

AN AGENDA FOR THEOLOGICAL STUDIES IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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My task in this lecture is to consider the future of systematic theology. I think it will be obvious that systematic theology has generally been developed in a western context. I do not apologize for this; it is a simple fact of history. Yet we need to recognize that systematic theology is, at least to some extent, shaped by the audiences which it addresses and the issues which are debated within a culture. Wolfhart Pannenberg has argued that western theology has been shaped by its engagement with the rise of the natural sciences and the secular critique of authority.¹ Yet these critiques are especially associated with the western world. Might not very different styles of systematic theology arise when the engagement in question is not western, but reflects issues in the emerging world – such as an encounter with Hinduism rather than secularism?²

¹ Wolfhart Pannenberg, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1991), 12-13.

² This idea is pursued in an interesting study by Leonard Swidler, *After the Absolute: The*

This predominantly western orientation of systematic theology raises thus some questions for our theme. Why, for example, should an Asian feel in slightest degree obligated to continue such a tradition? Is not the correct and obvious way ahead in the next century to develop theologies which arise out of our own engagement with the realities of the gospel, rather than accept what someone else – generally from a western context – has bequeathed us?

It is here that evangelicalism has an important contribution to make to systematic theology, by insisting that theology arises from Scripture, and is not derived from a series of philosophical presuppositions – presuppositions which, far from being universally valid and recognized, reflect the western context in which they emerged.

A biblical systematic theology is concerned with the exploration of the leading themes of Scripture, in order that their meaning may be understood and proclaimed in the living world of today. The theologian is thus required to correlate Scripture and the context in which the community of faith operates – that is, to allow biblical affirmations to impact on the contemporary situation. Philosophical categories may be used to develop and illuminate theological points. These points, however, have a biblical, rather than a philosophical, foundation. They are grounded in Scripture, even if we may use some philosophy congenial to our intended audience to develop them.

The history of evangelicalism suggests that the success of the movement rests upon its willingness to correlate Scripture with the context in which it finds itself, rather than simply reaching backwards into evangelical history to draw out past correlations, such as the way in which a text was applied by Calvin in his sixteenth-century Genevan context. I am sure that I do not need to remind this distinguished audience that sixteenth century Geneva bears little resemblance to what we expect Hong Kong to look like in the next century!

The issue is that of applying Scripture to our own contexts, rather than slavishly repeating interpretations of Scripture originally developed with a very different cultural context in mind.³ David F. Wells, one of

Dialogical Future of Religious Reflection (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990).

³ For an excellent discussion of this point, see David J. Hesselgrave and Edward Rommen, *Contextualization: Meanings, Methods and Models* (Grand Rapids: Baker, and Leicester: Apollos, 1989).

evangelicalism's most significant and respected contemporary exponents, comments as follows on the task of evangelical theology:⁴

It is the task of theology, then, to discover what God has said in and through Scripture and to clothe that in a conceptuality which is native to our own age. Scripture, at its *terminus a quo*, needs to be de-contextualized in order to grasp its transcultural content, and it needs to be re-contextualized in order that its content may be meshed with the cognitive assumptions and social patterns of our own time.

Wells's words point to the need to see Scripture and our own context as two horizons – horizons that need to be related to each other.⁵ For Calvin, the task was to relate Scripture to sixteenth-century Geneva; for you, it will be to relate that same Scripture to the Hong Kong of the next century. Calvin's approach and the results which it yields may be helpful to you as you seek to undertake this task; his answers cannot be identical to yours. For instance, it is well known that Calvin was interested in – and, to some extent, influenced by – the language and concepts of the classical Roman philosophical and rhetorical tradition.⁶ China has an older philosophical and rhetorical tradition. Why should you use the same ideas that Calvin borrowed, when you have a distinguished heritage of your own to draw upon?

If the Christian faith has any intellectual substance, then theology will remain of vital importance in the future. I believe passionately that Christianity is not simply believing in God; it is believing certain quite definite things about God, about Jesus Christ, and about our own nature and destiny. Theology is an attempt to set out these beliefs in an intellectually rigorous yet spiritually exciting way. The nature of the Christian faith is therefore such that theology must have an assured future.

Yet the nature of that theology needs to be examined. Western theology, which has dominated things for far too long, has generally proceeded on the basis of an agenda set by the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment was a period in western cultural history which argued for the elevation of reason above emotion and imagination, and stressed

⁴ David F. Wells, "The Nature and Function of Theology" in R.K. Johnston, ed., *The Use of the Bible in Theology: Evangelical Options* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox, 1985), 177.

⁵ This issue is explored in greater detail in Anthony Thiselton, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980).

⁶ See Charles Partee, *Calvin and the Classical Tradition* (Leiden: Brill, 1977).

the importance of detachment. A theologian was therefore someone who was concerned with ideas, and whose study of those ideas was to be undertaken in a detached and non-committed manner.

It will be clear from what I shall say that, while I believe strongly in the future of systematic theology, I do not believe that the hitherto predominant western model should be allowed to dominate. It is my view that western theology would be considerably advanced if many of its Enlightenment-based assumptions were to be abandoned. But that is an agenda that we must pursue in the west. The point I wish to make to this audience is quite simple: western theology has set you an example which is not entirely appropriate, either for your own situation in Asia, or for the study of theology in general.

To illustrate the importance of theology, both in the present and in the envisaged future, and to explore further the point which I have just made, I propose to examine the fundamental and vital role that theology plays in relation to three critical areas of the ministry and thought of the Christian church: spirituality; apologetics and evangelism; and ethics. In each case, I want to show how theology – correctly understood! – has an indispensable role to play.

Theology and Spirituality

In his *Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education*, the noted American theological educationalist Edward Farley points to a series of developments in theological education which have led to the loss of a defining theological vision characterized by the coinherence of piety and intellect. Farley argues that the term *theologia* has lost its original meaning, which he defines – a little lugubriously – as "sapiential and personal knowledge of divine self-disclosure", which leads to "wisdom or discerning judgement indispensable for human living." The original vision of theology was, he assures us, "not just objective science, but a personal knowledge of God and the things of God."⁷

⁷ Edward Farley, *Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), x, 7. The debate which resulted may be followed in works such as J. C. Hough and J. B. Cobb Jr., eds., *Christian Identity and Theological Education* (Chico, California: Scholar's Press, 1985); Charles M. Wood, *Vision and Discernment: An Orientation in Theological Study* (Atlanta: Scholar's Press, 1985); Edward Farley, *The Fragility of Knowledge: Theological Education in the Church and University* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988).

Christian theology cannot remain faithful to its subject matter if it regards itself as purely propositional or cognitive in nature. The Christian encounter with God is transformative. As John Calvin pointed out, to know God is to be changed by God; true knowledge of God leads to worship, as the believer is caught up in a transforming and renewing encounter with the living God. To know God is to be changed by God.⁸ The idea of a purely "objective" or "disinterested" knowledge of God is thus precluded. For someone to speak objectively about "knowing God" is as realistic as the lover speaking dispassionately of the beloved. As Søren Kierkegaard pointed out in his *Unscientific Postscript*, to know the truth is to be known by the truth. "Truth is something which affects our inner being, as we become involved in an appropriation process of the most passionate inwardness".⁹

Theology, in this classic sense of the term, is a "heartfelt knowledge of divine things" (Farley), something which affects the heart and the mind. It relates to both *fides quae creditur* and *fides qua creditur*, the objective content of faith, and the subjective act of trusting. But all this has changed, not on account of any fundamental difficulties with this classic conception of theology, but on account of the increasing professionalization and specialization of theological educators. The study of theology has become little more than the mastery of discrete bodies of data. It has something you just know about – where it should be something that shapes your life, provides a reason to live, and gives direction to ministry.

It is thus hardly surprising that so many North American seminaries report a burgeoning interest in spirituality on the part of their students, when they have been starved of the experiential and reflective dimensions of theology by the unwarranted intrusion of the academic attitude towards the subject just noted. There is an increasing recognition of the importance of spiritual formation as an aspect of a rounded theological education.¹⁰

⁸ On Calvin's understanding of the dialectic between theology and experience, see Wilhelm Balke, "The Word of God and Experientia according to Calvin," in W. H. Neuser, ed., *Calvinus Ecclesiae Doctor* (Kampen: Kok, 1978), 19-31.

⁹ Søren Kierkegaard, *Unscientific Postscript* (London: Oxford University Press, 1941), 169-224. Cf. P. L. Holmer, "Kierkegaard and Religious Propositions," *Journal of Religion* 35 (1955), 135-46.

¹⁰ See Walter L. Liefield and Linda M. Cannell, "Spiritual Formation and Theological Education," in J. I. Packer and L. Wilkinson, eds., *Alive to God: Studies in Spirituality* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter-Varsity, 1992), 239-52.

The study of theology is recognized to be transformative, in that one is recognized not merely to be wrestling with *texts*; nor yet with *ideas*, but with *the living God*. Theology can so easily become the study of theologians; its proper subject is the study of God.

On December 11, 1989, James I. Packer was installed as the first Sangwoo Youtong Chee Professor of Theology at Regent College Vancouver. The title he chose for his inaugural lecture, as much as its content, is telling: "An introduction to systematic spirituality". In that lecture, Packer stressed the utter impossibility of separating theology and spirituality.¹¹

I question the adequacy of conceptualizing the subject-matter of systematic theology as simply revealed truths about God, and I challenge the assumption that has usually accompanied this form of statement, that the material, like other scientific data, is best studied in cool and clinical detachment. Detachment from what, you ask? Why, from the relational activity of trusting, loving, worshipping, obeying, serving and glorifying God: the activity that results from realizing that one is actually in God's presence, actually being addressed by him, every time one opens the Bible or reflects on any divine truth whatsoever. This... proceeds as if doctrinal study would only be muddled by introducing devotional concerns; it drives a wedge between... knowing true notions about God and knowing the true God himself.

Packer's point is that a genuine experience of God makes the detached study of God an impossibility – a point appreciated by medieval mystical writers, who often spoke in rapturous terms of their experience and knowledge of God. It is like asking someone who is in love to be neutral about the person that he loves! Theology needs to be taught in the context of a worshipping and prayerful community, which is aware that to speak of God is potentially to end up adoring and worshipping him, and proclaiming him to the world.

The study of Christian theology in a committed liberal context, such as that found in most North American state university faculties of religion, must therefore be regarded as inauthentic, imposing totally artificial limitations upon what the "knowledge of God" might be like, and what its consequences should be. The systematic exclusion, as a matter of public polity, of prayer and adoration from such teaching results in a truncated and deficient understanding of theology. Seminaries

¹¹ James I. Packer, "An Introduction to Systematic Spirituality," *Crux* 26, 1 (March 1990), 2-8; quote at p. 6.

have a unique opportunity to "let God be God", and respond to him accordingly. They need to regain a sense of their distinctiveness at this point, and get rid of the outmoded and unjustified belief that they are somehow second-rate contexts for the learning of theology. A seminary provides a unique environment in which theology is taught by the committed to the committed, in a nourishing atmosphere of prayer, adoration and pastoral care, with a view to going out into the world convinced that the church has something *distinctive* to say and do.

The seminaries have a vital role to play in the next century, by fostering a quiet confidence in the intellectual, spiritual and moral relevance of the Christian faith to the modern world. They need to regain a sense of calling and of distinctiveness, appreciating that they provide an environment in which the cognitive, experiential and personal elements of faith can be nourished, stimulated and sustained.

So what benefits does a rigorous theological foundation bring to spirituality? The most important role of theology is to establish a framework within which spirituality is to be set. Christianity cannot be thought of as a vague and muddled set of attitudes or values. At its heart is a series of quite specific beliefs. An excellent example of this is provided by the doctrine of human nature and destiny, often referred to as "anthropology". A central theme of all Christian thinking about human nature is that its true nature and destiny can only be understood and fulfilled through a relationship with God. A more secular approach might well regard God as something of an irrelevance to human fulfilment and identity. Yet Christian spirituality is grounded in the belief that human fulfilment can only be fully achieved through a deepened relationship with God.

Theology thus has a major effect on the way in which Christians live and behave. To illustrate the importance of theology for spirituality, we may consider two beliefs, one of which is Christian, and the other not.

1. The world was created by God.
2. The world was created by an evil and demonic force, opposed to God.

The first of these is a classic Christian belief; the second represents a form of Gnosticism, which became influential in the second century. To understand the importance of theology to spirituality, we need to ask this question: what difference would accepting one of these beliefs make to the way we live?

The first belief encourages us to affirm and explore the natural world as a way of finding out more about God. If God made the world, God's "signature" (so to speak) may be found within the created order. Something of God's beauty can thus be known in the beauty of his creation. Furthermore, the creation is not to be worshipped as God, but is to be honored *as God's*. Immediately, we can see the foundations of a Christian approach to ecology emerging. If the world belongs to God, and not to us, then our responsibility is that of stewardship – we are to tend and care for something which belongs to God. We do not have the right to exploit it, because it is not ours. I shall return to this point later in this lecture.

The second belief, in marked contrast, leads to the idea that involvement in the world leads us away from God. It encourages the idea that the material order is evil, so that those who study it or care for it are rebelling against God or deliberately affirming forces which are opposed to God. Salvation is thus likely to be achieved only by withdrawing from the world, in order to avoid becoming contaminated by its evil influence. As the study of Christian history makes clear, precisely these attitudes can be discerned within some forms of Gnosticism in the second century, and also some variants of Christianity during the Middle Ages which were influenced by such ideas.

It will thus be clear that theology impacts on attitudes to the world, and the manner in which people live. Theology, then, rightly understood (and this qualification is of considerable importance) has a positive relation to spirituality. However, it is important to appreciate that this relationship is not always harmonious. Sometimes the tension arises through the intrusion of western ideas about detachment and neutrality into theology; sometimes it comes about as a result of an impatience with the limits of theology. In what follows, we shall explore the potentially negative aspects of this interaction.

As we suggested earlier, western Christian theology has often taken the form of explicitly academic reflection on the content of the Christian

faith. In other words, it is about knowledge, reflection and speculation. Particularly within the modern western academic context, this can lead to two serious difficulties.

1. Theology becomes so concerned with intellectual intricacies that it loses sight of the relational aspects of the Christian faith.
2. The western academic demand that scholarship should be detached and disinterested leads to a weakening of the link between theology and prayer.

Each of these difficulties has been recognised for some considerable time. There is a danger that theology will become so absorbed in abstract ideas that it loses touch with the living reality of God.

It will thus be clear that the understanding of the relation between theology and spirituality rests, in part, on how theology is to be understood. The new interest in spirituality suggests that the understandings of theology which have emerged in the recent past in the west are viewed as deficient by some, not least on account of their apparent lack of connection with the life of faith.

So is this a lesson we need to learn? As we prepare to move into the next century, we need to ensure that theology is not treated in a rationalist, academic and detached manner. There is no reason why Asian theologians should repeat the mistakes made by their western counterparts! Theology must be firmly linked to a love of God, a living relationship with him, and a longing to proclaim him to a world which so desperately needs him. This naturally brings us to consider the importance of theology for apologetics and evangelism.

Theology and Apologetics

In recent years, there has been a renewed recognition of the importance of apologetics – that is, to the defence and explanation of the Christian faith to those who have yet to come to faith.¹² Theology is essential to good apologetics, in two manners. First, it provides the apologist with a network of beliefs and doctrines, which enable him or

¹² See Alister McGrath, *Bridge-Building: Effective Christian Apologetics* (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1992). North American edition published as *Intellectuals Don't Need God and Other Modern Myths* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993).

her to detect weaknesses in alternative worldviews, and to identify the strengths of the Christian proclamation. Thus the doctrine of the final resurrection and eternal life is essential in any Christian apologetic response to the problem of suffering.

But theology is also important in a second manner. It provides an analytical framework by which the apologist may bring the full resources of the faith to bear on the situation in hand. Theological analysis allows the complex unity of the Christian faith to be broken down into its constituent parts, in order that the apologist can decide which of its many aspects can be deployed to the best effect. The complex Christian proclamation of the death and resurrection of Christ can thus be analysed, in order that its various aspects can be identified and exploited.

An illustration will make this important point clear, and help us understand the relation of apologetics, theology and evangelism. Jesus often compared the gospel to a feast, or some kind of great party (for example, see Luke 14:15-24). Try to imagine three different ways of getting people to come to that party.

The first approach stresses that there really is a party, explains why it is going to be great fun, and reflects on the great time that everyone is going to have. This is what *apologetics* is all about. Apologetics is basically about affirming the truth and the attraction of the gospel. It is a kind of pre-evangelism. It prepares the way for an invitation to be issued, by helping people to understand what Christianity is about, and why it is so attractive and meaningful.

The second approach focusses on the individual dishes which will be served. It identifies each of these dishes, and allows its attractions to be savoured. The wonderful vintage wines; the fresh and fragrant bread; the succulent fruit. All are named and savoured. This is what *theology* does. It invites us to wander around the heavily laden table, and marvel at the riches set out before us. It makes it easier for us to invite people to that feast, because we can tell them exactly what awaits them.

Thirdly, evangelism is about issuing a personal invitation to come to faith, and become a Christian. Yet theology has laid the ground for issuing that invitation. Just as a prism breaks a beam of white light into the beautiful colours of the rainbow, so theology allows us to separate out the individual elements of the Christian gospel. Theology is the

tool which allows the many facets of the gospel to scintillate brilliantly in its light.

But why is this important? Why should anyone want to explore the many facets of the gospel? The answer lies in the audiences to which we present the gospel. Different people have different needs and concerns. One aspect of the gospel may interlock with one group of needs, while another may match up with others. To appreciate this point, let us return to look briefly once more at a central theme of the Christian faith – the meaning of the cross.

In the eighteenth century, the great British mathematician Isaac Newton made an important discovery in his rooms at Trinity College, Cambridge. He noticed that a beam of white sunlight, entering through a narrow slit in the shutters of his darkened rooms, could be split into its constituent colours – red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo and violet – by a glass prism. The colours of the rainbow could be reproduced by a piece of glass in the laboratory, thus suggesting that raindrops were acting like glass prisms, diffracting the light of the sun, and "decomposing" it into a brilliant spectrum of colour.

The glass prism did not *impose* these colours on the white light; it enabled them *to be discerned* within it. What had hitherto been taken to be a simple colour – white – was now shown to be a complex unity of different colours. The prism split the white light up into its constituent elements, so that the colours, which were already there in the beam of white light, could be isolated, and examined individually. The apparently white light of the sun was shown to be made up of many different colours of light in combination. In nature, all were combined; in the laboratory, they could be split up.

The same is true of responsible Christian theology, which breaks the message of the cross and resurrection down into its constituent parts, so that they can be examined individually. The message of the cross is a unity – but it is a *complex* unity. It is by examining its individual components individually that the whole message can be better appreciated and understood. Theology does not invent these components; it merely uncovers them. They are not the product of some overactive theological imagination. They are already present, awaiting our analysis, in the "message of the cross". All that the theologian has done is to isolate them, so that each can be studied individually.

Newton's experiments with white light and prisms did not, however, stop with his observation that white light could be broken up into its constituent parts. He soon discovered that the same prism which split that white light up into its components could recombine those colours, and reproduce the original beam of white light. An experiment was devised which proved this neatly. A beam of white light was passed through one prism, which split it up into a glorious multicoloured spectrum, a rainbow of colours. This multicoloured beam was then passed through a second prism, identical to the first – which promptly recombined them, to give a second beam of white light.

The same is true of theology. Having analysed the message of the cross, and identified the images of grace within it in order that they can be better understood, the theologian recombines them, to give the message of the cross. It is the same message as before – but it is a message which is now far better grasped and appreciated. So why bother with this analysis? What is the point of it?

The answer is as simple as it is important: because we need to relate the message to its audience. We need to ensure that the message of the cross is as effectively proclaimed as possible. And that means asking what points of contact there are for the gospel. How can we make sure that it scratches where folks itch? To lapse into jargon for a moment: the gospel proclamation must be *receptor-orientated*. That is, it must be addressed to the opportunities which await it among its audience. Just as the science of apologetics is partly concerned with the theological analysis of the Christian proclamation, so the art of apologetics is concerned with the imaginative and creative application of its respective components to its audiences.

To illustrate this process, we may pass the Christian proclamation of the cross and resurrection of Christ through a theological prism, and examine the spectrum of images which awaits us.¹³

1. Images from a Battlefield. Christ has gained a victory over sin, death and evil through his cross and resurrection. Through faith, believers may share in that victory, and claim it as their own.

¹³ See further Alister McGrath, *Making Sense of the Cross* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), 45-86.

2. Images from a Court of Law. Through his obedience on the cross, Christ has obtained forgiveness and pardon for sinners. Those who are guilty can be washed clean of their sin, and be justified in the sight of God. They are acquitted of punishment, and given the status of being righteous before God.

3. Images from a Relationship. As sinners, we are alienated from God. God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, as he makes a new relationship possible and available. Just as an alienated man and woman can draw together again through the process of forgiveness and reconciliation, so we who are far from God can draw close to him through the death of Christ.

4. Images from a Prison. Those who are imprisoned by the oppressive forces of evil, sin and the fear of death can be liberated by the gospel of the cross of Christ. Just as Christ broke free from the prison of death, so believers can, by faith, break free the bonds of sin, and come to life in all its fulness.

5. Images from a Hospital. Those who are ill on account of sin can be made whole again through the ministrations of the wounded physician of Calvary. Through his cross and resurrection, Christ is able to bind up our wounds and heal us, restoring us to wholeness and spiritual health.

Notice carefully that theological analysis does not reduce the "word of the cross" to a single component; that would be reductionism, which is as crude as it is simplistic. It aims to discern the various ideas and images that are already there in this message, in the knowledge that one or more of these may prove to be of decisive importance to someone who is hearing the gospel for the first time. Theological analysis thus identifies apologetic possibilities.

For example, someone who is conscious of a deep sense of moral guilt, which prevents her from drawing near to God, may find the components of the "word of the cross" drawn from the court of law deeply relevant and meaningful. The proclamation of forgiveness could transform her life. But that does not mean that the message of the cross has been reduced to that theme. It simply means that the theologian enables the apologist to discern what his or her resources are, in order to connect up as effectively as possible with the needs of the individual to whom he or she is ministering.

While all the components of the message of the cross are relevant to the human situation, individual human beings will have different specific needs. For example, someone may have a genuine fear of dying. The gospel needs to be particularized for that person, tailored to her situation. The image of victory over the fear of death may well be profoundly important to that person. Does that mean *reducing* the gospel? No. It is to recognize that this is where the rubber hits the road in this particular life. This is a point of contact for the gospel. It simply means asking what aspect of the gospel is of particular relevance to that person's needs. It means taking trouble – both over exploring the resources of the gospel, and establishing the needs of the people to whom we minister.

The rest will follow, as the implications of the healing brought by the gospel begin to dawn in her new life of faith. The component of the message of the cross which addresses this fear of death is like the thin end of a wedge – it secures a point of entry. It is an emphasis within the message, not reduction of the message to a single point. It is but a starting point – a highly relevant starting point, to be sure. It is a Trojan Horse, which enters the camp of unbelief, before throwing open its gates to the full resources of the gospel. The rest can, and will, follow in its wake.

The remainder of the message of the cross remains to be experienced by that person. She has discovered it in part; its fulness will gradually break in on her, in that glorious process of exploration which attends good Christian discipling. And, as many discover, the best wine of the gospel is sometimes kept to the end; the aspect of the gospel which attracts someone to faith is often overshadowed in later Christian life, as another aspect of the gospel comes to be understood and appreciated fully.

Theology and Ethics

Today, there is a growing recognition of the distinctiveness of Christian ethics, and the critically important role played both by theology and the personal example of Jesus Christ in shaping its contours.¹⁴ Yet it was not so long ago that there was a movement within western liberal

¹⁴ See Alister E. McGrath, "Doctrine and Ethics," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 34 (1991), 145-56; idem, "In what way can Jesus be a moral example for Christians?" *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 34 (1991), 289-98.

theology which argued that there existed a universal morality which Christianity reflected. It was not necessary to know anything about Christian theology to make ethical judgements. This universal morality, it was argued, was adequate in itself. The Christian, Buddhist, Hindu, Moslem, humanist and atheist were all, it was argued, committed to much the same set of moral principles (with unimportant local variations). In his essay *The Abolition of Man*, C. S. Lewis described these as "the ultimate platitudes of Practical Reason". That view is now regarded as so seriously vulnerable as to be virtually defunct. Works such as Jeffrey Stout's *Ethics after Babel* destroyed the credibility of the idea of a "universal morality". Christian morality – like every other form of morality – is something special and distinct, and not just a sub-species of some non-existent "universal morality". With the passing of the myth of a "universal morality", Christian writers have begun to write with much greater confidence on the theme "Christian morality", in the knowledge that there *is* a distinctively Christian outlook on many matters. And this outlook, it is increasingly being stressed, is based upon Christian doctrine.

To make this point, we may consider a highly-acclaimed work on the theme of Christian ethics: Oliver O'Donovan's *Resurrection and Moral Order*. For O'Donovan, Christian ethics rests upon a proper understanding of the objective order imposed upon creation by God. To *act* in a Christian manner rests upon *thinking* in a Christian manner. In this work, O'Donovan – Regius Professor of Moral and Pastoral Theology at Oxford University – establishes the close connection between the theological notions of "creation" and "order".¹⁵

We must understand "creation" not merely as the raw material out of which the world as we know it is composed, but as the order and coherence in which it is composed.... To speak of this world as "created" is already to speak of an order. In the first words of the creed, before we have tried to sketch an outline of created order with the phrase "heaven and earth", simply as we say "I believe in God the Creator", we are stating that the world is an ordered totality. By virtue of the fact that there is a Creator, there is also a creation that is ordered to its Creator, a world which exists as his creation and in no other way, so that by its existence it points to God.

¹⁵ Oliver M. T. O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 31-32.

Three highly significant themes of major relevance to our theme can be discerned as emerging from O'Donovan's analysis.¹⁶

1. The concept of creation is understood to be focussed on the establishment of ordering and coherence within the world.
2. The ordering or coherence within the world can be regarded as expressing or reflecting the nature of God himself.

The creation can thus be seen as pointing to God, in that the exploration of its ordering or coherence leads to an understanding of the one who ordered it in this manner.

But how does doctrine affect Christian morality? To illustrate the importance of doctrine, we shall consider the way in which one major Christian doctrine has a direct impact upon the way we act. I propose to examine the way in which the Christian doctrine of creation impacts upon our attitudes to the environment. We have already seen how O'Donovan sees creation as establishing a pattern of divine ordering which underlies our acting in the world. Let us explore one specific aspect of this: how we respond to that creation.

The following points emerge from any responsible attempt to take the biblical insights concerning creation seriously:

1. The natural order, including humanity, is the result of God's act of creation, and is affirmed to be God's possession.
2. Humanity is distinguished from the remainder of creation in terms of being created in the "image of God".
3. Humanity is charged with the tending of creation (as Adam was entrusted with the care of Eden), in the full knowledge that this creation is the cherished possession of God.
4. There is thus no theological ground for asserting that humanity has the "right" to do what it pleases with the natural order. The creation is God's, and has been entrusted to humanity, who are to act as its steward, not its exploiter.

It is important to notice how the creation narratives can function as the basis of a rigorously-grounded approach to ecology. This has been set out in a particularly attractive manner in a recent study by

¹⁶ O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order*, 31-52.

Calvin B. DeWitt who has argued that four fundamental ecological principles can readily be discerned within the biblical narrative.¹⁷

1. The "earthkeeping principle": just as the creator keeps and sustains humanity, so humanity must keep and sustain the creator's creation;
2. the "sabbath principle": the creation must be allowed to recover from human use of its resources;
3. the "fruitfulness principle": the fecundity of the creation is to be enjoyed, not destroyed;
4. the "fulfilment and limits principle": there are limits set to humanity's role within creation, with boundaries set in place which must be respected.

In making such basic points, it must be noted that they have generally failed to been noted within the more sceptical sections of the scientific community, who persist in portraying Christianity as lending some kind of ideological sanction to the unprincipled and unlimited exploitation of the environment. In 1967, Lynn White published an influential article in which he asserted that Christianity was to blame for the emerging ecological crisis on account of its using the concept of the "image of God", found in the Genesis creation account (Gen. 1:26-27), as a pretext for justifying human exploitation of the world's resource. Genesis, he argued, legitimated the notion of human domination over the creation, hence leading to its exploitation. Despite (or perhaps on account of?) its historical and theological superficiality, the paper had a profound impact on the shaping of popular scientific attitudes towards Christianity in particular, and religion in general.

With the passage of time, a more realistic assessment of White's argument has gained the ascendancy. The argument is now recognized to be seriously flawed. A closer reading of the Genesis text indicated that such themes as "humanity as the steward of creation" and "humanity as the partner of God" are indicated by the text, rather than that of "humanity as the lord of creation".¹⁸ Furthermore, a careful study of the reception of this text within the Christian tradition makes it clear that

¹⁷ Calvin B DeWitt, "Ecology and Ethics: The Relation of Religious Belief to Ecological Practice in the Biblical Tradition," *Biodiversity and Conservation* 4 (1995), 838-48.

¹⁸ James Barr, "The Image of God in the Book of Genesis: A Study of Terminology," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 51 (1968), 11-26.

White's interpretation simply cannot be sustained.¹⁹ Far from being the enemy of ecology, the doctrine of creation affirms the importance of human responsibility towards the environment. In a widely-read study, the noted Canadian writer Douglas John Hall stressed that the biblical concept of "domination" was to be understood specifically in terms of "stewardship".²⁰ To put it simply: creation is not the possession of humanity; it is something which is to be seen as entrusted to humanity, who are responsible for its safekeeping and tending.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have been concerned with the future of systematic theology in the next century. It will, I think, be clear that I believe that systematic theology has a real future. A clear, critical and positive understanding of the Christian faith is both the essential foundation and the controlling principle of Christian spirituality, apologetics and ethics. Christian theology determines what is *Christian*, and allows this to shape our understanding of how we live out the Christian faith in the world. We could thus say that, properly understood, Christian theology has a *conservative* function – by which I mean that it seeks to safeguard, interpret and transmit what is truly Christian, ensuring that we never cease to maintain our identity as a truly Christian community.

Our Lord once reminded his disciples that they were the "salt of the earth". Yet, he went on, that salt can easily lose its saltiness. And what use is it then? Theology aims to preserve that saltiness. Its ultimate goal can be seen as allowing Christians to appreciate, understand, defend and maintain their Christian identity and distinctiveness in all that they say and do. In a world which so often seems to want all religions to say the same thing, theology enables us to maintain faithfulness and integrity.²¹ It is only by remaining true to the gospel that the church can survive.

¹⁹ See especially Jeremy Cohen, *'Be Fertile and Increase, Fill the Earth and Master It': The Ancient and Medieval Career of a Biblical Text* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989).

²⁰ Douglas John Hall, *Imaging God: Dominion as Stewardship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986).

²¹ See Alister McGrath, *A Passion for Truth: The Intellectual Coherence of Evangelicalism* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1996), 201-40.

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the future of systematic theology in the next century. The writer asserts that a clear, critical and positive understanding of the Christian faith – theology – is both the essential foundation and the controlling principle of Christian spirituality, apologetics and ethics.

撮 要

本文指出以忠於聖經為原則的福音派神學，將對二十一世紀的系統神學作出很大的貢獻。作者強調二十一世紀的神學應離開啟蒙運動以來，強求神學須恪守「客觀性」的錯誤假設。在本文中，作者亦展示了神學在屬靈操練、佈道及護教，並倫理三方面可扮演的角色，引帶出系統神學研究在二十一世紀的前景。