

Session 3 – THE GOSPEL ‘WHAT’ OF THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

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1. Introduction

Let us spend a few minutes reviewing the material that we've covered over the last few days. César Guzmán reminded us to begin with of the Gospel matrix of theological education. Since then, we have considered the implications of the gospel and the relationships it establishes for the ‘how’ of theological education, and the way that instructional methods themselves must reflect the I-Thou relationships which the gospel establishes. We thought yesterday about the impact of the gospel on the ‘who’ of theological training and how it is the faculty may be established, how theological educators may be encouraged, who will train so as to produce gospel ministers for the local church. After all, as César reminded us on Tuesday, training takes place with the local church in mind: it is highly practical in that sense. And today we move to discussing the question of what should go into a programme of theological education.

2. The Gospel as the principle of knowledge

Let us stay, though, for a moment with the thought that it is the gospel that establishes relationships, relationships in the first instance with the God who saves and adopts us, and in the second instance with our fellow believers who are, like us, in union through faith with the Lord Jesus Christ. The gospel is the principle of relationship, it is the principle of salvation, but is also a principle of knowledge. The gospel is an epistemological principle.

Permit me to expand on that. As we come to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, we come to recognize him for who he truly is. He is one person in two natures, he is both the son of David, born in David's house, and the fulfilment of promises about the Messiah. He is also the eternal Son of the Father. This identity is who he really is, and in faith, we know him for who he really is. And as we know the Son in faith we know that he is the Son of some-one, eternally the Son of some-one, and that some-one is his Father. And since the Son is eternally Son, his Father is eternally Father. We may well find our minds taken to John 17:6 and Jesus' high priestly prayer. Jesus comments:

I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word.

This repays some detailed attention. By name, we readily understand something essential to the identity of the person. So Jesus's comment that he has made God's name known is a claim to have given a profound revelation, a revelation which does not deal simply with the acts of God in space and time but with who God is. And yet there is a puzzle over this question of name, isn't there? For God also gave his name to Moses (Exodus 6:3–4). John's Gospel, however, consistently ranks the revelation that Jesus gives higher than that of Moses. We think, for instance, of the contrast in

favour of the revelation that Jesus brings in John 1:17, and the implicit criticism of the idea that Moses has had a complete theophany in John 1:18.

The question therefore arises, in what way is the revelation that Jesus brings superior? The name given to Moses, characteristically is taken as reminding us that God is uncreated, that he is a self-existent being. That is undoubtedly the truth. For it is a consistent part of the Old Testament polemic against idols, that God is uncreated while the idol is created (See Jeremiah 10:1-16, for instance). But Jesus brings a name that Moses cannot bring. For what Jesus reveals, as has often been noted, is his own identity, his identity as Son, eternal Son of the Father. This identity dominates the disagreement between Jesus and the corporate character termed 'The Jews' in John's gospel, and comes to a head in chapter 19:7 where the Jews tell Pilate that Jesus must die for claiming to be the son of God. But in claiming to be Son, Jesus is also saying something about God: he is saying God is his Father and the Jews well appreciate this as their reaction back in 5:18 makes clear. In short, in revealing himself as the Son, Jesus reveals God as Father. That is the name that he brings, that is the name that he alone can bring because he alone is Son.

All this is simply the basic but glorious truth summarised in the Nicene Creed. Yet we need to note something further about John 17:6: this name is given and revealed to those who the Father has given to Jesus. On reflection, there is something surprising about that. The surprise is that the identity of the Father is not something that is simply appropriated as a piece of information. That is to say a piece of information available to all human beings without distinction, whether or not they believe in Christ. We might say that in principle we can reveal to people that the earth is round, whether or not they believe in Christ. But the revelation that the name of God is Father is not something universally accessible in that kind of way. Jesus is quite specific. It is given to those whom the Father gave the Son from the world. The phrasing takes us back to John, chapter 6, of course, and Jesus' discourse on the bread of life. There Jesus states that the Father gives to Jesus those who will come to him (6:37). The thought is that if the Father gives, then the person he has given will come to Jesus. And coming to Jesus is one of the ways in which the Jesus of John's Gospel describes belief in him (6:35).

We need, though, to apply that thought about the people that the Father gives, to John 17:6. Jesus is saying that he has revealed the Father's identity to those who have faith in him, faith that is by virtue of the Father's giving. This line of thought is reinforced by the reference in John 17 to those who the Father gave as being 'from the world'. 'From the world' carries the implication that this may be where they came from and where they once belonged, but where they are no longer. For the world is the realm of human disbelief and rebellion in John's gospel. By the Father's generosity, people are drawn from the world of unbelief and given to the Son and they come to the Son, that is believe in him, and trust that he is the Son, and therefore that the Father is Father.

In this way, the great Trinitarian truths of the unity yet eternally inter-relating Father, Son and Spirit are truths known only in faith, known only through the gospel which proclaims the Lord Jesus as Son. The principle of knowing God as he truly is, as he is in eternity, is therefore the gospel. We may well follow Aquinas in saying that the subject matter of theology, what we know in theology, is God himself and creatures in

their relation to him.¹ If therefore we treat the subject matter of theology from the point of view of knowledge, we can only do so as believers, we can only do so through the gospel. We cannot study God from any other perspective, whether that perspective is of human experience, or human speculative philosophy, or the consensus of the majority, or the ecstatic mystic experience of the privileged few. For, quite simply, it is not from those perspectives, or by those means, that we know God.

3. Making the Gospel the Principle of Knowledge

Naturally, the question then is, how do we implement this idea that the Gospel is the principle of theological knowledge? We have seen that the Gospel brings us to the knowledge of God through believing the truth about Jesus' identity, that he is the Son. In that case we must clearly look for where we are brought to that knowledge of Jesus' identity, and that can only be in the Bible. Jesus himself regards our Old Testament as testifying about him (John 5:39), and as setting out what he must do and endure (Luke 24:26). Similarly the New Testament is manifestly christocentric. So to realise and to implement the Gospel as the principle of theological knowledge the Bible must necessarily be the priority of our study.

This is, after all, nothing more than the mainstream of orthodox Christian thought down the centuries. Thus Hilary of Poitiers insists on the priority of biblical testimony about God over against human speculation about God on the grounds that God is his own best witness.² And this again simply recognises the nature of our relationship with God that the Gospel establishes. It is an inter-personal I-Thou relationship. In an I-Thou relationship one accepts that the other must disclose themselves, the other is not simply an object that I investigate, but one to whom I listen as they speak of who they are. This is especially the case where the I-Thou relationship is one where one party is Lord and has a perfect self-knowledge. Put that way, Hilary's notion that we must let God witness to himself is simply common sense.

Moreover this primacy of the Bible is authentic Anglicanism. Article 6 of the 39 Articles reminds us that the Bible is sufficient to instruct us about salvation.³ The First Homily (the Homilies, we should remember are described by Article 35 as containing 'godly and wholesome Doctrine') states the place of the Bible not just as sufficient but as necessary:

Unto a Christian man, there can be nothing either more necessary or profitable, than the knowledge of Holy Scripture; forasmuch as in it is contained God's true word, setting forth his glory, and also man's duty.⁴

This historic position for the primacy of the Bible in theology is not an assertion that there are no other kinds of human knowledge. It is, though, to assert that theology and the education which follows it, have a special character among the various kinds of

¹ *Summa Theologiae* 1a.1.3.

² E.g. *De Trinitate* I.18

³ Article 6 begins: 'Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation...'

⁴ Homilies book 1. 1 'A Fruitful Exhortation to the Reading and Knowledge of Holy Scripture' p 1 in the edition published 1986 Focus Christian Ministries Trust: Lewes as *The Homilies*.

human knowledge. This has long been recognised and Thomas Aquinas provides a helpful framework for discussing this. In 1a.1.5 of the *Summa Theologiae* Aquinas faces the question of whether Christian theology, ‘sacred doctrine’ in his terms, is an inferior discipline or mode of knowing to others. We should note in passing how contemporary this question is in modern universities in the west, with that seemingly endless and often ill-tempered discussion as to whether a university should permit there to be a department of Christian theology at all.

Aquinas’ answer is that Christian theology is not an inferior discipline, but a superior one. He has several reasons for this judgment. He notes that it deals with nobler subject-matter, God himself, and has a higher end, ‘eternal bliss’. Yet what catches our attention in our present discussion is that Christian theology is superior because it has not lesser certainty but greater certainty than purely human sciences, be they physics or history. It is based on revelation from God. The significance of revelation is that this is knowledge not based on human reason, but on God’s knowledge, whether of himself or his creatures.⁵ In other words, revelation is valuable because of who God is, the uncreated creator of all. As uncreated, he has perfect self-knowledge, as creator of all he has perfect knowledge of his creatures. A word of knowledge that comes from him, then, is knowledge indeed.

From this perspective, Aquinas is in a position to note the relations of Christian theology to other sciences. Are they useful? Definitely, but as handmaids,⁶ whose propositions are weighed in the light of the revelation the Bible gives.⁷ This follows as the night the day. Once we have a view of God as the uncreated creator of all who knows perfectly, it must be his statements that correct and evaluate human knowledge, not the other way round. Nor is this a peculiarity of the mediaeval theological synthesis. This is the tone of the high Reformed theology of Frances Turretin,⁸ and it is the logical implication of Article 20 of the 39 Articles which indicates that the Bible cannot be contradicted, even by the traditions of the Church: ‘...it is not lawful for the Church to ordain any thing that is contrary to God’s Word written...’

You may feel I am labouring this point. Perhaps this is because I see theological curricula in my own country that do not see disciplines such as sociology or history or philosophy as handmaids which assist but are subordinate to a theology based on revelation in God’s Word written. Rather such disciplines are in practice given positions that correct what a theology based on revelation would hold. We are told that, for example, the clear teaching of Paul must be now seen in the light of, which in effect means corrected by, current social or psychological or other claims. We should be quite clear, I think, that this approach in principle assumes that valid theological positions arise independently of canonical revelation and cannot only contradict that revelation but actually be preferred to it. This would only be possible, would it not, if knowledge of God were possible outside the Gospel. And if such knowledge were possible outside the Gospel, then, to paraphrase the apostle Paul in Galatians 2:21, Christ came and died to no purpose. How could we expect some-one educated on a

⁵ See especially *ST* 1a.1.6 and also 1a.1.7 and 8.

⁶ *ST* 1a.1.5.

⁷ *ST* 1a.1.6.

⁸ *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* Topic 1 questions 8, 9, and 10.

basis that sees Gospel knowledge as redundant or erroneous then to go out and be a minister of that Gospel? The idea seems incoherent.

4. Actualising the Gospel as the Principle of Knowledge

It follows from what we have saying about the Gospel as the principle of knowledge and the understanding that the Gospel takes us to the Bible, that a theological education must be an education in the Bible. What would that look like?

4.1. Breadth of Coverage

It would mean that curriculum choices must respect the need for students simply to be taken through as much of the biblical text as possible. We may feel that it is not possible to explore each book in as much depth as we would like over, say, the space of three years. But the extent of our biblical coverage is a key point. It empowers students, by making them less vulnerable to a distorted selection of biblical material, whether from us or others. It is an antidote to error. The Homily on Scripture comments forcefully: ‘Ignorance of God’s Word is the cause of al error...’⁹ It models to them that point that Paul makes in Acts 20:27 that a Christian minister is concerned with all that God says. It also equips them better to treat God’s Word as a unity.

4.2. The unity of the Bible

We do well to stay with the notion of unity. For the idea of unity is what will shape not only our biblical studies teaching, but also our biblical and systematic theologies. The North American theologian John Frame provides a concise account of the relation between the different disciplines of exegetical, biblical and systematic theologies:

While exegetical theology focuses on specific passages and biblical theology focuses on the historical features of Scripture, systematic theology seeks to bring all the aspects of Scripture together, to synthesize them. Systematics ask, What does it all add up to?¹⁰

It is, of course, a basic principle of interpreting particular biblical texts that they must be construed in context. With any text, not just biblical ones, reading individual sentences so that they contradict each other may be an amusing party game, but it scarcely is calculated to help us know the mind of the author. Even so, with purely human texts, we are sometimes justified in finding contradictions. This scarcely surprises us, since consistent, coherent thought is difficult. Yet with a text originating with God, we rightly expect and seek consistency and coherence, not just between say, 1 John chapter 1 and chapter 4, but between, say, Paul and James on justification.

The rationale for this is not a bibliolatry, but a conception of who the God is who has originated the biblical texts. As Paul comments in Acts 20:27, when we speak of the plan or purpose or counsel of God, we speak of it in the singular, and as a whole. Given the sovereignty, wisdom, knowledge and truthfulness of God, this must follow. For to suggest that God has inconsistent plans, or plans that come to be implemented as one or another fails, would be to suggest he is not sovereign in salvation. To

⁹ *Homilies* 1.1 ‘A Fruitful Exhortation to the Reading and Knowledge of Holy Scripture’ p 4.

¹⁰ *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* 1987: 212. Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P & R Publishing.

suggest that there are mutually incompatible values within his purpose would be to impugn his wisdom and knowledge, and so on.

In other words, the God who meets us in the Gospel, eternal, uncreated Father, creator of all, necessitates a commitment at the level of our exegesis to the unity of individual texts, and leads us to seek for resolution and synthesis in the face of apparent contradiction. This again is part and parcel of the authentic Anglican approach to scripture. Article 20 reminds us that the Church does not have liberty to follow any exegetical conclusion. We read of the authority of the Church: ‘neither may it so expound one place of Scripture, that it be repugnant to another.’

At the level of biblical studies this means in concrete terms that there will not be, say, a Marcionite approach to the Old Testament, that reads it as inconsistent with or independent from or free-standing from the New Testament. Within New Testament studies it would not be appropriate to suggest that, say, Paul and John have inconsistent pictures of the Cross. Please do not misunderstand me at this point. The issue is not that different books, different corpora, different genres and different texts have different perspectives. They clearly do. The issue is rather that when those different perspectives are elevated into contradiction and incompatibility, to repugnancy, to use the terms of Article 20, then the unity of the Bible that derives from who the God of the Gospel is starts to evaporate. We shall return a little later to why that matters so much.

Let us pass, though, from exegetical theology to biblical theology. We may see biblical theology, following Frame, as drawing out the developing themes of the Bible and tracing through their narrative structure and sequence. An example would be following through the theme of death from Genesis 2:17 through to the fearful second death of Revelation 20:14, with the associations that are generated *en route* of exclusion, wrath, physical death, spiritual death in sin and so on.

Naturally the kind of exegetical theology we have just outlined inclines one to this kind of biblical theology. In fact, one might even ask, whether we have equipped our students to do exegetical theology as richly as we should if we have not also taught them this biblical theology. There is a certain delicacy required in this task. There is the presupposition of the unity of the Bible that permits and requires something like this. But equally the best biblical theology does not flatten out the particularities of the themes as they appear in the text. The strictures of James Barr about totality transfer from one occurrence to another remain chastening and warning for putative biblical theologies.¹¹

Systematic theology likewise on Frame’s account is a working through of the consistency and unity of the Bible. Frame also says: ‘Systematic theology seeks to apply Scripture *as a whole*.’¹² In this way, systematic theology is not merely a biblical discipline, in the sense that it works with the data of scripture, but one with a very particular presupposition, that Scripture genuinely is a whole.

¹¹ J.Barr *Semantics of Biblical Language*

¹² J. Frame *Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* p. 212.

At times, doubtless, systematic theology has failed to be truly biblical in respecting the data on which it rests, and doubtless too it has not always preserved the unity of the Bible as it should. Yet when faithful to its calling it is trying precisely to preserve the fullness of revelation. This is clearer still in Helmut Thielicke's comment:

‘[Systematics] attempts to include the whole of the study of revelation and to assign its details to their proper place in this whole.’¹³

The purpose of dealing with the whole of revelation in this way is, as Frame, says, so that it may be *applied*. Frame's comment is perceptive. Amongst other things the Bible is a book that tells us, as the Homily on Scripture puts it, our duty. It continues:

For in Holy Scripture is fully contained what we ought to do, and what to eschew, what to believe, what to love, and what to look for at God's hands at length.¹⁴

As soon as one recalls that one of the functions of the Bible is to tell us God's will for human life, then the task of systematics as a way of synthesising the data of the Bible becomes a way of maximising God's address to human life. It is an enormously practical discipline and in a sense Christian ethics is impossible without it. Karl Barth, though, stresses another aspect of the task of systematics:

Dogmatics [sc.systematic theology] is the testing of Church doctrine and proclamation... The concrete significance of this is that dogmatics [sc systematic theology] measures the Church's proclamation by the standard of the Holy Scriptures...¹⁵

We need to draw together the role of systematics as maximising the ethical application of the Bible and the role of testing the proclamation of the Church. Both reflect the attempt to make the Lordship of God real in the life of the Church and of the believer. It is, though, a relationship of lordship that characterises the personal I-Thou relationship that the Gospel establishes. For instance, the cry of one whose heart has been regenerated and enlightened by the Holy Spirit is precisely ‘Jesus is Lord’ (1 Corinthians 12:1-3), while Paul in Colossians can describe the process of conversion as one where we have been transferred from the realm of darkness to the kingdom of God's Son (Colossians 1:13 compare also Acts 26:18).

In this way the picture Frame gives us is of a systematic theology that is not antibiblical, or abstract and irrelevant, but precisely one that respects and implements the idea of the unity of the Bible and also is of critical practical importance for grounding our day-to-day obedience and the faithfulness of our witness. It is something a local church ministry cannot safely do without. My guess is that many of us face two questions: first, whether the systematics we teach does respect the unity of the Bible in this way, and secondly whether we teach systematics at all, or have dismissed it as an arid irrelevance in favour of other disciplines.

¹³ *A Little Exercise for Young Theologians* 1996:28.

¹⁴ *Homilies* book 1. 1 ‘A Fruitful Exhortation to the Reading and Knowledge of Holy Scripture’ p 1

¹⁵ Barth *Dogmatics in Outline* 1996:12,13.

4.3. *The Particularity of the Bible*

It has long been recognised that the texts of the Bible are given to us from within a location in time and space and human history. Thus, considerations of Israelite social customs can help us understand, say, the book of Ruth. Likewise, though, we would need to say with James Barr that the Bible is given to us not just in a particular historical and social location, but also in a linguistic location. Barr writes: ‘Language is not a tool but is essentially an entity in which the biblical material is built and within which it exists’.¹⁶ From this, Barr makes the point that right interpretation of the Bible needs training in the biblical languages.

This, naturally, touches us on a raw spot. Language training is not easy at the best of times and is in any case time-consuming. We may also point to preachers of our acquaintance who do not know the biblical languages but who preach faithfully enough. Yet in a sense we would want to challenge this. If the Bible really is as precious as we say, as the Anglican formularies indicate, indeed, as it itself teaches, more precious than fine gold (Psalm 19:10), then we would want the Bible taught in local churches not merely passably or adequately but as best we may. My own country has a saying, ‘do not let the good be the enemy of the best’. And equipping a minister with a command of the biblical languages enhances their ministry remarkably: it extends the range of scholarly material they may use and so on but most importantly it maximises their own direct contact with the text. There is less mediation through the work of translators and other scholars, and less dependence in that way, and more direct encounter with God through his word. There is a maximising of directness in the I-Thou relationship that a preacher or teacher has. I imagine we all want that for our students.

4.4. *The Perspective of the Bible*

The Homily on Scripture says this: ‘In these books we may learn to know ourselves’.¹⁷ One of the peculiarities of our personal relationship with God is that although he must reveal himself if we are to know him, and we must therefore listen, he already knows us. His disclosure to us is not just a revelation of who he is, but a revelation of who we are. We see this almost painfully in the teaching of Jesus. Thus in Luke 11:42 he charges the Pharisees with being those who neglect justice and the love of God. This was scarcely, it seems, their own self-image. But by Jesus’ words, a Pharisee could come to know himself, and turn to God in repentance and faith. Clearly, some did.

This bears on theological education in at least two respects. First, this gives a perspective for human history and for church history especially. The progress and failures of the people of God since the Ascension are to be seen in the light of Jesus’ lordship and his command to take the gospel of repentance, faith and forgiveness of sins to the ends of the earth. As such it furnishes with examples to learn from, be warned by and encouraged by, but all within the perspective of the reality and purpose of God that it sets out.

¹⁶ *The Concept of Biblical Theology*

¹⁷ *Homilies* 1. 1 ‘A Fruitful Exhortation to the Reading and Knowledge of Holy Scripture’ p 2.

Secondly, the Bible provides perspective on the non-revealed academic disciplines. The Bible both celebrates human understanding of God's creation (e.g. Job 28:1-11) but also notes its limitations because of our finitude (e.g. Job 28:12-28) and sin (Romans 1:21,22). From that point of view, naturally, a study of some secular disciplines will be useful and fruitful, enlightening us about an individual culture's self-understanding and goals. At its best this helps significantly in contextualising the Gospel for the culture in which a group of ministers have to work. Thus to understand contemporary England, knowing something of Friedrich Nietzsche's outlook illuminates some of the obstacles the Gospel faces and also some of the more astute insights some English people have on life in this sinful world. Knowing something of Jean-Jacques Rousseau helps one grasp some of the mechanisms behind the current tensions in English family life, and so on. To that extent, teaching in the areas of current world views, or sociology or psychology can have its place. But these human schools of thought are set within an overall perspective, the perspective the Bible itself gives on us, for 'In these Books we may learn to know ourselves.'¹⁸

4.5. *And without the Bible?*

Let me close this brief survey with one final reflection. What does theological education look like without this priority for a biblical understanding? It seems to me we can discern two dangers. First, the danger of incoherence. We may have space on our curricula for psychology, history, counselling, New Testament and so on. But each of these disciplines, shorn of the biblical perspective, tends to become a freestanding discipline which does not fully integrate with others, but tends to generate its own values. It is one thing to prepare our students for the complexities and subtleties of life. It is another thing entirely to send them out with a series of fundamentally dissonant understandings of life, so that their New Testament training says, solve the problem of your parishioner's adultery one way, while the counselling training says that answer is wrong.

Secondly, the risk is that if we do not listen to God's self-revelation as the basis and norm for our training, we will establish something else. We may speak of God, but that word will have become a label for a content of our devising, and not of God's revealing. To use the word 'God' for something we have devised attracts a striking biblical description and analysis. It is idolatry, for it is a view of God formed by human imagination and art (Acts 17:29). And of this the Bible calls us to repent.

Discussion

- How can we best contextualise theological education without theological compromise?
- What elements in theological education are necessary across all cultural contexts?

¹⁸ *Homilies* 1.1 'A Fruitful Exhortation to the Reading and Knowledge of Holy Scripture' p 2.