

GOSPEL AND THE STARTING PLACES OF SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

Ever since the birth, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, faithful people have been wrestling with the question of what Good News Jesus brought to the world and how we might talk about it. Although Jesus spoke quite clearly and demonstrated God's love in undeniable ways, the nuances and core of this revelation has been discussed and debated among Christians and non-Christians alike, with many asserting that they have the best answer. Although we may not be able to fully grasp the Good News in its entirety, it is absolutely necessary that we talk about the nature of the Gospel, our context today, and the need for the Good News in that context. Living in an age of post-modernism and post-Christendom, we must be honest about the dynamic aspects of the Gospel, but also faithful to the loving and living God that invites us into relationship with the Divine and the whole human community.

How one begins their exploration of the Gospel has important implications about how the Good News is defined and its impact perceived. Walter Bouman says, "The starting point for how one gives an account of Christianity is of critical importance for [providing a systematic theology]. The starting point determines two things: (1) how a particular account of Christianity is organized; and (2) where one makes one's foundational apologetic case for Christianity" (20). In an attempt to organize my own thoughts about the Good News of God, I personally tend to begin where Douglas John Hall begins, with the suffering of humanity and God's entry into that suffering. However, I recognize that I tend to approach the Gospel in this manner because of my own experiences and my tendencies in ministry. I have experienced and witnessed a lot of suffering in my life and have spent a lot of time wrestling with the question of where God is in the midst of it. My approach to the Gospel tends to reflect this personal spiritual journey as I share with others this struggle to find Good News in the midst of a broken world. However, I also acknowledge the fact that my experiences and gifts have led me to often try to "fix" things,

and that more often than I should, I approach ministry with this mentality. Thus, it is natural for me to embrace a theological system that seeks to identify the brokenness in people's lives and speak to them Good News that will bring hope and assurance in the midst of their suffering and sin. While this starting place and approach are very often helpful, Bouman's explanation of the importance of one's starting place reminds me that it is only one starting place and that there are other good approaches that speak to the different questions and dynamics of the Gospel.

Rather than choosing to follow one of the countless systematic theologians who have advocated one starting place or another for a theology of the Gospel, or blazing our own path, the Gospel might best be served by adopting the combined wealth of these approaches. I am not suggesting that we arbitrarily start anywhere, that we proceed in a non-systematic manner, or that we blend starting places and create a melting pot of systems. Rather, I propose that we begin in different places at different times depending on the immediate context and apologetic task. If Bouman is correct that the starting point determines where one makes one's apologetic case for Christianity, we must be willing to vary our starting point depending on the apologetic task at hand. The reality is that different people are in different places in their lives at different times. While I would tend to approach the Gospel by starting with suffering, this may not be the best starting place for every other person where they are. In fact, it is probably not even the best starting place for me at all time because it focuses on the suffering in my life and I am not always suffering. At times, the Good News might be most helpful and actually Good for me by beginning with God's creative action. I think we could all agree that in a newspaper, the definition of good news changes depending on the context and who is reading it. Likewise, the Gospel is Good News because it begins and ends where one is in their lives, speaking to the root of his or her experience in that time and place.

I have talked a lot about the importance of "local" contexts (the places in which

individuals find themselves in their lives), but it is also important to acknowledge the wider context that shapes the human community. Because even the world context is different from place to place, I shall focus primarily on the North American context. The reality is that we live in a post-Christendom, post-modern age. Christianity is no longer the norm of human practice and spirituality, and fewer people are familiar with the stories, traditions, and teachings that shape Christian living. It is in this age more than any other since the earliest centuries after Christ that the church is in need of the apologetic task. Although we live in a post-modern world with a post-modern mentality, many people (including Bouman) advocate a modern approach to this task. Even those outside the church expect a modern solution and explanation to the existence and relevance of God, even though they receive the Christian apology with a post-modern mentality (Conder 129). Along with other post-modern trends, such as the emphasis on community, this post-modern mentality involves a broader understanding of truth and a general skepticism that refuses to grant automatic authority to sources such as scripture and tradition. Thus, as we preach and teach the Gospel in our context today, we must be willing to admit that we cannot pin down God or even the Gospel. As a theologian of the cross would argue, as soon as we believe we have the answer, we have completely missed it. There is no “correct” starting point, nor is there any one system that can fully encapsulate the living God, just as there is no single symbol or metaphor that fully depicts the Divine. The fact is that God is beyond our full knowing, and we can only talk about God in ways that acknowledge the limitation of our words and our reason. Although this might be disparaging, there is Good News in the knowledge that God is beyond our understanding, and there is wonder to the mystery of God, which is embraced and welcomed in a post-modern worldview (Rollins 18-19). Nonetheless, we are called by God to the task of theology and proclamation of the Gospel with a variety of approaches, not so that we can explain the answer, but so that through conversation and relationship we might live in the

questions.

Having addressed the context and need for multiple starting points, we have come to the point of conversation about what the Gospel is. Throughout the paper thus far, I have used “Gospel” and “Good News” rather interchangeably because I consider them to be much the same, though my use of each term has been intentional in each place because, like the two sides of a single coin, they each have slightly different definition but are the same thing. The Good News is that there is a living and loving God that is with us. It might be argued that this means my starting place is with an incarnational theology, and perhaps that is true in this instance, because of the fact that I am probably still a modern thinker trying to live and converse in an increasingly post-modern world. My use of the term “living” to describe God is intentional. Rather than being the *object* of our speculation and theology, the *object* of our wants and needs, God is a *subject* with whom we are in relationship (Rollins 23). God is not defined by us, but has self-definition. Although we often like to think that we know what God is like, God continues to demonstrate that the Divine identity far surpasses our expectations. Because our desires are often focused on what we think will fill our emptiness and heal our brokenness, it is truly Good News that God far exceeds what we would to believe God to be. This living nature of the Divine is often expressed through our discussion of the Trinity (whether or not we use that word). We understand God to have an internal, immanent relationality that is intertwined with an economic relationship with humanity.

This Divine economic identity is the Gospel revealed to humanity in relationship. All of creation has meaning and purpose to its life because it is given by God. There is joy in the knowledge and experience that all that God has created is good. It is tempting to focus on the suffering and sin in the world (especially for Lutherans), but we cannot ignore the liberating experience the grace of God’s creating work, and share in the joy of abundant life. Humanity is

invited to participate in this creation as co-creators. Adopted into the family of God, our lives are given meaning and purpose beyond what that would have if it were up to us. We are justified not by our own works, but by the sheer grace of the God who created us and loves us. Nonetheless, we do live in a fallen and broken world where sin and suffering are prevalent. Rather than being distant from this world, God loved the world so much that God entered into it with the fullness of humanity. Through Jesus, the Divine love for humanity was revealed through life and death. God entered our world in human form to live among us, revealing God's profound love for humanity and out of that love, teaching us a new way of life. Furthermore, through the life and death of Jesus, we witness that God's love is so great that there is nothing we have experienced or ever will experience that God does not fully understand and willingly share. However, God's love is not simply solidarity with the suffering (and joy) of humanity. There is resurrection after death. Even death is transformed into life. Once again, we see that God is not bound by our expectations and our understanding. We would have God remove death, but instead God transforms it into new life. God is a God of transformation. From the beginning of time when God creates order out of chaos, through the inauguration of a new age when God transforms death into life through Jesus, into that new age when the Holy Spirit moves in and among humanity transforming sinners into saints. Even in our time and place, God continues to create and recreate in us and through us. We are made new each day and every hour. Through the Spirit, we are called not just into relationship with God, but into relationship with one another. Commanded to love one another as we love God, this horizontal relationship with each other is created in the image of our vertical relationship with God so that all might know the Good News of the live-giving and life-transforming power and love of the living God.

We preach the Gospel because God is love and life, and our recognizing that presence in our lives is essential to our fully living. We proclaim the Good News because the world needs to

hear it. We think that we do not need God, that we can make it on our own, but the reality is that we cannot. God's love and presence that transcends our understanding and expectation is liberating and life-giving. This Good News needs to be shared with the world because we think we know what it is, but too often have missed it completely. Because we cannot do it alone, we are called not as individuals, but as a community and as a body, to share this Good News. As the church proclaims the Gospel through word and action, that community and those individuals become the means by which God is present and saves the beloved adopted children. In the proclamation of the Gospel, we bear God to one another. As the Good News is spread throughout the world, hope (no matter where we are in life) springs forth. We are not alone. God is with us, living and ever-loving.

Works Cited

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