

## **THEOLOGY: QUEEN OR SERVANT<sup>1</sup>**

**Gordon J. Spykman<sup>2</sup>**

It is almost impossible to overestimate the importance of starting-points. If you start out wrong, you will end up wrong. Bad questions hardly ever yield good answers.

We sometimes learn that lesson in the school of hard knocks. Think of building a house. The walls, the roof, the entire superstructure depends on solid footings and foundings. Or take another example. In buttoning a shirt, if you start out wrong at the bottom, you will come out wrong at the top.

It all comes down to this: starting-points are nearly all-important.

### **Starting-points**

This axiom came through to me very forcefully a number of years ago. The well-known philosopher, Etienne Gilson, was being featured as guest lecturer at St. Michael's College, Toronto. I shall never forget his opening lines. Even before my ears had become accustomed to his brogue, he was busy laying out his cards, open face, on the table, for all to see. Without so much as an introductory comment, Gilson plunged directly into his basic argument about "ideas" and "things" - the presuppositions upon which his entire philosophy rests. In three very brief and pithy points he stated his case. This is how he put it:

“First, *things* belong to a lower order of reality.

Second, *ideas* belong to a higher order of reality.

Ideas, therefore, are *more real* than things.

And that's the way it is.”

It was a masterful opening statement - clear, crisp, challenging. I don't share

---

<sup>1</sup> Originally published in: *Christian Education in the African Context: Proceedings of the African Regional Conference of the International Association for the Promotion of Christian Higher Education, Harare 4-9 March 1991*. Grand Rapids: IAPCHE and Potchefstroom: PU for CHE, 1992; pp. 13- 23.

<sup>2</sup> Dr. Gordon J. Spykman, Calvin College, 1715 Griggs Street SE, Grand Rapids, Michigan 49506, USA

Gilson's belief system, nor his philosophy. But I do admire his strategy, and I hope shortly to emulate it. Gilson talked philosophy. Our focus today is different -though not unrelated to his. The question before us is this: What is theology?

After centuries of Christian reflection one would think that now at long last we should be able to offer a straight-forward, unambiguous answer to that question.

13

But, alas, that's not so. Among those in the Christian community today who stop long enough to look and listen and think about the issue, there are wide-ranging differences. Even among theologians, those who actively do theology, perhaps especially among them, there are deep and sharp disagreements. This lack of unanimity is also mirrored among non-theologians. Across the board, it seems, there is very little consensus on the question of theology. Perhaps some contrasting points of view are represented among us at this conference. If so, we can air them during the discussion period.

I invite you therefore to join me in reflecting anew on the question of theology. So far I have raised the issue in very general, global terms - in a way that fits many world situations. But we must also contextualize it. What role does and/or should theology play in the African context? In addressing the issue in this form I need your help. Your input is all-important.

The theme as announced for this session presents us with a single option. The program asks: is theology the "queen"? or is she a "servant"? But I wonder, is this our only choice? Is there no alternative to "queen" and "servant"? Are there no other definitions of theology?

Early on in this lecture let me say, Yes, there is another way. There are not only two, but at least three ways of viewing theology. So now, before moving along to an elaboration of my views, like Gilson, let me state my case succinctly in three points. First, theology is not the "queen" of anything; she is not "queen" in any sense of the word. Second, within the Christian community, theology is called to be a "servant". And third, a new point: within the Christian academy, theology is called to be a "partner". In short, therefore, what is theology? ... Not the "queen", but a "servant" and a "partner". Let's take up these three ideas - somewhat contextualized - in that order.

## Queen of the Sciences

Theology is “the queen of the sciences”. We’ve all heard that line before. It has its long and deep roots in the history of Western Christianity. Even today it has its strong advocates. How much weight should we attach to this royal authority which tradition ascribes to theologians? How seriously should we take theology’s claim to “queenship?” One could dismiss it by saying, “Where Christ is King there is no need of a queen!” I am inclined to agree. For conferring “queenly” Status on theology casts a dark shadow over the lordship of Christ Jesus. We then run the danger of turning theology into a yet another idol, with theologians as her prophets,

and doing theology as a form of false worship. Then we betray our calling. For theology is called to cast down idols, not create new ones, or perpetuate old ones. For, with Paul, we are to “lead every thought captive in obedience to Christ” (II Corinthians 5:0).

Some idolatries are not easily uprooted, however. And some ideas die very hard. The “queenship” of theology is a case in point. For centuries common people paid homage to this “queen”. Clergyman entered her courts with praise. The “queen’s” handmaidens - philosophers and other scientists - bowed to the dictates of her royal majesty, either willingly or otherwise. Just ask Galileo!

In its beginnings this idea of the “queenship” of theology is traceable to the influence of ancient Greek philosophers upon the real Christian church. The word itself, “theology”, is derived from its usage in Greco-Roman culture: *theos*, meaning “God”, was combined with *logos*, referring to “study”. Thus theology came to be understood as “the study of God”. It then stands in a class by itself. Those who do theology are then viewed as holding a very special, quasi-supernatural office. They are placed on lofty pedestals. The exclusive right and competence belongs to them to deal with the higher order of reality - the divine, the heavenly, the eternal, the transcendent. All other scholars must rest content with investigating the lower order of things - the human and historical, things earthly, temporal, and natural.

When once the Christian community elevated theology to this “queenly” throne its life of faith suffered great loss. Worship was robbed of its spontaneity and vitality. Common believers were hindered in growing in “the grace and knowledge of Christ Jesus the Lord” (II Peter 3:18). For on this view faith is no longer rooted in the heart, as Scripture teaches (Proverbs 4:23, Matthew 15:19). It is based instead on

the notion of “the primary of the intellect”. Thus the spiritual well-being of God’s people was placed at the mercy of the intellectuals among them, the theologians with their abstract and often speculative reflections about God. The faith of God’s people was then reduced to giving intellectual assent to the dogmas of the church as formulated by the theologians.

The roots of this stubbornly persistent problem go back to the second century. Fourth and fifth generations of Christians were emerging. Dramatic transitions were taking place from the original simple proclamation of the gospel to the earliest forms of Christian theologizing. Who were these early theologians? Most of them were not of Jewish background. They were Gentile converts, coming from the ranks of younger Christians. Moreover, in contrast to medieval theologians who were

15

mostly monks, and modern theologians who are mostly university professors, these early Christian theologians were mostly pastors and bishops of local and regional churches. In giving leadership to the faith life of their congregations they found themselves on collision course with the prevailing Greco-Roman spirits of their day. So they had to wrestle with the fundamental question, how to relate the gospel to pagan religions, and their theologies to the philosophies of the Roman empire.

A strongly negative response goes back to Tertullian in his well-known rhetorical question: “What hath Jerusalem to do with Athens?” - to which the clearly implied answer was “Nothing!” Withdrawal, isolation, “get thee out from among them” -this was one viable position. Such a separatist worldview was bound to have a strong appeal among Christians living in a hostile environment. Ultimately, however, it was another view that prevailed, one developed by Christian thinkers such as Justin Martyr and the Alexandrians. This wing of early Christianity advocated a more affirmative approach to the world. The result was a complementarity model, and upstairs-downstairs paradigm to picture the relationship of theology to other fields of study. As reason is subservient to faith, so it was argued, philosophy can serve in a preparatory way for doing theology. Thus theology was enthroned as “queen”. Philosophy and the other sciences were enlisted as “handmaidens” in the court of the theologians. Christian theology, it seemed, had triumphed over philosophy. Actually, however, the victor became the victim. For increasingly Greek concepts were allowed to shape the content of the Christian faith.

For centuries this split-level view of life was caught in a state of flux. Then, during the high medieval period, Thomas Aquinas created his grand design: a dualism seeking synthesis - an idea perpetuated by such thinkers as Gilson. Instead of the biblical teaching that grace restores nature, that is, that redemption in Christ renews

the fallen creation, as expressed later by the Reformers, Thomas held that grace complements nature and elevates it. Accordingly, theology belongs to the higher realm of supernatural realities, the realm of special revelation, where grace and faith are the keys to true knowledge. It is therefore endowed with the divine right to reign as “queen” over every other academic enterprise. For philosophy and all the other sciences belong to the lower domain of nature, where they operate by reason alone.

On this view theologians are recognized as the highpriestly caste of the Christian community. The “prophetic mantle” falls upon their shoulders. They speak for God.

In every crucial decision-making process involving doctrine or morals theologians speak the last word. They are the final judges.

But the question crosses my mind: Have I been “carrying coals to Newcastle”? Is this problem foreign to the African mind? Is your outlook on life so firmly holist that you are not tempted by these typically Western Christian dualist tendencies? From what I gather, the answer, alas, is “no.” The idea of theology as “the queen of the sciences” clings to all of us. It is deep-seated and longstanding. Through the gospel outreach of many mission churches this idea was transplanted from my world to yours. Now it has taken root here. It has born its dubious fruit. As former mother-daughter churches, which have now become sister/brother churches, we face this “colossal obstacle” (Bonhoeffer) together. It takes a self-consciously deliberate effort on our part to rid ourselves of this autocratic view of theology and opt instead for a view of theology which accents its role as servant and partner.

### **Covering the Waterfront**

Before moving on to motifs of servanthood and partnership, however, another view of theology demands our attention. It is as commonplace as it is unhelpful. In the popular mind the term theology covers the entire waterfront of so-called “spiritual” activities which take place in the Christian community. Everything “religious” is considered theological. This includes revelation, family devotions, all “**God** talk,” confessions of faith, prayer, Sunday school lessons, Bible study. All these so-called “sacred” activities are lumped together under the name theology, understood as a kind of “spiritual catch-all”. Such conventional usage involves a serious confusion of categories, however. For all these “spiritual-religious-sacred” activities do not apply only to theologians. They hold for all Christians. There is nothing specifically theological about them. They are therefore not helpful in defining theology’s unique field of inquiry.

Such loose usage of the concept theology creates another more serious problem. It fosters a false dichotomy between a so-called “sacred” and “secular” realm. Everything “sacred” is viewed as “Christian,” and such matters fall then into the lap of the theologian. All the rest is accordingly regarded as “religiously neutral”. Only theologians deal with values. Other scholars concentrate on pure facts. Whenever the light of Scripture is brought to bear upon a subject, such a discipline is then viewed as a study in theology. Such an approach closes the door on biblical perspectives and Christian reflection in all the other sciences. Then every effort to explore the other disciplines, such as biology, sociology, and economics, directed and illumined by the Word of God, is doomed to failure. The biblical worldview is

17

16

silenced in such subjects. A Christian philosophy never enters the picture. And where does that leave theology? The theologian then has no choice but to take on more than he can handle. When this happens, our theological circuits get overloaded, and we begin to blow our fuses.

So far we have allowed two long-standing and widely held views of theology to pass in review - theology viewed as “queen” and theology understood as “spiritually.” These two views are clearly very different. Yet they have one thing in common. Both make “too much” of theology - each in its own way. It is of course, also possible to make “too little” of theology - as often happens in modern secular circles. The question then arises at this point, How can we avoid these misleading views and chart a better course?

### **Faith: the Foundation for Doing Theology**

Simply stated, as a starter, let us define Christian theology as a study of the Christian faith - just as Islamic theology would study the faith of Muslims. This definition implies a certain subject/object relationship - the one doing theology being the subject and faith as his object of inquiry. Implied in this relationship is also a distinction embedded in the life of the theologian him/herself between faith, on the one hand, and theology, on the other. I am reminded of words spoken by the great Dutch theologian from around the turn of this century, Herman Bavinck. On his deathbed he is reported to have said “My theology doesn’t help me now. It is faith alone that counts. What did he mean? That he had deep regrets about devoting so much of his life to theology? Not at all. Given the chance, he would probably do it all over again. What then? Bavinck was accentuating the priority of faith.

The point of departure in doing theology must always be a childlike faith. Karl Barth was once asked to state in just a few words what it was that he believed. In response he recited the simple lines of the familiar children's hymn:

Jesus loves me, this I know, For the Bible  
tells me so.

“Unless we become as little children...,” as our Lord declared - this is the starting-point for all good theologizing. Childlike trust is at the same time the “faith of our fathers,” the “faith once for all delivered to the saints.” Such faith funds theology. And theology, by reflecting critically on it, can deepen and enrich the faith life of the Christian community. But faith always comes first. It is the primary order of

18knowledge. Theology is secondary. The church can get along without  
theology, but not without faith; without theologians, but not without believers.

Faith is the beginning of the journey, but not its end. It impels some of us onward to seek clearer and fuller understanding of the truth. “We believe,” as Augustine put it, “in order to understand.” Or, in the words of Anselm, theology is “faith seeking understanding”. A contemporary Christian thinker captures the thrust of these memorable pointers from the past in these words: “Faith does not retire when its search has found understanding. It continues to believe. It draws the rational enterprise into itself. Faith never bows out. It knows no boundaries” (Helmut Thielicke).

Faith and works, therefore, including our theological works, may not be divorced (James 2:4-26). But they must be distinguished. If we fail to honor this distinction, every theological problem - and they are legion - threatens to create a new crisis of faith. On the other hand, by distinguishing basic beliefs (which are solid) from theological ideas (with all their give and take), we can allow certain knotty problems to remain unresolved, and yet continue standing firm in the faith.

No theology has canonical status. That honor belongs to God's Word alone. The Bible is our only canon. It is the supreme rule of faith for Christian living. It speaks with full divine authority. The creeds of the church also carry authority. As restatements of the biblical message, however, the ecumenical and reformational creeds are always subservient to the Scriptures, and appealable to them. Our

theologies carry even less weight. If Scripture takes first place, and the confessions second, then theology comes in third. We may not identify it with God's Word. It is, at its best a faithful interpretation of the Word, true to the confessions, and suited to our time and place in history. Converting from one faith to another can be a very traumatic experience. It involves a radical turnabout. Giving up a high view

Of §91-iP^lITC 4 1pw one i§ also very §P^ri944 Oli^illP^ss. EVCII M^vi4ing Ell^g \*g4§ or the church should never be done lightly. But with our theologies it is different - we can hold onto them much more loosely. They are the fallible products of human hearts and minds. Theology can never create the norms for our faith life, nor define them; it can only discover them, elucidate them, and respond to them in a life of active obedience. What we say of the church - *ecclesia reformata semper refonnanda est* - we also say of theology - *theologia* ... We must always be busy rethinking, reviewing, and, if need be, revising our theologies. This is part of the process of scholarly sanctification. Along the way we can allow room for experimentation, for trying out new ideas, without immediately arousing suspicion.

19

Like the householder to whom Jesus referred, every kingdom theologian brings forth from his treasure things both new and old (Matt. 13:52). Doing theology is not unlike playing a game - it's a "happy science" (Barth). There are, of course, some firmly established rules which all the players must obey. But a playful spirit is also at home in doing theology.

### **Servanthood**

So theology need not cover the entire spiritual waterfront of the Christian life. She can also step down as queen. With this the stage is set for theology to play her supporting role as servant in company with other disciples of our Lord. Doing theology is then no longer a matter of mastery, but of ministry. We must then find theological ways to wash feet, to give a cup of cold water in Jesus' name, to turn the other cheek, to take up our cross and follow our Leader. As servants of God's Word, we are called to serve all of God's servants in living the life of faith.

Who knows, perhaps we have come to the kingdom for precisely such troubled times as these (cf. Esther 4:4). Doing theology is one way of ministering to the needs of our brothers and sisters in Christ. In our broken and bleeding world one thing they need badly is "serviceable insight" (Dordt College) into the problems of our day. Woe to us if we fail to give to them what has been given to us. With Paul, we still

“see through a glass dimly” (I Corinthians 3:12). That is undeniably true. But we have not been left empty-handed. Signposts have been entrusted to our care, which we can erect, pointing the way of the coming kingdom. By offering sound theological insight we can foster better working relationships between the academy and the church, between the pulpit and the pew, between the community of believers at work on Monday as well as worship on Sunday. Christian organizations also need a helping hand as they seek to create a Christian presence, and voice, and witness in society at large.

As theologians we join our fellow believers in singing:

How firm a foundation, ye saints of the Lord, Is laid for  
your faith in his excellent Word.

Their faith is ours. Their life is ours. Together we confess that life is religion. The way we live our lives is our religion. Within that religious life of faith there are many callings. Theology is one. It is the calling of some members of the Christian community, but not all. All are religious. All have faith. But not all are theologians. For example, everyone buys and sells, but that does not make everyone an

20economist. Or again, politics touches everyone’s life, but not everyone holds political office. So too with theology. All Christians live by faith. Those who do theology devote themselves to studying the Christian faith in a disciplined way. In this they are sustained by God’s people. They in turn are obliged to serve these people. This is our mandate - to deepen and enrich the community’s understanding of its faith, to preserve and defend it, and when necessary to help reform it. We are to do this as disciples of Christ and as servants of his followers.

The academy is the major base of operations for doing theology. Those who do theology may not retreat, however, behind the walls of their ivory towers. They must keep the lines of communication open to the church, its congregations and general assemblies, assisting in its various ministries. Such ecclesiastical work is primarily the responsibility of pastors, evangelists, and elders. It is therefore important to respect the difference between the academy and the church, between a lecture for students and a sermon for the whole congregation. Theology should not be dragged into the pulpit, or into council meetings, or into Bible study groups. In all this, however, theology can and should play a back-up role. It stands at the nexus

of faith, proclamation, and praxis and can help clarify the church's ministry in preaching, teaching, deaconal service, fellowship, pastoral care, and outreach.

Hand in hand with other scholars, we as theologians must keep our study windows and the doors of our lecture halls open to the crying needs of the world in which we live and move and have our being. We must help God's people develop a more mature Christian mind on the pressing problems that face us. Together we must hammer out a kingdom strategy for penetrating the marketplace of ideas and societal programs with the reforming power of the gospel. Scholars in other fields can help all of us think and act more biblically in political, economic, and social affairs. In addressing this agenda, theologians can help in thinking and acting theologically.

### **Focus on Faith**

As Christian scholars we are engaged in a common project. The light of Scripture must shine in every field of study. Together we must *seek* the mind of Christ (Phil. 2:5-11). Together we must use our gifts in serving our fellowmen. The question then arises: If we have all this in common, how does theology differ from other branches of learning? In this, I submit, that each has its own unique focus. In law we study the politics of life, in sociology our social relationships, and in economics we study business practices. So in theology we look at life from the viewpoint of faith. All these disciplines touch on life in real, down-to-earth, here-and-now ways. This holds for theology too. It cannot reach out to supernatural things beyond the

21

creation. It is only a creature. It must therefore respect its "world-relatedness" (Fowler).

Theology is accordingly a study of the faith knowledge of human communities within history. Given this human-historical orientation, perhaps we would do well to drop the traditional name, "theology" (study of God") and adopt a new name, say, "pistology" (Vander Stelt) - derived from the Greek *pistis*, meaning, "faith." But whether the old familiar name "theology" or the new strange-sounding name "pistology," we must reckon with the richness of meaning that comes with the biblical call to faith. In its most profound sense faith is God's gift of grace by which He brings us as sinners to conversion. This is clearly an act of God, radical and sweeping. It turns us around, enlightens our minds, and renews our theologizing. In this ultimate sense faith cannot be the object of investigation. It is a miracle. It lies beyond reason. Christian theologizing is itself a

fruit of this saving faith.

There are at least two ways, however, in which biblical faith is open to theological reflection. First of all, faith may be understood as an act on our part. It refers to those self-conscious, deliberate acts of believing by which we put our trust in Christ and confess his name. Thus “by faith” we are justified and made right with God. This act of faith is often called *fides qua* - “faith by which” (Hebrews 11). In the second place, the biblical idea of faith points to what we believe. It identifies the content of our faith. In this sense, faith refers to the confessional aspect of God’s Word revealed in creation, in Scripture, and in Christ. It also includes restatements of the biblical message in the form of “articles of faith,” often called *fides quae*, the creeds and confessions of the church.

### **Partnership**

Let us picture the academy as a spacious, sprawling, single story, ranch style house. As such, it is free of the long-standing up the down stairway, problems of older academic houses. There are plenty of rooms, connected by doorways, corridors, and hallways. In this house theology takes her place, not as queen, but as one house partner living side by side with the others. She occupies her assigned room. There she concentrates her efforts. But her vision must extend beyond the four walls of her room. In partnership with the other inhabitants, theology must pay attention to traffic patterns inside the house, to the condition of the house as a whole, to other houses on the street, and to the neighborhood.

To maintain clear pathways between rooms inside this house called *academia*, and to keep their windows clean and open to the outside world, theology and her

22partners must hold fast to the common faith. In working together they must allow the entire teaching-learning process to be shaped by the contours of a biblical worldview. Over time such a commitment offers promise of producing good fruit in the form of a Christian philosophy. A biblical worldview and Christian philosophy acting in concert provide the context and perspectives for partnership in Christian scholarship. With their help we can submit all of life to the holding and healing power of God’s Word. We can then also uncover the deeply religious roots and motivations which sustain our own systems of thought and those of others. And we can experience all our scholarly activity as

rooted centrally and comprehensively in the heart, the spiritual concentration point for all of life. Within this perspective theology plays *its* servant role in partnership with other disciplines. Each deals with its own unique aspect of created reality. Yet in their togetherness they are coherently inter-related.

While theology, like the other disciplines, touches life as a whole, it views life through its own specific window. Its mandate is to focus on the confessional, pistic aspect of life, to explore life's "ultimate concerns" (Tillich), the "Here I stand!" (Luther) certainties play a leading role and serve a formative function in shaping the Christian worldview, philosophy, and scholarship. Thus, in church history, for example, theologians looking back do not cover the full sweep of world history. They concentrate instead on confessional documents (creeds) and confessional institutions (churches), practices (worship), persons (missionaries), and movements (revivals).

Let us picture each discipline as an island. Theology is then one island among others. But none of them is an isolated island. Theology either. It does not stand alone, cut off from the others. At many points there are bridges leading to and from the other islands. These bridges are always open, and they carry a lively flow of two-way traffic. With this metaphor I close. Doing theology therefore comes down to this: servanthood in partnership.

\* \* \*