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SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY AND SPIRITUAL FORMATION: RECOVERING OBSCURED UNITIES

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“For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you. We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives, so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, and giving joyful thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of his holy people in the kingdom of light. For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.” (Colossians 1:9–14)

“And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God.” (Philippians 1:9–11)¹

As the guest teacher of a Sunday morning adult Bible class, I was expositing a biblical text to what seemed by all indications to be a receptive audience. In an unguarded moment the word “theology” passed through my lips as I was highlighting a particularly rich doctrinal theme embedded in the passage. Having recently completed doctoral training in systematic theology, I imagined that the eyes of my listeners would light up with glee upon the mere mention of the word “theology,” enamored as I was with the discipline, as I dipped into my theological treasure trove to share with them my insightful nuggets. How shocked I was to look out into my audience and

¹ All Scripture taken from NIV.

perceive the exact opposite reaction to what I had anticipated: rapt attention on faces suddenly transmuting into eyes glazing over with disinterest, even verging on annoyance, along with the volunteered comment: "We don't want to know about theology; just tell us what the Bible says." I resisted the impulse to counterpunch with the observation that we were already venturing into theological waters by our foray into the meaning of the text both for the original readers and for our contemporary context. It was an eye-opening experience, to say the least.

I would venture to say that that experience is not uncommon today, almost surely in secular contexts but also among Christians. As Ellen Charry observes, Christian doctrine and theology have become marginalized in the lives of believers.² Theology is sadly all too often perceived as abstract, boring, impractical, and irrelevant to real life concerns. It is associated with endless wrangling and theoretical dueling over esoteric issues that never seem to touch down in the practical spheres where we live and move and have our being. I have observed some preachers on more than one occasion prefacing an overtly theological assertion with the disclaimer that they are not going to "get too theological" on a given point, thus reassuring their congregation that any rising uneasiness will soon be over. Or they deftly "smuggle in" their theological gems *sans* the explicit tagging so that the listening audience is hardly if at all aware that they have just been "theologized."

Spirituality, on the other hand, tends not to have the same sort of repellent impact today. In fact, in the wider culture it carries a certain allure and inner longing. It is popular and "hip" to describe oneself as spiritual, though often followed by the disclaimer that one is not religious. To posture oneself as spiritual emits the aura of being someone open to transcendent realities—a trendy pursuit in itself—and all the more compelling as one is able to perceive practical payoffs that impact one's life in concrete ways.

EPISTEMOLOGICAL SHIFTING SANDS

It begs the question: Why is spirituality enjoying such popular appeal while theology has fallen on hard times? What has transpired to "dethrone" theology from its once celebrated status as "queen of the sciences" to something barely mentioned in public discourse without the seemingly obligatory parenthetical apology? At least part, if not much, of the blame can be traced to the epistemological legacy of the Enlightenment. It would go far beyond the scope of this essay to explore the full gamut of Enlightenment ideas which have significantly influenced worldviews today. But cer-

² Ellen Charry, *By the Renewing of Your Minds: The Pastoral Function of Christian Doctrine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 235.

tainly there are discernible epistemological threads operating in modern worldview perspectives that owe their genesis to shifts of thought rooted firmly in assumptions about truth and knowledge associated with the historical period of the seventeenth and eighteenth century. With the privileging of autonomous reason unfettered by allegiance to ecclesiastical authorities came a decisive break from all authoritative institutions, systems, and commitments.

Descartes' ambitious quest in the previous sixteenth century to reconstruct the edifice of all knowledge on the sure footing of objective certainty unadulterated by the vagaries of subjective sources opened the door to the unfortunate consequence of creating rifts between objective and subjective realms. With his "Eureka!" moment of discovering the one indubitable premise—"I think; therefore I am"—as the supposed objective foundation upon which to ground "sure and certain" knowledge came a fundamental shift of understanding human selfhood as a thinking being rather than as defined through personal relationship with God. Knowledge and truth were viewed as belonging to the purely objective sphere unsullied by the personal sphere where faith consorted with other subjective expressions such as private opinions and preferences. Lesslie Newbigin cites this purported dichotomy between the public realm (where truth and scientific facts properly reside) and the private realm (consisting of personal opinions, preferences, religious expressions) as one of the prime obstacles impeding Western culture from taking the truth claims of the Gospel seriously.³ To the extent that the above dichotomy is bought into as the reigning plausibility structure for what constitutes true knowledge, attempts to contend for faith assertions as true are tantamount to making a category mistake. Faith and truth are apples and oranges; only what is assessed as purely objective knowledge is allowed to count as true.

Other Enlightenment voices, fueled by their euphoria over the emancipation of reason from authoritarian interference by the church as well as untethered from the prevailing cultural ignorance and popularly embraced superstitions of their day, contributed to further sundering of what was once joined together. Kant's delimiting of pure reason to the phenomenal realm of empirical realities (while postulating a noumenal realm of nonempirical matters such as faith, God's existence, ethics, though held with the light touch of an agnostic) was nevertheless one more nail in the coffin of any notion of truth as a unified field of objective and subjective dimensions. David Hume's championing of empiricism as the sole standard-bearer of rationalism could only lead to a pervasive skepticism of nonempirical claims to truth. John Locke's construal of knowledge as wedded inextricably to sense data, emanating solely from sense experience and reason's ability to

³ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1989), 8–10, 17. Cf., also *Foolishness to the Greeks* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1986), 11–12, 15.

relate ideas coherently, contributed still further to the widening gulf between faith and reason. As Charry insightfully notes, “[Locke] thereby disjoined reason from both faith and sapience, eliminating both from the category of knowledge.”⁴ What she calls “sapience” (i.e., “engaged knowledge that emotionally connects the knower to the known”)⁵ was lost in the shuffle. Locke’s influence upon the history of thought co-opted even the theological world of his day. It can hardly be overstated: “Theology largely accepted Locke’s *tour de force* and abandoned sapience as genuine knowledge . . . one must finally ask whether all knowledge is exhausted by the objective disengaged terms Locke set down.”⁶

The dominoes have continued to fall. Domains of intellectual, spiritual, and ethical matters once held together have become increasingly isolated.⁷ The biblical quotes that began this essay reverberate with a message that integrates cognitive understanding, spiritual engagement, and ethical exhortations that guide and stimulate certain behaviors. The biblical writer prays that the kind of knowledge that imparts wisdom might be spiritually imparted in believers *for the purpose of* evoking behavior pleasing to God and issuing in fruitful service to others. Clearly, this knowledge for which the Apostle Paul prays refers to more than cognitive assent to purely abstract propositions; on the contrary, it is a knowledge that engages the total person mentally, emotionally, and volitionally toward the goal of empowering believers to live faithfully, joyfully, and gratefully in response to God’s gracious gift of redemption. The Philippians quote adds the insight that love and knowledge are not alien to one another but complementary dimensions that enable believers to discern and do the good, with character progressively shaped by Christ’s righteousness. Paul summons believers to be transformed in the entirety of their being by the Gospel of truth united with love, toward the ultimate outcome of extolling God’s glory through the way they live.

UNRAVELING UNITIES

Enlightenment assumptions surface today wearing modernist garb in places where the expectation, whether explicitly stated or implicitly understood, is that academic theology is to be conducted in an abstract, neutral,

⁴ Charry, *By the Renewing of Your Minds*, 7.

⁵ Charry, *By the Renewing of Your Minds*, 4.

⁶ Charry, *By the Renewing of Your Minds*, 7.

⁷ Diogenes Allen, *Spiritual Theology* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1997). Allen notes, “The great theologians of the past used to treat both kinds of questions, those asked by doctrinal and those asked by spiritual theology. Only relatively recently have doctrinal and spiritual theology been pursued in isolation from each other; for most of the history of theology, they interacted richly. To make progress in doctrinal theology it was essential to mature in one’s spiritual life, because theological understanding and spiritual progress went hand-in-hand” (19).

detached, purely cognitive manner so as to be “unbiased.” Such an approach requires the setting aside of all personal religious commitment to the content of one’s theological or biblical studies as an obstacle to objectivity. “The outcome of this,” notes Alister McGrath, “is that ‘theology’ has often been conceived as the academic study of religious concepts, with no connection with Christian life as a whole.”⁸ Such an approach views knowledge as objective information and propositions shorn of troublesome subjective elements that can distort. But when theology takes such a turn, the knowing of God becomes severed from loving God, which is eminently personal. Furthermore, theological knowledge reduces to a cerebral endeavor isolated from theological praxis, the doing of truth. Truth relegated to the abstract cognitive realm in turn suffers a fateful divorce from the ethical realm of goodness, happiness, and human flourishing. The degree to which academic specialization cordon off systematic theology, practical theology, biblical studies, and spiritual formation as entirely separate domains reflects to some degree at least certain epistemological divides that make it difficult to perceive their natural integration.

While I part company with some of the postmodern critiques that have been levied against modernist rationalistic assumptions, there are some decided benefits that have emerged from postmodern stables. The skepticism toward knowledge construed as purely objective, presuppositionless and neutral, eschewing any semblance of the subjective and the personal, has been long overdue. Groundbreaking work by Michael Polanyi⁹ and others in the field of the philosophy of science has effectively demonstrated the essential involvement of the personal in every pursuit of knowledge, not least in the process of doing science. Recognition of the influence of one’s social location and the impact of particular communal contexts on how one understands a given subject matter—whether it be a political movement, ideological worldview, theological concept or cultural phenomenon—has led to the increasing awareness of the need for greater cultural sensitivity and a more acute awareness of the way our inevitable presuppositions color our understanding—all of which should prod us in the direction of intellectual humility. In the case of theology, this has led seminaries and university religion departments to insist on the inclusion of books on global theology in their course required reading lists. The postmodern prizing of experiential knowing and valuing of narrative stories has expanded our understanding

⁸ Alister McGrath, *Christian Spirituality* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), 27.

⁹ Cf., This is explicated in great detail in his seminal work *Personal Knowledge* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., 1958, 1962). One can detect a sort of repristinization of the Kantian recognition of subjective mental processing that goes on in coming to know anything. The personal subjectivity of the investigator is inextricably involved in deciding what to focus on, discriminating which data are most significant, what hypothesis most adequately accounts for the phenomenon being studied, etc.

of knowledge as not confined to mere abstract propositions. The knowing process as inherently relational engagement with a given subject, including but not limited to the mere cognitive dimension, is a further boon. The Gospel-impeding public/private dichotomy that once relegated religion to the “kiddy” table of private opinions while the “adult” table took up the serious wrestling with public matters of objective facts and truth has been challenged. Theology as the study of a relational God who engages human beings on an eminently personal level has now been accorded a respectable place at the table of public discourse about truth without being shunted off to the sidelines.

CORRECTIVE RECONNECTIONS: ENCOURAGING TRENDS

Certainly I am not dismissing the advances made in scholarly methodology and theological developments since the Enlightenment. Despite my quibbling with troublesome Enlightenment-rooted fissures that have had a truncating effect on the conception of what counts for knowledge and truth, I do not advocate an intellectual “leapfrog” back into a supposed idyllic pre-Enlightened past. And yet I see signs within the last twenty years of helpful correctives leading to fruitful integration of spheres that prior to the Enlightenment were not severed.¹⁰

Ellen Charry’s work of probing doctrinal treatises of selected figures throughout church history has yielded an illuminating rediscovery of the explicitly *pastoral intent* of much doctrinal writing of the past.¹¹ Noticing the “purpose clauses” replete throughout classic texts on doctrinal matters, she discovered that in every case these ancient writers explicated doctrinal truth with the expectation that it would speak to the whole person and have a transformative impact on their lives.¹² There was no bracketing off of doctrinal teaching or biblical exegesis from pastoral care or moral exhorta-

¹⁰ Simon Chan, *Spiritual Theology: A Systematic Study of the Christian Life* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 16. Writes Chan, “The division of theology (a spiritual, dogmatic, biblical and so on) was quite unknown before the rise of rationalistic philosophy in the eighteenth century, a period commonly known as the Enlightenment. Before then theologians conceived of their task as a profoundly spiritual exercise, even when they used scholastic methods . . . A merely ‘academic’ theology would have been quite foreign to them, since theology is simply the rational and precise expression of the believer’s reflection of God. This reflection is not a disinterested observation but a personal engagement with God and with God’s glory.”

¹¹ The most full development of her thesis can be found in her book *By the Renewing of Your Minds: The Pastoral Function of Christian Doctrine*, although it is also laced throughout her other writings such as, “Educating for Wisdom: Theological Studies as a Spiritual Exercise,” *Theology Today* 66 (2009): 295–308.

¹² Charry, *By the Renewing of Your Minds*, viii, 3. A caveat is in order here. The relation between doctrine and experience is not always a one-way street from doctrine to experience. In relation to the fourth century Arian controversy, defenders of

tions. It was all woven from the same cloth, a seamless fabric of formative truth. Knowing God was not an abstract cognitive endeavor distinct from loving God; they were two sides of the same coin, so to speak, leading to human flourishing through the progressive formation of a virtue-formed character that glorified God. Ethical praxis was not a side endeavor but the natural outflow of knowing and loving, thinking and doing, as occurring together and mutually reinforcing each other. The premodern theologians did not need to choose between knowing God and experiencing God's love; their participation in the Christian community and its practices naturally treated those two functions as a unified response to the grace of God that had embraced them.¹³

Jesus as divine cited the widespread practice of worshipping Jesus in the early church as a key argument for affirming him as divine. Either the early Christians were idolatrously worshipping a mere creature, or they worshipped him because they rightly perceived him as divine. Thus, Christian experience prodded the faith community to think theologically. Another example is Paul's burgeoning success in preaching the Gospel to the Gentiles in Antioch, which ruffled feathers within the mother church in Jerusalem. They were so steeped in conventional thinking about God's plan for the Jews that the Gentile mission was an innovation for which many traditionalists were not prepared unless the Gentiles were to conform to Jewish conventions like circumcision. Yet when Paul was summoned to Jerusalem to explain the content of his ministry among the Gentiles (Acts 15, Gal. 2:1–10), he won the day with the argument that when the Gentiles received the Gospel simply by faith alone, the same Spirit that had fallen on Jewish Christians descended upon them, without imposing any Jewish cultural conditions whatsoever. Here again, the experience of the Spirit's movement among the Gentiles prodded the early Christian leaders to rethink their theology and make necessary adjustments in keeping with the way God was actually moving. Cf., Ray Anderson, *Ministry on the Fireline: A Practical Theology for an Empowered Church* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), esp. his discussion of "mission theology" in chap. 1 and 6.

¹³ Charry, *By the Renewing of Your Minds*, 28. She writes, "We have seen in every case that each theologian sought to unfold the mystery of God in order to bring people to know and love him and to live accordingly" (234). Stanley Hauerwas resonates with Charry's point, particularly in the context of his discussion of Barth's lament over the modern division between doctrine and ethics. Doctrine, according to Barth, was inherently ethical [i.e., "the attestation of the good of the command issued to Jesus Christ and fulfilled by him"], "On Doctrine and Ethics," in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997): "... from Barth's perspective, something has gone wrong if Christians have to ask what the relation or relations might be between doctrine and ethics. To assume that a 'relation' between doctrine and ethics needs to be explicated unjustifiably presumes that something called 'ethics' exists prior to or independent from 'doctrine.' Yet it is exactly that assumption which has shaped Christian practice and reflection about ethics in modernity" (22). And with characteristic humor, Hauerwas further laments the modern debacle, "Those trained to do theology 'proper,' however, seldom stray into 'ethics' as part of their job description. Too often theologians spend their time writing prolegomena, that is, essays on theological method meant to show how theology should be done in case anyone ever got around to doing any" (34).

Along the lines of seeking to reunite what has gotten torn asunder, a growing theological development has been emerging and gaining steam over the past decade described as “the theological interpretation of Scripture.” This movement is in critical response to historical critical handing of biblical texts, which perpetuates the aforementioned Enlightenment assumptions of knowledge as necessarily objective, neutral, and unbiased by any personal subjectivity. In the words of Daniel Treier, a key proponent of this new approach, this movement “seeks to reverse the dominance of historical criticism over churchly reading of the Bible and to redefine the role of hermeneutics in theology.”¹⁴ What this entails, without ignoring the usual exegetical work involved in exploring a biblical text,¹⁵ is moving beyond the mere mechanics of exegesis to interpret it through a “Trinitarian hermeneutic of God’s redeeming work through Scripture”—that is, “reading Scripture within a ‘rule of faith.’”¹⁶ Christians need not approach either Old or New Testament under the presumption of being a blank slate. As postmodernity reminds us, no one comes to the table devoid of presuppositions. What this approach advocates is not pretending to come with an unbiased blank slate but in full awareness of the preconceptions one brings and unapologetic about the faith convictions and commitments that cannot help but point one to the central message of God’s redemptive work in and through Jesus Christ. Christians do not have to abandon their Christian formation as they read the Old Testament, for instance. Rather they can (and ought to) interpret all texts in light of the central redeeming event of Jesus Christ. Jesus himself underscored this point in his post-resurrection conversation with the two disciples en route to Emmaus: “And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them *what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself*” (Luke 14:27). Such an approach is best

¹⁴ Daniel J. Treier, *Introducing the Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Recovering A Christian Practice* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 14.

¹⁵ Treier says of historical criticism that it is “not comprehensive of interpretation but rather is preparatory for it—it is servant, not master,” *Introducing the Theological Interpretation of Scripture*, 16. Kevin Vanhoozer voices a similar observation: “It is not that text criticism and other forms of criticism have no role; it is rather a matter of the ultimate aim of reading. Those who seek to interpret Scripture theologically want to hear the word of God in Scripture and hence to be transformed by the renewing of their minds (Rom. 12:2). In this respect, it is important to note that God must not be an ‘afterthought’ in biblical interpretation . . . One should not abandon scholarly tools and approaches in order to interpret the Bible theologically . . . The challenge, therefore, is to employ critical methods, but not uncritically. Critical tools have a ministerial, not magisterial, function in biblical interpretation. The aim of a properly ‘confessional criticism’ (Wolters) is to hear the word of God; theological criticism is governed by the conviction that God speaks in and through the biblical texts.” Kevin Vanhoozer, *Theological Interpretation of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 22.

¹⁶ Todd Billings, *The Word of God for the People of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), xiv.

done not as an individualistic enterprise but in conscious listening attentiveness to the Holy Spirit in Christian community.¹⁷

A third theologically promising corrective with overtones for spiritual formation, though cast with specific reference to pastoral care, appears in the work of Andrew Purves. His book *Reconstructing Pastoral Theology: A Christological Foundation* reveals his central thesis: The need to ground pastoral theology and care *christologically*. All hinges on the twin doctrines of union with Christ and participation in his ministry from and to the Father. As with the other two correctives mentioned above, this work revolves around a lamentable shift which he perceives to have resulted in an unpalatable loss. Whereas pastoral care used to be firmly moored in such classic theological themes as Christology, soteriology, Trinity, and the like, the last fifty years have witnessed a decided shift in pastoral care toward a more clinical, psychotherapeutic, social-scientific direction. Without demeaning the contribution of psychological insights, Purves poses the driving question:

What makes pastoral care *Christian*? . . . What does pastoral work have to do with incarnation and atonement, resurrection, ascension and eschatology; with the Christian doctrine of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one being three persons; with the teaching and ministry of Jesus; with the theology of Paul, and the author of Hebrews, and so on?¹⁸

Deferring solely to psychotherapeutic methods, goals, and care techniques feeds into the misconception once again that theology has to do primarily with abstract ideas and theories, that it is disinterested in or ill-equipped to tackle practical matters of formative practices concerning Christian faith and experience. But what could be *more* practical? Pastoral theology is about *acts*—first *God's* action, and secondly the *church's* action in its life and ministry in communion with God.

Practical theology is practical because it is theological. It has to do with God . . . the acting God. . . . Nothing could be more practical than the teaching about who God is and what God does in relation to us, on the one hand, and the concern to live in that relationship as the fundamental or constitutive basis of what it means to be a human being and the church, on the other.¹⁹

In the pastoral counseling room no less than in the pulpit or in the theologian's study the prime resource for such callings should be the same:

¹⁷ Treier, *Introducing the Theological Interpretation of Scripture*, 35.

¹⁸ Andrew Purves, *Reconstructing Pastoral Theology: A Christian Foundation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), xvii.

¹⁹ Purves, *Reconstructing Pastoral Theology*, 7, 9.

the content of faith itself, “for it is the grace of God in Christ for us that exposes the depth of the human condition in its separation from God in a way that science cannot. And this same grace offers a remedy that leads to healing, blessing, and salvation to eternal life in union with Christ.”²⁰ Purves sounds a vigorous call for pastors to be theologians, voicing in reverse order but with similar intent Ellen Charry’s call “to revive the pastoral function of theology [which] requires theologians to think of themselves as pastors helping people to find their identity in God.”²¹

Once again, the earnest invitation comes to resist the artificial rift between doctrine and practice, exegesis and experience. There should be no sidestepping of theology in the process of ministering to the concrete needs of parishioners. Of course, this does not presuppose that every presenting problem is facilely dealt with by dispensing Scripture verses like prescription drugs: Take these Scriptures twice a day and call me in the morning. But neither must the pastor presume that core theological pillars of faith have no practical bearing on the spiritual formation of their flock.

Pastoral work is concerned always with the gospel of God’s redemption in, through, and as Jesus Christ, no matter the presenting problem that someone brings. Pastoral work by definition connects the gospel story, that is, the truths and realities of God’s saving economy, with the actual lives and situations of the people.²²

FORMATIVELY SPEAKING . . .

All that I have been saying about trends of thought since the Enlightenment that have given rise to understanding the pursuit of knowledge as a detached, objective, abstract, unbiased undertaking have in turn precipitated unhelpful dichotomies that have had a bearing on theology’s interface with spiritual formation. Doctrine “is a matter of formation as much as information.”²³ Diogenes Allen eloquently voices what is becoming increasingly apparent:

There is no detached knowing of God—any more than there is a detached love of neighbor or a detached attitude toward sin and failure. The intellectual inquiry that is intrinsic to theology requires personal

²⁰ Purves, *Reconstructing Pastoral Theology*, xxix.

²¹ Charry, *By the Renewing of Your Minds*, 239.

²² Purves, *Reconstructing Pastoral Theology*, xxix–xxx.

²³ Kevin Vanhoozer, “A Drama-of-Redemption Model,” in *Moving Beyond the Bible to Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 163.

involvement and an aspiration to know and love God; it is inquiry that forms us spiritually.²⁴

Because of its vital formative function, *theology can establish and clarify the framework within which the spiritual maturing process takes place*. Vague spirituality untethered to Christian doctrine is ineffectual.²⁵ Harnessed to some New Age abstract, ill-defined notion of what is true beyond oneself, such unfocussed spirituality may be tantalizing at best but has little to distinguish it from a vain, futile “waiting for godot.” By contrast, the Apostle Paul was anything but vague about the content, context, and contours of spiritual maturation, citing the Body of Christ as the communal venue in which believers utilize their Spirit-bestowed gifts to build each other up “until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (Eph. 4:13).

Theology helps anchor the spiritual development of believers in the larger picture of God's redemptive plan. It helps link each one's individual story with the grand overarching story of God's people stretching back through history, making accessible to us the insights and devotional practices drawn from a rich heritage of faith traditions. Both the twists and turns, the illuminating highlights and the misstep lowlights, can offer guidance and direction for character development and spiritual deepening in our experience of God.

Theology reminds us that spiritual formation is not about prowess but about participation. It is not ultimately about mastering spiritual techniques or ramping up one's resolve to be ever more earnest in one's devotional practices. It is about the gracious gift of participating by faith in the life and mission of the triune God—“participation through the Spirit in the Son's communion with the Father, in his vicarious life of worship and intercession.”²⁶ The Apostle Peter invokes the language of participation in his

²⁴ Allen, *Spiritual Theology*, 154. A similar sentiment is voiced by Alister McGrath: “For someone to speak objectively about knowing God is as realistic as the lover speaking dispassionately of the beloved,” *Christian Spirituality* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), 27.

²⁵ Allen, *Spiritual Theology*, 159. “To look only for what is *helpful* in Christianity, largely because of [an] uneasiness at affirming its doctrines, has become a common practice both inside and outside the church . . . But there is a price to be paid. If we are concerned with finding help only, and not with truth, we are unlikely to find substantial help. For when we actually come face-to-face with temptation, danger, and death, we encounter reality—and at that point the question of who or what will guide and sustain us is no longer a side-issue. It cannot be put off indefinitely, pending further scholarly research. This is probably why ‘spirituality’ in general, in spite of its initial appeal, fails us. When the chips are down, vagueness about what we believe is not an asset” (159).

²⁶ James B. Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 9, 15.

discussion of godliness: “His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our [experiential] knowledge of him” through whose promises we “*may participate in the divine nature*, having escaped the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.”²⁷ Godliness is not merely revving ourselves up to try to do loving acts but in the words of Dallas Willard, “taking love itself—God’s kind of love—into the depths of our being through spiritual formation,”²⁸ which will enable us to act lovingly in radical ways. It is Christ in us,²⁹ the one “who has become for us wisdom from God—our righteousness, holiness and redemption,”³⁰ the gracious invasion of his life into ours as the source of new life in him.³¹ Christian theology delivers us from the vagaries of mushy spirituality in general by supplying a clear focus³² of personal participation in the *Who* (God’s triune life) in order to participate with God in the *What* (God’s redemptive mission to and for the world).

Finally, *theology that bears faithful witness to its subject remains open to imaginative, Spirit-inspired, and Spirit-guided outbreaks of new ways of engaging and forming our whole being*. Increasingly, fascinating studies examining the role of imagination and the arts as theological resources for elucidating spiritual truths and engaging culture are emanating out of such places as the University of St. Andrews and Fuller Theological Seminary’s Brehm Center for the Study of Theology, Worship, and the Arts. Kevin Vanhoozer’s recent “drama-of-redemption” model³³ is a further example of the creative “cross-fertilization” of theology and the performing arts that is generating promising new paradigms. It seeks to utilize theatrical imagery to mediate a fresh understanding of the dramatic dynamism set loose upon the world by the Triune God whose heroic determination to rescue us far surpasses anything Hollywood could dream up. The power of lively new metaphors to jostle our thinking and prod us to view with fresh eyes and renewed receptivity what can become all-too-familiar cannot be underestimated. Jeremy Begbie’s innovative explorations into the interrelations of music and theology have broken new ground in mediating fresh new ways

²⁷ 2 Pet. 1:3–4

²⁸ Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002), 24.

²⁹ Col. 1:27

³⁰ 1 Cor. 1:30

³¹ Gal. 2:20; Col. 3:4

³² Dallas Willard (*Renovation of the Heart*, 85–92) articulates spiritual formation in terms of the acronym VIM: *Vision*—of the kingdom (where what God wants done is done and where we partake of God’s nature), *Intention*—to be kingdom persons (where obedience, faithful living, and utter trusting reliance on him are paramount), and *Means*—to that end (replacing the inner character of the “lost” with the inner character of Jesus’ vision, feelings, and character).

³³ Kevin Vanhoozer, “A Drama-of-Redemption Model,” 151–209.

to envision the enigmatic doctrine of the Trinity, for instance.³⁴ By extension, I as a singer wonder whether there might be fruitful ground to be had in exploring the human voice as a vehicle of theological insight. The intimate involvement of the singer whose very body is the instrument, the *ruach* that enables two vocal folds to vibrate thereby producing sound, the flexibility within limits that allows expansive range of sound, the crucial role of diaphragmatic support coupled with relaxed openness of throat and focused direction within resonating chambers of the head, the rhythm of inspiration and expiration under disciplined control, the exhilaration of finding one's own unique voice, the power of the voice to stir an audience at the deepest level—not to mention the various genres like Gospel music that can give expression to the deepest angst of lament as well as intense jubilation—what new vistas might await the enterprising theologian who dares to probe that bundle of metaphoric possibilities?³⁵

CONCLUSION

Nearly two thousand years ago the Apostle Paul addressed the Christians in Galatia with these impassioned words: “My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth *until Christ is formed in you . . .*”³⁶ Their spiritual formation was uppermost in his mind and heart. His earnest yearning for them to grow up into maturity in Christ—likening his concern to a woman giving birth, no less—could hardly be more evocative. Such intense commitment to their spiritual progress was the underlying drumbeat of his theologically rich epistle to them. False teachers had infiltrated the ranks and perverted core Gospel tenets that were robbing the Galatians of their joy and freedom in Christ. Doctrinal distortions, if left unchecked, would wreak havoc on their whole understanding of Christian

³⁴ Jeremy Begbie, *Beholding the Glory: Incarnation Through the Arts* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 144–145. Trying to conceive of the Trinity using the model of space as a kind of container, which precludes two (or three) things occupying the same space at the same time (space as mutually exclusive), is predictably frustrating. Alternatively, he offers the illuminating analogy of aural space in which several distinct notes, simultaneously played, interpenetrate and overlap. This enables them to occupy the same auditory space while retaining their distinctiveness without compromising the other notes (a relational view of space).

³⁵ I recently returned from a choir mission trip in Europe. As the choir was concluding its final piece—a rousing Gospel number—in the context of a church worship service in Amsterdam, a man suddenly popped up and started dancing around in front of us—a totally unexpected occurrence. In conversation with him afterwards, he said exuberantly, “*Music is like Pentecost!*” I was left pondering the delightful possibilities of all that might mean!

³⁶ Gal. 4:19

faith and practice. Mind and heart, thought and feelings, theology and experience, knowing and doing were so intricately intertwined for this pastoral theologian that he was driven to speak passionately into their situation with vital theological correctives intended to protect and promote their spiritual growth in Christ.

Pastorally sensitive theology, delivered with theologically informed pastoral finesse, is needed in any age. Ongoing efforts aimed at recovering the practical intent and wholistic relevance of systematic theology in adjusting minds, attuning hearts and aligning lives with the transforming Living Truth of God are efforts well invested. After all, is not it in the very midst of the theologically dense book of Hebrews that we are charged to “spur one another on to love and good works . . . ?”³⁷ Understanding harnessed to emotional engagement issuing in acts of service. Or in more contemporary garb, as the prayerful song from the musical *Godspell* expresses it, at the end of the day our quest as believers—whether as systematic theologians, biblical scholars, spiritual directors or the like—must surely embrace the commonly held aim: “*to see Thee more clearly, love Thee more dearly, follow Thee more nearly day by day.*”

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³⁷ Heb. 10:24