AN Invitation TO Theological Study

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An Address Given at Perkins School of Theology

The majority of you gathered here are enrolling in the Master of Divinity program and are aiming for ordination and pastoral ministry. Others, in pursuit of a variety of objectives, are entering the Master of Theological Studies program. There are several entering the Master of Religious Education program, and others are joining the Master of Sacred Music program. Whatever your degree program, nearly all of you understand yourselves to be here pursuing education for some form of ministry. The curricular structure of these various programs is such that you are likely to be having at least some classes together with persons following other degree programs in the school, and you will be sharing — to the extent that your own schedule allows — in the common life of the school of theology. My task is to give you a brief orientation to this enterprise in which we are all about to be involved together, namely, theological education.

Education for ministry — any sort of ministry — involves several things, all interwoven. One thing it involves is what we might call education in Christian life. The authors of a recent book in theology have written: "Coping with God and with [God's] generosity is the central task of Christian faith."[1] Education in Christian life involves learning to trust in God and to be loyal to God — lifelong tasks in themselves, by most accounts. It involves acquiring and refining those habits and practices, emotions and dispositions

appropriate to trust in and loyalty to God. It involves coming to understand ourselves in ways appropriate to the Christian message, with its concepts of creation and fall, sin and grace, judgment to the hard of heart and good news to the poor, thanksgiving, joy, patience, and all the rest. All this pertains to education for ministry. In some traditions, this sort of thing has often been discussed under the heading of "spiritual formation" or "spiritual growth"; something like it pertains to all Christian traditions and communities, whether they pay it much explicit attention or not.

Another thing education for ministry involves is education in the Christian faith; that is, growth in understanding the Christian witness — the gospel, the tradition — and what it means when it speaks of God, creation, fall, Jesus Christ, incarnation, atonement, resurrection, and so forth. This is obviously closely related to the type of education just mentioned — education in Christian life, or education as formation — because grasping the central concepts of the Christian faith requires a certain living involvement with them. But the focus here is not so much on the personal appropriation of these concepts or of the Christian message so much as it is on simply grasping the content of the tradition — understanding what the Christian faith is — so that, for instance, you might give an account of it to yourself or to others.

A third thing education for ministry involves is equipment for the particular responsibilities of one's particular vocation in ministry — education in the performance of one's office. That office might be pastoral leadership in a congregation, for which you would presumably need education in the tasks of preaching, counseling, administration, and so forth, and not only in these distinct tasks but in the overall work of pastoral leadership to which they belong. Or perhaps you envision a special ministry in education, or in sacred music, or in community organization, or writing. In any case, there are likely to be particular competences and skills to be acquired, and a certain sense of yourself in the role to be attained, and this too belongs to education for ministry.

It is worth observing that these considerations all apply to education for the general ministry of the church — the ministry that belongs to all Christians — as well as to education for the more specialized ministries of church leadership. All Christians need and deserve competent education in Christian life, education in Christian faith, and education for the particular ways in which they share in the church's task of bearing witness in the world.

Typically, these various processes of education for ministry all start before one arrives in a school of theology — usually long before. There are, of course, many different routes by which people arrive at this place. For some, the route is a process of steady nurture in the life of the church: being raised in the church, actively participating, gradually taking responsibility for leadership in one field or another, perhaps having people point you toward a vocation in special ministry. For many others, the pattern has been different — perhaps early training in the church, leaving, returning later with a new slant on things; or coming to Christianity as an adult, without any real exposure to it before. But however it has happened, you arrive here with some sort of formation as a human being and as a Christian; with some understanding of what the Christian faith is; with some special abilities identified and cultivated. Further, all these educational processes will, we hope, continue long after you leave this place.

A school of theology provides an opportunity for intensive education in all three of these areas — formation, understanding the faith, equipping for ministry. In our setting, formation is given attention through some structured opportunities and occasions — small groups, occasions for corporate worship, workshops, some courses, and the like — but also through our life together. Similarly, understanding the faith is fostered in one way or another through many of the courses you will take and through informal conversation, reading, and reflection. Equipping you for the responsibilities of your ministry is the aim of various other courses and of internships and practica of various kinds (depending on your degree program and your own objectives), and extracurricular opportunities also have a contribution to make.

However, the particular responsibility of a theological school — and your particular responsibility while you are here — is theological education.

What is theological education? The term is not simply a synonym for education for ministry. Nor is theological education something we do alongside other things — something we might do, for instance, in a few specified courses, whereas other courses are devoted to other sorts of education. Rather, theological education is something we do through the whole curriculum and through our life together as a community.

Theological education, simply defined, is that process through which persons become theologians — competent participants in

theological inquiry. It is the fostering in persons of an aptitude for theology. Your principal task while you are here is to become theologians — or perhaps I should say, to become better theologians than you are at the moment, whatever your present ability may be. No doubt that is a better way of stating the task, because, just as you have arrived here already with some sort of Christian formation, some understanding of the Christian faith, and some cultivation of your gifts for ministry, so you have arrived with some sort of theological aptitude. It may be relatively good or relatively poor, in need of fine tuning or in need of major overhaul. But in any case, you are already theologians in that you have certain ways of thinking about Christian faith and life and practice, certain ways of forming judgments, certain habits of reflection. Your principal task here is to get much better at all this than you are now.

But why should you? Why should you want to become theologians? What does theology have to do with church leadership? In order to deal with these questions, I need to say something about the nature of Christian theology. Christian theology, as I understand it — and, though I don't claim to speak for my colleagues, I think this is a fairly representative understanding — is a critical inquiry into the validity of Christian witness. That is to say, Christian theology is the activity of examining the life and message of the Christian church, and of making some judgments as to whether they are what they purport to be, namely, authentic, true, and fitting representations of the gospel of Jesus Christ.[2]

One can emphasize the critical aspect of this inquiry — as, for example, when you reflect on some sample of witness already performed (say, the sermon you heard, or perhaps preached, yesterday) — and ask to what extent its witness to the gospel was authentic, intelligible, and appropriate to the occasion. Or one can emphasize the constructive aspect of the inquiry — as, for example, when you ponder next Sunday's worship service or the appeal your church has just received to join in an effort to ban the showing of the film *The Last Temptation of Christ* in your community — and ask what would constitute valid Christian witness in this situation. Both the critical and the constructive aspects are always involved, in every case, though one may be more prominent than the other.

Theological education aims to foster the aptitude for such reflection. I use the word "aptitude" advisedly here; an aptitude is a combination of a capacity and a disposition. To have an aptitude for something is to be apt to do it, under appropriate circumstances; and to be apt to do something you have to be both able to do it and disposed to do it. Ability alone does not make aptitude. Neither does willingness alone. It takes both. In other words, theological education is meant to improve your theological judgment. Its purpose is to make you better at recognizing valid Christian witness should you happen across any; to spot the bad stuff too — the inauthentic, unintelligible, inept stuff that, sad to say, abounds — and furthermore to see what is wrong with it; and to subject not only others' but also (and perhaps foremost) your own past and prospective efforts at witness and at the leadership of witness to searching, constructive criticism.

If at this point you fail to see the connection between theological aptitude and the responsibilities of church leadership, or between theological education and education for ministry, I'm not sure what more I can say. Genuine church leadership is not merely a matter of performing certain prescribed functions or filling certain roles in accord with prevailing expectations; genuine church leadership demands, among other things, imagination, and courage, and something that itself requires both imagination and courage — sound theological judgment. Such judgment is not the exclusive preserve of church leaders, nor is theological education something that concerns them alone. The basic education of all Christians should include a significant theological element: it should equip them for the sort of reflection on the quality of their own Christian faith and life and witness that Christian maturity requires. But it is essential that those entrusted with the special ministries of leadership in the church have an abundant measure of this judgment. It is for this reason that the advanced education for leadership that your various degree programs represent must be theological education.

What does theological education involve? How does one become a theologian? As with learning many things, one becomes a competent participant in theological inquiry by participating in theological inquiry. No one can give you good judgment. You acquire it, if you do, by making judgments, reflecting on your performance in the company of some experienced practitioners who can help you think about what you are doing, and trying again. You acquire it, that is, through participation in a community of theological inquiry. That is what this school tries to be. I appeal to a text that you shortly will be exhorted to read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest — the *Bulletin* of Perkins School of Theology. In its opening paragraph, we are told that "[t]he primary purpose of

Perkins School of Theology is twofold: to serve the church through disciplined reflection on its life and witness, and to prepare women and men for effective leadership in the church." Now, on a superficial reading of this statement, one might conclude that it was talking about two purposes that just happen to be combined here: on the one hand, reflection on the church's life and witness; and on the other, preparation of persons for church leadership. But if the preparation for church leadership that this school offers is essentially theological education, then the unity of purpose is visible. What it boils down to is this: This school prepares women and men for leadership in the church by involving them in disciplined reflection on the church's life and witness — including their own life and witness. It involves them in disciplined reflection on their own Christian existence, on their own understanding of the Christian faith, and on their own practice of ministry. And it does so in such a way as to equip them to engage in such disciplined reflection from then on.

What this involves, more specifically, you shortly will be finding out. For the moment, I should only say — lest there be any doubt on this point — that theological education is a complex affair largely because theological inquiry is a complex affair. Let me mention just two aspects of that complexity. In the first place, theological inquiry involves several distinct academic disciplines, or families of disciplines. In some of your courses, the methodology and approach will be mainly historical; in others, social-scientific concepts and methods — forms of sociology, psychology, and anthropology — will play an important part; in others, various sorts of philosophical inquiry will be prominent. Other courses will combine all of these or will add more besides. To the extent that your previous education has given you some background in these disciplines and has not yet faded irrecoverably from memory, you should be well prepared for what awaits you here. If you come with the advantage of a good liberal education, kept well-tuned, you will find most of what you encounter here to be an extension and enrichment of forms of inquiry you already know. If you do not bring that sort of preparation, or if it needs more than a little dusting off, I hope you will seek out the various sorts of help available to you here in getting oriented to your studies, and that you will then take advantage of the opportunity you have here to get a grounding in the liberal arts by way of your theological education.

The other sort of complexity I want to mention is this. In nearly

all of the study you undertake here, you will find yourself expected to engage in a threefold operation that corresponds essentially to the structure of theological inquiry as such. This threefold structure is not unique to theological study, incidentally; it is paralleled in some other fields. But it definitely belongs to theological study. When he described this structure, Martin Luther referred to its elements as *oratio, meditatio,* and *tentatio* — prayer, meditation, and testing — and he claimed to derive this scheme from Psalm 119. "Prayer" here refers to the moment of attentive, receptive listening — openness to being grasped by the subject so that it can make itself known. "Meditation" is the moment of reflection in which questions are posed and judgments are reached. "Testing" refers to the moment of appropriation — that is, of making those judgments your own by incorporating them into your subsequent practice and seeing how they stand up.

For example, suppose that one day in class I declare to you that I am a secular humanist. How might you respond to that declaration? Well, you might just write it down, in true consumer-of-facts style, just in case it should ever come up on an exam ("Is your instructor a secular humanist? — yes or no"), and wait for me to make another noteworthy point. Or you might throw down your pen (or tape recorder) in disgust, exclaiming to your neighbors, "They warned me at home about this school, and they were right!" and resolve to transfer to another school before we do you any more damage.

Or you might undertake a little prayer, meditation, and testing — in Luther's sense of these terms. That is, you might first try to make sure you understand this utterance of mine: What do I mean by the term "secular humanist"? Why would I think it appropriate to describe myself as one? Why am I saying this to the class?

Imagine that by listening attentively, or by asking me questions if you weren't sure you understood, you came to find out that I had uttered this declaration as a way of introducing an argument whose point was to convince you that "secular" and "humanist" should not be regarded as anti-Christian concepts, but rather as concepts with deep roots in the Christian faith. I wanted to suggest to you that true secularity and true humanism were things Christians ought to affirm and stand up for, over against the distorted notions of them current in right-wing religious and political jargon. What I had in mind was genuine biblical secularity, that view of the world as God's good creation which is implied by biblical faith in

God (and which, incidentally, is opposed to all secularisms ancient or modern), and genuine Christian humanism, that affirmation of human value which is implied by the gospel's revelation of "the humanity of God" (as Karl Barth put it) in Jesus Christ. You would perhaps then understand that I was not announcing my conversion to atheism, as you had at first assumed; you would have grasped my meaning and my argument, such as it was.

Then you would be in a position to meditate upon this declaration — or, as we might more commonly say, to reflect upon it. That is, you might ask yourself whether I was right in assigning those terms the meaning I assigned them and whether my reasons for associating secularity and humanism with Christian faith, and for affirming them as good things, and for thus considering myself a secular humanist, were sound reasons. You might, further, consider whether I showed good judgment in uttering this inflammatory declaration to the class. Apart from the merits of my case for my position, was I more likely to mislead than to inform my listeners? Under the circumstances, was it wise of me to make that statement, or was it ill-advised? Having arrived at some judgments along these lines in your meditation (judgments that might serve simply to reconfirm your previous views on these points, or that might open up some new possibilities), you could incorporate those judgments into your own subsequent reflection and practice, and test them.

Because our primary goal as your instructors is to nurture in you this sort of process of inquiry, to exercise and strengthen your judgment, you will probably notice a disconcerting habit in us: We keep asking questions, and we keep not giving you the answers. I don't mean that we will hide our own opinions; ordinarily, we will share those freely and will explain the reasons behind them as well as we can. But what we will not do is supply your answers for you. We continue to insist that you work these out for yourself, and we are likely to pay more attention to the soundness of the process by which you arrived at your judgments than to the judgments themselves. You may find this inconvenient. We are prepared for this, and we will meet your frustration with an equanimity that you will find most irritating. As your faculty, we have a deep commitment to your theological education.

In an article in the *American Journal of Theology* in 1916, Professor George Burman Foster of the University of Chicago Divinity School wrote: "It may be said that usually the candidate for the

ministry — young though he may sometimes be — enters the divinity school as a finished religious and theological product, but that in consequence of his studies there he departs, unfinished, growing, aware that his personality, with its religion and its theology, are alike in the making. A divinity school that achieves such a result has fulfilled its function in the life of the human spirit."[3] As Foster's reference to the age and sex of the typical student makes clear, several things have changed in schools of theology since 1916. But among the things that abide — at least, in schools that take seriously the task of theological education — is this unfinishing effect. Perhaps the uncompleted refurbishing and rearrangement of various classrooms and offices that you have noticed on your arrival this week can serve as an outward sign of an inward truth about our purpose here. As an unfinished and unfinishing school, we welcome you.

Notes

1: An Invitation to Theological Study

1. Daniel W. Hardy and David F. Ford, *Praising and Knowing God* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), p. 71.

2. For some development of the view of theology sketched here, see Charles M. Wood, *Vision and Discernment: An Orientation in Theological Study* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985).

3. George Burman Foster, "The Contribution of Critical Scholarship to Ministerial Efficiency," *American Journal of Theology* 20 (1916): 178.

2: Theological Education and Education for Church Leadership

1. David B. Burrell, *Aquinas: God and Action* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979), p. 4.

2. I do not mean to imply that only Christians can understand the Christian faith. However, an understanding of the Christian faith — or of any other religious tradition — does seem to require a kind of conceptual equipment that is normally achieved through personal participation in it. The task confronting the person who wants to understand a faith other than her own is to "entertain" that faith sufficiently to acquire the relevant concepts, through whatever sort of involvement is both necessary and appropriate. This is less difficult in some cases than in others, for a variety of reasons, but it is probably never easy.

3. There are other forms of theology and of theological education than Christian. To what extent, if at all, what I say about the Christian versions would be true of other traditions (for example, Jewish theology and theological education) is best left to members of those other traditions to judge. For more on the general understanding of Christian theology and theological education represented here, see Charles M. Wood, *Vision and Discernment: An Orientation in Theological Study* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985).

For all degree applicants:

What, according to Wood, is "theological education" and how is it related to "education for ministry"? How do "theological education" and "education for ministry" connect with your own perceptions of graduate theological education at Perkins School of Theology?