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A student of Friedrich Schleiermacher, the pivotal figure in the development of liberal Protestantism in the nineteenth century, once characterized his teacher's pedagogical style by invoking the memory of the great dialectician who gave to the Western tradition of philosophy its decisive impetus: "Schleiermacher taught theology the way Socrates would have done it had he been a Christian." This sentence captures what is involved in both good teaching and good theology. Like philosophy, theology is a critical inquiry that demands of students conceptual precision in the formulation of questions and answers, as well as the willingness to have one's questions and answers challenged by the rigors of conversation and debate.

Not all seminarians are pleased to learn this about theology upon entering my classroom. For some of them, theology is solely an exercise in what one already believes to be true. "Faith," according to this view, precludes the possibility of genuine critical questioning since such challenges to the church's doctrines signal a lack of faith and, hence, are destructive of faith. I remember one angry student upbraiding me, "This is supposed to be a theology course, not a philosophy course." For others, religious commitments cannot be intellectually debated since they express the subjective "spiritual journey" of individuals. Respect for persons in their

individuality requires tolerance, not debate. Another student once sincerely told me, “You are trying to teach us how to argue, but I’m a peacemaker, not a fighter.” The two postures I’ve identified come from opposite ends of the theological spectrum, but they share a common anti-intellectualism that has to be overcome if students are really to learn what theology is.

To be sure, there are some differences between theology and philosophy that cannot be overlooked. Theology’s starting point lies in the interpretation of a received tradition, not in a purely rational effort to understand the nature of being. Theologians thus spend a great deal of their energies in the exegesis of and commentary upon classical texts, beginning with the Bible and moving from there to the various kinds of literature that constitute the theological traditions of the church. In one sense, then, introducing students to the study of theology requires that they learn not only the tools of proper exegesis but also how to reflect self-critically upon what is involved in the interpretation of any text (hermeneutics).

Consequently, there is a body of historical knowledge that has to be mastered before one can truly be a theologian. For students to immerse themselves in this history means that they must be willing to enter into the debates about crucial issues of Christian faith that are represented by major figures such as Athanasius and Arius, Cyril and Nestorius, Augustine and Pelagius, Thomas Aquinas and Bonaventure, Luther and Erasmus, Calvin and Servetus, as well as others who could be named. Many of these debates had to do with alternative ways to understand the Bible. Gerhard Ebeling was surely right to observe that “the history of the church is the history of its interpretation of scripture.” But it is also true that the history of the interpretation of scripture has been the major source of conflict in Christian theology.

In order for students to appreciate the full range of these conflicts of interpretation, they have to be willing to set aside their own preconceived notions for the sake of trying to understand how persons who lived in very different times and places formulated and answered the major questions of theology. To facilitate such learning I, too, have to be willing to teach whatever texts and figures we are studying with as much impartiality and objectivity as possible. I do my best, therefore, to present each figure or idea with as much enthusiasm and passion as I can, which can initially give students the misleading impression that I agree with the viewpoint I happen to be interpreting on that occasion. At the end of a two-semester introduction to the entire history of Christian theology, one student came up to me and explained, “During the first semester I thought you were teaching us the theology you personally believe in because you presented each theologian’s ideas with such enthusiasm and respect, but as the year progressed I realized that you can’t possibly agree with everyone we read since they disagreed with one another.” In response to her comment, I said, “You correctly understood the purpose of the course.” Critical thinking requires the ability to see things from another person’s perspective and a willingness to entertain all the possible sides of an argument. For this reason, I only rarely disclose my own theological commitments when teaching theology so as not to make disciples

of students. I want to teach students how to think theologically, not what to think.

Understanding texts and figures from the past, however, is just the beginning of the theological enterprise. Theology is more than exegesis of texts and the endeavor to appreciate multiple perspectives. Students also have to learn how to analyze the cogency of theological arguments. Some of these arguments, of course, are strictly exegetical. If a theologian has defended an argument by appealing to a particular exegesis of a biblical text, to what extent does this argument stand or fall upon the correctness of that exegesis? But there are other arguments that are not so directly tied to exegesis. If a given theologian makes a philosophical argument for the existence of God (e.g., Anselm, Aquinas, Hartshorne), how strong is this argument when measured according to its own stated criteria of reason and human experience? The fact that theologians have made claims about all sorts of matters that can in principle be tested by those who do not share the Christian faith is an important thing to learn about theology.

Augustine's interpretations of human nature, for example, including his insistence that both reason and will are determined by what the heart loves, are subject to testing by other disciplines such as biology and psychology. The fact that Augustine can appeal to some relatively common observations about human behavior indicates that theology is about more than simply exegesis and hermeneutics. It also brings into play convictions about the nature of the human person as well as the nature of the world in which human persons exercise their capacities and confront their limitations. This becomes even more apparent when theologians address ethical questions.

Students are sometimes intimidated, initially at least, by the technical vocabulary of theology, including the many terms and phrases that come from foreign languages. I am of the opinion that theology is not an arcane discipline, requiring highly specialized expertise such as one would need in order to study physics. This is because the subject matter of theology concerns ordinary human life and experience in the world, including how persons evaluate and make sense of their lives. I try to make as many connections between theological concepts and personal examples from my experience or those of others so as to illuminate what it is that the theologians are talking about in their technical language. As I write these words, the task of next week's lecture is weighing on my mind: how to explain what Thomas Aquinas says about grace and merit. He makes many distinctions that can easily baffle the uninitiated. When, however, the scholastic form of his argument is clarified, and students learn how to read an article of the *Summa Theologiae*, his ideas become really quite simple to comprehend. So a lot of my teaching involves the attempt to show my students that, in the final analysis, they, too, can become good theologians if they are willing to put their minds to the task of thinking deeply about their own experiences with the realities to which the words "grace" and "merit" point.

What encourages me the most in my teaching is to observe students as they begin to realize not only how brilliant the great theologians of the past were but also how profound and illuminating their ideas remain for interpreting human life. Some of my students in this progressive seminary come to their study of theology with a bias against the traditions of the church on account of their patriarchal and homophobic character. This is understandable, but it is important to get students to see past these blind spots in the theological traditions for the sake of grasping what makes them worth studying even today. Two quotations are given at the top of my syllabus for the introductory course I teach in the history of theology. The first is from Jaroslav Pelikan: "Tradition is the living faith of the dead, traditionalism is the dead faith of the living." This apt characterization indicates that I don't consider the tradition to be the property of traditionalists whose only desire is a repristination of the past. The other quotation, from my favorite theologian John Calvin, clearly points to the revisionary nature of a serious theological grappling with the past: "Our constant endeavor, day and night, is not just to transmit the tradition faithfully, but also to put it in the form we think will prove best." In every generation, responsible theology is engaged in a critical sifting of what has been received from the past for the sake of the present and the future.

I love teaching. I love theology. I love teaching theology because it is important and, believe it or not, it is also fun.