



Ethics in Conversation

Catechesis and Criticism between Church and Academy

Steven Edward Harris

Introduction

Recent editions of *Ethics in Conversation* have explored the relationship between Christianity and higher education. Rather than argue for the need for distinctively Christian universities in the UK, with Craig Bartholomew,¹ or, more modestly, for smaller scholarly communities or institutes of distinctively Christian vision, with Trevor Cooling,² here I will elucidate some aspects of two key moral and spiritual challenges to the study of my own discipline – theology – in the academy. These challenges are the twin tasks of catechesis and criticism – challenges which impinge upon the proposals of Bartholomew and Cooling, as well as the status quo.

Theology has been – and is – practised in a number of institutions: the church, monasteries, cathedral schools, universities, and seminaries. Until the modern period, broadly speaking, these institutions were held together in their aims by a wider Christian culture. The Church and the

1 Craig Bartholomew, 'A Jewel in the Crown of North America: Christian Higher Education', *Ethics in Conversation* 23:3 (2019).

2 Trevor Cooling, 'Christian Higher Education: Another Jewel in the Crown?', *Ethics in Conversation* 23:4 (2019).

academy were not in tension, but united in their common work of catechizing the faithful and establishing true doctrine through criticism.³ In the modern period, those tasks have been redistributed by secularising policies and their aims redirected.

The Church's Catechesis and the Academy's Criticism

It is common now to view the relationship between the Church's teaching and academic study as follows. The Church instructs its youth in the Christian faith, teaching them what Christians have traditionally believed and discouraging doubt or criticism. The academy exposes historic Christian belief to critical testing, encouraging skepticism regarding the Church's credibility as a teaching authority and its claims, which must be established – if indeed they can be – on other grounds. In short, the Church's task is now

3 There are exceptions. In the late middle ages, for example, see Jean Gerson's proposals for 'reformation' of theological study at Paris in his letter to Pierre d'Ailly of 1 April 1400 (*Jean Gerson: Early Works*, trans. Brian Patrick McGuire, *Classics of Western Spirituality* [NY: Paulist, 1998], 167-174); or, in the early modern period, the pietism of August Hermann Francke (1663-1727) in reforming theological study at the new University of Halle.

catechesis; the academy's task is criticism – redefined.

This sketch is, naturally, overstated. Many theologians in the academy are confessing Christians, or even church-bound ministers, and seek some conciliation between the two sides. It also looks different in varying contexts, most notably between the UK, in which theology is embedded in university departments of theology and secular religious studies, and North America, in which theology is practised in seminaries, Bible colleges, or separate Christian universities, while religious studies is the sole discipline permitted in secular, public universities.

Even here there is variation, however. Many historic seminaries in North America are planted firmly on university campuses and, while often for all intents and purposes functioning as separate institutions, participate to a greater or lesser extent in the culture of the university. Some, such as Wycliffe College at the University of Toronto or the Divinity School at Duke University, emphasize historic Christian faith with vigour; others, which need not be named, follow the broader university's lead in a reductionist approach to Christian claims. A combination of these two impulses is more common in the UK. Here some faculty (and students) evidently work out of serious Christian commitment, while others embrace the reductionism of modern secular views of religion. Still others are Christians privately but such commitment is hard to discern in their teaching and scholarship on Christianity, perhaps intentionally so in a bid to be perceived as academically rigorous.

The opposition between the perceived tasks of Church and academy leads to extensive moral and spiritual difficulties for both students and teachers, encapsulated in this last set of privately religious, academically secular scholars. Such tension is often not lessened

for those in North America practising in separate institutions, such as seminaries. In my recent book *God and the Teaching of Theology: Divine Pedagogy in 1 Corinthians 1-4* (Notre Dame, 2019), I attempt to recover a vision of theological education that embraces both Church and academy and aims to alleviate such moral-spiritual difficulty. Here I will discuss the common two-fold task assigned to both. As the title of my book suggests, this task is God-given. And that, in turn, suggests that my answer to this quandary is not to seek a middle ground between the historic Christian faith and the modern secular academy. My answer, along with the premodern interpreters of 1 Corinthians on whom I draw, is more radical.

Theology in the University?

The place of theology in the public university is, in many places in the West, balanced on a knife edge, but my work gives no comfort for those looking to shore up its residence there. The work of theologians will go on, and go on well, whether situated in universities or separate institutions, for their God is faithful. That being said, neither do I presume the necessity of theology's exodus from the modern university. God may yet redeem the university. It is only that, akin to what Stanley Hauerwas says of the modern secular state, redemption requires quite a dramatic transformation but one that is real and possible in Christ.⁴

To say it more fully, the retention in the modern university of theology, properly practised and understood, would require public acknowledgment of Christ's Lordship on a fashion comparable to the Middle Ages. For it was in the Middle Ages, of course, that the great European universities were founded, with theology as their queen. Theologians now, barring a dramatic move of God for which we may and should pray, are going to have to live with the kind of precariousness of institutions

⁴ Stanley Hauerwas, 'The Church and Civil Society,' The Laing Lectures 2018: Theological Existence Today, Regent College, Vancouver, Canada, 22 March 2018.

known under hostile Roman, Persian, and (occasionally) Muslim rule.

In our day, the way forward may look like the founding of separate Christian universities, as in North America, where theology (along with all the other disciplines) can be practised in light of the knowledge of God in Christ Jesus. Or it may mean the maintenance of a distinctively Christian practice of theology in university departments, as increasingly difficult as that is surely to become. In neither case may theologians simply retreat to an enclave, unengaged with the truth claims being made in the wider academy. For the gospel is a public – indeed, cosmic – claim: Jesus is Lord. The Church, too, has a critical task; and the academy, where being redeemed, has a catechetical one.

The Church's Criticism and the Academy's Catechesis

In the preface and introduction to the first part-volume of his *Church Dogmatics*, Karl Barth lays out his understanding of theology's task. Here we find that Barth sees theology's task as both catechetical and critical, and as located within the Church. Theology, he writes, "is not a free science. It is bound to the sphere of the Church, where alone it is possible and meaningful".⁵ Two things may strike us immediately: Barth calls theology a "science," a term of the academy, and yet he says this science is "bound" to the Church.

Barth's use of the term science to describe theology is deliberately light-handed. Although it has historical pedigree (e.g., theology as *scientia* in the Middle Ages and Protestant Orthodoxy), the emergence to prominence

⁵ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 4 vols. in 13, eds. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1932-75), I/1, xiii; hereafter, CD.

of the natural sciences and the cultural distinction accorded such *Wissenschaften* and *wissenschaftliche* (scientific) inquiry rendered theology's status dubious. Terming theology a "science," even though "it would not make the slightest difference" if it were not called science, is a way of insisting that theology too has its own unique object of study.⁶ It is a justification for freedom from interference in its own affairs. Indeed, other sciences

have often intruded on theology in the modern period, Barth remarks, "judging the utterance of the Church about God in accordance with alien principles".⁷ For Barth,

it is precisely this criticism of the Church's talk of God by the other sciences on their foreign, secular foundations that makes the theologian's own critical task necessary.

The Church, therefore, also has a task of criticism. But it is a criticism on its own foundation: Jesus Christ, for there is no other (1 Cor 3:10). Theology's churchly task is "the criticism and correction of talk about God according to the criterion of the Church's own principle", which is to say, Jesus Christ.⁸ As regards the methods of the other sciences, simply put, "it has nothing to learn from them".⁹ The Church must critique its own talk about God on the basis of what has been given it to say in Jesus Christ. This criticism may also involve the critique of other disciplines when they overstep their bounds in judging the Church's teaching about God, that is, its catechesis.

If the Church, and church-bound theology, has its own critical task, does the academy

⁶ Barth, CD I/1, 8.

⁷ Barth, CD I/1, 6.

⁸ Barth, CD I/1, 6, emphasis added.

⁹ Barth, CD I/1, 8.

“
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”

have a catechetical one? One could speak of the academy's catechesis in two senses. On the one hand, the academy, as any institution, catechises its members simply by virtue of their participation. It is an institution, like any other, of moral practice, community, and formation. To be a student or faculty member of a university is *ipso facto* to be morally shaped by its shared practices. These may be good, as in practices of generous, humble and mutually-enriching intellectual enquiry.¹⁰ These may be bad, as in practices of self-aggrandizement, envious competition, or ruling certain truth claims inadmissible *a priori* (such as, for example, the claim that God exists and has saved us in Jesus Christ).

On the other hand, one could speak, if hopefully, of the academy's task of catechesis in unity with the Church's task. For much of the

university's history, this unity of tasks between the two institutions was a given. Indeed, Barth is himself willing to speak of the potentially "superfluous" nature of theology as a distinct discipline. "Philosophy and secular science generally do not have to be secular or pagan". There is no necessity in this; only the unhappy accident of modern secularisation. If theology does not fail to recognize "the possibility of grace", it cannot deny that God might make the truth of talk of God also part of the study of the other disciplines.¹¹ And then the academy would join the Church in its work of catechesis, apart from which theology must exist apart, being firmly "bound" only to the Church and critical of the secular academy.

The place of theology, then, in Church and academy, depends much on to which Lord either institution is committed in particular

historical circumstances. A sometime student of Barth's, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, deemed it necessary to found both a separate Church (the Confessing Church) and a separate academy (the illegal seminary at Finkenwalde) in order to be faithful to the Lord Jesus in Nazi Germany.

Barth argues that theology needs to keep its hand steady at its own God-given task. The proverbial "man in the street" will finally pay attention to theology, he writes, not when he is pandered to but when theologians "do what we are *charged* to do".¹² He continues, "I am firmly convinced that, especially in the broad field of politics" – he is writing in 1932, *nota bene* – "we cannot reach the clarifications

which are necessary today, and on which theology might have a word to say, as indeed it ought to have, without first reaching the comprehensive

clarifications in and about theology which are our present concern".¹³

So what is theology? What "comprehensive clarifications" need to be made today, again, about its nature and task? Here I'll explore some of what I propose in *God and the Teaching of Theology*, in which I recover premodern readings of the crucial chapters 1 Corinthians 1-4, and offer some new constructive directions.

God and the Teaching of Theology

The first and last word of theology is *God*. Paul introduces himself to his Corinthian congregation as "called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God" (1 Cor 1:1). It is thus by the will of God that his work of "preaching the gospel" (1:17) as one "entrusted with the mysteries God has revealed" (4:1) is brought about, shaped, and empowered to go

“ **The first and last word of theology is God.** ”

¹⁰ For some of these, see especially Mike Higton, *A Theology of Higher Education* (Oxford: OUP, 2012).

¹¹ Barth, CD I/1, 5.

¹² Barth, CD I/1, xvi, emphasis added.

¹³ Barth, CD I/1, xvi.

forward. God has revealed his wisdom to us in his Wisdom, Jesus (1:24) and we now are commissioned to “speak wisdom” to others (2:6). Thus, the task of the theologian, in the Church as in the academy, is a *charge*; it is not one that a person may take up or lay down of their own accord. Theologians, and other teachers in the Church, are morally bound to obey God’s command.

This implies a radically different picture of the task of theology than that assumed in the simple dichotomy with which I began. It is not that the Church builds up faith uncritically while the academy, even under the guise of the theology department, undoes this good work of catechesis. Both are summoned to the “obedience of faith” to the Lord Jesus (Rom 1:5), who is the criterion, as Barth emphasized, of true knowledge of God. Both Church and academy are likewise called to the twofold task of catechesis, which is primary, and criticism, which is secondary.

The Primary Catechetical Task, or Theologians are Called to Preach the Gospel

Paul writes, “For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel” (1 Cor 1:17). Everything else is secondary to instruction in the faith. The primary task of the Church and its teachers, including theologians, is catechesis, or the positive presentation of the truths of the gospel in its cosmic scope as they are all irradiated by the figure of the risen Christ. The Church is called to the preaching of the gospel, or to say the same thing, the making of disciples, and therefore to the positive, inexhaustible and joyful speaking of God’s good news of salvation in Christ. There is no more pressing or demanding task laid upon the Church by God – no task which more requires the constant asking, seeking and knocking for grace.

This is true equally of the “teacher or preacher,” the theologian or the minister, as Aquinas puts it in a telling equivocation.¹⁴ Good theology, as Philip Ziegler contends, is “always on the verge of tipping over into proclamation”.¹⁵ The work of the theologian in study, teaching and writing, and the course of the theology curriculum as a whole, should be determined by this positive orientation to proclamation. Students of theology today face a welter of disconnected subjects broken up in a relatively recent (i.e., two centuries old), and therefore contingent, fashion, as in Old Testament, New Testament, church history, systematic theology, pastoral care, and so on, each subdiscipline with its own methodological commitments that are, at best, weakly aligned with, and at worst, corrosive of, the approaches in neighbouring subdisciplines. There is no clear, encompassing, positive orientation to the gospel of Jesus Christ. As one astute observer noted, “the inner centre on which biblical interpretation, the study of church history, systematic theological thought and the life of the church should be oriented, seems virtually to have disappeared”.¹⁶ That so many students graduate with a degree in theology without being able to give a clear presentation of the gospel is a woeful indication of the state of theology in the academy today.

Curricular reform is a task, then, laid upon the theological academy by the call of the Lord Jesus to discipleship. To attempt a positive (!), rather than a wholly critical, analysis of this situation, let me suggest the following. Undergraduates in theology should be both instructed in and evaluated on a clear presentation of the gospel (by which, I should be clear, I do not mean the ‘Romans road’ but

¹⁴ See my *God and the Teaching of Theology*, 149-51.

¹⁵ Philip G. Ziegler, *Militant Grace: The Apocalyptic Turn and the Future of Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018), 30.

¹⁶ Henning Graf Reventlow, *The Authority of the Bible and the Rise of the Modern World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1985), 1.

the redemption of 'all things' in Christ). The curriculum, in its various subdisciplines, should be oriented like orbiting planets around that gospel, with points of greater or lesser distance, necessarily, but always circling back around to it. Thus, the student of theology should graduate with a honed ability to articulate the gospel, as well as a sense of how Old and New Testaments, church history, and so on, are oriented to it as a determinative material centre. Masters students in theology should not be encouraged to specialize too quickly. Instead of emphasizing novelty in research, a Masters student in biblical studies should be required to write not a thesis but a (brief) biblical theology of one or both testaments. Similarly, a Masters student in theology should be required to comment on a brief systematics by a leading practitioner – on par with the medieval requirement of commenting on Lombard's *Sentences*. Approaches to further subdisciplines follow. Only at the doctoral level should novelty in research be pursued, and even here with the requisite perpetual orientation to the gospel and its comprehensive implications.

The Secondary Critical Task

In a decidedly secondary place, both in sequence and in proportion, stands the task of criticism. The work of criticism has two parts, corresponding to the material centre of the Church's teaching (i.e., the gospel of salvation in Christ) and more peripheral elements orbiting this centre. First, criticism needs to be made of inadequate ways to portray the gospel, as of inadequate ways to portray a whole array of other topics that impinge upon the gospel (e.g., faith, knowledge, history, humanity, and God). The purpose of this criticism is to enable a better evangelical presentation. As with Apollos, "When Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they invited him to their home and explained to him the way of God more adequately" (Acts 18:26). Their purpose was not to extinguish the fire of proclamation but to direct it "more adequately."

Second, criticism may be made of claims to knowledge of the many points of greater or lesser distance from the gospel in the various subdisciplines of theology (and the other disciplines of the university). Here is greater affinity with what is usually meant by the critical task of the academy, though with the crucial difference that the gospel is the criterion and not itself subject to critical inquiry. Old Testament scholars may debate the pre- or post-exilic provenance of certain prophecies. Historians may debate the precise chronology of Paul's life or the appropriateness of Jewish and / or Hellenistic backgrounds to the New Testament's witness. Philosophers may debate the structures of human experience and knowledge vis-à-vis events of divine revelation. But none of these may be held to critically establish the knowledge of the gospel. They reside, instead, on the periphery of that centre and are, in truth, themselves dependent upon it.

A central aspect of the modern project was the attempt to establish knowledge anew on the foundations of – purportedly – universal human reason. (In reality, for white men like David Hume and Immanuel Kant, this was the 'universal' reason of white men.) The so-called wars of religion, including the Thirty Years' War (1618-48), left many searching for new foundations that would unite, rather than divide, European Christians. The solution on which thinkers generally fixed was a rational form of religion, which would, it was thought, be universal either because reason suggested a universal method, a way of proceeding that everyone could follow, or because reason suggested certain basic beliefs upon which all could agree.

Early on, thinkers were optimistic that if everyone used their reason to read the Bible for themselves, rather than relying on divergent church traditions of interpretation, they would all be able to see the plain meaning of the

text – at least, where it is plain.¹⁷ Later on, Kant wrote a trilogy of *Critiques* that attempted to critically establish knowledge, morality, and experience of the sublime through a philosophical analysis of the structures of the human mind itself. In so doing, he ruled the gospel out of bounds. Many theologians after Kant valiantly attempted to restore something of the gospel within the strictures he laid out, none more impressively than Schleiermacher. But the key is simply to outbid Kant's *Critiques* by the *krisis* unveiled over all human striving – even its striving in the good labour of theology – in the gospel (Rom 2:1-3).

In Jesus Christ is found the sole universal foundation for “wisdom and knowledge” (Col 2:3). But it is given in the scandalous particularity of divine revelation, which in God's good pleasure transformed all worldly wisdom into foolishness (1 Cor 1:21). To this good news we are morally and spiritually resistant. Therefore, the secular academy unsurprisingly prefers to subject the gospel to its own global-

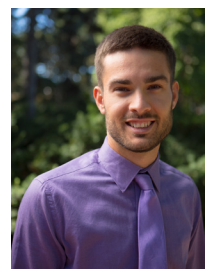
¹⁷ A prime example is John Locke, *An Essay for the Understanding of St. Paul's Epistles, by Consulting St. Paul Himself* (London: Awnsham and John Churchill, 1707).

imperialistic criticism rather than submit to the global claims of Christ. Into this breach the Church, and those in the academy faithful to its Lord, are called to witness by the work of catechesis and criticism – on its own grounds. In so doing, may God grant it, the academy may itself be redeemed through the Church's witness.

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The tasks of catechesis and criticism are moral duties, enjoined upon those who work in the Church and/or the academy by the risen and reigning Lord Jesus. He is himself the criterion by which such work must proceed and by which it will be judged (1 Cor 4:4-5). Let us work in such a way, with such faithfulness as stewards of the gospel (4:1-2), that our work will not be burned up in the fire but come through as precious gold (3:12). We do so in confidence that the “God who called us into fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful” (1:9). For in the teaching of theology, as in everything else, we are justified by grace, which is to say, by Jesus Christ.

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