ON DOING THEOLOGY

1 THEOLOGY AND THE NATURE OF FAITH

Why do theology at all? Do these questions of doctrine actually matter? 'He can't be wrong whose life is in the right' is a popular and attractive philosophy, and anyone worrying about 'forms and creeds' probably deserves to be written off as a 'graceless zealot'. Theology, organised and sustained reflection on Christian life and language, may be a (fairly) harmless hobby, but it can't be an enterprise central to the life of faith.

In response to this attitude, this essay suggests a definition of theology which would bring it a good deal closer to the heart of Christian experience: theology is an expression of responsible faith. 'Responsible faith' here means not just faith prepared to give an account of itself, but faith aware that it exists as a response to something: it is an answer to some call or initiative beyond itself, and so is always 'answerable', as we say, to something other than itself. Its authenticity or integrity is not to be judged simply in terms of the intensity of an individual experience: it is open to being judged and challenged by its own origins in a summons, a moment of creative newness in the human world. And theology is important as being one way in which that challenge can be kept before the present experience of believers. As such, it is an activity in which every believer can and should be involved - not a specialist activity for the few.

Of course there are other ways of thinking about faith: you could lay the emphasis on present feelings, or on the
acting-out of a loosely defined inspiration – a hope or purpose fired by the memory of Jesus – or on a listening for your own innermost truth, trusting that this will lead you to fulfilment. None of this is in itself wholly wrong or foolish; but the Christian understanding of faith insists that feelings and inspiration and truth to yourself only become part of a really transforming process when seen in the light of something more far-reaching (and more disturbing). In the New Testament, ‘faith’ is the name of that condition of life created through the death and resurrection of Jesus; it is the rebirth that lies on the far side of an entry into, a ‘yielding’ to, this mystery. It is first that simple trust that Jesus in his ministry asks for, trust in himself and in his Father; but only after Easter can the full scope of that trust be grasped, because only then do we see the full dimension of what God promises in Jesus. We are called out of the emptiness and nothingness of our struggles for self-sufficiency by the revelation of God’s inexhaustible mercy and his sovereignty over death and hell; we lose our familiar and safe (but illusory) selves as we give ourselves over to the kingdom present and active in Jesus, and so share in ‘a death like his’; and we are given back ourselves, renewed and absolved, and open to unimagined possibilities, made alive in the ‘spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead’. If we want to understand what Paul and John in particular mean by ‘faith’, it is no use looking for accounts of mental attitudes, or feelings or aspirations. Faith is the whole of what comes into being in us when God is allowed to interrupt and transfigure our lives in Jesus; and so it is not to be separated from the fact of the Christian community – the body of those marked off from the parent community of the Jewish people and from the pagan world around by baptism, the enactment of dying and rising, loss and rebirth with Jesus Christ.

Faith, in this sense, is not a replacement for knowledge of a mere ‘ordinary’ kind, not a set of answers to questions or a bundle of bits of esoteric information. Some of our long-standing worries about ‘faith and reason’ seem to arise from the odd idea that they are two rival ways of getting to know things; whereas faith in the New Testament context is more a way of seeing myself and my world afresh, and a resource for hoping, choosing, and acting. It relativises the whole issue of ‘wanting to be sure’ independently of changing my whole life, it questions the deep alienation of mind and heart we are so used to, and suggests another kind of understanding from the reductive and functional approach we commonly bring to the world. Justification by faith is also a justification in ‘unknowing’, the learning to live with what exceeds our grasp: more, perhaps, like learning to swim than learning to drive a car? an attunement, not a mastery.

Commenting on Genesis, Luther wrote of Abraham that he hid himself in the darkness of faith and therein found eternal light. This entry into darkness means that faith is God’s creation, the act of God in cutting across our self-despair, our recognition that we cannot bring ourselves to truth, to real life, acceptance, salvation, all that is meant by the ‘righteousness’ of Paul and the Reformers. This is the ‘alien righteousness’ which Luther speaks of, a state radically foreign to what moral effort, spiritual exercise or pious reflection can achieve. In his creation of faith, however, God also transforms us; he gives himself to us in love and so draws us into fellowship, indeed union, with himself. Because he speaks to us and with us, he makes us partners in his everlasting life.

‘Responsible’ faith today remains faith conscious of having been created, almost forced into being, by God’s entry into the world of women and men, conscious of its character as a following not a beginning. Believers, aware of living in a new climate in their relations to each other and to God, look with some wonderment at the complex events at the root of their present condition; and as they try to explore and see more fully the distinctive newness of that condition, they will inevitably seek to think through and make more fully their own those generative facts. If they were not awed, bewildered and overjoyed by this newness, there would be no questioning – and no sense of a risk of forgetting or betraying. ‘Christian theological thinking is thinking rationally in the wake of the act and word of the living God’ – a thinking that doesn’t seek to master but to be mastered by what it reflects on; or, better (‘mastery’ being so corrupted a metaphor in a world of real enslavement),
seeking to be one with, immersed in, 'owned' by its source and stimulus, the hidden drawing of God's love.

2 FAITH AND THE NEW CREATION

To talk about God 'interrupting' our world needs more clarification. The Christian Church exists as an identifiable community dating its origins at an identifiable moment; and this suggests that its existence can't be seen properly as just a dimension of continuing human experience. The Church - as its very name, ekklesia, proclaims - believes that it is there because it is called to be there, and that it is a place where the final and decisive truths about human beings are uttered and enacted so as to summon the whole human world to judgment, to summon the world to answer for its life, its failures and hopes. Thus God's coming among us is seen by the Church as, at one basic and important level, a negation: it relativises and apparently overturns existing attempts to make total and satisfying sense of our existence; and it offers 'to make its own sense' of us. There is a Church at all because the experiences focused upon Jesus so profoundly disturbed the religious and social 'sense' of the day, and could not be contained within these available patterns. The Church doesn't appear as a carefully planned and organised phenomenon.

So the sense of discontinuity in Christian origins cannot be evaded. Jesus is not seen as offering useful illustrations of existing types of experience: what happens in and around him constitutes new possibilities of experience. But this also means that the negativity, the rupture and the novelty of Jesus doesn't simply say 'no' to our humanity, and leave it there. It says 'no' to the humanity, the world, we invent and organise for ourselves, in our own various and warring interests, 'no' to our consoling images of ourselves; but it says 'yes' to (and enables us to say 'yes' to) us as we fundamentally are - creatures of God, objects of his love, called to fellowship with him: 'a quicknesse, which my God hath kist'. The negation does not annihilate us, but remakes us, re-forms what we can say and do, feel and imagine. And by bringing us back to what we most deeply are, it points to a continuity beyond the initial rupture: what seemed most strange (Jesus, and the new identity he offers us) is at last seen to be most natural, most homely, answering our most central and strong desire. We are not by nature sinners, posturing, manipulating, fantasising, trying to 'create' ourselves in despite of God and at the cost of each other, but we are chosen by God, called to share his freedom, before ever we turned from him. What happens in Jesus is new; yet, as Paul and his followers constantly remind us, the hidden truth, the 'mystery' of faith, is that it is also older than all human struggle and drama. The 'foolishness' of God, his coming into our world so much at an angle to our expectations and ideas, is the Wisdom in which he made all things. The Word which is Jesus, Jesus rejected and slaughtered, is in the beginning with God.

The events of Jesus's life, death and rising thus give us knowledge both of God and ourselves, a knowledge grounded in the reality of a new relation to God and ourselves. And, as the Church seeks to share this converted vision with the whole world, convinced of its urgent pertinence to all, it is bound to go on reflecting on the inner logic of all this. The sense of a recovery of our real identity as creatures, and the pressure towards universal mission - these things pose for the believer the question, 'What must be true of Jesus for this to be happening and for this to be intelligible?' and the instantly related question, 'What must be true of God for this to be intelligible?' These are the foundational theological questions of Christian belief, arising as they do directly out of the corporate experience of absolution and renewal, and the impulse to mission; they do not arise out of speculative guesswork about Jesus as an isolated historical individual, and they do not arise at all where the twin roots of new life and missionary urgency are absent. 'Responsible' faith is faith beginning to explore and respond to the events of its formation in praise, thought and action - constantly aware that its response stumbles far behind the massive and disorientating work of its author, and so constantly self-critical and not disposed to take itself, in itself, too seriously.
3 THE AUTHORITY OF THE CROSS

In this light, all Christian theology must be first and foremost a theology of the cross, acknowledging the disturbance caused by the particular living and dying of Jesus, and not subsiding into generalities; a theology for baptism, articulating the loss and re-creation that constitute our entry into faith. First God must be before us as hidden and strange, for only then can we learn to see ourselves in his light, when we realise that he is not to be seen or grasped in the light of what we think we are. Without this discipline, the believing community risks slipping into forms of speech or action that are self-indulgent and self-protecting.

If anyone wants to know why theology matters, they should study that archetypal crisis of the Church in our century, the struggle between the Confessing Church and the ‘German Christians’ in the 1930s. Here – as the Barmen Declaration proclaimed and as Barth and Bonhoeffer tirelessly repeated – is the parting of the ways between a true Church, responsible to God’s act in Jesus Christ, and a pseudo-Church, answering only to the pressures of the age. The theology of the cross can be and is properly a theology of resistance to a world that enslaves human beings to idolatrous and oppressive models of what they may be – and to a Church blind to this enslavement. If there is a Christian social and political ethics, its grounds are not in culture alone or in a diffusely benevolent humanitarianism, but in the judgment passed in Christ upon the prince of this world, and upon the self-serving delusions which that prince sows in the minds of men and women – the delusions that foster racial exclusivism, sexual domination, military expansionism and whatever else.

As many have discovered and are discovering, a theology of the cross which is a theology of judgment and resistance lies close to a deeper participation in the cross – from Bonhoeffer in his cell to the camps of the Soviet Union, or the detention blocks and interrogation centres of Johannesburg or the back streets of Santiago. ‘Responsible’ faith, theological faith, is faith called to answer for itself before courts and rulers, in the face of idolatry maintained by violence.

4 THE AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE

If theology, then, exists to help the Church to be what it is called to be, if for this end it involves a steady and radical exposure to the foundational events of Christian faith, it will necessarily accord central and decisive importance to Scripture, since Scripture is the unique witness to those events. This does not mean, however, that we are to imagine the theologian (the reflective believer) sitting down to study Scripture as if it were nothing but a historical report or a moral programme or a textbook of doctrine, and rising up to deliver definitive pronouncements. No, the Bible continues to be of unique significance because without it we should not
have any understanding at all of faith itself. It has this significance not simply because it speaks to us of God’s active presence in history, but because it speaks of this by being itself a response to God, rather than merely by detached ‘reporting’. Of course, the Bible is not all praise and thanksgiving; it is also law and narrative and argument. It is not just a list of examples of human response to the call of God; it presents to us the story and the content of that call, indeed presents the call itself and enables our response to it. And what gives it unity and integrity is the fact that it speaks in and to the life of communities (Old and New Israel) that define themselves in terms of God’s call. All that is said in Scripture is within the context of trustful response to a summons, a summons continuously alive and powerful in the memory and the prayer of a community. We should not know how God’s act is liberating and transforming if we did not hear it spoken of in liberated and transformed language, the language of a converted people. In its whole tenor and context, Scripture defines faith for us; what we find to say about faith is to be tested by this norm.

The Reformation appeal to Scripture (which all Anglicans, Catholic or Evangelical, are bound to recognise at the heart of their heritage, and which is enshrined in our classical and contemporary ordinals) assumes that the person reading Scripture is not engaged in a mere literary exercise, but is being dealt with by God. In this text, which relates and witnesses to the call of God to prophets and apostles, God continues to call his people now. To quote Luther again: ‘He who merely studies the commandments of God [mandata Dei] is not greatly moved. But he who listens to God the Commanding One [deum mandantem], how can he fail to be terrified by majesty so great?’

Perhaps we do not think often enough about the authority of Scripture in relation to the way it teaches us wonder (which is so much a part of faith). The Bible presents the primary and classical response of self-forgetful thanksgiving for God’s coming among us. Behind both Old and New Testaments is the dread, the bewilderment and the incredulous delight of people caught up in the unexpected and re-creative work of God. ‘Behold, I am doing a new thing’; ‘I am God, not man’; ‘fear fell upon them all, and they glorified God, saying . . . God has visited his people’; ‘they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid’; ‘my Lord and my God’. No accident that we can find so many powerful examples of this in the resurrection stories.

The essential test of a theology claiming to be ‘scriptural’ is whether it begins and ends in this sort of wonder; and the possibility of theology of this kind depends a lot on whether the theologian is consciously part of a community aware of the newness of its life, aware that the gospel is surprising. Not just the availability of Scripture as a text, nor the individual holiness and insight of the theologian, but the life of a Church concerned to be converted, testing its own faith by its continuity and congruence with what the language of Scripture shows – this is a necessity for creative theology. This is to say in other words that the theologian’s reading of Scripture depends for its fruitfulness on the action of the Spirit, the Spirit which is the power making present to us now the event of God’s acting in Israel and in Jesus. Or, in other terms again, you can’t be a ‘scripturally-minded’ theologian in a Church wholly devoid of saints: at best, you might be a learned repository of biblical lore, which is not the same thing. The theologian is there to help the Church be the Church through his or her attention to the classical witness of faith and conversion; but that attention is itself in turn enabled by the degree to which the Church is truly a fellowship of the Spirit. The relation of holiness in the Church and the critical service of theology is subtle, an interpenetration at many levels.

5 LISTENING TO TRADITION

This consideration reminds us that no reflective believer can read the Bible as if no one had ever read it before. Scripture can and must address us as new, as surprising, teasing, challenging, but its address will still inevitably be heard as it is reflected through a history of reading. Others have been here before; and if they have really heard the summons and the challenge of Scripture they will help to flesh out for us the
definition of conversion and faith set down in Scripture. Their discipleship is part of what nourishes ours, and we have a certain kind of responsibility to them as well as to the bare text of the Bible. If the Bible shows what it is like to be converted by God's interrupting of the world, the history of faithful reading of the Bible shows what it means for the converted speech of Scripture to be also converting speech for the generations after.

The history of reading as a history of discipleship is a central aspect of what theologians mean by 'tradition'. 'Tradition in its primary notion is not the revealed content, but the unique mode of receiving revelation, a faculty owed to the Holy Spirit.' It is not the uncritical and uncritiqued memory of the Church, but the memory of the Church's struggle for faithful understanding of scriptural revelation, and so of its own true nature in the purposes of God. The Church returns to Scripture to be converted, to test its present life and witness against the primary proclamation of the gospel. Tradition as bondage to what has been said and done just because it has been said and done has nothing to do with theology: the tradition that is important for theological method is the story of a Church thinking and living in confrontation with the primary challenge of God and its classical testimony. This is why tradition can itself be a critical and renewing factor in theology ('Tradition represents the critical spirit of the Church . . . made acute by the Holy Spirit'), a creative recovery of the past in the context of an idle, banal or corrupt present. The Reformers, the great Anglican divines, the Wesleys, Newman, Barth – all owe their renewal of immediacy in relation to the fundamental revelation to a recovery of 'tradition', a vitalising memory which reassures us that the present doesn't exhaust our possibilities. And perhaps one distinctive insight of a Reformed theology is that 'tradition' includes the memory of deep discontinuities, moments of 'recovery' (or 'retrieval', as modern philosophies of interpretation like to say) that represent a painful breach with prevailing fashions and assumptions – an insight that should at least offer some hope to theologians inclined to pessimism in the face of an uninspired present. The great seduction, of course, is to misread this as meaning that theology's future lies in a revival of the past; but this would be a capitulation to the past, a retreat into memory as an inner and static vision, not a conversation with it that encourages us to believe things might become different.

In any good conversation, we discover what we never realised we wanted to say: we become more articulately ourselves as we allow ourselves to be probed and discovered by another. For the theologian, this should mean an abiding wariness of our tendency to that kind of historical snobbery that assumes superior skills in some areas to be a guarantee of more comprehensive insight overall. We unquestionably possess a more nuanced awareness than previous generations of how the Bible as a collection of texts came into being and of the diversity of style and genre within those texts. This may or may not assist our skill in 'faithful' reading; and it does not automatically make us better readers and interpreters (for theological purposes) than an Augustine or a Luther – or the modern exegete still operating unselfconsciously in a pre-critical intellectual world, the African catechist or the Orthodox monk. Nostalgia for a pre-critical world is a pointless and dishonest response to our situation. But we have everything to lose in failing to take these alternative readings seriously – i.e. in relation to their understanding of our faith and a discipleship we claim in some measure to share.

6 THE USE AND ABUSE OF REASON

Attention to tradition emphatically does not mean that we are condemned to repeat the past; and relativising the present moment and its seemingly total claims does not mean pretending that it doesn't exist. We cannot make our starting-point other than what it is – what is given in the historical contingencies of when and where we happen to be. We can listen to the voice of a pre-critical age, but if we pretend to speak with that voice we delude ourselves (and deny the reality of genuine dialogue and challenge in our relation with the Christian past). So the questions we put to Scripture and the history of reading Scripture arise from both the problems and the skills we have as persons of our own age
and context. It is probably misleading to speak of a 'responsibility' to this context in quite the same sense as our having a responsibility to Scripture and tradition — yet it is not completely wrong. God calls us as and where we are; and his converting revelation does not make sense for us, does not become intelligible and communicable, utterly independently of the ways in which we now try to 'make sense' culturally and intellectually. So long as we use the same language in our general intellectual life and in our theologising, we cannot totally separate them, even if we acknowledge the error of simply transposing the canons and conventions of the one on to the other. Our responsibility here is to make sure that, as far as possible, what is said in theology can be heard as a proposal for 'making sense' in the world as it is, not just as the dialect of a ghetto.

The problem is that in every culture, but especially in one as fragmented as ours, 'making sense' is not reducible to a single method. What some people call the 'tyranny of rationality' or 'rationalism' arises where we suppose that 'reason' is a technique of argumentation applicable in exactly the same way, across the board, to all sorts of speaking and acting. In fact, reasoning is a vastly diverse thing; the natural scientist makes sense with one kind of language — more dependent than we once thought on imagination and controlled 'fantasy' (certainly in the further reaches of physics); the social and political scientist works through the creation of models and stories of the interaction of groups or individuals — and points out how easy it is for some to have their 'sense' made by others who have, or wish to have, power over them (ideology as a tool of control); the artist works to make sense of the uncompromisingly local or specific — this narrative, this canvas, this stone or wood, these musical relationships. All are 'reasoning' — arguing, persuading, pursuing conclusions, resolutions, adequate statements; all are searching for consistent utterance and integrity of vision.

Theological reflection cannot set aside considerations of what counts as 'reasoned' integrity in a culture; and to allow this is not to impose an alien rationalism upon faith, for there is no one scheme or 'grid' to employ. And it is certainly not to suggest that there is any mileage in the myth of an omnipotent and objective faculty, 'Reason' in a sort of degenerate eighteenth-century sense, that can discover a passive object called God, and map out what he can and cannot do. What we have called 'making sense' is as flawed and limited as the rest of human activity.

At first sight, though, this confronts us with a daunting agenda: no one area of our intellectual life is going to provide us with an abstract methodology for doing theology, and theology must learn to be at home with an immense variety of styles of thinking. We may note and develop a striking parallel with some bit of scientific or social-scientific or artistic method, but we should beware of claiming that such overlaps deliver to us the key for doing theology now. Making theological sense in relation to all this is bound to be a fragmentary and unsatisfactory matter: there can be no summa for this age, or perhaps for any readily imaginable future age. Theology cannot claim either to give decisive endorsement to any one kind of contemporary reasoning, or to offer a general intellectual synthesis. It can only attend to and struggle to speak with the plurality of reasonings that it confronts in specific settings, in the hope that, as already remarked, it can demonstrate an at-homeness and suggest an overarching context of living, perceiving and acting, in which the varieties of human searching and human integrity might find a place.

This implies, too, that theology must sometimes show that it can bear the disturbance and uncertainty, even the pain, of such exploration without seeking to impose a neat intellectual solution drawn from its own conceptual repertoire. Many of those who try to do theology will know the experience of emerging from engagement with a novel, play or film with a richer but far more confused or tormented awareness of human possibilities. God forbid that we should try to come up with the sort of 'Christian response' that attempts to remove the tensions, or even to exploit this experience as a quarry for 'illustrations' of doctrinal argument. We are required rather to wait and see what resources in our Christian vision are touched or awakened or challenged by this; to let the artist's statement and our own commitments work on each other. In such a situation, the good theologian needs patience, a deep
suspicion of theoretical reconciliations, the 'contemplative' capacity to stay with a work of the imagination for what it is in itself, and the strength to live with a degree of inner conflict and unfinishedness. We have already noted that in good conversation we learn what we distinctively have to say for the first time; this is true for the theologian in dialogue with Scripture and tradition, and it holds, too, for the theologian's encounter with the contemporary imagination. Here especially, a distinctive and individual voice reveals itself under the pressure of an alien questioning; and a sensitivity to the variety, the ironies, tragedies and non-resolutions of the imagination may save the theologian from a captivity to trivial optimism in theology and lying cliche in his or her response to the contemporary world as a whole.

7 THE PRIMACY OF SCRIPTURE IN THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH

Scripture, but not as a textbook; tradition, but not as a museum of conventions to be repeated; reason, but not as an abstract and uniform technique: the threefold cord of traditional Anglican theological method is an almost inescapable pattern in thinking about theology at all, even in our 'post-critical' time, once we grant that theology has to do with response and responsibility in our faith. But if we are to restate and reclaim the validity of this method, we must avoid any suggestion that the theologian is a detached individual working on three separate repositories of truth, and seeking to weave their data into a system, a religious theory. There would be no Christian theology without the community of faith, and no community without the anchorage of scriptural witness to its origins, to the power that creates and preserves the faith from which the community lives. The order and relation of the three aspects of our method matters enormously: the nature of our response and responsibility to 'tradition' and 'reason' must be determined by our response to the creative events witnessed to in Scripture, as we return constantly to the question of faith and its meaning.

This 'determining' role of Scripture, however, will operate in different ways. Sometimes it is immediately evident, in a theology beginning with the exegesis of the biblical text. But it may also appear more obliquely in the course of our dealing with tradition or 'reason'. That is to say we may discover it as we attempt to trace the characteristic methods of some saint or doctor; or as we become aware of what we need in resisting the pressures of some secular or pseudo-religious contemporary tyranny; or as we return to the angular puzzles of the gospel narrative from some encounter with the difficult particularity of modern imaginative narrative. Testing ourselves in the processes of encounter and understanding, we are repeatedly brought back to the central question of the foundation of trust or hope in us, which is God's self-disclosure to his people; and this means being brought back to the testimony of those first summoned to be God's people, and, ultimately, to the focus and embodiment of God's summons which is the person of his Son. The primacy of Scripture needs to be recalled whenever theology looks like becoming generalised religious reflection; but it is not a principle that can operate meaningfully abstracted from the community of believers assembled through the ages around Christ and from the concrete questioning arising now from the theologian's history and context. Theology is about the roots of faith, and so of present choice and action, not about patterns of ideas - even 'biblical' ideas (as I have suggested, Scripture is not best read as a collection of ideas). Its criteria are not to be reduced to fixed abstractions; they are always to do with the author and the perfecter of faith.

8 THE LIMITS OF PLURALISM

What about the problem of the 'professional' theologian's autonomy and the 'pluralism' of theological discourse? All we have said takes it for granted that the theologian does not ask to be heard or understood independently of the community of faith, and that the theologian as such does not determine the boundaries of that community. What power the theologian does exercise in the Church should depend on the closeness of his or her work to questions affecting the particularities of life
and faithful witness now; though these should not be defined simply as the questions that a majority of Christians in a particular time and locality happen to find interesting, but those that might be shown to affect what the Church essentially is. Theologians who claimed autonomy in the sense of asserting a right to be heard *in the Church*, quite irrespective of their awareness of such questions, would be (to put it mildly) making a rather eccentric claim; they would be defining their own commitments in some detachment from the commitments of the Church as Church. And in so far as theology is necessarily a committed reasoning *within* a committed community, such a situation blunts the *freedom of* theology to perform its role for the Church: it imprisons itself within a set of private preoccupations.

On the other hand, that freedom depends on theology's agenda not being set for it by either an ecclesiastical establishment or a consensus of popular devotion. Its role requires it to be in some degree unpredictable, and its responsibility is not simply to the expressed needs of the empirical Church (a point which, once again, a Reformed theology ought to grasp). What makes the theologian's autonomy a problem is that many in the Church do not distinguish between criticism of the empirical Church and criticism of the gospel, and that some theologians do not seem clearly enough to appeal to an authority other than scholarly expertise or contemporary fashion in challenging conventional versions of ethical or dogmatic positions. The suspicious Church member needs to learn a certain detachment from comforting but provisional or partial schemes of understanding; the theologian has to show an 'obedience' and attention to the general Christian commitment to faithful responsiveness when confronted by the divine interruption. And to the degree that some theological positions appear to evade any element of being constrained by the unmasterable initiative that calls forth faith, they weaken or undermine the essence of the community itself, and cease to be recognisably *theology*: the Church is justified in a critical retort to or repudiation of them. To take an obvious instance: if it is claimed that the particular identity of Jesus is utterly immaterial to the beginnings of the Church, or that the Holy Spirit is simply a metaphor for divine immanence in world or Church, it becomes impossible to make sense of commitment to and in a community that baptises, makes eucharist, nurtures a certain understanding of prayer and contemplation that is closely related to the paschal narrative, and reads the Scriptures. Such claims have ceased to be 'in conversation' with concrete ecclesial faith, past or present, and have next to nothing to do with the ideas of responsibility and responsiveness we have been trying to outline.

This is not a licence for heresy hunts or any other paranoid defence of orthodoxy: at one important level, the truth looks after itself — if we believe that the ministries of Word and sacrament enact for us the indestructible presence and *givenness* of God's promises. But it is a reminder that in some circumstances those who have some right to speak for the worshipping Church have the right to say of certain ideas that they have no claim to be called Christian theology because they are at odds with the very *conception* of the Church. Such a 'right' is not a limitation of intellectual freedom, a hierarchical tyranny, but the recognition that the 'grammar of commitment' presupposed by the very activity of theology does not admit of flat self-contradictions. And — whatever unease may be felt about aspects of this or that theologian's explorations — it is probably only rarely that a whole set or system of views can be characterised as essentially anti-theological. Furthermore, for this to be feasible requires a profoundly self-critical and 'responsible' Church in the first place, a Church that is actually concerned for its integrity, and so is prepared to endure some heavy theological questioning — not a Church that retreats into the repetition of formulas as soon as awkward questions are raised.

Nor does this threaten the proper multiplicity of theological 'styles'. 'Formal' and 'informal' dogmatics, philosophical and methodological work, political theology, theologies tending to the intellectual, theologies tending to the affective or intuitive, all these are and always have been called out by diverse circumstances, according to how the question of what faith and the community of faith mean. A Bernard and an Abelard, a Segundo and a von Balthasar, a Karl Barth and a David Tracy represent spectacularly different under-
standings of this question; but the Church and its leadership are not called on to pronounce on the relative priorities involved (which is why generalised condemnations of liberation theology, for instance, seem so misplaced), so long as the question remains one about faith, and is asked with the urgency appropriate to that responsibility basic to Christian faith itself.

All these generalities inevitably suggest a far more easily controlled and stabilised relation between theologian and Church at large than is ever the case. In practice, theology is difficult and the occasion of difficulties for those who aren’t full-time theologians. But the intellectually and spiritually disturbing dimensions of theology, the harshness of its questioning, rest upon the nature of the Church as the triumphant creation of a gracious God. If the Christian way were simply an experimental spirituality loosely inspired by a dead foreigner, we should no doubt be spared a lot of trouble; we should also be spared the transformation of the human world by God’s mercy in Christ. As it is, theology remains hard, for theologians and for their public, but the fact itself indicates the occasion for unstinted gratitude, celebration and – as we have seen – wonder at the sovereign work of grace. ‘The wrath of man shall turn to thy praise’; so, too, should the complexities and the turmoil of theology.

NOTES

2 This is how Karl Barth, perhaps the greatest theologian of the century, defines theology; for an elaboration of this statement, see his book on Saint Anselm, Anselm, Fides Quaerens Intellectum (London, 1960), esp. pp. 46ff.
3 Even a book like E. P. Sanders’ recent Jesus and Judaism (London, 1985), which heavily stresses Jesus’ at-homeness in the Jewish world of his day, points eventually to the inescapable novelty of the free offer of God’s kingdom to the wicked (see chaps. 6 and 10).
4 From Henry Vaughan’s poem, ‘Quickness’.
5 As in the opening chapters of 1 Corinthians and Ephesians especially.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


D. W. Hardy and D. F. Ford, Jubilate. Theology in Praise (London, 1984). This argues that all theology arises from and expresses the praise of God as drawn forth by the acts of God.

Inter-Anglican Theological & Doctrinal Commission, For the Sake of the Kingdom. God’s Church and the New Creation (Anglican
Consultative Council, 1986). The first report of this Commission, drawn from all parts and all traditions of Anglicanism, deals with the basic assumptions of theology, and the problem of Christianity's relation to culture and politics.

Dietrich Ritschl, The Logic of Theology (London, 1986). A sophisticated but not too technical discussion of theological principles by a rather unusual German theologian who has spent many years in pastoral ministry, and has taught in the USA and the Third World.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Do you think of yourself as a theologian?

2. Do you expect theology to be any use to you and your fellow Christians? If not, why not?

3. Why do you think that Anglicans have said that nothing can be required Christian belief that cannot be found in the Bible, at least implicitly?

4. What sort of associations does the word ‘tradition’ have for you? How do these connect with what the essay says about it?

5. Does religious experience have any authority in theology? If so, what kind of authority?

2

JESUS – GOD WITH US

1 INTRODUCTION

Christology has been at the centre of much of the theological debate of recent years, and rightly so, because the credibility and relevance of Christian faith in the modern world depend on the credibility and relevance of the Christian claims about Jesus. In England, the long-running debate about the validity and interpretation of the doctrine of the incarnation has been succeeded recently by discussion of the historicity and significance of the virginal conception and the empty tomb – a discussion which has brought little theological light into the darkness of widespread misconceptions. There is a serious danger that such debates may simply pit traditionalism against innovation. On the one hand, there are strident polemical assertions of orthodoxy, which seem to assume that orthodox belief can be preserved merely by being repeated with authoritarian sanctions. On the other hand, there are attempts to make Christian belief credible and relevant in the modern world, which seem to assume that credibility and relevance are achieved by diluting the faith until it resembles the best sentiments of secular culture.

But orthodoxy and relevance are not opposites. Since the real value of orthodoxy lies in its faithfulness to God's revelation of himself, it is genuinely preserved, not by defensive authoritarian repetition, but by being continually rediscovered as something newly meaningful for every age. The credibility and relevance of Christianity reappear when the attempt is made to repossess the full meaning of orthodox