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# Doing Theology in a Pluriform Church

**Martin Davie challenges us to face the reality that there are a variety of ways of being Christian and being human but warns against theology either starting its work from these or accepting them all as legitimate diversity. Instead, he calls for a theology that is engaged with the biblical witness to Christ but attentive to, and building bridges into, the pluriform church and world.**

How many Calvinists does it take to change a light bulb? *None. God has predestined when the lights will be on or off.*

How many Catholics does it take to change a light bulb? *None. They always use candles.*

How many Episcopalians does it take to change a light bulb? *Three. Two to mix the martinis and one to call the electrician.*

How many Baptists or Brethren does it take to change a light bulb? *CHANGE???????*

## The Pluriform Setting for Theology

Apart from the fact that I happen to find them funny, the reason I start this article with some ecclesiastical light bulb jokes is because they illustrate the first point that I wish to make: we all have to do our theology in a pluriform setting.

What these jokes draw attention to is the fact that a whole variety of different ways of being Christian exist in today's world. One of the things I want to argue in this paper is that any responsible theology has to be undertaken in the light of this fact. Furthermore, there are not only a whole variety of different ways of being Christian in today's world. There are also a whole variety of different ways of simply being human and theology needs to take these into account as well.

## A Pluriform Church of England

Looking at this pluriformity in more detail the first thing to note is that the Church of England is pluriform.

*It is socially pluriform.* Members of the Church of England come from a variety of ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds and live in a variety of social settings ranging from the leafy stockbroker belt in Surrey, through the deep rurality of the Welsh borders or the high Pennines, to the Muslim majority areas of inner city Bradford.

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1 Light bulb jokes taken from *Biblical Studies Bulletin* Issue 27, Mar 2002.

*It is liturgically pluriform.* The worship of the Church of England has always taken a variety of different forms. One of the first major councils of the Church of England, the Synod of Whitby in 664, was concerned with the problems caused by liturgical diversity, and liturgical diversity has been a feature of the Church of England ever since. This was true before the Reformation when a variety of different rites were in use, and it continued to be the case after the Reformation in spite of the attempt to create liturgical uniformity through the use of the *Book of Common Prayer*. It also of course continues to be the case today with liturgical practices ranging from those akin to the evangelical Free Churches to those that are more ornate and 'High-Church' than post-Vatican II Roman Catholic practice.

*It is theologically pluriform.* The Church of England has always been theologically diverse. In the pre-Reformation period the Church of England shared in the theological disputes of the medieval Church, the division of opinion about the teachings of John Wycliffe in the fourteenth century being just one example. In the post-Reformation period the Church of England was influenced in turn by Protestant, Catholic and Liberal forms of theology. These influences have produced a variety of different schools of theological thought all of which have both influenced each other and been internally divided. The result is a very complex theological pattern in which a whole variety of different forms of theological thought co-exist side by side ranging from High Calvinism, through Neo-Thomism to non-realism. If we ask which of these represents Church of England theology the answer is that they all do in the sense that they represent kinds of theology believed and taught by members of the Church of England today.

*Finally, the Church of England is ethically pluriform.* The most high profile division about ethical matters happens at the moment to be about homosexuality, but members of the Church of England also disagree about a whole raft of other ethical issues ranging from abortion to hunting. It is also worth noting that, in this area too, disagreement is part of the Anglican tradition. In the past, for instance, members of the Church of England have been divided about matters such as Sabbath observance, temperance and birth control that are no longer seen as divisive by most Anglicans today.

### **A Pluriform Anglican Communion**

Not only is the Church of England pluriform in the ways that I have just described, but it is part of a pluriform Anglican Communion. The current division about homosexuality did not create this pluriformity it merely illustrates it. Even if we set aside the issue of homosexuality it just simply is the case that the Church of England is different from the Church in Wales, which is itself different from the Province of the Southern Cone in South America, which is different again from the Church of the Province of Myanmar.

The differences involved cover all the areas noted in the case of the Church of England and the diversity is a result of a combination of different factors. As Bishop Peter Lee of the Church of the Province of South Africa notes in a very helpful paper, 'Anglican Identity Outside England' these factors can be divided under two headings: heredity and environment<sup>2</sup>.

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2 Bishop Peter Lee, 'Anglican Identity Outside England', unpublished paper from 'The Future of Anglicanism' Conference, Oxford, July 2002.

By *heredity* he means the fact that the identity of Anglicanism has been formed by the inheritance that Anglican churches 'have received whether at first-, second- or third-hand from the Church of England'.<sup>3</sup> What has happened, he argues, is that different ways of being Anglican have been exported from the Church of England around the globe and the result has been a whole variety of different Anglican churches rooted in different and often conflicting forms of churchmanship. For example, those areas of the Anglican communion which originated from the missionary activity of SAMS or CMS received a very different tradition of Anglicanism from those evangelised by USPG or the Community of the Resurrection and Christians in these areas have often been taught that their way of being Anglican is the only 'true' form of Anglicanism. As Lee points out, what this means is that

the heredity which many Anglican communities outside England have received has not been a commonly recognisable deposit of faith and tradition but a partisan version whose effect has been to store up further misunderstanding and dispute when adherents of that partisan inheritance have found themselves in an international Anglican context, meeting others who have been unwittingly sold an entirely different version of the same product.<sup>4</sup>

By *environment* he means the variety of variables that have then further shaped this basic inheritance. For example, the culture and history of the country in which a particular Anglican Church is set; the political situation within which a particular Church has had to operate; the ecumenical and inter-faith relationships (or lack of them) of a particular Church.

Just as a combination of heredity and environment help to make each human being unique, so likewise they have helped to make each different Anglican province unique and have thereby created a pluriform Anglican Communion.

Marc Nikkel's account of the spirituality of the Episcopal Church of the Sudan, a church that has suffered hugely and yet flourished hugely in the context of the savage Sudanese civil war provides a good illustration of how pluriform the Anglican Communion is. Nickell describes how crosses are made from the recycled metal from crashed MIG bombers so that the meaning of the cross – life from death – is given a particular local meaning. He describes

the massive Church of Zion, near the old cattle camp of Pakeo in Upper Nile Province, probably the largest mud and thatch construction in Sudan. Built in 1992, each aspect of its cruciform design was conceived in dreams. According to one widely embraced vision, four peoples, long in conflict with each – the Jieng, Nuer, Murle and Mandari – will enter, one through each of its four doors, there to be reconciled. The ancient cruciform pattern, first introduced by Anglican missionaries, plants the hope that Sudanese will find a place of conciliation within the cross of Christ.<sup>5</sup>

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3 Lee, 'Anglican Identity', p 2.

4 Lee, 'Anglican Identity', p 5.

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5 M. Nickell 'Spirituality in the Episcopal Church of the Sudan amidst civil conflict' in A. Wingate et al (eds) *Anglicanism: A Global Communion*, Mowbray, London 1998, p 76.

Nikkel further explains how

across Nilotic regions long, hand-held crosses made of wood, metal and ivory bristle over church gatherings, declaring the presence of a compassionate God, and the radical transformation of spiritual allegiances. Crosses are fashioned from the razed sacred posts and trees that once stood at the heart of sacrificial shrines. Sacred spears, long the symbols of Nilotic religion, have evolved into finely carved crosses to serve as 'swords of the Spirit' against unseen powers. Newly-converted diviners remake their wands and fly whisks, long used to invoke ancestral deities, to declare the glory of the crucified.<sup>6</sup>

The Episcopal Church of the Sudan is a definitely Anglican Church, loyal to the low church traditions it received from the missionaries of the CMS and still using the BCP (albeit in a vernacular translation). Yet, as the quotations from Nickell indicate, it is also an indigenous church that builds upon the experiences and traditions of the Sudanese peoples. It is this kind of mixture, replicated in different ways across the globe in a myriad different contexts, that has produced the pluriformity of the Anglican Communion.

### **A Pluriform Church Worldwide**

This pluriformity within the Anglican Communion is, of course, simply part of a far wider pluriformity in the visible Church of Christ worldwide. The second edition of the *World Christian Encyclopedia*<sup>7</sup> provides data on 33,800 Christian denominations and 3,445,000 churches or assemblies. Each of these denominations, churches and assemblies will be different in some way from all the others – that is just how pluriform the worldwide Christian Church really is.

Another way of looking at the same phenomenon is to consider the fact that the worldwide Church includes at one end of the spectrum ultra-conservative members of the Roman Catholic and Orthodox traditions (who consider their official leadership far too inclined to compromise the faith once delivered to the saints) and, at the other, ultra-liberal members of the Society of Friends (Quakers) who have almost nothing in the way of theological conviction or practice that ties them into the mainstream Christian tradition. These two extremes could not be more different and yet they would regard themselves, and are widely acknowledged by others, as being part of the Christian Church.

### **Diversity Within Diverse Traditions**

These two examples also highlight that the Christian Church not only comprehends various different Christian traditions, but that these traditions are internally diverse. Thus, the Roman Catholic Church can appear to be a monolithic entity when viewed from the outside, but is in fact extremely diverse. Not only are there the ultra conservative Catholics who hanker after the Latin Mass and regard Vatican II with deep suspicion, there are also radical Catholics who think the problem with the Catholic Church is that the programme of reform initiated by Vatican II has

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6 Nickell, 'Spirituality', p 76.

7 *World Christian Encyclopedia* (2<sup>nd</sup> edn), OUP, Oxford 2000.

not yet gone far enough.<sup>8</sup> At the other end of the spectrum, most people think of the Friends as ultra-liberal. This is true of many Friends, especially in this country. However, from a global perspective the biggest grouping of Quakers is those affiliated to Evangelical Friends International who have an evangelical theology and ethos very similar to other evangelical Protestant denominations while retaining a number of Quaker distinctives such as the general non-use of the sacraments and an emphasis on work for peace. The fact that John Wimber came out of this tradition indicates its flavour.<sup>9</sup>

### Two False Attitudes to Pluriformity

All this indicates that Stephen Sykes is correct when he declares that ‘diversity...is the norm for Christianity’.<sup>10</sup> This in turn means that we must abandon the ‘if only’ and ‘the grass is always greener’ responses to diversity.

The ‘if only’ response focuses on one issue that is currently divisive and wrongly suggests that if there was agreement on this one issue then all would be sweetness and light and divisions in the Church would cease. At the moment, one would think from the coverage in the press that *the* source of division within Anglicanism is sexuality. In fact, as we all know, Anglicans are also divided on a whole variety of other issues as well, the ordination of women and lay presidency at the Eucharist being only two examples that come to mind.

The ‘grass is always greener’ response looks enviously at some other Christian tradition and wishes that its own tradition was as united and cohesive as that other tradition appears to be. Thus, at the moment, conservative Anglicans may look enviously at the Roman Catholic Church and think ‘if only the Archbishop of Canterbury was more like the Pope and the Doctrine Commission more like the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith then all would be well in the Church of England’. However, in reality, the Roman Catholic Church has just as many internal difficulties as the Church of England. The grass in the next field only appears to be greener.

What we have to do is learn to live with pluriformity in the church and handle it in a theologically responsible fashion. Pretending it does not exist or hoping that it will somehow go away will not help matters.

### A Pluriform World

Not only is the Christian Church pluriform, but the world in which it exists is even more so. The world in which we live is marked by vast diversity – social, political,

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8 This latter tendency is clearly illustrated by the *Manifesto of the International Movement We Are Church* (at [www.we-are-church.org](http://www.we-are-church.org)) produced in 1997. This manifesto puts forward five radical demands: the building of a church of brothers and sisters that recognizes the equality of all the baptized, including the inclusion of the People of God in the election of bishops in their local churches; equal rights for men and women, including the admission of women to all church ministries; free choice of either a celibate or married life for all those who dedicate themselves to the service of the

church; a positive attitude towards sexuality, and a recognition of personal conscience in decision making; a message of joy and not condemnation, including dialogue, freedom of speech and thought and no anathemas or exclusion as a means of solving problems, especially as this applies to theologians.

9 For a helpful introduction to the Quaker tradition see M P Abbott et al, *Historical Dictionary of The Friends (Quakers)*, The Scarecrow Press, Lanham MA & Oxford 2003.

10 S.W. Sykes, *The Identity of Christianity*, SPCK, London 1984 p 52.

racial, religious, economic and sexual – and, because the Church is never hermetically sealed off from wider society, all this inevitably contributes to the diversity of the Church. Thus, although the differences between ECUSA and the Anglican Church of Nigeria are differences about real and important matters of theological conviction they also reflect differences between the two very different societies in which the churches operate. In America the context of ECUSA is a society in which gay and lesbian relationships are ever more widely tolerated whereas in Nigeria the Church is faced with the challenge of ministering in the face of a growing presence of militant Islam which depicts acceptance of homosexuality as evidence of Western Christian degeneracy.

### **How NOT To Do Theology in This Pluriform Setting**

The question that arises is how we should undertake theology in the light of this pluriform setting. Before examining the nature and task of theology, I want to suggest, there are two things that we should not do.

#### **Where do we start from?**

*Firstly, we should not regard any aspect of the pluriform Church or the pluriform world as the proper starting point for theology.*

In recent years there has been a great vogue for contextual theologies that have taken as their starting point some aspect of human existence or experience. Thus liberation theology took its orientation from the experience of the Latin American poor interpreted in terms of Marxist theory. Following on from that we have had black theology, feminist theology, gay and lesbian theology and green theology. We have also had various forms of indigenous theology such as Korean theology, African theology and Aboriginal theology, to name but three.

The emergence of these kinds of theology is a relatively recent phenomenon, but down the centuries there have also been a variety of confessional theologies that have taken as their starting point the beliefs of some particular part of the Christian Church: Catholic theology, Orthodox theology, Anglican theology, Lutheran theology, Reformed theology and so forth.

As I see it, both of these approaches are wrong in principle. The reason they are wrong in principle was made clear by the 1934 *Barmen Declaration* produced by the Confessing Church in Germany in opposition to the development of an indigenous ‘German’ theology by the Nazi inclined ‘German Christians’. Section I of the *Barmen Declaration* runs as follows:

‘I am the way and the truth and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me.’ (John 14:6). ‘Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that entereth not by the door into the sheepfold, but climbeth up some other way, the same is a thief and a robber...I am the door: by me if any men enter in, he shall be saved.’ (John 10:1,9)

Jesus Christ, as he is testified to us in the Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God, whom we are to hear, whom we are to trust and obey in life and in death. We repudiate the false teaching that the church can and must recognize yet

other happenings and powers, images and truths as divine revelation alongside this one Word of God, as a source of her preaching.<sup>11</sup>

The basic point being made here is clear: Jesus Christ as witnessed to by Holy Scripture is to be the sole source of our theology. This means that we cannot have a hybrid theology that posits something else alongside him as the source of our thinking about God.

### God and Theology

The reason for this is explained by the Scottish theologian T. F. Torrance:

If God really is God then to approach Him or to consider that we can know Him in any way except out of Himself and in a way appropriate to His transcendent nature would be a form of irrationality, but it would also violate an essential characteristic of the scientific mind that it is emancipated from all external authorities, for it 'acknowledges no ultimate authority save the witness of reality to his own mind'<sup>12</sup>

The first point Torrance is making here is that because God is who he is – the free and transcendent God who is not part of the created order – the only basis on which we can know him is in the way that he has decided to make himself known. According to the witness of Holy Scripture, the way that he has done this is through becoming human in Jesus Christ: no-one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known (John 1:18). Furthermore, to know Jesus Christ we have to attend to Scripture because it is through the prophetic and apostolic witness of Holy Scripture, called into being through the work of God the Holy Spirit (2 Tim. 3:16, 2 Pet. 1:21), that we know the truth about him.

It is therefore *irrational* to set up some other ground for knowing God, whether this is some aspect of human experience, or some form of the Christian tradition. Christian theology has only one basis and that is Christ.

In addition, Torrance says, to try to think about God in any other way than on the basis of his self-revelation in Jesus Christ would be *unscientific*. Theology is a science in the sense that it is a disciplined form of human thought that seeks to understand some aspect of reality by thinking about it in accordance with its own nature. To think scientifically therefore means approaching the object of study in as open-minded a way as possible, seeking to shape one's thinking about it by the nature of the object itself. Thus, when studying the solar system, astronomers need to set aside, as far as they can, any preconceived notions of what the universe is like and simply seek to discover how it actually is by looking at the evidence available to them. Similarly, the Christian theologian has – as far as possible – to set aside any preconceived philosophical or theological notions and simply study God's self revelation in Jesus Christ through the testimony of the biblical witnesses.

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11 Text in W. Leith (ed.), *Creeds of the Churches* (rev. edn), Basil Blackwell, Oxford 1973, p 520.

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12 T. F. Torrance, *Theological Science*, OUP, Oxford 1969, p 54.

## Tradition and Theology

Of course, both natural scientists and theologians operate with traditions of thought and models of reality they have learned from others. These shape the way they approach the subject matter they are studying. The point is, however, that these do not form the *basis* of their thought; they are open to being revised or abandoned if they do not fit with the reality of what is being studied.

In short, we must resist the temptation to take an aspect of the pluriformity of the Church or the world and make this the starting point for our theology. Theology has only one starting point and that is the divine revelation in Jesus Christ. This means, for instance, that I, as an evangelical, cannot do theology simply on the basis of existing evangelical thought. I cannot simply reach for my copies of the works of John Stott and use these as the basis of my thinking. As the Reformation slogan has it I have to go *ad fontes*, to the sources, patiently working through the biblical material relevant to that aspect of God's revelation that I am seeking to explore. Of course, Stott's writings may well help me in this process, but on the other hand they may not and this is something I shall not be able to tell in advance. What is true of John Stott would be equally true of writers from other traditions and of secular writers as well: we cannot rule out the possibility that Martin Heidegger or Carl Jung may be able to help us with our theology, but we cannot make their thinking its basis.

## Legitimate diversity?

*Secondly, we cannot simply affirm the pluriformity which exists in the Church by labelling it 'legitimate diversity'.*

In recent years, particularly in ecumenical circles, the concept of 'legitimate diversity' has often been invoked. This emphasis on the acceptance of diversity represents an entirely justifiable reaction against a previous situation in which Christians from different denominations and traditions were highly suspicious of each other and often questioned whether those who differed from them were really Christians.

## The Problems

'Legitimate diversity' raises a number of theological problems. These can be seen in the recent and representative affirmation of diversity contained in the *Porvoo Common Statement* agreed by the British and Irish Anglican Churches and a number the Nordic and Baltic Lutheran churches. This declares:

'Unity in Christ does not exist despite and in opposition to diversity, but is given with and in diversity.' Because this diversity corresponds with the many gifts of the Holy Spirit to the Church, it is a concept of fundamental ecclesial importance, with relevance to all aspects of the life of the Church, and is not a mere concession to theological pluralism. Both the unity and diversity of the Church are ultimately grounded in the communion of God the Holy Trinity.<sup>13</sup>

There are three problems with this statement. The *first* problem is that when the New Testament talks about the variety of gifts given by the Holy Spirit (e.g. 1 Cor. 12:4-11) it refers to a diversity of *ministries* within the one body of Christ. It is

<sup>13</sup> *Together in Mission and Ministry*, Church House Publishing, London 1996, pp 13-14.



difficult to extrapolate from this that *any* given form of diversity in theology, ethics, or church polity ‘corresponds’ to this and so is acceptable. The latter simply does not follow from the former.

The *second* problem is that it is questionable whether one can move from the unity and diversity of the Holy Trinity to the acceptance of diversity in the Church. According to orthodox Christian teaching the diversity of the persons of the Trinity consists solely in their relationships of origin. Everything else about them is identical.<sup>14</sup> This means that there is no difference between them in thought, will or action and thus nothing analogous to the kinds of diversities that exist in the Church. If one wanted to argue that the Church’s diversity was grounded in the diversity within the Trinity, one would have to show that it was grounded in the different relationships of origin that exist within the Trinity. Nobody has, to my knowledge, yet succeeded in showing this.

The *third* problem is that the Porvoo statement does not say whether there are any limits to diversity. However, there have to be limits to diversity. This is because if Christians can do what they like and believe what they like then the term Christian ceases to have any identifiable meaning. This is something that no one would want to say. Everyone in fact sets some limits to Christian diversity. They just draw the boundaries in different places.

### **Legitimate Diversity: A Proposal**

What is required is a better definition of acceptable diversity and, boldly rushing in where angels fear to tread, I suggest that *Christian diversity and pluriformity are legitimate when and only when they are compatible with the biblical witness to Jesus Christ.*

Thus ethnic diversity is a fundamental part of Christianity because, according to the witness of the New Testament, one of the results of Christ’s work was the creation of a multi-ethnic Christian community (e.g. Rom. 15:7-9). However, it would be unacceptable diversity to accept as legitimate the beliefs of people who denied that Christians will be resurrected at the last day on the grounds that (for instance) such a belief seemed impossible to accept in their cultural setting (cf. 1 Cor. 15:13-15).

This suggestion as to the limits of diversity raises the obvious question: how do we tell whether any given form of diversity is or is not compatible with the biblical witness to Jesus Christ? My response would be to say that this has to be argued out on a case-by-case basis.

In short, therefore, we cannot respond to the pluriform setting of theology by either affirming or rejecting diversity as such. What we have to do is to decide whether, in any given case, the diversity that is under discussion accords with the biblical witness or not.<sup>15</sup>

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14 *The Athanasian Creed* spells this out in detail

15 An objection to this approach might be to say that there are issues where the biblical witness appears to be silent. For example, there is division of opinion among Christians about the medical use of discoveries in the field of human genetics and no biblical material that specifically addresses this issue. However, I would

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argue that in all cases the biblical witness provides an overarching ethical framework on the basis of which to make judgements about these kind of issues as the Durham ethicist Robert Song has demonstrated in his recent study of the ethics of genetic engineering, see R. Song, *Human Genetics – Fabricating the Future*, DLT, London 2002.

## How To Do Theology in This Pluriform Setting

Having looked at how *not* to do theology in the context of pluriformity I now want to look positively at how we *should* do theology in this setting. We first need to look in more detail at the nature of theology under six aspects.

### The Nature of Theology

*First*, theology is a particular *form of repentant Christian holiness* in which our thinking about God is transformed in accordance with St. Paul's command, 'Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect'. (Rom. 12:2).

To put it another way, Christian theology is a result of the mortifying and vivifying work of Christ and the Spirit by means of which our fallen reason is made holy and we are enabled to think and speak truthfully about God. In the words of John Webster,

Holy reason is mortified reason. It is reason which has been judged and destroyed as it has been set under the judgment of God against what Paul calls 'all ungodliness and wickedness of men who by their wickedness suppress the truth' (Rom. 1:18). That judgment and destruction was effected once for all at the cross of the Son of God, the one in whose dying God destroyed the wisdom of the wise (Isa. 29:14, 1 Cor. 1:18-19). And holy reason continues to live out mortification as it carries the dying of Jesus within itself – that is, as it submits to the requirement of unceasing repentance, as the Spirit of holiness reproves reason's idolatry, pride, vain curiosity and ambition, as – in short-reason unlearns falsehood and is taught the truth. Holy reason is also reason made alive. If it is subject to the Holy Spirit's reproof as Lord, it is no less subject to the same Spirit's regenerative work as the giver of life. Through the life-giving Spirit, reason is given direction, and thereby turned to its proper end, which is the knowledge of the holy God and of all things in him. And through the Spirit, reason is made capable: its calling renewed, reason is instructed and equipped by the Spirit. And, through this sanctifying work of the Spirit, reason becomes 'holy', set apart by God so that it may undertake the ministry for which it was both made and remade.<sup>16</sup>

*Secondly*, as already indicated, the *subject matter* with which holy reason is called to engage is *the biblical witness to Jesus Christ*. To quote Webster again, what this biblical character means is that the work of theology

must be characterized above all by a deference to the reality of the gospel that is announced in Holy Scripture. That deference is expressed in many ways: by refusal of speculation; by resistance of the pressure to soften the imperative force of *sola scriptura* or *tota scriptura*; by the transparency of the language and concepts of theology to the scriptural canon; and above all, by the persistence, joy and humility with which holy reason addresses itself to the task of reading Scripture, not as master but as pupil, and by a willingness to learn in its school.<sup>17</sup>

16 J. Webster, *Holiness*, SCM, London 2003, pp 23-24.

17 Webster, *Holiness*, p 20.

*Thirdly*, theology has to undertake its God given task *in the context of prayer*. To quote Webster for a third time in his reflection on Ps. 25:4-5: 'Because theological work is always a process of mortification and regeneration, at its heart is the act of beseeching God for instruction...Such prayer is not merely ornamental in theology; it is of the essence. In prayer reason looks to God, confessing its inadequacy and its need to be led into God's truth, and trusting confidently in the Spirit's instruction'.<sup>18</sup>

*Fourthly*, theology has to be undertaken *in the light of Tradition*, the way in which the biblical witness has been understood, transmitted, and lived out in the life of the Christian Church down the centuries. As the ARCIC report *The Gift of Authority* puts it, Tradition is; '...a dynamic process, communicating to each generation what was delivered once for all to the apostolic community.'<sup>19</sup>

Acknowledgement of the importance of Tradition is often seen as a Catholic distinctive, but, as the Baptist theologian Stephen Holmes explains, *all* Christians need to take tradition seriously. To do so acknowledges that God has made us historical beings so the only way we can seek to make sense of the biblical message is in terms of the way it has been transmitted to us by those Christians who have gone before us: we simply cannot avoid engagement with tradition in reading the biblical text. Furthermore, belief in the communion of saints means taking seriously the beliefs and actions not only of other Christians in our own day but of those Christians who have gone before us. If we believe in the work of the Holy Spirit then we must take seriously that God has been continuously at work through the Spirit guiding his Church in the direction he intends and that Tradition is thus the result of divine as well as human activity.<sup>20</sup>

Of course, we also have to be aware that past generations of Christians were as subject to the effects of sin as we are, and open to the possibility that the Spirit may be saying something new to us in a new situation. This means that we have constantly to ask whether the witness of Tradition really has been consonant with the teaching of Scripture and whether it still represents what God is saying to us in our own particular context.

*Fifthly*, as Karl Barth argues in *Evangelical Theology*,<sup>21</sup> theology undertaken on these lines has the *character of a modest, free, critical, and happy science*.

It is *modest* because its subject matter is the God who forbids human beings to boast in their own wisdom.<sup>22</sup> It is *free* because it is not tied to any presuppositions about human existence or self-understanding or religious capability.<sup>23</sup> It is *critical* because it constantly has to rethink what it is saying in the light of the dynamic

18 Webster, *Holiness*, p 24.

19 *The Gift of Authority*, Anglican Book Centre/CTS, Toronto & London 1999 p 17.

20 See S. Holmes, *Listening to the Past*, Paternoster Press, Carlisle 2002, chapter one.

21 By 'evangelical theology' Barth simply means theology that is in accordance with the gospel.

22 'Evangelical theology is modest theology, because it is determined to be so by its object, that is, by him who is its subject'

(K. Barth, *Evangelical Theology*, Fontana, London & Glasgow 1965, p 13).

23 'With respect to those subordinate presuppositions, theology is, for all its modesty, in an exemplary way a free science. This means that it is a science which joyfully respects the mystery of the freedom of its object and which, in turn, is again and again freed by its object from any dependence on subordinate presuppositions', Barth, *Evangelical Theology*, p 14.

activity of the living God who is its subject: 'evangelical theology is an eminently *critical science*, for it is continually exposed to judgment and never relieved of the crisis in which it is placed by its object, or, rather to say its living subject'.<sup>24</sup> It is *happy* because it is concerned with the best of all possible news, the news that God has come amongst us to set us free to live for him.<sup>25</sup>

*Sixthly*, theology has a *practical purpose*. It exists to serve the Church by constantly recalling the Church to the source of its life and witness so that its witness may be purified and its life renewed. It also needs to be noted that understood in this way theology is the responsibility of the entire Christian community. All Christians have the responsibility of constantly allowing God to mortify and vivify their thinking about him as they listen to him speaking to them through the biblical witness. All Christians also have the responsibility of seeking to ensure that the life and witness of the Church is constantly renewed and purified. This is because the Church is the whole people of God in their collective life together and each individual Christian has a responsibility both for their own individual life and witness and for the life and witness of the Christian community as a whole.

## **Theology in the Context of Pluriformity**

Although, theology is not *based* on any aspect of the pluriform Church and world in which it is set, nevertheless Christian theology has to take this pluriformity seriously.

### **Bridge-building**

If the Church is to fulfil the commission given to it by Christ (Matt. 28:16-20; Acts 1:8) by bearing effective witness to him in word and deed, then its words and deeds need not only to be rooted in the biblical witness but also relevant to the questions that people are asking and to the situations that they are facing. What John Stott says about preaching in his book *I Believe in Preaching* also applies to theology: theology is like a bridge between God and the world and like any bridge it has to be firmly anchored at both ends. It has to be anchored in the divine revelation at one end and the reality of the situation it is addressing at the other.

This is why the books of the Bible differ from one another. All the biblical writers bear witness to the same self-revealing God, but they do so in different ways depending on the particular contexts they are addressing. The same has also been true of all the great works of Christian theology down the centuries. Whether one is talking about St Augustine's *City of God*, or Calvin's *Institutes* or Karl Rahner's *Theological Investigations* the pattern is the same: the theologian concerned is addressing the particular issues raised by their own contexts in the light of the biblical witness to Jesus Christ. That is what all of us have in our turn to do today. We too have to address the multiple contexts in which we find ourselves in the light of the biblical witness to Jesus Christ.

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24 Barth, *Evangelical Theology*, p 16.

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25 Barth, *Evangelical Theology*, p 18.

### Attentive Speech and Action

This means, I would argue, that we have to engage in a quadruple attentiveness. We have to be attentive to:

- the biblical witness itself in order to hear God speaking to us through it afresh;
- the situation we are addressing in order that, as far as we are able, we can see it as it really is;
- the Christian tradition in order to discern what it has to tell us that may be relevant to our situation;
- the voices of other Christians who have addressed or are addressing the same situation as ourselves in order that we might hear the Spirit is saying to the church;

Finally, when we have been as attentive as we can be, we have to decide what we think God is saying in this particular situation and speak and act accordingly. However, when we speak and act in this way we have to be constantly aware that we may be wrong. Theology is an aspect of Christian sanctification and although our sanctification is complete in Christ it will not be fully manifested in us until we get to heaven. This means that we will constantly get our theology wrong in many and various ways through 'ignorance, weakness and our own deliberate fault'.

As Torrance puts it:

Out of sheer respect for the majesty of the Truth as it is revealed in the Scriptures, we have to do our utmost to speak correctly and faithfully about it – that is the meaning of orthodoxy and the way of humility – but when we have done all this, we have still to confess that we are unfaithful servants, that all our efforts fall far short of the truth.<sup>26</sup>

This in turn means that we must regard any theological judgment that we arrive at as only a penultimate one rather than a final one. To quote Barth again:

It is as well to realise that we even when it seems that a verdict can and should be given in a specific case, we can only make, as it were, a judgement for the moment, for to-day, and tomorrow we must give another hearing to find out whether we have perhaps been deceived in some respect and thus ought to alter the judgment. Such judgments, even those that are well founded, even those that the divided Church has solemnly laid down in its mutually opposed and mutually accusatory confessions, must always be regarded in principle merely as very sharply put questions and not as God's own judgments. But when all this is seen and said, it must also be seen and said that the sword of God's real judgment does hang over our heads – over our own heads as well as those of our heretical partners in controversy – when we take up and pursue this work.<sup>27</sup>

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26 T. F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 1975, pp 163-4.

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27 K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics I/1* (2<sup>nd</sup> edn), T&T Clark, Edinburgh 1975, p 287.

### **Daring To Do Theology**

Barth's solemn warning about the judgment of God that hangs over us (see Matt. 12:36-37, 2 Cor. 5:10, Jas. 3:1) brings us to how we can dare to do theology at all. If in all our theological endeavours we are but unprofitable servants, and if we have to face the awful judgment of God at the last day, then theology becomes a highly dangerous enterprise. How can we, sinners that we are, dare to speak in the name of God? Yet, keeping silent is not an option either. As the parable of the talents shows, hiding our talent in the ground because we are afraid of God simply makes us an unprofitable servant deserving to be cast into the outer darkness where men weep and gnash their teeth (Matt. 25:14-30).

The answer to this dilemma lies in the great Reformation doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone. As Martin Luther urged Philip Melancthon, we have to go out and 'sin boldly'. We have to do the best theological work that we can while trusting not in our own theological righteousness but in God's manifold and great mercies granted to those who confess their unworthiness and seek his forgiveness.

Like the publican in the parable, we simply have to cry out 'God be merciful to me a sinner' (Lk. 18:13), trusting that in his mercy God will forgive our shortcomings and that in his mercy God will take our theological efforts, unworthy though they are, and use them for the manifestation of his glory and the extension of his kingdom.

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