prevenient grace, as was addressed in Gutenson's dissertation.¹¹

Affirming the tradition of the early church, and in keeping with the liturgy of the United Methodist Church, I hold the Apostle's Creed as normative in my understanding of theology.

We believe in God the Father Almighty,
Maker of heaven and earth;

And in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord:
Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
Born of the Virgin Mary,
Suffered under Pontius Pilate,
Was crucified, dead, and descended into hell.

The third day he rose from the dead;
He ascended into heaven,

And sitteth at the right hand of God the Father Almighty;
From thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.

We believe in the Holy Spirit,
The holy universal church,
The communion of saints,
The forgiveness of sins,
The resurrection of the body,
And the life everlasting. Amen.¹²

⁹ Psalm 28:7

¹⁰ Class lecture 05-11-04

¹¹ Gutenson, 114.

¹² Apostle's Creed, *United Methodist Hymnal*, page 881.

Anything that contradicts the teaching in this creed is to be seen as unacceptable for theological application in my life. I also affirm the other doctrines that are widely regarded as normative in Protestant Christianity, such as the Nicene Creed and the concept of Trinity.

Lastly, I affirm my own personal experience, as interpreted through in light of scripture and tradition, as being normative in my perceptive of theology. As examples, I would like to share a few brief stories that happened during my time at Washington State University. I included these in my seminary application, so if the reader questions my sanity, that complaint can be taken up with the admissions department.

I was able to be a campus evangelism intern while I was at WSU, and that changed my life. My former mentor, Demetrius Rogers, is an amazing man of God. He and I would spend several hours a week together in prayer and action for the community. On two separate occasions, we were praying and I saw what I could only describe as visions from God. On one such occasion, I saw a young man sitting alone at a table studying in a restaurant. Demetrius challenged me not to put God in a box, and we ended up at *Denny's* telling this young man that God had a plan for his life. The man then confirmed this by saying that he and his wife had been praying if they should enter some sort of youth ministry, and had been asking God for evidence of his calling on their lives.

On another occasion while we were praying, I got a vision of an elderly lady shopping, and also saw the number 11 in my head. It looked like an aisle sign that hung in a local supermarket. As we walked in, Demetrius said that he felt the Lord speak to him the words “paper plates.” Coincidentally, I saw the very same lady that I had envisioned, shopping near aisle 11, almost right next to the paper plates. We asked her if

she had any prayer concerns, as this was what I felt the Lord wanted. She said that she did indeed have a prayer burden, telling us that her friend was diagnosed with cancer. We prayed with her right there near the paper plates. Afterwards she said, “Thank you young men for listening to God and taking the time to do something about it!”

Those were two inexplicable events in which the only rationalization I can fathom is the direct influence of God in my life. This comports with numerous scriptural references in which God communicates directly to people,¹³ for a specific purpose to be accomplished. Had this not been in agreement with scripture, I think I would have checked into a psychiatric ward instead of applying to seminary. Other than a few seemingly miraculous instances, I would say that I am typical Christian, and am not normally given to such divine revelation. When I think back on those experiences, I wonder why there have not been more times in which I was willing to go out on a limb for God. I need to be more bold, even without someone there encouraging me. Perhaps I am to be the one to encourage others to step out in radical faith.

Purpose of Theology in Ministry

This brings me to the discussion of theological method as it relates to my present and future ministry. In the introduction, I mentioned that when coming to seminary, I was not really sure specifically what God had in store for me. I am still somewhat uncertain about the future, which is to be expected as a seminary student, but at least now I have a better understanding as to *what* is the area of my calling. I believe that I am called into a role of exhortation and instruction, which will probably involve both preaching and teaching. I enjoy working with moderate-sized discussion groups, as well

¹³ Genesis 12:1, Exodus 3:4, 1 Samuel 3:10, Joel 2:28, Acts 9:4, to name a few.

as on a more individual basis. Basically, I feel most effective when I am able to engage in dialogue those I am working with, to ensure that I am being understood.

While at seminary, God has also given me an answer regarding *whom* my ministry will involve. I met my fiancée Olga here, and she has always felt strongly called to return to Estonia, her country of origin. I feel that God had been preparing me for this eventual cultural switch, because I grew up in a military family and we had to move about every three years or so. We moved even more frequently when I was a teenager, and I went to five high schools in four years. Needless to say, my adolescence was a whirlwind of change. This did have its benefits, as I was able to see an assortment of ministry styles in the various Air Force chaplains and area pastors we met as we church-hopped around the country. By seeing points of agreement and divergence in their preaching, I was able to realize for myself some of the essential truths of Christianity, as well as identify areas of doctrinal flexibility.

I do not think that I would be the person I am today without the experiences I had growing up. This seems an obvious statement, but having to relocate so frequently helped me come out of my shell, so to speak. Otherwise, I do not think that I would be outgoing enough to feel comfortable as a proclaimer of the gospel. This is something that was confirmed in a personality profile test that Olga and I took as part of our pre-marriage counseling. The results described me as comfortable in social situations, yet liking to have time alone as well. In this regard, I would not call myself a true extrovert; rather I am an introvert who has learned to be gregarious. We really saw God confirming that we would compliment each other in ministry as well. My profile also said that I enjoy new activities and places, whereas she was described as someone preferring

familiar settings and structured routines. Estonia will be both of these for each of us, a totally new environment for me, and home sweet home for her.

I say all this to make the point that through my life experiences, the Lord was shaping and molding me in preparation for the task of ministry he has in store for us. We hope to be able to eventually live and work in Estonia, possibly at the Baltic Methodist Theological Seminary in the capitol city of Tallinn, which was founded by Asburians. Her father is a graduate of that seminary, and is a United Methodist pastor in Kohtla-Järve, Estonia. We hope to be able to assist with his church congregation as well. I was able to meet her parents and church family this past summer, and fell in love with them. I realize that ministry in Estonia will be quite different than in America, besides the obvious language barrier. Having a clear concept of theodicy will be important, as the country is still recovering from communism. Also, teaching people to embrace ethnic diversity will be imperative, as there is a backlash against people of Russian descent from those of Estonian ancestry.

In the meantime, Olga and I volunteer in helping out our friend who is the youth pastor at Nicholasville UMC. We go to The Rock / La Roca UMC in Lexington, where we are involved in the college-aged Sunday school. I will also be designing and launching a bilingual website for Rock/Roca, as this is an area that I have experience in. I currently work for the info services department at the seminary, as a co-webmaster, and have worked in network administration for an insurance agency in the past. I believe that throughout my life in ministry with people, God will use my technical expertise to compliment my efforts. I currently run a small graphic design business called SonSpring.com, which I hope to maintain as a ministry to others throughout my life.

In dealing with the high school students at Nicholasville, I have found that having a sound theological method has been helpful. Of particular importance has been using scripture and church tradition as norms to help the youth evaluate their experiences. Occasionally, they start to get discouraged in their Christian walk, as high school is not exactly a time in which following Jesus is considered the epitome of popularity. As far as ministering to college students goes, we have had several interesting discussions on the concept of just war, in which I was able to talk to them about the theories of Augustine.¹⁴ Overall, I feel effective in what God has called us to, ministering to people of various cultures, ages, and socio-economic backgrounds. I am looking forward to what the Lord has in store for us in the future.

Final Remarks

I hope that in years to come, this brief account of my theological method will no longer be enough to describe my ministry. I anticipate the need to further refine and continue to develop my theological method as my life in ministry continues. For now, the brevity of this essay will have to suffice, due to my relative ministerial inexperience. I would describe myself as an evangelical coherantist and say my theological goal is simply to better understand God for the purpose of explaining him to others. I would like to think that I possess the intellectual wherewithal to comprehend higher levels of theology, but desire to operate on a sliding scale of sorts, able to relate to people no matter where they are in life or in their spiritual walk. I aspire to be how the Apostle Paul described himself, becoming “all things to all people, that I might by all means save some.”¹⁵ I hope to maintain an open mind and heart, allowing the Holy Spirit to move.

¹⁴ González, 216. Kerr, 60.

¹⁵ 1 Corinthians 9:22 NRSV