

Notes on Ch. 1: The Context and Task of Christian Theology

[The purpose of these notes is to provide some orienting remarks for that person who might be reading or thinking about reading the Grammar for the first time or near the first time.]

A. Some points about the word ‘Grammar’:

1. The word itself suggests that *language* will be in the forefront of my discussions.
2. But now language looked at in terms of *discourses* and *practices*.
3. I want us to focus on *how* we use language and the *social practices* we depend on to make sense in *what* we say and do.
4. I will introduce a brief discussion of the *syntax*, the *semantics*, and the *pragmatics* of language, but it is not necessary here at the beginning to master those concepts. Just make a mental note and remember some of my points when I use these words later in the text.
5. Throughout the Grammar it is decisively important to remember the basic distinction between a *word* and the *uses of that word*; the mere occurrence of the same word in a locution or utterance does not necessarily mean that the word has the same *meaning in all of its uses*. This will be especially important to remember when we come to discuss the various *uses* the English word *God* might and does have in the English language and whether there are some special or normative ways in which the church will use the word.
6. As we move on through our upcoming discussions, it will be helpful to read and meditate on *Some Basic Theses about Language* [17-19]. I hope those theses get a grip on your imagination and thinking.
7. So why the term ‘Grammar’? It commands our attention to not only *what* we say and do but *how* we say it and do it and to the *reasons*—or accountability and intelligibility—we give in speaking, enacting, and explaining the church’s faith.

B. It should be helpful to remember that the present text arose out the task of teaching a yearlong course in systematic theology in the context of seminary education, during a time in which such systematic work was commonplace in almost all seminaries.

1. This seminary context means that the Grammar has both the virtues and vices of such an originative context.
2. Among the virtues is the aim at comprehensive coverage and ordering of the major traditional doctrines and seeing the doctrines in their mutual, interconnected relations, as well as having a strong sense for the defensibility and intelligibility of the doctrines.[35-42]
3. Among the vices is the impression sometimes inadvertently created that this sort of doctrinal ordering is the *only* way in which theological topics might be ordered.
4. And yes, there are other vices that we will not yet mention.☺

C. In the first chapter I pose the question of *what is the context of theology*.

1. I am emphatic that the primary context of theology is the *church*.
2. The church pre-exists our theologizing and the church’s language in all of its life is already *theological*—intending to be about God, directed to God, and witnessing to God.
3. Yet, the church repeatedly must come to grips with the *ineradicable questions* as to whether its discourses and practices are true and faithful to the reality of God. [33-34]
4. This *theological task* is pertinent to all phases of the church’s life: no pastor in his or her preaching and teaching, no layperson teaching a church school class or otherwise instructing folk in the faith can escape this question and this distinctively theological task.
5. Essential to such theological investigation and responsibility is the faithful awareness that God has spoken and called the church into existence.

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6. It also means the church embraces the quest for understanding—*faith seeking understanding*—as inherent in and internal to faithful living and witnessing to the reality of God. [30-32]
7. Note well: theologizing is not something that only professors and maybe pastors are expected to do; rather, theologizing is already going on in all phases of the church's life and the normative question is whether such is faithful and truthful.

D. Given what I have just said about the church, it is intelligible that I propose an understanding of the church to guide our quest for theological understanding:

**The church is that liberative and redemptive
community of persons
called into being
by the Gospel of Jesus Christ
through the Holy Spirit
to witness in word and deed
to the living triune God
for the benefit of the world
to the glory of God. [25]**

Let us grant that some of you reading this working definition for the first time might find yourself uneasy with this or that wording—some folk will worry about the language of trinity, for example.

But these are matters to be discussed and engaged in conversation—but hopefully such conversation is neither just *gassing and guessing* nor simply matters of *personal preference*.

E. In light of this definition of the church, as an orienting and working definition, it might be helpful to consider the following proposal as to what the Gospel of Jesus Christ is:

**The Gospel of Jesus Christ is the Good News
that the God of Israel, the Creator of all creatures,
has in freedom and love become incarnate
in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth
to enact and reveal God's gracious reconciliation
of humanity to Godself, and
through the Holy Spirit calls and empowers human beings
to participate in God's liberative and redemptive work by
acknowledging God's gracious forgiveness in Jesus,
repenting of human sin.
receiving the gift of freedom, and
embracing authentic community by
loving the neighbor and the enemy,
caring for the whole creation, and
hoping for the final triumph of God's grace
as the triune Ultimate Companion of all creatures. [27]**

Yes, some of you may find yourself profoundly puzzled by or in disagreement with this or that phrasing—or just with the idea that there is such a Gospel that is essential to and definitive of the discourses and practices of the church.

F. To potential conversation partners, I am proposing that it makes nonsense of the church and its life to suppose that church members and pastors can be literate in the faith and still believe that theologizing is nonessential to the church's life.

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I am challenging the notion that it is intelligible—and thereby somehow defensible—that a person might be a pastor and a lay leader of the church and still believe that it does not matter *what* one says or *how* one identifies the nature and mission of the church or explains *who God is* or *what the Gospel is*.

Hence, theologizing in a Christian context requires that we are prepared to embrace the vocation of being accountable to one another in what we say and what we do.

There might well be intractable disagreements among earnest Christians, but let us not presume that there *must be* such disagreements.

But let us be clear: the test of whether we are entering into honest conversation is not whether we already have an intact and comprehensive systematic theology; such may forever elude some of us. But in doing *systematic theologizing* we are hoping to become learned in how the discourses and practices of the church *hold together* and are *mutually interconnected* and without serious and enfeebling internal self-contradiction.

G. Consider now that I am proposing that the primary mission of the church is witnessing to the reality of God for the *benefit of the world*.

Hence, there is already some world in which the church exists and its witness is aimed at that contemporary world.

Read carefully the section I call *The Dialectic between Church and World*. [47-55]

H. So, among others, these questions should be emerging for you:

1. Does the church have a reality and a mission/purpose that are essential to its actual life? How would you phrase such?
2. Is there a Gospel that is essential to the church, without which the church is tempted to become no more than a vagabond mirror image of the world in which it lives, ingesting that world's values and enemies and proneness to violence?
3. Are there, unavoidably, some basic beliefs/teachings/doctrines that are essential to the church's life? If so, is heresy a real possibility?
4. If there are such beliefs, how do we go about identifying them, explaining/justifying them, and proclaiming/teaching them?
5. Is it now clear why I emphasize that the theologizing of the church is *confessional theology and witness*? Does that seem helpful or obfuscating?
6. On pp. 53-55 I make some diagnostic observations about the current situation of the church and the world. Are there some diagnostic points that seem inappropriate to you? Are there some others that you would like to add?

I. What has now been put on our plate, if we are to move forward on these questions and issues?

Ch. 2: Revelation and the Knowledge of God

What does it mean to appeal to God's self-revelation?

Ch. 3: Sources and Norms of Theology as Dialectical Confession and Profession

How do we engage and interpret Scripture and tradition and contemporary learning and culture?

J. Now that you are off and running [walking?], I suggest that you take some time to peruse the table of contents of the Grammar. Let the sweep and particulars of our upcoming topics and conversation get a grip on your imagination and whet your appetite. It might be helpful to remember that on page 40 I suggest that systematic theology is akin to a large *road map* of the church's discourses and practices.

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