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The Function of Theology

Don H. McGaughey

The diverse present day theologies that are being advocated are diverse largely because they proceed from different presuppositions regarding the nature and function of theology. The problem of programatic or task of theology becomes an extremely vital problem if one is interested at all in promoting unity among those claiming to follow Jesus. An attempt therefore to uncover the presuppositional thinking as regarding programatic of some of the more prominent contemporary theologies will be helpful.

To make a rough categorization, the more prominent existent theologies may be classified in four groups: 1) Conservative Protestantism, 2) Neo-orthodox Protestantism, 3) Liberal Protestantism, and 4) Roman Catholicism. Since we are speaking specifically of the problem of programatic or function of theology as a presupposition, (i.e., we are not speaking of the many theological ramifications that develop within these systems), we may say that the programatic for each group can be traced to the theological thinking of one or two men. For example the programatical thinking of Conservative Protestantism rests largely upon the concepts of John Calvin; that of Neo-orthodoxy rests largely upon Karl Barth; Liberal Protestantism on Friedrich Schleiermacher, and Roman Catholicism on Augustine and Thomas Aquinas.

Therefore our task is considerably lessened by simply ascertaining the presuppositional thinking of these men as regarding the function of theology. Having ascertained their presuppositional thinking, we shall then attempt to draw some evaluational conclusions.

Augustine:

Augustine possessed a mind that longed for religious truth. Having been brought up in the Catholic Church, he early "departed the faith" and became enamored with Manichaeism. But he was unable to find satisfaction here and consequently lapsed into a period of skepticism. Under the influence of Ambrose, bishop of Milan, Augustine once again found Christianity, and thereafter he became one of the most renowned expositors of the Catholic faith.

Having accepted the Catholic tradition, it became Augustine's unaltering conviction that the authority which he so needed in his search for religious truth was to be found ultimately in the Catholic Church. He indeed accepted without hesitation the Christian Scrip-
tures, but their authority really rested on the attestation of the church. Apart from this attestation, they had no true validity.\(^1\)

Although Augustine fully granted the authority of the church, he was still willing to admit that bishops and councils (ecumenical as well as provincial) could err.\(^2\) Thus the authority of the church did not necessarily imply infallibility in every official pronouncement. The absolute organ for infallibility, however, was left undefined by Augustine.

For Augustine, the task of theology was essentially a proclamation and interpretation of the sacred Scriptures in the milieu of the church's doctrinal tradition.\(^3\)

While it is quite true that Augustine was influenced by Neoplatonism (as is especially seen in his concept of God), it does not appear that his theology is a conscious attempt to combine this philosophical system with the teachings of the church. Nor does Augustine seem to be primarily concerned with offering an apology for Christianity to the unbelieving world. He holds that unless one first has faith he is not really capable of understanding:\(^4\) "\(\text{"nisi creditis, non intelligitis" ("unless you believe, you will not understand,") is his watchword. He states: "Rightly has it been ordained by the majesty of Catholic discipline that they who approach religion be first of all persuaded to have faith."}\(^5\) Further: "True religion cannot be rightly entered upon unless we submit to authority and believe those things which afterward, if we live well and worthily, we shall attain to and understand."\(^6\) And finally: "If you are not able to know, believe that you may know. Faith precedes; the intellect follows."\(^7\)

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\(^1\) \text{Contra epistulam quam vocant fundamenti, 5.} \ The complete Latin text of Augustine's works is available in Migne, \textit{Patrologia Latina}. The best critical text, (as much as is completed) is in \textit{Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum}, Vienna, 1866 to present. References in this article follow the English translation \textit{The Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers}. (Ed. Philip Schaff). Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1956.

\(^2\) \text{De Baptismo, II.3 (4).}

\(^3\) \text{De Catechizandis Rudibus XXVI, 50.}

\(^4\) \text{Enchiridion 5. Cf. also on this point \textit{A Companion to the Study of St. Augustine}. Ed. Roy Battenhouse. New York: Oxford University Press, 1955, p. 22. This publication is a very helpful guide in understanding the thought of Augustine.}

\(^5\) \text{De Utilitate Credendi 29.}

\(^6\) \text{Ibid., 21.}

\(^7\) \text{Sermo 188.1.}
Thus for Augustine, theology is "faith speaking to faith"; upon these principles he expounds what he believes to be the Christian message.

**Thomas Aquinas:**

The Age of Aquinas came under the influence of a different philosophical school from that of Augustine. As noted, Augustine lived under the influence of Neo-platonism, and western theology had continued largely under this influence up to the day of Aquinas. But the age of Aquinas was marked by a more dominant influence of Aristotle than the preceding age. Due to the work of Islamic scholars much more of Aristotle's writings became available to Christian thinkers.

In the *Summa Theologica* it seems that the problem or the task upon which Thomas sets out to work is the problem of introducing the Aristotelian philosophy of his day into the Roman Catholic traditional theology without corrupting the essence of the theology.\(^8\)

For Thomas theology is a science of revelation. It has its source in the Word of God—the Scriptures.\(^9\) Its basis is faith in the truth of this word.\(^10\) But the question is how to bring both reason and revelation together without sacrificing the essential truth in either of them, or rather, more positively, to the greater benefit of both.\(^11\)

One of the most significant differences between Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy is in the realm of epistemology. Platonism holds that man apart from individual things can know God and the spiritual world. Augustine, for example, writes: "The senses of the soul are as it were the eyes of the mind." And again: "I, Reason, am the same in the mind as the act of looking is in the eyes."\(^12\) On the other hand, Aristotelianism holds that all human knowledge is the result of sensible experience. Thomas clearly accepts this teaching. He states: "... our knowledge, even of things which transcend the senses, originate from the senses."\(^13\) Thomas, however, it should be pointed out, does not slavishly follow Aristotle in every point. As already noted, his main intent seems to be to bring about a reconciliation, or combining of Aristotelian philosophy and Christian theology, and especially in the *Contra Gentiles*, to use the latter


\(^10\) Ibid.

\(^11\) Gilson, *loc. cit.*

\(^12\) *Soliloquia* I.6 (12).


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as an apology for the former. In an attempt to do this, Aquinas combines Christian theology and Aristotelian philosophy by distinguishing between 1) natural and revealed theology, and 2) the conditions of knowledge in this life and in the next.14

Natural theology, or philosophy, according to Aquinas is all of the knowledge that is available to man discovered through Aristotelian principles—that is, through the senses. Revealed theology is that knowledge which is beyond the power of human reasoning, and is contained within the Christian Scriptures. However, revealed theology may also contain many things that are available through the senses, because all people are not able to exercise their reasoning faculties unto the attainment of these truths.

In the second distinction, Aquinas maintains that it was impossible to see God in this life. However, he goes beyond Aristotle in holding to a future life in which God can be seen apart from our corporeal bodies. He appeals to the Scriptures and maintains that those who deny that man can see God “contradict the authority of the Holy Scripture” and are “to be rejected as false and heretical.”15

From the foregoing it is seen that the theologies of Aquinas and Augustine rest on the same basis. Both agree that ultimately man’s reason is insufficient, and that he must accept God’s revelation before he can ever really know God. Both accept the Catholic Church as the authority, i.e., both accept the Scriptures as interpreted by the church as an infallible witness. Both feel that their primary task is to set forth the doctrinal tradition of the Catholic Church. The particular philosophical situation in which each man found himself, and to which each was attempting to communicate his thought, to a large degree accounts for differences that appear in their theologies: Augustine was primarily concerned with exposition, Aquinas with correlation. Essentially, however, their theologies rested on the same basis.

John Calvin:

Calvin’s entire theological system is largely structured upon his concept of God. His views of the Sacraments, Atonement, The Church, etc., are all shaped or colored by it. A right knowledge of God (and man, since God is manifested in His creation of man) is true wisdom. “True and substantial wisdom principally consists of two parts, the knowledge of God, and the knowledge of ourselves.”16

15Summa Contra Gentiles, op. cit., III.54.
16Institutes, I.1.1. The complete text of Calvin’s writings are available in Corpus Reformatorum, beginning with Vol. XXIX.
There is no question in Calvin's mind as to where or how one might obtain this true wisdom. In the first place, he is certain that it cannot be through mere human reason. Human reasoning is blind and can never in and of itself rise to a perfect knowledge of God. It is true, however, that human reasoning might know a few things. In fact the philosophers of great repute stumbled onto a few truths. But all their knowledge amounted to only a smattering.

Calvin believes that the human mind, by natural instinct, possesses some sense of the knowledge of God. However, he feels that this intuitive knowledge has been extinguished or corrupted partly by ignorance, partly by wickedness. Calvin also asserts that the knowledge of God is manifested in the phenomenal world and in His continual government of the world. But man is blind to these manifestations because of his pride and iniquity and can be made receptive to them only through divine impartation of faith.

Man, thus, is incapable, out of his own self, to rise to a pure and perfect knowledge of God; the sacred Scriptures therefore become the necessary guide and teacher to lead man into this true knowledge of God.

From this it is seen that Calvin follows the path of both Augustine and Aquinas in finding in the Scriptures an authoritative voice of God. But he does not, as these two, base the authority of the Scriptures upon the authority of the church. For Calvin, the ultimate witness to the authority of the Scriptures comes from the internal testimony of the Spirit.

In the light of the foregoing, it is concluded that, for Calvin, the function of theology amounts essentially to a formulating and an exposition of the teachings of the Scriptures. In the preface to his Institutes, Calvin specifically states that he has written this work "to prepare and qualify students of theology for the reading of the divine word."

37 Institutes II.2.18.
38 Ibid.
39 Ibid., I.3.1.
40 Ibid., I.4.1.
41 Ibid., I.5.14.
42 Ibid.
43 Ibid., I.6.1.
44 Ibid., I.7.2.
46 Preface to the 1559 edition of the Institutes.
Friedrich Schleiermacher:

Because of the work of this nineteenth century theologian the approach to, and the presentation of, theology was substantially altered. According to Schleiermacher, the essence of religion is "feeling." He arrives at this conclusion by differentiating between "knowing," "doing," and "feeling." "The Piety which forms the basis for all ecclesiastical communions is, considered purely in itself, neither a knowing, nor a doing, but a modification of feeling...."27 This "feeling," he more specifically defines as "absolute dependence."28

Schleiermacher's conception of religion as essentially feeling is based upon his analysis of self-consciousness. He perceives in self-consciousness, two elements—"a self-caused-element," and a "non-self-caused-element."29 He maintains that from the second of these elements arises a "feeling of absolute dependence." Schleiermacher designates that toward which this feeling is directed, the "whence" of this feeling. The "whence," he states, man has called "God."

This "feeling of absolute dependence" upon the "whence," of God, (being a part of the human self-consciousness), Schleiermacher designates "the religious self-consciousness." This "religious self-consciousness" tends toward fellowship. As this fellowship assumes certain definite limits, a church is formed.30

Having thus defined a church, Schleiermacher is able to proceed with his discussion of the task of theology. This definition, Schleiermacher feels is a necessary prerequisite to his discussion, because theology pertains only to the Christian church, and it can only be understood in the light of the proper conception of the Christian church.31

Schleiermacher defines the Christian religion as a "monotheistic faith, belonging to the theological type of religion..." It is essentially distinguished from other similar monotheistic religions by the fact that in it every thing is related to the redemption accomplished by Jesus of Nazareth.32 But, it should be noted that by redemption, Schleiermacher only means that in Jesus the "God-consciousness in man came to full expression.33

27The Christian Faith, p. 5. This work first appeared under the title Christlicher Glaube nach Grundsatzen der evangelischen Kirche im Zusammenhang dargestellt. The references in this article follow the English edition by H. R. Mackintosh, Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1956.
28Ibid., p. 12
31Ibid., p. 3.
32Ibid., p. 476.
33Ibid., pp. 476, 478.
On the basis of such presuppositions Schleiermacher maintains that the function of theology is to set forth descriptively and didactically the religious affections of the Christian church. As such it has a two-fold value—an "ecclesiastical" and a "scientific." The "ecclesiastical" value is seen in the reference to Christ as redeemer. The "scientific" value is seen in the definiteness of the concepts expressed and in their relation to each other.

Schleiermacher's analysis of the religious self-consciousness as a feeling of absolute dependence makes religion essentially a product of the human feeling. This being the case, Schleiermacher looks upon all theological pronouncements of the church as merely expressions of human feeling given in a specific situation and as such carrying no authority whatsoever. He states: "Dogmatic Theology is the science which systematizes the doctrines prevalent in a Christian church at a given time." With one sweep, Schleiermacher brushes aside all doctrine as nonessential, since it is only subjective statements arising from the inward feelings of various men.

Karl Barth:

For Karl Barth there is a vast qualitative difference (as opposed to a mere quantitative difference in certain expressions of contemporary theology) between God and man. "Man is man and God is God." As a result of this vast qualitative difference, there is considerable difficulty in attempting to bring the Infinite into the sphere of finite conception. The only way, Barth maintains, that this can be accomplished is by the adoption of the method of dialectical dualism.

Furthermore, if it is true that there is a vast qualitative difference between God and man, then man can never rise by means of his own reason into the realm of true knowledge of God. Man can know God only if God chooses to disclose himself to man. The movement concerning knowledge of God is always down—from God to man, never up—from man to God. "It is the Deus revelatus who is the Deus absconditus, the God to whom there is no way and no bridge, of whom we could not say or have to say one single word, had He not of His own initiative met us as Deus revelatus." It is

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34 Ibid.
35 Ibid., p. 78.
36 Ibid., p. 88.
Barth's position that God has indeed disclosed himself through the Word. Men comprehend this Word as they perceive it through the working of the Spirit.

When Barth speaks of the Word of God, he seems to think of it in two ways: 1) the Word which God speaks by and to Himself in eternal hiddenness, and 2) the Word addressed to man.

As certainly as the Word of God is primarily and originally the Word which God speaks by and to Himself in eternal hiddenness—in developing the concept of revelation in connection with the doctrine of the Trinity we shall return to this great and inalienable truth—as certainly as it is, in revelation, Scripture, and preaching, the Word addressed to men...

Barth's use of the term revelation is somewhat difficult to follow. He speaks of the Word being once for all revealed in Jesus as the Incarnate Word. Yet he speaks of revelation occurring to man today through the work of the Spirit. Perhaps we may understand it that the coming of the Word is revelation. In the incarnation of the Son of God the Word comes first. After this the Word comes when the spirit of man is touched by the Holy Spirit and faith is produced. Revelation is always an event, and comes in these two ways; i.e., in the once-for-all form of incarnation; and in its ever-repeated apprehensions of individuals.

Barth holds that the Word is addressed to man in three forms: through the revealed Word of God, through the written Word of God, and through the proclaimed Word of God. Barth conceives of the revealed word as the Word Incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth. The written Word is the Bible. And the proclaimed Word is the word as it is proclaimed in the message of the Christian church. These three, however, are not three distinct or different words, they are rather the “One Word” in a threefold form.

We have been speaking of three forms of the Word of God, not of three several words of God. In this threefold form and not otherwise—and also as the one invariably in this threefold form alone—it is given us, and in this form we must endeavor to understand it conceptually. It is one and the same, whether we regard it as revelation, as the Bible, or as proclamation. There is no distinction of degree or value between these three forms. For so far as proclamation really rests upon recollection of the revelation attested in the Bible and is therefore the obedient repetition of the Biblical witness, it is no less the Word of God than the Bible. And so far as the Bible really attests revelation, it is no less the Word of God than revelation itself.

38Church Dogmatics, p. 218.
39Ibid., p. 578.
41Barth, op. cit., p. 136.
With the above thoughts in mind it is easy to see why Barth defines theology as "the scientific test to which the Christian church puts herself regarding the language about God which is peculiar to her."\textsuperscript{42} He maintains that theology should be a function of the church, because the church by her very existence, by her work, and through her proclamation confesses God. Theology measures the language of the church by her own source and object.\textsuperscript{43} The task of theology is to measure (to criticize and revise) language about God by the standard of the principle peculiar to the church. It is to ascertain whether or not the church's language about God has the proper content. It has this proper content, Barth believes, when it has as its center Jesus Christ. "Language about God has the proper content, when it conforms to the essence of the church, i.e., to Jesus Christ."\textsuperscript{44}

Conclusion:

Having examined the programatical presuppositions of some of the leading theologians that Christendom has produced, some evaluating observations can now be made. First, we must reject completely Schleiermacher's concept of the function of theology as a descriptive and didactive setting forth of the religious affections of the Christian church. As noted, such a concept resulted from Schleiermacher's definition of religion as "feeling." Theologies that are built upon this definition tend to be philosophy or psychology of religion, rather than theology. If religion is only feeling, then all inquiry into this feeling is anthropological and is not theology at all.

Even when Schleiermacher speaks of the "whence" of the feeling of absolute dependence as being God, this in itself tends still to be anthropologic. If on the other hand the "whence" of the feeling of absolute dependence is in reality some "totally other," than man, then the important question is not what does man feel or think about the "totally other," for this would have no real value, but rather, what, if anything at all, can man know about the "totally other." This becomes a vital, burning question, which has real value.

Calvin, therefore, is much to be preferred when he approaches theology from the standpoint of knowledge about God. He recognizes that from its beginning Christianity claims to have such knowledge about God. It proclaims a revelation from God. To be a true Christian theologian, then, necessitates an acceptance of this claim. This acceptance must ultimately be a matter of faith—faith resulting from a confrontation with the Christian message. The statement of Augustine (\textit{nisi credideritis non intelligetis}) does not seem so strange.

\textsuperscript{42}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 1.
\textsuperscript{43}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 5.
\textsuperscript{44}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 11.
as it at first might appear. The task, therefore, of the Christian theologian should be essentially a proclamation of the Christian message.

But the question is immediately raised, what is the Christian message, and what is the source (or sources) of this message? The message has always been, and always must be that God has revealed himself in Jesus of Nazareth. The source of this message has always been (i.e., since its recording) the testimony of the New Testament Scriptures to this revelatory act of God in Jesus. A full realization of this source would act as a preventive to over-speculation in theology. It would seem that whether we like it or not we are bound by our source in a formulation of the Christian message for today. Theologians who maintain that the proclamation of the church is correct just so long as it has Jesus Christ as its center, have overlooked the matter of source.

This obviously raises the question whether the New Testament is itself revelation. Augustine, Aquinas, and Calvin all agree that it is. Schleiermacher denies it. Barth takes somewhat of a *via media*, stating that the New Testament Scriptures bear witness to the revelatory act of God in Christ. This certainly is true. But it does not say enough.

Barth's concept of revelation as always an event, must be questioned. It is difficult to understand how Barth can speak of the “once-for-all-ness” of revelation in Christ and yet at the same time state that to be fully realized it must be apprehended by man, even if such apprehension is ascribed to the work of the Holy Spirit.

When Barth refers to the Scriptures as revelation, he does not use the term in the traditional sense; he means that the Scriptures aid in the revelatory event. Actually such a position is quite similar to Calvin's “witness of the Spirit.” While Barth does not accept a fully Calvinistic and literal interpretation of the Genesis account of the Fall, he nonetheless maintains that the *Imago Dei* was *totally* effaced in man. Such an anthropological presupposition is quite fundamental to his entire theological system.45

The New Testament Scriptures themselves must, it seems, be regarded as revelation from God. To say that they are *simply human* testimonies to the revelatory act of God in Jesus is not enough. As

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such their only value would be in the proximity of their witness to the event of revelation.

If it is asked, on what basis one can accept the New Testament Scriptures as revelation, no equivocation is necessary. The answer is faith. As it was seen, Augustine and Aquinas accepted the Scriptures on the authority of the church. But Calvin is correct when he observes:

> It is a very false notion, therefore, that the power of judging the Scripture belongs to the Church, so as to make the certainty of it dependent on the Church's will. Wherefore, when the Church receives it, and seals it with her suffrage, she does not authenticate a thing otherwise dubious or controvertible; but, knowing it to be the truth of her God, performs a duty of piety, by treating it with immediate veneration.\(^{46}\)

In place of ecclesiastical authority, Calvin found refuge in the "witness of the Spirit." But the whole Calvinistic concept of the "Spirit's witness" seems to have grown out of the fallible Augustinian doctrine of Original Sin. Faith then, as it is implanted in one's heart when he beholds and considers the Scriptures, seems to be the only answer.

If the New Testament Scriptures are accepted as a revelation of God, then one final problem arises, i.e., the problem of how this revelation should be interpreted. But this is a matter of Hermeneutics and reaches beyond the scope of our present study.

When it is once granted that the New Testament Scriptures are more than human witness to the act of God in Christ, i.e., they are themselves revelation from God, then it seems that it must inevitably follow that the function of theology is to expound this revelation to the contemporary scene in the clearest possible terms.\(^{47}\)

\(^{46}\)\textit{Institutes} I.7.2.

\(^{47}\)Recognition in this article should also be given for help received from an unpublished article dealing with a similar subject by Roy Bowen Ward.