

Concerning My Earlier Understanding of Theology

What is said about the task of theology in the Preface to *Christ without Myth* confirms that I still thought of it at that time as simply a matter of interpreting—of passing on, or of ever seeking more adequately to express—the precious heritage of the church. Accordingly, I represented theology as taking place within the church's ongoing conversation concerning the ultimate source of its common life—without saying or in any way suggesting that it has a distinctive role in that conversation.

(Is it at all significant, however, that I also said there that this theological task is never done and must constantly be undertaken *ab ovo*?)

The understanding of theology expressed in the body of the book may be summarized as follows:

Theology seeks to explicate, and thus to unfold, as clearly and systematically as possible, the existential (existentiell) self-understanding implicit in Christian faith and in the kerygma of the New Testament.

Theology is the self-explication of faith.

One of the goals of the perennial theological task is to present the content of faith in a form that can be "understood of the people," i. e., in a conceptuality understandable to those to whom its explication of faith is addressed.

The other goal of Christian theology must be to express as appropriately as possible just this particular gospel and not any other word that may have been uttered in human history.

There are two goals of theology's explication and, correspondingly, two criteria for measuring its adequacy—namely, understandability and appropriateness.

(Serious confusion is introduced in this early statement of my understanding when I say that "the sole [sic] norm of every legitimate theological assertion is the revealed word of God," etc., only to go on to speak of the gospel as "the second [sic!] norm of theological restatement.")

It's clear from the following summary that essentially the same understanding is also set forth in *The Reality of God*.

The present task of systematic theology, summarily defined, is the task of stating in an adequate conceptual form in our particular situation the understanding of God, man, and the world re-presented in the witness of faith of Jesus Christ.

The theologian is never his own man, but exists for the purpose of expressing as adequately as he can the faith of the historical Christian community.

Even so, the systematic theologian's function is different from that of the historian, or historical theologian, in that he seeks to present a new critico-constructive interpretation of the witness of Christian faith that will enable the church to speak adequately in the present situation.

The theological enterprise has an unavoidably communal character, in that the theologian speaks within and on behalf of the catholic Christian church.

One criterion of theological adequacy is that the understanding of faith [sc. the Christian understanding of human existence] be formulated "understandably," i. e., in a way that will seem both meaningful and true to persons living in the particular time in and for which the theologian has his theological vocation.

The other criterion of theological adequacy is that the meaning of faith shall also be stated "appropriately," i. e., in terms that do not obscure but transparently express its fundamentally existential character as faith.

Protestant theology is nothing if not the appropriate interpretation in a given situation of the witness of Holy Scripture to the God of Jesus Christ. Yet no theology can be adequate that restricts itself to this dogmatic task alone. Beyond his duty to speak appropriately to the scriptural witness, the theologian must speak understandably to his contemporary hearers by taking full responsibility for the meaning and truth of his assertions.

The theologian's first duty is to secure an appropriate interpretation of scripture.

But in discharging either of his tasks—either the dogmatic task of speaking appropriately or the apologetic task of speaking understandably—the theologian must proceed critically, by distinguishing between claims to appropriateness and understandability and valid claims thereto.

Theology's cura prior is to interpret a given witness for which the reality of God is necessary.

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