

Rescuing Theology From the Theologians

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It is a great honour for me to have been invited to deliver the third annual John Wenham lecture. I knew John Wenham personally and had the privilege of working fairly closely with him over a number of years, an experience which left me, as indeed it left all those who knew him, with a deep appreciation of his love for the Lord and his total dedication to the cause of the Gospel in the world of academic scholarship. He was a man who could have attained high positions in both the university and the church if he had been prepared to compromise his beliefs, but to the end of his days he remained faithful to what he knew to be true and he never lost any opportunity to communicate his learning and his enthusiasm to others.

Few things were dearer to John Wenham's heart than his desire to share Christian truth with as many people as possible, and I am certain that he would have had a good deal of sympathy with the title of today's lecture. Rescuing theology from the theologians indeed! Few disciplines have suffered more from the follies of its practitioners than this one has, and yet none is more important for the eternal destiny of the human race. We can get to heaven without knowing anything about computer science, molecular biology or geophysics, but to be deprived of the knowledge of God is to be deprived of eternal life, and theology is nothing if it is not about knowing God.

This, I think, is where we have to begin. After all, if theology were not particularly important, it would not really matter whether the experts dwelt in a world of their own or not. I must confess that I feel this way about such disciplines, (if that is the word for them), as sociology and literary criticism. I do not much care whether the doctors of these things are comprehensible or not, because I know in my heart that I shall go on talking to other people and reading their books whatever the experts might say. Perhaps, in the final analysis, it is better that I cannot understand them, since that way they do not impair my enjoyment of the things they are trying to analyse.

Now there are many people who think that theology is in the same category as the social sciences and the humanities.

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Does it really matter, they ask, what learned theologians are saying if I have a personal knowledge of God in my heart and a living relationship with him in my life? What need is there for me to complicate the obvious, or to reduce the existential reality of spiritual experience to cold, abstract propositions? In one sense, of course, such people have a point—there is no need to do this at all. An illiterate grandmother in New Guinea who has met with Jesus is a greater theologian than a university professor of the subject who has not, and I have no doubt whatever that I shall meet more of the former in heaven than the latter. Without a personal experience of God, theology is a waste of time—indeed, it is quite meaningless. You can drive a car without knowing anything about car

mechanics—most of us do, in fact—but what would be the point of studying car maintenance if you have no car to maintain, have never seen one and perhaps even doubt whether such things exist?

The first qualification for any true theologian is a personal encounter with the living God, which can only come as his Holy Spirit convicts us of sin, points us to the righteousness which has been won for us by Christ's atoning sacrifice, and assures us that the prince of this world has been judged by the Father's acceptance of that atonement. Once we are clear about that, we can go on to the rest, but only once we are clear, because the rest is really no more than an elaboration and application to different areas of life of the great themes of the gospel. What I am saying here is nothing new. The Apostle Paul threw everything away, and told his people that he would still throw everything away, if only he could have the surpassing knowledge which was his in the love of Christ Jesus (Phil. 3:7-8). The great medieval doctor of theology, St Thomas Aquinas (1226-74), stopped writing his great *Summa* of theology when he had a vision of the living God, and no power on earth could persuade him to take up his pen again, because what he had seen and known went beyond anything which could be described by the human mind.

It may seem paradoxical to say so, but the attitude of Paul and Aquinas is one which ought to be shared by every theologian—as indeed it is, by those who truly know God for themselves. For who can describe that wonder in anything like adequate terms? And who can be content with a shadow of that reality when once he has experienced it in its fullness? Even the most clever intellectual reconstruction pales before the glory of the God whom it is trying so hard to describe, and theologians, more than anyone, ought to be aware of the feebleness of their efforts with respect to the object of their inquiry. For in no other discipline must the description inevitably fall so far short of the reality; nowhere else must the gap between theory and practice yawn quite so widely as it does here.

So why bother with theology at all? The first, and main reason that we are forced to do so is evangelistic. Theology is a means given to us by God for helping us to distinguish in our minds

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what is true from what is false in the statements which are made about him. Perhaps we need not make any statements at all, but we all do, and we must know whether what we say is right or wrong. Of course, our statements will never come anywhere near the true experience of God himself; theological argument by itself has never converted anybody, nor can it. But having said that, it still has an important role to play in preparing our minds to receive an experience of the living God. It does so, primarily by warning us what we must and must not expect. We are told for example, that the One with whom we have to do is eternal, omniscient, omnipotent, all good, all loving, all gentle and all patient. None of these things means anything until we have met him, because our minds are unable to comprehend what such a being would be like. But when we do meet God, we recognise who he is and what he is like, because the pieces of the mental jigsaw finally slot into place. He is the one who corresponds to all the clues, and indeed who far surpasses them.

True theology can only be the fruit of human experience of God, but this experience is not the preserve of any one person. Nor is it possible for any one of us to have a full and exhaustive understanding of him. Even if we restrict ourselves to the things which have

been revealed about God, and refrain from idle speculation about him, it is still true that none of us knows or understands everything. Even within the parameters of his self-revelation, God remains far greater than we are, and his revelation is a challenge to us to explore him more fully, as much as it is a confirmation of what we have already experienced.

I want to look at this more carefully because I believe it is here that so many of our modern difficulties have arisen. We are so focused on personal experience that it is hard for us to imagine that we all have much more to learn—and that much of the learning which we still have to do is written down for us in Holy Scripture, if only we had eyes to see it. For example, every once in a while I come across some poor person who tells me that he or she no longer experiences the same things that he or she knew at an earlier stage in the Christian life. People who once spoke in tongues no longer do so, but do not understand why. Others, who once found it no trouble at all to read several pages of the Bible at a stretch, now have to exert themselves to plod through a single chapter. And so on. In trying to help such people, I usually say that it may be that God is challenging them to go on to higher things in the Christian life, that they have been deprived of their earlier enjoyments not because they have sinned or grown cold, but because they are being told that it is time for them to move on. A large amount of the spiritual dryness which we experience is ultimately due to the fact that God is working in us at levels that we do not understand, and until we can penetrate them and see the wonder of his work in the secret places of our hearts, we shall go about looking for him, as the bride in the Song looked for Solomon, but we shall

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not find him. Growth is an essential part of life, but it is seldom (if ever) apparent to the one who is doing the growing. Theology is a sketch of what spiritual growth should be like, giving us a kind of checklist of the things which we still have to experience for ourselves.

Theology can only perform this function, of course, if it is the faithful reflection of the collective experience of the Church. This experience is twofold. First of all, I believe that God has been bringing his people to increasing maturity down through the centuries. This does not mean that he is constantly giving us new revelations, but that he is helping us to understand existing revelation more deeply. A classic example of this is the question of slavery. Even the apostles accepted it, although they knew that all men were ultimately created equal in God's sight. But today we are no longer prepared to tolerate it because God has educated our collective conscience to the point where we abhor something that the first followers of Jesus made provision for. Likewise we are far more sensitive today to the many weaknesses of the human race which we find in handicapped people, though this was not so much the case in Biblical times and it is remarkable how little is said about them in the Scriptures.

The spiritual maturing of the Church finds its outward expression in the development of theology, as does the particular experience of certain individuals. For example, some unknown person in ancient times came to the realisation that God is a trinity of three persons in one being, or substance, and this insight has been canonized for us in the classical formulations of our faith. Similarly, someone else suddenly understood that Jesus of Nazareth was one divine person in two natures—divine and human, and that too, got

transmitted to subsequent generations by way of theology. Of course not everyone, then or now, shares these understandings, and some have openly rejected them as either inadequate or wrong. But enough people over a long period of time, and from very different social and cultural backgrounds, have resonated with them as authentic expressions of Biblical revelation that we can say that they are true in a way which goes beyond the limitations of any one pattern of thought. That is why they have entered our theological inheritance as touchstones of what we call orthodoxy—a word which means 'right worship'. For if we truly know God as he is, and if we are worshipping him in the right way, these are the things that we shall believe and confess about him. There is a great deal more to it than that, to be sure, but there is nothing less, and it is our theological perception which provides us with the bottom line of authentic Christian experience.

Orthodoxy is a word which has nasty connotations to some people, but in actual fact it is nothing but a checklist of essential truth. I say 'truth' in the singular, rather than 'truths' in the plural because ultimately all truth is one, and orthodoxy

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cannot be broken down into component parts. This is perhaps most easily understood by giving an example. You all know the chorus, 'Jesus is Lord':

Jesus is Lord! Creation's voice proclaims it!
For by his power, each tree and flower
Was planned and made.
Jesus is Lord! The universe declares it!
Sun, moon and stars in heaven
Cry 'Jesus is Lord'.

The impulse for this chorus comes from two parts of Scripture—it is a combination of Psalm 19 and Philippians 2:11, and so can claim to be 'Biblical', at least superficially. Of course, no-one is naive enough to believe that if you go out to look at the sky you will hear the planets shouting 'Jesus is Lord', but it is not the poetic licence to which we must object here. The real problem with this chorus is that it claims that the message of redemption, which is what 'Jesus is Lord' proclaims, can be heard in creation—in other words, that a person can come to a knowledge of Christ without the proclamation of the Gospel. The result is therefore heresy, made up by putting selected truths together in the wrong way. I know that many people will find this hard to swallow. Whoever wrote the chorus was presumably not intending to come up with that, and I am sure that is true. Most people who sing it do not come to that conclusion either, and that is also no doubt true, though whether it is because they have meditated deeply on the words, I somehow doubt. Most people I know like the tune and never get any farther than that.

I know as well as you do that probably nobody has been led into heresy as a result of singing this chorus, and yet it is still potentially dangerous because it is theologically wrong. The subtlety, and therefore the great danger, of heresy is not that it is so palpably false that no well-meaning person would ever go near it. On the contrary, heresy is usually made up of half-digested truths, juxtaposed in ways which lead to the wrong conclusions. Woolly thinking of one kind or another may go on for generations, and only blossom into error when some clever person comes along to draw the logical conclusions from what he thinks is generally believed. In the early church, for example, the great Arian heresy, which held that Jesus was a creature and not God, emerged after centuries of a vaguely-held belief

that the Son was inferior to the Father, and therefore not fully 'God' in the strict sense of the term. For a long time, people held together their worship of Jesus, on the one hand, with this subordinationist theology on the other, and never really tried to harmonise the two, so that when Arius thought he was just tying up loose ends, a lot of people were ready to believe him. In fact he created a heresy which proved to be one of the hardest to combat in the history of the church, precisely because so many ordinary people thought that what he was saying sounded right.

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This is why a chorus like 'Jesus is Lord' is dangerous. Even if it makes little or no difference to us, it is a concession to woolly thinking which will one day meet its Arius, and then it will become clear that years of accepting that sort of thing have inadvertently prepared the ground for false teaching. It is the task of a good theologian to point this sort of thing out, even if it is unpopular at the time, and warn the church against falling into complacency, which is the prelude to error. When it is doing its job properly, theology trains the Christian mind to be on the lookout for possible trouble, as well as challenging believers to explore dimensions of their faith which may not yet have occurred to them.

So far I have been making out the case for good theology, but I am well aware that for many people today the problem is that so much of what passes for theology is bad or worse. Theologians tend to be noted for their unbelief, even on the rare occasions when they can be understood, with the result that many of the keenest believers today have a fear and an aversion to the subject. In some quarters it may even be thought that these two things go together—the more concerned you are to win people for Christ, the less time you will have for subtle argumentation which is liable to end up in heresy or unbelief. Conversely, the more theology you read, the less interested you will be in evangelism.

I am well aware of this situation and I believe that it is a tragedy for the church. In one sense, there is not much any one of us can do about it, since problems like this one are the result of many decades, even centuries of development, and barring an upheaval like the Reformation, are unlikely to disappear quickly. The liberal theological establishment with which we are blessed has just as strong an instinct for self-preservation as anyone else, and it will not give up its power easily. Students and others will continue to face the dilemma of having to be conversant with their doctrines on the one hand, so as not to appear 'ignorant' of current thinking, and yet keep themselves mentally and spiritually pure on the other. The latter task inevitably means developing antibodies to the prevailing establishment position, and this is never easy.

Many conservative students end up speaking the language of the liberal establishment whether they want to or not, and hanging on to their convictions may be almost impossible. I cringe, for example, every time I hear a supposedly conservative scholar talk about the 'Easter-event' instead of the Resurrection, because the former term is just a way of accepting that something extraordinary happened at the first Easter without specifying what it was. It has become an acceptably neutral term in academic discourse, but it shunts personal conviction to one side in a way that the blunter term 'resurrection' does not. And the minute you move away from the bluntness of theological tradition to the supposedly neutral ground of modern scholarly dialogue, you have in fact taken a step down the road towards unbelief.

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Another serious problem is that in such an atmosphere, orthodoxy can all too easily appear as a defensive reaction which has nothing but negative things to say, and so it can become very unattractive, even to those who might otherwise be disposed to accept it. The feeling that an orthodox theologian is usually a determined heresy-hunter, totally lacking in anything like a sense of humour and completely unable to see anybody else's point of view, is unfortunately too widespread for us to be able to ignore it. Such people do exist, alas, and they may do more harm to the cause of Christ than those who openly attack it. There is nothing quite so off-putting as the inquisitor who burns people at the stake out of love for them, because he would rather see their bodies burn in this world than their souls burn in the next!

I do not want to dwell on perversions of this kind, but I think we have to recognise that they do exist and that they have given the cause of orthodox theology a bad name. The answer is not to turn away from orthodoxy as if it is a hopeless cause best left to die its long overdue death, but to do what we can to use it to rescue theology for the church in the right way. An important key to this is good communication, and often the people best equipped to do it are the preachers and teachers in our churches. One of the main tasks of the preacher, and one of the main reasons why a preacher should have the best theological training available, is that they are supposed to be able to unpack abstract theology in a way which will mean something to the person sitting in the pew. That this classical understanding of the preacher's role now sounds strange to many people is a sign of just how far we have departed from the traditional Reformed understanding of the professional ministry. I spent twelve years of my life training men and women for the Church of England, and I have to say that it was a constant uphill battle—not so much against the prejudices of the students as against the unwillingness of the powers-that-be to take the notion of a professional preaching and teaching ministry seriously. It often seemed that, as far as they were concerned, a guitar, an annual reservation at Spring Harvest and a smattering of current psycho-sociological jargon was all the well-equipped pastor would ever need! Certainly that is all that some of them had, and one can only wonder at the sort of ministry which must result from that.

I am saying this because I believe that the best way to rescue theology from the theologians is to preach it in a clear and compelling manner. Karl Barth (1886-1968) once said that if theology could not be preached, then it was not theology at all. That is profoundly true, and ought to serve as the touchstone by which we measure whether any particular doctrine or theological system can meet the expectations placed upon it. Perhaps before I develop this theme further, a word about the nature of preaching is in order. Effective preaching has three co-equal elements.

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The first of these is good exegesis, the right interpretation of the Biblical text. Any form of address which is not the exposition of a Biblical text is not really preaching at all. I know that styles differ and that it is possible to preach thematically, as well as verse-by-verse through a particular book. But any sermon which does not open up to us a portion of God's Word has no right to the name, however true or uplifting it may be in other ways. As a nineteenth-century wit put it, congregations come to hear the ministry of the Word,

not the words of the minister, and we must be very careful to insist on that high standard as much as we can.

Secondly, good preaching is rooted and grounded in Christian doctrine. This is the aspect which I am giving special emphasis to in this lecture, but it must not be divorced from its context. Christian doctrine is the systematic exposition of Scripture, and its importance for preaching is that it provides the framework within which the particular passage and sermon being preached must be placed. It is not possible to deliver a complete guide to theology every time one stands up in the pulpit, but the true minister of the Word will always have their theological framework in the background to challenge the reading of the text in preparation for the message. What does this passage tell us about God? About who he is, what he is like and what he does? What does it tell us about humanity and its need of God? And what does it tell us about the way in which God has met this need? These are the fundamental points of theology, and they make a nice list of questions for the preacher to reflect on during preparation.

We do not often realise it, but the real effect of any sermon will lie in the degree to which it is theologically grounded, and theologically coherent. It is because so few preachers today have any real notion of these things that so much preaching is ineffective, even if it manages to be entertaining, erudite and encouraging. These three e's are all very well, but it is the fourth e—effectiveness—which counts in the end, and that can only be measured by the substance of the message, in other words, by its theology.

Now I do not for a minute wish to suggest that, after getting a good theological education, a preacher has a licence to blind the congregation with erudition. This is the common failing of young theological college graduates, who can usually be detected a mile off. I have a personal rule about this—if a preacher refers to 'the meaning of the Greek' during the sermon, there is trouble ahead. Quite apart from the fact that it will probably be inaccurate, this sort of thing is not the mark of superior intelligence but of inferior digestion. I do not mean that the preacher should not study Greek, read commentaries and absorb as much of the background information as possible for the exposition. Of course any preacher should. The trick, however, is so to absorb this material that it becomes second nature, that it gets transposed in heart and mind

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into something which is genuinely believed, and can therefore be expressed with conviction in the preacher's own words. The message, in other words, should come from the heart as well as from the mind, and the heart does not speak Greek.

What is true of a foreign language is of course equally true of registers of English which do not communicate. It is always a humbling experience to read a computer manual, even the kind expressly written for 'dummies', and to discover that one does not understand a word of it, even though it is in 'English'. Preachers have to remember that for most people, theological text books read in much the same way as a computer manual, and adapt them accordingly. It would of course be nice if everyone knew what an infralapsarian antediluvian postmillenarian apocalyptic Arminian is, since you never know when you might meet one, but surely there is a simpler way of explaining the concept?

Theologians fear simplicity because they think that it might be too simplistic, or detract from the majesty and the mystery of their high calling, but this is nonsense. The profoundest theologian of the NT is also the simplest—the Apostle John. Just listen to what he says: 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God ... In him was life, and the life was the light of men ... The Word became flesh and we beheld his glory ...'. A three-year old child can follow this without difficulty, but at the same time the most ancient of philosophers cannot plumb its depths. To put it another way, everyone is fed by these words, and not even the biggest appetite goes away hungry.

An incomprehensible theologian is a contradiction in terms, because his theology is unpreachable—nobody will understand it. I have to read more than my fair share of it, and if ever I get a chance—in a book review, for example—I always condemn it unreservedly, even if I happen to agree with what the author is trying to say. Indeed, perhaps I condemn it more severely in such cases, because there can be nothing more distressing than to find that the words of eternal life are being hidden behind a veil of obfuscation so thick that no-one can gain access to them. I am not suggesting that the answer is to simplify everything to the point of caricaturing the truth. What I want to see is clarity, comprehension and communication. Bear these in mind, and the good preacher will not go far astray.

Finally, the third element in a good sermon is application. If you have good exegesis and excellent theology but cannot apply it to the needs and concerns of your hearers, then you are not only wasting your time, you are confirming your congregation's worst fears—that theology and everything to do with it is basically irrelevant to everyday life. I believe that this has been a major problem in Britain over the past generation. If you want to know why so many Evangelicals have gone

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charismatic, you really do not have to look any further than the so-called Neo-Puritan movement of the late 1950s and early 1960s. The greatest representatives of this school—Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones, for example, or Dr Jim Packer—never had any trouble in gaining and keeping an audience. But their myriad disciples killed it with lifeless imitations. Often the only thing such people's sermons have in common with those of Dr Lloyd-Jones is their extraordinary length, and this is not what people want. Unable to find spiritual satisfaction in long-winded messages, they went for easier options—the quickfix blessing and a licence to behave absurdly in public without attracting any laughter or negative comments.

An ability to communicate is essential to any good preacher, and it is the ultimate test of any theology. Is this, or is this not changing my life? If the answer is no, then forget it—it is not the real thing. It will be apparent from this, I hope, that the last thing I have in mind is pandering to the wishes of the congregation. No preacher is there merely to tickle the ears of his people or to satisfy them with the platitudes and prejudices which they already believe. True preaching must be a challenge—not a destructive, iconoclastic harangue which does nothing but reinforce the preacher's sense of spiritual superiority in their own eyes, and give the people the unspoken conviction that he or she is really a hypocrite, but a penetrating and positive analysis of the human heart which is primarily designed to heal and restore, not to uproot and condemn. This can only be achieved if the preacher is conscious that in the first instance preaching is always preaching to oneself, because the preacher needs to hear the word of grace every bit as much as those who come to listen do. Being

convicted by their own words is the ultimate test both of truth and of communicability, for what will come across more than anything else is the sense that here we are dealing with a person of a humble and a contrite heart.

This is a tall order, but ultimately the only way to rescue theology, whether it is from the theologians or from anyone else, is to live it out in a convincing way. The proof of the pudding is in the eating, and while none of us is perfect, each of us has the Holy Spirit dwelling in our hearts by faith, and therefore the potential for turning abstract theory into a living and vibrant reality.

Well, I have given you quite a bit to chew over and no doubt also more than a little to react to. My brief was to rescue theology from the theologians, or at least to point out how this might be achieved. Whether I have succeeded in offering a way forward, only time and experience will tell. May God bless you as you seek to serve him more deeply in your life, and as you strive to grow more fully into the image of him who alone is the way, the truth and the life.

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