

Theology

What Is It and What Is It Good For?

Paul R. Hinlicky

In recent times, the curious and ironic, if not decidedly sarcastic term, “Nuclear Theology” emerged in National Security circles. It referred to the “how I learned to love The Bomb” doctrine of *Dr. Strangelove*, namely, the strategic concept of “mutually assured destruction,” by way of threatening retaliation with weapons of mass destruction: awesome symbols of power, terrifying instruments of persuasion, and ruthless emblems of the values and beliefs of their possessors. Noting this contemporary usage of “theology” is valuable as this inaugural issue of *Promissio: A Journal of Confessing Theology* reflects on the scholarly discipline of Christian thought, the knowledge of God or “theology.”

Luther’s Differentiation Following the Apostle Paul

When considering the various intellectual phenomena currently categorized as “theology” not only in organized religion but also, as above, in the “secularist” ideologies of contemporary “political religions,” one is forced to observe that, as a discipline of the mind, “theology” covers *all* human thinking in the highly contested field of putative highest goods. However, in a carefully explained sense, such contestation is biblically appropriate. In the Christian theological tradition in which this journal stands, theology is *knowledge* of the One who is God truly, rightly then to be feared, loved, and trusted above all. According to Luther’s Heidelberg Disputation, true theology (*vera theologia*) is knowledge of God (*cognitio Dei*), as he specifies pointedly and controversially, in “Christ crucified.” Conversely, false theology certainly exists, even if not especially within the empirical field of Christendom, as Luther names the thinking of those whom he terms “theologians of glory”—as if they had already achieved heaven by their own wisdom. Indeed, following the apostle Paul’s opening chapters in his first letter to the Corinthians, the task of Luther’s “theologian of the cross” is to *know* the difference, especially by being *this difference* in the personal conformation of the believer’s mind to the cross of Christ in expectation, then, not possession of the kingdom of heaven which comes purely as gift.

One reason for Luther's sharp differentiation arises from the equivocal utilization of the term, term "god," which may denote as many possibilities as a human mind conceives for the human heart to treasure as highest good, just as Luther later observed in his explanation of the First Commandment in the Large Catechism. A god can easily be an idol if the heart clings to that which the mind conceives as highest good yet is not God truly. What is truly God, however, is made known in Christ crucified, as Luther concludes the Heidelberg Disputation. This is the creative love that does not seek and find something beautiful to enjoy, but instead rejoices to create the beloved out of the sin-deformed and dying creation in an act of new creation. Since this world in its wisdom did not know God, it pleased God truly to know this world in the solidarity of the beloved Son's death on a cross.

Israel's Legacy: Title and Name

While Luther developed this sharp insight through careful readings of the apostle Paul in the New Testament, he, like Paul, built upon the theological inheritance from Israel. The *de facto* state of human culture's antecedent polytheism was etymologically recognized in the Hebrew title *Elohim*, a grammatically plural noun form that the Scriptures of Israel used with a strikingly ungrammatical singular verb form that, when literally translated into the English, would read as "The gods is/does x, y, or z." This grammatically odd yet theologically deliberate usage reflects the fact that in the polytheistic environment of Israel's faith, the Divine was conceived as a variously populated heavenly realm overseeing earthlings wherein many divinities contended among themselves in turf wars for control of the lower realm. Habitually, however, we translate *Elohim* as "God," as if the term were a singular personal name rather than a title for the divine; consequently, in our long-standing usage habituated by this poor translation, we treat "God" as a personal name rather than as a title. As a title, *Elohim*, according to Hebrew usage, should be rendered as "The Divine" or "The Holy," or "The Heavenly," the singular Deity reflecting Israel's recognition by the time of the second Isaiah of one divinity alone, incomparable, and presiding over the earth as sole Creator. In the Hebrew Scriptures, therefore, *Elohim* emerges as the title designating the creator of all that is not divine. The urgent questions then become: "Who? Who bears this title? Who is the One who is God truly?"

Israel's naming of *Elohim* was announced at the burning bush to Moses—YHWH, the promising God of the Exodus (but also the punishing God casting the pursuing slaveholders down into the sea). YHWH is personally named in Israel as the sole and rightful claimant to the title of deity, *Elohim*—*claimant*, as the *truth* of a *promisor*, lies in the *fulfillment* of its *word*. As such a recipient of divine salvation, Israel bequeaths the task of a theological critique of the idolatries of any antecedent culture of a fallen and afflicted creation that it may concretely, faithfully and obediently confess the promising God of salvation.

Israel's monotheistic critique of the divine pantheon consequently demoted the panoply of divinities in surrounding cultures into diverse subordinates (angels, powers and principalities, authorities, etc.) of the One truly God—a demotion that recognized their persisting power and presence but denied them ultimacy. In this way, Israel's adherence to the one who is God truly allowed for the persistent reality of sinful rebellion working havoc in actual evil on the field of the creation. This humble acknowledgment by persevering faith of the reality of contra-divine powers realized that the naming in word and deed of the "God" who promises himself as creation's deliverance remains embattled upon the earth. "YHWH is a warrior; Yahweh is his name" (Ex. 15:3); "He must reign until he subdues all enemies under his feet" (1 Cor 15:25). A definite militancy against spiritual powers of sin, death, and the devil animates the confessing work of true theology; doing true theology originates in and remains an act of apocalyptic warfare.

The Shema of Israel, which should be translated (and transliterated) "Hear O Israel, YHWH our God [Elohim], YHWH alone" (Deut. 6:4), anticipates the Reformation's exclusive battle cry, "by faith *alone* in Christ *alone* by grace *alone*." As such, the Shema lays axe to the root of the wider cultural world. Here, as in Israel of old, idolatrous naming of the divine prevails as humans project their own idealized selves onto the blank screen of unknown deity as an object of worship in quests for power over others. Or they invest ultimacy of saving power in merely temporal powers and principalities. This routine idolatry gets exposed as a self-deceived if not devious claim for divine right in "God is on our side" theology—which really means "our side is the divine one."

By naming the One who is truly God as YHWH, however, Israel at its best clung in faith to the promising God of the Exodus as the true deity, even in hapless exile as a result of her own unfaithfulness. Indeed, this specification of faithful YHWH's election of the poor in power, the enslaved, the nomad, the exiled, is reiterated in 1 Cor. 1: 28-29. In the apostle Paul's Corinthian correspondence, we are not then surprised to find a nonidentical repetition of Israel's confession of faith in the Shema. "[W]e know that "no idol in the world really exists" and that "there is no God but one." Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as in fact there are many gods and many lords—yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and from whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist" (1 Corinthians 8:4-6, NRSV).

Paul's restatement of the Shema in the light of Christ crucified possessed reformatory force in its time. In the Second Temple Period, the pious practice had developed of building "a fence around the law" to preclude the possibility of transgressing the commandment against speaking the name, YHWH, falsely. Orally enunciating the name YHWH was prohibited lest it be somehow, even accidentally, profaned. Ironically, however, this avoidance strategy of the literal speech act had obscured the significant difference between name and title, as henceforth Israel sub-

stituted titles like the Lord, the Holy One, or the Blessed One, even turning *Hashem* (Hebrew: “The Name,” referring to the now unutterable YHWH) into a title.

Using only titles pertaining to functions or offices rather than the personal name of the deliverer effectually distanced the Deity, no longer bringing YHWH near to save as a personal name would do according to the promise attached to it at the burning bush. Within this climate of pious distance, Jesus innovated by naming anew the God of Israel “the Father in Heaven,” even as that personally intimate naming implied Himself as the beloved Son of this Father—Jesus himself, then, as the one in whom the exalted heavenly Deity draws near to redeem and to rectify the fallen and afflicted creation. Inheriting Jesus’ new naming of God, his apostle Paul affirms *both* the doctrine of the incomparable being of true God as the one and only creator of all that is not God *and* the identification on the earth of this true God as the heavenly Father of this beloved Son, the two together as distinct personal agents, the creative source and the mediator respectively in redemption as in creation of all else that exists.

The Word from God Given Prior to Thought

Therein lies *the* daunting implication for theology that would be true to the one who is God truly. One *dares* to name God only because God gives His name to be known in deeds of deliverance and used appropriately for prayer, praise, and thanksgiving in the corresponding action, to boot, of apocalyptic combat of *disbelieving* the idols that still prevail upon the earth. To believe God is to disbelieve the idols. Formed in this militant way within the canonical Scripture matrix, theology is about true deity as it presupposes, as Israel had presupposed in the ancient cultural environment of manifest polytheism, an elusive sense of deity (*sensus divinitatis*) vaguely acknowledged but not known personally. Unknown deity, however, amounts to little more than a placeholder for humanity being tacitly aware of its finitude, its non-deity. To know that one is not divine is indeed to know something however vague about true humanity. Such vague religiosity or awareness of the divine (as in the plural form Elohim) over against our finitude is not, however, “natural *theology*” since theology is *knowledge* of God—the *sensus divinitatis* yields nothing but speculative groping in the dark or even angry blasphemy, as Luther spoke regarding theology undertaken in the mere “light of nature.”

Theology that is true to its subject matter depends on the knowledge of God *given* by God in as much as only the true God speaks truly of God. True theology thusly *dares* to confess in faith divine self-naming in the saving deed of divine self-giving, to repeat what has been heard by virtue of a word from God concerning God. Prior to all cogitation, this word of God concerning God is the ever-new inauguration of theological thinking. To the unbelieving world, this daring speech as a belief about beliefs seems circular, but for true theology, the circle is virtuous, not vicious. That is because confessing in faith the self-naming given by the self-giving

God is the only possibility of speaking truly of the One who is truly God. Because true human speech about God must be validated by God, such theological speech is a vulnerable act of faith, precisely so it is an acknowledgment that true God cannot be mastered, controlled or manipulated by creatures.

Certainly, representing theology as talk about God claiming to be true as prompted by a word from God raises a host of further questions about the grammar of naming as well as attributing or titling; it raises semantical questions about truth conditions, and ontological questions about reference or meaning with respect to the thing signified by the verbal sign. Indeed, questions arise about the different relation between the sign and the thing signified in ordinary, mundane language by contrast to theological language, that is, about the performative power of God's word in uniting the sign with the thing signified (Luther's "This [bread] is my body). Additionally, it also questions the inadequacy of mere human words clothing but perhaps therewith obscuring the alleged word of God. Perhaps above all mid this welter of difficulties, it acutely raises the question of deception, of lying spirits, false prophets, and dishonest messiahs seducing with false promises and seductive rhetoric. True theology has a lot of work to do!

Scripture in the Dock

Let us acknowledge, however, that scriptural discourse regarding the deity in its dialectic between naming and titling may thusly seem to doom us to a non-adjudicable maelstrom of conflicting words of God, each offering but one line of pious propaganda alongside multitudinous others as indeed often appears to be the case in contemporary biblical scholarship. The problem is nothing new. Already in the premodern theological tradition, many theologians advanced the program of "metaphysics to the rescue," as if thereby to sort out the really real substance of the Divine from the misleading rhetorical accidents of human language besetting the Bible's gross anthropomorphizing of the deity. Away with warlord YHWH! Back to the unknown divine, Elohim, God beyond the gods! Various conflicting human language about God tells nothing about the Divine, which is transcendently timeless, spaceless, persistently selfsame, beyond the cognitive ascent of human conceptualization. All language in the Bible about God only refers to various creaturely relations to this ontologically perfect being, *esse ipsum subsistens* ("being itself subsisting"—the metaphysical misreading of Israel's Shema which stands behind the common translation, "Hear O Israel, the Lord is one.").

Many contemporary biblical scholars also pronounce a similar judgment of doom on biblical language for God, as mentioned above; for them, though, Scripture is rather to be exposed as an incoherent assemblage of varying propagandas in the nefarious service of some worldly-all-too-worldly hegemony. The question nowadays is no longer whether Scripture is true, as it was still for the Enlightenment's ontotheology (i.e. the idea of the perfect being on top of the realm of being,

a notion that provided a rational criterion to purge biblical discourse under the Tribunal of Reason). In postmodernity, these scholars instead press the question of Scripture's alleged *holiness*. Many postmodernists regard the canonical text as *Unholy Scriptures*, a woefully influential source of perduring racism, sexism, classism, and bubbling wellspring of fanatical religious intolerance. For all the melodrama in this scholarship, the basic problem here is not new. As mentioned, one may recall only the difficult reception of the Hebrew Bible as the Old Testament of Christian Scripture in the early church. Jesus was surely not Joshua redivivus! There is a real problem here, a hermeneutical problem. Does Joshua model Jesus or Jesus Joshua? The sad fact of Christian crusaderism instantiates the problem.

Despite the rejection of Marcion during the formation of the canon by including the Hebrew Bible as Christian Old Testament, this problem remained. Due to Scripture's apparent ambiguity in any hermeneutically illiterate theology of "the Bible alone," the authority of the papal magisterium had evolved in Western Christianity to enact doctrinal judgements, including settling biblical interpretation. This became the hermeneutical issue at the heart of the Reformation, which also involved a reformation in theology as a discipline. A misleading slogan of "Scripture alone" can obscure this insight into what was at issue. As Herman Sasse once pointed out, *both* sides viewed Scripture's authority "as rightly interpreted," for Lutherans chiefly by the distinction between the law of God and the gospel of God, a hermeneutical differentiation within the word of God. In contrast, the papist claim was that when speaking officially, the Pope rightly interpreted the Scripture as the living representative of Peter to whom the keys of the kingdom had been given. Consequently, indeterminable, heated, and divisive theological argument based on competing yet equally plausible Scripture claims, but threatening the unity of the church, could be silenced and settled by papal fiat. Hence, the demand to recant his allegedly private and subjective reading of Scripture was placed upon Luther.

Luther's counterclaim was twofold: scripture is grammatically clear enough to interpret itself for competent scholarship when holistically studied, even if objective clarity is only received and understood subjectively by those enlightened and inspired by the same Holy Spirit who had inspired the Scriptures. Crucially, this enlightenment of the Holy Spirit can be named, Jesus Christ as saving Lord, apart from whom it is impossible to take canonical Scripture as a whole and thus read the canon holistically. The key to the Scriptures, then, is not the mind of Peter but the mind of Christ (Phil.2:5) given to all the baptized who thusly read the Bible as the prophetic and apostolic witnesses to the saving event of God named by Jesus Christ, crucified for our sins but raised for our justification. Luther's counter-thrust really ups the ante: without this Spirit-bestowed mentality, Scripture falls apart into its various components, a pile of archaeological rubble, precisely the contemporary outcome in post-Enlightenment "Biblical Studies" that expressly disavows being a theological discipline.

Luther treated theology as the communal scholarly work for the holistic, intra-textual, and, above all, *messianic* exegesis of Scripture. Such work in the discipleship of the mind is normed by the gospel's claim about Jesus Christ as the liberating

Lord of those enslaved to the anti-divine powers of Sin, Death, and Devil; his cross-achieved and Easter-vindicated righteousness suffices to justify the ungodly who entrust themselves to it by the grace of the same Holy Spirit infusing faith. The same Spirit who brought Jesus through the cross to his crown now caused his prophetic and apostolic witnesses to be recorded to form the faith of every new generation. The church thus ever freshly comes into the truth of Jesus Christ in the knowledge of God by way of Spirit-led theological exegesis of Scripture, certainly not, then, by Spiritless, naïve, and arbitrary proof-texting of a supposedly miraculous text regarding all sorts of extraneous matters. It comes into the truth of the beloved Son in the knowledge of God as the heavenly Father who sends this beloved Son into the maw of the afflicted and afflicting creation by the endowment of His own Holy Spirit to capture and liberate, to enlist and recruit redeemed humanity destined for the glory of God. The touchstone of such correct reading of the Bible is the cross of Christ declaring as true knowledge of God the beloved Son's full identification with the sinful and the perishing as the Holy One of God breaking into a strong man's house to bind him and plunder his goods.

Three Orders of Theological Discourse

Words! Words! Words upon words! Theology is word-smithing arising with the putative Word of God giving knowledge of God and proceeding in the words of faith about this Word of God in creed and confession. These represent several ordered levels of theological discourse: the word of God spoken prior to thought; the word of faith responding and repeating and thinking through what it has heard; the word of hope and love communicating the foregoing in and for the afflicted creation. As such, theology is ongoing communal reflection to the end that the community of faith may knowingly and intelligently cooperate in the saving mission of the God of the gospel to rectify, redeem, and fulfill the creation. Clarity is served, however, if we mindfully distinguish these three orders of theological discourse and identify which of these domains we are investigating in any given case. Clarity in theological argument will be a standard of this journal, producing doctrine of the promising God for its apt and timely confession following the gospel's mission in the world, addressing new problems and opportunities, creatively experimenting with words in pursuing effective communication all the while maintaining fidelity to the authoring and authorizing Word of God by which the meaning of the very word, "God," and the candidacy of the named God to bear the title of true deity are clarified.

In the tradition of Luther, we lift up as first-order theology the doctrine of the word of God, the "norming norm" (*norma normans*). With no other foundation to be laid than the one laid by God in Jesus Christ, the first order of theological business is to describe its own authorizing event of the Word of God spoken in the resurrection-vindication of the crucified Jesus for the life and death he lived and died for us. This is the gospel word which authors and authorizes the faithful church in mission and commissions the discipline of theology as the discipleship

of the church's mind, ever learning the mind of Christ as that which does not occur to us naturally but which, as befits disciples, must ever be *learned*. First-order theology, as such, consists in words about the Word of God given prior to thought. Hermeneutically this description consists in the proper distinction between the righteous demand of God and the forgiving, liberating, and enabling promise of God. It is a distinction within the one word of God incarnate in Jesus Christ whose mind was to give himself in the place and on behalf of sinners.

Second-order theology, accordingly, is the contextually apt repetition of what the community has heard *hic et nunc* from the gospel word of God as articulated in canon, creed, and ongoing confession. A Spirit-led growth of knowledge of God exists in, with, and under the ambiguities and vicissitudes of the historical church that claims our attention and, indeed, our devotion. Important clarifications concerning the doctrine of the Word of God occurred at critical junctures in this history that have been ecumenically decided in the form of creeds and further proposed in the form of confessions in the face of divided Christendom. These are decisions or proposed decisions of ecumenical doctrine for the ecumenical church forged in times of crisis concerning the Word of God, as if to say, given this challenge to the faith, we must speak about the Word of God one way rather than another, if we are to continue to proclaim, believe, teach, and confess the Word of God. This theological procedure should be very familiar to those in the tradition of Luther. The doctrine of justification as a confession of the church proposes that with Romans 8, Christians speak of Jesus such that nothing can separate from the love of God in Christ those who entrust themselves to it. Second-order theology in contemporary confession inherits as well as generates such *rules of faith* to articulate proper speaking of the gospel in just this way. Indeed, this procedure inherits important precedents.

During the church's early centuries, a life and death struggle with Gnostic dualism and against its docetic Christology took place, threatening to divide Old from New Testament and creation from redemption; this would-be separation ran right through the very person of Jesus Christ when Gnostics disdained His flesh, even in principle discarding it in favor of a "spiritual" Christ. Repudiating this deviation from the gospel, the canonical doctrine of Scripture emerged that united the Hebrew Bible with those writings of the apostolic epoch that bore true witness to Christ's coming in the flesh, as doctrinally articulated in the early baptismal creeds by reference to his birth from Mary and his resurrection from the grave. De facto, this recognition of the Christian Scripture of Old and New Testaments as canon, as rule of faith, was the first doctrinal decision of early Christianity. The Council of Nicaea in 325 A.D. further clarified that the gospel Word of God incarnate in Christ is identical in being, though not in person, with God the Father's own eternal being. None other than the eternal, uncreated and personally begotten Word of the Father became flesh in Jesus Christ, the beloved Son, for us and for our salvation. The Augsburg Confession in 1530, as clarified that in 1537 by Luther's Smalcald Articles, explained that for such salvation, Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son who knew no sin, came to be our sin in an astounding act of exchange that justly justifies the

ungodly who trust in it. At Barmen in 1934, in a time of trial when Nazism was demanding the total “coordination” of all social institutions including the church to its neo-pagan “political theology,” clarity was achieved through the declaration against Hitlerism’s *Führerprinzip* that Jesus Christ is the one Word of God for us and for our salvation whom we are to believe and obey in life and in death.

These precedents in the tradition of second-order theology have an abiding claim on Christian theology as “normed norm” (*norma normata*). The historical description and hermeneutically critical appropriation of this inheritance of derivative yet normative doctrine essentially constitute second-order theology. This work is crucial because the church’s confession of the Word of God in human time and space specifies *the terms* by which any theological deliberation is Christianly meaningful. If we are not speaking Jesus of Nazareth with the God of Israel, his heavenly Father, and their sanctifying Spirit, it is not a Christianly meaningful discussion of deity as the originating terms of the discourse have been abandoned. As we have reviewed, these terms include the *title* of deity as creator of all that is not God and the *naming* of the Deity as given by the Deity for prayer, praise, and thanksgiving, the naming by which believers disbelieve the idols as in I Corinthians 8:6.

Concretely, the resurrection of the crucified Jesus as the event of divine self-naming (Romans 1:2-4), together with the confession of faith in this naming as articulated in the credal tradition, define the terms of Christian discourse. The deliberative conversation in second-order theology occurs within the theological circle of the word of God and confessing faith. Here, theologians deliberate with one another through logical argumentation in the humble fashion of offering convincing critiques of common problems (i.e. immanent criticism within the theological circle) and proposing reformulations intending “orthodoxy” (teaching true to the gospel), submitted penultimately to the ecumenical judgment of the “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church” (i.e. the “ecumenical intention” of the Augsburg Confession) but ultimately subject to God’s judgment, He who alone verifies true speech about God. This definite but wide-open discourse opens the door into third-order theology. Equipped with these terms and rules for the right usage, further conversation between Christian theology and all other claims to knowledge and truth in the whole creation is authorized and indeed mandated. Such terms, given prior to thought, constitute the epistemic platform by which everything that exists is relevant, so no topic can be simply excluded from investigation in third-order theology. Far from being conversation stoppers, these are conversation openers because they provide the definite platform from which theology speaks.

In sum, theologians within the theological circle debate and deliberate over their formulations of the first two orders of theology. The description of the Word of God in the first-order of theology and of the tradition of its confession in the second-order can and must be scrutinized for adequacy in formulation to the end of intelligent contemporary appropriation, given the constantly changing horizon of meaning in human history. This scrutiny is a missiological imperative as the gospel advances into new times and places wherein the communication of claims to truth

must be tested both for faithfulness to the originating event and for contemporary intelligibility. Simultaneously, as the gospel encounters unfamiliar peoples, cultures, and languages, a rigorous work of translation utilizing all the resources of scholarly method and employing all the intellectual virtues is in demand. As such, the discipline of third-order theology engages others outside the theological circle in dialogue and disputation, in critique and in appreciation in sharing the human pursuit of truth. Of course, theologians engaged with third order missiological discourse remain within the theological circle; here also theology remain exclusively the work of faith in a word given prior to thought (Jüngel).

Promissio: A Journal of Confessing Theology thusly orients itself in the conflicted world of contemporary theologies, knowing that its struggle is not against flesh and blood but against spiritual forces of wickedness in high places. Thus, an insistence upon scholarly method and the intellectual virtues intends a first line of defense against sub-Christian resort to propaganda in a polemical situation, thus tempting a fall from grace into carnal counter-aggression. Articles in this journal will, therefore, be irenic in tone, requiring that necessary critique be charitable. Our authors may only venture criticism when they have described opposing positions with such charity, empathy, and insight that an opponent would acknowledge with delight, “Yes! That’s what I mean. I couldn’t have said it better.” Only then may insightful critique be issued because one is then dealing with the real thing rather than a convenient fiction, a proverbial strawman of one’s own imagination easily knocked to pieces with hostile rhetoric. We know very well with Melanchthon that nothing can be stated with such clarity that malice cannot twist it to mean something unintended, but as far as this journal is concerned, such malice will be on the conscience of opponents instead of our authors.

We welcome readers into these deliberations and solicit their participation.

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Promissio

A Journal of Confessing Theology



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